The semantics of Sibe and Mongolian temporal *only* words in a contrastive perspective

temporal *only*; progression; comparative analysis; Sibe; Mongolian

In this presentation we compare the semantics of temporal *only* words (Neeleman & van det Koot 2022) in three eastern Asian languages (Mandarin *cái*, Sibe *=sini*, and Khalkha Mongolian *döngöj)* and three standard average European languages (German *erst*, Dutch *pas* and Czech *teprve*). We focus on Sibe and (Khalkha) Mongolian, languages where the studied phenomenon has not been scrutinized so far. In a contrastive perspective of three European and one contact language, the aim of this study is to investigate intriguing similarities and contrasts in usage of temporal *only* words in these two languages of East Asia and to refine concepts for further cross-linguistic comparison.

Data: For Sibe, we use a sample of transcribed texts (ca. 33,000 words) supplemented by other datasets, collected during fieldwork and consultations with native speakers. For Mongolian, transcribed texts at The Oral History of Twentieth Century Mongolia are used in addition to consultations with native speakers. For the rest of the languages, we rely mainly on published data: German (König 1979, 1991), Dutch (Neeleman & van der Koot 2022, Mandarin (Hole 2004, Lai 1999, among others, in addition to consultations) and we use selective data from public corpora, especially for Czech (Intercorp, using a Treq application), to support our analyses.

Analyses: We examine several semantic features that have been stated in the literature, namely progression semantics (low degree of progress) and presence of a particle with an opposite high progress meaning ('already'); two basic uses paraphrased as 'not until' (1) and 'no later/no more than' (2) (König 1979, 1991, Neeleman & van der Koot 2022), and three semantic properties we consider derived uses of temporal *only* words: scalar evaluative use (3) (cf. Hole 2015), conditional use (4), and emphatic use (5) (cf. Lai 1999, Hole 2004). The relevance of all these features to cross-linguistic research (ie. their usability as comparative concepts) is examined.

Preliminary results: As a defining feature, temporal *only* words in all the examined languages have progression semantics. However, Mongolian situation is slightly more complicated with the temporal *only* meaning being distributed among three expressions, and an 'already' word being absent. Of the two basic uses, the 'not until' use is present in all the languages while the 'no later/no more than' use is not found in Sibe, which may be explained by the scope restriction of *=sini* (cf. König 1979:157).

The derived uses of temporal *only* words are shared by some of the examined languages: (i) a scalar evaluative use is found in Mandarin and Mongolian but not in the European languages and, more surprisingly, also not in Sibe; (ii) an emphatic use (mostly reference to a high degree of a quality) is present in all the examined languages; (iii) a conditional use (necessary condition) is shared by Mandarin and Sibe.

In the conclusion we will sketch a simple semantic map of temporal *only* words on the basis of the investigated languages and show their potential for further cross-linguistic research.

Examples:

(1) (Dutch)

Jan	*arriveerde*	*pas*	*op*	*ZONDAG.*
John	arrived	ONLY_{T}	on	Sunday

'John only arrived on Sunday.'

(2) (German)

Es	*ist*	*erst*	*10*	*Uhr.*
It	is	ONLY_{T}	ten	o'clock

'It's only ten o'clock.' (König 1979:151)

(3) (Mongolian)

bi	*döngöj*	*zuun*	*tögrög-tei*
1s	ONLY_{T}	hundred	tugrik-COM

'I only have as little as a hundred tugriks.'

(4) **(**Sibe)

Ambu	*goni-me*	*=sini*	*am*	*bait*	*isikia-m*	*mutu-m*
big	think-CVB	ONLY_{T}	big	matter	do-CVB	be.able-NPST

'Only if thinking without restrictions (literally 'thinking big') you can do great things.'

(5) (Czech)

to	*je*	*teprve*	*zábava*
this	is,	ONLY_{T}	fun

'(Of all kinds of entertainment) this is a true fun!'

Resources:

Intercorp: Rosen, Alexandr – Vavřín, Martin – Zasina, Adrian Jan. *Corpus InterCorp, version 15, 11 November 2022*. FF UK, Prague 2022. https://kontext.korpus.cz.

The Oral History of Twentieth Century Mongolia: Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit Department of Social Anthropology. University of Cambridge. Accessed 2025-03-10. https://amantuuh.socanth.cam.ac.uk/pages/home.php.

Treq: Vavřín, Martin & Rosen, Alexandr. Treq. FF UK. Praha 2015. http://treq.korpus.cz.

References:

Hole, Daniel. 2004. *Focus and background marking in Mandarin Chinese*. London & New York: RoutledgeCurzon.

Hole, Daniel. 2015. A distributed syntax for evaluative 'only' sentences in German. *Zeitschrift für Sprachwissenschaft* 2015; 34(1): 43–77

König, Ekkehard. 1991. *The Meaning of Focus Particles: A Comparative Perspective.* London: Routledge.

König, Ekkehard. 1979. A semantic analysis of German "erst". In *Semantics from different points of view,*eds. Rainer Bäuerle, Urs Egli, and Arnim von Stechow, 148–160. Berlin: Springer.

Lai, Huei-ling. 1999. Rejected expectations: the scalar particles cai and jiu in Mandarin Chinese. *Linguistics* 37(4): 625-661.

Neeleman, A., van de Koot, H. The interpretation and distribution of temporal focus particles. *Nat Lang Linguist Theory* 40, 793–835 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11049-021-09526-x