The Meaning System of Tense: A Systemic Functional Approach

Authors : Cunyu Zhang

Abstract : Through literature review about studies related to tense, it is found that there exist disagreements on the definition and existence of Chinese tense. Influenced by some researches on English language which regard tense as a grammatical category based on the verbal inflections of English, some Chinese researchers claim that there is no tense in Chinese language as there are no verbal inflections involved. Meanwhile, other Chinese researchers hold that Chinese still has tense although its verbs are non-inflectional based on the fact that Chinese lexical expressions can imply temporal meaning. We assume that the reasons for the above disagreements in terms of Chinese tense lie in the fact that all the previous studies prefer to view language "from the below" which means expressions of tense are the core part of these studies. However, there are about 6,000 languages with distinct expressions all over the world. Hence, if the language studies only concentrate on expressions, it must become more difficult to understand the nature of language. By contrast, functions of languages are similar; otherwise, the human beings could not communicate with each other. Therefore, we believe that it is necessary for us to have a theoretical study on Chinese tense within the framework of SFL which holds that language is a system where meaning is the core part while form is just the realization of meaning. In addition, SFL is a general linguistic providing a universal framework for languages all over the world. Therefore, based on Systemic Functional Linguistics, the paper firstly redefines tense as a deictic semantic category for describing the speaker's temporal location of processes and relevant temporal relations. With reference to this definition, this study explores the meaning system of tense. It is proposed that tense expresses four kinds of meaning, namely interpersonal, experiential, logical and textual meanings. From the interpersonal angle, tense helps to exchange temporal information between the speaker and the listener, and the temporal information refers to the anchoring of a concerned process in the past, present or future by the speaker. From the experiential angle, tense plays a role in the temporal locating of material, mental, relational, existential, behavioral and verbal processes by the speaker. From the logical angle, tense denotes the temporal relations at the two levels of clause and clause complex, and such relations fall into simultaneity, anteriority and posteriority. From the textual angle, tense refers to the temporal relations at the level of text, and the temporal relations in question concern linear serial relations and synchronous serial relations.

Keywords : Chinese, meaning system, Systemic Functional Linguistics, tense