Textbook: Focus on Students' National Identity

Chinese Language Theory Textbook: Challenges and Solutions

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Abstract

Proposed is a project (or principles) of a new version for the textbook of theoretical Chinese grammar based on the Predicative Concept of Language and continuous to the 2005-2006 edition. The book would be more systematic and will consider in more detail the non-equivalence of the language levels in Chinese and in Russian; the Topic-prominent typology of Chinese will be will be considered in more depth, as well as the variety of regional variants of Chinese; the impossibility of assimilating the Topic-prominent grammar to the same in the inflectional Subject-prominent languages will be systematically argued.

Keywords: Chinese language; Topic-Comment; language levels.

Introduction

Discussed are the basic principles of a textbook of the theory of Chinese language for universities, first of all in Russia, where the «Linguistics» (equivalent to the «Foreign language» specialties in other countries) is the most common (as well as the "Oriental Studies" and the "Pedagogical Education"). In Russia, considerable attention is paid to theoretical disciplines, and although their number is constantly decreasing, it is still possible to offer them as electives. First of all, it is the «Theoretical Grammar» usually lectured during one term or an academic year on the 3rd or 4th bachelor's year.

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The main problem is the understanding of the essence of the Chinese language and the language's typology explanation. In Soviet textbooks after 1950 Chinese was rigorously adapted to the grammar of the Russian. In Western countries, a descriptive approach prevailed. After 1980s the market has been gradually filled with textbooks published in PRC, where the theory is either absent, or applied minimally (the same descriptive approach), or reduced to formulas or "trees" ("generative" approach) or interpreted as «slightly changed» «European» theory (simply originating in the universal grammars of 17th century).

In Russia, in 1960-1980, there was a move towards a radical revision of the theory of both general and eastern linguistics, but since the 1990s, and even more so, in 2000s, there was a "rollback" — ever more often appeals to return to a fairly simple and consistent "middle school view" close to elementary Russian grammar with all its categories.

As for our two-volume «Theoretical Grammar of the Chinese Language» (Kurdyumov 2014), recommended by the Ministry of Education, its introduction and numerous discussions have shown that 1) there is still a lack of the understanding of the specifics of Chinese (an isolating & topic-prominent language), 2) teachers of language practice do not seek theoretical generalizations, 3) the students in Russia (mostly accustomed to the format of Unified Graduate Exam, "EGE") are accustomed to simple grammar standards and are unwilling to give up.

The material of the Chinese language and the author's more than 30 years of pedagogical experience show that the study (both practically and theoretically) would be more successful if to apply the principles previously outlined by Yuen-ren Chao (1968) and Li and Thompson (1976, 1981), and also — to rely on the principles of the Predicational Concept of Language (Kurdyumov 2013): it is necessary to consistently explain to students how Chinese differs from European languages. So the main emphasis should be on 1) topic-prominent typology of the Chinese language, 2) non-importance of categories of actor and action, 3) the significance of the language level system opposing to the "European", 4) the positionality of the parts of speech , 5) micro-syntax as the basis for the formation of lexical units (not "words"), 6) the significance of units higher than the clause, 7) the possible changes (with all its contradictions) in Chinese towards the agglutinating type. In addition, the "Chinese language" as a system should be considered as a whole, including "dialects" and the classical literary language *wenyan*, i.e. examples from these areas are valid and meaningful (if provided with explanations).

Purpose and objectives of the study

The main purpose: continuing the tradition of the edition of 2005-2006 create a comprehensive textbook of Chinese language theory, to define the basic principles of improving, to determine how to convey to the students its typological specifics. Objectives: to show linguistic principles the textbook of the theory should be based, and how the essence of the Chinese language can determine the structure and content of the textbook. The structure can / should be the following: review of achievements of Chinese linguistics in Russia, in the West and in the regions of the Chinese regions, the latest achievements in genealogy of Chinese language, the latest achievements in typology of Chinese language, Chinese "dialects" and "regional variants", language level system and its fundamental differences from "European", (topic-prominent) syntax of Chinese language, the micro-syntax as an analog and an opposite to "word formation", the problem and system of the (positional) parts of speech, description of specific categories, the complete index of function words, classifiers, interjections. A significant role should be played by the student's understanding of his own identity: as a critical researcher who knows well the theoretical principles of the organization of language and at the same time is "outside" (Zheltukhina 2016) and a culture-based approach to study (Tareva 2017).

Literature review

There are, of course, no guidelines as to how theory textbooks should be build: there are (only) programs and curricula that, if prepared in good faith, are based on the existing textbooks. So in most cases the author can follow the patterns (the books on the theory of the Chinese, the textbooks of the theory of other languages). The existing do not satisfy us as a whole: in Russia they are archaic and based on stereotypes of 1950s, in Western countries they are often oriented to the more practical demands of the audience, those which published in the Chinese-speaking regions are secondary to Western languages descriptions and stereotypes. Our own Grammar (Kurdyumov 2014), published only in one volume (instead of two), also followed the previous samples, and both volumes were about morphology (parts of speech).

The most famous works. Dragunov's book (1952) was well known, although its first part was written in Leningrad before World War II (and published later - Dragunov 1962). The most known is so called "morphological part" (1952). The grammar was written in the last years of Stalin's life and during the Soviet debates on linguistics (overcoming Marrism, i.e. the (class-based) "Japhetic theory" that replaced linguistics in 1924-1950). Dragunov was forced to add a lengthy (more than 30 pages) preface criticizing the views of another famous sinologist — professor Oshanin (editor in chief of the monumental dictionary later in 1980s). Dragunov's grammar is constructed as a consistent proof of the existence of a stable system of (vocabulary-based) parts of speech in Chinese. Main achievements: proposed are the basic positions: Noun and Predicate (predicate includes verbs and (qualitative) adjectives), which the author deduces from

syntax compatibility. The most examples were taken from "parallel Chinese", i.e. Dungan language (heavily influenced by Russian). To overcome the problem of instability of parts of speech (the same unit can act differently in different positions, for example, noun → relative adjective → qualitative adjective → verb — without affixing). Dragunov proposed the concept of "basic" and "derivative" values of parts of speech: 建設 jiànshè 'to build' (verb) as the main, and as 'constructing / a construction' (gerund / noun) as a derivative one. From our point of view, it is practically impossible to distinguish the "basic" and "not basic" values: the parts of speech "travel" (on different "distances"), and the spoken language *baihua*, as well as archaic *wenyan*, continues to remain isolative.In addition, Dragunov was forced to follow an ideological dogma: "There should be everything as in Russian: Chinese is normal".

Solntseva & Solntsev (1978) follows the same path: the main pathos is to prove the "normality" of Chinese and its similarity to Russian. The authors proposed the concept of a "zero" form of a word like "zero flexions" in Russian, and also — so-called "conversional homonymy". "Conversional homonymy" was previously argued by Smirnitsky (1957) to describe the parts of speech in English (where lexical units also "travel"): if a word goes into another part of speech, then it becomes another one. From our point of view, Chinese speakers do not differentiate the lexical meanings of units in different positions, and the "conversional homonymy" itself is nothing more than an ingenious method for solving the "eternal drama" of Soviet sinology — parts of speech in Chinese.

If Dragunov's grammar (taking into account its two parts: 1956&1962) was relatively complete, then Solntsev and Solntseva focused only on the the morphology. Speaking about the typology of the Chinese language, they came to the rather exotic idea that Chinese is "isolating in type and agglutinating in technique", and all languages, unlike the classes of Humboldt and Schleicher, can be divided only into two types: "isolating" and "non-isolating" (obviously repeating Schleicher's ideas about analytical and synthetic languages).

It is also impossible to borrow ideas from N.N. Korotkov's work (1968), with the same issue (parts of speech): trying to convince of their existence, the author constantly made contradictory conclusions, constantly denying himself.

Gorelov's grammar (1982) was excellent in its coverage of literary language material. It described in detail the types of Chinese syntactic and morphological structures — with only peculiarity: copying the middle school rules and descriptions, for what Gorelov was criticized even in the 1980s.

Nevertheless, creating our own grammar already in the 2000s, we tried to adhere to the structural principle and sequence of Gorelov's: the morphology, the syntactic types, index of function words, refusal to analyze lexical structures, an excessive number of examples.

The grammar of Tan Aoshuang (2002) is written in line with "Moscow Semantic School" and can be more viewed as a monograph, based on the descriptivist principle of "minimal theory", as well as on a similar principle (quite widespread in the Chinese linguistics): do not strive for global generalization and do not proceed from philosophical ones, but strive to reveal some "small" / "tasty" hidden aspects of the grammatical structures that are incomprehensible to the European reader. Of course, it was an interesting work with well-reasoned approaches, but also - more a presentation of a methodology not (general) results that would be explained to Russian students.

Of a number of grammars written in English, to be mentioned (for us) are the grammars of Yuen-ren Chao (Chao 1968) and Li & Thompson (1981). These books are significant because they first proposed a methodology for analyzing Chinese as topic-prominent: Chao put forward the very idea: what is usually called a "Subject" is really a Topic (i.e. the described, characterized part of the syntaxeme), and so called "Predicate" (in reality — the Comment), unlike European languages, does not express the idea of "actor and action" (which is absolutely familiar to a native speaker of Russian) (Kotsik 2017, Kotcik 2018). Li&Thompson proposed formal criteria for finding the Topic and Comment, as well as the idea of a new, four-stage typology of languages (in synchrony and diachrony), where they move changing the Topic-prominent and Subject-prominent types (also Li&Thompson 1976). Both textbooks are detailed, and explaining well the nuances of the grammar of the "Beijing" type of the Chinese language. Nevertheless, they are designed for the American students and the nuances of studying in the United States, the books are replete with theoretical simplifications and a tendency for descriptive methods (not stressing the priority of theory).

To talk about the grammars published in Mainland and Taiwan, basically, they are guided by the categories of classical European grammars and the authors do not strive for theoretical generalizations. In some cases, such grammars simply reproduce categories of the English language (Tang 2016), in the best cases, there can be many new features of Chinese so they can be used as (marvelous) reference books (Xiandai 1984) . From the point of view of a Russian, when some sections could be divided only into few main points,they really are subdivided into too many subcategories. In addition, such books lack an extremely significant component: comparative —   very important for a non-native speaker: a comparisons with the native language of students (in this case, with Russian) and an explanations (of reasons) for certain "dissimilar phenomena".

Methodology

We believe that Chinese as a language of non-inflectional typology can be an excellent key for explaining many controversial issues in the general linguistics, including, for example, those in English — extremely analytic, and in fact, close to isolating.

The methodological basis of our textbooks is the Predicational Concept of Language (Kurdyumov 2013), with the following basic principles: all languages have everything, but only in different proportions; following Li&Thompson and Yuen-ren Chao, languages may be divided (at least) into Topic- and Subject-prominent and, therefore, Chinese can not be described by the rules of Russian / European, the Topic and Comment, proposed in the origin on the basis of Chinese, are quite universal categories and suitable for creating a new theory of general linguistics (Simatova 2019). In the frames of such theory, language in general can be considered neither a product nor a static system, but a motion, "flow", a set of processes of generation and perception, the "key" points of which are Topic-Comment structures. Language can be modeled and explained as a multidimensional (2 axes, at least) dynamic system, where levels are "vertical" (with the clause as a primary communicative-autonomous unit — in the center), and the processes of generation and perception are "horizontal".

When explaining the structure of sentences, it should be explained that there are no subjects and predicates in Chinese, since they (in Russian, English, etc.) convey the "actor - action" idea: in Chinese, to the maximum, no action comes from anything, sentences like "Time (itself) is running fast" or "The phone is (is lying) on the table" (as in Russian) are impossible, most "actions" are nothing else but descriptions of a situation / state, or their changes. At the same time, even when really "someone is doing something" — there can not be agreement between the noun and verb in two parts of a sentence: so, anyway, there are Topic and Comment. That is why colloquial Chinese avoids formalized passive constructions (what causes another difficulty: Russian students interpret sentences like 茶碗打破了Cháwǎn dǎpò-le as "The teacup is broken" (that is, it broke "itself" in Russian, which is unacceptable for a Chinese speaker).

In addition, we proceed from the unity, but at the same time, the differences inside the phenomenon called "Chinese language" (with "dialects" as being described usually in Russia and Mainland China which are "separate languages" in Western Sinology). The textbook should describe not only the "Beijing version", but also the regional features (Mainland / Taiwan: Putonghua and Guoyu); if possible, take into account the features of the "dialects" (and provide examples). In addition, the literary written language *wenyan* should be described and constantly mentioned in comparisons.

Results

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Discussions

Taking into account the "Chinese fever" in Russia, when lots of students are ready to learn Chinese to become translator or teacher of Chinese, the statements outlined above have been repeatedly discussed and tested. In 2016-2020, the author headed the working group to determine the principles of the school graduate unified exam (EGE) in the Chinese language, and many theoretical provisions were included in the competency rubricator of it. On April 27, 2020, a discussion took place at the Russian State Humanitarian University, where the author's concept were once again discussed. In contrast to our concept, opponents believe, the basic order of SVO should be observed - on the contrary to Topic-Comment Structures. Our teaching experience, many years of work as a translator, constant communication with native speakers in mainland China and Taiwan, nevertheless, show the basicity of the Topic-Comment structures and the possibility of direct correspondence between the "isolating" and "topic" type of language.

Conclusion

The textbook with the principles proposed above, despite their "avant-garde nature" (during 30 years already), should serve the formation of the person of a linguist-sinologist who clearly understands the typological differences between languages, differences in the worldview / mentality and discourses of the existence of speakers. Chinese, and more broadly, isolating languages are typologically different from "Western", while "contradictions" are not a goal in themselves - but only a way of forming a student's holistic picture of language in general, and in the future - a new theory of general linguistics, embodied already in the new textbooks.

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