

## The Reported Speech Particle in the Xining Dialect

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Xining, Qinghai, a relatively small provincial capital, has long been a cultural crossroad, situated at the junction of the Chinese, Tibetan and Mongolic ethno-linguistic regions. There is good historical evidence that since at least the 13<sup>th</sup> century the region has been home to speakers of all three language families. This long time period has engendered the current situation in which many linguistic features have converged across the languages of the region.

Among such features is the use of a reported-speech particle, pronounced [fɔ̃], in the Chinese dialect of Xining. The particle is used at the end of sentences to indicate that the information in the sentence is from some other source that may or may not be mentioned explicitly. The particle is derived from the verb ‘to say’ (SC: *shuō* 说), though speakers do not generally recognize the derivation. The particle indicates the presence of a rudimentary evidentiary system at work in the grammar. Such a system is unlike any closely related Sinitic language, which suggests it was borrowed from one of the neighboring languages.

This reported-speech particle in the Chinese dialect of Xining demonstrates that the dialect’s grammar was altered in a profound way as a result of language contact. While the precise nature of that contact may never be known, when compared with other borrowed features and features that are clearly inherited from an earlier variety of Chinese, there is ample evidence that allows for some speculation as to the social conditions under which the contact occurred. The evidence is also valuable for supporting the general model of language change I have elsewhere called the eco-evolutionary model.

Variation in the pronunciation of this particle among Xining dialect speaker is also an indicator of ethnic affiliation. This particle, and the verb from which it is derived, belong to a class of words whose variation in initial consonant (between *f-* and *ʃ-*) is a clear marker of ethnic self identification.