



## Theoretical Pluralism and Empirical Granularity: A Review of the Greater Bay Area Forum on Chinese Grammar

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### Abstract

The Greater Bay Area Forum on Chinese Grammar convened at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) in June 2024. Organized by the T.T. Ng Chinese Language Research Centre of the Institute of Chinese Studies at CUHK and co-organized by the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao University Alliance for Chinese, the Forum gathered regional scholars to showcase the latest linguistic advancements, with a particular emphasis on cross-linguistic and cross-dialectal variations. Integrating synchronic and diachronic perspectives, participants engaged in rigorous academic dialogues on cutting-edge topics in Chinese grammar, fostering a robust scholarly community in the region.

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Regarding the static analysis and dynamic transformation of lexical categories, participants presented novel, multidimensional frameworks. Jingmin Shao and Tao Wang re-examined the conventional static paradigms of nouns, verbs, and adjectives by intensifying the investigation into their dynamic interconnectedness. They argued that these three primary word classes constitute a three-dimensional intersecting continuum within the mental grammar, rather than a linear, one-dimensional continuum. This intersecting network model effectively accounts for the long-standing theoretical dilemmas in classifying overlapping word categories (words exhibiting multiple parts of speech) and facilitates a meticulous examination of unique sub-classes within Chinese, such as “dynamic nouns”, “morphological nouns”, “morphological verbs”, and “dynamic adjectives”. This fine-grained deconstruction of lexical categories was further extended in Jianhua Hu’s investigation into the syntactic properties of Chinese verbs. Hu explored the diachronic evolution of “verb prominence” in Chinese, positing that while both Modern and Archaic Chinese exhibit strong verb prominence, Archaic Chinese possesses significantly more robust verbal characteristics, thereby qualifying more fully as a verb-prominent language. This prominence manifests in two structural dimensions: first, numerous lexical items that are intuitively analyzed by Modern Chinese speakers as nouns, prepositions, or adverbs functioned as full lexical verbs in Archaic Chinese; second, syntactic configurations perceived today as serial-verb or subordinating constructions (including verb-resultative structures) were predominantly coordinate verbal structures in ancient texts. Consequently, the study emphasized that researchers must look beyond the syntactic intuitions from Modern Chinese and conduct fine-grained, micro-level syntactic and semantic analyses based on cross-linguistic typological comparisons to capture the authentic syntactic nature of Archaic Chinese.

Beyond broad syntactic deconstructions, the Forum also focused on the discursive and modal analysis of micro-level lexical items. Chunli Zhao, utilizing the theories of syntax and semantics, presented a stratified investigation into the adverb *gongran* ‘openly/brazenly’ to bridge previous descriptive gaps. By systematically extracting its “defiant-against-reason” discourse association,

the study uncovers a dual opposing modality that contrasts the agent's stance ("self-interest–defiance–arrogance") with the speaker's stance ("righteousness–condemnation–indignation"). Syntactically, this modality restricts *gongran*'s predicate selection strictly to verbs simultaneously manifesting [+autonomy], [+explicitness], and [+violation]. Ultimately, through the validation of both direct speaker statements and implicit inferences, the research establishes discourse distribution as the primary operational unit for revealing this dual opposition.

The underlying generative grammar at the syntax-morphology interface constituted another core theme of the forum. Dun Deng addressed a fundamental debate within theoretical grammar concerning whether words are generated in the lexicon or derived via syntactic operations. Noting that linguistic scholarship in China has traditionally defaulted to the lexicalist view while leaving the syntactic approach largely unexamined, Deng demonstrated the vital importance of the syntactic approach through a case study of the modern Chinese property-denoting reduplicative template *AA*. The analysis revealed that Modern Chinese contains a substantial number of compound words that are generated during the computation of syntactic structures; these forms are structurally dependent on the sentence environment, and their lexical status must be determined by their syntactic configuration. Based on these empirical facts, Deng argued that Modern Chinese exhibits the characteristic of employing characters to construct sentences, generating words within sentences, and leaving no lexical items existing independently outside of sentences, thereby providing a formal validation of the early insights of pioneering Chinese grammarians.

In tandem with the exploration of synchronic structures, the forum incorporated diachronic and micro-level dialectal reconstructions. Huayong Lin and Zifei Wu utilized early missionary records to investigate diachronic changes in the pitch and intonation of spoken Cantonese. Because the Cantonese sentence-final particle (SFP) [a] is a single open vowel and its function is structurally independent of its etymological origin, its pitch variations directly manifest as sentence-final intonation. Analyzing the pitch patterns of SFPs in the 1902 annotated Cantonese textbook *How to Speak Cantonese*, the authors reconstructed the sentence-final intonation system of Cantonese from over a century ago. A comparison with contemporary variants in Guangzhou and Lianjiang dialects revealed that sentence-final intonation in modern Guangzhou Cantonese has undergone a diachronic process of diversification and complexification, wherein diverse tonal configurations have gradually exhibited signs of functional fossilization.

Subsequently, several scholars introduced formal syntactic and semantic tools to refine traditional descriptions of Chinese adjectives, attributive modifiers, and referential structures. Yang Gu and Jie Guo provided a unified theoretical account of the syntactic performance of gradable adjectives, addressing three traditionally disparate issues: the conditions for adjectives acting as predicates, the characteristics of non-predicative (attributive) adjectives ("distinguishing

words”), and the constraints on modification by degree adverbs. The authors argued that these phenomena can be uniformly explained under the Scale Structure Theory. Gradable adjectives map onto a scale range defined by parameters such as sets of degrees for measurement, dimensions of quality, and ordering relations. Specifically, an adjective acting as a predicate must obtain a specific “degree” value or a standard of measurement within its scale structure; non-predicative adjectives cannot serve as predicates because they fail to activate or link to a scale structure; and the distributional restrictions of degree adverbs depend on how the degree values obtained by the adjectives align with the semantic intensity of the adverbs.

Dingxu Shi challenged the traditional dichotomy of restrictive and descriptive attributive modifiers in Chinese grammar. Drawing on Dexi Zhu’s distinction between cohesive structures (*bai zhi* ‘white paper’) and combinative structures (*bai de zhi* ‘paper that is white’, *xuebai de zhi* ‘(literally:) snow-white paper’), Shi analyzed their syntactic-semantic functions. He demonstrated that all these constructions denote a subset within the set of the head noun. Consequently, all Chinese attributives are inherently restrictive, rendering the concept of “descriptive attributive” poorly defined and redundant in formal analysis. Furthermore, Shi questioned the prevailing view that post-posed components (e.g., *Riben yuanzhuang de* in the sentence *Wo gang maile liang che, Riben yuanzhuang de*. ‘I just bought a car, made in Japan.’) are “inverted attributives”; because these components merely describe rather than restrict the noun, borrowing the Indo-European concept of “non-restrictive attributives” to analyze Chinese is problematic.

Haihua Pan went a step further by replacing general semantic descriptions of noun-modifying constructions with formal semantic composition rules. From the perspective of formal syntax and semantics, he re-examined the traditional notions of “self-designation” and “shift-designation”, demonstrating that “self-designation” does not correspond to a natural syntactic class and this pair should be replaced by the distinct syntactic concepts of noun complement clauses and relative clauses. The difference between these two clauses lies in their licensing conditions and compositional mechanisms. Relative clauses require an internal semantic variable to convert a proposition into a one-place predicate, combining with the head noun via Predicate Modification. Conversely, noun complement clauses are licensed by a head noun with the semantic feature [+CONTENT] and of type <t, <e, t>>, undergoing composition via Functional Application. This formal approach resolves long-standing theoretical issues, including the blurred boundaries between “self-designation” and “shift-designation”, internal syntactic heterogeneity, conflicting analyses in existing literature, and the previously unexplained matrix-predicate usage of relative clauses, thereby offering strong explanatory and predictive power.

Alongside these micro-level formal analyses, the forum featured macro-theoretical frameworks on language evolution as well as practical discussions on language policy and standards. Danqing Liu proposed “inventory fusion”, a

process wherein heterogenous elements gradually converge and are eventually processed by native speakers as identical in their mental inventory. Through a systematic investigation of Chinese characters and grammar, Liu demonstrated that this pervasive dynamic phenomenon universally occurs across all linguistic strata, specifically in terms of phonology, orthography, lexicon, morphology, functional words, and syntactic structures. This theoretical framework provides an indispensable diachronic perspective for understanding the typological nature of Chinese grammar.

Finally, from the perspective of sociolinguistic application and the standardization of modern common Chinese, Jie Xu offered a profound revision addressing the ambiguities and one-sidedness of current grammatical standards, based on the philosophy of moderate pluralism for the national common language standard. He proposed replacing the traditional formulation of “taking exemplary modern vernacular writings as the grammatical norm” with “taking Beijing dialect grammar as the foundational grammar”. This foundational role is chiefly reflected in the requirement that regional grammatical formats must maintain a high level of mutual intelligibility with the Beijing dialect. On this basis, he explicitly put forward three core conditions for a dialectal grammatical format to enter the common language: systematicity (compatibility with the existing system), stability (being established by popular usage), and intelligibility (the ability to be naturally and smoothly understood by speakers of the Beijing dialect).

Delivering the closing remarks, Professor Sze-Wing Tang, Director of the CLRC, emphasized that in an era marked by the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence and large language models, foundational research dedicated to a rigorous and fine-grained understanding of the unique characteristics of Chinese grammar remains indispensable. He noted that the successful convening of this Forum has not only catalyzed deep academic cohesion within the Greater Bay Area but has also provided vital theoretical insights and a forward-looking vision for the future development of both teaching and research in Chinese linguistics.

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## 理論的多元闡釋與實證的微觀探討：大灣區漢語語法論壇綜述

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### 提要

“大灣區漢語語法論壇”於2024年6月在香港中文大學舉行。本次論壇由香港中文大學中國文化研究所吳多泰中國語文研究中心主辦，並由粵港澳高校中文聯盟協辦，匯聚了區域內專家學者展示最新語言學研究成果。會議聚焦跨語言與跨方言變異，講者融合歷時與共時視角，就漢語語法的前沿課題展開深入對話，有效推動了區域內學術共同體的建構與交流。