The Distinction between Finite and Nonfinite Verbs in Mandarin Chinese

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How to cite this paper: Mengmeng Tang. (2023). The Distinction between Finite and Nonfinite Verbs in Mandarin Chinese. The Educational Review, USA, 7(8), 1233-1243. DOI: 10.26855/er.2023.08.035

Received: July 28, 2023
Accepted: August 25, 2023
Published: September 22, 2023

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Abstract
It has been controversial as to whether there exist finite and nonfinite distinctions in Chinese. The current research systematically reviewed the theoretical development of finiteness and listed the representative ideas of Chinese finiteness from the perspective of generative, cognitive and functional approaches. The analysis of Chinese finite and non-finite verbs has the characteristics that it develops with the linguistic theories, whereas neglects the unique features of Chinese itself. As an isolating language, Chinese lacks inflectional morphology and tense, so it relies heavily on semantics, pragmatics, information structure, and discourse. Based on the conventional division between morphology and syntax, it is difficult to determine with clarity whether or not finiteness exists in Chinese, even though many researchers have addressed this question. Though some linguists have noticed the importance of explaining finiteness from semantic perspective, a more systematic interpretation is in need in the future studies in this field.

Keywords
Finiteness and nonfinite distinction, Chinese

1. Introduction
There has been a long-running discussion on the typological differences in MVCs about Chinese finite and non-finite verb distinctions. Many researchers have noted the importance of covert temporal information and specific syntactic structures in determining the finite verb in a tenseless language, and so proposed a finiteness category in Chinese. However, a number of researchers denied the existence of finite and non-finite distinctions in Chinese. Although there has been a considerable theoretical discussion of finiteness, no consensus has been reached to date on whether there exists finiteness in an isolating language, such as Chinese. This article will review the representative opinions in Chinese finiteness and introduce the latest development in this field.

2. The Distinction between Finite and Non-finite Verbs

2.1 Definition of Finiteness

According to the British dictionary, finiteness denotes “any form or occurrence of a verb inflected for grammatical features such as person, number and tense”. The free dictionary defines finiteness as “of or relating to any of the forms of a verb that can occur on their own in a main clause and that can formally express distinctions in person, number, tense, mood, and voice, often by means of conjugation, as the verb sees in She sees the sign”.

DOI: 10.26855/er.2023.08.035 1233 The Educational Review, USA
However, with the development of linguistics, the limitation of the previous definitions on finiteness was noted by grammarians. For example, Chalker and Weiner (1994) stated that “in some recent work in linguistics the idea that verb forms are finite or nonfinite has been abandoned. Instead, finiteness is regarded as a property of higher-order units such as clauses” (p.157). Nikolaeva (2007) claimed that “the development of syntactic theory starting from the 1960s led to an obvious departure from traditional assumptions. Finiteness was reanalyzed as something more abstract, essentially a clausal category that is only secondarily reflected in the form of the verb” (p. I).

2.2 A Brief Review of Theories on Finiteness

The research on finiteness can be traced back to Latin “finites”, with the meaning of “definite or determined in the sense referring to a particular person” (Sauter et al., 1968, p. 705). Following this, the study of the division between finite and non-finite verbs went through several stages: inflectional description (tensed forms vs. non-tensed forms); distributional description (predicate verbs vs. non-predicate verbs); parameters to determine the weakness of finiteness (being predicate, with tense, in agreement with the person and number of subject, being notional verbs or functional verbs, having mood markers); relations among clauses (finite clauses vs. non-finite clauses).

Since Latin is a morphologically rich language, person and number can be clearly identified. The earliest division of finite (+F) vs. nonfinite (-F) was on the basis of person and number, such as “wants” [+F] and “to see” [-F] in “she wants to see the sign.” Compared with Latin, there is much less inflectional morphology in English, and the agreement can only be overt in the third person singular, for others like “want” [+F] and “to see” [-F] in “I want to see the sign”, person and number can no longer explain finiteness.

In solving this problem, grammarians used tense to make the division of [+F] and [-F], that is, verbs with tense are finite and verbs without tense are non-finite, such as “encouraged” [+F] and “to attend” [-F] in “She encouraged Jerry to attend the meeting.” This criterion was widely accepted and is used even now (Nikolaeva, 2007; Maas, 2004). However, this division has its limitations in cross-language descriptions since tense is absent in some languages, such as Chinese.

Having noted the limitation of morphologically-related division between finite and non-finite forms, some grammarians began to identify finiteness via functional positions in a sentence. That is, verbs which can function as predicates are categorized as finite verbs, the others are non-predicate verbs. According to Cambridge English dictionary, predicate is defined as the part of a sentence that contains the verb and gives information about the subject. For example, in the sentence “she encouraged Jerry to attend the meeting” “encouraged” is the predicate of the sentence, therefore, it is the finite verb, while “to attend” is the object complement and the nonfinite verb. Nonfinite verbs can be placed in any positions except for the predicate.

Trask (1993) assumed that criterion of functional positions is the complement of the morphological criteria (person, number or tense), which means if a verb is finite; it should have tense, person, number inflections and be the predicate of a sentence. Johns and Smallwood (1999) found that in a main clause, the verb’s tense and its position may not be consistent with each other in determining the verb’s finiteness, such as in English imperative sentences, the verb has no number, person, nor tense inflections, but it is in the position of predicate.

To solve this problem, Quirk et al. (1985) abandoned the dichotomous division between finite and nonfinite verbs, instead, proposing a scale with a set of parameters to determine the strong or weak features of finiteness. These parameters include “a. being predicate in a sentence; b. having tensed forms; c. in agreement with the person and number of subject; d. being notional verbs or functional verbs; e. having mood markers.” If all these parameters apply to a verb in a particular construction, then it has strong finiteness; if the verb has some of them, it has relative weak finiteness; if the verb has none of the above parameters, it is a nonfinite verb. This approach to some extent explained the inconsistency of the morphological division and distribution division by putting all the features on a scale; however, the parameters can hardly be applied to languages without tense, mood, person or number.

Since the 1960s, within the theoretical framework of generative grammar, finite and nonfinite concepts were further described by more abstract clause properties and by this method, the research focus changed from verbs to clauses, and probed the relationships between constituents in the structure of a sentence. The concept of Infl (ection) was introduced, as one constituent with two different sets of features ([+Tense, +Agreement]) (Chomsky, 1981; Pollock, 1989). A finite verb has an Infl which has inflectional properties such as tense and person, and Infl may or may not be realized as separate words in the surface representation of the phrase. It provided a new perspective that INFL as an abstract category may not be represented on the surface structure.

In the 1980s, cognitive grammarians put forward two other terms: “process” and “grounding” (Langacker, 1987b; Langacker, 1987a; Langacker, 1991). Cognitive grammarians believed that “process” is the cognition of an action which contains all the state in different stages and “grounding” is a semantic concept, which means the connection with the true context. “Grounding” is the “process” of fixing conceptual image schemas in place and time for actions (La-
gacker, 1987). The cognition of an action is connected to the true context by specific temporal or spacial information, such as in the sentence “She encouraged Jerry.”, the cognitive action of “she encourage Jerry” is grounded to the true context “She encouraged Jerry.” by the past tense and it indicated that this action indeed happened and it happened in the past, so the verb “encouraged” is finite. The contribution of this approach is that it brought in a semantic concept, which provided a novel way in explaining the finiteness.

Halliday (1994) proposed that “the finite element carries either (primary) tense or modality, both of which are seen as relating the event deictically to the here-and-now of the speaker or writer” (p. 197). Even though functional grammar provided a way to explain finiteness via its functions in communication, Bulter (2003) criticized that “these accounts are limited almost exclusively to English and are closely bound up with the postulation of the verbal group as a constituent of clause structure” (p. 486).

From the functional-typological perspective, Givón (2001) emphasized the continuity between finiteness and non-finiteness and lists prototypes of finite clauses in which the prototypical finite clause is “She should have known math well”, while the least finite clause has desententialized, such as, “her good knowledge of math”. This indicates that the nonfinite clause is actually the integration of a subordinate clause into a main clause which shows the interrelation between the original independent clauses.

To sum up, the definition of finiteness has been developing, but, the afore-mentioned criteria apply mainly to inflectional languages, such as English. The question of how to view finiteness in a non-tensed language is important but complex, and a vast body of research on Chinese finiteness has contributed to this field.

3. Finiteness in Chinese

Previous researches on Chinese sentences with multiple verbs mainly centered on whether there are finite verbs and non-finite verbs; if there are, how to distinguish them. Finiteness in Chinese has been a controversial question for over 100 years. B. Yang (2015) noted that the disputes have 3 characters: a. a long history; b. different theoretical basis; c. scholars’ changeable positions.

As mentioned in the brief review of history of finiteness, the development of linguistic theories provides new perspectives in viewing finiteness in Chinese. Representatives of using generative grammar to explain Chinese finiteness were C.-T. J. Huang (1982, 1989), Y.-H. A. Li (1985, 1990), Hu et al. (2001), T.-H. J. Lin (2012), N. Huang (2018) and etc. Guo (2012), B. Yang (2015), He and Zhong (2017) combined functional grammar to Chinese finiteness research. Besides, there were cognitive approach and other research perspectives (e.g., Shi, 2001; Wang, 2010; Y. Yang & Tsai, 2011, etc.). Some scholars used to be the pros of [+F] distinction in Chinese (Hu, 1997), and then changed their opinions and denied the existence of Chinese finiteness (Hu et al., 2001). And some scholars even proposed that there were only finite forms in Chinese (Huang, 1992), or there were only non-finite forms of Chinese (R. Li, 2003).

A number of scholars propose a finiteness category for Chinese (e.g., Ma, 1898/1998; J. Li, 1924/2007; C.-T. J. Huang, 1982, 1989; Y.-H. A. Li, 1985, 1990; Shi, 2001; Tan, 1995; Song, 2000; D. Wang, 2010; C.-C. J. Tang, 1990; Xing Y.-H. A., 2004; Hu, 1997; Li & Liu, 2005; S. W. Tang & Lee, 2000; Tsai, 2006; Gu, 2007; Fang & Zhao, 2008; Her, 2008; Y. Yang & Tsai, 2011; Guo, 2012; T.-H. J. Lin, 2012; B. Yang, 2015; N. Huang, 2018). Within this group, there are diverse perspectives, including. a. research on criteria of distinguishing finite verbs from non-finite verbs (e.g., C.-T. J. Huang, 1982, 1989; Y.-H. A. Li, 1985, 1990; Tang, 1990; Shi, 2001; Xing, 2004; J. Li & Liu, 2005; T.-H. J. Lin, 2012; N. Huang, 2018; N. Zhang, 2019); b. research on sentence types which have finiteness distinction (e.g., Tan, 1995; Shi, 2001; J. Li & Liu, 2005; B. Yang, 2015; Fang & Zhao, 2008); c. research on the plausibility of finiteness distinction in Chinese (Y. Yang & Tsai, 2011).

However, a number of researchers do not believe that Chinese distinguishes finiteness (Lv, 1947/2005; L. Wang, 1954; Zhu, 1985; L. Xu, 1995, 1999; Y. Huang, 1992, 1994, 2000; T. Li, 1999; Hu et al., 2001; J. Xu, 2006; J.-W. Lin, 2006; Liu, 2010). These researchers argue that a. Chinese is not a tensed language; b. Adjectives can be predicates in Chinese; and c. The criteria proposed by proponents of Chinese finiteness can be falsified by some examples. The following paragraphs will briefly list some of the representative ideas in different approaches.

3.1 Generative approach

On basis of abstract category “AUX”, C.-T. J. Huang (1982) believed that covert “AUX” existed in Chinese, and it was reflected as modal marker “hui” (will), so “hui” can only be in finite clauses (see example 1).

*wo zhourbei [PRO mingtian hui lai]

1 Note: “AUX” is another term for “INFL” in generative grammar. It is an abstract category, and is composed of two elements [+agreement] and [+tense]. It may be reflected on surface level and maybe not.
I prepare tomorrow will come.

*“I prepare to will come tomorrow” (C.-T. J. Huang, 1998, p. 248)

And only nonfinite clause can be passivized in a long distance (see example 2).

a. Zhangsan bei Lisi pai jingcha zhua-zou le.

Zhangsan BEI Lisi send police arrest ASP.

**“Zhangsan was ‘sent-police-to-arrest’ by Lisi.”

b. *Zhangsan bei Lisi shuo jingcha zhua-zou le.

Zhangsan BEI Lisi say police arrest ASP.

**“Zhangsan was ‘said-police-to-arrest’ by Lisi.” (Hu et al., 2001, p. 1136)

In sum, Huang therefore distinguished two types of verbs: “control verbs” like “zhunbei” (prepare), “shefa” (try), “quan” (persuade), and “bi”(force), which can only be followed by nonfinite clauses, and other verbs like “shuo” (say) and “xiangxin” (believe), which can be followed by finite clauses.

However, pointing to Huang’s study, L. Xu (1985, 1986, 1994) argued that the ungrammaticality of non-finite verbs with “hui” is not because of the finiteness but the semantic incompatibility, because “hui” in Chinese denotes not only futurity (will), but also possibility and uncertainty (possibly).

Hu et al. (2001) also found that Pro (no lexical NPs) existing in non-finite clauses was not always true (see example 3).

wo zhunbei [mingtian xiawu tian hei yihou wo yi geren lai ].

“I prepare I come alone tomorrow afternoon after it gets dark.” (Hu et al., 2001, p. 1131)

They also argued that not all the non-finite verbs can be passivized (e.g., Zhangsan dasuan da Lisi. “Zhangsan planned to beat Lisi.” *Lisi bei Zhangsan plan beat.)

Further to Huang’s study, Y.-H. A. Li (1990) claimed that except for “hui” (will), tense markers like “yao” (will) can be the criteria of [+F]. She also proposed that time adverbials “congqian” (before) and aspectual markers “guo” (experiential aspectual particle) should co-occur and modify the matrix verb (e.g., *wo congqian gaosu ta [ni lai guo zher]2. I before tell he you come ASP here.) Another criterion is Y.-H. A. Li proposed was about “whether a negation marker can license a negative polarity item” (e.g., *wo meiyou gaosu guo ta ni zuo renhe shiqing. I not-have tell ASP him you do anything. “I have not told him you did anything.”)

Referring the aspectual marker “guo”, L. Xu (1995) pointed out that different interpretations will be derived when “guo” is situated in the predicates of different clauses. Y. Huang (1994) also found some examples to support the possibility for both the matrix and the embedded clauses taking an aspectual marker.

C.-C. J. Tang (1990) proposed 8 criteria to distinguish finiteness from no finiteness: the first three criteria are similar with Huang and Li’s proposal. The others are the interpretation of “wh-” word: finite clauses with “wh-” questions can be interpreted as both direct and indirect questions, while non-finite clauses with “wh-” can only be interpreted as direct questions; only verbs in finite clauses can be in the form of V-not-V; “shi” (be) can only be added to finite clauses, not to non-finite clauses; the constraint on the occurrence of certain “wh-” words; local topicalization of the object is not allowed in non-finite clauses but acceptable in finite clauses.

Tan (1995) found another criterion. Complements expressing generalization can only appear in front of finite verbs, not for non-finite verbs (see example 4).

a. Da ren fan fa.

Beat others violate law.

“Beating others violates the law.”

b. Da shui dou fan fa.

Beat anyone all violate the law.

“Beating anyone all violates the law.”

c. *Shui dou da fan fa.

Anyone all beat violate the law.

**Anyone all beating violates the law.”

Hu et al. (2001) argued that the negative polarity item “any”, a counterpart of “renhe” in Chinese, can be licensed across a finite-clause boundary in English, so it cannot be the criteria of finiteness.

Note: the clause after “tell” is a finite clause, so “before” and aspectual particle should co-occur only in the matrix verb “tell”. If the event of the clause is also in the past, there should be another aspectual particle.
These earlier researches pioneered in proposing certain criteria to make a [+F] distinction, however, the criteria were all falsified in Hu et al. (2001), and it thus showed that earlier evidences of the finite and nonfinite oppositions in Mandarin Chinese based on the existence of Tense as part of IP were not sufficient.

Xing (2004) pointed out that in pivotal sentences, time adverbials  

| a. Wo anpai ta wancheng zhexiong renwu. |
| I arrange him complete this task. |
| “I arrange him to complete this task.” |

| b. wo yijing/zhengzai/jiangyao anpai ta wancheng zhexiong renwu. |
| I already/ in the process of/ will arrange him complete this task. |

| c. *wo anpai ta yijing/zhengzai/jiangyao wancheng zhexiong renwu. |
| *I arrange him already/ in the process of/ will complete this task. |

In recent years, the question of whether there is covert tense T as the marker of finiteness in mandarin Chinese raises researchers’ attention again. Sybesma (2007) argues for the existence of a syntactic T node in Chinese in light of the universal applicability of current theories of tense, the ability in temporal explanation by Chinese isolated sentences without context, as well as the parallel empirical data from Dutch and Chinese, i.e., similar usage in tense adverbs and perfective markers. He believes that the tense morpheme is meaningless, while the tense agreement is between the tense and the temporal adverbs (e.g., wo 1989 nian zhuzai lutedan. I lived in Rotterdam in 1989).

As a response to Sybesma’s points of view, J.W. Lin (2010) denied the existence of tense in Chinese by proving that a tenseless analysis, i.e., bounded vs. unbounded events, is an equally alternative for the explanation of Chinese syntactic facts. J.W. Lin argued that a syntactic T head is absent in Chinese, the subordination is only reflected as the position of the modal (e.g., zhangsan [keneng [[qu taibei] le]]. Zhangsan be likely to go Taipei perf); when “le” occurs in a sentence with a root modal, the root modal falls within the scope of “le” (e.g., zhangsan [[nenggou [qu taibei]] le]]. Zhangsan be able to go Taipei perf). Since “le” is a dynamic aspectual particle occurring with dynamic predicates (activities, accomplishments, achievements), the verb phrase that “le” modifies indicates its finiteness. Therefore, epistemic modals in Chinese take finite TP complement (“le” modifies the VP and they together compose the finite complement), and root modals take a nonfinite TP complement (“le” modifies both the VP and the modal; therefore, VP itself is nonfinite).

Further to the debate on Chinese finiteness, T. H. Lin (2015) pointed out that J.W. Lin (2010)’s argument is non-sustainable. His argument is based on the evidence that some syntactic structures are sensitive to tense; Chinese tense system has its unique features; the parallelism between Dutch and Mandarin Chinese is temporal in nature; and the temporal interpretations of Chinese sentences can be accounted for by a pronominal tense system (p. 320). It was therefore claimed that an embedded clause with a clause-final particle “le”, allowing object fronting, and disallowing wide scope of object-position quantifiers is finite.

However, Grano (2012, 2015) argues that the distinction between types of Chinese clauses is not in terms of finiteness, but rather on basis of whether there is restructuring: verb phrases (VPs) or complement phrases (CPs). VPs and CPs are mutually exclusive and there are three diagnostic methods in distinguishing them. The first diagnostic is whether the embedded subject can be overt, i.e., CP complements have either a null pro subject or an overt subject. The second diagnostic is the availability of partial control interpretations, i.e., CP complements allow for partial control. The third diagnostic is the interpretation of aspect markers, i.e., CP complements force embedded aspect markers to be associated with the embedded clause. In contrast, VP complements do not have these properties. Ussery C. et al. (2016) supports Grano (2012, 2015)’s idea about the restructuring. They contribute new data based on the distribution and interpretation of “ziji” (reflexive pronoun). Grano (2017) also argued against T. H. Lin (2015)’s statements for tense in Chinese which is based on the finite and nonfinite contrasts and claimed that the Chinese finite and nonfinite distinction only exhibits if finiteness refers to a cluster of properties enabling a clause to stand alone, unembedded syntactically.

N. Huang (2018) present two diagnostic tools involving the focus adverb “ye” (also) and the morpheme “shuo” (to say) against the proposal that restructuring control predicates cannot take clausal complements. Restructuring control predicates refer to those in which the experiential aspect appears low but receives a “high” matrix interpretation, the
inner topic can appear between the matrix subject and the control predicate, and a focused phrase can be frontal to a position before the control predicate. Typical restructuring control predicates include “dasuan” (plan), “zhunbei” (prepare), and etc. N. Huang found that after restructuring control predicates, both “ye” and “shuo” can be used. “Ye” and “Shuo” usually appear high in a matrix clause and are reliable diagnoses for clausal structure (see example 6).

a. lisi hui shefa ye zai zhezhounei tijiao jinzhan baogao.
   Lisi will try also at this week in submit progress report
b. lisi xiang changshi shuo huan yixia biede xiafalu.
   Lisi want try shuo change a bit another shampoo
Thus, these examples show that restructuring control predicates can take clausal complement. Huang connected this fact to the concept of finiteness, i.e., finite “shuo” co-occurs with a constituent that can host these overt subjects, inner topics, etc., likely via subcategorization. In contrast, non-finite “shuo” does not.

Besides, Huang (2018) and Cao (2018) support Paul’s suggestion that “non-finite clauses lack the functional architecture postulated for finite clauses” (2002, p. 705), and all believe that finiteness is connected with the completeness of sentences.

N. Zhang (2019) argued that incompleteness of sentences may have various reasons, and finiteness is not necessarily connected to completeness. She proposed that sentence-final aspect particles “ne”, “le” and “laizhe” can only be used in finite clauses, although Chinese has no tense or case marker. Eight types of clauses that ban these particles are non-finite clauses, i.e., the complement of a control verb, the complement of a raising verb, the complement of “lai” (come) or “qu” (to), the complement of a non-epistemic modal, the V-even-not-V adverbials, small clauses, gapless relative clauses and the complement clause of “dui” (to). They are intrinsically embedded and show higher-clause-oriented properties. In contrast, finite clauses show speaker-oriented properties.

In sum, researchers in generative approach have proposed various criteria for finite and nonfinite distinctions in Chinese (see table 1), and their focus is to explore covert tense markers or sentence structures on basis of the features of universal finiteness.

3.2 Cognitive approach

Studies in cognitive approach tend to view finiteness from the semantic perspective. Klein (1998, 2006, 2008) proposed that a finite declarative clause contains an element assertion which is realized by the topic time and lexical content, whereas a non-finite clause is lack of the topic time. Klein, Li and Hendriks (2000) noted the importance of Chinese aspectual particles “le”, “guo”, “zai” “zhe” in asserting the topic time preceding, following, including or being included in the time of a situation described by the sentence and argued that the finiteness function in Chinese is realized by optional particles (p. 753).

Shi (2001) based his arguments on the one-dimensionality of time and argued that in describing multiple events which occur at the same time, only one matrix verb indicates the time information. He therefore proposed that finite verbs in Chinese have grammatical markers indicating time information, such as aspect particles “le” (completion aspectual marker), “guo” (experiential aspectual marker) and reduplication (see example 7).

a. Kan dianshi hen fei yanjing.
   Watch TV very harm eyes.
   “Watching TV harms eyes seriously.”

b.*Kan le/guo dianshi hen fei yanjing.
   Watch le/guo (ASP) TV very harm eyes.

c.*Kankan dianshi hen fei yanjing.
   Watch watch TV very harm eyes.

In terms of this criteria, Shi claimed that verbs as subject, object and verbs after prepositions of a sentence are usually non-finite. In certain Chinese-specific sentences, aspectual markers may appear after V1 or V2 to indicate different meanings, but the aspectual marker can only appear once.

T. Li (1999) believed that one-dimensionality of time cannot restrict expression in languages, for example, in Chinese, we use “you”, and “yibian” (meanwhile) to express events happening at the same time (see example 8). T. Li argued that in reality, we can’t smoke and drink at specifically the same time, but in language expression, we can describe them as the same time.
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women yibian chouyan yibian hejiu.
We smoke meanwhile and meanwhile drink wine.
“We are smoking and drinking.”

Yang and Tsai (2011) provided experimental evidence from ERP and fMRI\(^1\) demonstrating that syntactic features play an important role in the classification of nouns and verbs in Chinese. In the fMRI experiment, verbs, nouns and adjectives were respectively put in sentences as the modifier of the same nouns and results showed significant differences of brain reaction among the three conditions. In the condition of verbs as modifier, left middle frontal gyrus

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\(^1\) An ERP (event-related-potential) is the electrical response of the brain to a known stimulus; Functional magnetic resonance imaging or functional MRI (fMRI) is a functional neuroimaging procedure using MRI technology that measures brain activity by detecting changes associated with blood flow. This technique relies on the fact that cerebral blood flow and neuronal activation are coupled.
which is for syntactic processing (Luke et al., 2002) was activated. This indicated that there was a complex syntactic processing of changing the property of finite verbs to other functions (e.g. nonfinite functions) even though the morphology was not changed.

From the perspective of child L1 acquisition, infinitive sentences (e.g. They go ther) are often used by English children of 2-3 years old, and this is called optional infinitive stage (OIS) by developmental linguistics. Yang and Tsai (2011) found that Chinese children of 2-3 years old also experienced OIS by using negative imperative sentences (see example 9-10).

Baba bu shui le.
Dad not sleep CRS⁴ (children’s language)
Baba buyao shui le.
Dad will not sleep CRS. (adults’ language)

In example 9, the modal marker “yao” (will), a marker to distinguish finite and non-finite verbs, was omitted. Yang and Tsai (2011) therefore argued that “abstract finiteness exists intrinsically in Chinese verbs without phonological realization” (p. 174).

3.3 Functional approach

From functional-typological perspective, B. Yang (2015) argued that inflection is a basic property of ancient Chinese and ancient Tibetan, Tibetan, Tibetan dialects, Jingpo, Zhuang, Hmong, Yao, etc., therefore, morphological inflection is ever developing and changing, and cannot be regarded as a criterion in determining finiteness. He believed that some grammatical categories are marked “not by morphemic tags but by types of patterning, by lexical selection, or by word-order” (Whorf, 1945, p. 2), and Chinese has a different parameter so the morphological system is different. According to whether there is a subject, whether the verb is the predicate, whether the verb changes with number and person, Yang listed several situations between finite clause and non-finite clause. Among them, verb or verb phrases as subject are non-finite clauses, such as “Xiyan weihai ta de shentijiankang.” (Smoke harms his health.); “xiyan (smoke)” has no subject, is not a predicate, and does not change with person and number. In pivotal sentences such as “lingdao anpai ta qu shixi” (Leader arrange him go for an internship.), “qu shixi” (go for an internship) is not the predicate, it does not change with person and number but has a subject, so it is pseudo non-finite clause B. In verbs in series such as “xiaoazhang qu shudian maishu” (xiaoazhang go to bookshop buy books.), “mai” (buy) has a subject, as the predicate in second event xiaozhang buy books, but does not change with person and number, therefore, it is the pseudo non-finite clause A.

He and Zhong (2017) claims that Chinese clauses fall into finite and non-finite clauses based on whether the clause indicates a primary or primary-secondary tense by “grammatical, quasi-grammatical, lexical resources or unmarked resources” (p. 7). In contrast, the non-finite clauses are those with an absence of its own tense marker or with its own tense but relying on the tense interpretation of the ranking clause. For instance, in the sentence “wo kanjian guo lieren da banjiu” (I see ASP hunter shoot turtledove), the interpretation of “da” (shoot) depends on the ranking clause “wo kanjian” (I see). Therefore, “da” (shoot) is nonfinite.

4. Conclusion

In sum, several of the representative ideas in different approaches on how to distinguish between finite and non-finite verbs in Chinese have been outlined above. The analysis of Chinese finite and non-finite verbs has the characteristics that it develops with the linguistic theories. Within the development of generative grammar in 1980s, Chinese linguists adapted the “INFL” to specifically interpret the finite and non-finite clauses in Chinese. With the emerging of cognitive approach, linguistics tried to use the cognition of events to explain how Chinese sentences ground an event to a real situation, and how to view the events from different perspectives, and thus the “time-in-one-dimension” was proposed. Within the framework of functional grammar, more and more scholars began to focus on the function role of different types of clauses and try to classify the clauses according to their functions within the relations to the other clauses. However, as an isolating language, Chinese lacks inflectional morphology and tense and has a flexible word order, so it relies heavily on semantics, pragmatics, information structure, and discourse. Based on the conventional division between morphology and syntax, it is difficult to determine with clarity whether or not finiteness exists in Chinese, even though many researchers have addressed this question. Though some linguists have noticed the importance of explaining finiteness from semantic perspective, a more systematic interpretation is in need in the future studies in this field.

⁴ CRS: current related state (le). It is used by Li & Thompson (1981) to refer to the sentence final le.
Funding

This study was supported by Science Foundation of China University of Petroleum, Beijing (No. 2462023YXZZ006), Undergraduate Key Teaching Reform Project (30GK2312), and Graduate Teaching Reform Project (YJS2021048).

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DOI: 10.26855/er.2023.08.035 1242 The Educational Review, USA


