Abstract of the doctoral thesis

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The category of aspect in the history of linguistic research has been the subject of many considerations and studies. The approach to its functioning and scope has undergone a lot of changes. Originally regarded as a subcategory of tense, it is nowadays commonly seen as a separate category, albeit one that contributes to the temporal system of language. The earliest aspectologists in their research only dealt with languages of the Indo-European family – first Slavic and later Germanic. In these languages, it is related to the morphology of the verb and for this reason it was usual to consider aspect as a grammatical or primarily grammatical category. The topic of aspect in relation to Indo-European languages received numerous publications. Less attention has been paid to the precise description of this category in Mandarin Chinese, although there are numerous publications dealing with the subject. Initially, scholars associated aspect with deictic tense, and it was not until the 1940s that the differences between the two began to be recognized and the semantics of aspect was addressed, although the work emerging at that time can hardly be considered of value. It is only the research of Smith (1991) that is considered the first significant turn of sinological aspectology in this direction, and it remains an inspiration for aspectologists conducting research on Mandarin Chinese to this day.

The lack of greater attention paid to aspect by linguists at this stage may be due to typological issues. This is because the Chinese language is analytic, with a tendency towards agglutination. Instead, the languages under study are mainly inflectional languages, in which both the category of aspect and tense are embedded in the morphology of the verb.

Over time, linguists started recognizing that the category of aspect has a much broader and difficult framework. In addition to the grammatical tense, the construction of the semanteme represented in the sentence by the predicative or predicate is also important. Based on these insights, aspect is nowadays divided into two subcategories: grammatical and lexical. This division is the starting point in this thesis for the description of Mandarin Chinese aspect and the analysis of the aspectual value of the predicative and the external aspectual markers. Previous researches on the Mandarin Chinese aspect mainly relate to grammar. The topic is
usually discussed on the side, when describing the temporal system or general considerations of grammar. Moreover, few researchers take it up by adopting a semantic perspective, and the research already done in this direction is generally not very precise. Therefore, the author of this dissertation aims to investigate and describe the semantics of aspect in Mandarin Chinese. The present study adopts the assumption following Karolak's research, according to which the category of aspect is primordially semantic. In natural language, its markers are grammemes and aspectual semes that build semantemes, while between grammemes and semantemes there are specific meaning relations within the aspectual category. In line with this concept, the author hypothesizes that in Mandarin Chinese this bipartition also exists, and using it undertakes an analysis of grammemes and aspectual semes as markers of the aspectual value of a predicate. Sources on aspect in Mandarin Chinese overwhelmingly only provide descriptions of the functioning of aspectual partitives, and the semantic structure of the predicate is neglected. Hence, there is a need to expand the study of formal aspectual devices in Chinese to include the semantics of aspect.

In the present study, the predicate, which can be the predicative itself or a verb-complement syntagma in the function of a predicate, combining with morphologically distinct grammemes, is taken as the basic unit for introducing aspectual value in a Chinese sentence. A predicate is considered to be a verb or adjective that has an aspectual value and can have a predicative function in a sentence. Auxiliary and modal verbs are excluded from the study. The syntactic analysis accompanying description of the semantic properties of grammemes with aspectual semes and their relationships are the basis for the proposal of an aspectual classification of Mandarin Chinese predicates, which takes into account the typological features of this language. The classifications or taxonomies created so far have been created for Indo-European languages. Vendler's conception, which is most often cited, relates to English and is not sufficiently universal, so some of its assumptions are not adaptable to Mandarin Chinese. The new classification derived from syntactic analysis serves to discuss the internal temporal structure of different groups of semantemes and to juxtapose them with the semantic properties of aspectual grammemes.

Sentence examples taken from the corpus of the Beijing Foreign Language University BCC are analyzed and provide linguistic material exemplifying the described semantic relations and connectivity rules between aspectual grammemes and semantemes built of specific seme bundles. Examples illustrating specific phenomena in Mandarin are also taken from the BCC corpus, unless another source is indicated.
The thesis begins by presenting the aim and the main assumptions made for this dissertation. In addition to this, the first chapter provides an introduction to the topic of the temporal system of the Chinese language and the state of research in this area, which is further developed in the methodological chapter. The second chapter discusses the category of aspect in natural language, which has been repeatedly attributed to various linguistic phenomena in the course of linguistic research over the years. Although there is still no complete consensus among researchers regarding the characteristics of the category of aspect, and there are many linguists addressing this topic, this chapter attempts to synthesize the most popular and most common definitions that appear in the work of aspectologists. The differences between deictic tense and non-deictic aspect are also important, so the discussion on this topic is included in this section of the dissertation.

Chapter Three discusses the dual nature of the category of aspect, which is the starting point for the analysis of aspectuality in Mandarin Chinese. The elementary grammatical units (grammemes) and semantic units (bundles of aspectual semes that build semantemes) defined and discussed are central to the practical chapters. Their aspectual value is important for the description of the whole predicate and the semantic relations occurring in it. At the same time, it is a kind of introduction to the next, fourth chapter, in which the essence of the description is the category of lexical aspect and the discussion of semantic criteria for the division of predicates into classes. On the basis of the assumptions presented, it is possible to confront the existing classifications of predicates with the characteristics of Mandarin Chinese and, as a result, also to analyze the aspectual semantic properties of the whole sentence.

The fifth chapter is a methodological chapter and at the same time a link between the general theoretical part and the one on Chinese. A summary of the most important assumptions developed by Western aspectologists, as discussed in the preceding chapters, allows for their juxtaposition with the Chinese language and a polemic regarding the congruence of these theories. In this way, the criteria and stages of analysis as a research tool are derived. This part of the thesis is also devoted to collecting the most important information concerning the temporal system of Mandarin Chinese, in particular the place that the category of aspect occupies in it.

The next section on elementary units, i.e., chapters six and seven, discusses the already mentioned assumption that aspect is a primordially semantic issue. Although grammemes are grammatical units, they also bring a specific aspectual meaning to the predicate. They have specific semantic relations with the aspectual semes that build semantemes. For the analysis, the assumption presented in Karolak’s research is made that the category of aspect can be
represented by simple terms that form specific bundles – compound terms. However, a certain modification is introduced due to the typological characteristics of the Chinese language, in which the category of grammatical aspect is not a morphological feature of the predicate but is instead realized externally by means of particles and other function words. Karolak’s theory has been developed largely in relation to inflectional languages in which the grammatical aspect is inscribed in the verb form. Consequently, the assumption made in this work is that aspectual simple terms are represented by grammemes and aspectual semes, these in turn make up the aspectual value of the whole predicate and form compound aspectual terms.

The analysis carried out in the chapters on grammemes and semes finds its finale in the description of the aspectual semantics of the predicate in chapter eight, which is the culmination of the research. This makes use of the assumptions described in the preceding chapters concerning the semantic relations within the predicate. This analysis of conceptual structures is the basis for the separation of semantic classes, which makes it possible to group predicates according to what type of aspectual terms they are – simple or complex – and what subtype within them they represent. The results of the research done are summarized in chapter nine, which presents the conclusions reached.