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A Functional Study of Lexical Conversion within Modern Chinese Nominal Group

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Abstract

The phenomenon of lexical conversion within modern Chinese nominal group is often presented in ancient Chinese grammar. For many years, there have been earnest discussions in China about how we can better study the Chinese nominal group from alternative dimensions, e.g. cognition, pragmatics, multi-category words, word-class shift as well as functional perspective, but few pay attention to the lexical conversion from perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). As the SFL itself is "a problem-oriented theory" (Huang, 2006), to apply this theory to explain some certain language phenomena merits serious consideration. This paper is based on the Cardiff Grammar, an important model of SFL and the purpose is to explore the semantic and syntactic function in lexical conversion within modern Chinese nominal group. Through the contrastive study in light of the Cardiff Grammar, the Chinese nominal group can be functionally used as a Main Verb, a Main Verb Extension (MEx) and a prepositional group (pgp).

Keywords: Systemic Functional Linguistics, the Cardiff Grammar, modern Chinese nominal group, lexical conversion, Main Verb, Main Verb Extension, prepositional group

1. Introduction

Halliday (1988) has put forward that "we live in an age of growth, in which every day more and more things come into our lives; and things, and all their parts, need names. So more and more words come in with them-new words, or new ways of exploiting, embellishing and combining the old ones; and in this way the balance is maintained". Not only do the things need new names, but also the functions of some certain words are changing, the Chinese nouns for instance. For years, the lexical conversion of Chinese nominal group has drawn public attention of linguists. Most Chinese scholars study Chinese nominal group from the point of cognition (such as Shen, 2010; Gao, 2008), and some from the aspect of pragmatics (such as Gao & Xu, 2000); some hold that the certain Chinese characters are multi-category words, normally referring to nouns and verbs (such as Liu et al., 2004, pp. 168-170; Hu, 2006; Lv, 1979, p. 36); some regard the lexical conversion as a word-class shift (such as Wang, 1989), and others study from the functional perspective (such as Zhang & Fang, 1996, pp. 203-217; He & Hong, 2014). However, there are limited studies about the lexical conversion of Chinese nominal group from the perspective of SFL, precisely the Cardiff Grammar, a model of SFL. The discussion is mainly carried out from two fields: nominal group used as the Main Verb (sometimes the Main Verb Extension) and as the preposition. Interestingly, it is not proper to use the term "verb", "preposition" or "adjective", because these is no word class in the Cardiff Grammar. Instead, we should re-express: nominal group used as the Main Verb (sometimes used as the MEx) and as the prepositional group.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Categories of the Cardiff Grammar

The Cardiff Grammar, as one of the two most important models of SFL (the other is the Sydney model), is a "function-oriented, multifunction-oriented and meaning-oriented linguistics" (Huang, 2007). Fawcett, the founder of the Cardiff Grammar, attributes the fundamental categories in the theory to class of UNIT, ELEMENT of structure, PLACE and ITEM, which can be illustrated by Figure 1 below:

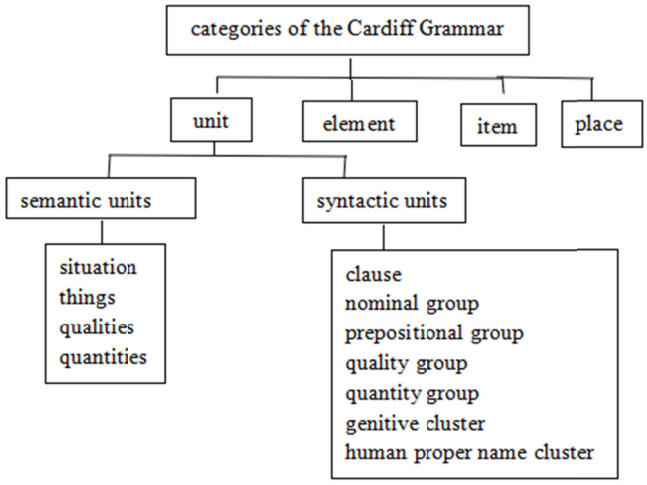

Figure 1. The categories of the Cardiff Grammar

In Figure 1, we find that the units within the Cardiff Grammar exclude verbal group. Fawcett (2008, p. 49) provides a convincing argument that "the concept of "verbal group" in the Sydney Grammar is a hindrance to understanding the nature of English syntax rather than aid". Therefore, he simply cancels the concept of "verbal group" and gets the Main Verb altered into the level of element, which is also "a simplification of the Sydney Grammar" (He & Zhang, 2008, pp. 56-69). In the Cardiff Grammar, there is no word class but provides a new term: ITEM. Item includes both "word" (in its traditional sense) and "morpheme" (Fawcett, 2000, p. 226), and item can be directly demonstrated at the level of form.

For the subject of this paper is about "lexical conversion", a relevant but important concept should be introduced: incongruence. Fawcett (2000, p. 210) mentions that if an event in the belief system is mapped onto a situation in the semantics (which will in turn be mapped onto a clause in the syntax at the level of form), the relationship between the "event" and the "clause" is said to be congruently- a term introduced by Halliday (1970, p. 149). However, an event can be incongruently realized by a nominal group, i.e., when "nominalization" takes place. See Figure 2 below:

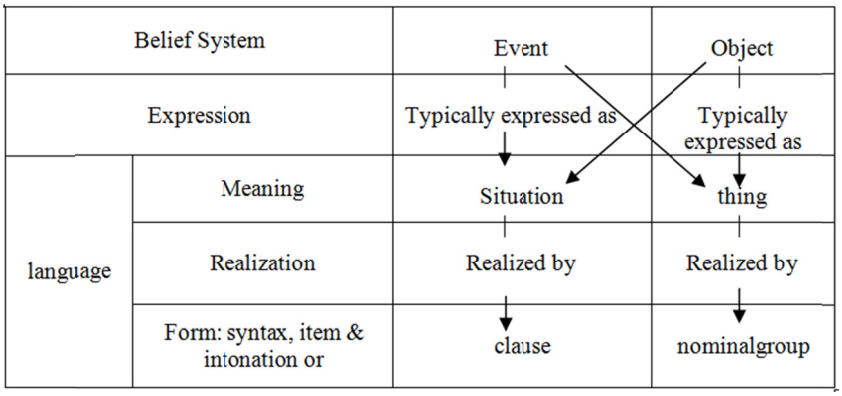

Figure 2. The relationship of logical form to semantics and syntax (Fawcett, 2000, p. 210)

2.1.1 Elements of the Nominal Group (ngp)

Elements of a typical nominal group in the Cardiff Grammar are head (*h* for short, which is an obligatory element), modifier (*m* for short, including the meaning of affective, dimension, epithet, age, colour, provenance and material), determiner (*d* for short, which can be divided into deictic determiner (dd), superlative determiner (sd), ordinative determiner (od), quantifying determiner (qd), fractionative determiner (fd), partitive determiner (pd), representational determiner (rd), typic determiner (td), qualifier-introducing determiner (qid), etc.) and qualifier (*q* for short, usually the postmodifier placed behind the head). In addition, there is also an important

relationship-SELECTION, which is realized by the element SELECTOR (usually the word *of*):

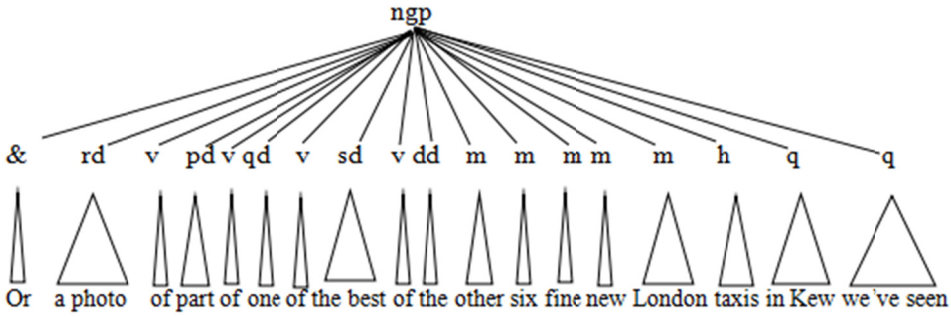

Figure 3. elements of a standard nominal group (Fawcett, 2008, p. 251)

Key. ngp= nominal group; h= head; dd= deictic determiner; &= Linker; rd=representational determiner; v=selector; pd= partitive determiner; qd= quantifying determiner; sd= superlative determiner; m= modifier; q= qualifier

Usually, a ngp can fill the Subject (S), Complement (C) and occasionally Adjunct (A) of a clause (Fawcett, forthcoming a). For instance, in *Last month, Mr Black went to London*, the ngp *last month* is A and the ngp *Mr Black* is S, while the ngp *London* is C. A ngp can also fill the completive (cv) in a prepositional group, such as *up on the mountain*. Moreover, a ngp can fill the elements of another ngp, such as *rd*, *pd*, *fd*, *qd*, *m*, etc. Furthermore, a ngp can fill *a degree temper (dt)* in a quality group (qlgp), such as *two meters wide*. When a ngp is a cardinal number, it is at amount (am) in a quantity group (qtgp), such as *one hundred and twenty*.

2.1.2 Elements of the Prepositional Group (pgp)

A typical prepositional group in the Cardiff Grammar includes the elements of preposition (*p* for short, an essential element), completive (*cv* for short) and prepositional temper (*pt* for short, an occasional element, which is usually preceded the preposition). Most prepositions express a meaning of minor relationship (Fawcett, forthcoming a, Chapter 21):

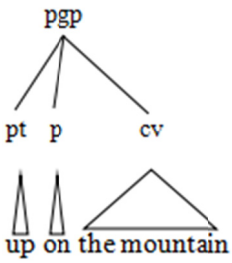

Figure 4. Elements of a standard prepositional group (Fawcett, 2008, p. 251)

Key. pgp= prepositional group; pt= prepositional temper; p= preposition; cv=completive.

A pgp may fill C, A, MEx, XEx and S of a clause, such as *I want to go to school*, *The phone rang at two in the morning*, *She fell in love with me*. It may fill *q* in a ngp, such as *the girl in blue*. Rarely, it fills a *cv* in a pgp, such as *from behind the door*. Besides, it can also fill *scope (s)* and *finisher (f)* in a qlgp, such as *good at chess*, *more intelligent than her*. Last, it may fill a *quantity group finisher (qtf)* in a qtgp, such as *more than two student*.

2.2 The Relationships between the Categories within the Cardiff Grammar

Fawcett (2000, pp. 193-272; 2008, pp. 75-77) outlines four relationships in the Cardiff Grammar: componence, filling, exponence and conflation:

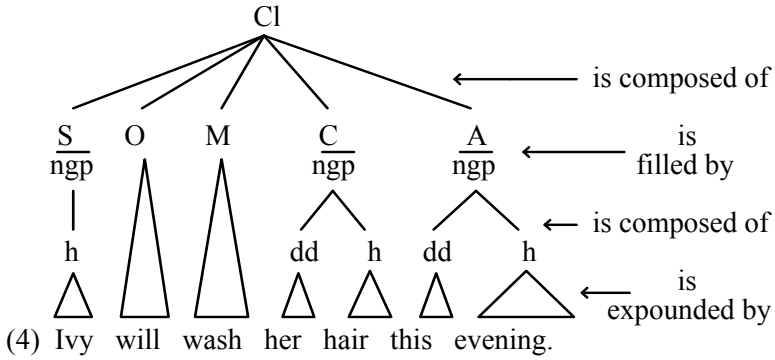

Figure 5. The basic relationships of syntax (Fawcett, 2008, p. 75)

Key. "/|\"= componence; "—"= filling; "Δ"= exponence; Cl= Clause; S= Subject; O=Operator; M= Main Verb; C= Complement; A= Adjunct; ngp=nominal group; h= head; dd= deictic determiner.

Here, Cl, S, O, M, C and A are the elements of the clause, while *dd* and *h* are the elements of the group (exactly a nominal group). And every word in the clause *Ivy wash her hair this evening* is respectively item. The analysis above is performed in English. So from Figure 5, we can see: a unit can be composed of one or more elements (such as the nominal group *this evening* is composed by dd *this* and h *evening*); some elements are directly expounded by items (such as the head of nominal group is directly expounded by *Ivy*); other elements are filled by a unit (such as the elements S, C and A are respectively filled by the nominal group *Ivy*, *her hair* and *this evening*). Particularly, it is worth mentioning that this kind of analysis can also be applied to Chinese clauses, such as the analysis of two Chinese clauses *Wo shi xuesheng 我是学生* (*I am a student*) and *Wo qu Beijing 我去北京* (*I go to Beijing*):

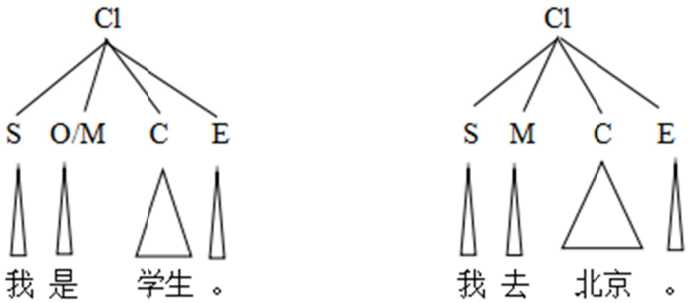

Figure 6. The instance of two Chinese clauses

Key. Cl= Clause; S= Subject; O=Operator; M= Main Verb; C= Complement; E=Ender.

In clause *Wo shi xuesheng 我是学生* (*I am a student*), the S is filled by a nominal group with only one element-the head "wo 我" (which means *I* in English), and the C is also filled by a nominal group with only one element-the head "xuesheng 学生" (which means *student* in English). This is the same to the second Chinese clause in Figure 6.

3. The Lexical Conversion of Modern Chinese Nominal Group

3.1 Division of Chinese Word Category

Different from the Indo-European languages, the word category in Chinese language is not relatively fixed. For instance, it is odd to use a noun as a M or to use a noun to modify another noun in English, but it is common in spoken or written Chinese texts, no matter in ancient Chinese or modern Chinese. According to Ma (1898), there is no fixed meaning of one Chinese character. Therefore, there is no fixed word class. However, in accordance with Gao (1986), there is absolutely no word class within Chinese notional word.

3.2 The Verbalization of Chinese Nominal Group

Here are some examples:

(1) Wo ye lai shunv yixia 我也来淑女一下 (Let me pretend to be a lady too)。

(2) Wo ye dakuan guo yihui 我也大款过一回 (I used to be a wealthy man)。

(3) Ta dang guo banzhuren 他当过班主任，dan zhi zhuren le yige ban 但只主任了一个班 (He used to be a head teacher of only one class)。Shen (2010).

In these three examples, shunv 淑女 (a kind lady), dakuan 大款 (a wealthy person) and zhuren 主任 (a teacher in charge of a class) are all nouns (precisely nominal groups and each of which only has a head, except shunv 淑女) as far as their original meaning concerned. Therefore, these three Chinese nominal groups can be illustrated by the tree diagram (in Figure 7) in the framework of the Cardiff Grammar:

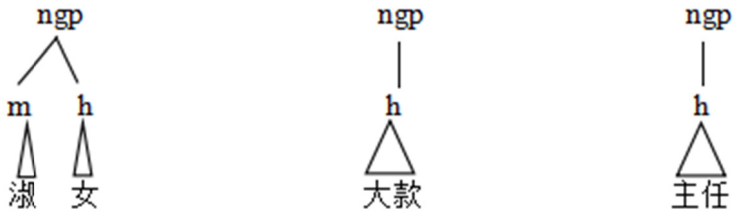

Figure 7. A systemic functional analysis of the Chinese nominal groups in example (1) to (3)

Key. ngp= nominal group; m= modifier; h= head.

Note. You may be aware that all these three nominal groups have two Chinese characters, but with the first one analyzed by the form of modifier plus head. First of all, shunv 淑女 is composed by two elements *shu 淑 (kind)* and *nv 女 (lady)* horizontally. And then, the relationship between each other is modified, which means the quality that this lady possesses is *shu 淑 (kindness)*. However, the second and the third nominal groups differ from the first one in terms of their internal structures. Despite that dakuan 大款 as well as zhuren 主任 is each composed by two Chinese characters, they together express one complete meaning without modified relation.

However, if the above three examples are attributed to nominal groups, the clauses are grammatically false. According to Fawcett (forthcoming a), a normal clause has just one M, and sometimes has a MEx which helps the M express a whole process. From the comprehension of the whole clause, we can infer that shunv 淑女, dakuan 大款 and zhuren 主任 function as M or MEx (to be a lady, to be a wealthy person and to be a teacher in charge of a class), though they are nouns morphologically.

The M at the level of semantics is called process, and Fawcett (forthcoming a) regarded the process as: action process, relational process, mental process, environmental process, influential process and event- relating process. What is more, there is a special process called reified process, which is expressed "not through the M but through the MEx- and here it is presented as a "thing" realized by a nominal group" (Fawcett, forthcoming b). For example:

(4) Ivy gave [Pro] him a kiss [PrEx]. (Fawcett, forthcoming b)

Fawcett (forthcoming b) also summarizes the characteristic of this kind of process: sometimes it can be an expansion in its internal structures and meanings as if it were a "thing" (a "reified event"). Such as "a kiss" in (4), is a MEx. The MEx has this name because "it functions as an "extension" of the Main Verb (M), so that the two elements JOINTLY express a Process" (Fawcett, 2008, p. 184). In other words, *gave* is not enough to express the whole meaning except adding *a kiss*. Among the Chinese clauses, we find a similar principle at work. In example (1), *lai 来* is the M of this clause, and *shunv 淑女* is reasonably a MEx. Furthermore, the MEx *shunv 淑女* also plays a role of "reified event":

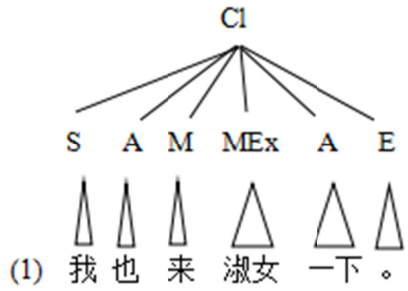

Figure 8. A systemic functional analysis of verbalization of example (1)

Key. Cl= Clause; S= Subject; M= Main Verb; MEx= Main Verb Extension; A= Adjunct; E= Ender.
Note. In Figure 8, "wo 我" (I) is the S; "ye 也" (too) is the A; "lai 来" (to be) is the M; "shunv 淑女" (a kind lady) is the MEx; "yixia 一下" (once) is also the A.

Example (2) is different from (1) at the level of form, because it does not have an obvious M. In section 2.1, we have introduced a concept of incongruence and a table of the relationship of logical form to semantics and syntax, but here we have to make a change:

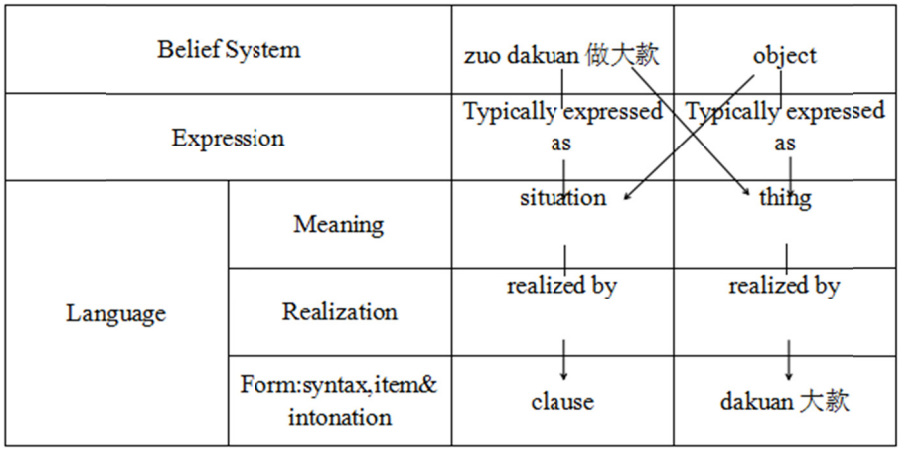

Figure 9. A systemic functional analysis of verbalization of *dakuan 大款*

Here, we find obvious differences between the grammar of Chinese and the grammar of English. When English language expresses a meaning of polarity, tense and modality, it has the Operator (O) to "help" the M, while Chinese does not. In Chinese, "tense is specified by three particles added to the verb: le 了, guo 过, laizh 来着, all of which have a past meaning" (Halliday & Ellis, 1951). Nonetheless, there are some marked words in Chinese such as "bu 不" (a negation word) expressing the meaning of polarity and the word "guo 过" (used to) expressing the meaning of tense (past tense), etc. Although these marked words function as O, the usage of them is not the same as O in English. O in English sentence can be moved to the beginning to exhibit an interrogative meaning, but Chinese does not. Chinese Grammar has its own system to express an interrogative meaning. Yet, common sense tells us that "dakuan 大款" is considered to be an M. This is because a normal clause (other than an exclamatory sentence in tradition) should have an M, and this M is a kind of nominalization. We also notice that although an event is incongruently realized by a nominal group in the way of nominalization, the English clause has an obvious M, such as *was* in *His observation on the bee's behavior was careful*. However, the Chinese "nominalization" word is directly used as an M, and this is exactly the lexical conversion of a nominal group in Chinese, and example (2) can be shown in a tree diagram in the following Figure 10:

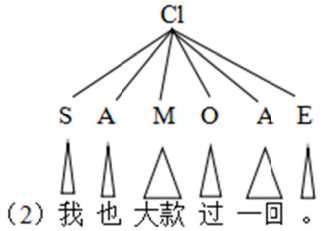

Figure 10. A systemic functional analysis of verbalization of example (2)

Key. Cl= Clause; S= Subject; M= Main Verb; O= Operator; A= Adjunct; E= Ender.

Example (3) is more or less similar to (2), with the second “zhuren 主任” as an M. “zhuren 主任” here means to be a teacher in charge of only one class:

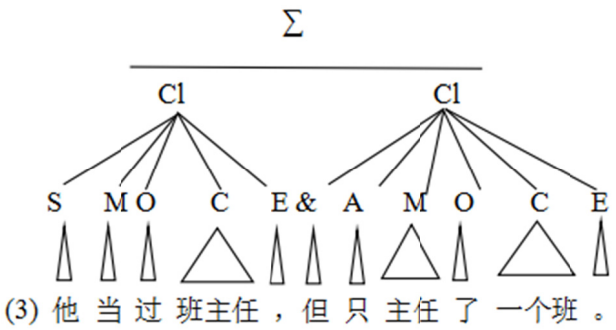

Figure 11. A systemic functional analysis of verbalization of example (3)

Key. Cl= Clause; S= Subject; M= Main Verb; O= Operator; A= Adjunct; E= Ender; C= Complement; ∑= Sentence.

3.3 Chinese Nominal Group Used as a Prepositional Group

In ancient Chinese, the noun is frequently used as Adjunct (A), with the form of a noun preceding verbs or adjectives. Yet, modern Chinese nouns barely deal with the noun as A (except the nouns expressing the meaning of time and location), because it breaks the grammatical rules. As for this phenomenon, some Chinese linguists classify it as the noun used as adverb, such as illustrated by Ma (1898). Some consider it as a word-class shift (see Wang, 1962). In addition, some even hold that the noun cannot be A at all (Zhu, 1982, p. 141).

In English, there are some nouns preceding verbs or adjectives too. For example:

(1) A short circuit will result when current-carrying wires touch each other.

(2) The schematic of a pressure reducing valve is shown in Fig 4.

(3) The load-bearing internal walls are cast from reinforced concrete, generally about 6in in thickness.

(4) This instrument should always be kept dust-free. ——Wang (1987).

Such usage of the nouns above usually expresses the meaning of time, place, manner, degree, etc. According to Fawcett (2000, p. 264), the complexity of language is in part caused by the recursion of embedding, and “this occurs when a unit fills an element of the same class of unit- and also, in a looser sense, when a unit of the same class occurs above it in the tree structure”.

In the Cardiff Grammar, a prepositional group typically contains a preposition (p) and a completive (cv). What is more, due to the embedding and filling occurrence, the internal structure of language can be relatively complex (but this is an advantage to demonstrate some language phenomena that cannot be cleared in traditional grammar):

(5) Zanmen Beijing jian 咱们北京见 (See you in Beijing)。

(6) Zanmen dianhua lianxi 咱们电话联系 (Let’s connect by phone)。

(7) Ta chang shijian juzhu zaiBeijing 他长时间居住在北京 (He lived in Beijing for a long time)。

In (5) *Zanmen Beijing jian* 咱们北京见 (which means *See you in Beijing*), the Chinese nominal group Beijing 北京(only have a head) is a cv of the prepositional group (zai Beijing 在北京 in Beijing) in which the p zai 在 (in) is covert, and this is the same with (6) and (7):

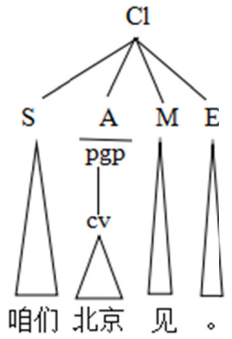

Figure 12. A systemic functional analysis of example (5)

Key: Cl= Clause; S= Subject; M= Main Verb; A= Adjunct; E= Ender.

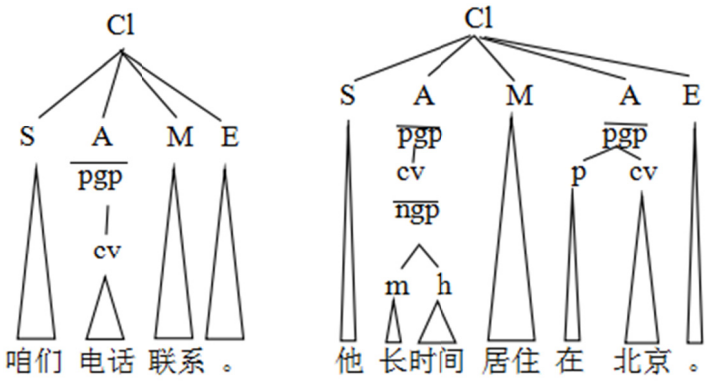

Figure 13. A systemic functional analysis of example (6) and (7)

Key. Cl= Clause; S= Subject; M= Main Verb; A= Adjunct; E= Ender.

4. Conclusions

This paper is a new attempt of functional syntactic analysis which is to explore the semantics and syntactic function of the phenomena in lexical conversion within modern Chinese nominal group. On the one hand, the study further indicates that SFL is a general linguistic theory, just like Huang (2007) has put forward. It proves that the SFL can be applied to other different languages (at least Chinese) besides English. This makes it feasible to study Russian, German, French, Japanese, and even Sanskrit, etc., which gives enough research space for the successors. Last but not least, the study shows that the Chinese nominal group can be functionally used as M, sometimes MEx (as illustrated in section 3.2) and even a pgp, and the research findings can be demonstrated as the following Figure 14:

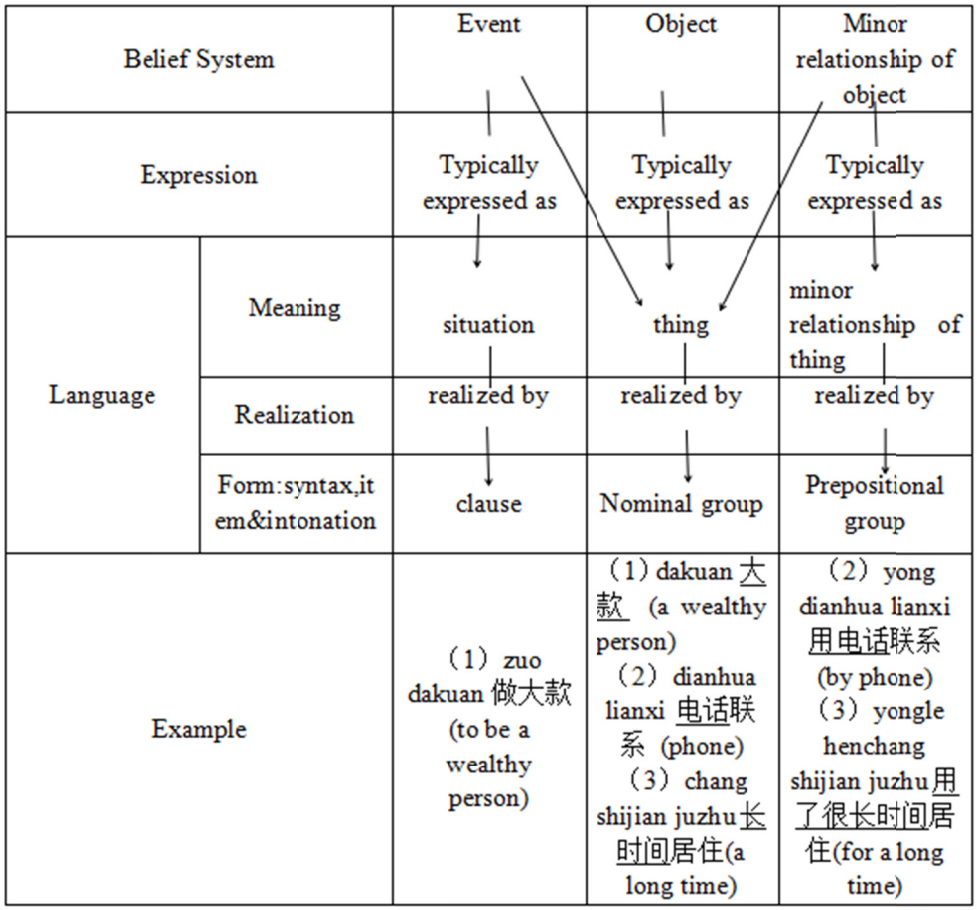

Figure 14. A summary of lexical conversion within Chinese nominal group

Notes. 1. The event "zuo dakuan 做大款" in the belief system is supposed to be mapped onto a situation in the semantics- TO BE A WEALTHY MAN, which will in turn be mapped onto a clause in the syntax at the level of form by three Chinese characters "zuo 做", "da 大", "kuan 款", but it is incongruently realized by a nominal group "dakuan 大款" (a wealthy man). 2. The minor relationship of object ("yong dianhua 用电话"; "yongle henchang shijian 用了很长时间") in the belief system is supposed to be mapped onto a situation in the semantics- BY PHONE and FOR A LONG TIME, which will in turn be mapped onto a clause in the syntax at the level of form by three Chinese characters "yong 用", "dian 电", "hua 话" for the former one, and by six Chinese characters "yong 用", "le 了", "hen 很", "chang 长", "shi 时", "jian 间" for the latter one, but it incongruently realized by a nominal group "dianhua 电话" (phone) and "henchang shijian 很长时间" (a long time).

Acknowledgments

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