Topic Prominence and Temporal Encoding in Mandarin Chinese

Authors : Tzu-I Chiang

Abstract : A central question for finite-nonfinite distinction in Mandarin Chinese is how does Mandarin encode temporal information without the grammatical contrast between past and present tense. Moreover, how do L2 learners of Mandarin whose native language is English and whose L1 system has tense morphology, acquire the temporal encoding system in L2 Mandarin? The current study reports preliminary findings on the relationship between topic prominence and the temporal encoding in L1 and L2 Chinese. Oral narratives data from 30 natives and learners of Mandarin Chinese were collected via a film-retell task. In terms of coding, predicates collected from the narratives were transcribed and then coded based on four major verb types: n-degree Statives (quality-STA), point-scale Statives (status-STA), n-atom EVENT (ACT), and point EVENT (resultative-ACT). How native speakers and non-native speakers started retelling the story was calculated. Results of the study show that native speakers of Chinese tend to express Topic Time (TT) syntactically at the topic position; whereas L2 learners of Chinese across levels rely mainly on the default time encoded in the event types. Moreover, as the proficiency level of the learner increases, learners' appropriate use of the event predicates increased, which supports the argument that L2 development of temporal encoding is affected by lexical aspect.

Keywords : topic prominence, temporal encoding, lexical aspect, L2 acquisition