

Meichun Liu (劉美君)
Professor and Head
Department of Linguistics and Translation
City University of Hong Kong

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Topic

The Chinese Mind: what does Chinese tell us about grammar?

Abstract

Chinese grammar is underspecified in a number of functional domains that are found obligatory in other languages. What is the Chinese grammar sensitive to and what is exactly “coded” in the grammatical system? These two questions have not been answered satisfactorily. This study aims to show that an insightful presentation of the Chinese grammar should depart from the English-biased framework and look into the fundamental mapping principles of FORM (surface coding) and FUNCTION (grammatical meaning) as they are realized in daily discourse of Chinese. Some unique characters of Chinese that have been puzzling to linguists include: the frequent use of bare nouns, the frequent omission of subject and object, non-obligatory coding of tense, obligatory presence of a degree marker in adjectival predication, unmarked serial verb construction, marked sequencing constraints (such as verb copying), the diverse use of *de* in NPs and VPs, the alternating functions of negative markers (*mei* vs. *bu*), and a number of controversial ‘aspectual’ markers (*le*, *zhe*, *guo*, *zai*). The study will demonstrate how a function-based (Givón 1993, Frajzyngier with Shay 2016), construction-oriented (Goldberg 1995, 2005, 2010) approach will offer a more sensitive account of the morpho-syntactic structures of Chinese. After all, “metaphorically and literally, grammar – as musical form - must make sense” (Givon 1993).