

TENSE AS AN ‘ALTAIC’ FEATURE IN NORTHERN SINITIC?

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ABSTRACT

Sinitic languages are very often described as ‘tenseless’, since they are mostly seen as lacking grammatical markers of tense. However, the debate concerning the tenseless nature of Sinitic has not settled yet: several types of items (modal and aspectual particles, verbs, etc.) have actually been analyzed as expressing both aspect and tense, tense and modality, or even tense only. In this paper, we would like to critically evaluate the role that contact with non-Sinitic (‘Altaic’) languages may have had in the grammaticalization of grammatical tense markers in Sinitic. Based on a survey of the proposals concerning the presence *vs.* absence of tense as a grammatical category in Sinitic languages, we shall argue that, just as just as for many other defining features of the East and Mainland Southeast Asian Area, the prominence of aspect and the general indeterminatedness of utterances appear to be somewhat less evident in (part of) Northern China than in Southern China. We shall assess the claims that contact

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favoured the development of tense in different Sinitic varieties: while this is very likely to be true for future markers in the Qinghai-Gansu region and perhaps in some other Northern Sinitic varieties, other tense (proto-)systems seem to be mostly explained by internal developments. We shall also discuss the reasons behind the apparent asymmetry between future/nonpast and past tense markers in this respect, exploring the role of the Mongolic languages of China in the establishment of mixed aspect-tense systems based on the past vs. nonpast opposition.

KEYWORDS

Tense Language contact Northern Sinitic Qinghai-Gansu *Sprachbund*

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern Standard Chinese (henceforth: MSC) and Sinitic languages in general are very often described as 'tenseless languages' in the literature, since they are mostly seen as lacking grammaticalised markers of tense (see e.g., Smith and Erbaugh 2005; Lin 2006, 2012; Matthews and Yip 2011; Sandman 2016; Li 2018). Thus, in Sinitic, the interpretation of time reference relies on other factors, such as lexical and grammatical aspect, modal verbs and particles, the use of time expressions, and context. Indeed, the lack of grammaticalized expression of tense is commonly seen as a feature not only of Sinitic, but also of the whole East and Mainland Southeast Asian area (see Dahl and Velupillai 2013).

However, the debate concerning the tenseless nature of Sinitic has not settled yet (for an overview, see Soh 2014; Arcodia 2023). Some scholars (e.g., Sybesma 2007; Sun 2014; He 2020) provide arguments in favour of a covert tense analysis (i.e., syntactic tense, namely a Tense node, in the absence of morphological tense), particularly for MSC. Also, several types of items (chiefly, but not exclusively, modal and aspectual particles) in Sinitic have been analyzed as expressing both aspect and tense, tense and modality, or even tense only: this is mostly true for non-standardised Sinitic languages, i.e., Chinese dialects. For instance, Xing (2023) discusses sentence-final particles in Jin dialects which, in his view, mark past, present, and future tense (both absolute and relative), some of which could be analyzed as fully grammaticalized dedicated exponents of tense, reportedly even obligatory in some varieties.

论北方汉语时制系统的性质与来源

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摘要

汉语族语言通常被描述为“无时制”语言，因为它们大多被认为缺乏名副其实的时制标记。然而，关于汉语的无时制性质，争论尚未解决：很多学者认为汉语中有不少情态助词、体标记、动词等能同时表示体与时、情态与时制，还认为其中有些语法标记专门表现时制。本文旨在了解汉语与非汉语（“阿尔泰”）语言接触是否影响到汉语族语言时制标记的语法化。基于有关汉语时制标记已有的研究，我们将论证，正如东亚与东南亚语言区域的许多其他特征一样，体范畴的重要性与话语的不定性在部分中国北方方言没南方方言那么明显。本文认为，青海—甘肃区域的语言与一部分其他北方方言的将来时标记的演变很可能受到了阿尔泰语言的影响，但别的方言的时制系统应该是独立演变的。本文还讨论将来时/非过去时标记与过去时标记在汉语方言中的非对称性，进一步探讨中国蒙古族语言对汉语方言体时混合表达系统建立的影响。

关键词

时制 语言接触 北方汉语 青海—甘肃语言区域