Chinese-English Contrastive Grammar

An Introduction

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Preface

This book is written primarily for Chinese readers who have at least some basic knowledge of English grammar, and who have attained a fairly high level of proficiency in English (roughly upper-intermediate or above). We believe this book will be a useful study companion for teachers and students specializing in a wide range of language-focused or language-related disciplines, including English, Chinese, linguistics, language information sciences, professional communication, language teaching, cultural studies, translation and interpreting, language pathology, and speech therapy. The main objective of this book is to familiarize our readers with a subset of the common difficulties encountered by Chinese learners and users of English, in Hong Kong and beyond, in ESL or EFL pronunciation and lexico-grammatical structures.[1] A second objective is to help our readers understand the ways in which the Chinese language has undergone structural changes as a result of Europeanization (especially anglicization) since the 1900s. Judging from the outcomes of such influences, some may be seen as beneficial while many more are demonstrably adverse. In scope, Europeanization is not at all limited to linguistic structures, but these structures also manifest in Chinese learners' and users' pragmatic competence and performance in their social interaction with others. Such socio-pragmatic competence (Kasper & Rose, 2002) is reflected in their choice of L1 pragma-linguistic resources when using L2, including 'pragmatic strategies such as directness and indirectness, routines, and a large range of linguistic forms which can intensify or soften communicative acts' (Kasper & Rose, 2002, p. 2). We will illustrate such interlanguage pragmatic (ILP) strategies with a couple of Chinese 'rules of speaking' when Chinese EAL learners and users are engaged in intercultural communication in English (e.g., preferring more Chinese pragma-linguistic strategies when realizing speech acts such as making requests or responding to compliments in English). We will also examine

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1. Regarding the question, whether the status of English in Hong Kong is more appropriately characterized as a second language (ESL) or a foreign language (EFL), there is as yet no consensus among scholars (see Li, 2017, for an in-depth discussion). For our purpose in this book, we will use the term 'English as an additional language' (EAL) as a superordinate of ESL and EFL.

an apparently contrary case, namely EAL speakers' predilection for one linguistic subsystem in (especially American) English when interacting with others in Chinese or English, the adoption of an English(-sounding) first name.

The grammar of any language is a huge topic. And, given that Chinese and English are among the languages of wider communication with the largest numbers of first and/or second language learners and users in the world, to compare and contrast these two grammatical systems is an even more challenging task. In this book, we will follow Michel Paradis's characterization of language and grammar as follows:

> [Language] refers to the language system (phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics), often referred to as 'the grammar' or 'implicit linguistic competence' by contemporary linguists within the generative-grammar framework. Language is a necessary but not sufficient component of verbal communication. (Paradis, 2004, p. 240)

Thus, for our purpose, 'grammar' is used in a broad sense to include not only the morphology and syntactic structures (often referred to as 'morphosyntax') of a language but also its sound system (phonetics and phonology) and how these linguistic resources are used to make meaning when speakers/writers interact with others in context-specific situations (pragmatics). The scope of each of these research areas is huge. To make our task more manageable, the main focus of this book will be on lexico-grammatical deviations commonly found among Chinese EAL learners in the process of learning or using English (**Chapters 3–7**). This will be supplemented with a chapter on contrastive phonology between (Hong Kong) Cantonese and English (**Chapter 2**); a chapter that examines how, for over 100 years, Chinese grammar has been influenced by European languages (i.e., Europeanized) since the beginning of the twentieth century (**Chapter 8**); and a chapter on various socio-pragmatic problems, typically in intercultural communication contexts involving interaction between native and Chinese speakers of English (**Chapter 9**). As the non-standard lexico-grammatical and non-native pronunciation features (when using English) as well as socio-pragmatic choices (when using Chinese) arise from contact between English and Chinese via their speakers/writers, the problems identified in this book may be located in the contact zone of the grammars of these two languages (see Figure 0.1).
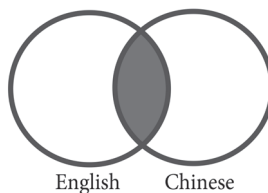

Figure 0.1
The scope of Chinese-English contrastive grammar in this book

English and Chinese belong to totally unrelated language families, which is why the two languages have very little in common. A lack of similarities between English and Chinese helps explain the enormous learning difficulties on the part of Chinese learners of EAL.

English and Chinese belong to two typologically different language families, and the typological distance between them is huge. In the study of linguistic typology, languages are classified according to their structural features and functional affinities (i.e., similarities and differences), the goal being to describe and account for commonalities and diversity in the linguistic structures and functions of the world's languages. English is a Germanic language within the Indo-European family. Extending the kinship metaphor a little more, we may say that English has several cousins, of which the most prominent are German and Dutch. Also, practically all of the Scandinavian languages—Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish (but not Finnish)—are Germanic (see Crystal, 1997, for more details). The typological proximity between these languages helps explain why speakers of other Germanic languages tend to pick up English more easily, thanks to the systemic similarities in lexis and grammar between English and their native language. Similarly, English-speaking learners of French as an additional language will appreciate that many French words look like English words. The reason is that, for centuries, English has been heavily influenced by the French language. French, however, does not belong to the Germanic family; it is a prominent member within the Romance family, which includes other well-known European languages such as Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese (Crystal, 1997).

The two branches of Indo-European, Germanic and Romance, have many linguistic features in common. For instance, they all have a tense system, definite and indefinite articles, and they all distinguish between singular nouns and plural nouns. None of these features are shared by Chinese, which is a Sino-Tibetan language (Sinitic). Other Sino-Tibetan languages include Tibetan and Burmese (Tibeto-Burman) and Thai (the Tai division).[2]

The reason for going into some details of language typology here is that, for Chinese learners of English, many of the EAL learning difficulties may be accounted for by the notion of typological distance. In principle, the more linguistic features shared by the two languages in question, the easier it is for native speakers of either language to learn the other language. For instance, Ringbom (2007, p. 54) distinguishes between three levels of cross-linguistic similarity: (a) item level, (b) system level, and (c) overall level. Based on second language acquisition (SLA) data involving different language pairs, Ringbom concludes that cross-linguistic similarities such as 'item transfer' tend to facilitate language learning:

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2.   Although Japanese and Korean have borrowed and incorporated a large number of Chinese lexical items into their languages, they do not belong to the Sino-Tibetan family. It is widely believed that Korean and Japanese are Altaic languages. Such a belief would make them distant cousins of Turkish, Mongolian, and Manchu.

> Item transfer in comprehension is overwhelmingly positive: if cross-linguistic similarities between items can be perceived and established, comprehension is facilitated. Quick and effective item learning for comprehension is above all what distinguishes the learning of a related TL [target language] from learning an unrelated language. (Ringbom, 2007, p. 57)

Thus, for example, French learners of English will find in the tense system of French a convenient frame of reference when they try to make sense of the English tense system, and vice versa for English-speaking learners of French. Such convenience is not available to Chinese learners of English, however. Owing to tremendous typological differences between Chinese and English, the two languages have rather few linguistic features in common. These include subject-verb-object (SVO) basic word order, verb-particle constructions such as 'pick up' (拿起, *ná qǐ*, *naa4 hei2*) and 'put down' (放下, *fàng xià*, *fong3 haa6*), and double-object constructions like 'give me ten dollars' (給我十塊錢／畀十蚊我).[3] All of these seem to be relatively straightforward for Chinese learners and users of English, suggesting that positive transfer is taking place thanks to structural overlap between Chinese and English (Yip & Matthews, 2007).

Compared with structural similarities, however, there are many more structural disparities. One consequence is that native speakers of either language who want to learn the other language tend to come across enormous acquisitional problems. This is why Chinese learners of English tend to find it so hard to grasp, for example, the grammatical subsystems of tense and articles in English, among others (see Chapters 5 and 6; see also Li, 2017, for examples of common EAL errors). Similarly, many Westerners have tremendous difficulties mastering the tone system in Putonghua (Mandarin) or, worse still, Cantonese, mainly because tonal differences as the basis for differentiating lexical meanings are unknown in their languages (Li, Keung, Poon, & Xu, 2016).

Informed essentially by insights of research on contrastive analysis (CA), error analysis (EA), contrastive phonology (Cantonese and English), Europeanized grammatical features in Chinese, and intercultural pragmatics, this book highlights some of the salient acquisitional and communication problems encountered by Chinese learners when learning and using English (and, to a lesser extent, Chinese), with special reference to Hong Kong Chinese learners and users of English. Through systematic comparison and contrast between the relevant parts of (standard) English and (standard) Chinese/Cantonese grammar, it is hoped that the reader will better appreciate *why* certain anomalies occur and *how* to overcome them. A majority of the common learning difficulties discussed and exemplified in this book may be shown to be caused, at least in part, by adverse influence of the learner's mother tongue (i.e.,

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3. *Gěi wǒ shí kuài qián, kap1 ngo5 sap6 faai3 cin4 / bei2 sap6 man1 ngo5.*

cross-linguistic influence or negative transfer), which in Hong Kong refers to spoken Cantonese (the vernacular) and Standard Written Chinese (SWC). Similar influence, more often adverse than conducive, may also be detected in the other direction, given that knowledge of English tends to impact negatively on Chinese speakers' or writers' native language due to 'adverse Europeanization' (非良性歐化, *fēi liángxìng ōu huā/ fei5 loeng4 sing3 au5 faa3*).

This book consists of nine chapters. At the end of each chapter there is a 'Further Reading' section pointing the way to accessible material on the main topics covered in the chapter and a list of questions or activities that are useful for reviewing the main points of the chapter. Suggested answers to these questions and activities may be found at the end of the book.

Regarding terminology, the term 'Putonghua' will be used when reference is made to the national spoken language in China. On the other hand, 'Mandarin' will be used to refer to (a) the biggest 'dialect' group in northern China (generally referred to as 北方方言, 'northern dialect', as opposed to other southern 'dialects'), or (b) the standard variety of spoken Chinese in Taiwan.

As the reader may have noticed, Chinese characters are transliterated into both Mandarin (Putonghua) and Cantonese: the former in pinyin, the latter in the romanization system devised by the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong (LSHK) called Jyutping (Tang et al., 2002). To cater for the needs of both readers who can read Chinese and others who may find romanization more convenient, each of the linguistic examples will be presented in Chinese characters, supplemented with inter-linear glosses, followed by the rendition of words at the morphemic level, plus an idiomatic translation of the example. As logographic Chinese characters may be read in either Mandarin or Cantonese, romanization in both pinyin and Jyutping will be provided (except for Cantonese-specific expressions). For highly technical, field-specific jargon in English, the Chinese equivalents will be provided but not the romanization. Finally, following common practice in applied linguistics research, an asterisk (*) placed at the beginning of an expression indicates that it deviates from the norms in Standard English, Cantonese, or SWC, while a question mark (?) at the beginning of a linguistic example signals that it is marginally acceptable.

This book grew out of our efforts in teaching an undergraduate course entitled Chinese-English Contrastive Grammar. We would like to thank our students for their feedback to an earlier draft of the manuscript prepared for that course. In the process of revising the manuscript for publication, we have also benefited from two anonymous reviewers' insightful, critical, and constructive comments, as well as useful input and instructive feedback from our colleagues Rebecca Chen, Regine Lai, and Christy Liu. Their kind assistance is hereby gratefully acknowledged. It goes without saying that, as co-authors, we alone are responsible for any inadequacies that remain.

4
Passive Voice

What is the passive?

In this chapter, we will discuss what the passive is and how it is used in English and Chinese. To begin with, consider (1)–(3):

(1)   *I am graduated from the Education University of Hong Kong.
(2)   *She has been suffered from cancer for the past two years.
(3)   *The accident was happened five years ago.

In all of these sentences, the auxiliary verb *be* (i.e., *am graduated*, *has been suffered*, *was happened*) should be deleted. The correct versions thus are (4)–(6):

(4)   I graduated from the Education University of Hong Kong.
(5)   She has suffered from cancer for the past two years.
(6)   The accident happened five years ago.

The question that arises is: Why is it ungrammatical to passivize the verbs in (4)–(6)? This has to do with the properties of the verb.

Transitivity and passive voice in English

Before discussing the issues regarding the passive, it is necessary to understand what a passive sentence is. The passive construction is often misunderstood to be a construction that takes an undergoer as the subject (Liberman, 2009; Pullum, 2011). In fact, the passive is a syntactic phenomenon (Haspelmath, 1990). In English, a typical passive sentence[1] has the auxiliary *be* and the past participle of a verb. Therefore, *He died* is not a passive sentence, whereas *He was killed* is.

In Chapter 3, we discussed transitive and intransitive verbs. To recapitulate, transitive verbs require a direct object, and intransitive verbs do not allow a direct

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1.   There is also the *get*-passive in English (e.g., *the car got stolen*).

object. These are closely related to the passive construction in English.[2] Consider (7) and (8):

(7)   Peter broke the vase.

(8)   The vase was broken (by Peter).

We can see that (7) is a basic active (as opposed to passive) sentence with the verb *break*, which is a transitive verb, in this case because it is followed by a noun phrase *the vase*. Example (8) is a passive sentence, as evidenced by the presence of an auxiliary *be* before the main verb, which is in the past participle form *broken*. The difference between (7) and (8) is that the object in (7)—*the vase*—becomes the subject in (8).

In other words, a passive sentence can be seen as a product of 'transformation' from an active sentence. It thus follows that, if there is no direct object in the active counterpart, the corresponding passive sentence (via transformation or otherwise) will not be feasible. This is illustrated in (9) and (10):

(9)   Mary laughed [ ].

(10)   *[ ] was laughed.

Laugh is an intransitive verb. When it is used in an active sentence, the result is *Mary laughed*, as in (9). In other words, after the verb *laugh*, there is no noun phrase following it. We saw in (7) and (8) that the passive is formed via moving the object in the active sentence to the subject position (i.e., the beginning of a sentence). However, there is no object in (9). The resulting sentence in (10) lacks a subject and is thus ungrammatical.

Returning to the sentences in (1)–(3), the verbs *graduate*, *suffer*, and *happen* are intransitive verbs. They all take either a Theme or a Patient as the subject, as shown in (11)–(13).

(11)   the person who completes the study programme in a school   *graduates* [Theme]
(12)   the person who is sick *suffers* [Theme/Patient]
(13)   an event *happens* [Theme]

Because these verbs are intransitive, we do not need to, and in fact we cannot, transform these active sentences into passive sentences. Verbs that can take a Theme or a Patient as their only argument are called ergative or unaccusative verbs, and they

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2. In some languages, it is also possible to passivize intransitive verbs. For example, in Japanese, one can say 息子に死なれた *musuko ni shin-are-ta* [(lit.) I was died by my son], in which the verb *shinu* 'die' is used with the passive morpheme *-are*. The sentence means 'my son died on me'.

are more susceptible to over-passivization than are other intransitive verbs such as *walk* and *run*, which take an Actor/Agent as the only argument. Yip (1995) argues that learners might have interpreted these verbs as 'underlyingly transitive' (p. 137).

Although a passive sentence involves a transitive verb,[3] it should be noted that not all transitive verbs can be passivized. For example, one can say *he resembles his father*, but not **his father is resembled by him*. The explanation is beyond the scope of this book.

The passive in Chinese

According to Li and Thompson (1981), the term 'passive' in Mandarin Chinese is often used to refer to sentences containing the word 被 (*bèi*). In syntactic structures, Chinese is similar to English, in that only transitive verbs can occur in passive sentences. This is illustrated in (14)–(17).

(14) 張 三 殺 了 李 四。
　　Zhāngsān　shā　le　　lǐsì
　　Zhangsan　kill　ASP　Lisi
　　'Zhangsan killed Lisi.'

(15) 李 四 被 殺 了。
　　Lǐsì　bèi　shā　le
　　Lisi　BEI　kill　ASP
　　'Lisi was killed.'

(16) 李 四 死 了。
　　Lǐsì　sǐ　le
　　Lisi　die　ASP
　　'Lisi died.'

(17) *[ ] 被 死 了。
　　　　bèi　sǐ　le
　　　　BEI　die　ASP
　　'[ ] was died.'

We can see in (15) that 殺 (*shā*, 'kill') can occur in a passive sentence, because it is a transitive verb, as shown in (14). On the other hand, 死 (*sǐ*, 'die') cannot occur in a passive sentence, as shown in (17), because it is an intransitive verb, and there is no object that can be moved to the subject position of the passive sentence.[4]

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3. Some passive sentences involve an intransitive and a prepositional phrase (e.g., *the bed has been slept in*).

4. In recent years, there has been a tendency to use *bèi* with intransitive verbs such as 自殺 (*zìshā*, 'commit suicide'), 辭職 (*cízhí*, 'quit a job'), etc.

Differences in using the English and Chinese passive

Using the English passive

According to Thompson (1987), the use of the passive is mainly for two reasons (p. 497):

A: If the agent is not to be mentioned, use the passive.

B: If the agent is to be mentioned, then use the passive only when the non-agent is more closely related than the agent either

   B1: to the 'theme' of the 'paragraph', or

   B2: to the participant in the immediately preceding clause.

To elaborate, the passive is used (i) because the Actor (Agent) is unknown or unidentifiable (corresponding to A above), or the Actor is either irrelevant or unimportant to the hearer (corresponding to B1), and (ii) the discourse drives the use of the Patient to be in the subject position (corresponding to B2). We will illustrate these in the following.

The reader might have experience shopping online, and might have seen emails like the one in (18):

(18)   Your item has been shipped.

The use of the passive is motivated by the fact that the person who shipped the item is not important to the receiver of the email. In fact, it would be strange if the company sends you an email like (19), because the most important message is the whereabouts of the item and not who took it to the post office:

(19)   Michael has shipped your item.

The use of the passive in (18) is therefore justified because the person who shipped the item is not important, at least to the receiver of the email, and thus this information should not be included. On the contrary, if information about the 'shipper' is included, as in (19), the receiver of the message might find it confusing and wonder why it is relevant.

Now consider another case involving the use of a passive sentence. Compare the two paragraphs in (20) and (21). Example (20) is an excerpt from the novel *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1998), and (21) is a slightly modified version:

(20)   Albus Dumbledore didn't seem to realize that he had just arrived in a
       street where everything from his name to his boots was unwelcome.
       He was busy rummaging in his cloak, looking for something. But he did
       seem to realize he was being watched, because he looked up suddenly at
       the cat, which was still staring at him from the other end of the street.

(21)   Albus Dumbledore didn't seem to realize that he had just arrived in a
       street where everything from his name to his boots was unwelcome.
       He was busy rummaging in his cloak, looking for something. But he did
       seem to realize (the cat/something/someone) was watching him, because
       he looked up suddenly at the cat, which was still staring at him from the
       other end of the street.

Although (21) is possible, the reader will probably agree that the original excerpt
in (20) sounds better. The reason is that the whole paragraph is talking about Albus
Dumbledore. If we imagine the situation as if we are watching a movie, our eyes are
on Dumbledore from the beginning of the paragraph. If an active sentence is used
and *the cat* is mentioned, as in (21), our focus would have to shift to the cat, and
then back to Dumbledore (because the cat was watching him), and then back to the
cat again (because he looked up at the cat). This shift of focus would cause an abrupt
transition of attention from Dumbledore to the cat.

Consider another example of the English passive. The excerpt in (22) is a narrative
about how olive oil is made:

(22)   'the fresh fruit is collected into a weighting hopper along with some leaves
       and twigs, but these can easily be removed later. A machine like this can
       collect as many olives in an hour as it would take the traditional farmer
       to collect in an entire day. When the harvest reaches the production plant
       the fruit is washed to remove leaves and twigs in the collection process.
       The more stubborn twigs and branches that remained are filtered out
       using a grill, which only allows the fruit to pass through'

The use of the passive in (22) can be explained by both reasons discussed above:
(i) the excerpt is about olive oil production, focusing on the main ingredients—
olives—and so the doer(s) in the process is(are) unimportant information, and (ii) the
excerpt has been following the 'fate' of the olives: the olives, together with the leaves
and twigs, are collected, and then the leaves and twigs are removed and filtered, and
the olives are washed. By using the passive in this excerpt, the reader will not need
to attend to other entities that are seen to be 'peripheral' in the process. The excerpt
would look very different if the passive sentences were changed into active ones. The
reader might want to do it as an exercise.

Using the Chinese passive

Unlike English, the Chinese passive is traditionally used to express adversity (i.e., unfavourable situations) (Li & Thompson, 1981). Consider (23) and (24).

(23) 我 的 錢 包 被 人 偷 走 了。
Wŏ   de   qiánbāo   bèi   rén   tōu   zŏu   le
I   NOM   wallet   BEI   people   steal   away   ASP
'My wallet was stolen by someone.'

(24) 他 的 褲 子 被 狗 咬 破 了。
Tā   de   kùzi   bèi   gŏu   yăo   pò   le
He   NOM   pants   BEI   dog   bit   torn   ASP
'His pants had a hole bitten in them by a/the dog.'

Examples (23) and (24) are typical unfavourable events from the subject's point of view. Interestingly, when a neutral verb is used, the adversity meaning is still at play. Examples (25) and (26) are adapted from Li and Thompson (1981, p. 496).

(25) 張 三 被 人 看 見 了。
Zhāngsān   bèi   rén   kànjiàn   le
Zhangsan   BEI   people   see   ASP
'Zhangsan was seen by someone.'

(26) 我 們 的 話 被 聽 到 了。
Wŏmen   de   huà   bèi   tīngdào   le
We   NOM   conversation   BEI   hear   ASP
'Our conversation was overheard.'

In (25), although it is not clear under what circumstances Zhangsan was seen, we can be sure that Zhangsan did not want to be seen. In other words, this is an unfavourable situation for Zhangsan. It is also clear in (26) that the speaker was not happy about the fact that their conversation was overheard.

Usage of the Chinese and English passive: Contrastive differences

Whereas the Chinese passive is often used to express adversity, there is no such tendency in English. The mismatch in function in the use of the passive between Chinese and English explains why many passive sentences in English cannot be translated into Chinese using the passive. Consider the examples in (27)–(32):

(27)   The bridge was built in 1908.

(28)   *這 條 橋 於 1908 年 被 建 成。

Zhè   tiáo   qiáo   yú   1980   nián   bèi   jiàn   chéng

this   CL   bridge   in   year   BEI   build   complete

'The bridge was built in 1908.'

(29)   這 條 橋 於 1908 年 建 成。

Zhè   tiáo   qiáo   yú   1980   nián   jiàn   chéng

this   CL   bridge   in   year   build   complete

'The bridge was built in 1908.'

(30)   The bill has been paid.

(31)   *這 賬 單 已 經 被 繳 付 了。

Zhè   zhàng   dān   jījīng   bèi   jiǎofù   le

This   CL   bill   already   BEI   paid   ASP

'The bill has been paid.'

(32)   這 賬 單 已 經 繳 付 了。

Zhè   zhàng   dān   jījīng   jiǎofù   le

This   CL   bill   already   paid   ASP

'The bill has been paid.'

We can see that (27) and (30) are legitimate passive sentences in English. However, their directly translated passive counterparts in Chinese in (28) and (31) are unacceptable. When 被 (*bèi*) is removed, as in (29) and (32), they become acceptable.

These examples show clearly that the passive in English functions differently from that in Chinese. In Chinese, if the object of a verb is to be the focus of the sentence, one only needs to place it at the beginning of the sentence. This is called topicalization, which has been briefly discussed in Chapter 3 (see also Chapter 7). The freedom to topicalize almost any noun phrase in Chinese allows Chinese to avoid using the passive in most cases, and the use of the passive in Chinese (i.e., the *bèi*-passive) is traditionally reserved for expressing adversity, even though under the influence of the English passive, the *bèi*-passive is getting more and more widespread (for more details, see Chapter 8, Europeanization).

The non-adversity use of the passive 被 (*bèi*) construction in Chinese is increasingly popular (Li & Thompson, 1981). For example, many native speakers would find (33) quite acceptable.

(33)   他 的 工 作 表 現 被 老 闆 賞 識。

Tā   de   gōngzuò   biǎoxiàn   bèi   lǎobǎn   shǎngshí

He   NOM   work   performance   BEI   boss   recognize

'His performance at work was recognized by the boss.'

In addition to 被 (*bèi*), words such as 獲 (*huò*), 受到 (*shòudào*), or 得到 (*dédào*) have passive meaning, which can be used in favourable situations. Example (33) can thus be rephrased as (34):

(34) 他 的 工 作 表 現 獲／受 到／得 到 老 闆 賞 識。
      Tā de   gōngzuò biǎoxiàn   huò/shòudào/dedào lǎobǎn shǎngshí
      He NOM work   performance receive   boss   recognize
      'His performance at work was recognized by the boss.'

To summarize, the use of the passive in English is often driven by the demotion or backgrounding of the Actor/Agent or the promotion or foregrounding of the Patient/Theme. That is, in English the passive is used because the Patient/Theme is more relevant to the conversation or in a written text than the Actor/Agent is. In contrast, the passive in Chinese is often used to express adversity, although the use of the formal passive using the passive marker 被 (*bèi*) to refer to neutral or even favourable situations is getting more and more common. If there is a need to focus on an object of an active sentence in Chinese, the object will be placed in the topic position of the sentence (i.e., the beginning of the sentence) without using any marker, such as *bèi*.

As mentioned, the difficulty Chinese learners of English have with the passive in English is partly related to topicalization. In fact, it is also related to other syntactic properties of the Chinese language, including the serial verb construction and the *ba*-construction (把字句).

Over-passivization and how to avoid it

Over-passivization, which refers to passivization of intransitive verbs, is a type of error often made by Chinese learners of English (Yip, 1995). In fact, over-passivization is a common error among English learners of different L1 backgrounds (Zobl, 1989). In general, learners tend to over-passivize a certain type of intransitive verb called 'unaccusative verbs'. Unaccusative verbs take a Theme or a Patient as the subject. Examples are *suffer*, *happen*, and *disappear* (see examples 1–3 above). On the other hand, learners are less likely to over-passivize 'unergative verbs'—verbs that take a doer as the subject—such as *walk*, *laugh*, and *play*. In fact, all the examples given at the beginning of this chapter involve unaccusative verbs.

Since the passive is closely related to transitivity, it is important for learners to understand the syntactic patterns in which a given verb occurs, that is, whether a verb is a transitive or intransitive verb, and what arguments it takes as the subject and the object. Learners should also understand that the subject of a sentence is not necessarily a doer or initiator of an action or event, as in the case of unaccusative verbs. Looking up the transitivity pattern of a verb in a good, reliable dictionary is a good practice.

Questions and activities

1. Decide which of the following verbs can be passivized. Make a sentence with each of the verbs that you think can be passivized. Explain the meaning of the sentence (N.B.: a verb can have many senses. Sometimes it can be passivized in one sense, but not in others).

    i.   think
    ii.   call
    iii. slip
    iv.   notice
    v.   walk
    vi.   give

2. For the following verbs, decide how many arguments (e.g., subject, direct object, indirect object) it can accommodate. Then describe the semantic role of the arguments as in Examples (11)–(13). You may use a dictionary. Finally, if they have two arguments, form a passive sentence with the verb. Are they good passive sentences? Why or why not?

    i.   suit
    ii.   frighten
    iii. flatter
    iv.   vanish
    v.   lack

3. Go to google.com. Search for 被 (*bèi*), and look at the first 20 entries where it is used as a passive marker (ignore irrelevant entries such as 綿被). How many of them are associated with adverse meanings?

4. Translate the following English text into Chinese. When translating, bear in mind the differences between Chinese and English discussed in this chapter.

    > The World Health Organization recommended Tuesday that nations regu-
    > late electronic cigarettes and ban them from use indoors until the exhaled
    > vapor is proven not to harm bystanders. It also called for a ban on sales
    > to minors of the popular nicotine-vapor products, and to either forbid or
    > keep to a minimum any advertising, promotion or sponsorship.
    >
    > The Geneva-based agency said the "apparently booming" $3 billion
    > global market for more than 400 brands of e-cigarettes means appropriate
    > regulation is needed. Regulation "is a necessary precondition for estab-
    > lishing a scientific basis on which to judge the effects of their use, and
    > for ensuring that adequate research is conducted and the public health is
    > protected and people made aware of the potential risks and benefits," the
    > report said.
    >
    > (Adapted from NBC News. Retrieved from http://www.nbcnews.com/
    > health/health-news/who-urges-stiff-regulation-e-cigarettes-n189176.)

5.   Look for two signs, one in English and one in Chinese (e.g., on campus, near your home, etc.) in which the passive is used. Can you explain why the passive is used in each of the two cases?

Further reading

Brinton and Brinton (2010) discuss the syntactic structure of the passive construction in English, and provides many examples of transitive verbs that cannot appear in a passive sentence. Li and Thompson (1981) include an in-depth discussion of the variations in the use of the passive construction in Chinese. For more advanced readers, Shi (1997) offers an informative overview of various syntactic features associated with the Chinese passive.

5
Tense and Aspect

Introduction

Tense and aspect are two linguistic domains that are often treated as if they are the same. In fact, they highlight different time-related meanings of an event. For example, there are subtle semantic differences between (1) and (2):

(1)   I *did* my homework.   (past tense)
(2)   I *have done* my homework.   (present perfect tense)

   Although the process is the same (i.e., 'do my homework'), notice that (1), with simple past tense *did*, is expressed as an action in the past which is unrelated to the present. By contrast, in (2), with present perfect tense *have done*, while the speaker similarly considers the action ('doing homework') is completed as of now, the result of that action (i.e., completed homework) continues to be relevant to the present (e.g., the speaker makes a case to his mother that he now has the right to play computer games). In this chapter, we will explain what tense and aspect are, how they are expressed in English and Chinese, and the common errors made by Chinese learners of English.

Tense and aspect in English

Before we explain what tense (時態) and aspect (時貌) are, let us consider the sentences in (3) and (4). Example (3) is adapted from a novel, and (4) is a modified version of (3).

(3)   The man <u>was running</u> so hard and it must have been cold because smoke and foam <u>were spewing</u> from his mouth in puffs as it had from the horses before. (van Dijk, 2006, p. 569)
(4)   The man <u>ran</u> so hard and it must have been cold because smoke and foam <u>spewed</u> from his mouth in puffs as it <u>had</u> from the horses before.

Both sentences describe a man-running situation. The event described in both sentences happened in the past, as indicated by the past form of the verb *be* (i.e., *was/were*) in (3), and the use of past tense forms (e.g., *ran*) in (4).

But there is another obvious difference between (3) and (4). Example (3) uses present participles such as *running* and *spewing*, whereas (4) uses the past tense forms *ran*, *spewed*, etc. The 'tense' in (3) is often called 'past continuous tense', but in linguistics, the 'continuous' part is referred to as **aspect**. That is, Example (3) is in past tense, and it has 'progressive' aspect. Example (4), on the other hand, is in past tense but has 'perfective' aspect.

Tense indicates *when* an event happens/happened (Comrie, 1976): whether it happened in the past, is happening now, or will happen in the future. Strictly speaking, English has only three tenses: past, present, and future.[1] One does not have a choice of which tense to use when describing an event, because if the event happened in the past, one is bound to use the past tense form, as shown in (5) and (6).

    (5)   I <u>was</u> born in 1993, when my mother <u>was</u> 30 years old.
    (6)   I <u>was</u> cleaning the floor when you <u>called</u> (last night/two months ago).

In contrast, aspect represents how the speaker views an event (Brinton & Brinton, 2010; Radden, 2007): whether he or she sees an event as a complete whole, or one that is ongoing or developing. The situation described in (3), where the progressive is used, is more vivid and may give the reader a sense that he or she has gone back in time, looking at the event happening or unfolding in front of his or her eyes, as illustrated in Figure 5.1. The bar in grey symbolizes the length or duration of the event. With an imperfective (progressive) viewpoint, the event is viewed from within. In other words, the event is seen as having an internal time frame. In contrast, (4) may give the reader a sense of viewing that same event from the outside, as illustrated in Figure 5.2. The event is viewed externally as if it were a black dot, with no attention to the 'inside' of the event. The event is not seen as having an internal time frame. We call the viewpoint in (3) 'imperfective' (or, specifically, progressive), and the viewpoint in (4) 'perfective'. It should be noted that, regardless of the viewpoint (i.e., perfective or imperfective) one takes, it does not change the fact that the event happened in the past and past tense must be used.

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1. Some linguists argue that there is no future tense in English. We are not going to elaborate on this because it is beyond the scope of this book.
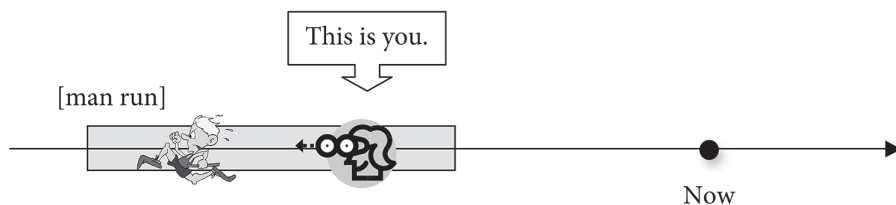
Figure 5.1
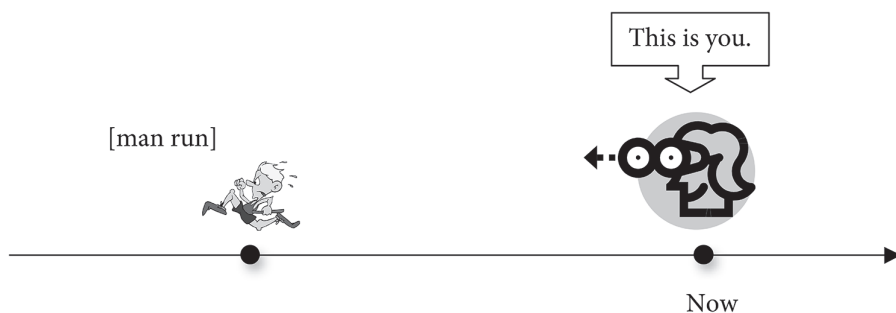The progressive (imperfective) viewpoint in a past event

Figure 5.2
The perfective viewpoint in a past event

As long as the man-running event happened in the past, both (3) and (4) are grammatical sentences. The only difference between the two versions is how the writer presents the event to the reader. The writer/speaker thus has relatively more freedom in choosing an aspect than in choosing a tense.

There is a recurrent past situation where both the progressive and perfective viewpoints must be used (see, e.g., (7)). When two events are referred to, one serving as the 'background' to the other 'foregrounded' event, the background event must be expressed using the progressive aspect (e.g., *was cleaning*), while the foregrounded event has to be in perfective aspect (e.g., *called*). Compare (7)–(9):

(7)   John was reading when Mary entered.
(8)   Sue was going to the library when she met Tim.
(9)   We were watching TV when the telephone rang.

Such a type of situation has been characterized as 'incidence schema':

PERF + IMPF (foreground + background; main foreground event cutting into background event) (Sasse, 2002, p. 228; cf. Li, 2011, p. 46)

It is important to make a clear distinction between tense and aspect when English and Chinese are compared, because Chinese (and Cantonese), unlike English, does not have tense markers; it only has aspect markers.

Aspect in Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese

Native speakers of Cantonese, when asked how pastness is expressed in Cantonese/ Chinese, often answer that 咗／了 (*zo2/le*) indicates an event that happened in the past. However, this is a common misconception. Consider the sentences in (10)–(12) below:

(10) 我 尋 晚 睇 咗 一 齣 電 影／我 昨 晚 看 了 一 部 電 影。

Ngo5	cam4	maan5	tai2	**zo2**	jat1	ceot1	din6 jing2
Wǒ	zuó	wǎn	kàn	**le**	yī	bù	diànyǐng
I	last	night	watch	ASP	a	CL	movie

'I saw a movie last night.'

(11) I saw a movie yesterday.

(12) 你 尋 晚 打 比 我 嗰 陣 我 抹 緊 地／
你 打 電 話 給 我 的 時 候 我 在 擦 地 板。

Nei5	cam4	maan5	daa2	bei2	ngo5	go2	zan2		ngo5	maat3	gan2	dei6
You	last	night	call	give	I	CL	moment	I	clean	ASP	floor
Nǐ	dǎ	diànhuà	gěi	wǒ	de		shíhòu	wǒ zài	cā		dìbǎn
You	call	phone	give	I	NOM	moment	I	ASP	clean	floor

'I was cleaning the floor when you called.'

In (10), 咗／了 (*zo2/le*) appears after the verb 睇／看. The time of the event is yesterday, and it may lead us to think that 咗 (*zo2*) functions as a past tense marker like *saw* in (11). However, if we compare (12) and (6), we will have a different conclusion. In (12), the time of the event is still yesterday, but no 咗／了 (*zo2/le*) is used. The past tense forms *was* and *called* in the corresponding English sentence (6) have no equivalents in (12).

On the other hand, 咗／了 (*zo2/le*) can be used in non-past events (i.e., present or future). Consider the sentence in (13).

(13) 下個星期五我已經去咗 (了) 英國啦。

Haa6	go3	sing1kei4ng5	ngo5	ji5ging1	heoi3	zo2	jing1gwok3	laa3
Xià	gè	xīngqīwǔ	wǒ	yǐjīng	qù	le	yīngguó	le
Next	CL	Friday	I	already	go	ASP	England	SFP

'I will have gone to England next Friday.'

The sentence in (13) describes an event (going to England) in the future (next Friday). If 咗／了 (*zo2/le*) was a past tense marker corresponding to the regular past *-ed* in English, we would not expect 咗／了 (*zo2/le*) to appear in (13), because it is an event in the future. However, (13) is perfectly acceptable. This further shows that 咗／了 (*zo2/le*) is not a past tense marker. In fact, 咗／了 (*zo2/le*) is a perfective marker which is used to indicate the completion of an event in relation to a point in

time (e.g., next Friday). The completion point can be in the past, as in (10), or in the future, as in (13).

Chinese thus has no tense markers. Consider (12) again. Although the events (me cleaning the floor and you calling) happened in the past, there is no marker such as -ed that signifies this past tense meaning. Rather, *ngo5 maat3 gan2 dei6/wǒ zài cā dì bǎn* 'I am/was cleaning the floor' are both compatible with situations happening at present, in the future, or in the past as in (12).

A friend of one of the authors, who is a native speaker of English, once asked how Chinese speakers know whether they are talking about a past event or not if Chinese does not have past tense markers such as -ed. Although sometimes clarification is necessary, in general Chinese native speakers have little problem understanding when an event happens/happened while interacting in Cantonese/Chinese. We have other linguistic devices, such as phrases of time serving as adverbials (*yesterday*, *last Monday*, etc.). Even without these adverbial phrases, often we can deduce time-sensitive information from the context at large. For example, in (14), despite a lack of tense marking, we can still easily infer that the two persons are talking about things that happened in the past:

(14) 甲：我星期日去咗海洋公園慶祝母親節。你呢？
    Ngo5   sing1 kei4 jat6   heoi3   zo2   hoi2 joeng4 gung1 jyun2
    I   Sunday   go   ASP   Ocean Park
    hing3 zuk1   mou5 can1 zit3.   Nei5   ne1
    celebrate   Mother's Day.   You   Q
  A: 'I went to Ocean Park to celebrate Mother's Day on Sunday. What about you?'
    乙：我朝早飲茶，下午睇戲，夜晚就煮飯俾畀媽媽食。
    Ngo5   ziu1 zou2   jam2 caa4,   haa6 ng5   tai2   hei3
    I   morning   yum-cha   afternoon watch movie
    je6 maan5   zau6   zyu2   faan6   bei2   maa4 maa1   sik6
    evening   then   cook   rice   give   mother   eat
  B: 'I had yum-cha in the morning, saw a movie in the afternoon, and cooked dinner for my mother in the evening.'

In fact, the utterance by B in (14) can also be an answer to the question 'What are your plans next Sunday?', and in this case, the events will happen in the future.

Past tense in English and perfective marker in Cantonese/Mandarin Chinese

Although the past tense marking function in English (i.e., regular past -ed and irregular past) and the perfective marker in Cantonese/Chinese 咗／了 (*zo2/le*)

are conceptually distinct, functionally they overlap in meaning to some extent. The reason is that the past tense form in English also has perfective as part of its meaning. In other words, English past marking has two functions: indicating an event that happened in the past, and viewing the event externally. For example, (15) would be unacceptable if the man is still running a marathon at the time of speech.

(15) The man ran a marathon.

The logical next question to ask is whether a past tense marker can be imperfective. That is, can we view an event that happened in the past as if it has not yet ended? The answer is yes. In Example (6), the verb form *was cleaning* is progressive (i.e., imperfective). In other words, we can 'pretend' that we are in the past and look at the event as it unfolds from within (as shown in Figure 5.1). In many languages, such as Spanish and French, there are two kinds of past tense, perfective and imperfective.

Perfective and perfect

In English, perfect 'tense' refers to the form *to have + past participle*, as shown in (16).

(16) I have sent her an email about the exam.

Perfect 'tense' seems to be very similar to simple past tense in that both denote a completed event, but they have rather subtle differences. Compare (16) and (17).

(17) I sent her an email about the exam.

Out of context, it is difficult to tell which utterance is 'correct' or more appropriate. In fact, either of them can be correct, depending on the speaker's focus. The use of *have* in (16) suggests that the sentence is in the present tense ('present perfect'). It might seem odd at first to use the present tense when the event is obviously completed, but the use of the present perfect in fact indicates the relevance of the event to the present time. Example (16) can be rephrased as (18):

(18) I am currently in the state of having completed the action of sending her an email about the exam.

This 'state' of current relevance helps explain why (16), using the present perfect tense, is more appropriately used as a response to a question like 'Are you sure she knows about the exam?' rather than 'What did you do?' The latter would be more appropriate as a response to (17).

This can be further illustrated in (19) and (20). There are two verbs in example (19), which are both in the past tense: one simple past (*came*), the other past perfect (*had sent*). Example (20) is a paraphrase of (19):

(19) I <u>had sent</u> her an email about the exam before I came.

(20) I was in a state of having completed the action of sending her an email about the exam.

We can tell clearly that (17) is in the present tense, whereas (19) is in the past tense. Example (17) signifies the present state of the speaker, whereas (19) signifies the state of the speaker at a time in the past.

So what is the difference between (16) and (17)? Example (17) is a simple description of what the speaker did, as in the conversation in (21).

(21) Mary: What did you do on Sunday?
      Peter: I sent Susan an email about the exam.

It would be very unnatural for Peter to answer Mary's question in (21) with the response (16): 'I have sent Susan an email', because Mary was asking him about what he did in the past and not the relevance of that completed action (the sending of the email) to the present. The same explanation applies to (1) and (2) in the beginning of this chapter. Thus, (1) is a description of what 'I' did at a certain point in time in the past, and the action has little relevance to the present, whereas (2) is an expression to show the relevance of the completed action (i.e., doing homework) to the present (e.g., in a situation in which the boy asks his mother if he can play computer games).

Other aspect markers in Chinese

Although Chinese lacks tense markers, it has more aspect markers than English has. For instance, aspect markers in Mandarin Chinese include 過 (*guò*) (experiential) and 著 (*zhe*) (continuous). 過 (*guò*) is used to highlight the experience, as shown in (22) and (23).

(22) 大 雄 去 過 台 灣。
      Dàxióng   qù   guò   táiwān
      Daxiong   go   ASP   Taiwan
      'Daxiong has been to Taiwan.'

(23) 我 愛 過 他。
      Wǒ   ài   guò   tā
      I   love   ASP   he
      'I was once in love with him.'

過 (*guò*) is similar to 咗／了 (*zo2/le*), in that they both highlight the endpoint of an event. However, their meanings are completely different. Compare (24) and (25):

(24) 大 雄 去 了 台 灣。
      Dàxióng   qù   le   táiwān
      Daxiong   go   ASP   Taiwan
      'Daxiong went to Taiwan.'

(25) *我 愛 了 他。
      Wǒ   ài   guò   tā
      I   love   ASP   he
      'I have loved him.'

It is unacceptable to say (22) if *Daxiong* is still in Taiwan (Li & Thompson, 1981). It is only acceptable when *Daxiong* went to Taiwan and then came back. In (23) and (25), we can see that we can attach *guò* to 愛 (*ài*, 'love'), but *le* is not compatible with the same verb.

著 (*zhe*) (continuous aspect) is used with durative verbs. Durative verbs describe actions/events that have duration. For example, 等 (*děng*) 'wait' is a durative verb, unlike 爆炸 (*bào zhà* 'explode') and 畢業 (*bì yè* 'graduate'), verbs which are perceived as not having any internal time frame or duration (hence the oddity of *爆炸著 (*bào zhà zhe* 'exploding') and *畢著業 (*bì zhe yè* 'graduating'). 著 (*zhe*) in Mandarin Chinese or 住 (*zyu6*) in Cantonese, is very similar to 在 (*zài*) (Mandarin Chinese) or 緊 (*gan2*) (Cantonese) respectively. 在 (*zài*) and 緊 (*gan2*) are used to mark imperfective aspect, but 著 (*zhe*) and 在／緊 (*zài/gan2*) are used with different verb types. 在 (*zài*) can only be used with activity verbs (i.e., dynamic action verbs) (Li & Thompson, 1981). Other verb types, such as stative verbs, are not compatible with *zài*, as shown in (26)–(28):

(26) 李 四 在 跑 步。(activity verb)
      Lǐsì   zài   pǎobù
      Lisi   ASP   run
      'Lisi is running.'

(27) *李 四 在 愛 他 的 妻 子。(stative verb)
      Lǐsì   zài   ài   tā   de   qīzi
      Lisi   ASP   love   he   NOM   wife
      'Lisi is loving his wife.'

(28) *李 四 在 門 口 在 站。(verb of posture)
      Lǐsì   zài   ménkǒu   zài   zhàn
      Lisi   at   door   ASP   stand
      'Lisi is standing at the door.'

Zhe (著), on the other hand is compatible with most verb types, as shown in (29)–(31).

(29) 李 四 跑 著 步。
Lǐsì   pǎo   zhe   bù
Lisi   run   ASP   step
'Lisi is running.'

(30) 李 四 愛 著 他 的 妻 子。
Lǐsì   ài   zhe   tā   de5   qīzi
Lisi   love   ASP   he   NOM   wife
'Lisi is in love with his wife.'

(31) 李 四 在 門 口 站 著。
Lǐsì   zài   ménkǒu   zhàn   zhe
Lisi   at   door   stand   ASP
'Lisi is standing at the door.'

However, you may notice that there is a slight difference between (26) and (29). Whereas (26) can occur on its own, (29) would sound better if it is attached to another clause, as in (32).

(32) 李 四 跑 著 步 去 學 校。
Lǐsì   pǎo   zhe   bù   qù   xuéxiào
Lisi   run   ASP   step   go   school
'Lisi is running to school.'

In (32), 跑著步 (*pǎo zhe bù*, 'running') functions as a means for 去學校 (*qù xuéxiào*, 'going to school'). Thus 著 (*zhe*) fulfils a function of backgrounding a clause (Li & Bowerman, 1998).

There are also verbs to which both 在 (*zài*) and 著 (*zhe*) can be attached, but they produce different meanings. Consider (33) and (34):

(33) 她 在 穿 和 服。
Tā   zài   chuān   héfú
she   ASP   wear   kimono
'She is putting on a kimono.'

(34) 她 穿 著 和 服。
Tā   chuān   zhe   héfú
she   wear   ASP   kimono
'She is wearing a kimono. / She is in a kimono.'

While (33) and (34) may both be translated as 'She is wearing a kimono' in English, (33) describes an action of putting on traditional Japanese attire, whereas (34) describes a state in which the girl is in traditional Japanese attire. These examples clearly distinguish the different functions of the two aspect markers: *zài* is a progressive aspect marker, whereas *zhe* is a continuous aspect marker.

Misuse of English tense and aspect among Chinese EAL learners

Many L2 learners of English do not think that past tense is particularly difficult, because they started learning the function of past tense at a young age, and by and large they are able to produce past tense forms, including the irregular forms that they have memorized. The difficulty, however, does not lie in whether a learner knows if a verb is regular or not or is able to produce the correct form, but to supply past tense marking in appropriate contexts.

Indeed, past tense marking is often omitted by Chinese learners of English, especially when speaking. One reason is related to processing. Our cognitive resources are limited, and speaking a second language usually requires more effort than does speaking our first language. Research has shown that L2 learners tend to be less sensitive to morphological marking in the target language than are native speakers (Clahsen, Felser, Neubauer, Sato, & Silva, 2010). Learners tend to compromise inflections, because they tend not to severely affect the meaning of a sentence. They are not used to paying attention to inflections, especially when their first language lacks them. In the case of past tense marking, because Chinese does not require any tense marking and the time of the event is often conveyed through the use of time adverbials (e.g., *yesterday*, *last Sunday*), Chinese EAL learners of English tend to neglect English tense marking when making sense of English input or producing English output.

The second reason is related to a tendency to dissociate past tense with events that lack an endpoint (i.e., atelic events), especially stative verbs. This is one of the predictions of the Aspect Hypothesis (Andersen, 1991; Robison, 1990; Shirai, 1991). Even if learners have sufficient time to think (e.g., when they write in English), they sometimes make the wrong judgement about which tense should be used. The supply of past tense is usually easier when the event being described has an endpoint, such as the one in (35):

>   (35)   She left the room a few minutes ago.

Example (35) is a clear case of past tense: The act of leaving started and ended a few minutes ago. But in (36), many learners may have difficulty deciding what tense is more appropriate:

>   (36)   I saw a movie yesterday, and it <u>was</u> about the Second World War.

Be is a stative verb. That is, we tend to perceive that the property of being about the Second World War continues without an endpoint. Therefore, it is relatively difficult for us to decide whether past tense should be used in (36). But the use of past tense here only indicates the speaker's recalling of the movie. The speaker is viewing a past event from the present time, as illustrated in Figure 5.2. In short, it is perfectly acceptable to use present tense in reference to the Second World War, as in (37), but

the meaning is slightly different. The speaker, instead of recalling what the movie was about, simply expresses the content of the movie.

(37)   I saw a movie yesterday, and it <u>is</u> about the Second World War.

This tendency to dissociate past tense marking and atelic verbs may come from two sources. First, it may be natural to do so due to a distributional bias (Li & Shirai, 2000). That is, in the linguistic input past tense marking is more frequently used with telic verbs than with atelic verbs. This also affects native English-speaking children in their language development. Second, it may be due to L1 influence. Native speakers of Chinese, which does not have tense markers, tend not to rely on tense markers to signal the time of the event, especially when the event is a state and the state holds true even at the time of speech.

Questions and activities

1.   Go to the EMCJ Multimodal Parallel Corpus at http://corpus.eduhk.hk/EMCJ/index.php. Search for the verb *called* in the movie *He's Just Not That Into You*. Look at the results. How many of them were actually translated with 了 (*le*) in Chinese?

2.   Search for 在 in the movie '失戀 33 天' in the EMCJ Multimodal Parallel Corpus. Look for instances of '在 + verb'. What are the verbs that are used with 在?

3.   You might want to work with a partner on this task. Take note of a Cantonese/Chinese conversation of about 100 words long that occurs around you (e.g., when you are at a restaurant, on the school bus). Analyse the conversation according to the following:
     (a)   The event being referred to in the conversation: When did it happen?
     (b)   Were there any aspect markers used? If so, what are they, and what verbs were used?
     (c)   Translate the conversation into English. What tense/aspect markers would you use?

4.   Past tense is sometimes not used even when describing events that happened in the past. This is called 'historical present'. Have you observed any instances of historical present? When is it usually used? What effect does historical present have in meaning? (Hint: Make use of the notion of how an event is perceived when past tense is used as shown in Figures 5.1 and 5.2.)

5.   Both *the door is unlocked* and *the door was unlocked* are grammatical sentences, but they have subtle differences. What grammatical aspect is used in each sentence? (Hint: You can say *the door was unlocked by the owner*, but not *the door is unlocked by the owner*.)

Further reading

For readers who want to have a more in-depth understanding of the semantics of English aspect, Langacker (1982) will be a good choice. For a discussion of the actual use of aspect marking in Mandarin Chinese, readers can refer to Xiao and McEnery (2004). The study also briefly discusses the differences in aspect marking in Chinese and English.

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