

# The time orientation of *qian* 'front' and *hou* 'back' in Chinese: A Corpus-based Behavioral Profile Analysis

Shuqiong, Wu

Sichuan International Studies University

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The Chinese spatial terms *qian* 'front' and *hou* 'back' can be used to indicate the past as well as the future. Previous studies have provided many accounts of their contradictory usage, but very few corpus-based studies have been conducted to examine their usage in authentic data. Based on the corpus data and adopting a behavioral profile approach (Gries and Divjak 2009; Gries 2010), this study examines their time orientation in actual usage. The following three questions were addressed: (1) What is the time orientation of *qian* and *hou* in Chinese? (2) Is the time orientation of *qian* and *hou* correlated with the constructions in which they occur? If so, how are they correlated? (3) What are the motivations underlying the time orientation of *qian* and *hou* in actual usage?

The corpus analysis yields the following findings. First, the primary temporal meaning of *qian* and *hou* is indicating time sequence, with *qian* meaning 'earlier' and *hou* meaning 'later'. Second, Chinese speakers tend to conceptualize the future as being ahead of them and the past behind them. Their contradictory usage of *qian* and *hou* arises from the lack of a distinction between Ego-Reference-Point and Time-Reference-Point. Third, *qian* and *hou* are used mainly in five constructions as temporal words: *qian/hou*+X, X+*qian/hou*, prep+*qian/hou*+V(P), *qian/hou*, and fixed expressions. The constructional profiles reveal that their time orientation correlates with the constructions in which they occur. Based on the corpus results, this study also addresses the motivations underlying their time orientation in various constructions and argue that their time orientation stems from an interplay of temporal metaphors, the constructions in which they occur, and context.

Different from the previous qualitative and experimental studies, this corpus-based study demonstrates that Chinese speakers conceptualize the future as being ahead of them with the past behind them and construe the earlier times in front of the later times in the temporal sequence. It presents the first corpus evidence for Yu's (2012) view that the metaphorical orientation of time in Chinese is realized by the pair of conceptual metaphors FUTURE IS IN FRONT OF EGO and PAST IS BEHIND EGO. Moreover, based on corpus data, this study shows that the Time-RP metaphor plays a more important role than the Ego-RP in the time orientation of *qian* and *hou*. In addition, by adopting a corpus-based behavioral profile approach, this study suggests that speakers' metaphorical representations of time are shaped by a multitude of factors rather than single space-to-time mappings.

## References

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