Aspect Markers and Sentence Types – A corpus-based study

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Aspect is an important area in the current linguistic investigations on the syntax-morphology-semantics interface. There has been a huge amount of literature on the inter-relationship between aspect marking, verb types and different situation types (Dowty, 1979; Depraetere, 1995; Smith, 1997; Vendler, 1967; Xiao & McEnery, 2004; among others), but the accounts provided in the previous studies are mostly based on intuition or on a small set of data, and many problems remain unsolved. The aspectual system in Chinese is even more under-researched. Aspect marking in Chinese is optional, and the presence or absence of a certain aspect marker is determined by a number of factors. A corpus-based (usage-based) study will greatly help us understand how each of the factors impacts the use of aspect markers.

To make up for the inadequacies of the previous studies, we made use of three corpora, each containing around 250,000 words, representing three different discourse types: fiction, news reports and conversations, to investigate the inter-relationship between aspect marking and verb types, text types, discourse organization and sentence types. The present paper reports part of this corpus-based study: the inter-relationship between aspect marking and sentence types.

We manually tagged 28 sentential features, including types of sentence constructions, types of objects, types of different kinds of adverbials, etc. in the corpus of fiction. After the completion of the tagging, we conducted computationally interactive and detailed manual textual analyses, which allowed us to produce some interesting findings:

i. Aspect markers don’t appear in relative clauses, nor in focus clauses;
ii. Only a few aspect markers appear in causative clauses (mainly the perfective marker 了), or nominalized clauses (mainly the stative aspect marker 着);
iii. Aspect markers seldom appear in negative sentences;
iv. More aspect markers appear in passive sentences and ba constructions;
v. The stative marker 着 occurs more often in sentences with definite or indefinite objects than in sentences with quantified object, while the opposite is true with the perfective marker 了.
vi. The experiential 为 is used more often in sentences with resultative phrases.

The findings allow us to provide both quantitative and qualitative descriptions of aspect marking in Chinese. On the theoretical level, our qualitative accounts with the support of quantitative analyses will contribute to the development of a general theory of aspect and to our understanding of Chinese grammar. On the applied level, our comprehensive and explanatory accounts of the Chinese aspectual system will have implications to Chinese language teaching.
References: