

XIAO Richard and McENERY Tony (2004). *Aspect in Mandarin Chinese: A corpus-based study*. Amsterdam : John Benjamins. 305 p.

The Chinese aspect system has undergone extensive research during the past five decades. However – as the authors of this book point out – different linguists define aspect in different ways, hence, there is no generally accepted explanatory model. One of the main aims of this book is to present such a model. What differentiates this account from previous ones is not the framework – Xiao and McEnery use a somewhat modified version of Smith's (1991, 1997) two-component aspect model – but the fact that it is corpus-based and contains both quantitative and qualitative evidence for the authors' claims where many other studies have relied solely on native speaker intuition. To outline the aspect system of Mandarin Chinese is a tremendous task but Xiao and McEnery have accomplished a much-awaited study and a carefully prepared monograph that should be of great interest to all scholars in the field.

The book starts with an introduction followed by **Chapter two**, which briefly reviews the existing literature on aspectual theory, defines Smith's two-component aspect theory and presents some problems with her model. In **Chapter three**, the authors divide one of the components in Smith's theory – situation aspect – into two levels, verb classes at the lexical level and situation types at the sentential level (the latter in turn categorized into three units: nucleus level, core level and clause level). I found this chapter very well structured and enlightening. The discussion on the context-

dependent effect of NP arguments on situation aspect in Chinese is particularly interesting. The authors also discuss the roles played by peripheral adjuncts and viewpoint aspect (i.e. *e* aspect markers) in clause level situation aspect.

The fourth and fifth chapters present the perfective aspects and the imperfective aspects in Chinese. These two chapters form the nucleus of this book. The very thorough analysis of these aspects in Chinese is a pleasure to read (although I did not agree with everything in it), in particular since this part of the book is generously sprinkled with example sentences from the corpora. I will go into the analysis in some detail and comment on the parts that I find particularly worth pointing out.

**Chapter four** explores the perfective viewpoints, of which (according to the authors) there are four in Mandarin Chinese. These are the actual aspect (marked by *-le*), the experiential aspect (marked by *-guo*), the delimitative aspect (marked by verb reduplication) and the completive aspect (marked by resultative verb complements). The chapter begins with an introduction to the actual aspect marker *-le* and a clarification on the authors' standpoint in the debate over whether *le*, which can occur both as a post verbal particle and as a clause-final such, should be considered as one or two morphemes. This is a debate that I believe partly originates in two distinct research foci. Two-morpheme advocates generally concentrate on differences in syntactic distribution and – to a limited extent – semantics, while one-morpheme advocates concentrate on semantic similarities and pragmatic effects on the interpretation of *le*. While Xiao and McEnery defend the two-morpheme treatment of *le*, unlike most other authors with this view, they argue that a complete description of the Chinese aspect system should include both verbal *-le*, or actual *-le*, and clause-final *le*, or Change of State (COS) *le*. However, they seem to have had some problems finding a proper place in their model for COS *le* (perhaps caused by their characterization of the inchoative aspect as an

imperfective viewpoint). In the end, while its function and interaction with situation types is briefly described in a section in chapter four, it is not included in the aspectual model. One is tempted, in the end, to see this as a failure to incorporate COS *le* into the Chinese aspectual system. I also find it regrettable that the authors choose not to mention – or fail to observe – the fact that post verbal *-le* and clause-final *le* show certain overlapping functions, such as expressing perfect tense/aspect. If they had done so, they would probably have had less difficulties incorporating clause-final *le* into their model. Further, Xiao and McEnery do not discuss the quite common sentences with clause-final *le* that describe isolated events in the past such as:

- (1) Ni shang ge zhoumo zuo shenme le?  
 you last CLF weekend do what LE  
 'What did you do last weekend?'

and

- (2) Ta qunian biye le<sup>1</sup>  
 he last-year graduate LE  
 'He graduated last year'

It would have been interesting to know how the function of *le* in such sentences could be subsumed under the concept Change of State. Finally, it was pleasing to see the acknowledgement of a relationship between actuality and reference time, since the relationship between aspect and reference time is often neglected in the literature. However, I think Reichenbach's (1947) three times (Event Time ET, Reference Time RT and Speech Time ST) could have been introduced earlier and in a little bit more detail as some readers may not be familiar with them. It is also a bit puzzling that the authors include ET=RT=ST (i.e. e simultaneity of both Event

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<sup>1</sup> *Biye* 'graduate' is a verb-object construction that is normally separated by verbal *-le*, hence this should be clause-final *le*.

According to Xiao and McEnery's definition of reference time, the reference time in this sentence should be last year. But it is neither the case that the subject broke his leg before last year, nor necessarily that the final state of his leg being broken does not hold during this time (last year) – rather, it does not hold at Speech Time.

The third and fourth perfective aspects, the delimitative aspect, achieved through verb reduplication, and the completive aspect, manifested by resultative verb complements (RVCs), are explored in the final two parts of this chapter. Xiao and McEnery argue that all RVCs indicate completion. They compare the sentences

(4) Hao rongyi dang-le bing  
 very easy is-ACTL soldier  
 '(He) finally became a soldier' (p. 167)

and

(5) Hao rongyi dangwan bing  
 very easy is-finish soldier  
 '(He) finally ended his soldier life' (p. 167)

and argue that the former, with *-le*, indicate the beginning of a situation while the latter, with the RVC *wan* 'finish', indicates completiveness. On the other hand, two pages earlier, *dangshang pingwei*, 'become a judge (in contests)' (pp. 165-166) exemplifies the use of RVC *shang* 'up') but does not express a completed action. In fact, the authors acknowledge that *shang* here indicates the attainment of a goal – which means that it does not indicate completion any more than *-le* does with the stative verb *dang* 'to be, act as' but rather the inception of a state. It thus seems a bit too strict to claim that all RVCs express completion.

**Chapter five** is devoted to the imperfective aspects in Mandarin Chinese. These are, according to Xiao and McEnery, the inceptive

viewpoint (marked by *-qilai*), the durative aspect (marked by *-zhe*), the progressive aspect (marked by *zai*) and the continuative viewpoint (marked by *-xiaqu*). While most other works on aspect regard only *zai* and *-zhe* as indicators of the imperfective aspect in Chinese, in this study also *-qilai* and *-xiaqu* are incorporated into the Mandarin aspect system. *-Qilai* and *-xiaqu* are usually described as verb complements with directional and/or resultative meanings. While these meanings are acknowledged in the book, its focus lies on the aspectual functions of *-qilai* and *-xiaqu*. A considerable part of this chapter discusses the verbal marker *-zhe* and its three basic functions: to signal durativity, to express overlapping actions or provide background information and to indicate existentiality in so-called locative inversion sentences (which is in fact also a case of providing background information). I found the part about the occurrence of *-zhe* with the stative verb *you* 'have' particularly interesting. *-Zhe* is compatible with durative situations and incompatible with stative verbs that indicate relations and personal properties. The authors' findings show that *-zhe* can only co-occur with *you* (which indicates relationship) if its internal argument refers to an abstract concept. In this chapter, the emphatic force that is often signalled by *-zhe* when it occurs with stative verbs is also mentioned. Unfortunately, not much is said about it. I would have liked a more detailed analysis of such sentences and a more specific description of this function than "*-zhe* emphasises the state of *being alive*" (p. 190) in the sentence

(6) Danxin shuo-le zhenhua hou bu neng  
worry say-ACTL truth after not able

huo-zhe huijia  
live-DUR go-home

'He was afraid that if he told the truth, he would not be able to get home alive' (p. 190).

What exactly the emphatic force marked by *-zhe* consists of is quite unclear. Further, it is argued here that *-zhe*, as opposed to actual *-le*, can be used in both backgrounded and foregrounded situations, whereas *-le* can only be used in foregrounded situations. This claim sounds odd considering that this part of the chapter deals with, among other things, locative inversion sentences in which *-le* according to Hu (1995) "presents a resultative state which is a state due to certain previous action". This suggests that these sentences too, must be regarded somehow as presenting backgrounded situations.

In the final part of this chapter, the so-called zero aspect is investigated. Is there such a thing as neutral aspect marking in Chinese? The authors argue that there isn't. In their data there are no examples of unmarked sentences that are neither perfective nor imperfective. Sentences that take zero aspect marking are not ambiguous between perfective and imperfective readings – their aspectual meanings are contextually determined. An interesting observation here is that monosyllabic verbs seem to have a tendency to require the presence of *-le*, while with disyllabic verbs in similar contexts *-le* can be omitted.

In **Chapter six**, the merits of a language-universal aspectual framework are successfully demonstrated as the authors contrast the distribution of aspect markers in English and Chinese and look at how aspectual meanings in English are translated into Chinese. Certain differences between aspect marking in Chinese and English are discussed: not only is English a much less aspectual language than Chinese, but there are also differences in distribution that can be traced to distinctions between the two languages regarding how some of the aspects are used. For example, the progressive in English has several uses in addition to expressing an ongoing situation, such as indicating habitual or anticipated situations. The chapter begins with a comparison between the distributional patterns for the perfective and the imperfective aspects in the two languages but the main part of the chapter investigates Chinese

translations of English aspect markers based on an English-Chinese parallel corpus. The possible translations of each aspect are exemplified with extracts from the corpus and discussed. Tables demonstrate differences in frequency. This chapter shows the language-independency of the framework and the findings here seem consistent with the definitions of the aspects presented in the earlier chapters. Not only is this chapter undoubtedly of great value for linguists interested in contrastive research but the clarity and structure of it also further validates the symmetry in this theory, which makes it a very nice wrap-up.

The book ends with a short summary and some suggestions for how the model could be extended by the inclusion of an analysis of the relationship between aspect and other grammatical categories, such as negation.

Overall, I found the book very enjoyable and I appreciated the clarity and highly cohesive structure of the model. It contains an elegant symmetry that, considering the empirical evidence presented and the excellent refinement of Smith's two-component theory, will be hard to refute. In addition, the abundant examples from corpus data will be of great value for researchers in this field. I would, however, have liked to see more discussion regarding pragmatic influence on the interpretation of the aspects. Very little is mentioned as to how the context affects aspectual reading. For example, it is implied in chapter five that the durative aspect (marked by *-zhe*) normally indicates dynamicity with a dynamic verb constellation, while it demonstrates stativity with a stative verb constellation. But a verb like *chuan* 'wear'; 'put on', that can be both stative and dynamic, can have either of the readings with *-zhe* depending on the context in which it occurs. While Xiao and McEnery acknowledge the distinction between the two readings, they do not explain what makes the reader interpret it either way. Similarly, it is not completely clear when *-guo* should be interpreted as an RVC and when it is an experiential aspect marker, a distinction that is obviously made based on contextual clues. That being said, this book presents an important step on the road towards

a better understanding of the Chinese aspectual system, including both situation aspect and grammatical aspect, and convincingly demonstrates the value of using corpus data to achieve greater accuracy when describing linguistic phenomena. It can be recommended to anyone who would like to know more about the fascinating temporal system in Mandarin Chinese.

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