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Fundamental Structures of the Chinese Language

Topic–Comment and Other Key Structures

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

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Foreword

This book represents a very innovative new approach to the teaching of Chinese, as it describes Chinese in a way that represents how Chinese structures actually work in natural discourse rather than imposing an English-like subject–predicate structure and verbs with inherent direction and fixed argument structures on Chinese, as had been done in most works on Chinese since the middle of the 20th century (other than the works of Chao Yuen Ren and Lü Shuxiang), and it takes a partially constructionist approach, which is the cutting edge of new work in linguistics. This is important because the usual structuralist approach of isolating the smallest elements and talking about them in isolation as building blocks does not really represent the language as actually used. In natural speech, it is the combinations of elements that we call constructions that are the base elements in language acquisition and language use. All conventionalization (grammaticalization) of new structures that emerge from the communicative interaction of speakers is also based on constructions, not individual morphemes or words. The words and structures we use only get their meanings from their uses in context, that is, in combination with other elements that an addressee can take as a whole to infer a context in which the speaker's utterance makes sense.

Related to this is another innovative aspect of this book: rather than imposing arbitrary word classes on words and then having to explain the many "exceptions" found in natural speech, the approach is again that of construction grammar (but also goes back to a Chinese linguist, Li Jinxi, of the early 20th century), that of identifying the functions of words based on their positions in constructions (i.e., in the utterances). This is an important aspect of Chinese grammar and one that speakers of Indo-European languages find hard to grasp.

Another focus of the book is the in-depth discussion of the grammatical aspect of the clause, an extremely important part of Chinese grammar but the most difficult part to understand. Aspect is insightfully treated in a broad way, as "everything that determines the particular state at which the verbal action is situated or highlights a specific point within the internal development of the action." Additionally, rather than just talking about individual morphemes, the many larger structures that give the forms their meaning form the basis of the discussion.

All languages manifest information structure, that is, patterns such as topic–comment (the most unmarked information structure), but they do so in different ways. Speakers need to package the information in the utterances they make in particular ways to best suit the situation and the addressee of the utterance, and this means using structures to help the addressee to distinguish between the information already shared with the speaker and the information not shared with the speaker, and pay greater attention to the latter (the former is necessary as context for integrating the latter; the two together make up a message). So different utterance structures (e.g., sentence structures) exist in order to express the different information structures. In Chinese, all sentence patterns directly manifest particular information structure patterns using word

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order. Many other languages have some structures that use word order to directly represent different information structure patterns, and some use intonation or complex structures to represent the different patterns. English has grammaticalized a system of mood marking (e.g., declarative vs. yes–no interrogative vs. question-word interrogative vs. imperative) that uses the word order of the subject and finite element in the clause to mark the different moods, and it also uses word order to mark grammatical relations; that is, it does not always use word order to mark information structure, though it has complex cleft structures for marking narrow focus information structure and some presentational structures. Because of this, English speakers largely depend on intonation to mark information structure.

The teaching is also fully grounded in practical use, and the book includes the practical analysis of a natural text to show how the concepts taught can help learners understand natural texts. It also has useful summaries at the end of the chapters for students to review what they have learned.

Professor Fisac and Professor Moratto are well read in terms of the analysis of both modern and classical Chinese, as well as in linguistics, in literature, and in translation, and they cite the many references and databases they base their analysis on. This makes the book useful also as a springboard for further studies, as readers can go to the original sources to deepen their understanding of the concepts and the language.

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07 January 2023