



# Circumstantiation of projection: Functional syntax of Angle in English and Chinese



Shu-Kun Chen

Foreign Language Department, Guangdong University of Finance, Guangzhou 510520, China

## HIGHLIGHTS

- The article attempts to probe into projecting Circumstance from an English-Chinese typological perspective.
- The article proposed a term figure-circumstance to address the peculiar syntactic behavior of Angle.
- An examination of Angles through the dimension of explicit and implicit orientation.
- A detailed account of phenomenon, *according to me*, in English.
- Some tentative explanation is made on the typological features that motivate the explicit orientation of Chinese Angles.

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## ABSTRACT

Circumstance, in the grammar of Systemic Functional Linguistics, is the component associated with the process in transitivity system in the experiential strand of meaning. The most common types of circumstance such as location (including time and space), manner, extent, cause, contingency, accompaniment and role have been well investigated under different theoretical frameworks. However, the grammar of the projecting circumstance (phrases that represent sources of speech) has not gained adequate attention in the previous studies on English, not to mention Chinese. This study is an attempt to conduct a functional syntax analysis (the Sydney model) on one type of circumstance—Angle—in English and Chinese. Some major findings of the analysis are: (i) Angle should, arguably, be treated as figure circumstance due to its peculiar syntactic feature. (ii) It is useful to adopt a two dimensional classification of Angle to observe the levels of projection (source versus viewpoint) and the modes of projection (explicit versus implicit). The implicit mode of Angle in English expands the meaning potential of projection so that the conventional meaning is altered. (iii) English Angle can be explicit and implicit whereas Chinese Angle is predominantly explicit except in the projection of writing. (iv) The *according-to* prepositions in Chinese are richer than English and can be used as subordinating conjunctions. (v) The fuzziness of grammatical categories may be the typological feature motivating the explicit orientation of Angles in Chinese.

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## 1. Introduction

Circumstance, under the framework of Systemic Functional Grammar (hereafter SFG), is one of the three components in transitivity system which realizes the experiential line of meaning [13,15]. The three components are:

(i) A process unfolding through time

- (ii) The participants involved in the process  
(iii) Circumstances associated with the process.

For example, in a clause like *I get hungry on the beach*, the core element is the process *get hungry* and there is one participant – realized by the first person pronoun *I*. The circumstance *on the beach*, as it were, is the peripheral element that orbits freely around the process. That is known as a ‘nuclear’ model of transitivity in SFG [11,22]. Of present interest is projecting Circumstance, which could be best illustrated through the following examples:

E-mail address: [chenshuk@foxmail.com](mailto:chenshuk@foxmail.com).

(1)(a)Government sources say about the new peace plan that it will be discussed on Monday. (Matter)

(b)According to government sources, the new peace plan will be discussed on Monday. (Angle)

(c)Government sources say that the new peace plan will be discussed on Monday. (clause complex) ([26]: 336)

Projecting Circumstance, as ([26]:335) puts it, represents a semiotic Angle on a process (Angle as in 1b) or some aspect of the content of a projection (Matter as in 1a). Angle and Matter are functionally related to projection clause complex (corresponding roughly to speech representation in traditional grammar) as in 1c. The three examples above also suggest that Projection is a trans-grammatical semantic domain, which means that Projection could be realized by different grammatical units such as clause complex, prepositional phrases, adverbs, etc. It should be stressed that, in SFG, the same grammatical unit may expound different (meta) functions that correspond to varied clusters of systems. For example, the traditional notion of 'subject' is labeled as Participant in transitivity system and as Theme in thematic structure if they happen to be realized by the same item. Circumstance is an experiential label which can be mapped onto Adjunct, a component in the Mood structure in the interpersonal line of meaning. But in SFG, Adjunct is at the same time a multifunctional concept which also refers to grammatical items beyond the scope of Circumstance (see further discussion below).

In some classic reference grammars, circumstantial elements are discussed with the notion of adverbial or adjunct, which covers a much wider scope [31]; Biber et al., 1999 [17,28]; Greenbaum 1969). Therefore, a review on the previous studies on circumstances will have to exclude numerous items of adjuncts and adverbials in the traditional sense. For instance, interpersonal adjuncts such as *probably* and *reportedly* and textual/conjunctive adjuncts such as *however* and *on the other hand* will not be discussed here. Adverbial clauses (in the sense of [18,31] are analyzed as enhancing dependent clauses in clause complexes in SFG.

The most common types of Circumstance such as location (including time and space), manner, extent, cause, contingency, accompaniment and role have been well investigated under different linguistic disciplines such as traditional grammars [17,31,37], generative grammar (papers in Refs. [1,3], cognitive grammar [8,9], corpus-based approach [9,36] and SFG [12,15] [27] [2].<sup>1</sup>; However, the grammar of the projecting Circumstance has not gained adequate attention in the previous studies on English, not to mention Chinese. This paper is an attempt to conduct a more detailed analysis on the syntax of one type of projecting Circumstance—Angle—in English and Chinese within the framework of SFL. The paper will first probe the peculiar syntactic feature of Angle. Then it will examine some noteworthy syntactic behaviors of Angle in English and Chinese. Finally, the underlying motivations for the syntactic variance of Angle between the two languages will be discussed from the perspective of typological generalization.

## 2. The circumstantial feature of Angle

As mentioned in the beginning, Circumstance, as an experiential unit, is labeled as Adjunct in the interpersonal Mood structure. The two lines of grammatical structures are illustrated below:(Table 2.1).

The analysis above shows that Circumstance can be mapped on Adjunct as in *last year*, but Adjunct does not necessarily correspond to Circumstance as in *to my aunt*. To clear things out ([15]:311, 154–155), definitions of the two concepts are quoted below:

Circumstance: (i) As far as meaning is concerned, we used the expression 'circumstances associated with' or 'attendant on the process', referring to examples such as the location of an event in time or space, its manner, or its cause; and these notions of 'when, where, how and why' the thing happens provided the traditional explanation, by linking circumstances to the four WH forms that were adverbs rather than nouns. (ii) This ties in with the second perspective, that from the clause itself: whereas participants function in the mood grammar as Subject or Complement, circumstances map onto Adjuncts; in other words, they have not got the potential of becoming Subjects, of taking over the modal responsibility for the clause as exchange. (iii) Thirdly, looked at from below, they are typically expressed not as nominal groups but as either adverbial groups or prepositional phrases – mostly the latter, since adverbial groups are largely confined to one type, those of Manner.

Adjunct: An Adjunct is an element that has not got the potential of being Subject; that is, it cannot be elevated to the interpersonal status of modal responsibility. This means that arguments cannot be constructed around those elements that serve as Adjuncts; in experiential terms, they cannot be constructed around circumstances, but they can be constructed around participants, either actually, as Subject, or potentially, as Complement.

At the first glance, Circumstance and Adjunct seem to be two functional labels for the same component in a clause. However, the key distinction lies in the interrelation between the components within one line of functional structure; that is, Circumstance is defined with reference to Process whereas Adjunct to Subject. Furthermore, some adjuncts could not be accounted for experientially because there are plenty of adjuncts having no bearing on Process. Therefore, Adjunct is further divided into modal Adjunct, conjunctive Adjunct and circumstantial Adjunct; only the last type construes Circumstance in experiential meaning. Modal Adjunct refers to items that work within the Mood structure (mood Adjunct) such as *never*, *yet* or realize evaluative meaning (comment Adjunct) such as *fortunately* and *allegedly* while conjunctive Adjunct pertains to textual components such as *however*. It is important to note that, according to [15]; items like *reportedly* are considered as comment Adjunct whereas *according to* is aligned to Circumstance of Angle. It leads to two questions: (i) how is Angle related to Adjunct? In other words, does Angle have an experiential or interpersonal interpretation? (ii) How is Angle syntactically different from other types of Circumstance?

A close examination of the definition of Circumstance suggests that Angle is not really a Circumstance in the strict sense. Semantically, the meaning of Angle is not associated with the Process of the clause but rather extends over the whole 'figure' (the experiential term for a clause, see Ref. [13]. Analyze example (1b) again:

(3)According to government sources, the new peace plan will be discussed on Monday.

The item *according to government sources* is by no means merely related to the Process *be discussed* but rather to the clause as a whole including the Participant *the new peace plan* and the Circumstance *on Monday*. In other words, in contrast with the Circumstance *on Monday* which is associated the Process, *according to government sources*, I suggest, should be defined as a figure-associated Circumstance.

There is syntactic evidence to prove that Angle differs from other types of Circumstance in nature. Following Greenbaum's

<sup>1</sup> Corpus-based methodology plays a central role in SFL as well; see Ref. [33] for works that discuss the connection in detail.

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