

Tense Marking in Taiwanese Mandarin

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Introduction

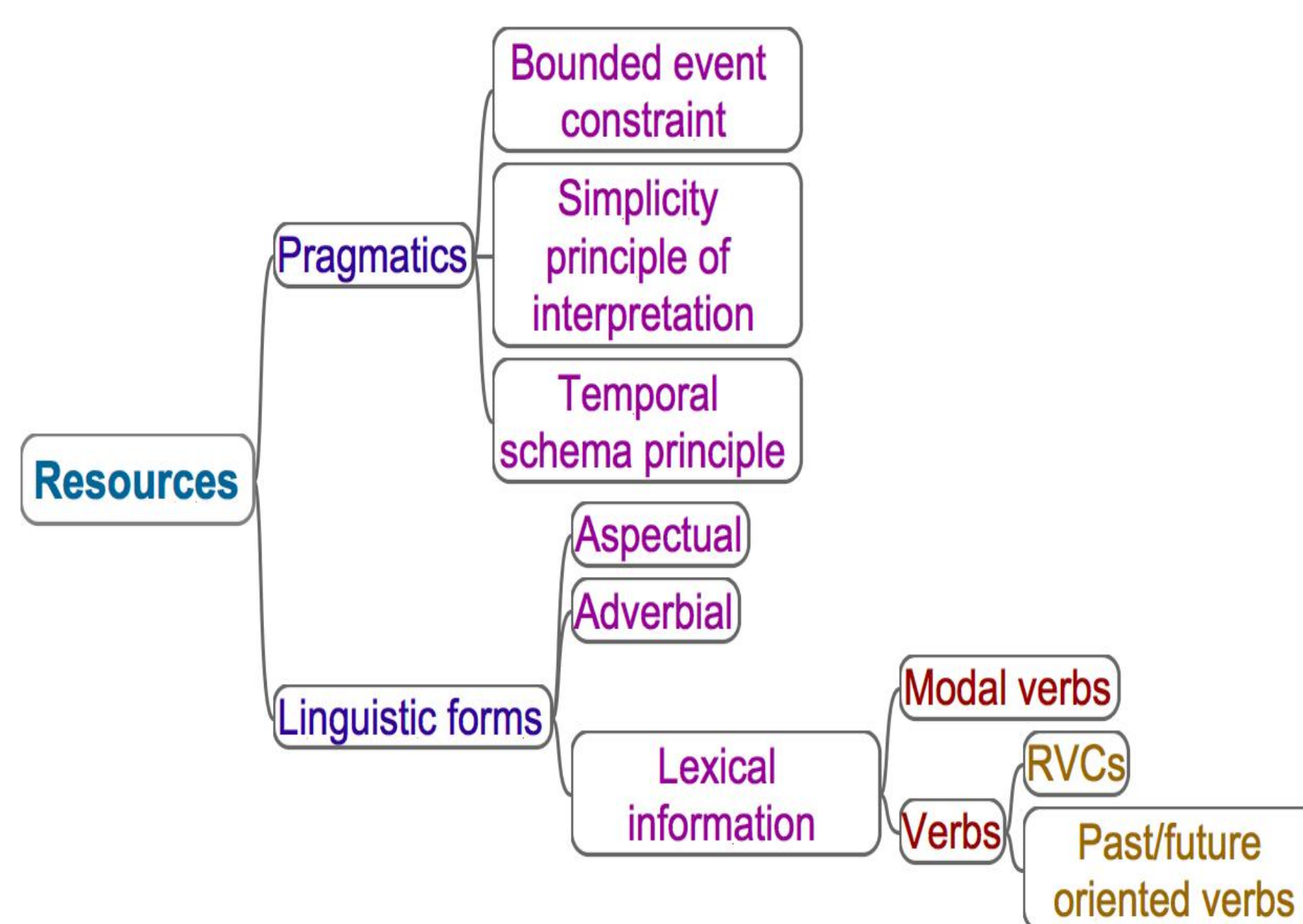
• Mandarin is an aspect language, rather than a tensed language. Does this mean that Mandarin is a tenseless language?

• Tense

| Syntactic | Semantic |
|--|-------------------------|
| A syntactic node + Morphological realisation | Temporal interpretation |

• Temporal interpretation (Smith & Erbaugh 2005)

- Mandarin is tenseless: tense does not exist in its grammar.
- Reichenbach's approach applies to Mandarin.
- Relation between a reference time and situation time is grammatically coded by aspect markers *le* 了 and *guo* 過, and adverbials *yijing* 已經 'already' and *cai* 才 'only then'.
- Relation to speech time is not coded grammatically, but is expressed by context.
- Temporal location resources of Mandarin are all semantic:



The Issue

• **Smith & Erbaugh's temporal model cannot explain tense interpretation patterns in different construction types.**

1. Wo he cha I drink tea 'I drink tea.'
2. Wo ba cha he *(le) I BA tea drink CRS 'I've drunk the tea.'

| | Construction | Temporality | Temporal indicator |
|----|---------------------|---|---|
| S1 | SVO pattern | a. Present tense b. Habitual (still present tense) | None |
| S2 | The ba-construction | Present perfect tense | CRS- <i>le</i> 了 NOT Perfective marker |

• Treating *le* 了 as a Perfective marker leads to conflict in viewpoint aspect, as in (3).

3. Ta zai chi le she PROG eat *PFV 'She's already eating.'
zai 在: imperfective marker
le 了: perfective marker

Thus, *le* 了 does not mark perfectivity, but rather CRS (Currently Relevant State) (Li & Thompson 1981).

• S1 does not need any temporal indicator for licensing, but S2 does need *le*'s licensing. → The SVO construction has inherent temporal value, but the *ba*-construction does not.

• **The temporal information conveyed by construction is a default which can be overridden.**

4. Wo gang he cha I just now drink tea 'I drank tea just now.'

The addition of the adverb *gang* 剛 'just now' overwrites the tense expressed by the SVO pattern in S1, turning the situation [I drink tea] from present to past.

Discussion

• **The necessity for the *ba*-construction to be temporally licensed:**

• Lipenkova (2014): The *ba*-construction's argument structure is subject to the causer-requirement constraint, in 6.

6. [[*ba*]] = $\exists e \lambda x. \text{causer}(x)(e) \dots$

• Lipenkova's causer-requirement constraint still cannot explain the necessity of the temporal licensing.

7. Ta (hui) bei lao-ban ma (le) she will PAS boss scold CRS 'She (will be)/was scolded by the boss.'

The argument structure of the *bei*-construction is also subject to the causer-requirement construction, yet it does not need any temporal indicator to denote past tense, nor for licensing. → The *bei*-construction has the temporal value of past tense.

• **Grammatical moods can convey tense.**

• The imperative mood codes future tense.

8. (**zuo-tian*) cha he wan yesterday tea drink finish 'Drink up the tea.'
*Yesterday (someone) drank up the tea.'

• **The hierarchy of competing means for tense marking.**

• Given that grammatical constructions can locate situations in time, it is expected that there would be competition for tense marking, between different means.

9. Ta (na-shi) zheng-zai chi bing she at that time PROG eat ice-cream 'She (was)/is eating ice-cream.'

| Example | Change in tense | Contributor for change |
|-----------|-----------------|---------------------------------------|
| S1 vs. S4 | Present → Past | <i>gang</i> 剛 'just now' (adv.) |
| S7 | Past → Future | <i>hui</i> 會 'will' (L.I) |
| S8 | Future → Past | <i>zuo-tian</i> 昨天 'yesterday' (adv.) |
| S9 | Present → Past | <i>na-shi</i> 那時 'back then' (adv.) |

- adverbial > construction
- **lexical information > construction**
- grammatical mood > adverbial
- **adverbial > aspect marker**
- **mood > adverbial > construction**

Conclusions

- Taiwanese Mandarin does have grammatical tense marking.
- Grammatical tense marking resources in TM: aspect markers, grammatical moods and syntactic constructions.
- There is a hierarchy of mechanisms for marking tense, semantic and grammatical.
- Semantic tools seem more powerful than grammatical ones, except for moods, which would not be overridden.

Selected References

- Li, Charles N., and Sandra A Thompson. *Mandarin Chinese*. University of California Press, 1981.
- Lipenkova, Janna. "The Syntax-Semantics Interface in the Chinese Ba-Construction." Freie Universität Berlin, 2014.
- Smith, Carlota S., and Mary S. Erbaugh. "Temporal Interpretation in Mandarin Chinese." *Linguistics* 43.4 (2005): 713–756.

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