Expressing temporal reference in Mandarin Chinese compared to French: a translation corpus study
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This study aims at investigating the expression of temporal reference in (Mandarin) Chinese, a tenseless language, compared to French, a tensed language in naturally occurring data. In tensed languages, temporal reference is expressed using verbal tenses, such as the French Passé Composé or the English Present Perfect, whose meanings are conveyed by tight inter-relations between tense and grammatical aspect. In a tenseless language, verbs are not obligatorily inflected for person, tense or aspect and need not co-occur with a temporal, aspectual or modal marker, but they express temporal reference as precisely as tensed verbs do (Lin 2012). In Chinese temporal reference can be determined either on the basis of linguistic cues (i.e. linguistically marked or direct temporal reference) or inferred contextually when no linguistic cue is provided (i.e. linguistically non-marked or indirect temporal reference). Regarding the former, several linguistic categories exist and may co-occur: temporal adverbials (e.g. shang zhousan ‘last Wednesday’), temporal adverbs (e.g. cengjing ‘once’ for past time, jiang ‘will’ for future time), aspectual marking (e.g. the perfective morphemes -le and -guo and the imperfective morphemes zai and -zhe) and lexical aspect among others (Bohnemeyer and Swift 2004; Smith and Erbaugh 2005; Smith 2008; Lin 2003, 2012; Li 2012). As for the latter, the temporal anaphora phenomenon (i.e. consecutive sentences share the temporal reference of the first sentence from a discourse, Li 2012) and universal pragmatic principles play important roles (Smith 2008).

Most of the existing studies are not based on systematic and quantitative analyses of corpus data (with the exception of Shi 2011 investigating the translation of English into Chinese). So, in this study we built and analysed two translation corpora (Chinese-French, French-Chinese) consisting of randomly chosen texts mostly from the websites of the Chinese Embassy in France and the French Embassy in China. Translation corpora allowed us to investigate the expression of temporal reference and the usage of the above-mentioned linguistic markers in Chinese both as source language (SL) and as target language (TL). Two of our research questions are as follows. First, what are linguistic and non-linguistic means used in the translation of verbal phrases in the two translation directions? Second, is temporal reference in Chinese (SL vs. TL) most frequently linguistically marked or non-marked? In order to answer these questions, we have analysed 250 pairs of verbs phrases from the French-Chinese corpus and 200 pairs from the Chinese-French corpus.

With respect to the first research question, the analysis of the Chinese-French corpus has shown that Chinese verb phrases were translated into French using a verbal tense in 64% of the cases, without a verbal tense in 22.5% of the cases and not translated at all in 13.5% of the cases. In the French-Chinese corpus, the 244 verb phrases in French were translated into Chinese by a marked verb phrase (51%) using an aspectual marker (24%) or a temporal marker (27%), by an unmarked (aspectually or temporally) verb phrase (46%) and by a non-verbal phrase in 2% of the cases.

As for the second research question, the results of our quantitative analyses did not significant differences between linguistically marked vs. contextual localizations in the past, present and future in Chinese (SL). In contrast, in Chinese (TL), the localization in the past and in the future is more frequently contextual than linguistically marked (44.3% vs. 30.9% for the past, 23.2% vs. 13.9 for the future), whereas the contrary occurs regarding the localization in the present (55.2% vs. 31.5%). Additionally, a series of morphemes have been added in Chinese (TL) in order to diminish its context-dependence with respect to temporal reference, such as the past-oriented yi / yijing and ceng, the present-oriented yizhi and zheng, and the future-oriented jiang. Our assumption is that this difference is due to the influence of French as source language, in which temporal reference is linguistically marked via verbal tenses.
References: