UC Riverside
Issues in Applied Linguistics

Title
Issues in Chinese Functionalism: An Interview with Sandra A. Thompson

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/05z41132

Journal
Issues in Applied Linguistics, 5(2)

ISSN
1050-4273

Author
Huang, Chiung-chih

Publication Date
1994-12-30

DOI
10.5070/L452005200

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

Issues in Chinese Functionalism: An Interview with Sandra A. Thompson

Chiung-chih Huang
University of California, Los Angeles

PROFILE

Sandra A. Thompson is Professor of Linguistics at the University of California at Santa Barbara. She specializes in discourse and language universals, and is particularly interested in the role of patterns of conversational discourse in shaping morphosyntactic regularities. She is the co-author with Charles Li of *Mandarin Chinese: A Functional Reference Grammar*. She has co-edited *Studies in Transitivity* with Paul Hopper, *Clause Combining in Grammar and Discourse* with John Haiman, and *Discourse Description* with William C. Mann.

INTRODUCTION

The functional approach to Chinese has been one of the major trends in the study of Chinese grammar. This approach takes the position that language functions primarily as a tool of human communication and that linguistic forms are derived from and motivated by this communicative function. The approach challenges autonomous views of grammar, and explores the relationship between grammatical structures and the contexts in which they are used. Professor Sandra Thompson is one of the best-known Chinese functionalists and *IAL* is pleased that Prof. Thompson agreed to be the subject of this interview. In this interview, the topics include the central tenets of the functional approach, the development of Chinese functionalism, the lack of morphological complexity in Chinese, and the controversial issue of grammatical relations in Chinese. In addition, more personal questions include her initial interest in Chinese, her preparation of the famous Chinese Reference Grammar, and the focus of her recent research. This interview presents not only Prof. Thompson's view of Chinese functionalism, but also her personal experience as a researcher in this field.

Issues in Applied Linguistics
ISSN 1050-4273
© Regents of the University of California
Vol. 5 No. 2 1994 409-423

THE INTERVIEW

Huang: *Your research on Chinese linguistics has been so influential. I believe many people would be very curious as to how, as a native English speaker, you first got interested in Chinese. Could you please tell us a little about this?*

Thompson: I was a linguistics major at Ohio State University. One of my linguistics teachers was a Chinese linguist named William Wang. When I went to him and told him that I thought I was well prepared to do linguistics because I had taken French and German and now I was studying Russian (I thought that was all very exotic), he said, "All of that is within Indo-European. You really have to get outside of Indo-European. I think you should enroll in my Chinese class next quarter." William Wang had come to Ohio State to set up a linguistics program and a Chinese language program, and then he would turn the Chinese language program over to other people, but in those days he was also teaching Chinese language. So, I enrolled in Chinese and he was also my linguistics teacher, and that was how I got hooked on Chinese, and I never stopped.

When I started to study Chinese, something clicked for me as a linguist realizing that I was very bound in my ways of thinking that languages were like Indo-European languages. I think to understand any language we have to go outside of our own language family. Someone like you has done that naturally from the time you were ten or younger when you began to study English, but for me this happened much later. I had studied Russian and I thought it was very strange, but only when I began to study Chinese did I realize how important it is to look at at least two languages that are very very different from each other. So I think for me that was not just the beginning of the definition of a career for me in Chinese linguistics but also an awareness, for me as a teacher and a researcher and as a general linguist, of how different languages could be and how much I wanted to try to understand those differences. Although I was always very interested in linguistics, I think starting to study Chinese really made it very clear to me how fascinating it is and how important it is to try to see what different ways languages have of providing us with this communicative tool. That is what I am still working on and I think I always will be, and I think lots of linguists have this idea, but that was just the way it happened for me. I was lucky, I think, that I fell into Chinese, but it was a complete accident. It happens with a lot of people. I did not start out deciding I wanted to do Chinese, but when the opportunity was there, clearly I was ready for it.

Huang: *So you studied the Chinese language before you decided to do some research on Chinese?*

Thompson: That's right. But because of William Wang, the two started to go together very quickly. He was designing a number of research programs in Chinese syntax. In those days, people were very much interested in pursuing the implications of some of Chomsky's writings for Chinese, and I was involved in some of those projects. So it wasn't very long before I was applying my language knowledge and my linguistic knowledge, and beginning to bring those together. I actually was taking Chinese and working on Chinese linguistics pretty much concurrently. I was very lucky. In the '60s when I was in graduate school, there was a lot of interest in machine translation, and William Wang had some machine translation projects, so I was able to do a little work on those. People were very optimistic about machine translation in those days, but it certainly forced me to start thinking about the actual differences between Chinese and English, and how to think about them linguistically. So I think all that for me was very formative even though I didn't continue working in a formal framework for very long. I began to be very interested in semantics and pragmatics and those were just not being tackled by the formal frameworks. In a way I have been a Chinese language student ever since, of course, because you never stop studying your second language or your third or whatever it is.

I first went to live in Taiwan in 1966. I stayed there for three months. I was teaching English, and trying to speak as much Chinese as I could. Then I went back with Mack (my husband) to Taiwan to live in 1974-75. I was doing a study with Charles Li on tone acquisition, looking at how Mandarin-speaking babies learn to use tones. That study was eventually published in the *Journal of Child Language*. We had a wonderful time there doing that study, and I think that I learned a lot of Chinese that way and I also learned a lot about Chinese child raising practices ((*laughs*)).

In addition to my trip to Taiwan, I was very lucky to make a trip to Mainland China with Charles. We went to Inner Mongolia and lived there for several months, and we worked on some dialects of speakers that happened to be living in that area, although they did not come from that area. That was another aspect of my field work.

Huang: *In 1981, you and Charles Li published a collaborative book* Mandarin Chinese: A Functional Reference Grammar.[1] *This book has been such an important work not only for students and teachers of Chinese but also for linguists and sinologists. Can you tell us something about your preparation of this book?*

Thompson: We started working on that Mandarin Reference Grammar almost as the very first collaboration that we had, Charles and I. We began to work together in the early '70s, and we were working on a range of topics. By the time we went to Taiwan in '74-'75, we began to realize we might want to put a book together. So we did a fair amount of work in Taiwan at that time working with native speakers and trying to solve some of the more difficult problems,

especially the ones involving the particles, which is still a very difficult issue. Then we went back to Taiwan in 1978 specifically to collect more data for the Mandarin Reference Grammar. By 1978, we knew that we would write this grammar. So, that is a little bit about how those two stories converge. That first field trip was specifically doing tone acquisition, but we already had it in our minds that we wanted to write this grammar. So we prepared for that book for at least ten years, working on various areas and trying to get as much real spoken data as we could. Even if it wasn't necessarily connected discourse, we were trying to elicit sentences in the right contexts. We were very much interested in context-based uses of language.

Huang: *What do you think are the major differences between this book and most of the earlier Mandarin grammar books?*

Thompson: The earlier works had tended to be what I think of as more structural. Looking at Chinese from a structural point of view is an attempt to describe syntactic or grammatical structures as a kind of a puzzle in and of itself. But what we were trying to do was something more functional in the sense of taking these structures and looking at them in context. As I say, we were interested in the contexts in which you would use certain kinds of structures, like the *shi...de* construction[2] or the demonstratives, or what we were calling serial verb constructions[3] or the particles. With everything that we were looking at, we were interested in the kinds of meanings that it conveys and the sorts of communicative functions that the construction has. And I think that is what set this grammar apart from some of the earlier grammars. It is not to detract from those works, especially Chao's grammar,[4] which I think are very insightful. But what people have liked about our grammar, I think, was this emphasis on the functional side and the language-in-context side. And I think maybe that is why a lot of functional linguists have appreciated it and students of Chinese and teachers of Chinese have appreciated it, because we at least began to try to describe the relationship between the structures and their communicative functions. I think that was what was missing from the earlier works.

Huang: *What is the central tenet of this functionalist approach to Chinese?*

Thompson: Functionalism for Chinese is related to these questions of language—the view of language as a tool of human communication. Once you accept that view, then it seems that the central concern in trying to describe and explain linguistic form has to be in the context of this kind of function. So I think that is what all functionalists have in common. They view the relationship between grammar and communicative function as something very central. It is not to say that there cannot be grammaticization that takes on a life of its own, but the basic question has to always be: How do people use these structures to convey these communicative needs? And, the answers are far from

simple. They are very complicated, but I think that is the thing all functionalists share in Chinese linguistics just as much as in all the rest of the areas of linguistics.

Another way of thinking about this question would be to contrast what functional linguistics is doing as opposed to some of the more formal approaches. I don't think it is necessary to make that explicit contrast, but maybe that would be a useful way to proceed. I think that the main thing that divides functional linguistics from other aspects of linguistics would be this emphasis on trying to understand language structure—phonological structure, or morphological or syntactic or discourse structure, from the point of view of communicative function. So functional linguistics would be any approach which is interested in the sorts of contexts in which language is used and trying to relate form and context. And, I think in the past, functional linguistics has tended to try to imagine the contexts, but I think more and more we are now coming to where we actually try to take language in its context and work with audio tapes or video tapes of real language interactions. That seems to me the best way to go about this. But all the functional endeavors, I think, have been aimed in this direction. So, it kind of suggests that language is not so much of a kind of formal puzzle or some kind of an autonomous capability that is separate from our social capabilities or our cognitive capabilities, but it actually emerges from those, and the very aspects of language that formalists want to call autonomous grammar are just those aspects that have become the most routinized, as far as I am concerned. So, if we have languages that have subject-verb agreement, and people say, "What's the function of subject-verb agreement?" I would say that *that* is a very important question and it is not one to be ignored. Functionalism would see something like subject-verb agreement in a language where it is automatic, as the "freezing in" of a discourse strategy. It is the *routinization* of a discourse strategy. If you understand grammar that way, then there cannot be any autonomous grammar.

So, to me, functionalism is pervasive. It is not possible to take an autonomous view of grammar, if you understand language as a tool of human communication. So to me the autonomous approach doesn't make any intellectual sense because of the need to recognize language as used by people to communicate their ideas, their feelings, their thoughts, their identities, and their hopes and goals and wishes. If we have pieces of grammar that appear to be autonomous, pieces of grammar that differ from one language to another, the question we have to ask is why. Why do those parts of the grammar get frozen in this language but not in that language? I think the answers have to be understood in the sense that we cannot totally make up new patterns every time we open our mouths. If so, we will never be able to cooperate as a society. So language has evolved as a way of routinizing some of these communicative habits. If it is seen that way, then it seems to me all the pieces of the puzzle fall into place. The things that some people want to call autonomous are not autonomous, they are just more deeply frozen in. But all of grammar is frozen

discourse. And it seems to me that the freezing is at different layers or different degrees of profoundness. Those are some of the views that I have of functionalism, and I am continually checking with other functionalists in the field, and I feel that that is quite widespread. Maybe those are some of the ways of thinking about language that we are forced to by considering the data, by considering how people really are. Then you cannot pretend that it is something more like a crossword puzzle, or something kind of separate from the social creatures that we are. That is why functionalism is making big strides, going in these different directions—the cognitive direction, and the more social direction, to try to bring these strands together. In my own work, I am really interested in including the cognitive and the social sides, because I think they both have a lot to say that is very real and very important about the study of language.

Huang: *What is the background of the emergence of Chinese functionalism? When did it start and how?*

Thompson: I see a parallel between the development of Chinese functionalism and the development of functionalism in the rest of the field of linguistics. In the larger field of linguistics I have done some work on what functionalism is all about and has been about, and I think that functionalism really had two major inputs that I think have also been reflected in Chinese linguistics. One is the emphasis on universals and typology. So functionalists working in Chinese linguistics would be very interested in how Chinese fits in with the general typological claims that people are making. The other is the emphasis on discourse and pragmatics and attempting to see the structures of Chinese grammar in terms of these functional concerns. I think that the people who are working in Chinese linguistics are absolutely in tune with the rest of the field. That is why I think these developments are happening at the same time, because Chinese linguists are also general linguists and typically have had very general linguistic training. I would say in the last 30 years that has become very true, not being highly specialized sinologists, but being broadly trained linguists and bringing those general linguistic concepts into the study of Chinese. That is why I think the field of Chinese linguistics has been so much enriched in the last 30 years or so.

Huang: *What were the major issues at the beginning of Chinese functional studies? And, what are the new emphases in the '90s?*

Thompson: I would say that also parallels the trends in functionalism in general. I think at the beginning of Chinese functional studies, there was a big interest in the semantics and the pragmatics of individual constructions. There was a lot of interest in the *ba* construction[5] and what kinds of semantic and pragmatic constraints there were on the use of *ba*, and so forth. There was quite a lot of interest in that, and topic-comment constructions,[6] the so-called *shi...de*

construction, relative clauses, serial verbs, and so forth. I think all this was very valuable and very useful. And now in the late '80s and in the '90s, I see, again paralleling the trends in general functional linguistics, Chinese linguistics is also taking on some new emphases. One of them is the cognitive emphasis, and the other one is the discourse emphasis. There is a major group of people following the work of James Tai who has tried to articulate some of the tenets of cognitive grammar for Chinese. I think that a number of us have been working in parallel on the discourse side. A lot of people have been really concentrating on written discourse, and at the same time a lot of people were working on spoken discourse, and trying to collect natural conversational data. Again, the developments in Chinese functionalism parallel what has been happening in functionalism in general. And again, it is not an accident, because the functionalists within Chinese linguistics are also general linguists. So the trends are going to be the same. Chinese linguistics used to be more, as I said, interested in certain constructions like the *ba* construction and so forth, but also very much interested in word order, which is still an issue. I think that was characteristic of some of the earlier work on universals and typology. Now I see people going in more radical directions and trying to talk about some new ideas in Chinese grammar, not so much the older emphasis on these construction types but on rethinking what Chinese grammar is from the cognitive point of view or from the discourse point of view. I find all of that very interesting.

As for the future, I think we are going to continue to see more work on cognitive grammar for Chinese, the implications of categorization, more work on the semantics of categorization, and things like the semantics of classifiers[7]--some of the kinds of issues that James Tai has brought up[8]. Also I predict more developments on the discourse side concerning issues like the differences between spoken and written Chinese. More work will be done using spoken data, interview data, TV data, talk show data, conversational data, and doctor-patient data to try to understand real conversational, interactional Chinese. I very much feel involved with that, because that is where some of my strong interests are right now. And that means that we are going to be looking at different aspects of Chinese. Different issues emerge when you are looking at conversational data. Among those are issues having to do with particles. I don't think we can ever really understand the so-called final particles until we can study real talk in interaction. I personally have been very much intrigued with applying concepts from conversation analysis into the study of spoken language, including Chinese. So I may be one of the proponents of that perspective, but there are a lot of other people working in this area looking at conversation from the point of view of intonation units, from the point of view of repairs, from the point of view the kinds of grammatical properties a conversational turn has. These are all new questions that no one would have been able to pose before we think about integrating some of the findings from conversation analysis with the findings from Chinese functional studies.

Huang: *I remember a recent article by you and Hongyin Tao which discusses backchanneling in Mandarin conversation.*[9]

Thompson: That's right. That is another aspect of the whole situation—backchanneling, or what we call reactive tokens. There is just a lot to do. People are interested in working on such things as, as I said, repair and repetition and how people backchannel. You just need data to try to understand this. So I think the emphasis is getting to be less on looking at preconceived structures in their contexts, but actually now looking at the structure of the interaction and saying what the implications are for grammar, and maybe we have to start thinking about grammar in a lot of new ways. That is at least my current thinking. I think some of the work that Hongyin Tao has been doing is starting in this direction in a very nice way, and also some recent work by Randy LaPolla that gets back to the issue of grammatical relations.[10]

Another trend happening in the '90s is more work being done on various Chinese languages, and I think that is a great trend. Some of it has to do with the fact that there is more recognition throughout the Chinese speaking world of some of the other so-called dialects or languages. So I am looking for more work to be done on Taiwanese and Hakka, and especially Cantonese, now that there are many more linguists working in these various parts of the Chinese speaking world. I see that as a very positive development, too.

Huang: *The issue of grammatical relations has been a major issue in Chinese grammar over the last 50 years. There seems to be a general consensus among Chinese functionalists that there are no grammatical relations in Chinese. Could you tell us your thinking on this issue?*

Thompson: I think my own thinking is emerging on this question. Following LaPolla (1990, 1992), I have been thinking that some of the traditional grammatical relations don't make much sense for, let's say, Mandarin because there doesn't seem to be any grammatical emphasis on certain kinds of NPs as opposed to certain other kinds of NPs, that is, the traditional subjects and objects or ergatives and absolutives. You just don't have that kind of grammatical coding. But recent studies that these three people have done--Hongyin Tao,[11] Shuanfan Huang, and Kawai Chui[12]--looked at conversations and narratives and quantitatively showed very clear patterns that you could find between the A and the S and the O in a given clause, if you think of A as being the traditional agent-like argument in a two-argument clause and the S as a single argument in a one-argument clause; the O would be the traditional patient-like argument in a two-argument clause. You see that there are very strong parallels that suggest a new type of grammatical relation. So, I would now probably take a position based on that research. I would not now say there are no grammatical relations, but that the grammatical relations are of a different type. And I think that the discourse data, the spoken language data and the quantitative methodology have

made this very clear. So I like the direction of this kind of research; it's very empirical, it's very spoken language-based, and it's very quantitative. So the results are kind of striking; they are very very convincing.

Huang: *So you are saying that we should adopt a different point of view of grammatical relations for Mandarin?*

Thompson: That's right, and in general, the emphasis on spoken data is forcing us to take a different view of what grammar is. And that is what I am seeing with my studies for English as well—that when we look at conversation, we see that some of our older views of grammar have to be redone; they have to be revised. To me, that is very exciting, because grammar is happening as we talk. It is not thinking up sentences. It is looking at what people really do. And if you can see very clear patterns in what people do when they talk, then that is the most convincing thing, as far as I am concerned. In fact, Charles and I are hoping to write another volume for the Chinese Reference Grammar—maybe volume two, that would be a new look at Chinese grammar from the point of view of conversational data. It will be a while yet, but we feel that that is one of the things that was missing in the other book, and we would like to plan this project to try to make another volume coming out of these studies of discourse.

Huang: *It seems that resources of spoken, conversational data are very important for Chinese functional studies now. We need that kind of corpora . Is there any corpus available?*

Thompson: There are not any corpora yet, but I think that there is a group in Taiwan now working through the auspices of the Academia Sinica to establish a corpus. I think that that will be a start. If Charles and I are successful in obtaining funding for our project, we would then have the possibility of putting a corpus together, too, that would parallel our corpus of spoken American English that we are doing here in Santa Barbara. We would be able to have a unified on-line corpus of Chinese data. But I eventually would like to work together with the people in Taiwan, so we can get our resources together. So right now it is embryonic. I think everybody has a little bit of data, but it would be nice to have something uniform. At the same time, it takes a huge amount of administration to organize a corpus, and it takes more money than any of us has, so we have to live with those realities, too.

Huang: *Mandarin Chinese is quite striking in its general lack of morphological complexity. Since morphology gives us so few clues to the organization of grammar, does this pose a particular challenge with the study of Chinese grammar?*

Thompson: I think this is a really interesting question, this issue of morphological complexity. I would say for all of us, probably, working in Chinese linguistics, this has been one of the big puzzles, especially for many of us who are also trained in general linguistics, who see a lot of polysynthetic languages. We know that it is possible for grammars to express a large number of grammatical concepts through their morphology. So how is it that a language can get along with so few morphological categories—either nominal or verbal? I think that one of the answers in people's minds has been that there has to be a lot of inferencing. So on the one hand, it is a complicated kind of semantic question: How do people base inferences on these kinds of morphological categories or lack of morphological categories? But it is also an issue in grammaticization. So why is it that certain languages will grammaticize categories that Chinese never grammaticizes? And why is it that it is so consistent over the millennia? Why does Chinese never turn into a polysynthetic language? The genius of the language is this analytic tendency, and over time there isn't any inclination to grammaticize these kinds of concepts. From the point of view both of communicative inferencing and strategic issues and from the point of view of grammaticization, I think this is a very fascinating question. I wish I had more answers. Joan Bybee's theory is that it has to do with what is obligatory and what is not obligatory. I think that must be right. There are very few obligatory categories at the word level in Chinese. So I look forward to some more work on this, trying to zero in on this question. If we could compare the stories that Chinese language speakers would tell to those of Hebrew speakers or even speakers of more heavily morphological languages like Iroquoian or some of the other American Indian languages, we would get a better view of this idea of obligatoriness. Somehow these categories are left optional for Chinese and it is something that the Chinese languages all share. That to me is maybe a promising direction to go. It is not enough just to say Chinese speakers have to infer more. That cannot be enough. We want to understand why the structures in language work like this. So this comparative type of project seems to be one that we could think about doing.

Huang: *As you mentioned, comparative studies can be very revealing. In one of your recent articles, you compare the conversational use of reactive tokens in Mandarin, Japanese, and English. The results are really interesting and informative.*[13]

Thompson: Some of the work we have been doing here at Santa Barbara was facilitated by a grant that we got from the Office of Pacific Rim in the Office of the President, and that allowed us to compare some conversational strategies across languages. I think there is a huge amount we could do in that area, but what we chose to work on were two things: One was, as you noted, what we call the reactive tokens, like "backchanneling", where we found that American English and Tokyo Japanese and Northern Mandarin differ very very much in

frequency and type of reactive token use. We found this very very interesting and worthy of further study. The second paper we expect to come out of that research is one that would compare particle usage in Mandarin and Japanese, where we know that both of these languages use utterance final particles, but we don't know whether semantically or pragmatically they are doing the same kinds of things. I think this is a very difficult topic. We have found that this idea of the prosodic unit that we call an Intonation Unit seems to be a good unit for defining the locus of the particles in both languages, so that seems promising, but how the particles interact with turn-taking or to what extent they express attitudes and moods, this is all yet to be worked out. That would be maybe the one big area that I look forward to some future research on. To me this is the hardest aspect of the study of Chinese, let's say, that is facing me right now, and I think it is true for any Chinese language, and it is true for any language that has particles—even more true for Southern Chinese languages like Yue dialects[14] and maybe Hmong and some of the other Southeast Asian languages—this tremendous use of particles, and I don't think we have a good handle on what they are doing. So that is another aspect of the comparative study. Another is some work that is being done now by colleagues at the University of Colorado, comparing the way in which the grammar of Japanese and the grammar of English deal with repair in conversation, and I find this also very revealing, because it is related to some of the canonical typological differences between English and Japanese. So, now I would like to work on repair and a comparison between Chinese and English, say, with regard to repair strategies. Other things that people have suggested have to do with repetition and the role of repetition, both as a backchannel strategy and as a kind of cohesive strategy. There are all different kinds of repetition, and I would love to see studies like that. But, overall, the big interest in comparative studies, I think, is that it goes beyond just the study of that individual language, so if we are Chinese linguists, we are interested in comparing Chinese and English, either because we want to be teaching one language to the other or because these are the languages we are fluent in and we are in a position to make a comparison. But I think comparing any two languages also has this very rich capability or potential for showing us the answer to this big question about why grammars are different. What is the range of ways in which languages can organize their grammars? So I find this a very fascinating issue, too. I think that we were lucky to get funding that would allow us to pursue this research on Chinese, Japanese, and English, but independent of funding considerations, I'd like to see a lot more of this kind of work being done, because I think it is just very very revealing and it has, of course, big implications for those of us that are involved, say for Chinese and English, that help us to understand our own bilingualism or our second language learners' problems and so forth.

Huang: *You have mentioned some promising areas in the studies of Chinese functionalism. Do you have further suggestions for future research?*

Thompson: In a way, what the future of the field is depends on the individuals who are working in the field and I think there are a wide range of interests. So, I can mainly talk about what seems fascinating to me and what I would like to be working on. Other people should follow their own interests. For me, the exciting thing is trying to expand our thinking about what grammar is, to try and break out of our traditional modes of understanding grammatical structures or grammatical constructions and so forth, and try to think about grammar in whatever new ways the study of conversation could lead us to. Even such things as what is a question, or what is an answer, where we tend to think about questions, in very structural terms, everyone knows what a question is, but to what extent do those structural questions show up in the places where we would say, "Aha, a question is being asked, and someone is giving an answer." They don't always match up one-to-one with the structural question. And there are people working on what counts as an answer, and so I am interested in that kind of issue and the way in which we can have a new understanding of grammatical relations by looking at the conversation and saying "Aha, we see patterns here." Let's not in advance go to the data and say "I'm going to look for subjects or objects or *ba* or adjectives or relative clauses," but let's look at the data and see what patterns emerge from the data. Right now that strikes me as being a very fascinating direction to go—to really try to sort of shed some of our old preconceptions. Some of our old preconceptions will be confirmed, but we need to be open to the possibility that we change our views on certain kinds of things that we may have been thinking about.

The other issue is the sorts of things that I think more old fashioned, functional or grammatical studies cannot get at. And that includes the study of things like particles and discourse markers. So there is a very interesting project now going on by Shuanfan Huang and Yung-O Biq at National Taiwan University comparing Taiwanese and Mandarin discourse markers—expressions like Mandarin *name* and English *y'know* and Mandarin *suoyi* and kinds of connective particles that are used in ways that we cannot even imagine if we just think of how we might talk. We have to look at how we really do talk. So, I see hopefully some solutions and those solutions are going to involve new ways of thinking about grammar, too—a whole restructuring of our views of what language is, what grammar can be. So I find that very exciting and something I'd like to look for in the future.

Huang: *Thank you very much for sharing with us your insightful view of Chinese functionalism.*

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

As pointed out by Prof. Thompson, it is important to go outside of our own language family in doing linguistic research. She revealed the fascination she experienced in studying the Chinese language and in doing research on Chinese. As a functionalist, she suggested that the central tenet of functional linguistics is to understand language structure from the point of view of communicative function and context. This emphasis also sets apart the Chinese Reference Grammar, written in collaboration with Charles Li, from other grammars.

In the discussion of the development of Chinese functionalism, Prof. Thompson pointed out the parallel developments of Chinese functionalism and general functionalism.[15] At the beginning of Chinese functionalism, studies emphasized universals and typology and focused on the semantics and pragmatics of individual constructions. The new trend in the '90s takes cognitive and discourse perspectives on Chinese grammar. There is a great interest in trying to understand conversational, interactional Chinese and in integrating the findings from conversation analysis with the findings from Chinese functional studies.

As traditional grammatical relations do not seem to be useful in a grammatical description of Chinese, Prof. Thompson suggested that grammatical relations of Chinese are of a different type, and that we should adopt a different view of grammatical relations for Chinese. As for the lack of morphological complexity in Chinese, she suggested that the question of how Chinese can get along with so few morphological categories may be answered by taking a closer look at the nature of communicative inferencing and grammaticization.

Chinese functionalism has been making great strides, and has been restructuring our traditional view of Chinese grammar. It is hoped that further research following this promising direction will continue to lead us to new ways of thinking about grammar.

NOTES

[1] Refer to Li & Thompson (1981). This book has also been translated into Mandarin Chinese. Refer also to Huang (1983).

[2] The *shi...de* construction is a sentence construction with a nominalization. It consists of a subject followed by the copula *shi* followed by a nominalization (Li & Thompson, 1981).

[3] The serial verb construction refers to "a sentence that contains two or more verb phrases or clauses juxtaposed without any marker indicating what the relationship is between them" (Li & Thompson, 1981, p. 594).

[4] Refer to, for example, Chao (1968).

[5] In the *ba* construction, the direct object is placed immediately after *ba* and before the verb: S *ba* O V.

[6] Mandarin has been claimed to be a topic-prominent language (Li & Thompson, 1976, 1981).

[7] In Mandarin, a classifier is used before a noun when the noun is modified by a numeral, a demonstrative, or certain quantifiers. There are several dozen classifiers in Mandarin, and the choice of classifier is determined by the noun (Li & Thompson, 1981).

[8] Refer to Tai (1989).

[9] Refer to Tao & Thompson, (1991).

[10] Refer to LaPolla (1990, 1992).

[11] Refer to Tao (To appear).

[12] Refer to Huang & Chui (1994).

[13] Refer to Clancy, Thompson, Suzuki & Tao (To appear in *Journal of Pragmatics*).

[14] Refer to Luke, K.K. (1990).

[15] For further discussion of the recent development of Chinese functionalism, refer to Biq, Tai & Thompson (To appear).

REFERENCES

Biq, Y., Tai, J. H-Y., & Thompson, S. A. (To appear). Recent developments in functional approaches to Chinese. In J. Huang & A. Li (Eds.), *New Horizons in Chinese Linguistics*.

Chao, Y. (1968). *A Grammar of Spoken Chinese*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Clancy, P. M., Thompson, S. A., Suzuki, R., & Tao, H. (To appear). The conversational use of reactive tokens in English, Japanese, and Mandarin. *Journal of Pragmatics*.

Huang, S. (Trans.) (1983). *Hanyu Yufa*. Taipei: Crane Co.

Huang, S. & Chui, K. (1994). Is Chinese a pragmatic ordering language? *Proceedings of the Fourth International Symposium on Chinese Languages and Linguistics*, Taipei.

LaPolla, R. J. (1990). *Grammatical Relations in Chinese: Synchronic and Diachronic Considerations*. Ph. D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.

LaPolla, R. J. (1992). Pragmatic relations and word order in Chinese. In P. Downing & M. Noonan. (Eds.), *Word Order and Discourse*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Li, C. N. & Thompson, S. A. (1976). Subject and topic: a new typology of language. In C.N. Li (Ed.), *Subject and Topic*, (pp. 457-489).

Li, C. N. & Thompson, S. A. (1981). *Mandarin Chinese: a Functional Reference Grammar*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Tai, J. H-Y. (1989). Toward a cognition-based functional grammar of Chinese. In J. H-Y. Tai & F.F.S. Hsueh (Eds.), *Functionalism and Chinese Grammar*. Chinese Language Teachers Association Monograph Series 1, 187-226.

Tao, H. (To appear). *Units in Mandarin: Prosody, Discourse and Grammar*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Tao, H. & Thompson, S. A. (1991). English backchannels in Mandarin conversations: A case study of superstratum pragmatic 'interference.' *Journal of Pragmatics*, 16, 209-223.

Chiung-chih Huang is a Ph.D. student in the Department of TESL and Applied Linguistics at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her interests include functional grammar, second language acquisition, TESL, and teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

Editor's note:

The following information has been brought to our attention. We hope language researchers working on Chinese and L1 acquisition research will find this information useful.

The Hong Kong Cantonese Child Language Corpus

This corpus consists of 170 Eten text files input in the internationally accepted CHILDES convention (cf. MacWhinney, B. & C. Snow [1985], Child Language Data Exchange System, *Journal of Child Language*, 12, 271-296). These text files are based on longitudinal observations and audio-recordings of conversations with 8 Cantonese-speaking children (aged 1 1/2 to 3). Each file, on average, consists of approximately 1500 lines (30 kilobytes).

The following software programs have been designed for this corpus:

(i) A text-search software, *Chinese Keyword in Context.*
(ii) A program to romanize Chinese texts according to any user-defined romanization convention.
(iii) A program to generate lists of vocabulary items with frequency measures on the tagged corpus files.
(iv) A program that creates a separate morphological tier under each string of morphemes so information about parts-of-speech can be added.

This corpus is scheduled to be released in September, 1995.

For further information, please contact any of the following:

Thomas Lee	htlee@psyche.mit.edu
Colleen Wong	egchwong@hkpucc.polyu.edu.hk
Sam Leung	langacq@hkucc.bitnet