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The Typological Significance of the Chinese Modality Particles

---Abstract---

by

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Studies on modality have most often focused on sentential particles in Chinese. This paper recognizes different levels of modality, where the narrow scope stops at the end of a sentence while the wide scope extends over more than one sentence and even a whole discourse. Qualities like solemnity, seriousness, sadness, distress, happiness, relaxation, elegance and humor---do not only characterize style, but they also qualify for expressions of modality in its broad sense. It is true that sentence-final particles often take the host sentences as their scope and thus many of them are structurally obligatory. Yet many others are grammatically optional and their selection depends largely on the requirement of the stylistic or discourse coherence. Chu (屈承熹 2004, 2006a, 2006b) has correctly identified the relevance functions of some of the modern Chinese utterance-final modality particles and designates the particles as discourse markers. From another perspective, relevance markers are no different than wide-scope modality markers.

Modality in fact is a linguistic universal, but different devices are used for expressing it. In terms of intonation, word order, adverbs, parentheticals and particles, this paper analyzes modality attributes of different languages, noting their universality and uncovering the typological differences of Chinese from those of Indo-European languages. There is a tendency for Chinese to rely on particles for modality. *Mashi Wentong* (1898) concludes that "modality particles are unique to Chinese" on the basis of a comparison of Chinese with Western languages. In fact, of course, modality particles are an important part of the grammars of many Sino-Tibetan languages as well as those of Japanese and Korean.

Chinese particles have undergone tremendously significant changes since the ancient period. The changes have given rise to a string of different forms, the study of which may help resolve problems in typological changes of modality particles in the history of the Chinese language. The particles also reflect the complex variations between Chinese geographical dialects. The study of such variations in the dialectal particles should be able to result in a map of the dialectal typology of those particles.

In view of the uniqueness of the Chinese modality particles, it is plausible to consider Chinese a type of language that has structuralized the concepts of modality.

Key Words: Modality Modality particle Mood Discourse Linguistic universal
Language typology