

“Aboutness” and Clause-Linking: Two Separate Functions of Topic in Mandarin*

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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies two separate functions of the Mandarin topic: “aboutness” and “clause-link”. Quite a few strong correlations are found between these two functions and the structural forms that perform them. “Aboutness” is mainly carried out by heavily coded structures: full NPs accompanied by stress and morphological makings. “Clause-linking” is mainly carried out by lightly coded structures: weakly stressed pronouns or zero anaphors without morphological markings. While the respective structural forms many well be termed marked and unmarked topics, they do not lend themselves to discrete categories. They are rather two opposite ends of a continuum with lesser marked and lesser unmarked forms in-between.

Once application of this distinction is to explain why some Mandarin topics can occur in focus positions such as *lain ... dou/ye*. They must be marked topics that carry a large amount of information. Another application is to solve the question of whether or not the *ba*-construction is a topic marker. It is found that though the NP following *ba* may perform the function of “clause-linking”, the function is not derived from the *ba*-construction.

Key Words: topic function, aboutness, clause-linking

* This paper is a collection of some random thoughts that have most recently occurred to me surrounding the notion ‘topic’. It has been put together hurriedly in a very rough form of organization to meet the deadline. Of course, I could have blamed it on a computer breakdown. But I know Charles would not in any way forgive me for sloppy research, even just for this once. I will write another paper with better organization and more careful research to redeem myself. Nevertheless, some weaknesses have been removed upon suggestion of two anonymous reviewers, to whom I express my gratitude.

1. Introduction

Topic in Mandarin has often been interpreted through examples like the following:

- (1) a. *Zheke zhu, yezi hen da.*
 this-M tree, leave very big
 'This tree, (its) leaves are very big.' (L & T, 1981:15)
- b. *Neitiaoyu, maocai chi le.*
 the-M fish, cat eat LE
 'That fish, the cat ate it.' (Chu, 1983:140)
- c. *Nachang qiu, women kan-de-lei-si le.*
 that-M ball-game, we watch-PART-tired-dead LE
 'That ball game, we watched it and were exhausted in the end.'
 (adapted from Tsao, 1990:170)
- d. *Duiyu Bosiwan zhanzheng, women dou hen guanxin.*
 as-for Persian-Gulf war, we all very concerned
 'With regard to the Gulf War, we are all very concerned.' (Ho, 1994:33)

Sentences with apparent topics are also given from actual English usage to match the Chinese ones above: (Chu, 1983:129)

- (2.a) *Center lane* must turn left.
 b) *That stupid seatbelt*, you can hardly unbuckle it in such frigid icy water.

(2.a) is often found as a traffic sign and (2.b) was uttered in a TV interview of a survivor in a plane crash in which the aircraft dove into the icy water of the Potomac River near Washington, D.C.

It is true that such examples correctly illustrate one of the functions of topic, namely, marking the 'aboutness' relation (see Lambrecht, 1994:131), which can often be adequately explained within the confines of single clause. There is, however, more than just topicality that is expressed by many of such constructions. For example, (1.d) and (2.b) also involve a focus. On the other hand, there is another equally, if not more, important function that the examples do not illustrate—i.e. that of clause-linking. When this clause-linking function is treated at all in the literature, it is done separately and in connection with another notion 'topic chain' (e.g. Tsao, 1990:324-346). The separate treatments of the two functions as if they were not related at all have resulted in the following misunder-

standings:

- (3) a. Topics such as those in (1)-(2) are typical in their function, which is to express ‘aboutness’.
- b. As ‘focus’ is often associated with topics like those in (1)-(2), it has been taken to be a topic function. This misconception leads to a contradiction that a topic is used for both given and new information.
- c. ‘Focus’ markers like *duiyu* ‘as for’ in (1.d) and the movement of the NP *that stupid seatbelt* in (2.b) have been misidentified as necessary topic markers.
- d. Clause-linking is either relegated to secondary status or even shoved out of the definition of topic.

The kind of treatment thus gives the false impression that the first and foremost important function of topic is to express the ‘aboutness’ relation between the topic and the comment. It can even be misinterpreted as to mark ‘focus’ on the topical NP. Under such circumstances, an examination of the clause-linking function often leads to an insurmountable contradiction between two kinds of topics. The clause-linking topics are not supposed to carry ‘new information’; many of the isolated ‘aboutness’ topics, on the other hand, add a lot of information to the entire proposition. (See Chu, 1996, for some clarification in this area.) To solve the knotty problem, we propose to distinguish two types of topics: marked and unmarked. Marked topics are those that are illustrated in (1)-(2) whose topical function is merely to indicate ‘aboutness’. They are syntactically and morphologically marked and can be used to express ‘focus’ (which will be defined late). Unmarked topics are those that are often illustrated in connection with topic chain. Their function is both to express ‘aboutness’ and to link clauses in a topic chain, e.g.

- (4) *Ta* *zuo xiti*, *O* *jingshen bu jizhong*.
 he do homework, spirit not concentrate
 ‘When he does homework, he is not attentive.’ (Tsao, 1990:325)

In (4), the *ta* and *O* serve to mark both the relatedness of the two clauses (by indicating coreference) and an ‘aboutness’ between the topics and their respective comments (which are also subjects and predicates, respectively).

In the following, we will try to clarify some details of the ‘aboutness’-marking function in Section II, of the clause-linking function in Section III, of marked topic and focus in Section IV, and of topic and focus in specially marked constructions in Section V. Section VI includes a summary and some concluding thoughts.

II. 'Aboutness' and Topic Type

The 'aboutness' relation can be characterized as one between a referent and a proposition that expresses 'information which is RELEVANT TO and which increases the addressee's KNOWLEDGE of this referent.' (Lambrecht, 1994:127) Thus, there exists in (1.a), for example, a relation between the referent 'this tree' and the proposition 'leaves are big' that expresses information relevant to 'this tree' and adds to the addressee's knowledge about 'this tree.' This relation applies to all the sentences in (1)-(2) and (4) as well. As a result, the topics illustrated in the examples can be said to mark such a relation. Although some analysts don't see this 'aboutness' relation as a characteristic for the Chinese topic, e.g. Chafe (1976:50-51),¹ the characterization covers the topics of both topic-prominent languages like Chinese and subject-prominent languages like English. Moreover, it does not really conflict with the scene-setting function proposed by Chafe and others.

It is to be noted, however, that the 'aboutness' relation does not exclusively exist between a topic of the above kind and its relevant proposition (i.e. comment). It may also exist between what is usually regarded as 'subject' and 'predicate'.² E.g.

- (5) *Ta zuotian lai le.*
 he yesterday come LE
 'He came yesterday.'

where *ta* is not generally recognized as a topic in Chinese (nor is *he* recognized as such in English). Yet between *ta* as the subject and the predicate *zuotian lai le* there may also exist an 'aboutness' relation when the utterance is used as a response to the question *Ta zemme le?* 'What happened to him/What did he do?' In this pragmatic context, (5) also possesses a topic-comment structure.³ The

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1. Chafe (1976:50) contends that a Chinese 'topic sets a spatial, temporal, or individual framework within which the main predication holds,' which doesn't seem to conflict with Lambrecht's characterization.
 2. Subject and predicate are defined by a 'doing' or 'being' relationship between them. (L & T, 1981:74)
 3. Lambrecht (1994:121-7) convincingly argues that, depending on its prosodic pattern, an English sentence similar to the one in (5) may be assigned to three different pragmatic classes: topic-comment, identificational, and event-reporting. At this point, we are discussing (5) as a topic-comment sentence, though we will later treat it as an event-reporting

problem is, then, for the analyst to make a choice between two alternative descriptions of the fact. One is to say that the ‘aboutness’ relation exists between topic and comment on the one hand and between subject and predicate on the other. If so, it would be wrong to invoke ‘aboutness’ as a characteristic of topic. This is not the alternative that many grammarians like to choose. The other is to say that ‘aboutness’ is a characteristic of topic but not one of subject. If so, a claim must be made that the subject and predicate of (5) possess an ‘aboutness’ relation between them just because they happen to be topic and comment at the same time. This seems to be the more tenable position. From this position, two questions immediately arise: (a) Are there subjects that are not at the same time topics? and (b) Why is the topic in (5) marked differently than—or rather, not marked the same as—those in the other examples?

The answer to the first question is an unqualified ‘yes’. If (5) occurs as a response to *Zemmlé le?* ‘What happened?’ or in a similar context, the sentence functions to report an event.⁴ As a result, there is no ‘aboutness’ relation between *ta* and *zuotian lai le*, though they remain subject and predicate. The second question is exactly the main theme that we are to address.

Morphologically speaking, the ‘aboutness’ relation can be minimally marked or even not marked at all as long as the referent is syntactically coded in front of a comment. This is the case in (4) and (5) where the topics are **unmarked**. In other words, the relation is a result of the default interpretation of no marking except word order within the clause. However, an unmarked topic can be optionally followed by a pause phonologically or by a pause particle morphologically. (See Tsao, 1990:56) The pause or pause particle indicates nothing more than that the ‘aboutness’ relation is now explicit. We can therefore say that pauses and pause particles **maximally** code the **unmarked** topic. Moreover, in addition to the phonological pause and morphological pause particles, there are a small number of morphological markers that can precede or follow a topic. (Cf. Ho, 1993: 53) When any one of them occurs with the topic, it becomes **marked**. This is the case in (1.d). Other NPs in the clause-initial but non-subject position to serve the topic function can be regarded as **marked** topics **minimally** coded by syntax, e.g. those in (1.a)-(1.c).

It should be clear from the above discussion that all types of topics indicate

one. As for prosodic patterning, we are not as sure about how it works in the Chinese version as how it does in the English sentence.

4. See Note 3 above for pragmatic classes of sentence. Now we are treating (5) as belonging to another pragmatic class, though it is morphologically and syntactically the same as the topic-comment sentence treated earlier.

'aboutness' regardless of whether they are marked, unmarked or in-between. Then, why do they appear in different forms? We will answer this question in the following sections.

III. Unmarked Topic and the Clause-Linking Function

It seems that the unmarked topic is used for two functions: to mark the 'aboutness' relation (which is a general function for all topics) and to indicate relatedness between clauses. We have discussed how it indicates 'aboutness' above. Now we will show that its other function is for linking clauses.

Observe:

- (6) a. *Zuotian yige pengyou jiegei wo_i yiben shu_j,*
 yesterday a-M friend loan-to me a-M book
 'Yesterday a friend loaned me a book'
- b. *wo_i yiwei O_j hen haokan,*
 I thought very interesting
 'I thought (it would be) very interesting.'
- c. *jieguo O_j yidian yisi ye meiyou,*
 result a-little meaning even not-have
 '(It) turned out (that it was) not interesting at all.'
- d. *souyi, O_j wo kanle jiye,*
 therefore, I read-Le a-few-pages
 'So, I read a few pages (of it)'
- e. *O_j O_i jiu bu kan le.*
 then not read LE
 'and stopped reading (it).' (Chu, 1993:33-34)

In (6), there are two topics (i) *wo* 'I', anaphorically referred to as *O_i*, and (ii) *yiben-shu* 'a book', anaphorically referred to as *O_j*. The position of each of the zero anaphors in the clause is determined by putting back the pronominal *wo* or the lexical NP *neibenshu* 'that book', treating each clause as if it were occurring in isolation. All this was confirmed by an informal survey of a number of native speakers.

It is obvious that both topics serve to link the clauses. While the topic *wo* links clauses (a), (b) and (e) by occurring in either the pronominal or zero form; the topic *yibenshu* links all five by occurring in the zero form except in clause (a).

Disregarding the conjunctives *jiieguo* ‘as a result’ and *suoyi* ‘therefore’, both topics occur clause-initially except in (a). These are the favorite conditions for an NP to help form topic-chains. (Cf. Li, 1985; Chen, 1986; Xu, 1995.) In fact, all the clauses in (6) form one topic chain linked by the topic *yibenshu* ‘a book’. Within this large chain, clauses (a) and (b) form a smaller one linked by the topic *wo* ‘I, me’. (See Chu, forthcoming, Chapter 8.) As far as I know, nobody has specifically addressed how the O_i ‘I’ in (e) serves to link each clause to the rest of the passage.

Furthermore, according to Chu (1993:33), 74 out of 82 native-speaking respondents indicated in a survey that the passage in (6) was about ‘a book’ rather than about anything else. This suggests that the ‘aboutness’ relation also exists between the topic and its comments even when the main function of the topic is to provide a link between clauses. A conclusion can also be drawn that there is psychological reality in the recognition of the topic’s basic function as expressing an ‘aboutness’ relation.

IV. Marked Topic and Focus

As topics, the marked ones serve to indicate the ‘aboutness’ relation. In addition, they may also serve to indicate focus. This is so because, unlike the unmarked topics, they may be highly informative in the sense that they add knowledge to what has already been known to the addressee.⁵ For example, a ‘heavily coded’ marked topic always increases the knowledge of the addressee in relation to something already known to him/her:

(7) Lian *Xingqitian*, ta dou lai mafan wo.

LIAN Sunday, he DOU come bother me

‘Even on Sundays he comes to bother me.’ (adapted from Tsao, 1990:258)

As generally accepted, the semantic interpretation of (7) consists of two presuppositions and one assertion. The two presuppositions are: ‘He comes to bother me (at some unspecified times),’ and ‘You, the hearer, would not expect him to do so on Sunday.’ The assertion is: ‘But he does.’ In this sense, the NP *Xingqitian* ‘Sunday’ can be considered a topic because it expresses ‘aboutness’ though it doesn’t function to link clauses. This topic is obviously a **marked** one and is

5. According to Lambrecht (1994:213), focus can be defined as ‘the semantic component of a pragmatically structured proposition whereby the assertion differs from the presupposition’. In other words, ‘Focus=Assertion—Presupposition’ in pragmatic terms. We are giving a loose interpretation of the definition.

heavily coded by the preposition *lian*, the adverb *dou*, the clause-initial position, and the pause indicated by the comma. In addition to the ‘aboutness’ relation between *Xingqitian* and the rest of the clause, it also adds new knowledge to what is presupposed to be known to the addressee, i.e. the message that ‘he bothers the speaker on Sunday’ is added to the presupposed knowledge that ‘he bothers the speaker at some unspecified times.’ Example (7) is therefore a typical case of a marked topic expressing both ‘aboutness’ and focus.

Marked topics which are less heavily coded (e.g. those introduced by prepositions like *guanyu* ‘with regard to’, *duiyu* ‘with regard to’ and *zhiyu* ‘as for’ or other expressions like *jiu ... laishuo* ‘as far as ... is concerned’, etc.) are less likely to express focus than the more heavily coded ones. E.g.

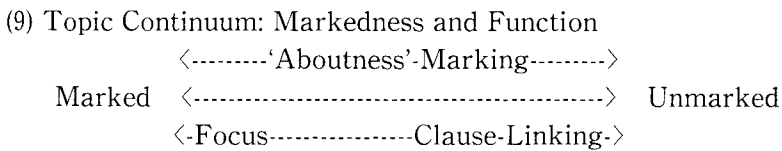
- (8) Guanyu *ni shuo de neige wenti*, wo dao you yige banfa.
 with-regard-to you say *DE that-M* problem, I rather have a-M way
 ‘With regard to the problem you mentioned, I got a way (to deal with it).’

The topic *ni shuo de neige wenti* is coded by the preposition *guanyu*, the clause-initial position, and the pause. While it definitely indicates ‘aboutness’, it may or may not carry focus, depending on whether or not there is a contrast present in the context. If it is preceded by something like *zhexie shi dou hen nan chuli, women yihou zai tan ba* ‘All those matters are very hard to deal with, let’s talk about them later,’ then there definitely exists a contrast between ‘all those matters’ and ‘the problem you mentioned’. In this case, a special stress is required for the focus on one or more of the lexical items in the topic. Thus, the topic becomes a contrastive one and adds knowledge to what has already been known, i.e. ‘(although) all those matters are hard to deal with.’

The even less heavily coded topics are the unmarked ones in (1.a)-(1.c). As unmarked topics, they are maximally coded by the clause-initial position and a pause. Although they are equally likely to carry focus, they do seem to be more likely to serve the clause-linking function than the more heavily coded ones in (7) and (8).

Finally, the least heavily coded topics are the unmarked ones like those appearing in (4) and (6). They are only coded by the clause-initial position and only serve to link clauses. They are also the ones that have to appear in the form of a zero or pronominal. This is a logical consequence, because focus, informativeness and stress have to be carried usually by a lexical phrase, and at least by a stressed pronominal. The topic that only marks clause-linking does not need any rich lexical content, which is essential to carry stress, focus or additional information.

It thus seems that there are some general principles guiding the form and function of the topic. The ‘aboutness’-marking function is basic to all topics but the clause-linking function is not. The more explicitly expressed a topic is, the less likely it performs the clause-linking function. On the other hand, though focus is not a function of topic, the capability of a topic to carry focus is in direct proportion to the explicitness in the marking of the topic: the more explicitly expressed a topic is, the more likely it carries focus. These principles can be stated in terms of marked and unmarked topics. They are graphically represented in the form of a continuum below:



Between the two extremes of the most heavily coded (**the marked**, as in (7)) and the totally uncoded (**the unmarked**, as in (4) and (6)) are those that are ‘minimally coded’ marked ones (as in (8)) and the ‘miximally coded’ unmarked ones (as in (1) and (2)).

V. Topic and Focus in Special Constructions

In Section IV, we discussed a special construction, the *lain ... dou* structure. In this section, another special construction will be discussed whose functions we think can be clarified in terms of topic and focus: the *ba*-sentences. It is examined below in light of the two separate functions of topic: aboutness and clause-linking.

There has been a lot of interesting discussion on the *ba*-sentences since mid-50s when Wang Li published his *Zhongguo Xiandai Yufa* (Modern Chinese Grammar). Many problems concerning the structure have been examined in detail time and again. We will only try to answer one simple question about it: What is the topical status of the NP following *ba*?

While Hsueh (1987:16-17) considers the NP following *ba* a primary topic, Tsao (1990:168-204) treats it as a secondary one. The reasons that Hsueh gives for his claim are that the NP cannot be deleted (as compared to the NP following *bei*) and that it is directly related to the VP following it. After a detailed comparison of the similarities between the *ba*-NP and other topical NPs, Tsao reaches the conclusion that this NP is a secondary topic because of its syntactic position and semantic nature. A crucial piece of evidence seems to be the sentences in

(10), though Tsao doesn't intend them as such.

- (10) a. *Ta ba chezi maile.*
 he BA car sell-LE
 'He sold the car.'
- b. *Chezi_i ta ba ta_i maile.*
 car he BA it sell-LE
 'Speaking of the car, he sold it.' (Adapted from Tsao, 1990:218)

The only structural difference between the two sentences is a preposed *chezi* 'car' in (b), leaving a resumptive *ta* 'it' behind to follow *ba*. An inevitable question that arises is: What is the functional difference? The only reasonable answer is that the *chezi* in the clause-initial position in (b) seems to have a more uncontroversial topical quality than when it follows *ba*, as in (a). Then it follows naturally that the *chezi* following *ba* in (a) cannot be as prominent a topic as the one in the clause-initial position in (b). If the NP after *ba* should be treated as a topic at all, it must be a secondary topic.

However, if we look at the problem from the perspective of aboutness and clause-linking, we may gain a fresh insight. Imagine this scenario: A couple are moving abroad and they are discussing what to take with them. Something like this may take place between them:

- (11) A: *Chezi_i zenme ban?*
 car how do
 'What (are we going to) do with the car?'
- B: *Ba ta_i maile me.*
 BA it sell-LE ME
 'Sell it, of course.'

In this exchange, *chezi* 'the car' is the topic in the sense that there is an aboutness relation between it and the rest of the utterance. *Ta*, on the other hand, also expresses an aboutness relation, but in addition it functions to link the two clauses as question and answer. In other words, while the lexical NP *chezi* in this pragmatic context functions as a topic only on one account, the pronominal *ta* does so on two accounts. Now imagine another scenario where Speaker A is complaining about Old Zhang:

- (12) A: *Lao Zhang_i qianle wo liangbaikuai qian, O_i yizhi dou shuo meiyou*
 Old Zhang owe-LE me 200-dollar money, straight all say not-have

qian huangei wo.

money return-to me

‘Old Zhang owes me 200-bucks and has been saying he doesn’t have the money to pay me back.’

B: *Ta_i ba chezi_i maile, O_i jiu you qian le.*

he BA car sell-LE, then have money LE

‘When he sells the car, he will have the money.’

In this exchange, *Laozhang* obviously is a topic because it expresses an aboutness relation. The ensuings *ta* and *O*’s are topics because they perform both functions of marking the aboutness and the clause-linking relation. On the other hand, the NP following *ba*, namely *chezi* ‘the car’, performs neither functions. Admittedly, it may perform some linking function if ‘the car’ has been mentioned previously. But it may also function to name a familiar referent without any prior mention. At best, it is a case of indeterminacy.

The two conversations clearly illustrate that the *ba*-construction by and in itself does not make the NP in question a topic.

Recall Hsueh’s argument that the NP after *ba* should be treated as a primary topic because it is not deletable and because it bears a direct relation to the VP. The non-deletability has to be with *ba*’s nature as a full preposition (in comparison with *bei*) and the direct relation with the VP is actually a characteristic of the object. Neither has anything to do with whether or not the NP should be treated as a topic.

Viewed from the two basic functions of the topic, the *ba*-structure itself seems to be independent of topic-marking. If the NP following *ba* happens to be a topic at all, it is not by virtue of the intrinsic nature of the *ba*-structure. The difference between (10.a) and (10.b) should then be looked upon as one of both topic and focus. That is, the preposed NP in (10.b) is an explicit topic that carries a contrast while the NP following *ba* in (10.a) may or may not be a topic. It may, of course, also carry a contrast if it is heavily stressed, which is a phonological means for expressing focus (as opposed to the syntactic means in (10.b)).

Hsueh (1987:17) also claims that the agent NP in the *bei*-construction is actually a secondary topic. Applying the same criteria may possibly show that, just as the *ba*-construction, the *bei*-construction is also independent of topic marking. But, of course, it will take further investigation to confirm it.

VI. Summary and Concluding Thoughts

Topic in Mandarin has generally been explained through its function of

marking 'aboutness' at the expense of the other equally characteristic function of 'clause-linking'. While the former is easily recognizable within a clause, the latter can be detected only across clause boundaries. Not attributing to either function its due importance in the appropriate context leads not only to the confusion as to what a topic is like but also to the contradiction that topics are defined by the given information they carry, and yet, contradictorily, some of them are highly 'informative'. By acknowledging the two functions as separate but likely to be coexistent in a topic, it is made possible to recognize as topics those constructions that serve either or both functions. It is further noted that the topics serving the 'aboutness' function only, may be allowed to be highly informative while those mainly serving the clause-linking function is not permitted to be so. This distinction is reflected in form as well. The topic that marks 'aboutness' only, appears in the form of a lexical noun phrase and may be heavily marked phonologically, morphologically and/or syntactically, but it may not appear as a zero or a pronominal unless the pronominal is stressed. The clause-linking topic generally occurs in the form of a zero or pronominal and the pronominal may *not* be stressed. If it appears in the form of a lexical noun phrase at all, it serves other functions, e.g. reactivation, paragraphing, etc. This treatment also helps clarify the topicality status of the nominals involved in such structures as the *ba*-sentence and the *lian ... dou/ye* construction.

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“表述相關”與“子句連接”： 華語主題的兩種功能

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摘 要

本文認為，華語主題有兩種不同的功能：“表述相關”與“子句連接”。這兩種功能與主題的形式有相當密切的關聯。“表述相關”的功能，主要由實質名詞組擔任，而且帶有重讀及附加標記；而“子句連接”的功能主要由非重讀的代名詞或回指零形擔任，而且不帶附加標記。這兩種形式雖可分別稱之為“有標主題”及“無標主題”，但却不能以兩種截然不同的類型處理。它們僅是兩個極端，介乎兩者之間還有多種不同程度的標記。

這樣的分別，可以用來說明，為什麼有些主題可以出現在焦點位置（如連…都／也）。這些都是有標主題，帶有大量信息的。另外還可以用來觀察“把”字後的名詞組究竟是否應當看作主題。本文發現，雖然這樣的名詞組可以有“子句連接”的功能，但是這個功能並非由“把”字結構賦予的。

關鍵詞：主題的功能，表述相關，子句連接