

The Expression of Tense in Chinese Languages

One of the research topics in the 'Syntax' project is concerned with the question of the expression of tense and finiteness in Chinese languages and the role played by sentence final particles.

Report >
China

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Formulating an assumption that is widely held, Li and Thompson (1981:13) write: 'Mandarin has no markers for tense'. However, there exist minimal pairs like the following (cf. Li and Thompson 1981:589 (46a,b)):

(1) a. **tamen ba-dian-zhong kai-men**
they eight-o'clock open-door
they (will) open at eight o'clock

b. **tamen ba-dian-zhong kai-men de**
they eight-o'clock open-door prt
they opened at eight o'clock

The linguistic terms used in the example above and the ones to follow are all explained in the note below.* The only formal difference between the above sentences lies in the presence of the element *de* in (1b). In terms of meaning, the difference is that the variant with *de* definitely has a past tense interpretation, while (1a) does not. We must, however, for several reasons, not jump to the conclusion that *de* is a past tense marker. One of these reasons is that the following minimal pair (based on Li and Thompson 1981:592 (55), (56)) does not show the same interpretational difference as we saw in (1):

(2) a. **women bu hui qifu nimen**
we not will bully you (plural)
we are not going to bully you

b. **women bu hui qifu nimen de**
we not will bully you (plural) prt
we are not going to bully you (believe us)

Here, the difference has nothing to do with tense. Whereas (2a) is a neutral statement of fact, (2b) is used in a situation

Note >

* In all examples 'prt' signifies 'particle'. In example 3 the numbers used in the expression 'A3-Chan4 hai4 keoi5-lou5gung1' refer to tones in Cantonese. For example: 'A3' signifies 'A' in the third tone.

in which 'you' may have reasons to fear that 'we' are going to bully 'you', or to explain other aspects of 'our' behaviour (cf. Li and Thompson 1981: 592). In Cantonese, another variety of Chinese, we have an element *lei4*, which, judging from the following minimal pair, also indicates past tense:

(3) a. **A3-Chan4 hai4 keoi5-lou5gung1**

Ah Chan be 3s-husband
Ah Chan is her husband

b. **A3-Chan4 hai4 keoi5-lou5gung1lei4**

Ah Chan be (s)he-husband prt
Ah Chan was her husband (for a while in the past;
no longer is)

Like Mandarin *de*, *lei4* can also not be a pure tense-marker as we know it, since it only co-occurs with certain types of predicates; generally, past tense markers do not discriminate in that way. Despite these reasons for doubting the wisdom of calling *de* and *lei4* tense-markers, we must acknowledge the fact that Chinese languages do have (morphological) means to explicitly mark a sentence as [+past], as we just saw.

Li and Thompson's opening quotation is correct in the sense that one and the same sentence can be used to describe a past and a present or future event. The following Mandarin examples show this:

(4) a. **wo zuotian mai shu de-shihou, peng-shang Li Si**

I yesterday buy book when bump-into Li Si
when I was buying books yesterday, I bumped into Li Si

b. **women xian chi-fan, hou mai shu**

we first eat later buy book
we'll first eat, then we'll buy books

The same verb phrase *mai shu* 'buy book' is used to describe a past event in (4a) and a future event in (4b). There is no marking of anything. Indeed, overt marking with *de* in (4a) would lead to ungrammaticality.

It must be noted, however, that in isolation predicates tend to have a strongly preferred temporal reading, which can hardly be overridden by pragmatic interference (cf. Matthewson 2002: see also Lin 2002). In (linguistic) isolation, the following Mandarin example is necessarily interpreted as present tense. If *Zhang San* refers to someone who is dead, the sentence is not felicitous (even if both hearer and speaker know):

(5) **Zhang San zhu zai zher**
Zhang San live at here
Zhang San lives here

We can add an adverbial like *yiqian*, 'formerly', and get a past tense interpretation, as (6) shows. The same effect can be reached by embedding it in a linguistic context such that it will get a past tense interpretation:

(6) **Zhang San yiqian zhu zai zher**
Zhang San formerly live at here
Zhang San lived/used to live here

The point is that (5), without such linguistic manipulations, only has a present tense interpretation; as noted, a deceased person as the subject is not enough to enforce a past tense interpretation. In other words, pragmatics alone is not enough. This can be taken as an indication that the Chinese sentence contains some tense element, the interpretation of which is fixed structurally.

In short, Chinese languages may have means to explicitly mark a sentence as [+past], that this marking is not always obligatory, and may in certain contexts even be ungrammatical. We also found reasons to assume that Chinese sentences may contain a temporal referential element; the reference of this element is determined by the structural context. We seek to interpret these findings, also in the light of general theories of tense, finiteness, and subject licensing. In the meantime, comments are welcome. ◀

References

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