Aspect: A general system and its manifestation in Mandarin Chinese

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Rice University, 1987
RICE UNIVERSITY

ASPECT:
A GENERAL SYSTEM AND ITS MANIFESTATION
IN MANDARIN CHINESE

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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April 1, 1987
Abstract

ASPECT has recently attracted much interest and attention, but it has been treated as a temporally construed verbal category. In the present study, an alternative and more accurate characterization of ASPECT is suggested. We postulate that a DIFFUSE--FOCUSSSED opposition is the fundamental aspectual principle, which can have such various manifestations as HOLISTIC--RUPTURED (Chamorro), UNREALIZED--REALIZED (Makilese), UNMODIFIED/PLAIN--INTENSIVE (Pore), UNMODIFIED/PLAIN--DIMINUTIVE (Songhai), ESSENCE--ACCIDENCE (Spanish), REMOTE--IMMEDIATE (Alabama), and IMPERFECTIVE--PERFECTIVE (Russian), depending on the language in question. Further, we adopt the common semantics of 'well-formedness' and point out that the DIFFUSE--FOCUSSSED principle can better explain why and how ASPECT tends to blend with other grammatical categories such as Tense, FOCUS/Voice, ROLE and Mood.

Moreover, we examine four Aspect markers le, quo, zai and zhe in Mandarin Chinese, indicating how they constitute an integrated semantic system formed from two manifestations of DIFFUSE--FOCUSSSED: REMOTE--IMMEDIATE and NONCONGRUENT BOUNDED--CONGRUENT BOUNDED. The resultant combinations are <CONGRUENT BOUNDED & IMMEDIATE> for le, <CONGRUENT BOUNDED & REMOTE> for quo, <NONCONGRUENT BOUNDED & IMMEDIATE> for zai, and <NONCONGRUENT BOUNDED & REMOTE> for zhe. The Mandarin
example provides reinforcement for the proposition that the fundamental aspe\-ctual principle postulated here is more powerful, and that this principle can more accurately and consistently characterize ASPECT systems in languages.

To conclude, we point out that grammatical manifestations of the DIFFUSE--FOCUSSED opposition in fact reflect how language users make sense of the real world around them. Language then must be seen more generally as a manifestation of human intelligence. Consequently, no rigid and mechanical way can accurately predict actual language usage.