

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON TENSE AND ASPECT IN CHINESE

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ABSTRACT

Chinese, it is well known, is an aspectual language. It does not mark tense grammatically. It is then generally accepted that there is no tense category in Standard Mandarin, at least when referring to morphological tense or syntactic tense, and not semantic tense, which is attested in almost all languages of the world. See Liu Mei-chun (2015). However, see also Sun Hongyuan (2014), Sybesma (2017) among others, who have presented arguments to conclude that Chinese can be considered to have syntactic tense. If we stick to Comrie's (1985) definitions, we can indeed consider that there could be a real category of tense in Chinese, and not only a category of aspect. A brief diachronic incursion into the origin and the evolution of the main aspectual markers (*liao* 了, *zhao* 着, *guò* 过, *zài* 在, etc.), and more specifically into the tense markers of the so-called *hàn ér yányǔ* 汉儿言语 (the language of the Han) of the Yuan dynasty (*yǒu* 有, *lái* 来, etc.) perhaps influenced by Middle Mongolian will first be made. Then, with reference to recent research undertaken by Zhang Jingting (2017), Zhao Lüyuan (2021), Yang Yonglong and Zhao Lüyuan (2021), Xing

Acknowledgments My thanks to G. F. Arcodia, R. Djamouri, J. Lefort, and Xu Dan for their constructive comments when a preliminary version of this article was presented on March 23rd 2023 in Hong Kong (The Education University of HK) as part of the 'France-Hong Kong Joint Research Scheme PROCORE 4686', and on April 10, 2023 at the ANR-LCNC Workshop in Paris. This work was supported by the following projects: French ANR – Hong Kong RGC 'PROCORE', ANR LCNC, ERC-2019-AdG-883700-TRAM.

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Xiangdong (2021), etc., the paper will try to show that the present-day Sinitic languages of Northwestern China (Tángwāng 唐汪, Gān'gōu 甘沟, Línxià 临夏, Wǔtún 五屯, etc.) have genuine tense markers, which cannot always be equated with aspectual markers.

KEYWORDS

Tense and Aspect Diachrony Typology Northern China Altaic Languages

1. INTRODUCTION

Chinese is known to be an aspectual language. It does not mark tense grammatically, so it is generally accepted that there is no tense category in Standard Mandarin, at least when it comes to morphological or syntactic tense, and not semantic tense that is attested in almost all languages of the world. In fact, unlike most Indo-European languages, there is no clear opposition between present and non-present, or even between past and non-past, which is certainly a stronger opposition in linguistic typology. As for the future, which is both a modal and a temporal concept, it can be marked by adverbs, but it is never obligatory. See Liu Meichun (2015).

However, Zhu Dexi (1982: 209) had already pointed out that modal particles such as *le* 了, *ne* 呢, or *laizhe* 来着 often express tense. See above all Zhang Jiqing (1998), and also Teng Shou-hsin (1986), Chen Ping (1988), Sun Hongyuan (2014), Sybesma (2017), who conclude that Chinese can be considered to have a syntactic tense.

A brief incursion into the history of Chinese will first be made, at the time of the Yuan dynasty (13th–14th c.), where some tense markers seem to have been common in this language called *hàn'ér yányǔ* 汉儿言语, such as *yǒu* 有, *lái* 来, etc., which have been said to be influenced by Middle Mongolian. I will then draw on recent research undertaken by Zhang Jingting (2017), Zhao Lüyuan (2015, 2021), Yang Yonglong and Zhao Lüyuan (2021), Xing Xiangdong (2015, 2017, 2020), etc. and will try to show that the present-day Sinitic languages of Northwestern China: Tángwāng 唐汪, Gān'gōu 甘沟, Línxià 临夏, Wǔtún 五屯, etc., have some tense markers, which cannot always be equated with aspectual markers, or modal particles.

汉语时与体的新视角

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摘要

众所周知，汉语是具有体貌的，但在语法层面，它并不标记时态。所以，一般而言，普通话里没有时态范畴，至少没有形态或句法上的时态，而语义层面的时态则显见于几乎所有自然语言中。详见刘美君(2015)。也有不同观点，如 Sun Hongyuan(2014)与 Sybesma(2017)等人就试图证明汉语是具有句法时态的。遵照 Comrie(1985)的定义，我们则可以说，除了体的范畴，汉语里可能确实有时态范畴。本文首先将对汉语中主要的体标记(*liǎo* 了, *zhe* 着, *guò* 过, *zài* 在, 等等)的起源与演变做一个简要的历时考察，尤其是元朝“汉儿言语”中的时态标记(*yǒu* 有, *lái* 来, 等等)，这些标记可能受到中古蒙古语的影响。然后，通过援引张竞婷(2017)、赵绿原(2021)、杨永龙与赵绿原(2021)、邢向东(2021)等人的研究，本文将试图说明今天的西北地区汉语方言(如唐汪、甘沟、临夏、五屯等地)确实具有时态标记，而且我们不能总是把它们与体标记混同起来。

关键词

时态与体貌 历时语言学 类型语言学 西北方言 阿尔泰语言