

The influence of tense interpretation on discourse coherence — A comparison between Mandarin narrative and report discourse



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Abstract

“Narrative” and “report” are temporal discourse modes that receive different tense interpretations. Adopting Centering Theory as its analytical tool, this article focuses on extended temporal structures in both modes that involve the Mandarin *bei*-passive construction. By tracking the behavior of an attention-focusing element called the *backward-looking center* (Cb), the author demonstrates that narrative and report discourse pattern differently in their strategies for maintaining discourse coherence. These differences are attributed to the divergence in the standard tense interpretation of these two modes: continuity (narrative mode) vs. deixis (report mode). The former tense interpretation maintains discourse coherence in more apparent ways, for example through the use of pronominal forms and the intersentential function of the *bei*-object. The latter tense interpretation produces a comparatively non-compact relation between two adjacent utterances. Deixis does, however, make possible both multiple Cb branching and multiple Cb retention, which together form a “last resort” strategy for preserving the coherence of report discourse.

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1. Introduction

Since at least Partee (1973), it has been known that the interpretation of tense requires contextual information. As Smith (2007: 420) puts it, “the type of text passage in which a sentence appears determines the interpretation of tense in that sentence, and the key factor is the discourse mode of the passage.”

Discourse modes, according to Smith (2001, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2009) and Smith and Erbaugh (2009), are classified into five different types based on the situation and entities they introduce into the discourse as well as their contributions to the text progression; these five types are *narrative*, *report*, *description*, *information*, and *argument*. Among these five modes, narrative, description and report are temporal modes, each of which is governed by a different set of temporal principles. Specifically, the extended temporal reference of each mode is established and maintained in a different way, reflected by the temporal relation between two adjacent sentences within an “extended temporal structure.” The temporal information of one sentence can derive from the temporal interpretation of another, or alternatively, the two sentences can be temporally independent from each other.

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The temporal reference relations in different modes have been very thoroughly analyzed, especially by Smith (2004, 2005, 2007); I will provide an overview of this analysis in section 2. However, it remains unclear how distinctions in tense interpretation among modes of discourse affect discourse structure, including discourse coherence and referential choice. It is my aim in this paper to uncover the concrete impact that different patterns of tense interpretation impose upon the natural discourse of Mandarin Chinese. To this end, I adopt a refined version of Centering Theory, developed by Wuyun (2013) and Wuyun and Pan (2014b), as an analytical tool to assess and present a detailed account of the status of tense interpretation on discourse coherence. By showing differences in *center* transition patterns as well as referential relations among two different discourse modes, namely narrative and report, I demonstrate that tense interpretation exerts a profound impact on discourse organization and discourse coherence. More precisely, I show that continuous interpretation of tense in narrative mode facilitates the maintenance of discourse coherence; conversely, the deictic pattern of tense interpretation found in report mode makes the discourse relationship between two adjacent utterances relatively looser. Thus, the two modes are not equivalent in terms of the extent to which they maintain the discourse-coherence function of *bei*-utterances.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 first shows how extended temporal reference is established and maintained in different temporal discourse modes, specifically narrative and report, following work from Smith (2001, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2009). Then it provides a brief introduction to how temporal information is conveyed in Mandarin Chinese. Section 3 will introduce Centering Theory (CT henceforth), an analytical tool used for calculating the degree of coherence in discourse and measuring the fluency of information flow. In section 4, I adopt the theoretical framework of CT and present a general data analysis of Mandarin narrative and report modes of discourse with *bei*-passives; I illustrate five major differences between these two modes. A thorough discussion concerning the correlation between these differences and certain tense interpretation distinctions will follow. Concluding remarks are presented in section 5.

2. Tense interpretation in narrative and report

2.1. Tense interpretation in temporal modes

The discourse unit I will focus on is termed the “extended temporal structure” by Smith (2009). Usually, an extended temporal structure is a sequence consisting of three to five sentences, in which the temporal information contained in one sentence informs on the temporal interpretation of another (most likely adjacent) sentence. The dependency of one sentence on another is termed the “capture relation.”

According to Smith (2009), a sentence may *demand* capture if it does not establish temporal reference on its own. This situation arises especially in the absence of time adverbials — for instance, in the sentence *She is drinking coffee/She drank some coffee* — or when there is a time adverbial, but it does not establish temporal reference — as for instance with the adverbials *previously*, *afterward*, etc. Alternatively, sentences are *available* for capture if they are able to establish their own time reference in certain contexts. When uttered alone, such sentences are interpreted as anchored to the time of speech; when uttered as part of an extended temporal structure, their time interpretation becomes anchored to the temporal sequence. Examples of sentences available for capture include: (a) *Next Monday the new semester will begin*; (b) *Our first semantics seminar is on Friday. On Friday* in sentence (b) could establish an independent time reference when this sentence is uttered alone; alternatively, it could be anchored to the reference time established by *next Monday* when sentence (b) belongs to the same extended temporal structure with sentence (a).

A third possibility is that a sentence may be *protected* from capture. Deictic temporal expressions *protect* a sentence from capture by anchoring the sentential event explicitly to Speech Time (SpT), i.e. “now”; because of this anchoring, such sentences cannot shift their reference to a time established in another sentence. Thus, these sequences cannot be taken as extended temporal structures. For example: (a) *Every morning Olga makes a pot of coffee.* (b) *She bought some beans yesterday.*

Building on Smith’s (2009) work, I contend that there are actually only two types of temporal reference relations available between adjacent sentences in real discourse — captive and non-captive. It is always possible, in real discourse, to identify the captive relation for a sentence that is *available* for capture; therefore, it is most parsimonious to group sentences that establish contextual time reference into the “captive” subset and those that mandatorily establish time reference in isolation into the “non-captive” subset. As the following discussion will show, a captive relation between two sentences is the key factor that permits different tense interpretations, which in turn play an essential role in determining modes of discourse.

Smith (2009) articulates this dichotomy, too. According to her analysis, tense can be either “absolute” or “relative,” depending on whether it anchors to Situation Time (ST), which is the time of the situation expressed, or to the time established by other temporal expressions. This distinction is relevant not only to the interpretation of verbal tense, but to the interpretation of temporal adverbials as well: deictic temporal adverbials are absolute, and *protect* a sentence from

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