

THE EXPRESSION OF LOCAL TEMPORAL ORDER IN THE VAGUE TIME OF CHINESE DIALECTS: A CASE STUDY OF HUBEI DIALECTS

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Abstract

In the context of globalization, standardized, linear clock time is increasingly becoming the dominant temporal system. However, this process has not eradicated the diverse “temporal syntax” deeply ingrained in local cultures. This study takes the prevalent temporal expressions in Hubei dialects as an entry point, aiming to explore how language, as a social practice, participates in constructing and sustaining a local temporal order that differs from mainstream precise practices. It is argued here that dialectal temporal terms reflect a temporal philosophy that emphasizes harmony with natural rhythms and cyclical social activities, thereby fostering a more flexible and human-centred rhythm of life within local communities.

Keywords: *temporal order, Chinese dialects, ambiguity, local knowledge.*

Research background

In an era of globalization increasingly dominated by precise clock time, rediscovering and examining the diverse “temporal syntax” rooted in local knowledge [Zhou 2021] holds significant academic value and practical relevance. Time is not merely a physical constant but a category profoundly shaped by human cognition, language, and culture. Chinese dialects, as dynamic carriers of local culture, offer a crucial window into the rhythms of life, cognitive patterns, and cultural logic of different societies through their rich and unique temporal expressions – particularly the prevalent vague temporal terms.

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Academic attention to temporal terms has a long history. They can be classified along two dimensions: semantics and grammatical function [Lü 1982; Ding 1961; Zhu 1982; Zhao 1979]. Semantically, temporal terms refer to words or phrases denoting time; grammatically, they can function as objects following prepositions like “在” (at) or “到” (to) and can be referred to by phrases like “这个时候” (this time) or “那个时候” (that time). Xing [1996] classified temporal terms into time points and time periods. Vague temporal terms constitute a special subclass characterized by unclear and imprecise temporal boundaries, possessing subjectivity and context-dependency. For instance, the boundary between “清晨” (early morning) and “早晨” (morning) is ambiguous; different age groups may perceive “深夜” (late night) differently – young people might consider it to be after 1 a.m., while the elderly might define it as after 11 p.m.

Scholars such as Jiang [1992] and Wu [1999] laid the groundwork for fuzzy linguistics by systematically analysing the manifestations and causes of fuzziness in temporal terms from a synchronic perspective. They broadly categorized vague temporal terms into four types based on core semantics:

- 1) Vague time points or periods indicating positions or ranges with unclear boundaries, e.g., “清晨” (early morning), “深夜” (late night);
- 2) Vague temporal quantities, e.g., “一会儿” (a while), “片刻” (a moment);
- 3) Vague temporal frequency, e.g., “经常” (often), “常常” (frequently), describing imprecise occurrence rates;
- 4) Vague temporal sequence words, e.g., “不久以后” (not long after), “过一阵子” (after a while).

In Fuzzy Linguistics, Wu [1999] specifically analysed the fuzziness of terms like “past, present, future, morning, evening”. Li [2001] pointed out that time itself is a fuzzy concept; initial timekeeping relied on natural or biological cycles like the Sun’s position or crowing of rooster, and the degree of this reliance and the method of segmentation were closely tied to the production and life practices of specific communities. Wang [2004] noted that ancient people recorded time through “events with strong regularity and temporality”, creating temporal expressions in three main ways: combining temporal terms with other morphemes, e.g., “中午” (noon), “次日” (the next day), “去年” (last year); concatenating temporal terms, e.g., “今昼” (today daytime), “夜晚” (night); and utilizing extended meanings of temporal terms. Fu [2006] identified three modes of temporal segmentation in Chinese: natural patterns, instrument measurement, and relative standards, touching upon the subjective and objective dimensions of temporal cognition. Regarding the morphological features of temporal terms, Zhang [2004] argued that to comprehend time, the Han people often map spatial schemas like “up-down” and “front-back” onto the abstract concept of time via metaphor. Of course, since modern times, temporal terms have

also been influenced by foreign cultures, e.g. “点钟” (o’clock), “小时” (hour) [Liu, 2024]. Starting from the concept of “fuzziness”, Tian [2015] defined vague temporal terms as words or phrases denoting time whose duration and boundaries lack precise definition, meaning there are no strict start or end points.

Beyond studies dedicated to temporal terms in the common language, some scholars have also explored the characteristics and origins of vague time in dialects. For example, Wei [2018] noted that ancestors “worked at sunrise and rested at sunset”; before clocks entered daily life, people in rural areas relied on observing the sunrise and sunset processes to enrich understanding and discern patterns, using bodily references for temporal expression – “drawing analogies from the human body for immediate concepts and from external objects for distant ones”. Li and Wang [2023] took Mandarin terms like “今年” (this year), “这个月” (this month), “这个星期” (this week), “今天” (today), “正晌午” (high noon), and “现在” (now) as starting points, extending forward or backward to form a relatively complete temporal chain, analysing the features of temporal nouns and providing cognitive explanations.

Hubei dialects are primarily divided into three major areas: Southwestern Mandarin, Jianghuai Mandarin, and Gan dialect. Temporal nouns in these dialects exhibit some typical variations. Which temporal terms in Hubei dialects possess typically vague semantics? What are the underlying reasons? In what other contexts are dialectal temporal terms used, and what roles do they play? This paper aims to explore how local temporal order is concretely embodied in the vague temporal expressions of dialects. Focusing on temporal terms in Hubei dialects, it will compare similarities and differences across dialect areas and analyse their application scenarios and practical significance in people’s daily lives.

Categorization of temporal terms in Hubei dialects

In current research on Chinese dialect vocabulary, the classification of temporal terms often references the framework established by *A Brief Table for the Investigation of Chinese Dialects* [Ding and Li 1956] and *the Great Dictionary of Modern Chinese Dialects* [Li 2002], typically categorizing them into terms for seasons, festivals, years, months, days, etc. This paper conducts a systematic review and comparison of temporal terms in Hubei dialects based on field survey materials included in the Collection of Chinese Language Resources: Hubei [Wang 2023]. This ten-volume collection covers four dimensions – phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, and oral culture – and contains linguistic data from 50 cities and counties in Hubei Province, encompassing Southwestern Mandarin, Jianghuai Mandarin, and Gan dialects. Additionally, the corpus sources for this paper incorporate Hubei dialect survey books authored

by local scholars renowned for their work in dialect investigation and research [Zhu and Zhang 2021].

Comparative analysis of specific entries reveals minor differences in terms for festivals and seasons, while slightly greater variation exists in terms for years, months, and days. Although the word formation of temporal terms in Hubei dialects is largely influenced by Mandarin, resulting in largely consistent expressions for many entries. Examples include: “时候 (*shíhòu*, time), 什么时候 (*shénme shíhòu*, when), 现在 (*xiànzài*, now), 以前 (*yǐqián*, before), 以后 (*yǐhòu*, after), 一辈子 (*yībèizi*, a lifetime), 今年 (*jīnnián*, this year), 明年 (*míngnián*, next year), 后年 (*hòunián*, the year after next), 去年 (*qùnián*, last year), 前年 (*qiánnián*, the year before last), 往年 (*wǎngnián*, former years), 今天 (*jīntiān*, today), 明天 (*míngtiān*, tomorrow), 大后天 (*dàhòutiān*, three days from now), 昨天 (*zuótiān*, yesterday), 前天 (*qiántiān*, the day before yesterday), 整天 (*zhěngtiān*, all day), 下午 (*xiàwǔ*, afternoon), 白天 (*báitiān*, daytime), 半夜 (*bànyè*, midnight), 正月 (*zhēngyuè*, first lunar month), 元宵节 (*yuánxiāojié*, Lantern Festival), 清明 (*qīngmíng*, Qingming Festival), 端午 (*duānwǔ*, Dragon Boat Festival), 七月十五 (*qīyuè shíwǔ*, Ghost Festival), 中秋 (*zhōngqiū*, Mid-Autumn Festival), 冬至 (*dōngzhì*, Winter Solstice), 腊月 (*làyuè*, twelfth lunar month), 除夕 (*chūxī*, New Year's Eve), 历书 (*lìshū*, calendar), 阴历 (*yīnli*, lunar calendar), 阳历 (*yángli*, solar calendar), 星期天 (*xīngqítiān*, Sunday).”

However, a rich array of localized expressions also exists, with dialectal forms exhibiting distinctive characteristics. The most pronounced variations are concentrated in vague time-period concepts such as “清早 (*qīngzǎo*, early morning)”, “上午 (*shàngwǔ*, morning)”, “中午 (*zhōngwǔ*, noon)”, “下午 (*xiàwǔ*, afternoon)”, “傍晚 (*bàngwǎn*, dusk)”, and “夜晚 (*yèwǎn*, night)”. Among these, terms for “早晨 (*zǎochen*, morning)”, “中午 (noon)”, and “傍晚 (dusk)” display particularly diverse expressions due to their fuzzy temporal boundaries. For instance, “清早 (early morning)” might be expressed as “一擦黑 (*yī cāhēi*, as soon as it darkens)” or “天蒙亮 (*tiān méngliàng*, sky getting dimly bright)”; while “傍晚 (dusk)” has numerous local variants such as “天快黑了 (*tiān kuài hēi le*, sky is about to turn dark)”, “打黑影子了 (*dǎ hēiyǐngzi le*, casting dark shadows)”, “煞了黑 (*shà le hēi*, darkness sets in)”, “暗些 (*àn xiē*, getting darker)”, “打麻影儿 (*dǎ máyǐngr*, when shadows become blurred)”, “黄昏黑 (*huánghūn hēi*, dusk darkness)”, “麻糊些儿 (*má hú xiē*, getting murky)”, and “下昼边 (*xiàzhōu biān*, edge of the late afternoon)”. These expressions reflect a naive word-formation logic based on visual imagery or natural phenomena.

Table. Comparison of dialect vocabulary

Dialect Region	Early Morning	Morning (Forenoon)	Noon	Afternoon	Dusk / Evening	Night
Xianning (Gan Dialect Area)	早晨 (<i>zǎochen</i>)	上昼 (<i>shàngzhòu</i>)	中时 (<i>zhōngshí</i>)	下昼 (<i>xiàzhòu</i>)	下昼边 (<i>xiàzhòu biān</i>) / 天煞黑 (<i>tiān shà hēi</i>)	半夜 (<i>bànyè</i>) / 夜嘞 (<i>yè lei</i>)
Xiaogan (Jianghuai Mandarin)	方亮 (<i>fāngliàng</i>) / 麻麻亮 (<i>mámal-iàng</i>) / 粉明儿 (<i>fěnmíngér</i>)	上半天 (<i>shàng-bàntiān</i>) / 晏 昼儿 (<i>yàn-zhòur</i>)	中时 (<i>zhōngshí</i>) / 正中时 (<i>zhèngzhōng-shí</i>)	下半年 (<i>xiàbàn-tiān</i>) / 下昼儿 (<i>xiàzhòur</i>)	天擦黑 (<i>tiān cāhēi</i>) / 一霎黑 (<i>yī shà hēi</i>)	晚寻 (<i>wǎnxún</i>) / 黑了 (<i>hēi le</i>)
Jingzhou (Southwestern Mandarin)	清晨 (<i>qīng-chén</i>) / 麻麻亮 (<i>mámal-iàng</i>) / 乌漆八早 (<i>wūqībāzǎo</i>) / 乌早八早 (<i>wūzǎobāzǎo</i>)	上午 (<i>shàngwǔ</i>)	转中 (<i>zhuǎnzhōng</i>) (can refer to noon or midnight, 12 o'clock)	下午 (<i>xiàwǔ</i>)	挨黑 (<i>āi hēi</i>) / 煞黑 (<i>shà hēi</i>) / 擦黑 (<i>cā hēi</i>)	夜晚 (<i>yèwǎn</i>)

Taking “dusk” as a specific example for analysis, one category emphasizes the degree of “darkness”. For instance, expressions like “煞黑 (*shàhēi*)” and “挨黑 (*āihēi*)” in the Jingzhou dialect, and the progression from “一擦黑 (*yī cāhēi*)” to “夜里 (*yèlì*)” in the Huanggang dialect, all use the gradual deepening of darkness to distinguish time periods, vividly depicting the process of the sky turning dark. Another category relies on the appearance of “shadows” in visual perception. Examples include “打麻影儿 (*dǎ máyǐngr*)” in the Fangxian dialect, along with expressions like “打夜影儿 (*dǎ yèyǐngr*),” “打麻子眼 (*dǎ mázǐ yǎn*),” and “打乌央 (*dǎ wūyāng*).” These all start from the natural phenomenon of “shadows appearing” to describe the characteristic of dusk. Additionally, terms for “morning” often incorporate concepts of brightness in their word formation. Examples are “麻风亮 (*máfēngliàng*)” in the Zhongxiang dialect and expressions like “麻粉粉亮 (*má fěn fěn liàng*)” or “麻麻亮 (*mámaliàng*)” in other dialects.

Furthermore, differences in some temporal terms across dialects are also reflected in the choice of morphemes for word formation. “Beginning of the year” can be expressed as “年头 (*niántóu*)” or “开年 (*kāinián*)”, while “end of the year” might be expressed as “年尾 (*niánwěi*)” or “年根 (*niángēn*)”. “Day after tomorrow” has

forms like “老后天 (*lǎohòutiān*)”, “外后儿 (*wàihòur*)”, “大后儿 (*dàhòur*)”, “万后儿 (*wànhòur*)”, and “挨后儿 (*āihòur*)”. “Three days ago” might be expressed as “上前日 (*shàngqiánrì*)”, “向前日 (*xiàngqiánrì*)”, or “先前日 (*xiānqiánrì*)”. Temporal terms also frequently combine with pronouns and locatives to form more complex temporal systems. For example, “上半天 (*shàngbàntiān*)” and “下半天 (*xiàbàntiān*)” divide the daytime period, while “向前年 (*xiàngqiánnián*)” and “大前年 (*dàqiánnián*)” construct annual sequences. Phrases like “入秋 (*rùqiū*)” and “秋上 (*qiūshang*)” describe the gradual onset of autumn. “入梅 (*rùméi*)”, “出梅 (*chūméi*)”, and “黄梅 (*huángméi*)” refer to entering the rainy season, leaving the rainy season, and the rainy season itself, respectively.

On the semantic level, dialectal temporal terms exhibit metaphorical characteristics. They employ vague expressions for time periods, such as “一眨眼 (*yī zhǎyǎn*, a blink of an eye)”, “一口气 (*yīkǒuqì*, in one breath)”, “一哈哈儿 (*yī hāhā*, a very short while)”, and “转个脑壳 (*zhuǎn gè nǎoké*, turn one’s head)”, using concrete actions to metaphorize the passage of time. This reflects the elasticity of the time concept. They also utilize spatial metaphors and entity metaphors. For example, “外后儿 (*wàihòur*)” means “the day after tomorrow,” and “年尾 (*niánwěi*)” or “年根 (*niángēn*)” refers to “the end of the year”. If a local dialect has an exceptionally rich vocabulary of temporal terms, it may suggest that the residents lead diverse lives and have more nuanced experiences of time.

Causes of vague semantics in temporal terms of Hubei dialects

Vagueness is a significant semantic feature of temporal terms. In Fuzzy Linguistics, Wu [1999] points out that the cognitive boundaries of temporal terms are influenced by multiple factors including era, ethnicity, social status, occupation, education level, political-economic environment, educational background, language habits, and gender. These factors collectively cause shifts in the boundaries of their intension and extension. Specifically for Hubei dialects, the emergence of vague semantics in their temporal terms primarily stems from the following three reasons:

(1) Natural reference points and cognitive differences

Traditional Chinese temporal terms relied on natural celestial phenomena such as “sunrise and sunset” as cognitive reference points, a pattern particularly evident in dialects. Temporal expressions based on celestial phenomena inherently possess perceptual fluidity, leading to significant variations in understanding among different individuals. Especially during transitional periods like dawn and dusk, where natural light gradually changes and activities shift, the related temporal terms are not only abundant in number but also demonstrate greater elasticity and interpretive space

in their semantics. Surveys show that the time spans corresponding to temporals terms perceived based on sunrise and sunset vary among different respondents, clearly reflecting the fuzziness of their semantic boundaries. In contrast, cognitive deviation for temporal terms using clocks as mechanical reference points is significantly reduced [Tian 2015]. This cognitive difference is closely related to the user's living environment and language habits: those still living in rural areas, especially those retaining dialect habits, mostly continue to use a temporal expression system referencing natural phenomena and agricultural rhythms; whereas non-dialect users living in cities, regulated by modern schedules and management systems, have generally shifted to relying on clocks to establish precise, unified temporal cognition.

(2) Agricultural life and event-based timekeeping

In long-term agrarian societies, time was closely linked to life events and seasonal farming activities, forming a cognitive tradition of "marking time by events". Hubei dialects not only possess rich terms for segmenting time – such as “月半 (mid-month)”, “月头 (beginning of the month)”, “月底 (end of the month)”, “月末 (month's end)”, dividing months by the lunar cycle; and “春生 (spring growth), 夏长 (summer flourishing), 秋收 (autumn harvest), 冬藏 (winter storage)” integrating natural laws with agricultural rhythms – but also continue to use “月令 (monthly ordinances)”, phenological changes, and farming proverbs to mark time. These are often preserved in local agricultural proverbs, forming a set of temporal discourse using nature and farming as coordinates.

The ancient *Yueling* chapter of *the Book of Rites* represents a temporal order, an order summarizing people's daily production and life experiences according to different months [Legge 1885]. *Simin Yueling Yin Nongyu* is a collection of folk agricultural proverbs from an Eastern Han dynasty classic [Hsu 1980]. It narrates the agricultural arrangements of large manors from the first to the twelfth lunar month, particularly detailing the planting seasons for grains, melons, vegetables, and cash crops by month. Hubei's unique agricultural products, such as “菜薹 (*Cai Tai*)”, aquatic vegetables like lotus roots from the Jiangnan Plain, potatoes and navel oranges from the high-altitude areas of western Hubei, all have their planting times recorded in many local farming proverbs. For example, “七菹八蒜·九油十麦·寒露种菜薹。(Plant scallions in the seventh [lunar] month, garlic in the eighth, rapeseed in the ninth, wheat in the tenth, plant *Cai Tai* at Cold Dew)”. “三月三·藕发苦。(On the third day of the third lunar month, lotus roots sprout)”. “春分早·谷雨迟·清明种薯正当时。(Spring Equinox is early, Grain Rain is late, Qingming is just the right time to plant potatoes)”. “正月栽竹·二月栽木·三月栽橙正时足。(Plant bamboo in the first lunar month, trees in the second, oranges in the third is perfectly timely)”, etc. People associated

time with their perception of surrounding things and specific social activities, even anchoring and transmitting time through “events” in forms like festival rituals and dietary customs. This cognitive method of integrating time into concrete events and customs strengthens the elasticity and context-dependency of its semantics, forming the lived foundation for vague meaning. Therefore, temporal terms not only contain life philosophy but also carry collective memory and cultural identity.

(3) Intergenerational change and social transformation

With urban-rural changes and the modernization of lifestyles, the temporal reference system has undergone significant differentiation. A portion of the population still engaged in agricultural activities, especially the elderly (approximately 60 years of age and older), maintains the tradition of recording time through events and the lunar calendar in daily communication via dialect vocabulary. They have mostly experienced a complete agrarian life and are accustomed to using lunar months like “腊月 (*La Yue*, twelfth lunar month)” and “冬月 (*Dong Yue*, eleventh lunar month)”, as well as expressions based on solar terms and phenology, to organize their life narratives. In contrast, the younger generation is not only gradually forgetting dialectal temporal terms but also, influenced by globalization and urban culture, more commonly adopts the Gregorian calendar and clock time, celebrating solar calendar birthdays and living by schedules. As many dialectal temporal terms are increasingly disappearing from the speech of young people, a temporal order and cognitive mode linked to traditional agrarian civilization is also gradually receding. This intergenerational difference not only accelerates the demise of some vague temporal terms but also reflects the fading of the traditional temporal order in modern society, making vague semantics a pragmatic feature of specific groups and lifestyles.

Today, clock time has gradually become the primary method of timekeeping for institutionalized activities like work and study, emphasizing precision and synchronization. However, in daily life, interpersonal interactions, and festive activities, people still rely to a certain extent on vague, event- and social-habit-oriented traditional timekeeping methods. This coexistence and distinction between “institutional time” and “lived time” also embodies, in a sense, the cultural adaptation and dual logic in the Chinese cognition and practice of time.

The social practice of Hubei dialect temporal terms in daily life

The temporal expression system in dialects not only reflects people’s cognitive modes of time but also carries rich regional culture and life experiences, being intricately linked to natural rhythms and cyclical social activities.

Connection to natural rhythms

Agricultural activities are a significant source for the formation of dialectal temporal terms. Many temporal terms in Hubei dialects appear in idioms and proverbs, expressions often closely tied to the growth cycles of crops. The Hubei region experiences four distinct seasons, with summer and winter being slightly longer, and frequently witnesses special weather phenomena such as “倒春寒 (late spring cold)” and “秋老虎 (Indian summer)”. Wuhan dialect thus includes sayings like “四月八·冻煞鸭 (On the eighth of April, even ducks freeze to death)”, “三月八·冻煞鸭 (On the eighth of March, even ducks freeze to death)”, and “二四八月乱穿衣 (In the second, fourth, and eighth lunar months, wear clothes haphazardly)”, vividly reflecting the characteristic temperature fluctuations during seasonal transitions. As spring and autumn are relatively brief, a series of farming proverbs have developed around crops like peanuts, rice, and rapeseed. For example, “清明前后·种瓜点豆·花生点就 (Around *Qingming* [around April 5th], plant melons and beans; sow peanuts right then)” points to *Qingming* as a crucial period for spring sowing; “立秋摘花椒·白露打核桃·霜降刨花生 (Pick Sichuan peppercorns at the Start of Autumn, knock down walnuts at White Dew, dig up peanuts at Frost's Descent)” precisely marks the harvest times for different crops in autumn and winter. Furthermore, the proverb “七月花生·八月的苕 (Peanuts in July, sweet potatoes in August)” circulated in the mountainous areas of western and northern Hubei also reflects the habit of judging time based on the ripening stages of crops.

Climatic conditions also play a notable role in the formation of dialectal temporal terms. For instance, “二四八月” broadly refers to spring and autumn, “十冬腊月” specifically indicates winter, and “五黄六月” corresponds to summer. These terms not only demarcate seasons but also incorporate people's perception of the natural environment. Relevant examples can be found in regional proverbs, such as the rain-related proverb from Tongshan: “五月落连阴·遍地是草筋; 六月落连阴·遍地是黄金。(If continuous rain falls in the fifth lunar month, grass roots are everywhere; if continuous rain falls in the sixth lunar month, gold is everywhere [i.e., a good harvest]).” From Xiaogan, there is: “头八无雨二八休·三八无雨到寒秋 (If there's no rain on the first 'eight' [likely the 8th, 18th, or 28th of a month], the second 'eight' will be idle; if there's no rain on the third 'eight', it will last until the cold autumn).” And “七落八不落·九的似瓢泼; 七晴八不晴·九的放光明。(If it rains on the seventh [day], it won't on the eighth; on the ninth, it's like pouring from a ladle. If it's clear on the seventh, it won't be on the eighth; on the ninth, it shines brightly).”

Furthermore, the widespread circulation of the “九九歌 (Nine-Nine Song)” across Hubei also demonstrates the richness of dialectal temporal terms, though

its specific content shows regional variation. For example, the Wuhan version goes: “头九二九·家里搓手; 三九四九·沿河插柳; 五九六九·牵牛走走; 七九八九·田头放火; 九九百花开·老牛下天来。(First and second nine-nine, warm hands at home; third and fourth nine-nine, plant willows along the river; fifth and sixth nine-nine, lead the ox for a walk; seventh and eighth nine-nine, set fire in the fields; ninth nine-nine, flowers bloom everywhere, the old ox descends from heaven)”. Another version is: “夏至入头九·雨伞握在手; 二九一十八·脱褂着罗纱; 三九二十七·出门汗直滴; 四九三十六·卷席露天宿; 五九四十五·严秋是老虎; 六九五十四·乘凉进庙寺; 七九六十三·床头窝被里; 八九七十二·子夜寻棉被; 九九八十一·开柜拿棉衣。(Summer Solstice enters the first nine, umbrella in hand; second nine is eighteen, remove tunic and wear gauze; third nine is twenty-seven, stepping out sweat drips straight; fourth nine is thirty-six, roll mat and sleep outdoors; fifth nine is forty-five, severe autumn is a tiger; sixth nine is fifty-four, seek coolness entering temple; seventh nine is sixty-three, huddle under quilt by bedside; eighth nine is seventy-two, search for quilt at midnight; ninth nine is eighty-one, open cabinet to get padded clothes)”.

The term “双抢 (*shuāngqiǎng*)”, once widely used in rural areas of the middle and lower Yangtze River region, refers to “rushing to harvest early rice and rushing to plant late rice”, specifically denoting the scorching dog days from mid-to-late July to early August each year. For rural residents born before the 1990s, “双抢” carries a profound collective memory. With the advancement of agricultural mechanization and adjustments in planting structures, the frequency of this term’s use has gradually declined. Other expressions like “一日三秋 (One day feels like three autumns – missing someone dearly)”, “陈谷子烂芝麻的事情 (old grains and rotten sesame – trivial matters of the distant past)”, and “鸡上笼 (chickens going to roost – dusk)” all reflect metaphorical connections between time and behaviour or states. This further corroborates the deep influence of agrarian life on the conceptual segmentation of time.

Connection to cyclical social activities

Regarding temporal terms related to diet, expressions such as “过早 (*guò zǎo*, eating breakfast)”, “过中 (*guò zhōng*, eating lunch)”, “过晏 (*guò yàn*, eating around 10 AM)”, “过午 (*guò wǔ*, eating lunch)”, and “过夜 (*guò yè*, eating dinner)” reflect variations in local temporal order. Among these, “过晏” is currently found only in a few areas like Xishui, Hubei, referring to a light meal eaten around 10 AM, between breakfast and lunch. The character “晏” here is pronounced “àn”, retaining its ancient meaning of “late/delayed”, as in “你来晏了 (You’ve come late)”. This phenomenon might be related to the habit in agricultural times of working early in the morning due to the heat and eating closer to noon, or it may stem from a tradition of two meals a day. In contrast, “过早” is commonly used throughout Hubei; “过夜” still refers to

dinner in places like Ezhou, Xianning, and Macheng; “过中” in the Jiangnan Plain refers to a simple lunch. These expressions reflect the dietary custom in rural areas that centres on dinner, whereas contemporary health concepts more often advocate a pattern of “eating a full lunch”, showcasing the evolution of temporal customs. In the Wuxue area of Hubei, the midday light meal is called “喝茶 (drinking tea)”, and “茶么时 (chá me shí)” refers to lunchtime. According to records, in rural Tianmen, Mianyang, and Hanchuan areas of Hubei during the 1970s and 1980s, when daylight was shorter in autumn and winter, two meals a day were typically followed (breakfast at 10 AM, dinner at 5 PM); during the longer days and busy farming seasons of spring and summer, “过中” (around 1 PM) was added as a half-meal, forming a “two-and-a-half meals” dietary structure. Traditional Chinese Medicine theory also contains numerous time-related expressions, especially terms associated with “午 (noon)”, such as “午枕 (noon nap)”, “午牌 (noon watch/time)”, “午炮 (noon cannon)”, and the health-preserving concept of “过午不食 (no food after noon)”, all embodying the connection between time and human biological rhythms.

Some traditional festival customs have been well-preserved across Hubei, exhibiting regional diversity. Customs such as the Flower Festival in the second lunar month, the “小端阳 (Little Dragon Boat Festival)” on the fifth day of the fifth month, the “大端阳 (Great Dragon Boat Festival)” on the fifteenth day of the fifth month, and the “末端阳 (Final Dragon Boat Festival)” on the twenty-fifth day of the fifth month continue in some regions. On the sixth day of the sixth lunar month, there is the custom of “晒红绿 (suns their colourful clothes)”. As this coincides with the intense summer heat, a folk tradition of “晒伏 (drying during the dog days)” emerged, also known as the “晒衣节 (Clothes’ Drying Festival)”. Traces of festival customs are also visible in proverbs, such as “三十夜的火·除夕夜的灯 (The fire on the 30th night, the lamps on New Year’s Eve)” depicting New Year’s scenes; during the Ghost Festival on the 15th of the seventh month, there is a widespread folk taboo against going near water; and “三月三·吃鸡蛋 (On the third day of the third month, eat eggs)” is a seasonal food custom circulating in Hubei.

New Year customs in many parts of Hubei are still passed down through children’s rhymes, such as the “《过年歌》 (New Year Song)”: “二十四·打扬尘; 二十五·打牙们; 二十六·割年肉; 二十七·去赶集; 二十八·打糍粑; 二十九·样样有; 三十的夜·桃花谢; 三十的晚上熬一夜; 初一早·年拜了·腰一勾·手一摊; 京果麻糖都归我”。(On the 24th, sweep away dust; on the 25th, [prepare for] children’s activities; on the 26th, buy New Year meat; on the 27th, go to the market; on the 28th, make glutinous rice cakes; on the 29th, everything is ready; on the 30th night, peach blossoms fade; stay up all night on the 30th; early on the 1st, New Year greetings done, bow from the waist, stretch out hands; all the Beijing fruits and sesame candy belong

to me)". These lyrics systematically record the New Year preparations and celebrations from the 24th of the twelfth lunar month to the 1st day of the first lunar month.

In important activities in rural areas, traditional temporal expressions are still employed. For instance, the timing for the bride's entry during weddings, or for breaking ground and capping the roof in house construction, often uses the twelve two-hour periods (时辰, shíchen) method for timekeeping; searching for lost items may also involve calculating dates and directions through specific methods, reflecting the continuity of traditional temporal cognition in contemporary life. The ancient perception of time was inherently vague. Although later tools like sundials and water clocks achieved a certain degree of precision, creating multiple time nodes, in practical application, these temporal concepts retained overlapping and boundary-blurring characteristics.

Furthermore, proverbs also contain descriptions of the relationship between time and health. For example, Xianning's "扇风歌" (Fanning Song): "扇风歌·扇尔风·扇尔凉·扇尔六月打脾寒·扇尔七月伤寒病·扇尔八月晒上床·扇尔九月抬上山·扇尔十月呜哩哇啦。(Fanning song, fan your wind, fan your cool, fan you into getting malaria in June. Fan you into typhoid fever in July, fan you into staying in bed in August, fan you into being carried up the mountain in September, fan you into wailing in October)". This rhyme uses vivid language to remind people to pay attention to disease prevention and health maintenance in different months, reflecting folk wisdom about the connection between time cognition and bodily care.

Case analysis: The vague semantics of "Zhongshi" and its encounter with modern temporal order

The term "中午 (noon)" in Mandarin itself possesses vague semantics. Wu (1999) pointed out that the word "中午" is a composite of vague and precise concepts. It can refer specifically to 12:00 noon, but it can also serve as a vague boundary between "morning (上午)" and "afternoon (下午)". In cognitive linguistics, the "figure-ground" theory posits that within a cognitive scene, which elements are perceived as "figure" and which as "background" depend on multiple factors such as attention allocation, viewing angle, object position, colour, and contrast in motion vs. stillness. In the temporal cognition of people in Hong'an, the entire period from breakfast to lunch – due to its crucial importance in agrarian life – is highlighted as the "figure" requiring a specific name. Specific clock times within this period, like 10 o'clock or 11 o'clock, recede into the "background". The term "中时 (zhōngshí)" in the Hong'an dialect is precisely the linguistic manifestation of this cognitive structure. Unlike "中午" in Mandarin, which typically refers to "around 12:00 noon," "中时" in the Hong'an dialect broadly refers to the entire forenoon from after breakfast until before lunch. Its time span is wide, and its semantic boundaries are distinctly vague.

This unique usage of “中时” is the linguistic crystallization of the local temporal order formed through long-term agricultural practice in Hong'an society. Its vague semantics are deeply rooted in culture and lived experience. Etymologically, “中时” has existed since ancient times, appearing in texts like “后汉书 (Fan Ye's Book of Later Han)” [Fan 2014] and “抱朴子 (Baopuzi)” [Ge 1966], originally meaning “the noon hour”. While preserving the term, the Hong'an dialect has seen its meaning shift and expand, reflecting the diachronic accumulation of language evolution. More importantly, as an agricultural county, Hong'an's traditional production model followed the rhythm of “working at sunrise”. Farmers would go to the fields after their morning meal and work until the sun was high before returning home for lunch. During this continuous labour process, there was no practical need to further subdivide the “forenoon”. Thus, “中时” became a comprehensive temporal term covering this entire work unit. This method of segmenting time based on farming activities constitutes an “event-time” system, contrasting with the “clock-time” system prevalent in modern society.

The vague temporal order represented by “中时” in the Hong'an dialect does not exist in isolation. When it encounters the modern mainstream temporal framework – such as school schedules and administrative operations based on precise clock times – significant tension arises between the two. Modern institutions require a unified and clear understanding of nodes like “8:00 AM” or “12:00 noon”. However, Hong'an people accustomed to using the vague term “中时”, especially school-age children and youths frequently interacting with the outside world, often face cognitive adaptation challenges. This situation also drives new understandings and usages of local dialectal temporal terms. This tension reveals the predicament of local temporal orders in the process of modernization. On the one hand, the life wisdom embedded in “中时” – synchronicity with nature and flexibility – provides cultural resources for reflecting on the “time anxiety” brought by modernity. On the other hand, under the pressure of standardized time, this term is also in flux. The younger generation tends to use Mandarin terms like “上午 (forenoon)” and “中午 (noon)”, or their understanding of “中时” gradually gravitates towards precision. This dynamic process vividly reflects how different “temporal grammars” collide, adapt, and evolve in the context of globalization.

Through the case analysis of “中时” in the Hong'an dialect, it becomes evident that local temporal orders are deeply imprinted in the vague temporal expressions of dialects. The vagueness of “中时” is not linguistic imprecision, but rather a projection of the production rhythms and life patterns of Hong'an's traditional agrarian society onto language – it is a knowledge system adapted to local practices. It embodies a time-cognition mode centred on events and closely connected to natural cycles, providing a typical example for understanding the interactive relationship between language, cognition, and culture.

Conclusion

This paper is dedicated to research of the vague temporal terms in Hubei dialects, systematically exploring the concrete manifestations and cultural connotations of local temporal orders within language. The study reveals that the vagueness of dialectal temporal terms is not a cognitive limitation or an expressive flaw, but rather a form of knowledge rooted in local practice. Through deep integration with natural rhythms, agricultural activities, and daily customs, it constructs a temporal order characterized by elasticity, contextualization, and humanistic care. Under the impact of globalization and standardized temporal systems, this order faces the risk of marginalization, yet it also provides valuable local wisdom for reflecting upon modern conceptions of time.

In Hubei dialects, expressions such as “中时 (*zhōngshí*)”, “煞黑 (*shàhēi*)”, and “过宴 (*guò yàn*)” not only carry rich regional cultural memory but also embody the dynamic interaction among language, cognition, and environment. The semantic vagueness and flexibility of these temporal terms meet the contextualized needs for time in traditional agrarian societies and reflect a harmonious symbiotic relationship between humans and nature. However, with the acceleration of modern life rhythms and the widespread adoption of standardized time, the contexts for using dialectal temporal terms are gradually shrinking, and the cognitive patterns behind them are facing reconstruction. This change represents not merely a loss at the linguistic level but a decline of an entire local knowledge system.

Future research could further employ methods from sociolinguistics and cognitive semantics to deeply investigate the variations in the use of dialectal temporal terms across different generations, urban-rural environments, and social groups. It should focus on their trajectories of change and mechanisms of adaptation within the modernization process. Simultaneously, the value of dialectal temporal terms as intangible cultural heritage for preservation and transmission should be emphasized, exploring their positive role in local cultural identity and ecological civilization construction. By understanding the “temporal grammar” within dialects, we can grasp the diversity of the Chinese language more comprehensively and, moreover, rediscover the humanistic significance of time and the diverse rhythms of life within the rapidly evolving modern society.

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