A text-based study of the grammar of Chinese from a systemic functional approach

Volume 1

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I hereby certify that the work has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution, and also that the sources of information used and the extent to which the work of others has been utilised have been indicated in the thesis.

Eden Sum Hung Li

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Abstract

This is a purpose-oriented and text-based study of the clause grammar of Chinese from a systemic functional perspective. Using data from the Chinese translation of an English-language novel, I have explored the non-arbitrary relationship between the semantic and grammatical system networks of the three modes of meaning, namely ideational, interpersonal and textual, by taking an inductive, top-down approach. The ideational meaning construes our experience of the world around us and inside us as a structural configuration; the interpersonal meaning enacts our social and intersubjective roles through the selection of speech functions; and finally the textual meaning enables the ideational and interpersonal meanings to proceed as a flow of information, i.e. as text in context.

This is a study of text, an attempt to extend the clause grammar towards discourse semantics. Texts are studied as an unfolding process, and hence instead of modeling text as a generic structure, system networks which indicate the meaning potential that a language user can utilise are constructed. The ways in which the interactants take turns to make a conversation move on have been examined; the systems which control the flow of information as a text unfolds have been constructed; and finally, the issue of textual connexity has been explored. The issue of connexity in the present study embodies three concepts: the connexity of information chunks, which is concerned with the property of cohesion; the connexity of messages, which is closely related to the property of coherence; and the connexity of text, which includes methods of thematic progression and thematic selection.

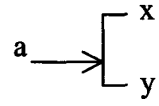
This thesis is also a contrastive study of Chinese and English, hoping to shed some light on translation between the two languages and on teaching Chinese to English speakers. The grammatical systems of the three modes of meaning in the two languages have been compared from three angles: from around, i.e. concerning the options available in the systems; from above, i.e. concerning the syntactic structural differences of the options; and from below, i.e. concerning the syntactic structural differences of the options, as well as the relative frequencies of the various options in the systems.

Symbols used in glossing Chinese

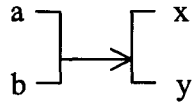
symbol	meaning	example
Particle		
ASSOC	associative	*qíshí tā bìng bù léjiě shì shí de zhēnxiàng* Actually he not know the matter ASSOC truth
ASP	aspectual	*nǐ zhēn jiù le wǒmēn, qīnàide péng yǒu.* you really save ASP we dear friend
DISP	dispositive	
DISP: op	dispositive: operative	*tā jiāng shǒuzhǐ pādì tán le yī shēng.* s/he DISP: op finger 'pa' snap ASP one MEAS
DISP: rec	dispositive: receptive	*tā bǎ báiluó lā-daò yīpáng* s/he DISP: rec Poirot pull reach aside
EMP	emphatic	*tā diquè shì měilì de.* s/he really EMP beautiful EMP
NEG	negative: neutral	*nǐ bú huì nòng cuò le ma?* you NEG possible make wrong ASP MOD: int
NEG: pf	negative: perfective	*tā cóng měi-yǒu qù guō měiguó?* s/he from NEG:pf go ASP America
NOM	nominaliser	*tā zhèng yǔ yī gè ǎixiǎo de nánrén tánhuà,* he just with one CL lean-small NOM man talk
NTR	negotiator	*nǐ yào jiàn wǒ ma?* you want see I NTR: int
NTR: int	negotiator: interrogative	
NTR: ass	Negotiator: assessment	*zhè gè dūshì wǒ hái měi dào gùo ni* this MEAS city I still NEG: pf visit ASP MOD:ass
POSS	possessive	*tā hēi shèhuì zhōng de dùitōu xià de dúshǒu* s/he triad society inside POSS enemy take action
SUB	subordinating	[[*sǐzhe sǐwáng de*]] *shíjiān yīng zài wǔyè.* the deceased die SUB time must be/at mid-night
Nominal		
MEAS	measurer	*tā jiāng shǒuzhǐ pādì tán le yī shēng.* s/he DISP: op finger 'pa' snap ASP one MEAS
NUM	numeral	*Huǒchē tóu yě qīránde wūyè le yī shēng* train head also melancholy cry ASP NUM MEAS
Q-why	Question-why	*wèishénme tā yào duì wǒ sāhuǎng?* Q-why s/he has to towards me lie

Verbal CV	coverb	*wǒ gěi tā shè le gè quāntào.* I CV s/he make ASP MEAS trap
PV	postverb	*zài wǔyè zhì língchén ěr shí zhījiàn.* CV mid-night CV early morning two o'clock PV
TAG	moodtag	*cuògùo le jiù tài kěxī le, shì-ba?* missing ASP then too pity ASP TAG
CC	complex construction	*nǐ fàn zhǔ de hǎoli le, bù-shì-ma?* you dish cook CC very good ASP TAG

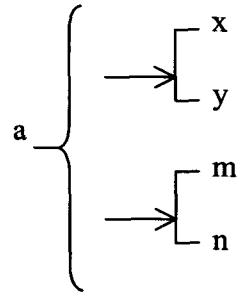
Systemic notational conventions



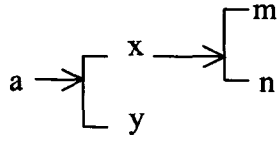
system:
if 'a', then 'x' or 'y'; abbreviated as 'a: x/y'



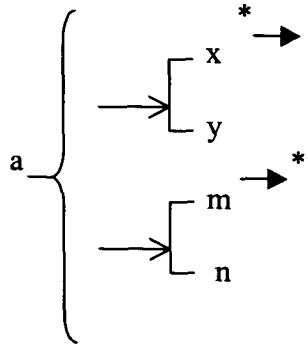
disjunction in entry condition:
if 'a' and 'b', then 'x/y'



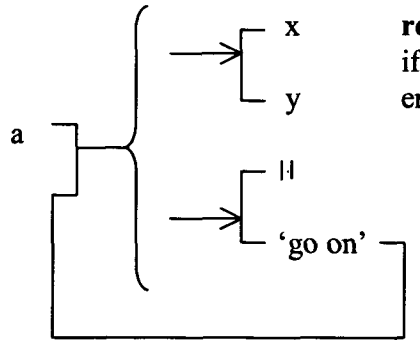
simultaneity:
if 'a', then simultaneously 'x/y' and 'm/n'



delicacy ordering:
if 'a', then 'x/y';
if 'x', then 'm/n'



conditional marking:
if 'a', then 'x/y';
if 'x', then also 'm'



recursive system (logical):
if 'a', then 'x/y' and simultaneously option of entering and selecting the same system again

(adapted from Matthiessen 1995)

Prelude

At the outset of this search for an understanding of the nature of language in general and the grammar of Chinese in particular, there are three quotable excerpts lingering in my mind. The first passage is an extract from the first book of the Bible:

> Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly."…. the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel – because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth. (Genesis 11:1-9)

The second passage comes from an interview with Halliday published in *Discussing Language*:

> Halliday: I don't believe in all-purpose grammar; I have in mind, rather, a grammar for the sort of purposes that I have been interested in, and those people that I have worked with. Grammars vary in their delicacy of focus. You may need for certain purposes a very dedicated grammar, one that's only going to do one job, and that job will totally determine the form of the grammar that you choose. At the other end of the scale, you have the notion – as is traditional in linguistics – of an all-purpose grammar, one which is the best for every job, which I really don't believe in. I've tried to move in at a midpoint on this scale – aiming at a grammar that will do a number of different jobs. (Halliday 1974: 609)

The third passage is taken from Hjelmslev's *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language,* translated by F.J. Whitfield:

> The description (of the language) shall be free of contradiction (self-consistent), exhaustive, and as simple as possible. The requirement of freedom from contradiction takes precedence over the requirement of exhaustive description. The requirement of exhaustive description takes precedence over the requirement of simplicity. (Hjelmslev 1943: 10)

I do not believe in a 'universal' description of grammar. But I am in search of a 'universal' grammatics (a theory of grammar); 'universal' in the sense that the theory is general enough to be applied to most, if not all, languages and also flexible enough to allow room for modification and refinement. However, 'general' is not equivalent to 'simple'. Unless we can grasp the complexity of a language, the pursuit of general rules can only lead to an oversimplification, and a distortion of facts.