Research Centre for Cantonese
Department of Chinese Language and Literature
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Research Seminar

THE SYNTACTIC STRUCTURING OF PASSIVE IN CHINESE AND VIETNAMESE: A COMPARATIVE VIEW

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Date: 20 December 2010 (Monday)
Time: 2:30pm – 4:00pm
Venue: Swire 1, Fung King Hey Building, CUHK

Abstract

Much interesting research has been carried out on the syntactic structure of Mandarin passive constructions in recent years, with significant results described in Ting (1998), Huang (1999), and Tang (2001). Huang (1999), in particular, places modern Mandarin *bei*-constructions in a broad comparative perspective, incorporating insights from the diachronic development of *bei* passives, and the synchronic realization of passive in non-Mandarin varieties of Chinese (Cantonese and Southern Min) as well as other East Asian languages such as Japanese and Korean. The present paper adds a further comparative perspective on Chinese-type passives and their parametric variation in East Asia with a consideration of passive structures in Vietnamese, an Austroasiatic language which has received much influence from Chinese as the result of earlier, prolonged Chinese dominance of the northern part of the country, during the formative years of the Vietnamese language.

Passive structures in Vietnamese show much obvious similarity to those in Mandarin, and seem to be closer to Chinese in surface structure than the passive in Japanese and Korean. The canonical adversity-type passive in Vietnamese is formed with a morpheme *bị* that is closely related to Chinese *bei*, and displays many of the same properties that Chinese *bei* passives have: (a) clear signs of a (possible) two-clause structure, (b) resistance to resumptive pronouns in the 'gap' position, (c) locality effects in the post- *bị/bei* portion of the construction, and (d) indications that a 'short passive' may be an option alongside 'long passives' (as in Chinese – Huang 1999) see example (1). Interestingly, Vietnamese also forms parallel *non*-adversity passive constructions with a second morpheme, *được*, cognate with Cantonese *dak* and Mandarin *de*. Elsewhere, Vietnamese *được* occurs as (a) a post-verbal modal of ability similar to Cantonese *dak*, (b) a lexical verb meaning 'to receive', similar to both Cantonese *dak* and Mandarin *de*. This is illustrated in example (2).

This paper probes how the two passive types in Vietnamese are both similar and different from modern Mandarin *bei* constructions, and addresses the issue of non-gap and indirect passive structures, the potential occurrence of agent-oriented adverbs predicated of the surface subject, productivity limits of the Vietnamese passive, and the significant phenomenon of *intransitive passives* in Vietnamese, in which an intransitive verb appears following *bị* (3) in a way that is not at all possible in Chinese (4):

(1) Nam bị   (thầy giáo) phạt (*anh ta).
    Nam PASS teacher   punish   him
    'Nam was punished (by the teacher).'
(2) Nam được (thầy giáo) khen (*anh ta).
    Nam PASS teacher   praise him
    'Nam was praised (by the teacher).'
(3) Nam bị ốm.
    Nam PASS be.sick
    'Nam has got sick.'
(4) *Zhangsan bei bing-le
    Zhangsan PASS be.sick ASP
    intended: 'Zhangsan has got sick.'

About the Speaker

Andrew Simpson is Professor of Linguistics and East Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles. Before joining USC in 2007, he was a member of the Department of Linguistics in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, from 1999-2006. His research interests focus on the comparative syntax of East, Southeast, and South Asian languages. He has produced four books: *Wh*-movement and the theory of feature-checking, Endangered Languages, Language and National Identity in Asia, and Language and National Identity in Africa, and is currently working on two new book projects relating to Chinese and sluicing. Along with James Huang and Mamoru Saito, Andrew Simpson is also one of the three general editors of the Journal of East Asian Linguistics.

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