

Richard Xiao & Tony McEnery 2004, *Aspect In Mandarin Chinese: A Corpus-based Study*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company. ISBN: 1588116018

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## 1. Overview

As an aspect language, Chinese has attracted a great deal of attention in linguistic research. However, systematic treatment of Chinese aspect has been lacking. In this regard the publication of *Aspect in Mandarin Chinese: A Corpus based Study* (AIMC) by X&Mc, which is based on the first author's dissertation work, can be seen as a breakthrough. Two of the most notable features of this book can be summarized as follows.

First, it is the first book on aspect based on corpus data, and as far as I am aware, this is true for both English and Chinese. Researchers often argue over some of the very basic issues of Chinese aspect, issues such as the inventory of aspect markers and their use and meanings. Much of the controversy may be attributable to the diverse range of theoretical concepts used by different scholars, but a lot more, to me, may be attributed to the lack of empirical data. Typically, researchers base their discussion on intuition and made up sentences; for a category as complex as aspect, however, much more help than intuition and isolated sentences is needed. AIMC uses two monolingual corpora of Chinese: a collection of newspaper texts of over 125,000 characters, and, for Chapter 6 only, the Lancaster Corpus of Modern Chinese (LCMC), which has over one million words and is a balanced corpus of written Chinese. For comparison with English, the authors use a written British English corpus (FLOB), a written American English corpus (FROWN), as well as an English-Chinese parallel corpus. Throughout the book, the authors use statistical data to support their claims, with interesting results. One such example is the figures on the distribution of the verbal suffix ('actual') *-le*, the change of state (COS) *le*, and the double-role *le*. The authors find that nearly 85% of the *le* uses are the verbal suffix *-le*, 13% are the COS *le*, and 2% are the double-role *le* (p. 92). These figures show interesting features of narrative discourse. While large scale corpora are becoming increasingly available for research, it is rare to find book-length studies on a specific topic that draw exhaustive evidence from corpora. AIMC, in this regard, sets a useful model for similar research in the future.

Second, while an empirical study in nature and with a focus on Chinese, this book fills in many theoretical gaps. With a clear survey of the state of the

art in aspect research, and extending the theoretical frameworks developed in such works as Vendler (1967) and Smith (1997), X&Mc propose a new model of aspect where situation aspect (the semantic dimension) is distinguished from viewpoint aspect (the grammatical dimension). Upon elaborating on the two-component model, they apply it systematically to Chinese and English, with quantitative data. Such a combination of intense theoretical discussion with solid empirical data is both rare and refreshing, and the findings clearly go beyond the two languages covered.

## 2. The Contents

The book contains seven chapters, which are organized around three themes: theoretical discussion, aspect in Chinese, and comparison of Chinese and English.

Chapter 1 discusses the general problems in aspect research and aspect in Chinese. It highlights a number of shortcomings of existing research, including the lack of empirical data and the lack of a comprehensive view of the subcategories of aspect (e.g. situation aspect vs. viewpoint aspect). A detailed description of the Chinese and English databases used for this study is provided.

Chapter 2 introduces the authors' two component theory of aspect, which sets up the overall framework for the remainder of the book. The two components refer to situation aspect and viewpoint aspect. Situation aspect deals with verb semantics, the classification of verbs based on their inherent aspect values, whereas viewpoint aspect refers to morphosyntactic marking of aspect (i.e. aspect markers). The former is semantic/conceptual in nature and is supposed to be shared by all languages, whereas the latter is grammatical in nature and tends to be language specific. The proposal of these two components is not exactly new, as the authors acknowledge, and it relies heavily on the work of Smith (1997), but X&Mc approach it in a different way. The authors argue that aspect is fundamentally compositional in nature, and as such the two components, which have previously been linked to the lexical level and the sentential level, respectively, should now be treated as simultaneously working at both levels. For situation aspect, X&Mc emphasize that situations (including dynamic *events* and non-dynamic *states*) should be taken to refer to linguistic expressions codifying entities in the real world rather than real world entities per se: and for viewpoint aspect, the authors maintain a dichotomy of perfective and imperfective aspects.

To show how situation aspect operates at both the lexical and the sentential levels, Chapter 3 first evaluates three traditional semantic parameters, [ $\pm$ dynamic], [ $\pm$ durative] and [ $\pm$ telic], and then introduces two additional ones: [ $\pm$ result] and [ $\pm$ bounded]. While the proposal of [ $\pm$ result] is motivated mainly by the Resultative Verb Complement (RVC) construction in Chinese, a structure that X&Mc consider to be highly relevant for aspect in Chinese, the introduction of [ $\pm$ bounded] makes it relevant the distinction between final temporal endpoint (a criterion for [ $\pm$ bounded]) and final spatial endpoint (a criterion for [ $\pm$ telic]). With these parameters defined, X&Mc go on to propose six verb classes as constituting situation aspect at the lexical level: activity, semelfactive, accomplishment, achievement, individual-level state, and stage-level state. To demonstrate specifically how situation aspect is the result of the interaction of lexical and sentential parameters, the authors introduce 12 rules to map the verb classes at the lexical level onto situation types at the sentential level (which are said to have the same categories as those for the lexical level situation types). To illustrate, Rule 1, Verb  $[-\text{telic}/\pm\text{bounded}] + \text{RVCs} \Rightarrow \text{Derived predicate } [+result/+telic]$  basically states that when complements, as expressed by the RVC, are added to the [-telic] or [-bounded] verbs, the derived predicate becomes [+telic] and [+result] because of the effect of the complement, which indicates a final spatial endpoint or result (pp. 60–1). An example of this given by the authors is *ta he zui le jiu* (he drink drunk liquor — ‘he got drunk’). These mapping rules are further grouped into the categories of nucleus level composition, core level composition, and clause level composition, a taxonomy defined by Van Valin (forthcoming) and whose determination depends on the kind of associated elements (arguments and non-arguments) that interact with the main verb or predicate. In devising this elaborate system of situation aspect, X&Mc succeed in bringing together the relevant materials at different levels and recognizing their places in the overall interlocking system of situation aspect.

Following the chapter on situation aspect, Chapters 4 and 5 move on to the domain of viewpoint aspect, and deal with perfective and imperfective aspects respectively. What is notable about those two chapters is that the authors take a much broader approach to aspect marking than most researchers have attempted. For perfective marking, for example, in addition to the well discussed markers, *-le* and *-guo*, the authors dedicated considerable space to reduplication forms and VRC constructions, where the latter is shown to be the most productive perfective marker for completeness. The same can be said about imperfective viewpoint aspect, where X&Mc identify *-zhe*, *zai*, *-qi-lai*, and *-xiaqu* as major devices for the imperfective aspect. Even though some of these forms have been discussed by earlier authors (e.g. Chao 1968, Li and

Thompson 1981), AIMC provides by far the most comprehensive coverage of aspect marking in Chinese.

It may be pointed out that the value of using corpus data is best illustrated by the two viewpoint aspect chapters. In discussing the Change of State (COS) *le*, for example, the authors show us that the COS *le* interacts most prominently with Individual Level State (ILS) verbs (40.59%) and Achievement verbs (35.64%) (Table 4.4, p.137). Such a skewed distribution is in contrast with the actualization *-le* (i.e. the verb suffix *-le* that indicates the actualization of a situation) discussed earlier in the chapter, which is shown to concentrate more on Achievement (49.9%), Accomplishment (29.6), and Action (13.1%) situations. Equally useful is data for the distribution of three RVC categories: Result-State RVC=872 (50%), Directional RVC=824 (47%), and Completive RVC=45 (3%), and for the functional distribution of the durative *-zhe* (Overlapping=51.25%, Durative=37.82%, and Locative Inversion=10.92%). These figures present a panoramic view of the tendencies of the aspect markers in actual language use, at least as they appear in the kinds of data that this book analyzes.

For each of the aspect markers under discussion, the authors typically start by clarifying the relevant notions used by various researchers; then general properties of the item in question are provided, with an optional comparison of similar items. This is followed by a description of the interaction patterns that the item has with situation types; and finally, important semantic properties of the item in question are discussed. In the case of the progressive *zai*, for example, the authors discuss the relevant semantic properties of progressive-ness, non-holisticity, and dynamicity that are seen to be associated with the progressive marker.

After the discussion of the Chinese situation aspect and viewpoint aspect, the book dedicates a whole chapter to the comparison of aspect in Chinese and English. This is almost an independent project considering the fact that it is based on a larger amount of data that became available later in the course of the study. What makes this comparison useful is that it provides concise distributional information about the aspect markers in fifteen different text categories and tracks, quantitatively, how English aspect marking is translated into Chinese. On the basis of these counts, the authors further identify patterns of aspect marking in the two languages. A number of the reported patterns provide useful data for examination. For example, the figures in Table 6.21 (p.276) show that the imperfective category, simple future, in English is translated into Chinese with the following top three devices: Modal (44.63%), Adverb (29.75%), and Unmarked (22.31%). This, obviously, is much more useful than

merely saying that tense is expressed in Chinese by lexical means, as is typical of the literature on tense-aspect in Chinese.

Chapter 7, the last chapter, gives a concise and clear summary of the findings of the book. It helps the reader to grasp the main ideas behind the rather complicated and vast range of topics covered by the book.

### 3. Critical Evaluations

While there is no doubt in my mind that AIMC breaks new grounds in aspect research, a number of critical remarks may be offered before wrapping up this review.

First of all, even though this book is based on corpus data, the monolingual database for Chinese is relatively small by today's standards: there are just over 125,000 characters, which is likely to be translated into 100,000 or fewer words, in the main corpus. As the authors inform us, the large, million word LCMC corpus did not become available until the late phase of the study. More problematic, however, is the issue of discourse genre. Most of the monolingual Chinese texts outside of LCMC that are used for the main project come from a newspaper, and they are naturally more typical of journalistic discourse. For this reason the title of the book might be more aptly called *Aspect in Written Chinese*. We are in no position to judge, for example, whether the patterns identified in this book would apply equally well to spoken, dialogic Chinese, or spoken English for that matter. As a pioneering study on aspect based on corpus data, however, this deficiency is easily forgiven.

Secondly, the discussion on situation aspect is very much theory-driven and abstract. To the authors credit, they have made every effort to construct the categories as operationalized as possible. However, due to the fact that this component of the theory depends heavily on the classification scheme of verbs in isolation, i.e. within a "neutral context", not all of the categories are clearly identifiable. One such example is the feature [ $\pm$ bounded] in Section 3.2.5. Even though this is a new feature introduced by the authors for situation aspect, this section is heavy on comparison with other features (e.g. 'telic') and with other researchers' definitions. No clear positive diagnostics, as with the cases of [ $\pm$ telic] and [ $\pm$ dynamic], are provided. As a result [ $\pm$ bounded] seems to be one of the least clearly described features of situation aspect.

Related to the two aforementioned points is that, since the book strives to present empirical data from natural language corpora, one would expect more original data and coding decisions to be revealed and discussed in the book.

In addition to coding issues that one would like to see discussed, for example, it would be very helpful to have all the verbs found in the corpora and their associated categories in situation aspect listed as something of an appendix to the main text.

Finally, even though the authors take a useful expansive approach to viewpoint aspect in Chinese, some important issues remain missing from their coverage. For example, the contrasts between the progressive markers, *zheng*, *zhengzai*, and *zai* (see Hsu 1998), and between *-guo*, *-le* and adverbs such as *yijing*, *ceng*, and *cengjing* would be highly relevant topics to explore for such a comprehensive book.

To sum up, overall AIMC does an outstanding job in introducing a new empirical approach to aspect study; its broad approach to aspect in Chinese is fruitful; and the parallel corpus-based contrastive analysis of Chinese and English has both theoretical and practical values. It is no exaggeration that *Aspect in Mandarin Chinese* by Xiao and McEnery will be a landmark in Chinese linguistics and in aspect research in general.

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