
A Book Review of *Five Treatises on Chinese Grand Grammar*

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Abstract: Shen J-X's monograph *Five Treatises on Chinese Grand Grammar* is a further reflection on the Chinese grammar following his proposals of the Super-Noun model for Chinese word classes and the parallel model of Chinese syntax. Against the tendency to study syntax, semantics and pragmatics separately, Shen argues that Chinese Grand Grammar involves a comprehensive consideration of prosodic, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic factors simultaneously. Basically, Shen accepts the proposal that the predominant and primary unit in Chinese language is *zi* (word-syllable) which is monosyllable and carries a specific tone and meaning. This fact accounts for a package of difference and contrast between the artistic and poetic Chinese language and the word-based English language. Taking daily conversations as the prototype of discourse, Shen naturally explains the properties of continuity and dynamism of Chinese run-on utterances.

Keywords: Chinese Grand Grammar, Super-Noun, Word-Syllable, Prosody, Four Chunk Format, Run-on Utterances

1. Introduction

Five Treatises on Chinese Grand Grammar is one of the "Research Series on Linguistic Hot Issues", a collection of recent theoretical achievements of the most influential linguists in mainland China. This monograph, consisting of five chapters, not only generalizes the characteristics of Chinese language, but also bases itself upon some recent findings of linguistic typology. It is a further reflection on the Chinese grammar following the author's proposals of the Super-Noun model for Chinese word classes [1] and the parallel model of Chinese syntax [2]. By Grand Grammar, Shen means that Chinese language is unique in three aspects. First, Chinese words, clauses and passages are organized the same way. Second, the sound, form and meaning of Chinese language are mixed without clear-cut boundary. Third, the informative, expressive and other functions of Chinese are realized simultaneously. With a theoretical pursuit different from the universal grammar proposed by Chomsky, Shen opposes the tendency of modern linguistics to study syntax, semantics and pragmatics separately.

2. The Five Treatises in Different Chapters

The first Chapter is "Chinese word class and syntax from the antithesis of Tang poetry" which advocates that linguists should break through the Indo-European grammatical concepts of nouns and verbs that are in exclusive opposition. In Chinese, nouns constitute a super category including verbs as its sub-category. In other words, Shen believes that all verbs in Chinese are in effect verbal nouns because Chinese words have not yet been divided into different parts of speech. According to Shen, the antithesis of Tang poetry adds more evidence to the conclusion that Chinese has Super-Nouns containing not only common entity-denoting nouns, but also verbs and adjectives. It follows that the so-called nominalization in Chinese is nothing but a superfluous concept of analogy with other Indo-European languages. Instead, Chinese is characteristic of nominalism, the interference of which results in negative transfer and accounts for various mistakes made by Chinese students while they are learning English as a foreign language [3]. Only by acknowledging

this fact can we succinctly and coherently explain the parallel and duality of part of speech required by the antithesis in Tang poetry. “What really matters in Mandarin poetry is prosodic and semantic duality between the parallel words; the part of speech and structural relations are secondary” (P. 31). Taking Tang poetry for illustration, Shen re-emphasized his proposal that the grammatical system for Mandarin Chinese depends on “class inclusion” instead of “class distinction”. In another influential book *Nouns and Verbs* [1], Shen claims that the purported subject-predict structure in Chinese in effect takes a somewhat *suowei* (signified)-*suoyiwei* (signifier) relation.

Chapter two “Chinese Grand Grammar includes prosody” comparatively analyzes Chinese poetry and English songs and illustrates their distinct characteristics of rhythm. First, only Chinese has the rhythmic unit *zi* (word-syllable) which is monosyllable and carries a specific tone and meaning. Secondly, the rise and fall in rhythm is shown in sentence intonation in English, whereas it is shown in the tones of word-syllables in Chinese. Thirdly, in English the pause and transition in rhythm is decided by the word stress, but in Chinese it is determined by the degree of syllable combination tightness. Thanks to these differences, it is important to control the number of word-syllables to maintain a well-balanced rhythm in Chinese and the position of pauses involves a comprehensive consideration of prosodic, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic factors simultaneously. In English, prosody and grammar are separate and interacting at an interface. In Chinese, however, prosody itself is included in the Grand Grammar, as is shown in figure 1. The reason for this difference is that Chinese is a typically character-based language and the free variation of syllable combination tightness gives rise to flexibility of Chinese rhythm. Naturally, Chinese has no obvious and definite lexical stress, but discourse accent. Compared with word-based English, Chinese is more of an “artistic and poetic language”, rather than a “technical one” (P. 85).

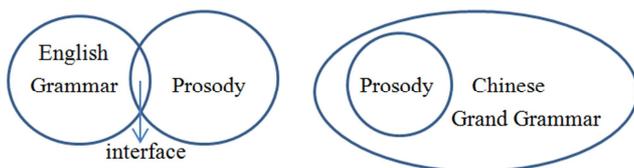


Figure 1. English Grammar vs. Chinese Grand Grammar.

Intertextuality, as a rhetorical device frequently used in ancient Chinese poetry and prose, refers to two adjacent sentences or the two parts of one sentence that express different things superficially, but actually interpret and complement each other, talking about the same thing. In Chapter three “A contemporary interpretation of intertextuality and antithetical couplet”, compound words, four-character words and disyllable words in mandarin are all broadly analyzed as intertextuality. In other words, the format of intertextuality is elastic, with two-syllable words being the minimal version that can be expanded to more complex units of expressions. Basically, both word-formation and

sentence-construction in Chinese are based on pairing/coupling, and syllable symmetry itself is a manifestation of this grammar mechanism. The antithetical couplet refers to the fact that the beginning of the following sentence repeats the end of the previous one. This, according to Shen, also comes from repetition and progression in daily conversation, which is but a dynamic representation of the intertextuality. To extend this, the author further argues that the antithetical couplet pattern is the origin of grammar for all human languages, which gives rise to a head-tail overlapping, rhythmic and coherent linguistic effect. “From this universal pattern, mandarin developed in the direction of the antithetical couplet, while Indo-European languages the subject-predicate structure” (P. 139).

In the fourth chapter “On four chunk format in Chinese”, the author explains the properties and principles in building and processing the symmetrical and dynamic constructions. In light of the Grand Grammar, the four chunk format is a result of grammaticalization with the characteristic of “adding similarity on adjacency” (P. 146). In effect, this parallel and balanced pattern is symbolic of as well as rooted in daily dialogues and resonance between speakers and hearers. For English speakers, a subject must be followed by a predicate to express a complete and grammatical sentence. To Chinese speakers, however, only parallel expressions count as perfectly well-formed and make real sense. Two reasons for this four chunk pattern are provided, one being that every Chinese character equally exist in form with its own meaning, the other being that the number 4 is unique in that it could be obtained either through 2 plus 2 or by 2 times 2.

Chapter five “Two or three, on the minimal Chinese run-on utterances” reemphasizes that daily conversations provide the prototype of discourse, thus continuity and dynamism are the defining properties of Chinese run-on utterances. In daily talks, a complete speech round normally includes a tripartite of “incitation-response/incitation-response”, with the middle part being the reply of the initial question and incitation of the following response. Following this, the minimal mandarin run-on utterances are defined as a triplet consisting of three pausal utterances, each separated by an obvious pause, a comma or a full stop. A pausal utterance, as a grammatical unit, carries its own intonation and functions as a speech turn. Such terms as “minor sentence” and “small clause” are abandoned since they are not needed in Chinese grammar. Different from the dichotomous schema of dividing a single cause to subject and predicate, and a single sentence to clauses, the run-on utterance is based on three-to-one mechanism, i.e., “from one comes two; two then gives birth to three; and three to everything, and from this tripartite utterance derive the ever-changing discourse patterns” (P. 200). Applying Zellig Harris segmentation-and-classification discovery procedure into Chinese discourse analysis, Shen once again argues that subject and predicate are equivalent to each other, both belonging to substitution class, which means that the Chinese syntax is essentially based upon information structure and is characterized by parallelism [4].

3. Comments and Recommendation

Theoretically, the Grand Grammar framework is an academic effort under the Chinese discourse system. “In order to inherit and transform the unsystematic but insightful ideas in traditional Chinese linguistics with a modern perspective, neither viewing Chinese language in isolation nor studying it from the Indo-European perspective is advisable”(p. 2). Within the framework of modern linguistics, this monograph provides a new interpretation of *huwen* (intertextuality) and *lianyu* (chain-text, anadiplosis) in traditional Chinese philology, and straightforwardly explains that the Chinese language is characteristic of parallel processing and dynamic processing. Shen basically accepts the proposal advocated by both Pan [5] and Xu [6] that the predominant and primary unit in Chinese language is *zi* (word-syllable), adding that more findings in the study of Chinese prosody point to this fact. Undoubtedly, Shen’s proposal, in many aspects, runs contrary to the Chomskyan linguistics, for which, grammar is narrowly understood as syntax (the computational component). For Chomsky [7], grammar only does the job of building syntactic structure that serves as input into the semantic and phonetic components. The three independent modules of syntax, semantics and phonology are isolated from one another but meeting at the interfaces. However, Shen argues against the universality of this assumption and holds that Chinese Grand Grammar contains all these different parts which are mixed but not completely separated. Therefore, a panorama of Chinese grammar involves a comprehensive consideration of prosodic, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic factors simultaneously.

Despite the seemingly differences, the “Super-Noun” category echoes Larson’s suggestion that verbs and adjectives in Chinese might be classified as subtypes of the nominal category [8]. Some similar idea could also find expression in Kaufman [9] which proves that the purported predicates in Tagalog, an Austronesian language in Philippine, should be reanalyzed as nominal phrases. The claim that “parallelism” and “resonance” in dialogues are the origin of the structural coupling in grammar is in line with the dialogic syntax proposed by Du Bois [10]. Furthermore, Shen takes the properties of *Huwen* and *lianyu* as part of human’s universal language competence rooted in dialogue and benefit to processing efficiency. Considering these similar insights, the

Grand Grammar is not applicable for Chinese language alone as the author claims, especially when he argues that all human languages share the same origin of the antithetical couplet pattern, which is another way of labeling the universal grammar. Empirically, this monograph provides some interesting and intriguing linguistic data in Chinese classics and poetry that can help grammarians of different approaches better understand mandarin and human’s language in general.

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