



Compte rendu

Grammatica cinese. Le parole vuote del cinese moderno (“Chinese Grammar. Empty words in Modern Chinese”). By ROMAGNOLI CHIARA. Milano: Hoepli, 2012. Pp.296.

“Grammatica cinese. Le parole vuote del cinese moderno” (Chinese Grammar. Empty words in Modern Chinese) is a volume in Italian published in the ‘Collana di Studi Orientali’ (Book series on Oriental Studies), edited by Federico Masini. It deals with the description and use of the principal adverbs, conjunctions, particles and prepositions of Modern Chinese. The book is divided in four chapters, each treating in details a different lexical group. Each chapter has a short introduction that illustrates origin, function, position and classification of the words analyzed in the section. Each term is presented with a brief introduction, and inserted in at least four sentences that exemplify its function and pragmatic use.

In the preface and introduction, the Author justifies the choice of the term ‘empty words’ *xūcí* 虚词 to define the words under examination. Inspired by the influential Lu Shuxiang’s *Hanyu babai ci* (“Eighty words of Modern Chinese”), the Author selected those words that are generally identified as functional words, i.e. words that do not have specific lexical content, but have a pure grammatical function, such as secondary words, auxiliaries, link words, discourse connectors, discourse items, logical signs. Notably, Chinese is often regarded as an analytic language, in the sense that it lacks flecnal morphology, like conjugations and declinations. In Chinese, the linking between words, or, more technically, the expression of syntactic relations among constituents, modality, time and aspect, is given by words that have a merely grammatical meaning. In addition to the common linguistic definition of such words as functional, the Author follows the traditional Chinese terminology designing them as ‘empty words’ in opposition to ‘full words’ *shící* 实词. On the one hand, a ‘full word’ is endowed with lexical content; it denotes things, events, properties, like nouns or verbs; it presents the semantic material for building the lexical meaning, and can be substituted by another ‘full word’ of the same paradigmatic quality in the formal structure. On the other hand, an ‘empty word’ cannot be an independent sentence member, has generally a quite fixed position in the sentence, and it is a part of a closed group, composed by a limited number of elements. Following some Chinese literature on functional words, the Author also makes a further distinction among empty words, proposing that adverbs are actually ‘semi-empty words’ *bànshící* 半实词 (Wang Li, 1985) since,

differently from prepositions, conjunctions, and particles, their lexical meaning can be individuated (for studies on the classification of words in Chinese, see Ma 1989, Lü 1999, Chao 1968, Packard 2000, among others).

Despite the title of the book, the largest chapter is indeed on 'semi-empty words', the adverbs. The Author introduces the most common properties of Chinese adverbs. She briefly discusses their common positions, functions, ordering restrictions, the fact that they cannot be used in isolation, and their potential different morphological variants, such as reduplication. The Author, pointing out that the classification of different adverbs is still a much debated issue, mentions some of the most notable Chinese studies on this topic. She concludes that the categories generally recognized by all the scholars are those individuated by Zhu Dexi (1982), which are mainly four: time, quantificational, degree and negation adverbs. To this basic set, it is possible to add frequency, manner, modals, locative adverbs and interrogatives. As mentioned above, the subdivision of adverbs is a long-standing topic in literature, however, the Author wisely makes a precise choice following Zhu Dexi's classification for the reader's convenience. Each adverb is systematically and schematically analyzed, sometimes with tables that summarize all the meanings, with their related examples. Interestingly, where relevant, the Author also points out some properties and the impact of different possible prosodies on the pragmatic and the interpretation of an adverb.

The second chapter deals with prepositions. In the introduction, firstly the Author mentions the three main functions of a prepositional phrase: verbal and nominal modifiers and verbal complement. Secondly, she gives a list of the types of elements introduced by prepositions and aspectual particles that can follow them.

The third chapter is on conjunctions and presents an handy table that illustrates a classification of the conjunctions on the basis of their typology, word and sentence phrase they can connect, and the constructions where they can appear.

The fourth and last chapter deals with particles. The Author remarks that particles consist of the word class characterized by "the highest degree of emptiness". This is due to the fact that particles lack lexical meaning, syntactic autonomy and intonational contour (they are pronounced with neutral tone). According to the traditional classification in the literature on the didactic of Chinese, the Author states that Chinese particles can be subdivided in three groups: structural *jiégòu zhùcí* 结构助词, aspectual *dòngtài zhùcí* 动态组词, and modal *yǔqì zhùcí* 语气助词. The structural particles appear immediately on the left or right of nominal or verbal phrase, and set the syntactic relations between elements in a sentence; the aspectual particles are located right after the verb; the modal ones at the end of the sentence and give a particular modal force to the interpretation of the clause.

"Grammatica cinese. Le parole vuote del cinese moderno" is a reference book, that can be used also by readers that do not read Italian: for each words, in fact, the Author presents several examples in which the word under analysis can appear,

clarifying its use and meaning. Unfortunately, the book cannot be a substitution to a regular grammar, but it is an extremely useful tool to integrate the study of Chinese in understanding the functional words in a deeper detail.

The book is very well structured. The terms are singularly illustrated in an extremely schematic way, organized in alphabetic order, and inserted in many examples to better illustrate each construction, which makes the book very easy and convenient to consult. Interestingly, the Author also proposes some contrastive analyses between words with similar meaning through several references within the book, and highlights synonymous that are differently used in distinct sociolinguistic contexts, in spoken or written language. Such a comparative aspect of the book is very useful to clarify the various interpretations and usages of Chinese functional words, whose differences may be difficult to understand and use for students that are still not very well trained in spoken Chinese. It is very interesting to note that the sources of most of the examples in the book are from literature written in Chinese, in particular Chinese grammars, contemporary fictions, and journal articles. This aspect gives to the reader the opportunity to have direct experience of the usage of functional words in an every-day examples of spoken language.

The book is addressed above all to learners with an intermediate and advanced level of knowledge of the Chinese language that know the writing system and at least the basic syntactic structures. This is mainly due to the fact that examples are proposed with pinyin and translation, but without glosses corresponding to each word of the sentence. However, the book can be easily used by learners with lower levels of knowledge of Chinese as a sort of essential dictionary for the most frequent functional words. Importantly, the book is a useful tool for students that are planning to take the *Hanyu shuiping kaoshi* HSK (Chinese Proficiency Exam), since many words discussed correspond to the HSK's different levels (from 1 to 6). Finally, the Author highlights some critical and still debated points on Chinese functional words, which can be used as research topics to be further investigated by students interested in Chinese Linguistics.

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