

Headedness and lexical categories: the case of Sino-Vietnamese compounds

The so-called “Sino-Vietnamese lexicon”, i.e. Chinese loanwords and neologisms built of morphemes borrowed from Chinese in Vietnamese, such as *khoa học* ‘science’ (Chin. 科學 *kēxué*) have received attention in the literature on word-formation and language contact (see e.g. Alves 1999, Bisang 2001), as they reveal interesting structural properties. Chinese and Vietnamese noun phrases, as it is known, display the opposite order of head and modifier: respectively, head-modifier and modifier-head, and this is reflected in nominal compounding (Packard 2000, Ceccagno & Basciano 2007, Nguyen 1997): compare Chin. 汽車 *qìchē* ‘car’, lit. ‘steam/petrol vehicle’, and Viet. *xe jíp* ‘jeep’, lit. ‘car jeep’. One striking feature of Sino-Vietnamese compound nouns is that, for some of them, both orders of head and modifier are attested: *á châu* vs. *châu á* ‘Asia’, compare Chin. 亞洲 *Yàzhōu*, lit. ‘Asia(n) continent’. Whereas for certain pairs the difference in the order is apparently irrelevant, for some other pairs it has been claimed (Bisang 2001) that the native head-modifier order suggests a nominal interpretation for the compound as a whole, whereas the “Chinese” order is present when the word is used as a modifier of another noun: *chủ nghĩa xã hội* (Head-Modifier) ‘Socialism’ vs. *xã hội chủ nghĩa* ‘socialistic, related to socialism’ (compare Chin. 社會主義 *shèhuìzhǔyì*, right-headed). In this talk, we want to assess the above mentioned claim, namely that the order of modifier and head may influence the assignment of a Sino-Vietnamese compound to a certain part of speech; we shall focus on complex words built around the head morpheme *tính* ‘nature’, from Chin. 性 *xìng*. Our hypothesis is that, notwithstanding the categorial indeterminateness which is typical of an isolating languages like Vietnamese (Hagège 2005), the part of speech may belong to the construction according to which the complex word is created (in a *Construction Morphology* framework; Booij 2005, 2007). We shall also analyse Chinese words with 性 *xìng* as a head, showing the flexibility in their syntactic behaviour between a “true” noun and a (non-predicative) adjective.

Selected references

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