

## The “Topic Time” in the Narrations of Chinese Learners of French Foreign Language: Extended or Not?

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### Abstract

*This article aims to analyze the topic time (Klein, 1994) expressed by Chinese learners of French foreign language in narrations. Chinese and French belong to two different temporal-aspectual systems. Sun (2008) considers that Chinese learners of French conceptualize extended topic time with the influence of their mother language, in which the temporal mark is very flexible. In French, Chinese learners will also have an extended conception of topic time, so that they reorganize events by using simultaneous order. In this paper, the extended topic time is only found when the situation is 2-phase with the « DANG...DE SHIHOU » structure, and that is because of the characteristic of distinguish phase in Chinese. Other types of reorganization of temporal relations in Sun (2008)'s research are not confirmed in our paper.*

**Keywords:** Topic time, Chinese learners of French, extended, 2-phase, reorganization

### Introduction and research questions

Chinese and French languages belong to different language systems and dispose different methods to mark the tense and aspect. French has rich morphology to express tense and aspect, but Chinese is a Sino-Tibetan language, which doesn't have flexional morphology to express the number, genus, or even time. Chinese is generally considered as a language of aspect. The aspect, or aspect marker, has attracted the attention of many Chinese linguistic researchers (Tompson 1968, Li & Thompson 1981, Wang 1985, Smith 1997, Xiao & McEnery 2004, Smith & Erbaugh, 2005, Lin 2006). The differences between two languages bring difficulty for Chinese learners who study French as a foreign language. The studies of learning French as a foreign language show the influence from mother language (abbreviation, L1): English (Kaplan, 1987, Bergström, 1995), Arabic (Véronique 1987), Swedish (Kihlstedt 1998, 2003), Japanese (Trévisiol 2003, 2012), Germany (Granget 2004), Chinese (Leung 2003, Sun 2008), etc.

Sun (2008) observed oral narrative data of Chinese learners who studied French as a foreign language. The results show that influenced by the flexibility of temporal marking in their source language, Chinese learners of French have a conception of extended narrative topical time. That is, the learners describe several successive actions presented in a film as simultaneous. This reorganization shows the learners' flexibility of temporal conceptualization.

The present study investigates several questions concerning the topic time in the written narrations of Chinese learners of French foreign language:

- (1) In Sun (2008)'s research, the task was oral narration of silent film, which gave the learners little time to well organize the temporal order of a complicated narration. If the task is changed, meaning the learners are asked to retell a story in writing, will the results be the same?
- (2) If the flexibility of temporal conception is also found in our results, does it mean that it is due to the conceptualization of extended topical time in learners' L1 Chinese? Are there other possibilities?
- (3) In the research of Sun (2008), she has only one Chinese native speaker who did an oral narration in Chinese as the control group, the quantity is small. In this study, the control group is composed of eight Chinese native. We will verify whether the natives conceptualize an extended topic time in their written narrations.

### 1. Theoretic framework : TT, TU, TSit (Klein 1994)

To analyse the temporality in languages, it's necessary to mention the notion of three *points* of Reichenbach (1947): point of reference (R), point of event (E), and point of speech (S).

He claims that tenses can be described by the temporal relations of the three points. His framework has been widely adopted in the fields of linguistics. However, his temporal system has some weaknesses (e.g., this system is formed for English, but not for French, because the interpretation of some French tenses depends on context). As an example, in some context, the *passé composé* express the resultative aspect; however, in other context, it presents anteriority (Vet, 2007).

Klein (1994) proposes three time intervals for tense analysis: TU (time of utterance), TSit (time of situation), and TT (topic time). The Topic Time “is the time span to which the speaker’s claim on this occasion is confined” (Klein 1994: 4). The author gives an example (Klein 1994: 40):

- Judge: “What did you notice when you looked into the room?”
- Witness: “A man was lying on the floor”

The TT is the time at which the witness looked into the room. The TU is the time at which the question is raised and answered. The TSit is the information offered by the predicate.

Klein uses TT and TU to define “tense” and TT and TSit for “aspect”. She indicates three basic types of **tense** according to the relationship between TT and TU:

**Present:** TT includes TU;

**Past:** TT before TU;

**Future:** TT after TU.

She proposes four categories of **aspect**: (Klein, 1994: 108)

**Imperfective:** TT includes TSit (the time for which an assertion is made falls entirely within the time of the situation)

**Perfective:** TT at TSit (when TSit denotes two states, both the source and the target state are assumed to at least partly coincide with TT)

**Prospective:** TT after TSit

**Perfect:** TT before TSit

In Klein’s description, the TT is interpreted according to the discursive context. It is an important point to distinguish the approach of Klein from those of the others. An example proposed by Klein:

### 1. Yesterday, John was sick.

In this statement we do not know the relationship between “sick of John” (TSit) and “now” (TU), because John’s state of health at the time of utterance (TU) is not indicated. The assertion of the statement is true for “yesterday” but not necessarily for “now”. The TT is very flexible for the analysis of temporal relation. Furthermore, the aspect of Klein shares the same criterion of measurement as time: it is TT as interval, which is important. Klein gives a definition that corresponds to a subjective perception:

*Aspect concerns the different perspectives which a speaker can take and express with regard to the temporal course of some event, action, process, etc.: the speaker may view it as completed, as on-going, as imminent, and possibly in other ways. This ‘view’ is independent of the time which the event, action, process, etc. occupies on the time axis.* (Klein 1994: 16)

We notice that the TT is decided by the speaker’s intention. This flexible interpretation allows us to better understand the temporal system established by speakers. Therefore, we use Klein’s theoretic framework to analyse our corpus.

Klein distinguishes also three types of situation (inherent property of an eventuality):

0-state predicates: states that cannot be changed,

1-state predicates: states that can change,

2-state predicates: dynamic.

### 2. Brief comparison of Chinese and French temporo-aspectual system

Guillaume (1970 :23) indicate that “*Le système temporel français est trimorphe*” (The French temporal system is trimorphic). Indeed, in French, the division of tense is distinct: past, present and future. For aspect, it has aspectual opposition *passé composé (perfectif)/imparfait (imperfectif)* in the past tense category.

For Chinese, some researchers believe there are grammatical methods to express the tense and others have the opposite opinion.

They think the temporal relations of Chinese are expressed by temporal adverbs or deictic terms that locate a situation with respect to another moment (e.g., the moment of speech) (Smith & Erbaugh 2005, Lin 2006). For aspect, there are suffixes:

**Suffix -le:** express perfective aspect

**Suffix-guo:** express perfect aspect

**Suffix -zhe:** express imperfective aspect (durative)

In addition, an adverb, “**zai**”, expresses progressive aspect.

However, the suffix doesn't mark the aspectual value systematically in Chinese. When there is no suffix, how can it be interpreted? According to Bohnemeyer & Swift's (2002)<sup>1</sup>“default aspect” theory: for telicity-dependent language, when there are no aspect marks, it is the *lexical aspect* that has a correlation with the aspectual value of the sentence. The 2-state predicate expresses the perfective aspect, whereas the 0-state and the 1-state predicate express the imperfective aspect.

### 3. The distinguished phase (DP) in French and Chinese

We have mentioned that Klein (1994) proposes three types of situations (0-state, 1-state, and 2-state). But how can we define the situation? Klein(1994) indicates that there is a *distinguished phase* (DP) that decides the TSit. 0-state predicates and 1-state predicates have only one phase; however, the 2-state predicates have *one source phase* (SP) and *one target phase* (TP).

According to Saillard (2015), in French, the DP can be either the source phase (SP) or the target phase (TP), depending on the semantic interpretation of each verbal tense. Saillard (2015) explains the choice of the DP in the case of the narrative present:

2. *La sonnerie retentit. Le train arrive. Les soldats se ruent à l'assaut des portières.*

The bell rang. The train is coming. The soldiers rush to the assault of the doors.

This example describes the source phase (*the train is about to arrive*) and the target phase (*the train has arrived*) of the “*le train arrive*”. The DP includes both SP and TP.

In Chinese, unlike French, DP is always the target phase.

Klein, Li and Hendriks (2000) explain in Chinese:

The 1-state in the case of phase 1:

3. 散步 (sànbù): walking

The target phase where there are two phases (the RVC structure):

4. 看完

kàn wán

read finish

For this expression, the source phase is the state of “看 kàn” (read) and the target phase corresponds to the completion state of the action of “read”. The DP therefore means the target phase, which is marked with “完 (wán)” (finish).

### 4. Corpus

Our corpus is written narration. To obtain narrative data, we asked the learners to look at a fragment of the film *Modern Times*, which is the same with Sun (2008)'s corpus, in order to do the comparison.

The participants form three groups, with a total of 28 informants:

#### Two control groups:

- A group of Chinese native speakers (*abbreviated: CN*), who wrote the narration in Chinese: 8 informants.
- A group of French natives (*abbreviated: FN*), who wrote it in French: 8 informants.

**One group of Chinese learners of French** (*abbreviated: FL*), who wrote the story in French as a foreign language. Depending on the length of learning and the indication of their teachers, the group of Chinese learners is divided into two subgroups according to their level: beginner level, intermediate level.

For the transcription of the Chinese, it is divided into four parts:

*First line:* Chinese

<sup>1</sup>Cited from Lin (2006)

Second line:pinyin transcription (Chinese phonetic)

Third line:literal transcription

Fourth line: translation

## 5. Results

### 5.1 2-phase predicate and “(DANG)...DESHIHOU” structure

The structure “(DANG) ... DESHIHOU” is translated into French by *au moment précis où*, *quand*, *alors que*, *pendant que*, etc. It is a frequent structure in Chinese. In general, it is associated with verbs without suffix of aspect. Smith considers that this structure expresses the neutral aspect and gives an example (Smith, 1997: 79):

5. Zhangsan daojiade shihou, Mali \* xie gongzuobaogao.

Zhangsan arrivehome DESHIHOU Mali \* write report report

We consider that this example presents several difficulties: first, this sentence is not natural in Chinese: we must add the progressive adverb “*zai*” in the main proposition:

6. Zhangsan daojiadeshihou, Malizai xiegongzuobaogao.

Zhangsan arriveat home DE SHIHOU, MaliZAI writing work report.

Secondly, we indicated that for the 2-phase predicate, the aspectual interpretation applies at the target phase. In this example, the predicate “*daojia*” (comehome) expresses 2-phase and “... DE SHIHOU” (themoment) indicates the target phase. Therefore, it fixes a bounded TT that coincides with part of the progressive aspect expressed by the main clause “Mali ZAI xie gongzuo baogao” (Mali is currently writing a work report). In this case, the structure “(DANG) ... DE SHIHOU” marks a simultaneity between the two propositions.

In our corpus, there is also the use of this structure with the 2-phase predicate “出来 *Chulai*” (comeout) in the corpus of our Chinese native speaker group:

CN<sup>2</sup> [39 (a) (b)<sup>3</sup>]:

39. a.	出来	的时候	-----	[+++++++]
	chūlái	DE SHIHOU	not yet out	exit (no longer there)
	go out	shihou		

By the time he came out,

b. 打开	了	路边	的	信箱,
dǎ-kāi	-le	lù biān	de	xìnxiāng
knock-open	PERF	street side	SUB	mailbox

(He) opened the mailbox on the side of the street.

In this example, the two propositions express the perfective aspect. In the subordinate clause, the “... DE SHIHOU” structure (themoment) indicates the resulting state of “go out”: that is to say, the moment when “he” is no longer inside; in the main clause, the RVC “打开 *dǎ-kāi*” (open) with the perfect particle “-le” clearly marks the perfective aspect. The simultaneity can be expressed in French as follows:

7. Au moment où il est sorti, il a ouvert la boîte aux lettres.

when he came out, he opened the mailbox.

We also find in our corpus that French native speakers use equivalent temporal conjunctions of “(dāng) ... de shíhou” in French to indicate simultaneity:

FN 4 [5]:

5.a. Mais au moment où elle allait se faire arrêter, (TT)

But when she was being arrested, (TT)

b. un homme moustachu s’est dénoncé à sa place.

a man with a mustache betrayed himself in her place.

In this example, “au moment où elle allait se faire arrêter” (when she was being arrested), indicates the TT (source phase of “se faire arrêter” <be arrested>), which is simultaneous with the TS (s’est dénoncé à sa place

<sup>2</sup> “CN” represents Chinese native speaker, “2” represents the number of informants.

<sup>3</sup> The number of proposition in the corpus.

“has denounced in its place”). The conjunction “**au moment où**”(when) expresses the **simultaneous** relationship between two proposals.

Sun (2008) considers that in Chinese, the ways of expressing temporality are very flexible. The Chinese would therefore have a **conceptualization of extended TT**. In other words, they prefer to set a TT that includes successive actions: the influence of *L1*. However, as we have shown above, **it is rather the convergence of the structure “(DANG) ... DE SHIHOU” and conjunctions (when / when ...) that is the problem**: when the structure “(DANG) ... DE SHIHOU” is used with a 2-phase predicate, it emphasizes the target phase and ignores the source phase. It marks rather the simultaneity between the state resulting from a situation (e.g., *quand il est sorti = quand il est à l’extérieur, <when he came out=when he is outside>*) and another event.

Sun (2008: 85) gives an example from a narrative of a native Chinese and indicates that he fixes an extended TT:

66. Gao Baolu:

a. er tamen / tamen liangge ne jiu zai jieshang ne  
and they two NE JIU in street NE  
and both are in the street

b. zaitou mianbaodeshihou pengjian-le  
to steal bread DE SHIHOU meet LE  
the two met at the time of stealing bread

Sun (2008) considers that the extended TT is “**tou zai mianbaodeshihou**”(time of flight). The TT covers two successive actions: stealing of bread (TSit 1) and the meeting of two persons (TSit 2). Indeed, the TT “*moment of steal*” encompasses both TSit. However, it seems that the speaker considers the *escape* after the *steal* part of the action of steal. This does not mean that the TT is extended but merely indicates that for him the *totality of the steal of bread action* includes the action of steal and the escape with the bread. It is rather a personal choice. Indeed, in our corpus, the natives who tell this scene express it successively and not simultaneously.

In addition, Sun (2008) provides examples of Chinese learners of French from initial to advanced level and explains that Chinese learners have an extended TT conceptualization, yet we find that some examples do not express the extended TT:

67. Yang Shenfu - 16.5 months learning Sun (2008: 82)

- a. **quand** cette pauvre femme /parti a parti ε parti/  
*when this poor woman left*  
b. la vieille la vieille femme /di/ à + boulangerie  
*the old woman told to the bakery*

This example shows that when two propositions are linked by the conjunction “*quand*”(when), the learner uses two verbal forms: simple form of “*parti*” and compound forms “*a parti*” “*ε parti*”. According to the forms, we believe that the speaker wanted to use *passé composé* in French. The Chinese translation will therefore be:

68. a. 当 那个 可怜 的 女人 离开 的 时候  
dāng nàge kělián de nǚrén líkāi de shíhou  
DANG the poor SUB woman leave DE SHIHOU  
b. 那个 年长 的 女人 就 对 面包店 老板 说  
nàge niánzhǎng de nǚrén jiù duì miànbāodiàn laoban shuō  
the aged SUB woman JIU to bakery boss say

If we use the graph of Klein (1994), “**离开 líkāi**”(leave) is a 2-phase predicate, the source phase is “haven’t gone” and the target phase is “left”. The structure “(DANG) ... DE SHIHOU” indicates a time at which the target phase is achieved:

----- [+++++]  
is not gone - inside (source) **is not par- is gone (target)**

According to the analysis, we note that the “(DANG) ... DE SHIHOU” structure with the 2-phase indicates the DP of 2-phase. It seems that Chinese learners make a concept transfer from their L1. Then they use in French the equivalent of the “(DANG) ... DE SHIHOU” structure as “*quand*”(when), “*au moment où*” with the 2-phase predicate to show resulting state of a situation. Actually, in our corpus, the Chinese learners describe this scene in another way:

FL 103

- 1.a. Une semaine avant, j'ai vu une femme  
*one week ago, I saw a woman*
- b. qui a volé le pain.  
*Who stole the bread*
2. Mais l'autre femme l'a vu  
*but the other woman saw it*
3. donc elle a appelé la police.  
*So she called the police.*

This passage avoids the use of simultaneous conjunctions to describe the situations. The situations are carefully and correctly narrated, even if the FL 103 learner is at the initial level of French. Generally speaking, in the written narrations, the learners do better than the learners on Sun (2008)'s corpus. This also shows that in written narration, learners have more time to organize the temporal relation of narration. So it is clearer, and no such extended TT is found.

## 5.2 Reorganization of temporal relationship-not confirmed

Sun (2008: 84) gives another example of the extended TT:

69. Leijie (advanced group Paris, 4 years acquisition of French) **Sun (2008: 84)**

- a. quand elle /komãs/ à s'enfuir avec ce pain  
*when she (begin) to escape with the bread*
- b. la vieille dame /di/ à à au patron  
*the old lady (say) to to the boss*
- c. mais **à ce moment-là**, cette fille /ε elã rãktõre/ avec ce héros quand /navε/ un de delui raconter  
*butat that time, this girl (met) this hero when (?) totell him*

Sun (2008) considers that this scene shows successive events: first, *the girl ran away* and then, *the woman talked to the boss* and finally, *the girl met Charlie*. However, the temporal relationship of this scene is very complicated: it is true that it is first the girl who runs away, then the rich lady speaks to the boss, but the meeting between the daughter and Charlie happens almost just when *the lady talked to the boss*. The learner therefore uses "**à ce moment-là**" (*at that time*) to add another simultaneous event (*daughter Charlie encounter*), but this is not an extended TT. We find in our corpus the description of the same scene in FN 2:

70. FN 2 [3-6]:

3. Alors que Charlot arrivait au coin de la rue,  
*but Charlot arrived at the corner of the street,*
4. la femme la bouscula  
*the woman rushed in him.*
5. **Au même moment**, le boulanger sortit  
*At the same time, the baker went out*
- 6.a. et une passante qui avait vu la femme voler la baguette et s'enfuir avec  
*and a passer-by who had seen the woman steal the baguette and run away with*
- b. avertit le boulanger  
*warned the baker.*

We find that the narrator considers, on the one hand, *the encounter between the woman and Chaplin* and, on the other hand, the action where *the woman warned the baker* happened "**au même moment**" (*at the same time*). This shows that the two events are simultaneous and therefore there is no widening of the TT.

## Conclusion

All the examples above show that in Chinese, the complex temporal relationship is expressed using conjunctive structures, aspect markers and lexical aspect. The extended TT is rare in Chinese stories by native Chinese (indeed, in our corpus, we have not noticed it). We find that it is the structure "*(DANG) ... DE SHIHOU*" with the 2-phase predicate emphasizes the target phase, which is the time of situation. This is not because of the flexibility of temporal marks in Chinese L1 of learners as Sun (2008) explained in her article, but because of the characteristics of distinguished phase in Chinese.

For some reorganizations of temporal relations by Chinese learners in Sun (2008)'s corpus, two explanations are possible: first, the task of Sun (2008) is oral, and the temporal relations of the chosen scenes are complex. It is therefore difficult to organize it. Learners prefer to reorganize information. Second, although students can use expressions like "puis" (then), "après" (after), etc. to mark successiveness, it is possible that they do not remember precisely the temporal order of some situations, so they retell them as if these happened at the same time.

To conclude, Chinese learners of French in our corpus organized better the temporal relation of narration than in Sun (2008)'s corpus. It maybe because of the difference between tasks: our is written narration, whereas hers is oral narration. Furthermore, after careful analyses and the use of the same fill segment to retell the story, we find that some examples of Sun, which she considered should be narrated successively, are actually simultaneous. We can find the same scene narrative by French native speakers, and the events are narrated simultaneously.

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