CHAPTER 3
RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN
FUNCTIONAL APPROACHES TO CHINESE

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of Chinese grammar from a 'functional' point of view reflects the general functional, cognitive, and discourse tradition in current linguistics (see Chafe 1992; Hopper, 1992; Langacker, 1987, 1991; Nichols, 1984; Thompson, 1992). We understand the central tenet of this tradition to be an emphasis on linguistic structure as reflecting the role of language as a tool of human communication rather than as an instantiation of an abstract set of mental representations.

This approach is thus first and foremost a functional one. It takes the position that the primary function of language is for human beings to communicate about their ideas, experiences, feelings, and attitudes in the physical world around them, and that grammatical structures arise from those functions. This position thus challenges the conventional and dominant view of linguistic symbolization, that grammar is an arbitrary, autonomous, self-contained formal system that humans use to interpret, and communicate about, the world. The basic tenet of the functionalist approach is that forms are derived from functions rather than vice versa, thus contrasting with the formalist position, which treats forms as independent of functions. Hence, this approach adopts a strong form of functionalism, not only in postulating natural correlations between form and function, but also in asserting that forms can be, and should be, accounted for in terms of functions.

With respect to linguistic explanations, this approach looks for grammar-external, functional explanations. This also contrasts sharply with a formalist approach, which seeks grammar-internal, formal explanations for linguistic phenomena. Formalists account for linguistic structures using abstract principles and mechanisms. Functionalists, on the other hand, are not satisfied with grammar-internal formal explanations, which they consider to be descriptions but not explanations. Moreover, in our view, genuine explanations lie in both the structure of the real world, as conceptualized by the language user, and the linearity of human speech. Linguistic structure is further shaped by humans by memory capacity, processing strategies, and interactional principles.

Thus functionalist scholars are interested in the way particular structures are used, how their meanings interact with their use, how the grammatical patterns in one language relate to those serving similar functions in other languages, and how grammatical patterns are related to discourse patterns. In this chapter we first provide a brief history of functionalism in Chinese linguistics. We then discuss approaches to Chinese grammar from the point of view of their meaning and use, and finally we discuss the recent research which explores the relationship between discourse and grammar.

2. A BRIEF HISTORY OF FUNCTIONAL APPROACHES TO THE GRAMMAR OF CHINESE

2.1. Early Precursors to Chinese Functionalism

Current functionalist research in Chinese linguistics has its roots in the structuralism of pre- and post-World War II China, particularly Ding (1961), Gao (1957), Lü (1941, 1955), Wang (1947, 1955), and Zhu (1956). Four other major forebears working outside China were Dragunov (1960), Chao (1968), and Mullie (1932), who all made landmark contributions to the functionalist tradition, and Kratochvil (1968), whose description of Mandarin morphology remains one of the best.

2.2. The Emergence of Functionalism in the 1970s

Just as functional linguistics began to flourish and attract a large number of scholars in the 1970s, so did Chinese functionalism come into its own at about this time. Important work by, for example, Alleton (1972, 1973, 1977), Cartier (1972), Chu (1973, 1976), Hagège (1975), Henne et al. (1977), Huang (1974a, b), Li (1971, 1972, 1974, 1976), Li and Thompson (1974a, b, 1975, 1976, 1978), Light (1979), Lu (1973, 1977), Paris (1977a, b, 1979a, b), Peyraube (1977, 1978, 1979), Ross (1978), Tai (1973, 1976), Teng (1973, 1974a, b, 1975, 1977, 1979a, b), Thompson (1973a, b), Tsao (1976, 1979a, b), and others formed a solid body of contributions to the understanding of Chinese grammar, influenced by the semantic insights in Fillmorean Case Grammar (Fillmore, 1968), as well as by the contemporary burgeoning interest in typology and universals and the attendant revival of descriptive accounts from a typological perspective. Cheng et al. (1979), a significant collection of papers from a 1977 symposium on Chinese linguistics, captures the essence of this tradition.

One of the most widely discussed issues during this period was that of the 'topic-comment' nature of Chinese. According to Chao (1968: 70), prototypical 'subject-predicate' sentences account for only about fifty