

A COGNITIVE-SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF THE CHINESE ELEMENTS 才 (CÁI) AND 就 (JIÙ): COMMON AND DISTINCTIVE ASPECTS

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Abstract: This article offers a cognitive-semantic contrastive analysis of the scalar functional elements 才 (cái) and 就 (jiù) in Mandarin Chinese. Although traditional descriptions treat these units as «adverbs» or «particles», their core function is to focus a constituent of the utterance and to express the speaker’s subjective evaluation relative to an expectation. The study draws on Lai’s «rejected expectations» model, Fauconnier’s theory of pragmatic scales and Langacker’s notion of construal. The analysis reveals the shared cognitive basis of the two elements (positioning on a scale, rejection of an expectation, subjectivity) and their principal difference - directionality on the scale: 才 locates the asserted value higher than expected (later / more / harder), whereas 就 locates it lower (earlier / less / easier). The rendering of this contrast in Uzbek translation is also considered.

Keywords: scalar functional element, cognitive semantics, rejected expectation, subjectivity, focus, pragmatic scale, translation equivalence, Chinese, Uzbek

INTRODUCTION

In the grammatical structure of the Chinese language, the adverbial elements 才 (cái) and 就 (jiù) occupy a special position. At first glance, these units appear to function as simple adverbs of time or degree; however, their actual functions are far more complex: they serve to highlight a particular component of a sentence (focusing) and express the speaker’s evaluation in relation to a previously established expectation (预期, yùqī). For this reason, in modern linguistics they are interpreted as scalar functional elements (梯级算子) [7; 625].

The core of the problem lies in the polysemy of 才 and 就: their temporal, restrictive (quantitative), conditional, and emphatic uses differ considerably from one another. Traditional lexical-semantic descriptions are unable to connect these usages within a single framework and often treat them as unrelated “homonymous” meanings. Cognitive semantics, however, provides an explanation of this polysemy through a single abstract schema - the psychological scale represented in the speaker’s conceptualization [7; 626]. As Lai Huiling points out, all uses of 才 and 就 can be explained by the nature of the scale on which they operate and can be integrated into one common semantic structure.

The aim of this article is to conduct a comparative cognitive-semantic analysis of the elements 才 and 就, identify their shared cognitive basis and distinctive features, and demonstrate how these differences are reflected in translation into Uzbek. The study is based on a descriptive-comparative method, the concepts of construal, subjectification, and pragmatic scale in cognitive semantics, as well as the analysis of practical examples.

Cognitive semantics studies language as an inseparable part of general human cognitive abilities and considers meaning not as a reflection of objective reality, but as the result of the speaker’s particular interpretation of reality (construal) [9; 116]. As Lakoff and Johnson have demonstrated, abstract concepts are often structured through spatial metaphors; for example, metaphorical mappings such as QUANTITY IS UP/DOWN and TIME IS SPACE are manifested in different domains of

language [8; 14]. This type of spatial-scalar conceptualization lies at the core of the semantics of 才 and 就.

Fauconnier introduced the concept of the pragmatic scale, showing that many linguistic units refer to sets of values ordered according to a certain parameter and that conclusions are drawn based on this scale [4; 353]. König, in turn, demonstrated that focus particles generate a set of alternative values associated with the focused component [6; 33]. 才 and 就 function in the same way: they compare the focused value with alternative values and position it at a specific point on the scale.

The theoretical foundation of this study is Lai Huiling’s model of “rejected expectations.” According to this model, 才 and 就 imply a change in the truth value of a proposition, and this change occurs at a point different from the one expected by the speaker [7; 630]. Biq clearly expresses this distinction: with 才, the affirmed value is located “higher” on the scale than the expected value, whereas with 就 it is located “lower” [2]. This opposition of “higher/lower” constitutes the main cognitive parameter distinguishing the two elements. Traugott’s theory of subjectification explains how these units historically develop from independent meanings into markers expressing the speaker’s evaluation [14; 35].

All uses of 才 are unified by a single cognitive schema: “the actual value is higher than the expected value.” In temporal usage, this principle is manifested as “lateness”:

他八点才来。

(tā bā diǎn cái lái)

“He only came at eight o’clock (although he was expected to come earlier).”

Here, the event of arrival occurs later than the time expected by the speaker - that is, it appears at a “higher” point on the scale. The same direction is maintained in the domains of quantity and effort: 才 indicates that achieving the intended result requires more time or effort than expected:

我说了三遍，他才懂。

(wǒ shuō le sān biàn, tā cái dǒng)

“Only after I had said it three times did he understand.”

In conditional usage, 才 marks a necessary condition: in the construction 只有……才, the main event occurs only when the condition is fulfilled:

只有努力，才能成功。

(zhǐyǒu nǔlì, cái néng chénggōng)

“Only through effort can one achieve success.”

From the perspective of force dynamics, 才 can be interpreted as a marker of resistance or delay [12; 409]: the result is not achieved easily but requires additional effort or time. Therefore, 才 often carries the connotation of a subjective evaluation such as “insufficiency,” “lack,” or “worse than expected” [17; 129].

In contrast, 就 is unified by the principle that “the actual value is lower than the expected value.” In temporal usage, this principle is manifested as “earliness” or “immediacy”:

他八点就来了。

(tā bā diǎn jiù lái le)

“He had already arrived at eight o’clock (although he was expected to come later).”

In the domain of quantity, 就 indicates that sufficiency is achieved with fewer resources than expected:

三个人就够了。

(sān gè rén jiù gòu le)

“Three people are enough (although more people were expected to be needed).”

In conditional usage, 就 expresses a sufficient condition: in the construction 只要.....就, the fulfillment of the condition is enough for the main event to occur:

只要努力，就能成功。

(zhǐyào nǔlì, jiù néng chénggōng)

“If one makes an effort, one can succeed.”

From the perspective of force dynamics, 就 expresses ease, natural flow, and the absence of obstacles: the result is achieved with less effort and earlier than expected. Therefore, 就 is generally associated with a positive subjective evaluation such as “sufficiency,” “ease,” or “better than expected” [5; 61].

Cognitive-semantic analysis shows that 才 and 就 share a number of common features. First, both are scalar functional elements that operate on a pragmatic scale organized according to a certain parameter (time, quantity, degree, or condition) [4; 356]. Second, both function as focus markers, relating to a specific component of the sentence and implying its alternative values [6; 34]. Third, both reject an expectation - that is, they indicate a discrepancy between reality and the situation anticipated by the speaker; in this sense, they serve as means of expressing subjective evaluation [7; 631]. Fourth, both require a reference (expected) value: without this value, the meaning of these elements cannot be realized. Finally, both elements have undergone a process of grammaticalization, developing from independent meanings into subjective markers that express the speaker’s perspective [14; 40].

Despite their shared cognitive foundation, 才 and 就 contrast with each other in several important parameters. The main difference lies in their direction on the scale: 才 places the affirmed value above the expected value, whereas 就 places it below the expected value [2]. Other contrasts arise from this fundamental distinction, and they are summarized in the following table.

Table 1.

Distinctive Parameters of the Elements 才 and 就

Parameter	才 (cái)	就 (jiù)
Direction on the scale	higher than expected	lower than expected
Temporal meaning	lateness (“only then,” “not until”)	earliness, immediacy (“as soon as,” “already”)
Quantity / effort	more is required	less is sufficient
Type of condition	只有...才 - necessary condition	只要...就 - sufficient condition
Completion marker (了)	usually does not combine with it	often combines with it
Evaluation polarity	insufficiency / lack	sufficiency / ease

There is no single grammatical form in Uzbek that directly corresponds to 才 and 就. Their cognitive meanings are conveyed through various means, including affixes (-oq/-yoq, -gina), auxiliary words (faqat “only,” atigi “just/merely,” zo’rg’a “barely,” endigina “just now,” allaqachon “already”), and syntactic constructions. The meaning of 就 related to “earliness/sufficiency” is often expressed through the affix -oq/-yoq or the construction “...sa (bas/kifoya)” (“if..., it is enough”), whereas the meaning of 才 related to “lateness/insufficiency” is expressed through units such as

“endigina” (“just now”), “...gandan keyingina” (“only after...”), “faqat ...sagina” (“only if...”), or “zo’rg’a” (“barely”).

From the perspective of translation pragmatics, the main task is not lexical correspondence but the preservation of the expectation-rejection component. As Nida emphasizes, equivalence should be dynamic, meaning that it should recreate the effect of the text on the receptor [11; 159]. If this component is omitted, the pragmatic failure described by Thomas occurs - a translation that is grammatically correct but pragmatically inaccurate [13; 94]. The levels of denotative and pragmatic equivalence proposed by Komissarov and Barkhudarov provide a basis for maintaining balance in this process [16; 51].

Cognitive-semantic analysis shows that although the Chinese elements 才 and 就 appear different on the surface, they are based on a single underlying cognitive mechanism: the placement of the actual value on the speaker’s conceptual scale in relation to the expected value. Their common foundation includes scalarity, association with focus, rejection of expectations, and subjectivity.

The main parameter distinguishing them is the direction on the scale: 才 represents a value higher than expected (late, more, difficult), whereas 就 represents a value lower than expected (early, less, easy). This single difference explains all other contrasts in temporal meaning, types of conditions, completion, and evaluative polarity.

These conclusions provide a theoretical basis for accurately conveying the subjective-pragmatic meanings of these elements in Chinese language teaching and in Chinese–Uzbek translation practice.

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