

German-Chinese Contrastive Analysis: Research Status and Prospects

This article presents a comprehensive review and assessment of the current state of research in German-Chinese contrastive analysis, which frequently encompasses elements pertinent to foreign language acquisition. The aim is to illustrate the substantial contributions made across various sub-disciplines of linguistics in both German and Chinese academic contexts as well as potentially within the research communities of other languages. Furthermore, this article reflects on previous research initiatives and provides insights into research prospects, particularly in relation to language policy and the advancement of linguistics within the Chinese and German language communities.

It seems hard to differentiate between “Contrastive Linguistics” and “Comparative Linguistics” as they are often used to refer to related fields of study. The former focuses on contrasting specific or multiple aspects across two or more languages while the latter primarily seeks to identify linguistic universals from a historicist perspective and is thus associated with language typology studies. However, this article does not strictly distinguish between “Contrastive Linguistics” in a disciplinary context and “Contrastive Analysis” in a methodological one. While historical-comparative linguistics has a long-standing tradition within a diachronic framework, contrastive linguistics emerged as an independent linguistic discipline only in the mid-20th century, largely in response to the demands of foreign language education. The close and often inseparable relationship between contrastive linguistics and language teaching research is further exemplified by subsequent research findings related to German-Chinese contrastive analysis, which frequently integrates didactic and methodological components.

In China, the contrastive approach with a practical orientation was first observed intermittently in early literature on Chinese grammar, particularly in *Ma's Complete Grammar* (*Mashi wentong*, 1898–1899). However, it was not until the late 1970s, following the Cultural Revolution, that contrastive studies characterized by a theoretical framework and self-awareness began to emerge. Initially, from the 1970s onward, contrastive analysis primarily concentrated on the contrast between Chinese and English while parallel research into Chinese and German was still in its infancy. With the revival of foreign language instruction, including German, the contrastive analysis of German and Chinese experienced significant growth in the 1980s and continues to evolve today, undoubtedly influenced by new methodologies.

In the field of contrastive phonetics, several studies have investigated discrepancies in pronunciation through the lens of didactic and methodological considerations in speech training. These studies encompass both segmental-phonetic and phonological levels as well as the phonotactic structures of the two languages. Contrastive analysis in phonology also extends to the suprasegmental level, particularly prosody, where accent and intonation are compared across the two languages. Despite increasing interest in this field, it can be argued that the contrastive analysis of German and Chinese is underrepresented within the phonetic-phonological domain, especially in comparison to other subfields. This research gap may be attributed to a relative lack of focus on phonetic-phonological aspects within the broader context of German studies in China. Additionally, it is partially a con-

sequence of the predominance of writing-based learning methodologies in foreign language instruction in China, which, despite the integration of (post-)modern pedagogical approaches, continues to be mainly oriented towards grammar teaching and testing.

In the field of lexicology, comprehensive contrastive analyses have been conducted across nearly all word classes and their subclasses, with modal verbs, domain-specific terminology, functional verb structures, and semantic false friends in German and Chinese being of particular significance. Furthermore, processes of word formation, particularly compounding, along with the concept of definiteness intricately linked to the use of the definite article (determiner), have garnered increased scholarly attention. Contrastive studies of German and Chinese have produced noteworthy findings for various structures and constructions, including linear structures in antecedents, left dislocation constructions, adpositions, split attributes, clauses, and other sentence types in Chinese that often lack direct equivalents in German. Additionally, elements such as voice, tense, and the closely related concept of aspect as well as the subjunctive mood and theme-rheme structure have been identified as critical areas for contrastive research. It is important to note that many linguistic phenomena in Chinese that are challenging to clarify through the lens of traditional Chinese grammar can be effectively explained through the framework of valency theory. Consequently, contrastive valency is emerging as a promising subfield with considerable research potential. Contrastive phraseology is also expected to expand, particularly with the recognition of phraseological competence as an essential component of broader communicative competence.

Further significant research outcomes have emerged from German-Chinese contrastive textology. Contemporary studies are increasingly moving away from the traditional conceptualization of text as a mere structural entity within the framework of text linguistics, which typically emphasizes syntactic and systemic linguistic orientations. Instead, such studies focus on elucidating the cultural values embedded within texts. This marks a departure from earlier German-Chinese contrastive studies that primarily concentrated on cohesion and coherence as mechanisms of textualization, adherence to conventional textual characteristics, or textuality through exemplars from both languages. Recent investigations have shifted their emphasis towards cultural dimensions, particularly the cultural specificity of text types or genres within each language. Research in this domain incorporates a wide range of text types, including, but not limited to, academic texts across various disciplines and texts intended for everyday practical purposes as well as multimedia and multimodal hypertexts such as SMS messages and texts for online communication. The contrastive analysis of hypertexts frequently transcends internal linguistic considerations within the realm of communicative or interactional linguistics, expanding to cover non-verbal and para-verbal communication elements such as conversational behaviors and the relationship between texts and images. Furthermore, there is a discernible trend towards pragmatic, cognitive, communicative, ethnographic, sociological, dynamic, and even interactive approaches – characterized by the concept of functionality – in German-Chinese contrastive textology. In this context, text is conceptualized as a dynamic form rather than a fixed, static product, and studies in this area are increasingly referred to as genre analyses.

From the preceding discussion, it can be concluded that German-Chinese contrastive analysis, similar to the broader field of linguistics in China, is demonstrating a paradigm shift from a micro-level focus to a macro-level perspective. This transition is characterized by

a significant change in emphasis from morphemes, constructions, and sentences to texts as linguistic units. The cultural orientation and characteristics inherent in text linguistics and text type linguistics are also evident in contrastive studies of specific texts and text types in German and Chinese. The methodologies of discourse linguistics, along with interactional or communicative linguistics, highlight the pragmatic-functional dimension, which is similarly reflected in German-Chinese contrastive studies. These studies not only contrast linguistic contents but also underscore the importance of language contexts and speech acts. While the focus on literary studies and translation has always been a prominent feature since the inception of German studies in China, Chinese Germanists, along with an increasing number of linguists specializing in Chinese at home and abroad, have made substantial contributions to the contrastive analysis of German and Chinese. A key indicator of the recognition of such studies is the receipt of state funding for research projects in this area. Finally, it is essential to consider contrastive analyses that deal with more than two languages. English, being the most widely spoken foreign language in China, and Japanese, which has the second largest number of learners in the country, are often included in these studies.

Despite the existing research, there remains considerable potential for further exploration in German-Chinese contrastive analysis. A notable paradox emerges in this context: while numerous studies concentrate on the same subjects for contrastive analysis, leading to partially overlapping content, there are still many topics that have not been addressed, highlighting a significant gap in the academic landscape. In recent years, there has been increasing advocacy for recognizing linguistics in China as an independent discipline, rather than as a subset of literary studies. Whether this will be realized in the future remains uncertain. Nevertheless, it is anticipated that the advancement of linguistics in China will promote the further development of contrastive German-Chinese analysis, which should integrate new perspectives and dynamics related to interlinguality, interinstitutionality, internationality, and interdisciplinarity.