Aspectual classes in Chinese and their operability for teaching

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Abstract

There have been a variety of proposals for classifying verbs in Mandarin Chinese based on their semantic properties including aspectual properties of events denoted by the verbs. For instance, Teng (1975) proposes a tripartition of verbs into states, actions and processes. Tai posits three classes similar to Teng's: Activities, States and Results. On the other hand, Smith (1991/1997) extends Vendler's (1957) work to apply the same classification (with Vendler's four classes plus a fifth class of Semelfactives) to an array of languages including Mandarin Chinese. Despite Teng's and Tai's demonstration that only three classes are necessary to account for lexical and grammatical aspectual combinations in Chinese, Vendler-related proposals seem to be by far the most popular among linguists working on Chinese verbs and event types since the 1990s. However, there also have been novel proposals that have not received as much attention, such as Bittner's (2013) four aspectual types or J. Lin's (2004a, 2004b) compositional analysis of event types.

In this talk, we will try to compare positions that may be described as 'universalist' to 'language-specific' proposals, in order to answer two possibly related questions: do they differ in explanatory power? Do they differ in operability for Chinese language teaching?

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