

# Modern Chinese Pragmatic Marker “Guan Ta Shenme X” and Its Grammaticalization

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**Abstract:** There is a sentence pattern in modern Chinese--“guan ta shenme X”. In this sentence pattern, “guan ta “ has become a word, and the semanteme of “shenme” is delexical, and X can be a word, a phrase or a minor sentence. The sentence pattern expresses the attitude of denying any condition. This paper first describes in detail the structural and semantic features of “guan ta shenme X” and then examines its grammaticalization process. It is found that this minor sentence is a value judgment or understanding made by the speaker while ignoring a certain premise or consequence. Specifically, it includes two types: ignoring the condition and ignoring the result. In addition, “guan ta shenme X” is grammatically transformed into an unconditional pragmatic marker in unconditional compound sentences, and expresses the speaker's subjective knowledge and emotions during this evolution.

## 1. Introduction

In modern Chinese, there is a sentence pattern “guan ta shenme X”, For example:

(1) Guan ta shenme zhi xu! Xian chong jin qu zai shuo! [1] (Whatever the order is! Let's rush in first!)

(2) Guan ta shenme qian jin xiao jie de shen fen! (Whatever the identity of rich young lady is!)

(3) Guan ta shenme tian ming zai wo bu zai wo, wo zong shi ti dao bu juan, jin wo de ze ren zuo qu jiu shi le. (No matter destiny is in me or not, I am always tireless and do my duty.)

(4) Guan ta shenme, shao bu de yao qu zou zou. (No matter what, I have to visit.)

The “X” in the above sentence can be a word (example 1), a phrase (example 2), or a minor sentence (example 3). It can even be in the default condition (example 4). The question word “shenme” signifies any meaning and appears in conjunction with “guan ta “. “guan ta shenme” (“ta” represents him) can also be said as “guan ta shenme” (“ta” represents an object or an animal). In this paper, “guan ta shenme” (“ta” represents him) is used for all reference. The following will describe the structure and semantic characteristics of this type of sentence pattern, and discuss its grammatical and subjective manifestations.

## 2. Structure Features

### 2.1 About “Guan Ta Shenme”

“Guan” in the sentence pattern is not a literal component, different from “guan”, which has a real conceptual meaning. For example,

(5) Zan men zhi guan hua tian jiu di qu, hai guan ta shenme jian fa? (Let's just spend time drinking and having fun, why do we care about swordsmanship?)

In this sentence, “guan” means “pay attention to”. It is a notional verb. This situation does not belong to “guan ta shenme X”. No matter in the current sentence or the context, the personal pronoun “ta” from example 1 to 4 doesn't have a specific referent. “Shenme” in the examples does not mean its basic questioning meaning, but a generic referential meaning.

In “guan ta shenme”, No other elements can be inserted between “guan” and “ta”. As a whole,

they do not represent an action. Its semantics cannot be inferred from the literal meanings of “guan” and “ta”. “guan ta” is generally placed at the beginning of the sentence, but can also appear in the sentence. For example,

(6) Wo shi shang bei zi dao yue gong qu tou kan shui xi zao, xia bei zi guan ta shenme san sheng san shi, zhi yuan yi hui gaolao zhuang de Luo Zhenyu. (I am Luo Zhenyu who went to the Moon Palace in my previous life to see who took a bath, and in the next life, whatever immorality, only want to go back to Gaolao zhuang.)

In terms of rhythm, there is no pause between “Guan ta” and the “shenme”. “Shenme” must be stressed to enhance the tone.

## 2.2 About Variables of “X”

When “X” is a word, it is often presented in the form of “X bu X”.

(7) a. Guan ta shenme dingxing bu dingxing, neng ding jiu neng gai, shenme dou shi ren gan de! (No matter if it is decided or not, it can be changed if it can be decided, and everything is done by humans!)

b. Guan ta shenme li bu li ji, gen Tang Xiaoxiao zuo dui jiu shi gen ta is Qu Luofu guo bu qu! (No matter if its self-interest or not, fighting against Tang Xiaoxiao is to have trouble with Qu Luofu!)

c. Guan ta shenme dui bu dui. Lai ba! Zan men yu ren fen dou, qi le wu qiong. (No matter if it is right or not. Come on! Let's struggle with others, and we have endless fun.)

In example (7), “X bu X” is formed by the combination of positive and negative forms of words. If X is a disyllabic word, it can be omitted as a monosyllabic word, and usually the second syllable in the first X can be omitted, as in (7b).

When “X” is made up of phrases, its predicate component can also be made up of the conjunction of positive and negative forms (example 8).

(8) a. Guan ta shenme jia chou wai yang bu wai yang! (Don't care about washing your dirty linen in public!)

b. Guan ta shenme yuan ze! Guan ta shenme ba zi he bu he! (Don't care about principles! Don't care about the horoscope!)

According to the corpus investigation, there are few examples in which X is a minor sentence, only scattered in modern Chinese corpus. Such as:

(9) Guan ta shenme jia li qi zi, hai zi zai deng zhe zi ji, li kai le jia duo me zi you. (I don't care if my wife and children are waiting for me, it is free to leave home)

It should be pointed out that the researchers searched for “guan ta shenme X” in the Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL) of Peking University and the literature column of Bank of Chinese corpus (BCC) Beijing Language and Culture University. A total of 52 cases were retrieved. Among them, 47 cases were used as words, accounting for 90.38%. It can be seen that X in “guan ta shenme X” is mostly words, directly modified with “shenme” to indicate that it is related to the nature or type of things [1]. Even if X is a phrase or a minor sentence, it has the nature of a certain noun after adding “shenme” to indicate something, as in example (8b): “Guan ta shenme ba zi he bu he”, it means “don't care if the horoscope fit each other.”

## 2.3 How to Make a Sentence with “Guan Ta Shenme X”

“guan ta shenme X” can be a sentence by itself (example 10). It can also form a compound sentence expression with its preceding sentence or its subsequent sentence (example 11).

(10) Guan ta shenme shi ne! Neng ban jiu ban, bu neng ban zai shang liang. (No matter what thing it is, if you can, do it. If you can't, discuss it again.)

(11) Zao zhi ru ci, zhen gai dai liang xiang fang bian mian qu, guan ta shenme ti mian bu ti mian. (If I had known that, I would have taken two boxes of instant noodles with me, no matter if it is decent or not.)

“Guan ta shenme” often appears in sentences together with subjective components that enhance the effectiveness of expression. These subjective elements are mostly adverbs such as “dou”, “ye”,

“fanzheng”, and “haishi” (Example 12). Together with the minor sentence “guan ta shenme X”, it highlights the focus of the sentence and reflects a strong subjective color.

(12) a. Guan ta shenme zhen erzi, si sheng zi, gan erzi, wo dou bu xie yi gu. (Who cares if he is the real son, illegitimate son or adopted son, I don't give a shit!)

b. Guan ta shenme ya li, pai chu wan nan women ye yao lai. (Regardless of the pressure, we will come after all difficulties.)

c. “Guan ta shenme hou tai, fan zheng, wo bu neng rong ren!” Bingxin fenfen de shuo. (“Regardless of his background, anyway, I can't tolerate it!” Bing Xin said angrily.)

d. Guan ta shenme shu sheng, cai dou kuai leng le, women hai shi jin qu he women de jiu ba. (Whatever scholar he is, the food is getting cold, so let's go in and have a drink.)

“Guan ta shenme X” also exists in the form of parallel sentences to enhance the momentum and deepen the expression of the speaker's subjective emotions. e.g.:

(13) a. Guan ta shenme jin ma jiang, guan ta shenme gong zuo, guan ta shenme ren sheng bu ren sheng, ren sheng zong xu yao feng kuang de shi hou. (No matter what the Golden Horse Award is, no matter what the job is, no matter what the life is, life always needs crazy time.)

b. Yi Shi jian, ta zhen xiang kua chu dian ti, jiu zheme liu xia lai, guan ta shenme ye dan jie, guan ta shenme zhong yang jiu dian! Guan ta shenme ding wei mei ding wei! Guan ta shenme sao zhou xing! (For a moment she wanted to step out of the elevator and just stay, whatever Christmas or the Central hotel! Whatever reservations she has made! No matter what hoodoo she is!)

### 3. Semantic Features

According to the collected examples, “Guan ta shenme X” is not used to state a fact, but the speaker's knowledge or attitude expression under certain conditions, which is highly subjective. Subjectivity is when the speaker expresses his own position, attitude and feelings towards the passage while uttering a passage, thereby leaving his own mark in the discourse [2]. Edward Finegan believes that subjectivity involves the speaker's perspective, the speaker's affect, and the speaker's epistemic modality [3]. “Guan ta shenme X” represents an unconditional conditional minor sentence. The entire sentence pattern expresses an attitude of negating any condition, that is, when the speaker expresses a certain premise or consequence, there are relevant factors in the context that negate the premise or consequence, in order to reflect the speaker's indifferent attitude.

(14) a. You de lao shi shuo: “ren jia shi ‘quan wei’ ren shi!”

Tong xue men shuo: “guan ta shenme ‘quan wei’! shui fan dui Mao Zedong si xiang wo men dou bu yun xu.” (Some teachers said: “They are ‘authoritative’!” The students said: “Whatever their 'authority'! We don't allow anyone who opposes Mao Zedong Thought.”)

b. Zuo wei yi ge mei zhuang ai hao zhe, ...xiang jie mao gao zhe Zhong rang ren ai bu shi shou de xiao wu jian, guan ta shenme pin pai hai shi gong xiao, zhi yao shi hao kan de tong tong lai yi zhi. (As a beauty lover ... the little things like mascara that people really like, no matter what the brand or the effect, as long as it is good-looking.)

The assertion in example (14a) that “we don't allow anyone who opposes Mao Zedong's thought” is made on the premise that there is an object of “authority”, and the speaker believes that this condition will not be true whether it is “authority” or not because no one can be allowed to oppose Mao Zedong Thought. In the example (14b), the speaker thinks that “as long as it is good-looking”, but does not care about the result of “no matter what the brand or the effect”. Here, the speakers express their subjective attitudes or emotions with “Whatever their 'authority'” and “no matter what the brand or the effect”, which reflects the characteristics of subjectivity.

In terms of specific expression content, the unconditional conditional minor sentences represented by “whatever X” have two cases: ignoring the premise and ignoring the consequences. Below are the examples.

#### 3.1 Ignoring the Premise

In this category of “Guan ta shenme X”, X is a premise, and the whole structure means that the

speaker ignores this premise.

(15) a. Qi ye chang zhang zong jie chu yi tiao jing yan: guan ta shen me gai ge, xian zheng shang shi dian zai shuo, zhun mei kui chi. (The manager of the enterprise summed up an experience: No matter what the reforms are, try to be the pilot first, we won't lose anything.)

b. Guan ta shenme xue ya se hai shi xiao fen hong, fan zheng lao gong zhe tiao yong ku shi huo le. (It doesn't matter if it's snow color or pink, my husband's swimming trunk is popular anyways.)

c. Wo men ren duo shi zhong, guan ta shenme zhan shu bu zhan shu! Yi duo yao si xiang, quan bu dou gei wo shang! (There are so many of us, no matter what tactics or not! Ants can kill the elephant, come on!)

In example(15a), the speaker ignores the premise (“No matter what the reforms are”), and said “No matter what the reforms are”. Example (15b) “It doesn't matter if it's snow color or pink”, as a prerequisite, “this swimming trunk is popular”. In example (15c), the speaker does not consider the issue of “tactics” at all, and see more people as the first choice. In this category, “Guan ta shenme X” means the subjective understanding of “no need to take X into consideration”.

### 3.2 Ignoring the Consequences

In this category of “Guan ta shenme X”, X is a consequence, and the whole structure means that the speaker ignores this consequence.

(16) a. Guan ta shenme Fu zuo yong, neng gong zuo jiu xing. (Regardless of the side effects, as long as it works.)

b. Mama zhi chi ta: “Zhi yao you da xue shang jiu hao, guan ta shenme da xue.” (His mother supported him: “As long as he can go to a college, it doesn't matter what college he goes to.”)

c. Guan ta shenme hao ping cha ping e ping, ai shui shui, zhe shi shu yu yi ge shi dai de meng xiang, jiong jing he fan nao, Da Peng dong, Xu Zheng dong, Shen Teng dong, ku zhe xiao de guan zhong dou dong. (Regardless of the good reviews, bad reviews, and mean reviews, they are not important. These are the dreams, predicaments and troubles of an era, Da Peng understands, Xu Zheng understands, Shen Teng understands, and the crying and laughing audience understands.)

In the example (16a), the speaker thinks that as long as he “can work”, he doesn't care about “the side effects”. In example (16b), the mother only hopes that “as long as he can go to a college”, and does not care about which college he will eventually enter. In example (16c), the speaker ignores the consequences of “good and bad reviews”. This kind of “Guan ta shenme X” expresses ignoring the result is equivalent to the subjective attitude of “nothing X does not matter”.

## 4. Grammaticalization of “Guan Ta Shenme X”

“Guan ta shenme X” comes from the double objects structure. In the Song Dynasty literature “zhuzi Language Category “, the three components of “guan”, “ta” and “shenme” all have real meaning in the double objects structure. e.g:

(17) Jingfu shuo wu shen xian, ye bu xiao de. Bian you, ye you shen qiyi! Bi ci wu xiang gan, you guan ta shenme? Que xu yao li hui shi yu fei. (Jingfu said that there is no god, and there is no need. Even if there is, it is too strange! We have nothing to do with gods, so Why care about them? What you need to care about is right and wrong.)

In example (17), “guan” is a substantive verb, meaning “care”; “ta” is an indirect object referring to a specific object, that is, the “god” in the preceding sentence; “shenme” is a direct object to express doubt. The minor sentence is placed in the context of rhetorical questions, expressing the negative meaning of “it has nothing to do with the gods, don't care about them”. The pragmatic negative meaning given in the rhetorical context has been repeatedly used, gradually being regulated, and further semanticized [4], even in declarative sentences can also express negative meaning. Here is an example from the Ming Dynasty novel *Journey to the West* (18).

(18) nan guai dao: “Hun jia, ni que duo xin na! ... zhe ge ba he shang, dao de na li, fang ta qu ba.” (The monster said: “My wife, your mind is really careful!... This monk, let him go.”)

Gong zhu dao: “Lang jun, fang ta cong hou men li qu ba.” (The princess said: “Husband, let him go through the back door.”)

Yao mo dao: “Nai fan li, fang ta qu bian ba, you guan ta shenme hou men quan men li.” (The monster said: “It's annoying, just let him go, who cares about the back door or front door.”) (*Journey to the West Part 1*)

In Example (18), “Guan” is still a verb with the actual meaning, meaning “don't care”; “ta” also has a clear meaning, that is, the above-mentioned “monk”; but the meaning of “what” has been delexical, expressing anything refers to, modify the optional follow-up component “back door, front door”. The small sentence expresses “just let him go, don't care if he goes through the front door or the back door”.

The first unconditional minor sentence usage of “Guan ta shenme X” was found in *Journey to the West*, such as:

(19) Bajie dao: “Zai bian hai zai shan qian, zhi shi ru jin feng zhuan le ye.” (Bajie said: “I came to the front of the mountain again, but now the wind has changed.”)

Xingzhe dao: “Guan ta shenme zhuan feng bu zhuan feng, qie zou lu” (Wukong said: “It doesn't matter if the wind changed or not, just go.”) (*Journey to the West Part 2*)

In example (19), “Guan” is no longer an actual verb, and “ta” has no clear meaning. “Guan ta” means “don't care”. It has become a rhyme word [5], which also conforms to the development trend of Chinese disyllabic words [6]. Zhang Tiantian (2012) pointed out that the combination of the verb “guan” and the pronoun object “ta” has been conjunctive [7]. According to the investigation, the word “guan ta” has not been included in the dictionary for the time being, but in some contexts, it already has the function of a conjunction. Similar to “no matter”. The term “no matter” and other connectives are used from conditionally marked compound sentences to unconditional compound sentences, which means that the result or conclusion is valid under any conditions or premises [8]. For example, in example (19), “guan ta” is used as a conjunction to associate the preceding and following segments. Regardless of whether the condition of “the wind has changed, “we all continue to walk”. It can be seen that “Guan ta shenme X” has become an unconditional minor sentence marker.

In the corpus of the Qing Dynasty, the form of the component X in the unconditional marker usage “Guan ta shenme X” is more abundant, not only in the form of “X bu X”, it can also be a generic category (example 20b) or an exhaustive list (example 20c) . e.g:

(20) a. Guan ta shenme gui bu gui de, qie meng zhou gong. (Don't care about the ghost, just sleep.)

b. Yao jing bu lai bian ba, ta yao shi lai le, jiu na dao kan ta, guan ta shenme yao jing. (It is better if the goblin doesn't come. But if he comes, just cut him with a broadsword, no matter what kind of goblin he is.)

c. Guan ta shenme da ren de zhi yu, peng you men pan wang, pang ren chi xiao, ming sheng hao bu hao, wo zhi qiu kuai huo bian le. (I don't care about adult's understanding, friends' expectation, others' laugh, if I have a good reputation or not, I just want to be happy.)

In the above examples, in addition to the variety of X's components, there are also cases of collocation with adverbs, such as “jiu” in (20b) and “zhi” in (20c). With the increase of the co-occurrence of “Guan ta shenme X” and adverbs, the semantics of the minor sentence become more delexical, and more express the subjective emotions and attitudes of the speaker. Just as Zhang Yisheng (2000) believes that the formation of certain delexical mechanisms is mainly triggered by pragmatic reasons, the final completion of the delexical process is also induced by the interaction of various pragmatic factors in the process of language use [11].

“Guan” derives a negative meaning in the rhetorical context, and forms a double-syllabic prosodic word with the delexical meaning of “ta”, which has the function of conjunctions. At the same time, it cooperates with “shenme” and X in the unconditional compound sentence to complete the “guan”. The semantic evolution of “X” is grammatically transformed into an unconditional pragmatic marker.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper discusses the formation of a sentence pattern of “Guan ta shenme X” from the

perspective of a double-object structure into an unconditional pragmatic marker, which is regarded as a process of grammaticalization of the sentence pattern. In the process of evolution, the verb-object phrase “guan ta” became blurred and chunked, but the delexical “Guan ta shenme X” could not be separated from a certain sentence environment. For example, in a rhetorical question, “guan ta” has already begun to be delexical. However, it is not closely related to the specific sentence pattern, and it does not need to appear in the complex sentence, and “ta” can also be a notional reference. When the delexical “Guan ta shenme X” appears in the environment of unconditional complex sentences and guiding the unconditional minor sentence, the evolution can be completed. Among them, “ta” is highly delexical and must be adhered to behind “guan” to form a conjunction function “guan ta”. In the process of gradually grammatically turning “guan ta shenme X” into a pragmatic marker, it expresses the speaker's subjective knowledge and attitude.

## 6. Note

① The linguistic data of this paper comes from the Modern Chinese Corpus, Center for Chinese Linguistics, Peking University (CCL), Bank of Chinese corpus, Beijing Language and Culture University (BCC), and People's Daily Online. To save space, individual language examples have been shortened.

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