

SYNOPSIS

THE HYBRID SYNTACTIC TYPOLOGY OF SINITIC LANGUAGES

« SINOTYPE »

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In the past, the unquestioned assumption has been that Chinese languages are mere dialect variants and mainly differ in terms of sound systems and lexicon but not greatly in terms of their grammar. Even the distinguished linguist, Y.R. Chao upheld this point of view, while producing, paradoxically, a grammar of Cantonese not to mention detailed descriptions of aspect and modal particles in Wu dialect grammar, neatly showing differences from those in Mandarin (see Chao 1928, 1947).

Although it is true that the written language, acquired in formal education, provides a common medium of communication, from a technical and linguistic point of view, Chinese languages are mutually unintelligible in their spoken form, showing a relationship similar to Romance languages such as French, Spanish, Italian and Rumanian (see Chappell 1992, 2001a, 2001b). In fact, the written language itself is based on the official, standard language, Mandarin, with an overlay of literary Chinese. It is hence mainly for sociopolitical reasons that Chinese languages are considered to be dialects. In contradistinction to this tradition, this project will treat Chinese dialects as a separate, though indisputably related, group of languages belonging to the same taxon, with the technical name, Sinitic.

The primary objective of this project is to elucidate the reasons for why Sinitic languages possess a contradictory mixture of word order correlations, some of which tally with VO while others tally with OV. Preliminary hypotheses suggest that this hybrid nature could be due to the original source constructions in some instances (Givon 1984), suggesting that these could then be explained in terms of language-internal development involving grammaticalization. Others may be due to areal diffusion as Hashimoto (1976, 1986), Dryer (2003, forthcoming 2008) and Comrie (2007) *inter alia* propose or if not, simply to retention of features present in earlier stages of the language.

In this respect, my research to date has shown in fact that there is not just a North-South divide for Sinitic languages, as Hashimoto proposed (1976), stranding Mandarin dialects on one side from Southern Sinitic on the other (Cantonese, Hakka, Min, Wu etc). Further subdivisions within Sinitic can be made, in particular for Southern Sinitic, separating the Min dialects from Hakka and Yue (Cantonese), yielding a more fine-grained classification according to specific typological parameters such as aspect, modality and prepositional constructions.

A detailed study of the main syntactic features of the ten branches of Sinitic can thus rectify the situation for studies of this branch of Sino-Tibetan by filling in the many gaps which exist compared with our knowledge of its sister branch, Tibeto-Burman, much more fully surveyed in the typological literature to date. This can be accounted for by the fact that a much larger number of solid grammars are available in western languages for Tibeto-Burman. A study of Sinitic grammar carried out from a typological angle is therefore timely.

An international team of seven researchers and doctoral students will be established to carry out this project in which each member will be responsible for the grammatical description of one or two representative Sinitic languages. As principal investigator, I will undertake the overall direction of the project including an advisory role as *directeur de thèse* for the two doctoral students. I will be responsible for the synthesis of the individual descriptions of Sinitic languages into an overall picture of major typological characteristics of Sinitic languages within the Southeast Asian linguistic zone. This will include a new classification of Sinitic languages based on areal features and considerations of diachronic syntactic change. The findings will be made accessible to the larger linguistics community in both a monograph on the hybrid nature of Sinitic syntactic typology and in a series of monographs on lesser known Chinese languages.

Yunji WU (University of Melbourne), the co-investigator, and I will also carry out fieldwork on a grammar of a Sinitic language which has a transitional character – the Waxiang language – being located to the south of the Yangzi River in Hunan province, central China, that is, between northern and southern types of Sinitic languages. Research has already commenced on this component of the project in 2006. We expect the analysis to shed light on the controversial question of areal diffusion versus genetic inheritance, given the widely accepted characterization of the Sinitic taxon in terms of this afore-mentioned North-South typological dichotomy.

The topics which will be covered in this project for the ten representative languages of the major subgroups in Sinitic are listed below in terms of order of research:

NOMINAL STRUCTURE IN SINITIC LANGUAGES

1. Issues in prenominal modification

Demonstrative-Number-Classifier-Adjective-(ligature marker)- Noun

Relative clause-Noun

Noun_{possessor} -Genitive-Noun_{possessed}

2. Pronominal systems, (personal pronoun, demonstrative & interrogative paradigms)
3. Classifier systems and their interaction with dependency marking
4. Affixal morphology (plural marking, nominalizers, diminutives, gender affixes)
5. Locative postpositions

PREDICATE STRUCTURE IN SINITIC LANGUAGES

1. Adpositional phrases and adverbials

PP - V (spatial and temporal adjuncts)

Manner Adverb-VP

2. Negative and modal auxiliaries
3. Postverbal complements of manner and extent and their markers
4. Resultative, directional and potential verb compounds
5. Aspect marking and its diachronic relation to resultative and directional verb compounds

CLAUSAL STRUCTURE IN SINITIC LANGUAGES

1. Questions and sentence-final particles
2. Comparatives and copular constructions
3. Pretransitive or object-marking disposal constructions
4. Passives and causatives
5. Benefactives, ditransitives and double object constructions
6. Instrumentals and comitatives

COMPLEX SENTENCES IN SINITIC LANGUAGES

1. Temporal subordination
2. Causal and consequence constructions
3. Conditional and counterfactual constructions
4. Concessive constructions

The project will have the following outcomes:

- An international symposium on the *Syntactic typology of Sinitic languages* is planned to be held in Paris towards the end of the fourth year.
- The two major monographs which will be produced are:

Sinitic languages: a typological characterization of hybrid grammar by the PI
A grammar of Waxiang, a Sinitic language of Northwest Hunan by the PI and the CI.

The five other team members will produce a series of grammars in English on some of the lesser-known Sinitic languages that can be used as reference works for typologists at large. The titles of the grammars are merely suggestive at this stage, depending on the final choice of the variety of Sinitic by each of the postdoctoral fellows and doctoral students (for whom the grammar will be their thesis topic in the first instance): Below are listed some of the possibilities.

Suzhou: syntax of a Wu dialect (Sinitic) (or Shanghai, Ningbo, Shaoxing etc)

Xiamen: syntax of a Southern Min dialect (Sinitic) (or Quanzhou, Zhangzhou...)

Nanning: syntax of a Pinghua dialect (Sinitic)

Xiuning: syntax of a Hui dialect (Sinitic)

Taiyuan: syntax of a Jin dialect (Sinitic)

Bao'an: syntax of a Hakka dialect (Sinitic) etc
