To appear in *Language, Context and Text* 8(1): 85–115.
https://doi.org/10.1075/langct.00101.zha

Shunting in grammatical description: Are declarative and interrogative clear-cut categories in Khorchin Mongolian?[1]

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Abstract

The paper offers two alternative descriptions of Khorchin Mongolian interpersonal grammar around the issue of whether the language makes a clear-cut distinction between declarative and interrogative. The discussion is grounded mainly in the co-occurrence of clause-final particles and the different tense suffixes we observe in Khorchin Mongolian conversations. The paper additionally proposes a model of dialogue that complements Halliday's characterisation in terms of giving and demanding of information or goods-&-services. It conceptualises conversation as a site for the interactive positioning of interlocutors in terms of their knowledge and responsibility, which is foregrounded in the interpersonal grammar of Khorchin Mongolian. In doing so, the paper alerts to the dangers of mistaking hypotheses with assumptions and highlights the importance of shunting in systemic functional language description and typology.

Keywords: interpersonal grammar, Khorchin Mongolian, declarative, interrogative, shunting

1. Setting the scene

In the final chapter of *Language typology: A functional perspective* (Caffarel et. al. 2004), synthesising findings from the book, Matthiessen observes that "all languages seem to differentiate mood categories like declarative, polar interrogative and imperative; this is certainly true of the small number of languages described in this book [i.e. French, German, Japanese, Tagalog, Chinese, Vietnamese, Telugu, Pitjantjatjara]" (Matthiessen 2004: 611). This observation is also seen in later typological studies in systemic functional linguistics (hereafter SFL), such as Teruya et al. (2007) on Danish, French, Spanish, Òkó, Thai and Japanese, Mwinlaaru et. al. (2018) on Niger-Congo languages and Li (2023) on a sample of 60 languages.

Some recent descriptions of individual languages—e.g. Korean, Mandarin Chinese and Scottish Gaelic—to some extent challenge this generalisation, at least the distinction between declarative and polar interrogative. In Korean, for example, Shin and colleagues (Shin 2018; Kim et al. 2023; Shin & Martin 2023, 2024; Martin this volume) argue that the primary distinction in the interpersonal clause grammar is between [formal] and [informal] in the FORMALITY system, with the former oriented to "status relations in the negotiation of dialogic exchanges" and the latter to "establishing common ground for affiliation" (Kim et al. 2023: 109). The distinction between declarative and polar interrogative is made grammatically only in formal clauses through culminating suffixes in the verbal group. In contrast, comparable

[1] An earlier version of the paper was presented at the 50th International Systemic Functional Congress held at the University of Glasgow. I am grateful for the helpful questions and comments I received from the audience. I also would like to thank the guest editor Prof Tom Bartlett and the anonymous reviewer for their detailed comments on the earlier version of the paper, which greatly improved the clarity of my arguments.

word resources are used in informal clauses to distinguish choices in a system called STANCE, which interlocutors draw on to establish common grounds for agreement. The system is interpreted in terms of Martin and White's (2005) ENGAGEMENT system as resources "for contracting the play of voices around an exchange of meaning by enhancing the grounds for accepting the proposition" (Kim et al. 2023: 124).

Similar to informal clauses in Korean, Wang (2021) notes that in Mandarin Chinese there is no grammatical evidence for distinguishing interrogative from declarative. He argues for an ENGAGEMENT-oriented system simultaneous to the [indicative/imperative] distinction, which offers choices for tabling propositions or proposals as either negotiable or not negotiable through clause-final particles, opening up or closing down the dialogic space. Such ENGAGEMENT oriented resource is also described for Scottish Gaelic in Bartlett (2021), where a distinction between [assertive] and [non-assertive] is made for [indicative] (instead of [declarative] and [interrogative]). Non-assertive clauses make use of dependent forms of the verbs and what is called "mood clitics" to construe propositions as open to alternatives; assertive clauses, on the other hand, draw on the independent forms without "mood clitics" to construe a proposition as uncontested.

The lack of grammatical distinction between declarative and polar interrogative in some languages is not a novel finding in itself. In Dryer's (2013) survey of 'polar questions' in 955 languages on WALS Online, 174 languages are identified as without any grammatical marker of polar interrogative, of which 173 use 'interrogative intonation' and one language—Chalcatongo Mixtec (Oto-Manguean; Mexico)—does not have a declarative-interrogative distinction. In the SFL literature, McGregor (1984, 1990, 2021: 31) argues that there are neither grammatical nor prosodic distinctions between declarative and interrogative clauses in Gooniyandi. On the other hand, in languages such as Chilean Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese, as they are described in Quiroz (2008, 2013, 2018, 2021) and Figueredo (2021), although the systemic contrast between declarative and polar interrogative is established in the lexicogrammatical stratum, the distinction is made phonologically rather than grammatically. The establishment of the declarative/interrogative grammatical distinction based on phonological motivation is also adopted in Kim et al.'s (2023: 121–124) description of the Korean INFORMAL MOOD, where intonation pertains not only to the identification of declarative and polar interrogative, but also to that of imperative. These studies foreground the complex interaction between discourse semantics, lexicogrammar and phonology when it comes to interpersonal grammar (also see e.g. Halliday and Greaves 2008, O'Grady 2020, Rose 2021).

Confining myself to the content plane of language—discourse semantics and lexicogrammar, I will offer two alternative descriptions of the interpersonal grammar of Khorchin Mongolian, a dialect of Mongolian spoken in northeastern Inner Mongolia. In Description I (developed in Sections 2 and 3), I start with Halliday's (1984, 1985, 1994) assumption that "the nature of dialogue" is in giving and demanding information or goods-&-services, and discuss the possibility of setting up a distinction between declarative and interrogative in Khorchin Mongolian in their systemic environment. In Description II (developed in Section 4), I reflect on the interactions between the systems in Description I and offer a complementary model of dialogue as a site for the interactive positioning of interlocutors. Drawing on this complementary model, I evaluate the possible evidence against the declarative/interrogative distinction in Khorchin Mongolian and instead argue that the interpersonal grammar of Khorchin Mongolian can be understood with respect to the process of settling propositions. The alternative descriptions offered in this paper underscore SFL's emphasis on "shunting"

(Halliday 1961, 1992) in developing systemic functional language descriptions, i.e., between discourse and grammar, between clause and word, and between system and instance.

2. Description I: exchanging information and goods-&-services

In describing interpersonal grammar, one of the basic assumptions we usually make, following Halliday's speech functions, is that people use language to make statements, ask questions, and issue commands, which arise from the roles we take and the commodities we exchange in dialogues.

> In most general terms, at the level of social context, dialogue can be interpreted as a process of exchange. It is an exchange involving two variables: (1) the nature of the commodity that is being exchanged [i.e. information or goods-&-services], and (2) the roles that are defined by the exchange process [i.e. giving or demanding]. (Halliday 1984: 11)

This characterisation has been proven very useful in describing speech functions and provides a general point of departure for the description of interpersonal clause grammar. For example, in the Khorchin Mongolian dialogue presented in (1) below, the aunt's (A) move is a demand for service, which is rejected by the uncle (U), a "discretionary alternative" to the "desired response" (Halliday 1985: 69). This is followed by another move from the uncle where he explains his response by giving information about his inability to carry out the action. The transcription scheme and the abbreviations used for glossing examples in Khorchin Mongolian are given in the appendix.

(1) The interlocutors are making steamed dumplings.

a. A:	*ën*	*haalëg*	*deer*	*tör-ul-òd*	*tèba-ø*
	PROX	steamer	on	circle-CAUS-CONV[2]	place-2
	'Place (the dumpling) in a circular manner on the steamer.'				

b. U:	*bi*	*tèb-h=uè*
	1SG	place-NPST.PTCP=NEG
	'I will not place (them).'	

c. U:	*bi*	*chèd-h=uè*
	1SG	know.how-NPST.PTCP=NEG
	'I do not know how.'	

In contrast to (1), the initiating move in the exchange in (2) is about information. The government official (GO) demands the information, and the rural resident (RR) gives the information. Chinese loanwords that maintain their original forms are underlined in the transcription lines.

[2] Converbal suffixes in Khorchin Mongolian mark a number of logico-semantic relations, forming complexes at different ranks. The paper glosses them simply as CONV 'converb' since this part of the grammar is underexplored from an SFL perspective. In this particular case, the two verbs form a verb complex because neither of them can be expanded into a verbal group. The first verb specifies the state resulting from the activity construed by the second verb.

(2) The government official is calculating the annual income of the rural resident's family and asking about the price of the sheep they sold.

a. GO: *hëdi* *hold-s* *ii*
how.much sell-PST.PTCP PTCL
'How much did you sell?'

b. RR: *babai* *duo*
eight.hundred plus
'Eight hundred plus yuan.'

The clause in (2b) is elliptical, as is common in response moves. We can potentially recover the ellipsed elements as in (3).

(3) RR: *babai* *duo* *hold-j*
eight.hundred plus sell-PST
'(We) sold (the sheep) for eight hundred plus yuan.'

A general observation we could make based on the limited amount of data we have in (1) to (3) is that in Khorchin Mongolian a demand for goods-&-services is realised by clauses that are marked for PERSON—e.g. the second person gloss in (1a) while giving and demanding information involve clauses that are marked for TENSE—e.g. the non-past tense in (1b) and (1c) and the past tense in (2a) and (3). This is certainly the most direct, or the unmarked way of realising these speech functions in Khorchin Mongolian.

We will use the labels of [imperative] and [indicative] to refer to these two types of clauses respectively as options in the interpersonal clause system of MOOD. As it is introduced above, the distinction between the two is established in the verbal group, making it an interpersonally significant element in the clause. We will borrow the term Predicator from Halliday's description of English (see Halliday & Matthiessen 2014) to refer to the interpersonal clause function of the Khorchin Mongolian verbal group. This simple system is given in Figure 1.

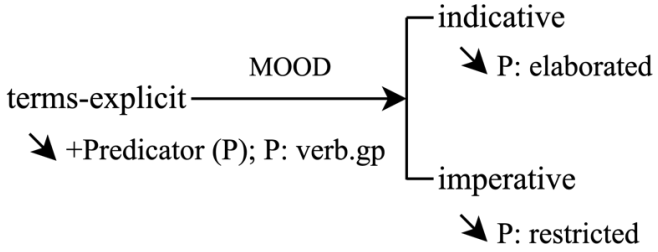

Figure 1. A basic MOOD system in Khorchin Mongolian

Two notes regarding the system in Figure 1:

i. The entry condition of the system is called [terms-explicit] as opposed to [terms-implicit] to capture the distinction between clauses that require a verbal group and those that do not. When there is no verbal group, information about TENSE and MODALITY is absent. The terms of negotiation of the propositions or proposals presented through such clauses are typically read as anchored in the time of speaking without any explicit speaker assessment. For further discussion of this point with examples, see Zhang (2020a: Section 4.1.2).

ii. The verbal groups realising the Predicator are termed [elaborated] and [restricted]. Elaborated verbal groups can select for TENSE, POLARITY, MODALITY and ASPECT; restricted verbal groups, on the other hand, mainly select for PERSON. The term "restricted" is borrowed from Quiroz's (2013) description of the Chilean Spanish verbal group. For a systemic functional account of the Khorchin Mongolian verbal group, see Zhang (2020b).

The interpersonal structures of (1a) and (1b) as instantiations of the choices in the MOOD system are analysed in (4) and (5).

(4) *ën* *haalëg* *deer* *tör-ul-òd* *tèba-ø*
PROX steamer on circle-CAUS-CONV place-2

Predicator
restricted verbal group

'Place (the dumpling) in a circular manner on the steamer.'

(5) *bi* *tèb-h=uè*
1SG place-NPST.PTCP=NEG

Predicator
elaborated verbal group

'I will not place (them).'

Zooming in on [indicative], it can be further divided into [declarative]—as in (1b), (1c), and (3)—and [interrogative]—as in (2a). While interrogative clauses are marked by particles (e.g. *ii* in (2a)), the declarative clauses we have encountered so far do not (but see Section 3 below). Additionally, the interrogative clause in (2a) enquires information about a particular element—an elemental interrogative—and thus involves a question word *hëdi*. In contrast, the interrogative clause in (6a) below enquires the polarity of the proposition—a polar interrogative, which does not require a question word aside from the clause-final particle *mè*.

(6) The government official is making sure that the rural resident received the subsidies from the government.

a. GO: *jèrgan* *hön* *ug-sën* *mè*
six sheep give-PST.PTCP PTCL
'Did (the local officials) give you six sheep?'

b. RR: *ee* *bèè-na*
INTJ COP-NPST
'Yes, there is.'

Following Wang's (2020) description of Classical Tibetan, we use Interrogator to refer to the clause function of the particles in interrogative clauses and use Inquirer for the interpersonal clause function of question words in elemental interrogative clauses. The system network in Figure 2 extends [indicative] in terms of delicacy along these lines. Following Matthiessen and Halliday (2009) and Martin (2013), the systemic conventions are: + 'insert function'; ^ 'sequence function'; # 'unit boundary'.

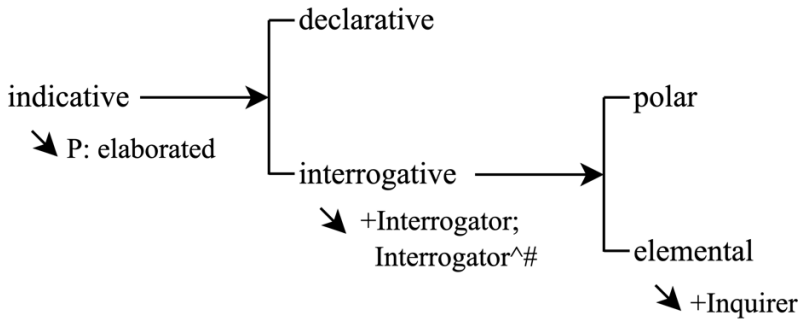

Figure 2. More delicate options for indicative clauses in Khorchin Mongolian

In (7) and (8) below, we apply the structural analyses to (2a) and (6a).

(7) *hëdi* *hold-s* *ii*
how.much sell-PST.PTCP PTCL

Inquirer	Predicator	Interrogator
nominal group	verbal group	particle

'How much did you sell?'

(8) *jèrgan* *hön* *ug-sën* *mè*
six sheep give-PST.PTCP PTCL

Predicator	Interrogator
verbal group	particle

'Did (the local officials) give you six sheep?'

3. Description 1 (continued): negotiating propositions

In Section 2, we noted that in Khorchin Mongolian, an interrogative clause requires an Interrogator realised by certain clause-final particles. The examples of declarative clauses we examined so far, on the other hand, do not require particles. It is, in fact, possible for declarative clauses to end with a particle, which indicates the speaker's assessment of their and their addressee's knowledge of information, albeit optional. A notable pattern of the clause-final particles in Khorchin Mongolian is that they co-occur with different tense suffixes, either participial or non-participial (Zhang 2021a). The particles I identified in my conversational data are listed below in Table 1 with respect to the more delicate indicative options. Complex forms NEG *bixi da* and NEG *doi* are excluded because the NEG component would require a participial tense suffix in the preceding verb, and thus there is no choice as far as the tense suffix is concerned.

Table 1. The co-occurrence of tense suffixes and clause-final particles in Khorchin Mongolian

Choices in MOOD	**Tense suffixes**	**Particles**	**Informal gloss**
declarative	non-participial	*xè*	I know and I assume you also know
		gëne	information from hearsay
		gën xè	information from hearsay + surprising
		hoi	information from direct experience
		xidoi	I know and you should have known
		xide	inferred information
		shoi	surprising information

	participial	*sho*	asserting knowledge
		xi	noting information
		ba	uncertain information
		shëmu	guessed information
		xide	obvious information
		waiyang	shared information
polar interrogative	non-participial	*uu*	direct question, often elliptical
	participial	*mè*	direct question
		mu	'either/or' question
elemental interrogative	non-participial	*da*	curious question
	participial	*ii*	direct question
		mè	resuming question

As the informal gloss indicates, these particles in Khorchin Mongolian are related to epistemic related categories, such as 'evidentiality' in the sense of direct and indirect "source of knowledge" (e.g. Aikhenvald 2004, 2018; Boye 2018; San Roque 2019), 'epistemic modality' in the sense of speakers' "degree of confidence" in a proposition (e.g. Boye 2012, 2014), and 'engagement', which accounts for the broad field of "grammaticalised intersubjectivity" in the typological literature (e.g. Evans et al. 2018a, 2018b) (and hence different from, but not unrelated to, the use of the term in APPRAISAL in SFL). However, these particles fall into a unified paradigm and do not readily fit into any one of these categories. Below I will exemplify the uses of some of these particles in conversations, first for declarative and then for interrogative.

3.1 Co-occurrence of clause-final particles and participial tense suffixes in declaratives

For declarative clauses, when the particles *waiyang* and *xide* are used, the propositions are construed as "settled" (Shin 2018) between the interlocutors, i.e. that is the interlocutors accept the validity of the information. In particular, a clause with *waiyang* construes a proposition as 'shared' information and is often used to support another proposition in conversation, as in (9).

(9) A more complete version of (2)

a. GO: *hëdi* *hold-s* *ii*
how.much sell-PST.PTCP PTCL
'How much did you sell?'

b. RR: *babai* *duo*
eight.hundred plus
'Eight hundred plus yuan.'

c. GO: *òò*
INTJ
'Oh.'

d. RR: *hèb~hèmda*
RED~cheap
'very cheap.'

e. PR: *lò* *hön* *sè* *sanbai* *duo* *yuan* *tol-**sën*** ***waiyang***
grown sheep only three.hundred plus yuan reach-**PST.PTCP** **SHARED**
'The grown sheep only reached three hundred plus yuan.'

The rural resident's move in (9e) supports the claim that they sold their sheep at a very low price in (9d). Different from the proposition-supporting function of clauses with *waiyang*, when a clause involves the co-occurrence of the participial tense suffix and *xide* it is often used to point out established information, e.g. the interlocutors both witnessed an event or heard someone say something. In (10), for example, the niece teases the uncle for not sticking to what he claimed by reporting what he said back to him.

(10) An extended version of (1)

a. A: *ën* *haalëg* *deer* *tör-ul-òd* *tèba-ø*
PROX steamer on circle-CAUS-CONV place-2
'Place (the dumpling) in a circular manner on the steamer.'

b. U: *bi* *tèb-h=uè*
1SG place-NPST.PTCP=NEG
'I will not place (them).'

c. U: *bi* *chèd-h=uè*
1SG know.how-NPST.PTCP=NEG
'I do not know how.'

(Sometime later, U was putting the dumplings on the steamer as instructed, on which the nephew (N) comments:)

d. N: *bai-j* *chèd-h=uè* *gë-**sën*** ***xide***
place-CONV know.how-NPST.PTCP=NEG say-**PST.PTCP** **OBVIOUS**
'(You) said (you) do not know how to place (them).'

In contrast to the 'settled' reading of *waiyang* and *xide* used with the participial tense suffixes, the co-occurrence of *shëmu* and the participial tense suffixes expresses that the speaker is not certain about the information, and they do not think that the addressee would have any input, as in (11).

(11) The government official is trying to figure out the group of people who visited the rural resident's (RR) family some days ago. After giving information about the uniform the visitors were wearing, the RR offers his guess about one or two of the visitors' ethnic identities.

a. RR: *ngul* *hòyir=ën* *irgën* *ba* *haoxiang*
and two=TOP Han MAYBE seems
'And it seems two of them are Han Chinese.'

b. RR: *nëg* *ke=gën* *irgën* ***shëmu***
one MEASURE=TOP Han **NOT.SURE**
'Maybe one of them is Han Chinese.'

The example in (11b) does not have a verbal group, as it is for relational clauses in Khorchin Mongolian that construe states of affairs at the time of speaking. We can potentially adjust the clause to be about a past state, as in (12), for which we need to use a participial past tense suffix. Note that the clause is odd because it implies that the ethnic identity of the person undergoes change. It is given here simply to show a point about the co-occurrence of the particle *shëmu* with a participial tense suffix because I do not have better examples in my corpus.

(12) *nëg* *ke*=*gën* *irgën* *bèè-**sën*** ***shëmu***
one MEASURE=TOP Han COP-**PST.PTCP** **NOT.SURE**
'Maybe one of them was Han Chinese.'

If we assume that declarative clauses with particles co-occurring with the participial tense suffixes share a coherent meaning, we might describe them as presenting a proposition as 'not for negotiation', either because they are seen as established facts (as in the case of *waiyang* and *xide*) or because they lack sufficient evidence to be meaningfully engaged with (as in the case of *shëmu*).

3.2 Co-occurrence of clause-final particles and non-participial tense suffixes in declaratives

Contrary to the 'not for negotiation' reading of clauses that feature the co-occurrence of clause final particles and participial tense suffixes, clauses in which clause final particles co-occur with non-participial tense suffixes present a proposition as 'being negotiated' or 'negotiable'. This is illustrated through the particle *xide* in (13) below (cf. a different use of *xide* in (10)), which is an extended version of (11).

(13) An extended version of (11)
The government official (GO) is trying to figure out the group of people who visited the rural resident's (RR) family.

a. GO: *hën* *ir-s* *ii*
who come-PST.PTCP PTCL
'Who came?'

b. RR: *gorëb* *durëb* *hò* *tèn-h*=*uè*
three four all know-NPST.PTCP=NEG
'Three or four, (I) don't know any of them.'

c. RR: *tër* *udër* *mandël* *ge*=*nè*=*tè* *chama*=*tè* *chog* *òsh-sën* *tër* *jalu* *bas* *bèè-n*
DIST day NAME brother=GEN=DAT 2SG=COM together go-PST.PTCP DIST young person also COP-NPST
'The young person with whom you went to brother Mandel's is also there (with them).'

d. RR: *chirëg*=*nè* *ëmëd* *deel* *ëms-j* *èè-j*
military=GEN trouser clothes wear-CONV COP-PST
'He was wearing a military uniform.'

e. RR: *ngul bas nëg chirëg=nè ëmëd deel ëms-j èè-h hun bèè-na*
and also one military=GEN trouser clothes wear-CONV COP-NPST.PTCP person COP-NPST
'And (there is) another person who is also wearing military uniform.'

f. GO: *wuzhuangbu=nè hun ir-**j** **xide***
People's.Armed.Force.Department=GEN people come-**PST** **INFER**
'So officials from People's Armed Force Department came.'

g. RR: *ngul hòyir=ën irgën **ba** haoxiang*
and two=TOP Han **MAYBE** seems
'And it seems two of them are Han Chinese.'

h. RR: *nëg ke=gën irgën shëmu*
one MEASURE=TOP Han NOT.SURE
'Maybe one of them is Han Chinese.'

The GO's proposition in (13f) is arrived at based on the evidence provided by the RR regarding the uniform the visitors were wearing. It is 'negotiable' in the sense that it could potentially be challenged in the face of new evidence, e.g. there is no record showing that officials from People's Armed Force Department visited the village. Similarly, the proposition the RR puts forward in (13g) is likely based on his observation of the visitors, e.g. the language they used.

We can further generalise from the observation so far that declarative clauses without any clause-final particles (such as 13c–e) are somewhere between those that explicitly present a proposition as non-negotiable and those that explicitly present a proposition as negotiable as far as negotiability is concerned.[3] Such bare declaratives typically take the non-participial tense suffixes.[4] For a more extreme case of non-negotiable propositions, we can include embedded clauses that function as Qualifiers in nominal groups, as in (13c) and (13e).[5] I thus propose a cline ordered in terms of the negotiability of the propositions construed in a Khorchin Mongolian clause in Table 2.

Table 2. A cline of negotiability for Khorchin Mongolian clauses

least negotiable						**most negotiable**
embedded clause with a	>	declarative clause with co-occurrence of a particle and a	>	bare declarative with non-	>	declarative clause with co-occurrence of a particle and a

[3] The reviewer pointed out to me that the bare declaratives could alternatively be interpreted as not marking negotiability. I am inclined to place bare declaratives on the cline because such clauses are still presented as negotiable via the Predicator. What is not explicitly marked is the way interlocutors are positioned with respect to their knowledge of the information at stake. Additionally, bare declaratives may also take the participial tense suffix (see footnote 3 below), which would table a proposition as less negotiable. The cline proposed here remains contestable and needs to be verified based on more naturally occurring interactions.
[4] Based on my native speaker intuition, it is possible for bare declaratives to take the participial tense suffixes to present a piece of information that is obviously shared between interlocutors. But I have not encountered this use in the data I transcribed so far and will leave it aside for another occasion.
[5] For an extended description of the nominal group systems in Khorchin Mongolian, see Zhang (2021d).

participial suffix	participial tense suffix	participial tense suffix	non-participial tense suffix

Borrowing terms from recent work on Korean (Shin 2018; Kim et al. 2023; Shin & Martin 2023, 2024; Martin this volume), we call clauses that feature the participial tense suffixes [non-settling] and those that feature the non-participial tense suffixes [settling].[6] The system that affords the choice is called STANCE in Figure 3. The system can potentially be understood as the grammaticalisation of speaker stance.

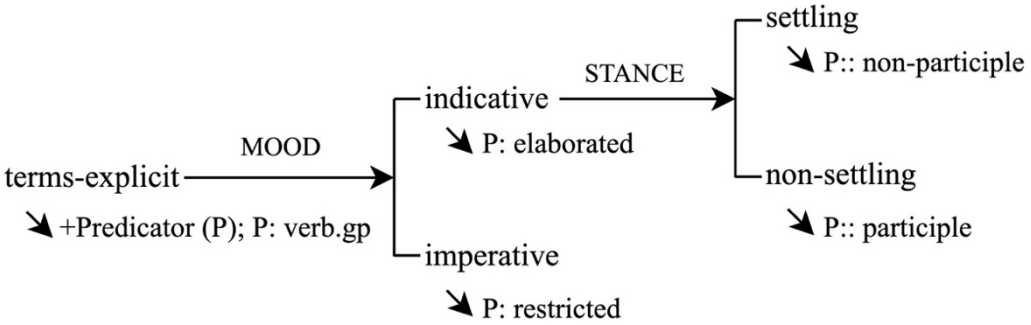

Figure 3. STANCE as a more delicate indicative system

In the realisation statement of settling and non-settling clauses in Figure 3, I use double colon (::) to show that there is a preselection relationship between non-adjacent ranks (cf. Halliday (2009), where the symbol is used to mean 'classify lexically as', and Martin (2013), where the symbol is used to mean 'lexicalise'). In this case, the realisations of the clause rank features preselect features at word rank, e.g. the Predicator realising the feature [settling] at *clause* rank preselects a *word* rank feature [non-participial]. A preselection relationship between adjacent ranks is shown via a colon (:), e.g. the Predicator realising the *clause* rank feature [indicative] preselects a *group* rank feature [elaborated].

3.3 The STANCE system and interrogative clauses

As shown in Table 1, similar to clause-final particles in declarative clauses, particles in interrogative clauses can be categorised based on their co-occurrence with the participial and non-participial tense suffixes. They are listed again below as a reminder.

i. Particles that co-occur with non-participial tense suffixes in interrogative clauses (i.e. settling)
    a. polar interrogative: *uu*
    b. elemental interrogative: *da*
ii. Particles that co-occur with participial tense suffixes in interrogative clauses (i.e. non-settling)
    a. polar interrogative: *mè, mu*
    b. elemental interrogative: *ii, mè*

[6] The distinction in Korean is between [settling] and [settled], capturing cases where a proposition is presented as either "case open" or "case closed" (Shin 2018: 29). The term 'settled' does not capture the co-occurrence of clause-final particles and participial tense suffixes in Khorchin Mongolian because for *shëmu* (see discussions around (11)), which co-occur with a participial tense suffix, the proposition is presented with little confidence and cannot be meaningfully engaged with. In addition, the [settling/non-settling] distinction is also relevant to different types of interrogatives that occur at different places of an exchange in settling a proposition (see Section 3.3).

We will illustrate how the [settling] and [non-settling] opposition works with respect to interrogative clauses below. In the examples below, the relevant particles are glossed as either STL 'settling' or NSTL 'non-settling' instead of the generic PTCL 'particle' as we did in the examples above. For a detailed discussion of these particles, see Zhang (2020a: Section 4.2.3).

First, settling interrogatives. This is exemplified through a conversation between an aunt (A) and her nephew (N) in (14), who are making dumplings. Before this exchange, the nephew says that they have made enough dumplings, in response to which the aunt requests that the nephew finish all the dumplings.

(14) The nephew is helping his aunt make dumplings.

a. A: *hòni* *id-ø* *aa* *tiim* *bòl*
all eat-2 EMP like.that COND
'If so, eat them all.'

b. N: *hòni* *id-j* *bar-h=uè* *bòl* *yaa-**n*** ***da***
all eat-CONV finish-NPST.PTCP=NEG COND what-**NPST** **STL**
'What if I don't finish them all?'

c. A: *fakuan*
fine
'(I) will fine (you).'

d. N: *hëdi* *fal-**n*** ***da***
how.much fine-**NPST** **STL**
'How much will (you) fine me?'

e. A: *uj-j* *èè-gad* *bòl-nò*
see-CONV COP-CONV decide-NPST
'(I) will decide based on what I see (i.e. It depends.)'

The exchange in (14) is of course not serious. The aunt and the nephew are teasing each other. However, in terms of the propositions they negotiate around 'punishing', we see that the interrogative clauses in (14b) and (14d) function to elaborate the proposition in the preceding move and hence are involved in the process of settling the propositions on the means of punishment. A similar use of a settling interrogative clause is also observed in polar interrogatives, as in (15).

(15) The two teachers are trying to swap their classes because one of them has an urgent business to attend to.

a. T1: *chi* *di* *jì* *jie* *ug-nj* *èè-ø* *mè*
2SG number which session give-FUT[7] COP-NPST.PTCP NSTL
'Which session are you going to give me?'

[7] The gloss here is not entirely accurate. The secondary future is realised analytically at group rank through the syntagm v-*ŋj èè*-, which cannot be easily presented in a morpheme-by-morpheme gloss. For a discussion of TENSE in the Khorchin Mongolian verbal group, see Zhang (2020b).

b. T2: *bi* ***uu***
1SG **STL**
'Me?'

c. T1: *ng*
INTJ
'Yes.'

d. T2: *di* *si*
number four
'Fourth session.'

e. T1: *si* *nianji=nè* ***uu***
four grade=GEN **STL**
'The fourth grade's?'

f. T2: *ee*
INTJ
'Yes.'

In (15b) and (15e), the clause is kept to a minimum, which is a feature of elaboration questions. In exchange structure terms, these are dependent moves, i.e. 'query' in Berry's systems (Berry 1981, 2016, 2017) and 'clarification' in Martin's systems (Martin 1992, 2018; Martin & Rose 2007). When the ellipsed components of the clauses are recovered, the particle *uu* co-occurs with the non-participial tense suffixes, as in (16).

(16) *si* *nianji=nè* *gi* *ug-ën* *gë-**j*** ***uu***
four grade=GEN ACC give-NPST mean-**PST** **STL**
'Do (you) mean to give me the fourth grade's (class)?'

In contrast, the non-settling interrogative clause with the particle *mè* in (15a) poses an independent question that initiates an exchange. Two more examples are given in (17) and (18) to show the use of non-settling interrogative clauses, respectively for elemental and polar.

(17) Repeating (2)

a. GO: *hëdi* *hold-**s*** ***ii***
how.much sell-**PST.PTCP** **NSTL**
'How much did you sell?'

b. RR: *babai* *duo*
eight.hundred plus
'Eight hundred plus yuan.'

(18) Two teachers of Mongolian are discussing if the sentence made by a student is correct.

a. T1: *ën* *uulbër* *taar-**ø*** ***mè***

PROX sentence correct-**NPST.PTCP** **NSTL**
'Is this sentence correct?'

b. T2: *taar-na*
correct-NPST
'(It) is correct.'

The discussion so far shows that both declarative and interrogative clauses can take clause-final particles, and they may co-occur with either participial or non-participial tense suffixes. To capture this pattern, we extend our interpersonal clause network as Figure 4, positioning STANCE as a system simultaneous to the declarative/interrogative distinction. We additionally set up an ASSESSMENT system with [declarative] as its entry condition to capture the distinction between declarative clauses that end with a particle and those that do not. Structurally, following Zhang (2020a, 2021b) the function label Positioner is used in assessed declarative clauses since the particles play a crucial role in positioning interlocutors with respect to their knowledge of information.

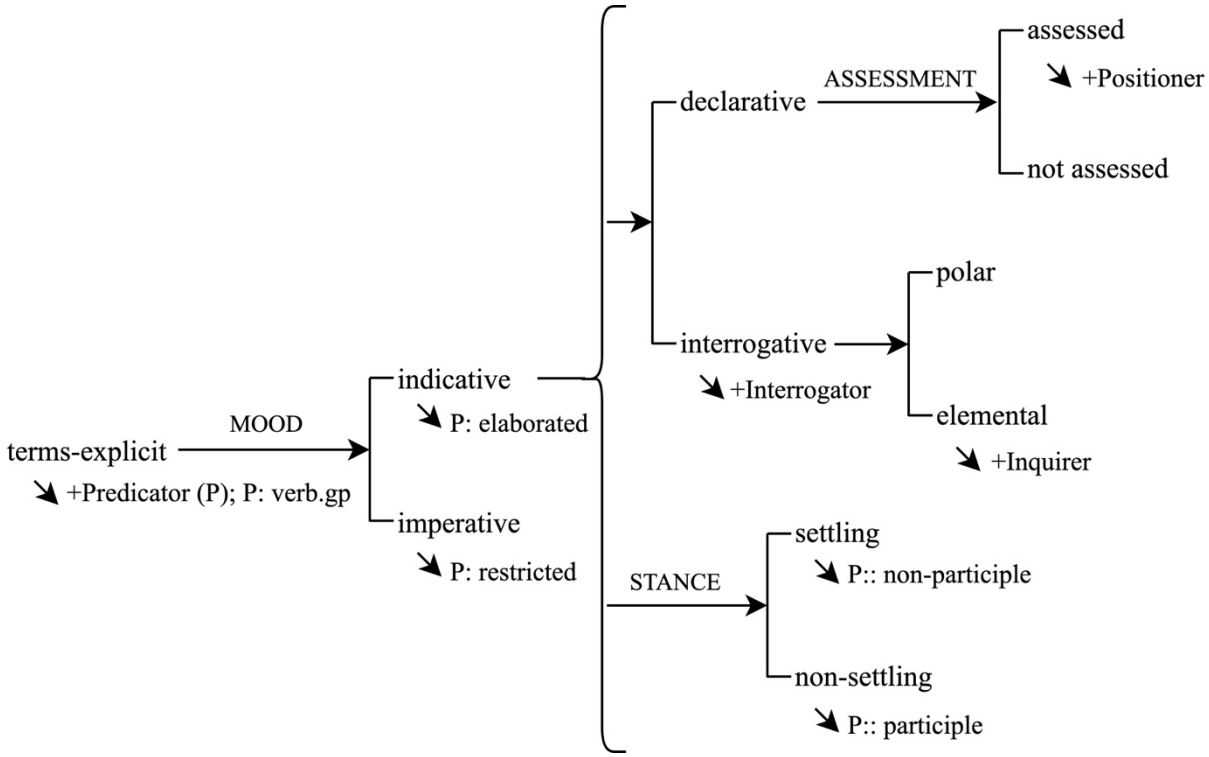

Figure 4. STANCE as simultaneous to the declarative/interrogative distinction

Structural analyses of assessed declarative clauses are exemplified in (19) and (20) (cf. the analyses of interrogative clauses in (7) and (8)).

(19) *lò* *hön* *sè* *sanbai* *duo* *yuan* *tol-sën* *waiyang*
grown sheep only three.hundred plus yuan reach-PST.PTCP SHARED

Predicator	Positioner
verbal group	Particle

'The grown sheep only reached three hundred plus yuan.'

(20) *wuzhuangbu=nè* *hun* *ir-j* *xide*

People's.Armed.Force.Department=GEN people come-PST INFER

Predicator	Positioner
verbal group	particle

'So officials from People's Armed Force Department came.'

4. Description II: degree of settledness

We started off with Halliday's characterisation of dialogue in terms of giving and demanding information or goods-&-services. This has led us to recognise in the grammar of Khorchin Mongolian a general distinction between [indicative] and [imperative], whose "grammatical reflex" (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 49) is the presence or absence of grammaticalised information about time and speaker judgement (i.e. via the system of TENSE, MODALITY and the like). Within [indicative], we made a distinction between [declarative] and [interrogative], corresponding to the distinction between giving and demanding information in discourse. The two are mainly distinguished on the ground that the former can potentially end with a Positioner, which is realised by "modal particles" (Zhang 2020c); the latter requires an Interrogator.

A similar description is offered in Zhang (2021b). The main difference is that therein the point of departure is Berry's (1981) conception of knowledge exchange and action exchange, and the grammatical resources of Khorchin Mongolian are described in relation to the structural elements they realise in an exchange. The basic model of interaction this framework offers is that our exchanges revolve around the provision of information (knowledge exchange) or the performance of action (action exchange), and the structure of an exchange can be described with respect to the accomplishments of these tasks. This framework and its later extensions (e.g. Ventola 1987; Martin 1992) have been used as a discourse-oriented point of departure for the descriptions of a number of interpersonal grammars in Martin et al. (2021). However, Berry's framework is not fundamentally different from Halliday's when it comes to our conception of the "nature of dialogue". For instance, her initial description of the primary knower role—i.e. who knows information or has authority over information—is based on an understanding of knowledge exchange essentially as "transmission of information" (Berry 1981: 126)—i.e. a process of "giving and demanding information".

What does the grammar of Khorchin Mongolian (and languages like Korean, Mandarin Chinese, and Scottish Gaelic surveyed above) tell us about social interactions? With its attention to the speakers' investment in their proposition as well as their attention to their interlocutors' state of knowledge, we may alternatively consider conversation as *a site for the interactive positioning of interlocutors*. In Khorchin Mongolian, this is reflected in the complex interplay between the clause-final particles and the tense suffixes. They are used to show that the speaker either knows or does not know the information at stake, and, at the same time, position their interlocutors as either knowing or not knowing the information. This motif is, in fact, suggested in Berry's (1981) discussion of the choices available to speakers at different places in the interpersonal structure of an exchange. For example, at K2 in a quiz show (a slot taken up by interlocutors who are positioned to be inferior in their knowledge), the speaker may "indicate that he is fairly confident that he does know the information already or that he is not so confident" (Berry 1981: 129). As an aside, there is also a growing body of typological literature on the grammaticalisation of the assessment of

knowledge under the category of "engagement" (Evans et. al. 2018a, 2018b).[8] We will, however, leave aside further discussion of this point for another occasion and return to our data.

What this means for Khorchin Mongolian is that the grammatical distinction between [settling] and [non-settling] construes a topology, i.e., "a set of criteria for establishing degrees of nearness or proximity among the members of some category" (Lemke n.d., as cited in Martin and Matthiessen 1991: 370). The topology comprises a speaker parameter and an addressee parameter, as in Figure 5. Along the speaker parameter, there is a cline from an indication that the speaker knows to an indication that the speaker does not know; along the addressee parameter, the cline has to do with the extent to which the speaker assumes knowledge on the part of their addressee. A typological take on such issues around knowledge positioning is offered in Zhang (2021c), where systemic contrasts in discourse semantics are established between speakers positioning themselves as either knowing or not knowing information, a perspective that does not account for gradience in the speakers' projected state of knowledge. For a discussion of how typological and topological perspectives complement each other in language studies, see Martin and Matthiessen (1991).

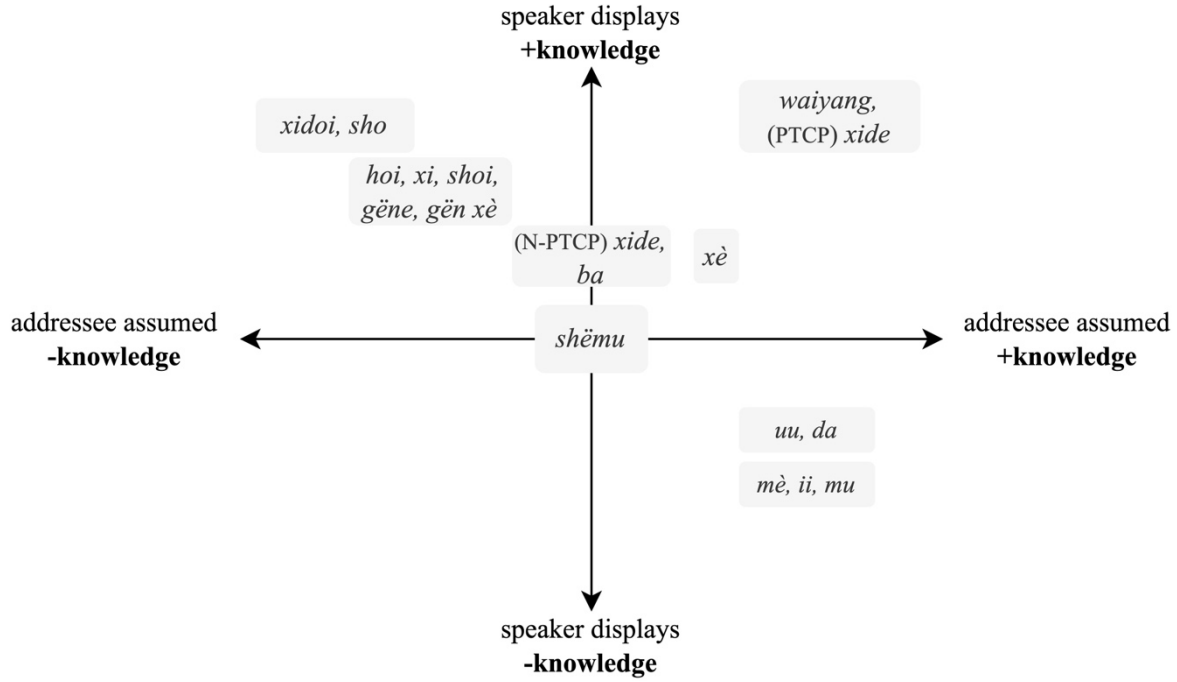

Figure 5. A topology for interlocutor positioning

How does this change in perspective from "giving and demanding" to "interlocutor positioning" affect our understanding of the Khorchin Mongolian interpersonal grammar? A notable consequence of such a complementary model is the possibility of conceiving [declarative] and [interrogative] in Khorchin Mongolian as forming a continuum without a clear-cut boundary. As we have seen in the discussion so far, declarative and interrogative clauses exhibit the same distributional pattern when it comes to the interaction between clause-final particles and tense suffixes. The particles co-occur with either the participial or

[8] ENGAGEMENT in SFL is a sub-system of APPRAISAL (White 2000, 2003; Martin & White 2005), which has to do with the adjustment of dialogic space. There is potential dialogue between work on dialogic space and the grammaticalisation of knowledge positioning as it is initially attempted in Zhang (2020a: Section 3.2.3, 2020c, 2020d) based on Khorchin Mongolian data.

non-participial tense suffixes, and both can be interpreted with respect to the process of settling a proposition. There *is* variation as to the extent to which a proposition is settled, but the variation is a cline that is marked by the particle-tense co-occurrence, instead of a clear-cut distinction between declarative and interrogative. We can thus reinterpret this area of the interpersonal grammar of Khorchin Mongolian along a "cline of settledness", from the least settled to the most settled. A tentative proposal is offered in Table 3, which requires additional corpus-based analyses for verification and adjustment. But the general idea is that the least settled ones expect the completion of a proposition as an interaction unfolds; the most settled ones, on the other hand, are often used to support other propositions. The table also includes information about the positioning of interlocutors in terms of their knowledge (cf. Figure 5).

Table 3. A cline of settledness for Khorchin Mongolian clauses

	Least settled							Most settled
Particles	*mè* *ii* *mu*	*uu* *da*	*shëmu*	*ba* *xide*	*hoi* *xi* *gëne* *gën xè*	*sho* *xidoi* *shoi*	*xè*	*waiyang* *xide*
Tense form	PTCP	NPTCP	PTCP	NPTCP	NPTCP	NPTCP	NPTCP	PTCP
Speaker knowledge	--	-	?	+	+	++	+	++
Addressee knowledge	+	+	?	?	-	-	+	++
Examples	(17)(18)	(14)(15)	(11)	(13)				(9)(10)

In Table 3, the plus and minus signs are used to indicate stronger or weaker claims or assumptions about knowledge, i.e. the expression of one's and their assumption of their interlocutors' "epistemic state" (cf. Muntigl 2009; Heritage 2012). The table additionally includes the numbers of the examples that correspond to each point on the scale. To illustrate the three points neighbouring the "most settled" set, consider (21). The teachers are discussing the mode of transport a parent uses to take her children to school. T1's knowledge of the situation is that the parent used to take her daughter to school by a motor tricycle and is now taking her son to school by a motorbike; T2's knowledge, on the other hand, is that the parent has always used a motorbike. For a detailed analysis of this conversational segment, see Zhang (2020c).

(21) Two teachers are gossiping about a parent

a. T1: *Sëchin=nè* *huu* *chini* *anggi=nè* *xi*[9]
NAME=GEN son 2SG.GEN class=GEN TAG
'Sëchin's son is in your class, eh?'

b. T2: *mm*
INTJ
'Yes.'

c. T1: *Sëchin* *niidëm* *muotuo=ger* *yab-j* ***èè-n*** ***hoi***
NAME always motorbike=INS commute-CONV COP-**NPST** **DIRECT**
'Sëchin is always commuting by motorbike.'

[9] Note that the *xi* in this example is distinct from the particle *xi* in Tables 1 and 3. Here it is a tag that invites confirmation from the addressee and is realised on a separate tone group from the main clause.

d. T2: *muotuo=ger* *hurge-j* *èè-n* *gë-j* *uu* *huu=gen*
motorbike=INS take-CONV COP-NPST mean-PST STL son=ACC.POSS
'You mean she's taking her son (to school) by motorbike?'

e. T1: *ee*
INTJ
'Right.'

f. T2: *höödgër* *mu* *èl* *gër=d=n* *hon-ul-chih-yi*
back home or which home=DAT=3POSS stay-CAUS-PFV-OPT
'She should let (her son) stay at the back home (=his grandparents' home) or any home (near school).'

g. T2: *nëg* *bag* *jòòs* *ug-ed*
one little money give-CONV
'(She can) give (them) some money.'

h. T2: *ën* *lò* *hütën=d* *tër=en*
PROX great cold=DAT 3SG=ACC.POSS
'In such cold weather, her son…'

i. T1: *tër* *ihin=ën* *ortè* *sanlun=ger* *yab-j* *èè-**j*** ***xè***
DIST daughter=3POSS before motor.tricyle=INS commute-CONV COP-**PST** **SHARED**
'Her daughter was commuting (to school) by motor tricycle before.'

j. T1: *tër* *sanlun* *nöch-h=uè=lè* *bòl-**j*** ***ba***
DIST motor.tricyle start-NPST=NEG=RES become-**PST** **MAYBE**
'That motor tricycle may have stopped working.'

k. T2: *uguè*
NEG
'No.'

l. T2: *Sëchin* *niidëm* *muotuo*
NAME always motorbike
'Sëchin always (takes her children to school) by motorbike.'

m. T1: *ha*?
INTJ
'Eh?'

n. T2: *Sëchin* *niidëm* *muotuo*
NAME always motorbike
'Sëchin always (takes her children to school) by motorbike.'

o. T1: *uguè*
NEG
'No.'

p. T1: *sanlun=ger* *bas* *yab-j* ***èè-j*** ***sho***
motor.tricyle=INS also commute-CONV COP-**PST** **ASSERT**
'(She was) also commuting by motor tricycle.'

q. T2: *òò*
INTJ
'Oh.'

The clauses with their particles and tense forms highlighted are all settling clauses. They are used by the interlocutors as they settle on propositions around the way the parent takes her children to school. In (21c), T1 shares a piece of information from his direct experience, e.g. something he saw (marked with particle *hoi*). From the co-text and the use of the high frequency modality (*niidem* 'always'), we know that the information is worth sharing because the parent no longer uses her motor tricycle—an "abnormal" behaviour if you like. Considering the response from T2, who negatively evaluates the situation (21f-h) and did not seem to realise the newsworthiness of the proposition in (21c), T1 points out the parent's past choice of the mode of transport in (21i), which he assumes is shared information between the interlocutors (marked with particle *xè*). He then offers a guess as to why the parent no longer uses the motor tricycle in (21j) (marked with particle *ba*). However, T2's response in (21k-l) shows that she does not share the information presented in (21i), and so the speakers return to settle this proposition. Eventually, T1 asserts his authority over the contested information in (21p) (marked with particle *sho*).

Accounting for the co-occurrence of particles and particular tense suffixes in Khorchin Mongolian in a unified framework of "degree of settledness", instead of adopting two distinct labels—Positioner and Interrogator, we can alternatively use a generalised function Positioner to specify the meaning of clause-final particles in the analyses of the interpersonal structure of a Khorchin Mongolian clause. This suggests that the clause-final particles can be interpreted in a unified manner in terms of the way interlocutors position one another with respect to their knowledge of information. The crucial interpersonal elements are thus Predicator and Positioner as in (22) to (24).

(22) alternative analysis of (7) *hëdi* *hold-s* *ii*
how.much sell-PST.PTCP NSTL

Inquirer	Predicator	Positioner
nominal group	verbal group	particle

'How much did you sell?'

(23) alternative analysis of (8) *jèrgan* *hön* *ug-sën* *mè*
six sheep give-PST.PTCP NSTL

Predicator	Positioner
verbal group	particle

'Did (the local officials) give you six sheep?'

(24) *sanlun=ger* *bas* *yab-j* *èè-j* *sho*

motor.tricyle=INS also commute-CONV COP-PST ASSERT

Predicator	Positioner
verbal group	particle

'(She was) also commuting by motor tricycle.'

We can accordingly revise our system network about the major interpersonal clause systems of Khorchin Mongolian as in Figure 6. The features [complete] and [incomplete] are borrowed from Wang's (2021) description of the Mandarin Chinese interpersonal grammar, which characterise the elemental interrogative clause in Description 1 (see Figure 4) with respect to the completeness of a proposition.

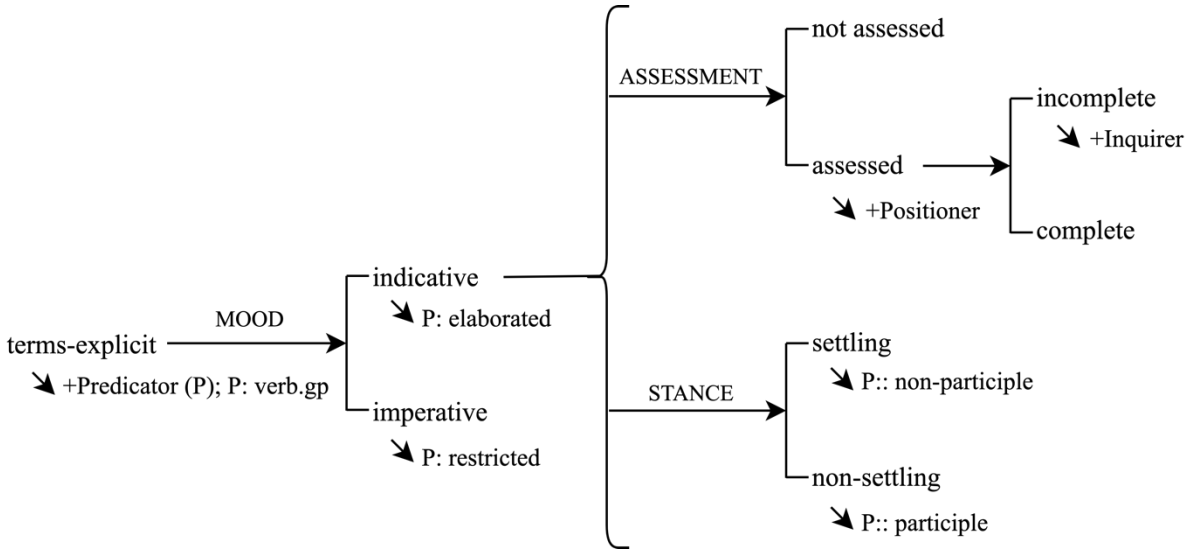

Figure 6. Major interpersonal systems of Khorchin Mongolian (Description II)

5. Concluding

In this study, I offered two alternative descriptions of the Khorchin Mongolian interpersonal grammar, with particular attention to the co-occurrence of clause-final particles and tense suffixes. In Description I, [declarative] and [interrogative] are set up as distinct choices in the system; In Description II, in contrast, the two choices are interpreted as forming a continuum without a clear-cut boundary, and thus are not described as distinct choices in the system. The grammatical patterns in Khorchin Mongolian additionally foreground the need for a complementary model of conversation that is not centred on the giving and demanding of information or goods-&-services, but rather as a site for the interactive positioning of interlocutors. For conversational segments that concern information, this positioning is to do with the interlocutors' claimed or presumed knowledge of the information; for those that concern action, the positioning is to do with the interlocutors' claimed or presumed responsibility for carrying out the action. This latter point is not discussed in this paper; see Zhang (2024).

What is the moral of the study for systemic functional description and typology? First, hypotheses should not be taken as assumptions. Previous typological studies have shown that languages tend to be similar in their less delicate systemic choices and in the more abstract discourse semantic meanings they realise (Matthiessen 2004, 2018; Teruya et al. 2007; Martin & Quiroz 2020, 2021; Martin & Wang 2021). It is thus reasonable to hypothesise that the languages we have not described systemically likely make the less delicate (e.g.

declarative vs. interrogative) distinctions we have found in other languages. But it is dangerous to take these hypotheses as assumptions and look for such categories in the language under description. This danger is well-attested in the debates over the category of Subject, at least in the systemic functional literature. Second, shunt. This wisdom from Halliday's early work (e.g. Halliday 1961) is still an essential guiding principle in our exploration of languages today. In this attempt to describe Khorchin Mongolian in its own terms, I frequently shunted between grammar and discourse, between clause and word, and between system and instance. This is one of the affordances of the elaborate theoretical architecture we work with in SFL (Matthiessen & Halliday 2009; Martin 2013), which allows room for the production and interpretations of "alternative descriptions" (Matthiessen 2025).

Funding information

The study was supported by the National Social Science Fund of China (grant number 22CYY057).

Appendix

1. Romanisation scheme used for the Khorchin Mongolian examples

Vowels in IPA	ɐ	ə	i	ɔ	o	u	ɛ	œ	y	ɵ
Romanisation	*a*	*e*	*i*	*ò*	*o*	*u*	*è*	*ö*	*ü*	*ë*

Consonants in IPA	n	p	pʰ	x	k	kʰ	l	m	s	ʃ	t	tʰ	tʃʰ	tʃ	j	r	w	ŋ	ɕ
Romanisation	*n*	*b*	*p*	*h*	*g*	*k*	*l*	*m*	*s*	*sh*	*d*	*t*	*ch*	*j*	*y*	*r*	*w*	*ng*	*x*

2. Abbreviations used in glossing

1 = first person; 2 = second person; 3 = third person; ACC = accusative; CAUS = causative; COM = comitative; COND = conditional; CONV = converb; COP = copula; DAT = dative; DIST = distal; EMP = emphatic; FUT = future; GEN = genitive; IMP = imperative; INS = instrumental; INTJ = interjection; NEG = negation; NPST = non-past; NPTCP = non-participle; NSTL = non-settling; OPT = optative; PFV = perfective; POSS = possessive; PROX = proximal; PST = past; PTCL = particle; PTCP = participle; RED = reduplication; RES = resultative; SG = singular; STL = settling; TOP = topic marker.

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