

Tense, Aspect and Modality in Chinese: A Typological Study

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Abstract

This dissertation is an investigation of the tense-aspect-modality (TAM) system of modern regional varieties of Chinese (also known as Sinitic languages or Chinese dialects) from a functional typological perspective. It also presents an exploration of the synchronic status and diachronic development of a range of relevant grammatical morphemes and functional categories in Chinese.

The dissertation includes three major parts, each dwelling on modality, aspect, and tense respectively.

Part One is a comprehensive survey of modality in Chinese within the framework of the semantic map model. With extensive data from a variety of Chinese dialects as well as certain non-Sinitic languages, we build up a new semantic map of modality, with special emphasis on the possibility modality, which is a substantial refinement of the existing map proposed by typologists. Based on the empirical study on modality's semantic map, we further propose certain working principles for improving the methodology of semantic map building. Throughout the chapters in this part, we adhere to the methodological combination of two distinct approaches – the inductive approach (i.e., the conventional method for semantic map building) and the deductive approach (i.e., the semantic-structure analysis).

Part Two is devoted to the discussion of the aspect system of Chinese, with a particular focus on the verbal *LE* in Mandarin, one of the most important aspectual morphemes in Chinese. The main purpose for this part is to give a refined account of the status and function of verbal *LE* on the basis of a comprehensive description of the conditions determining or affecting its use. We argue that both the grammaticalization degree and the semantic indication of verbal *LE* are inconsistent across various clausal contexts and lexical predicates. The verbal *LE* in either Standard Mandarin or other Mandarin varieties (particularly Northwestern Mandarin) is a morpheme heterogeneous in synchronic status and along the process of further grammaticalization.

Part Three focuses on the sentence-final particle *LAI* in certain northern dialects. A number of northern dialects use *LAI* 來 as a sentence-final particle to mark a large range of past states of affairs; that is to say, its usage in past-tense marking becomes pretty much mature. The observation constitutes a great challenge to the traditional assumption that Chinese does not have any grammatical device for tense marking. Our examination of the sentential *LAI* in northern Chinese dialects leads to a new understanding of the tense system of Chinese, and provides a plausible explanation for the puzzling usage of the sentential *le* and *laizhe* in Standard Mandarin.