

# *Exploring the Temporal Expressions in Chinese from the Linguistics Perspectives*

Yuhui Luo<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>College of Letters and Science, University of California Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, United States of America

a. Yuhui781@ucsb.edu

\*corresponding author

**Abstract:** Chinese offers an intriguing linguistic terrain for temporal expressions that is vastly distinct from many Indo-European languages, which use verb conjugation structures for this purpose. This paper delves deep into China's nuanced temporal nuances, exploring their implications on time delineation using uninflected verbs. Focusing on contextual clues, adverbs, particles and sentence structure we observe the interaction among these components that ensure clarity and precision when conveying temporal information. Notably, temporal adverbs such as "Gang Gang" and "Gang Cai", when used with aspect markers, create layers of temporal ambiguity which underline how language's inherent flexibility relies on shared contextual understanding. By conducting a comprehensive analysis of Chinese temporal expressions, this paper highlights the adaptability of languages, as well as their mutually reinforcing relationship between grammar and pragmatics, and culture and cognition in communicating time's complexity.

**Keywords:** Temporal expression, Verb Conjunction, Aspect Markers, Ambiguity in Temporal Expressions.

## 1. Introduction

Chinese is widely revered for its complex characters and tonal system, yet remains an intriguing case study for temporal expressions due to its distinct lack of conjugation in verbs. While most Indo-European languages utilize inflections on verbs to denote tense, aspect, mood or even person, Chinese verbs remain uninflected throughout usage; this remarkable linguistic feature has far-reaching effects for how time and temporal relationships are conveyed; instead relying heavily on context clues, particles, adverbs and aux words to highlight particular temporal nuances in context [1-4].

At the core of it all lies verb conjugation's absence, creating an inherently ambiguous situation. Take for instance the sentence, "Ta Qu Shang Dian", without context cues it can be read differently depending on when one reads it; thus necessitating an investigation of how Chinese can convey temporal information without resorting to morphological modifications for temporal presentation.

Chinese uses various strategies to disambiguate temporal expressions. One such strategy involves employing time adverbs as a way of specifying temporal frames; for instance, adding "Zuo Tian " (zuotian) after "Ta Qu Shang Dian " unequivocally indicates past action [5]. Additionally, "Ming Tian " (mingtian) and "Xian Zai " (xianzai) can also be employed to denote future and present actions respectively.

At one time or another, temporal ambiguity must be resolved through contextual cues. Chinese relies heavily on its context when it comes to understanding temporal meaning of sentences. If spoken discourse involves past events such as "Ta Qu Shang Dian " being discussed, additional details may be added by speakers to clarify intended references for temporality versus present context (where "Ta Qu Shang Dian " would likely refer to ongoing or immediate actions).

As verb conjugation does not exist in Chinese, particles and auxiliary words play an integral part in conveying temporal information. Particles like "Liao " (le) and "Zhao " (zhe) play an invaluable role in clarifying temporal meaning within sentences; for example "Liao," for instance, can indicate completion of actions such as in the example above (transforming Ta Qu Shang Dian to Ta Qu Liao Shang Dian), signalling past events more easily; while "Zhao " can denote ongoing actions such as the example below (Ta Zai Shang Dian Li Mai Dongxi zhe).

Chinese sentence structure contributes significantly to expressing temporal relationships in an elegant and nuanced way. Its typical word order, subject-verb-object (SVO), offers a relatively neutral temporal ground where verbs remain unmarked by tense markers; however, time adverbs placed before or after verbs can subtly alter this reading - they may indicate the action's duration or manner when placed before verb.

## 2. Lack of Verb Conjunction

Chinese is notable for its lack of verb conjugation, yet this provides it with the flexibility needed to express temporal nuances more flexibly than most languages. Instead, context, adverbs, particles and sentence structure all play a significant role in understanding temporal meanings compared to verb conjugation's direct means of conveying it grammatically; Chinese shows off this complex interplay between linguistic elements and pragmatic cues in communicating an array of temporal information effectively [2].

Chinese's lack of verb conjugation creates complex temporal expressions which necessitate multifaceted methods for disambiguation. Language expertly navigates temporal nuances through its effective use of time adverbs, particles, contextual cues and sentence structure. This linguistic peculiarity not only illustrates the versatility of human language to express complex ideas but also highlights how grammar and pragmatics interact to effectively communicate temporal information. Furthermore, Chinese serves as a fascinating reminder that languages can often find ingenious ways around structural constraints, leading to diverse and innovative communication strategies.

## 3. Ambiguous Time Phrases

One notable characteristic of Chinese temporal expressions is their inherent ambiguity, often stemming from their lack of inherent temporal markers in certain phrases [5]. Take "Ming Tian," which translates to "tomorrow." At first glance it seems straightforward, yet without context it becomes complex; leaving room for interpretation ambiguities such as does "Ming Tian " refer to any day after today or any future day under consideration? Such an ambiguity poses a linguistic puzzle where context, cultural cues and pragmatic insights help interpret its temporal meanings. One key to unambiguously understanding Chinese temporal expressions lies in context. Take, for instance, two individuals having a conversation on a Friday who hear a phrase such as "Wo Men Ming Tian Jian "(Women mingtian jian). Their interpretation depends on shared pragmatic knowledge between themselves; "Ming Tian "unambiguously points towards Saturday in this context; while on Mondays the meaning changes again: Monday indicates Tuesday as its replacement day if conversation occurs in that slot. Thus the temporal ambiguity is resolved not by internal structures but through extralinguistic cues.

Chinese time phrases often involve vague, subjective descriptions like "Jin Tian "(jintian) and "Zuo Tian "(zuotian), which loosely translate to "today" and "yesterday," respectively. Such statements define timeframes relative to where one stands in relation to their speaker. "Jin Tian," while usually denoting today's date, may still fluctuate depending on its context of conversation. "Jin Tian " and "Zuo Tian " can both refer to Friday, as in a retrospective discussion taking place on a Saturday; without additional contextual context they have inherent ambiguities that impeach precise temporal interpretation in Chinese.

Notably, Chinese provides a range of temporal expressions which do not inherently carry ambiguity. "Qian Tian "(qiantian) and "Hou Tian "(houtian) serve as unambiguous references to specific dates relative to when speaking at that moment in time. While these expressions do not contain inherent ambiguities themselves, their inclusion demonstrates both cultural acceptance and innovative language usage when it comes to temporal reference - their presence highlighting both innovation in terms of temporal reference as well as cultural recognition of precise temporal demarcations as markers of time-boundary demarcations by language innovators.

Chinese's approach to temporal expressions reflects a larger linguistic trend that accords great weight to contextual knowledge, shared information, and cultural understanding. Some time phrases exhibit their pragmatic nature by being somewhat vague - rather than solely relying on grammar constructs, the language relies on participants coming together collaboratively in communication to form meaning through shared understandings of world events and their discourse environment.

In summary, Chinese's investigation of ambiguous time phrases highlights their intricate interplay between linguistic elements and pragmatic context in creating precise temporal references. "Ming Tian," "Jin Tian," and "Zuo Tian" demonstrate Chinese's dependence on context, shared knowledge, and cultural cues to resolve ambiguity. Expressions such as "Qian Tian " and "Hou Tian " provide clear temporal demarcations while also showcasing Chinese's nuanced approach to representing time. Through Chinese linguistics, one gains insights not only into temporal expression but also the ways language connects to culture and cognition to construct meaning across an ever-evolving communicative landscape.

#### **4. Temporal Adverbs and Aspect**

Temporal adverbs play an essential role in Chinese to indicate when an action took place or will take place, typically "Gang Gang" (ganggang), meaning "just now". But this seemingly straightforward expression, when combined with aspect markers, reveals layers of temporal ambiguity; although "Gang Gang " suggests recent past times but its precise location in time becomes unclear due to these aspect markers Any text or material outside the aforementioned margins will not be printed [6-7].

Aspect markers in Chinese grammar serve to alter an action's temporal properties and add subtlety and complexity to narratives. When combined with temporal adverbs such as "Gang Gang " or the aspect marker "Liao" (le), the expression "Gang Gang Liao" creates an ambiguity as to whether an action occurred recently or has just taken place; this comes about due to mixing recent past notions like "Gang Gang " with completed actions represented by "Liao." This creates confusion as to when considering which actions took place recently or has just completed due to this combination between recent past "Gang Gang " and completed actions denoted by "Liao."

Phrases like "Gang Cai," meaning "a moment ago" or "just a while ago," highlight the depth and diversity of temporal adverbs and aspect markers, especially when used together with different aspect markers such as "Zai" (zai) or "Guo" (guo), thus expanding upon its temporal interpretation; "Gang Cai Zai" could indicate ongoing action from an ongoing action occurring recently while "Gang Cai Guo "(gangcai guo) could indicate completed actions from recent times past; these combinations demonstrate how aspect markers interact to create its temporal interpretation.

Temporal ambiguity created by interactions between temporal adverbs and aspect markers highlights the pragmatic nature of language. Chinese speakers rely heavily on contextual cues, shared knowledge, discourse environments, intonation patterns and conversational cues to disambiguate temporal meanings; for spoken dialogue this means using intonation, stress patterns or conversational cues that reveal whether an action is currently underway, completed, or newly initiated.

Beyond "Gang Gang " and "Gang Cai," Chinese boasts an extensive library of temporal adverbs to pinpoint actions in time. Examples include Dai Hui (daihui), which refers to "later," while Ceng Jing conveys "once or previously." Meanwhile "Jiang Lai " (jianglai) refers to future time, while Wei Lai ("weilai) specifically denotes coming future time. These adverbs provide distinct temporal contours while interaction with aspect markers or contextual elements determine their precise temporal nuances.

Additionally, auxiliary verbs like "Jiang " (jiang) and "Hui " (hui) can further modulate temporal interpretations. "Jiang " often connotes an impending action while "Hui " suggests future occurrence. For instance "Wo Jiang Qu" implies "I will go soon," while "Wo Hui Qu " (Wo Hui qu) conveys "I will go in the future." When combined with adverbs and aspect markers they form intricate webs of temporal interpretations [8-12].

## 5. Conclusions

Chinese temporal expressions reflect an intricate web of interplay among language structure, pragmatics, and contextual interpretation. Combining temporal adverbs with aspect markers highlights how shared knowledge and conversational context play an essential role in resolving temporal uncertainties. While verb conjugation might seem restrictive at first glance, this absence creates a rich tapestry of communicative strategies necessitating close cooperation between linguistic elements and pragmatic cues to produce powerful responses from listeners and speakers alike.

Exploration of temporal adverbs, aspect markers and their interactions in Chinese temporal expressions has demonstrated the complexity of linguistic communication. These combinations highlight the significance of context and shared knowledge for deciphering temporal meanings. Chinese's approach to temporal reference emphasizes the significance of collaborative meaning construction among speakers, where language serves as a versatile means for conveying subtleties of temporality in a fluid and ever-evolving temporal landscape. By looking through this linguistic lens one can appreciate not only Chinese grammar's complexity but also how human cognition helps navigate this intricate space known as time.

Chinese temporal expressions offer an intriguing window into the greater complexity and adaptability of human language. Without verb conjugations as the backbone, as is seen in Indo-European languages, Chinese relies heavily on contextual cues, particles, adverbs and sentence structures to articulate temporal nuances. As highlighted here by this paper's findings on "Gang Gang" and "Gang Cai", juxtaposed with aspect markers can introduce layers of temporal ambiguity demonstrating shared context and cultural understanding as essential factors when understanding temporal interpretation. This investigation into Chinese temporal linguistics offers crucial insight into how languages navigate around inherent structural constraints. Chinese is distinguished from other languages by its emphasis on pragmatic communication dynamics, where both speakers and listeners must work together towards building meaning through cooperative processes of meaning construction. By studying Chinese, we see how languages are not simply static systems of rules but are living tools integral to culture and cognition. Languages evolve, adapting to meet the complexities of human experience. This paper highlights their remarkable adaptability as a testament to humanity's deep-seated capacity for innovation and adaptation when faced with language-related obstacles.

## References

- [1] Eaves, M. "English, Chinglish or China English?: Analysing Chinglish, Chinese English and China English." *English Today* 27.4 (2011): 64-70.
- [2] Tzeng, Ovid JL, Sylvia C and Daisy L. H. "The classifier problem in Chinese aphasia." *Brain and language* 41.2 (1991): 184-202.
- [3] González, V. Chia-Yin C., and Claudia S "Cultural thinking and discourse organizational patterns influencing writing skills in a Chinese English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learner." *Bilingual Research Journal* 25.4 (2001): 627-652.
- [4] Li, Weijun, et al. "Prosodic phrase priming during listening to Chinese ambiguous phrases in different experimental tasks." *Journal of Neurolinguistics* 51 (2019): 135-150.
- [5] LI, Weijun, et al. "Neural processing of ambiguous Chinese phrases of stutters." *Acta Psychologica Sinica* 50.12 (2018): 1323.
- [6] Albrecht, J.H., Rebecca H, and G. Elisabeta M "The Chinese room: visualization and interaction to understand and correct ambiguous machine translation." *Computer Graphics Forum*. Vol. 28. No. 3. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2009.
- [7] Meisterernst, B. "The syntax of aspecto-temporal adverbs from Late Archaic to Early Medieval Chinese." *Journal of East Asian Linguistics* 25 (2016): 143-181.
- [8] Smith, C. S., and Mary S. E. "Temporal interpretation in mandarin chinese." (2005): 713-756.
- [9] Xiao, R. Z., and Anthony M. M.. "A corpus-based approach to tense and aspect in English-Chinese translation." *The 1st International Symposium on Contrastive and Translation Studies between Chinese and English*. 2002.
- [10] Lin, J.W. "Temporal reference in mandarin Chinese." *Journal of East Asian Linguistics* 12.3 (2003): 259-311.
- [11] Lin, Q.. *Anxiety and self-efficacy in Chinese international students' L3 French learning with L2 English and L3 French*. *Frontiers in Psychology*, (2022) 13, 998536.
- [12] Lin, J.W. "On the temporal meaning of the verbal-le in Chinese." *Language and Linguistics* 1.2 (2000): 109-133.