

T AND ASP AS FUNCTIONAL PROJECTIONS IN TENSELESS LANGUAGES

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1. Introduction

As is widely known, one salient fact about the languages of the East and South-East Asian Sprachbund (such as Thai, Vietnamese or Chinese, to mention but three) is that they lack the category of verbal tense. Thus, a verb may be used in the same morphological form (usually the root form, or the only existing form) regardless of whether the temporal reference is present (1a) or past (1b).

- 1a. Wo jinnian zai Taibei gongzuo.
1s this year in Taipei work
Ø This year I am working in Taipei.'
- b. Wo qunianzai Taibei gongzuo.
1s last year in Taipei work
Ø Last year I was working in Taipei.'

This fact poses interesting problems for universalist theories of grammar such as the Principles and Parameters approach to syntax (Chomsky 1981 and related work). Should facts in Chinese and similar languages be taken to imply that the functional category T (responsible for tense in tense languages) is not projected at all in Chinese, or is the natural consequence instead that we should assume that T is projected, but that it behaves differently from T in a language like English? Either of these solutions is problematic from a universalist point of view. In the present paper it will be argued that T is, in fact, projected in Chinese (and presumably in other South East Asian languages) and that it has largely the same function as in English, but that other factors in the syntax of Chinese are responsible for the phenomenon of tenselessness. The data in the present paper are taken from Chinese. It is not clear at this stage whether or not the argumentation carries over to other tenseless languages.

The present paper is structured as follows: in section 2, two types of temporal verb morphology are presented. In section 3, distinctive features of these are outlined with data from other languages, particularly English, Basque and Swedish. In section 4 these features are projected onto data from Chinese, where it is shown that the T/A system of Chinese has important parallels to that of English. In section 5, it is shown how the present analysis tallies well with Laka's (1994) analysis of the interaction between Tense and Negation. Finally, in section 6, an attempt is made to use the structure proposed for Chinese to account for the fact that Chinese is a tenseless language. It is shown that the present proposal is successful in accounting for a subset of the properties of tenselessness in Chinese. Avenues for further research are also outlined.

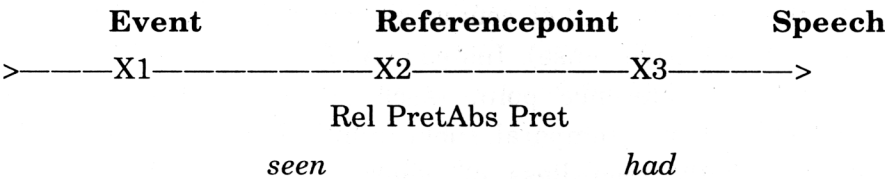
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2. Two categories: absolute vs relative tense

The initial point of our discussion concerns basically the view of tense proposed in Reichenbach (1947) and developed and modified in Comrie (1985). We distinguish between absolute tense, which makes direct reference to real-time, and relative tense, which makes reference, not to real-time, but rather to a separate point of reference on the time scale. In this paper, I shall not review the details of Comrie's model, the interested reader is referred to Comrie (1985), particularly chapter 6, for an excellent exposition□.

In English, absolute tense and relative tense can occur in one clause, giving rise to the so-called complex tenses such as the plu perfect and the future perfect. Thus the relationship between the event depicted and an arbitrary reference point is indicated by relative tense, whereas the relationship between this reference point and the speech act is indicated by absolute tense. This is illustrated in Fig. 1.

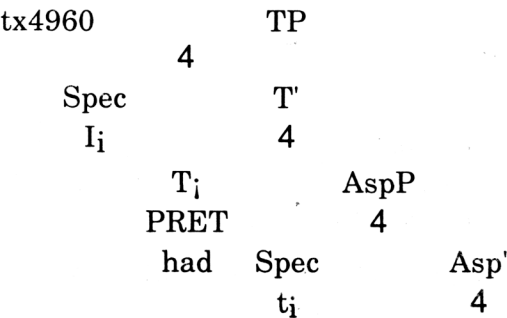
Fig. 1. The time structure of the pluperfect

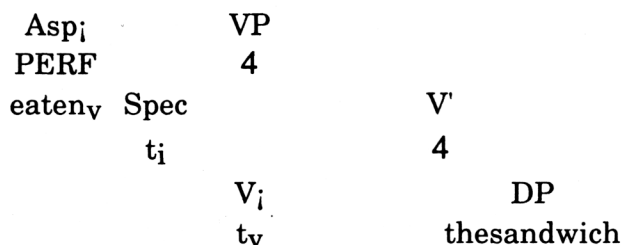


This implies that an English clause with a complex tense involves two different tense categories. Of these, the one normally referred to as *tense* is absolute tense. Relative tense, on the other hand, is not often discussed in the generative literature. In general, however, the syntactic slot occupied by relative tense is shared with aspect. Thus, a language like Russian, which more or less lacks relative tense (cf Comrie 1985:69), instead has a productive set of aspect morphology. Furthermore, the aspectual category of progressive in English would straight forwardly fill the position as relative present tense (expressing simultaneity between the Event and the Reference point(as in Fig. 1). The slot filled by relative future tense in Basque is also that filled by the aspect perfective (cf Laka 1994:11).

For these reasons (as well as for the economy of structure), it will be assumed in the present paper that relative tense occupies the same functional projection as aspect. An analysis of an English complex tense should therefore include not only the category of absolute tense (indicated here as T_i), but also that of relative tense / aspect (indicated here as Asp_i). The minimal structure required would be as in Fig. 2. (It is of no account whether or not $AspP$ is assumed to project a Specifier. In the interests of structural uniformity, I have included a Specifier in the structure in Fig. 2.)

Fig. 2. T_i and Asp_i in clause structure





Regardless of whether the element occupying the Asp_i head in English is an aspectual morpheme or a relative tense morpheme, it seems clear that the structure of English requires the projection of two categories rather than simply one.

3. T_i and Asp_i - differences and definitions

There are certain differences which can be noted between the behaviour of the categories located in T_i and Asp_i respectively. The most obvious difference is that T_i makes reference to real-time, whereas Asp_i does not (this is of course identical to the definition for the difference between absolute and relative tense). Instead, Asp_i makes reference to a point in time indicated by a separate reference point (such as that indicated by a time expression such as a time adverb or a temporal subordinate clause). Interestingly, this time reference functions identically regardless of whether the element concerned is relative tense (as in the periphrastic relative future *about to*) or aspect (as in the progressive *-ing* form).

2a When you arrived, I was about to have lunch.

PRET FUT

b. When you arrived, I was having lunch.

PRET PRES

In (2a), the reference point is set at a point in the past, and the event time is defined as being in the relative future, as seen from the reference point. In (2b), which incorporates a form which is aspectual, the time reference behaviour is identical. The reference point is set in the past by the past tense of the auxiliary, while the event point is set as simultaneous with the reference point by the use of progressive aspect.

Secondly, T_i elements may only occur with an agreeing time adverbial. Thus, if the time adverbial has future reference, the past tense form of a verb is ungrammatical (3a). On the other hand, Asp_i elements may occur with any time adverbial, since they refer either to aspect or relative tense. Thus, if a relative past tense form cooccurs with a time adverbial referring to future time, the clause is grammatical as long as the absolute tense form agrees with the time adverbial. This holds regardless of whether the Asp_i form represents relative tense (3b) or aspect (3c).

3a. *When you arrive tomorrow, I was eating lunch.

b. When you arrive tomorrow, I will have eaten lunch.

c. When you arrive tomorrow, I will be eating lunch.

This fact may seem to follow trivially from the first point, namely that T_i refers to real-time, whereas Asp_i refers to a reference point. Interestingly enough, we will see in the discussion on Chinese that these two properties are, in fact, independent.

Thirdly, T_i elements and Asp_i elements differ with respect to their interaction with negation. We shall discuss the situation with T_i first.

As Ouhalla (1991) has noted, there is evidence for cross-linguistic variation in the hierarchical ordering of various functional projections in the clause. Ouhalla discusses primarily the relative hierarchical height of T_i and Agr_i (agreement). Laka (1994), on the other hand, discusses the relative hierarchical height of T_i and Neg_i . Her analysis of Basque places Neg_i higher than T_i in Basque, as opposed to the situation in English. Interestingly enough, regardless of whether T_i is above Neg_i or vice versa, there is no difference in the interpretation of the clause (4). Thus, both T_i and Neg_i appear to display a shared scope which is entirely independent of the relative height of either.

4a. Nik ez nuen liburua erosi nahi.
 I-ERG NEG AUX.1sE.3sE.PRET book-ABS buy want
 'OI didn't want to buy the book.' (Basque)

b. I did not want to buy the book.

Both of these clauses are interpreted identically, so that it is not evident from the interpretation that Neg_i is above T_i in Basque whereas T_i is above Neg_i in English. Either of the following paraphrases would be equally suitable to either example.

5a. It is not the case that [I wanted to buy the book]. ($Neg_i > T_i$)

b. In a setting in the past, [I do not want to buy the book]. ($T_i > Neg_i$)

Again, this may seem to be trivial until compared with data from Chinese. We shall express this fact here with the metaphor that T_i is *Neg-transparent*, in that it shares scope with a Neg_i which is lower in the structure (we shall return to Laka's analysis of Basque presently).

This is crucially not the case for Asp_i elements. In languages such as English, word order evidence suggests that Neg_i is above Asp_i , so it is difficult to test the scopal variation of Neg_i and Asp_i . It is, however, possible in some cases to force a negator to appear below an Asp_i element. This is not very idiomatic in English, particularly since Asp_i almost always attracts the verb, but possible in Swedish with the idiomatic expressions *hålla p att* (lit. 'be engaged in', used as a progressive marker, i.e. relative present) and *vara p väg att* (lit. 'be on one's way to', used as a relative future), which have meanings related to those of Asp_i elements. If a negation is embedded underneath such an Asp_i expression, the scopal interpretation is unambiguous (6).

6. Lisa var p väg att inte kpa boken.
 Lisa was going to NEG buy book-DET
 'OLisa was considering not buying the book.'
 (lit. 'OLisa was about to not buy the book.')

The interpretation of (6) is such that the situation 'OLisa not buy the book' was developing, and is normally only felicitous if, in fact, Lisa does decide to buy the book after all. Crucially, however, in example (6), Asp_i is interpreted as having unilateral scope over Neg_i . Thus (6) can be interpreted as in paraphrase (7a), not as in paraphrase (7b).

7. The situation [Lisa does not buy the book] was developing.

b. #It is not the case that [Lisa would buy the book].

The interpretation in (7b) is natural if we create a situation where Neg_i has scope over the Asp_i element, as in (8).

8. Lisa var inte p väg att kpa boken.
 Lisa was NEG going to buy book-DET

‘Lisa was not going to buy the book.’

The construction in (8) simply negates the assertion that Lisa was going to buy the book, and is quite felicitous even if Lisa did not, in fact, buy the book. Thus, the relative interpretation of Asp_i elements and Neg_i is dependent on the hierarchical relation between them. If Asp_i occupies (or can be made occupy) a structurally higher position than Neg_i , it is also interpreted as having scope over Neg_i . If (as is the normal case) Neg_i has scope over Asp_i , the interpretation is that of a negation of the remainder of the clause, including the Asp_i element. We shall express this by stating that Asp_i is Neg-opaque.

We have outlined three criteria which distinguish T_i elements from Asp_i elements. These are summarized in Fig. 3.

Fig. 3. Criteria distinguishing T_i from Asp_i

T_i	Asp_i
real-time	no real-time
time adverbial agreement	no time adverbial agreement
Neg-transparent	Neg-opaque

Now the stage is set for a closer examination of the Chinese data.

4. The two categories in Chinese

We have suggested that English clause structure should be analysed as having one T_i projection and one Asp_i projection, and we have demonstrated criteria which distinguish these from one another. Returning to Chinese, we note that it is a tenseless language. The question is therefore if any of the categories defined so far can be of use in our analysis of Chinese.

In this paper we will concentrate on the behaviour of the particle *le* (commonly described as a perfective particle, cf Norman 1988). In a simple clause, in isolation, *le* may be added after the verb to indicate that the action is completed (9).

9. Ta mai-le shu.
s/he bought-LE book
‘S/he bought books.’

However, there is evidence suggesting that there are two positions at which the morpheme *le* may appear. One is immediately postverbal (preceding the object, as in (9)), the other is clause-final (following the object, as in (10)). These are referred to in the literature as V-*le* and sentence-*le* respectively.

10. Ta yao mai shu le.
s/he want buy book LE

‘S/he now wants to buy books (and this is a new situation).’

It is clear that V-*le* is attached / cliticized to the verb. Sentence-*le*, on the other hand, appears to be adjoined to the clause as whole (rather than to the object), since it is not dependent on the nature of the word preceding it (which need not be an object, cf (11)).

11. Ta yao zou le.
s/he wants leave LE

‘S/he now wants to leave (after not having wanted to previously).’

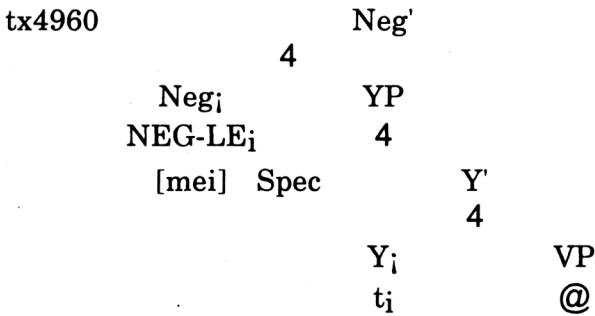
Let us therefore assume that X_i and Y_i are heads corresponding to T_i and Asp_i . The next question is then: which corresponds to which? Here the criteria which we defined in section 2 come into play.

Let us begin with the third criterion. How do *V-le* and sentence-*le* interact with negations? Here we find a very interesting contrast. *V-le* may not cooccur with the normal negation *bu* (‘Onot’) at all (13a). Instead, there is a separate negation, *mei* (‘-you’)(‘Onot-have’) which incorporates the concepts of both negation and *le* (13b).

- 13a. *Ta bu mai-le shu.
 3s NEG buy-LE book
 Intended reading: ‘OS/he did not buy books.’
- b. Ta mei-(you) mai shu.
 3s not.have-(have) buy book
 OS/he did not buy books.’

In structural terms, we can suggest that *mei* is the result of raising of a perfective / past feature from Y_i to Neg_i , and the realization of the ensuing portmanteau morpheme as *mei* rather than as a compound of *bu* and *le* (cf Fig. 5). We shall discuss possible reasons for this movement in section 5.

Fig. 5. The structure of *mei*



The interaction of sentence-*le* and Neg_i is quite different. Sentence-*le* may cooccur with the negation *bu*. If it does, however, it does not imply the negation of a perfective or past tense action. Instead, sentence-*le* takes unilateral scope over the entire clause, including the negation(14).

14. Wo bu yao mai shu le.
 1s NEG want buy book LE
 OI no longer want to buy books.’

Example 14 can only be interpreted such that the entire situation ‘I do not want to buy books’ is a recent development. Since X_i has unilateral scope over Neg_i , rather than both sharing scope over the whole sentence, it appears that X_i is Neg-opaque, and therefore a suitable candidate for Asp_i according to the third criterion presented in section 3. As far as Y_i is concerned, we can say nothing as yet, since fusion of Y_i and Neg_i creates a situation where Y_i and Neg_i share scope due to actually occupying the same position. This is neither evidence of Neg-opacity nor of Neg-transparency.

Let us continue then with the second criterion. We noted that a defining characteristic of T_i is that it may not cooccur with an adverbial which disagrees in temporal interpretation, whereas Asp_i may. If we begin by examining X_i in this light, we

see that sentence-*le* may cooccur with a time-setting topic which can have either present or past tense interpretation (15)¹.

15. Women dao nali de shihou, fangzi yijing yao jianhao le.
 we to there DE time house already will built-ready LE
 'By the time we get there, the house is going to be finished soon.'
 'When we got there, the house was soon to be finished.'

Thus, it appears that sentence-*le* displays another property which is typical of Asp_i rather than of T_i . In contrast, this ambiguity is not present with *V-le*. Thus, the only possible interpretation of a corresponding construction with *V-le* is that the action occurred in the past (16a). This can be seen by the ungrammaticality induced by inserting a disagreeing time adverbial into the subordinate clause (16b)².

- 16a. Women dao nali de shihou, Lisi yijing mai-le fangzi.
 we to there DE time Lisi already buy-LE house
 'When we got there, Lisi had already bought a house.'
 (#'When we get there, Lisi will already have bought a house.')
- b. *Women mingtian dao nali de shihou, Lisi yijing mai-le fangzi.
 we tomorrow to there DE time Lisi already buy-LE house
 O*'When we get there tomorrow, Lisi had already bought a house.'

Clearly, then, *V-le* in Y_i behaves in a similar fashion to T_i elements according to the second criterion from section 2 (in that it may not cooccur with a disagreeing time adverbial), while sentence-*le* in X_i behaves in a similar fashion to Asp_i , in that it may cooccur with a disagreeing time adverbial.

We have now seen two pieces of evidence connecting sentence-*le* to Asp_i and one piece of evidence connecting *V-le* to T_i (with data concerning interaction with Neg_i as yet inconclusive). The final test concerns the first criterion, namely reference to real-time. As it turns out, neither sentence-*le* nor *V-le* make clear reference to real-time. The fact that an embedded *V-le* derives its temporal interpretation from the clause in which it is embedded is traditionally viewed as evidence of its aspectual, rather than temporal, nature (17).

17. Ni chi-le wan-fan yihou cai keyi chuqu wan.
 you eat-LE dinner after only then can go.out play
 'You can go out to play after having had your dinner.'

Likewise, it is possible to construct examples in which sentence-*le* is embedded within a temporal subordinate clause, and it then also derives its interpretation from the clause rather than from real-time (18a).

18. Ta bu yao mai shu le de shihou, women keyi huijia.
 s/he not want buy book LE DE time we can return.home
 'When s/he no longer wishes to buy books, we may return home.'

Thus, neither *V-le* nor sentence-*le* derive their interpretation from real-time. To summarize our tally, observe Fig. 6. The question of a real-time link gives us no clue as to the correspondences of the Chinese projections. The evidence from cooccurrence with time

¹ I am grateful to Yang Suying for having brought these examples to my attention.

² Unless qualified by delimiting elements, cf Yang (1995:77).

adverbials suggests that sentence-*le* is an instance of Asp_i whereas V-*le* is an instance of T_i . The evidence from interaction with Neg_i suggests that sentence-*le* is an instance of Asp_i , but is inconclusive as far as V-*le* is concerned (since the s-structure hierarchical ordering of Neg_i and V-*le* is neutralized due to fusion).

Fig. 6. T_i and Asp_i features of V-*le* and sentence-*le*

	V- <i>le</i>	Sentence- <i>le</i>
Real-time link	-	-
Time adverbial cooccurrence	T_i	Asp_i
Neg interaction	-	Asp_i

The analysis of V-*le* as a tense morpheme is not new. Rohsenow (1977) has argued that V-*le* should be viewed as a marker of both perfective aspect and relative anteriority (i.e. relative past tense). Ross (1995), in a very detailed analysis of the semantic functions of V-*le* and sentence-*le*, also argues that V-*le* has the properties of a past tense marker. The present analysis is new in that it primarily deals with purely structural criteria, and attempts to define T_i and Asp_i elements independently of their meaning. It is interesting to note that the results reached are the same.

We shall henceforth tentatively assume that V-*le* is an instance of T_i and sentence-*le* is an instance of Asp_i and examine the consequences of this view. In the following sections we shall attempt to find further evidence to fill the table.

5. Basque and Chinese verb movement

We have noted in section 3 that T_i displays a property that we called Neg-transparency, which implies that Neg_i and T_i show a shared scope, regardless of which is hierarchically above the other in the structure. This was illustrated with data from English, where T_i is above Neg_i , and Basque, where Neg_i is above T_i . In Basque, the situation is slightly more complex, however. Given word order data from Basque involving the obligatory adjacency of the finite verb and the negation, Laka (1994) argues convincingly that the finite verb in Basque raises and adjoins to the negation. This is expressed in what Laka calls the TenseC-command Condition (Laka 1994:23ff).

Fig 7. Laka's Tense C-command Condition(henceforth TCC)

Tense must c-command at s-structure all propositional operators of the clause. Laka's TCC forces the tensed verb to raise to Neg_i in the syntax, to ensure that T_i c-commands Neg_i at s-structure at the latest. If we follow our previous assumption that V-*le* is an instance of T_i , raising of an element from Y_i to Neg_i can be derived automatically from the TCC with no further stipulation. Thus, the TCC gives us a new criterion which we can use to identify V-*le* with T_i , at the same time as it succeeds in explaining why raising from Y_i to Neg_i must occur (the difference between Basque and Chinese being that in Basque the tensed verb raises and adjoins to Neg_i , whereas in Chinese the temporal feature raises and is realized as the portmanteau morpheme *mei* in Neg_i).

Let us now briefly return to our discussion of the Neg-transparency of T_i . It was argued in section 2 that T_i and Neg_i are always interpreted as having equal scope. The important question is how this equal scope interpretation comes about. We expressed it such that T_i is transparent to some feature in Neg_i which is responsible for the truth-

value of the sentence. Interestingly enough, the TCC offers evidence that this transparency is not mutual, but rather that the equal scope interpretation can only be derived by transparency if T_i is above Neg_i , not vice versa. If Neg_i is above T_i , T_i must raise to Neg_i to ensure the equal scope interpretation.

This seems to indicate that Neg-transparency and the TCC are, in fact, two realizations of the same principle, namely that T_i and Neg_i must have equal scope at s-structure. This can be expressed informally as the Equal Scope Principle (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8. The Equal Scope Principle

If category X is Neg-transparent, it must be interpreted as having equal scope with Neg. If X_i is above Neg_i , the Neg-transparency in itself allows the relevant Neg-features to percolate up to X_i , which is sufficient to ensure this interpretation. If X_i is below Neg_i , it must raise to join Neg_i at s-structure. T_i is such a category X.

We have now shown further evidence that *V-le* in Chinese should be viewed as an instance of T_i . If this is the case, we must try to explain what it is that makes Chinese a tenseless language in spite of this.

6. Why is Chinese tenseless?

There are two important ways in which Chinese is a tenseless language. These will be illustrated with reference to *V-le*. Firstly, *V-le* is unable to make reference to real-time out of an embedded context (19a), and secondly, *V-le* is necessarily perfective in its use, so that it may not be used with unbounded verbs (19b)¹.

19a. Ni chi-le fan yihou, keyi chuqu wan.
2s eat-LErice after can go.out play
O'After you have eaten, you may go out to play.'

b. *Wo qunianzhu-le zai Taipei.
s1 last.year live-LE at Taipei
O'Last year I lived in Taipei.'

Both of these serve as counter evidence to our suggestion that *V-le* is a T_i element. Let us examine the first fact first.

We have hitherto assumed that reference to real-time is a feature of T_i rather than of Asp_i . We have done so on the basis of evidence from a language like English, where T_i is above Asp_i . The facts in English admit of another explanation, however. Reference to real-time is, in English, a property of the higher of the two levels T_i and Asp_i (viz. T_i), whereas lack of this reference is a property of the lower one (viz. Asp_i). If we assume that this property does not follow from the nature of the category, but rather from its hierarchical level in the clause, it follows that we would not expect T_i in Chinese to be able to access real-time.

Instead, we should expect Chinese Asp_i (i.e. sentence-*le*) to be able to refer to real-time. However, since the primary function of sentence-*le* is to indicate that the situation as such is new (and is aspectual rather than temporal), its reference to real-time is also rather weak (and can, in fact, be blocked by embedding, as was seen in example (18)). Thus

¹ If the structure in Fig 9, no reference has been made to the C_i projection. This is a major study in its own right.

it appears that only the higher of the two levels T_i and Asp_i is able to access real-time, and of these, only T_i can derive any temporal information from such a reference. This would imply that absolute tense with reference to real-time is only a possibility in a language where the higher category is identical to T_i , i.e. where T_i c-commands Asp_i (as in English).

The second problem concerns the ungrammaticality of *V-le* cooccurring with unbounded verbs. This, if anything, should be taken as evidence of the aspectual nature of *V-le*.

Given the analysis of *V-le* as a relative tense morpheme, it might be assumed that the incompatibility of *V-le* with a stative verb may be derived from a reinterpretation of a stative verb as incorporating a progressive aspect which corresponds to a relative present tense. This avenue is not available, however. Such an analysis would imply that *V-le* always necessarily refers to a reference point other than real-time, whereas *V-le* in actual fact often does refer to real-time (whenever it is not embedded).

Thus, it seems clear that *V-le* incorporates the aspectual specification of perfectivity. On the other hand, it is equally clear from examples like (16) that it is not purely an aspectual morpheme, but also has a past tense specification (realized, due to its structural position below Asp_i , as relative tense). It is likely that the tense properties derive from the fact that it is generated in the head T_i (a suggestion for which we have support from other structural criteria independent of the semantics of tense and aspect). The question is therefore where the aspectual properties derive from.

A possible solution has been outlined by Ross (1995). Ross suggests (op.cit. 110) that states are unanchored in time. If this is the case, then it is no surprise that they should be incompatible with tense-marking. Crucially, this would seem to hold for relative tense, but not for absolute tense (since absolute tense languages like English are capable of expressing states in the past tense). The exact consequences of the difference in behaviour between absolute and relative tense with respect to this suggestion remain to be studied in detail.

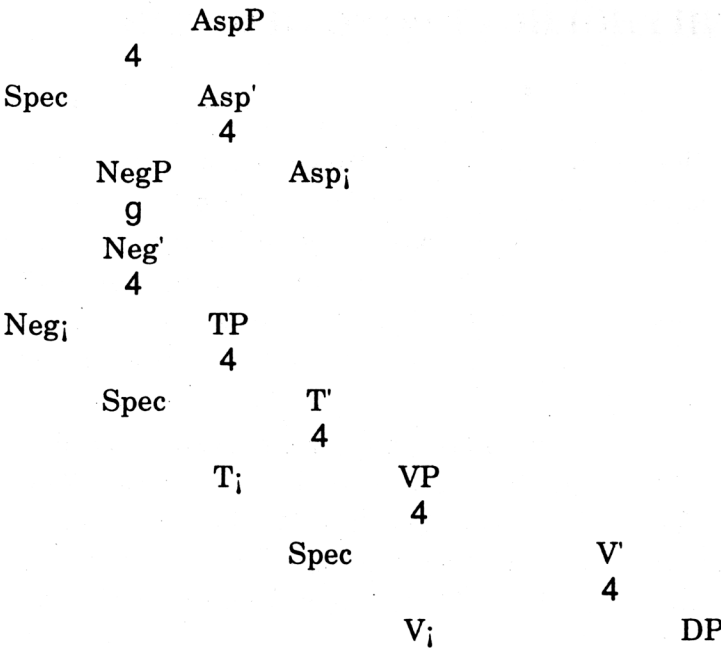
7. Summary

In the preceding sections, it has been argued that the fact that Chinese is a tenseless language does not derive from the lack of a T_i projection. Instead it has been argued that Chinese possesses the same T_i projection and Asp_i projection which we assume for English and other tense languages. Cross-linguistic data from English, Swedish and Basque are given to present criteria distinguishing T_i from Asp_i , and on the basis of these criteria, it is shown that *V-le* should be identified with T_i , whereas sentence-*le* should be identified with Asp_i . What then causes Chinese to lack the category of verbal tense as we know it is not a lack of the T_i projection, but rather the hierarchical ordering of T_i and Asp_i , with Asp_i above T_i , blocking the absolute time reference of T_i . Finally, as a tentative generalization, it is proposed that one defining property of tenseless languages is that Asp_i c-commands T_i rather than vice versa. The relevant structure assumed for Chinese is therefore as illustrated in Fig. 9¹.

¹ I am indebted to the researchers Shigeru Tsuchida (on Imorod), Yukihiro Yamada (on Itbayat and Iwasay) and Tsunekazu Moriguchi (on Iralalay, Isamorong and Babuyan) for their pioneer work in collecting the comparative wordlists for all these languages and dialects. Without their important work this paper could not have been written.

Fig. 9. The structure of the Chinese clause

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CÁI GÌ CHI PHỐI HOẠT ĐỘNG GIAO TIẾP

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Quá trình giao tiếp thường được ví như bước nhảy tango của hai người, bước nhảy này đòi hỏi sự "hợp tác" của hai người ban nhảy. Tuy nhiên, chỉ hợp tác thôi thì không bảo đảm sự thành công của điệu nhảy, vì có thể đôi bạn nhảy đó không thành thạo các bước nhảy. Và quá trình giao tiếp ngôn ngữ cũng có thể như vậy, vì người nói có thể ngộ nhận người nghe hiểu mình, còn người nghe thì không thể hiểu người nói nói gì. Sự hợp tác trong cuộc thoại là hữu ích, song nó không phải là khái niệm cơ bản chi phối các hoạt động của những người tham gia cuộc thoại.

Do đó, việc cùng nắm rõ các bước nhảy và những tiền ước giao tiếp của nhau dường như là những điều kiện tiên quyết cho sự thành công của các hoạt động này. Tuy nhiên, một vũ sư giỏi có thể hướng dẫn cho một vũ công chưa thụ đắc đầy đủ những thao tác của bước nhảy. Tương tự như vậy, trong giao tiếp ngôn ngữ, người nghe có thể hiểu ý định của người nói mà không cần có tri thức thỏa đáng. Tôi lấy một ví dụ như sau: A không hề biết âm nào trong tiếng Đức cả.

A: Can you speak German? B: Aber natürlich Ich kann.

Trong ví dụ này, nếu A tin B nói thật thì A hiểu rằng phát ngôn của B là tiếng Đức và như vậy B biết nói tiếng Đức. Vấn đề ở đây là người nói tiên nhận biết được khả năng hoặc sự xác tín của A (chứ không phải là tri thức tiếng Đức của A) trong việc xác nhận phát ngôn của B là tiếng Đức. Để việc trao đổi thành công thì việc A phải biết tiếng Đức là không nhất thiết. Có rất nhiều minh họa cho thấy quá trình giao tiếp thực tế vẫn diễn ra mà không cần đến tri thức chung của cả người nói lẫn người nghe.

Trong bài viết này, tôi xin được giới thiệu một khái niệm dựa trên sự tri nhận được gọi là "Tính quan yếu thỏa đáng" là yếu tố chi phối hoạt động giao tiếp. Đây không phải là một khái niệm đảm bảo sự an toàn cho việc giao tiếp bởi người nói bao giờ cũng có thể "đánh lạc hướng" người nghe hoặc người nghe có thể không chú ý đến những gì người nói nói ra. Tuy nhiên, tôi sẽ chứng minh khái niệm này có thể giải thích được nhiều dữ kiện, kể cả cuộc trao đổi kể trên và tôi sẽ chứng minh nó có hiệu lực.