



Cognitive Chinese Grammar
认知汉语语法

张宁宁 著



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谨以此书献给我的授业恩师沈黎教授

This book is dedicated to my lifelong mentor Dr. Shen Li,
who helped cultivate my undying passion for language.

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Preface

Three years of silent labor have finally come to fruition. My book is titled *Cognitive Chinese Grammar*, a name which indicates the subject matter as well as the theoretical guidance of this research, and which betrays the author's ambition to emulate *Cognitive English Grammar* by Günter Radden and René Dirven. With this book I intend to reshape, or at least challenge, the conventional wisdom about grammar in general and Chinese grammar in particular, to demonstrate the potent descriptive-explanatory power of cognitive linguistics, and, hopefully, to introduce a modicum of applicability into the lofty, ivory-tower notion of theoretical linguistics.

Grammar, says the French dramatist Molière, governs even the kings. His quip more or less reflects the popular belief that grammar is something high above and mysterious, which prescribes rules of language and norms of communication. This popular (mis) belief, which finds its most powerful incarnation in the Chomskyan tradition, dissolves in the light of cognitive linguistics, as the latter draws instead on human cognition and adopts a bottom-up approach to language (as opposed to the top-down approach favored by the traditional theories). Cognitive linguists, myself included, hold that language taps into our cognitive abilities and thus can be described and explained in such terms. What we call "grammatical rules" are little more than entrenched linguistic patterns extracted from numerous real-world utterances in discourse contexts, not some overarching dictates which guard language use with jealous vigilance against ungrammaticality of whatever kind. Moreover, as a language is inseparable from the culture from which it emerged, and in which it grows, thrives and evolves, a cognitive linguistic investigation is thus at the same time a cultural study. In other words, language, culture and mind are united under the framework of cognitive linguistics.

Then what is the glue that keeps language, culture and mind stuck

together? The answer is meaning, the notion of which in cognitive linguistics includes what are traditionally defined as semantics and pragmatics. Cognitive linguistic analysis, therefore, focuses first and foremost on the construction and expression of meaning, and on the pairing of form with meaning. For cognitive grammarians, grammatical explanation pretty much takes care of itself once analysis of meaning is taken care of.

There are, however, inherent difficulties for cognitive linguistic investigations, and methods for dealing with them might invite criticism from those who subscribe to traditional ideas. First, as cognitive linguistics posits no rigid boundary between grammatical and ungrammatical, thus cognitive grammatical analysis could risk criticism of imprecision. Second, the bottom-up approach suggests that description of the grammar of a particular language is not accomplished unless and until each and every linguistic item of it has been properly investigated. This means that cognitive grammatical analysis goes on indefinitely, since a language has countless linguistic items which vary slightly or significantly across the members of the speech community. Third, we do not have direct access to meaning construction which is a mental phenomenon, and this inaccessibility could be taken as adversely affecting the accuracy or even reliability of cognitive grammatical description.

These difficulties are real but not insurmountable. The blurry boundary between grammatical and ungrammatical does not require cognitive linguists to strike whenever ungrammaticality rears its head. Their primary task is to extrapolate the tendencies in language use, which allow for a certain degree of flexibility and vagueness, and yet which retain a potent power of prediction. The immense size and complexity of the repertoire of a natural language makes cognitive linguistic investigation not a mission impossible, but merely a mission ongoing. Anyway, a bottom-up approach by no means precludes the possibility or plausibility of positing higher-level, abstract linguistic constructs, except that this is often done in a “realistic” (see Dąbrowska, 2004) as well as “minimalist” (see Taylor, 2013) fashion, that is, cognitive linguists posit linguistic constructs that are psychologically real and verifiable, keep their number to a minimum, and do not pull a construct out of their theoretical hats whenever the need arises to account for some apparently quirky phenomenon—linguistic constructs are the backbone

of a theory, not stopgaps for theoretical leakage. The third difficulty will eventually be overcome by the development in cognitive psychology and neuroscience, and for now, well-designed psycholinguistic experiments should be able to answer at least some of our immediate needs for evidence.

There used to be diametrically opposed opinions regarding Chinese grammar. One extreme, over-asserting the unique characteristics of the Chinese language, held that the Chinese language was not amenable to Western theories, and one must speak of Chinese grammar (if Chinese had a grammar at all) only at discourse level; whereas the other dogmatically followed the tradition of Western linguistics, indiscriminately imported theories of morphology, lexicology and syntax, and piously forced them upon the Chinese language. The contrast has now become less acute, but these lines of thinking still persist and prevail among Chinese linguists. Perhaps this is why cognitive linguistics has been receiving similar treatment since it got imported: it is either rejected as “unusable,” or applied with such haste that theoretical cohesion and detail get overlooked. As a consequence, the works of many self-anointed cognitive linguists show little depth of insight or consistency of theory.

My book therefore is likely to both inspire and outrage, as it is not intended as a compromise between the two extremes, but rises above them. Its primary objective is to dispel the myth, mystery and misconception surrounding Chinese grammar, and to showcase both the uniqueness of Chinese and its conformity with the linguistic theories which respect facts of language use and human cognition. The tremendousness of Chinese linguistic phenomena, and the bottom-up approach which I faithfully adopt, compel me to concentrate on only a few, albeit significant, grammatical patterns within the limited space of a single book. Moreover, almost each chapter in this book is in effect a collection of studies, for the bottom-up approach in cognitive linguistics requires both an extensive (and infinitely expanding) bottom and upward generalization, and it is thus incumbent on the acolyte to investigate as many phenomena and extract higher-up, unifying patterns out of seemingly diverse patterns.

However quixotic I may sound, *Cognitive Chinese Grammar* is only the first of many to come, each of which will focus on a particular cluster of linguistic phenomena. And I will venture a general theoretical framework

for Chinese grammar when the “bottom” has become large and solid enough for a maximal generalization. But now we are of course several books away from that undertaking.

Zhang Ningning, at Fudan University

January 20th, 2015

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Chapter One

Introduction

If the comparison is with English, French, German, or other Western languages, then the Chinese language is indeed far more “flexible,” so much so that it helped cultivate the prevailing myth that “Chinese does not have grammar.” This myth easily dissolves when we consider the fact that native speakers of Chinese are perfectly capable of detecting the boundary between grammatical and ungrammatical sentences. Nevertheless, the flexibility of the Chinese language remains a persistent and perennial fascination for many grammarians with various theoretical backgrounds: how to analyze a language in which there seem to be more exceptions than rules, nay, a language in which exceptions seem to be the rule?

The theoretical orientation one adopts for investigating the grammar of a language, and the conclusions he will eventually reach, hinge largely on his assumptions about the nature of grammar, and the source of grammaticality. Most grammarians are basically right in assuming that grammar consists of “items and rules,” that linguistic conventions are the primary source of grammatical correctness, even though they seem to be contented with describing, or just labeling, items and rules of languages that happen to attract their attention.

Controversies inevitably arise as to what linguistic theory one should employ for analyzing such a “flexible” language. Ever since the days of Ma Jianzhong (马建忠), Chinese linguists (the present author included) have been

embarrassingly dependent on Western linguistics for theory, methodology, and terminology. Such a dependence has excited numerous criticisms from Chinese linguists and teachers. Some of them deplore that the Chinese language was born free but now everywhere it is in chains of imported theory and terminology. Others question the compatibility between Western linguistic theories and the peculiarity of the Chinese language, to which, they believe, Western theories are unavailing instruments of analysis. Still others, proudly conscious of its cultural uniqueness, claim that only a tailor-made linguistic theory can do justice to such a peculiar language as Chinese, and deliver it from the academic hegemony of Western linguistics.

There are inherent risks of overgeneralization in building a theory on the characteristics of several or even just one language and then applying it to other languages, and these potential risks tend to translate into actual problems when theories based on Indo-European languages are forced upon Chinese. For example, even *Ma Shi Wen Tong* (《马氏文通》, literally, *Ma's Comprehensive Treatise on Written Language*), Ma Jianzhong's masterpiece, was once accused of "imposing on the Chinese language rules of foreign languages, thereby failing to capture its unique spirit and flavor¹." Nevertheless, given the similarities that miscellaneous language-cultural communities may share, it is not utterly impossible for a linguistic theory to capture, across different language-cultures, some of the commonalities in human thought and symbolic behavior, even though an over-arching, all-purpose theory might be unattainable. The one-theory-for-one-language proposal, possibly motivated by cultural triumphalism, would create nothing more than an academic autarky, a theoretical loop between one language and the one theory exclusively designed for it.

Consciously aware of the risks involved in applying Western linguistic theories *in extenso*, the present author has chosen a nascent linguistic tradition, namely cognitive linguistics, which is general enough to capture commonalities across diverse languages, and yet malleable enough to accommodate language-specific features. The cognitive-linguistic tradition consists of different and yet interrelated endeavors (e.g. metaphor and metonymy, categorization, constructionist approaches to grammar,

¹ “强以外国文法律中文，失中文固有之神味。” This criticism came from the renowned Chinese linguist Yang Shuda (杨树达, cited in He Rong, 1985)

cognitive semantics, cognitive lexical semantics, cognitive poetics, usage-based approaches to language acquisition and language change); although Langacker's Cognitive Grammar is the theory most pertinent to this book (as its very title clearly indicates), other cognitive-linguistic theories will also make their presence felt throughout the following chapters.

Cognitive linguistics is a far better instrument (or kit of instruments) than other linguistic approaches in revealing the nature of grammar, because meaning, or semantics, which is the invisible force governing almost all grammatical behaviors, and which is the quintessential link between language, mind and culture (Kövecses, 2006), is the primary object of its investigations. Cognitive linguists hold that meaning is a mental phenomenon and thus can be described in terms of cognitive abilities and conceptual operations. This suggests that under the cognitive-linguistic paradigm, grammatical analysis is not essentially different from, or indeed almost identical with, semantic analysis. And this also minimizes the potential incompatibility between cognitive linguistic theories and Chinese grammar—the universality of human cognitive faculties spares us the tasks of positing language-specific semantic/grammatical notions which may or may not be of help in linguistic investigation.

Grammatical analysis is in essence an (imperfect) articulation of grammatical intuition, and what the author intends to accomplish in this book is what Dąbrowska (2004) calls “a psychologically realistic grammar” of Chinese, a grammar which is based on real-world linguistic experience and conforms to the native speaker's intuition. Therefore it is unwise to ascribe grammar to something mystical like the Chomskyan LAD, and equally unwise to be content with “explanation by classification” (i.e. labeling types of linguistic items, and then constructing grammatical rules out of the labels, which is tantamount to adding academic aura to everyday linguistic knowledge). Constructing a “psychologically realistic” grammar requires us to rise above “purely grammatical” theories, and to inquire into the motivations behind grammar and usage.

Lamentably, and quite understandably, what *can* be accomplished within a single book is rather limited, given the immensity and enormity of Chinese grammar and the constraints on space. In this book a general framework is built for “Cognitive Chinese Grammar,” under which a handful of grammatical constructions, which are over-studied but still underexplored,

are (re-)analyzed. The *bǎ*-construction, the double-object construction, the double-subject construction, the existential construction, etc., each chapter title shorthands an enormous body of literature, but this by no means suggests that these ponds are all “fished out.” *Cognitive Chinese Grammar* attempts to reveal the hidden, true characteristics of these constructions, and provide cognitive-linguistic explanations for their productivity and constraint. As these chapters unfold, we shall see that the Chinese language actually has abiding laws, and speakers of Chinese are law-abiding.

The author of this book does not stop at characterizing each of those grammatical constructions; it is also the aim of this book to account for the sources, and to explore the extent, of the flexibility of Chinese grammar as a whole, so as to dispel the popular misconception that the absence of morphological impedimenta and syntactic straightjackets makes Chinese infinitely more flexible than, and eminently superior to, Western languages.

This book is simultaneously prescriptive, descriptive, and explanatory; its prescriptive value proceeds from its descriptive accuracy, and its descriptive accuracy rests upon the superb explanatory power of cognitive linguistics. Therefore this ambitious enterprise is not solely intended to amuse the intellect of fellow grammarians; it also might be of service to advanced learners of Chinese who already claim a fairly good command of this language and yet are still struggling with its usage details. Language acquisition is a mosaic process, that is, the learner acquires a language construction by construction, and acquires a construction in a piecemeal fashion, picking up numerous linguistic details “along the way” (Tomasello, 2003). My book could help shorten the journey that the language learner has to make, by effing some of the apparently ineffable facets of Chinese grammar. *Cognitive Chinese Grammar* might also inspire ideas about a cognitive-oriented pedagogic grammar, which distills small quantities of theory and distributes them, in much diluted doses, to theoretically naïve non-native learners of Chinese.

Chapter Two

Cognitive Chinese Grammar: A Framework

We begin this ambitious enterprise by spelling out the prerequisites essential to *Cognitive Chinese Grammar*. These prerequisites are roughly divided into three categories: (i) cognitive resources, (ii) cognitive linguistic theories of grammar, and (iii) academic labeling. The first and second categories have to do with “theoretical orientation” or “theoretical underpinning,” the third with terminology, the kind of academic jargon which our theoretical orientation stipulates and which our linguistic investigations prefer. These prerequisites form the general framework under which specific grammatical phenomena are analyzed. The review of these prerequisites is somewhat cursory, because the author assumes that the readers already have a sufficient amount of knowledge regarding those areas.

1. Cognitive Resources

A fundamental idea of cognitive linguistics is that both language acquisition and language use draw on a vast array of mental resources, which include encyclopedic knowledge and general cognitive abilities. Since it is often difficult to distinguish one from the other, for the sake of convenience I have lumped “encyclopedic knowledge” and “cognitive abilities” under the blanket