

'Topic', 'Subject' and Argument Selection in Chinese*

James H-Y. Tai

National Chung Cheng University and
The Ohio State University

ABSTRACT

This paper clarifies several confusing issues regarding the notions of 'topic', 'subject', and 'object' in Chinese grammar, and thereby proposing a syntactic analysis capable of making a clear three-way distinction among these three notions. This paper also modifies the principles of argument selection proposed by Dowty (1991) so that the selection of different types of arguments as 'subject', and 'object' in Chinese can properly be accounted for.

Key Words: topic, subject, object, argument selection principle

1. Introduction

Despite their centrality in both traditional grammar and contemporary syntactic theories (e.g., GB, LFG, RG), the notions of 'subject' and 'object' have undergone long and arduous debates since the 1950's in the analysis of Chinese. Not only have their working definitions often varied from one analyst to another, their value as theoretical constructs have also been challenged from time to time. Compounding the problem is the introduction of the notion of 'topic' contrasting with 'subject' in the analysis of Chinese.

* This is a revised version of the paper presented at the First International Conference on Chinese Linguistics (ICCL-1), in Singapore, 24-26 June 1992. This paper is more formally oriented than many of my recent works. I have, therefore, chosen it to contribute to the Festschrift volume in honor of Professor Tang Ting-chi, who has devoted much of his linguistic career to the formal study of Chinese grammar. I am indebted to two anonymous reviewers whose valuable comments have enhanced the quality of this paper. Naturally, I am solely responsible for any mistakes herein.

This paper has two main purposes. One is to propose a distinction between ‘topic’ and ‘subject’ as syntactic notions in Chinese. Within this purpose is the re-examination of Li and Thompson’s (1981) distinction between ‘topic’ and ‘subject’ in Chinese. The other is to understand the distinction between ‘subject’ and ‘object’ by means of argument selection principles based on Dowty (1991). As a working strategy, I will first distinguish ‘topic’ from ‘subject’ and ‘object’, and then further distinguish ‘subject’ from ‘object’. This paper thus consists of two main parts. In the first part, I will show that ‘topic’ as a syntactic notion can be distinguished from ‘subject’ in Chinese. In the second part, I will derive the notions of ‘subject’ and ‘object’ in Chinese in terms of argument selection principles proposed by Dowty, together with my modifications.

To begin, two preliminary remarks are needed. The first is the recognition of the need to separate at least three levels of linguistic information; namely, semantic roles, syntactic functions, and discourse (pragmatic) functions. Thus, the syntactic notion of ‘topic’ should be distinguished from the discourse notion of ‘topic’. Second, following Chafe (1976), I recognize a distinction between Chinese-style topics and English-style topics. Chinese-style topics can be illustrated by sentences such as (1) and (2), and English-style topics by such sentences as (3) and (4).

A. Chinese-Style Topics

- (1) NEI-CHANG HUO, xingkui xiaofang-dui lai de zao.
 (that-CL fire fortunate fire-brigade come DE fast)
 ‘That fire, fortunately, the fire brigade came quickly.’
- (2) NEI-KE SHU, yezi hen da.
 (that-CL tree leaf very big)
 ‘That tree, (its) leaves are very big.’

B. English-Style Topics

- (3) YIFU, wo xi-le.
 (clothes, I wash-ASP)
 ‘The clothes, I’ve washed (them).’
- (4) ZHANGSAN, wo bu renshi.
 (John, I not know)
 ‘John, I don’t know (him).’

In terms of function, while Chinese-style topics set a spatial, temporal, and individual frame within which the main predication holds, English-style topics express contrastive foci. In terms of semantic relationship, while English-style topics are arguments of verbs, Chinese-style topics are non-arguments which

hold various kinds of relevance relation to the main predication.

As to the formal relationship between the two types of topics, there have been two views in the literature. One is to treat Chinese-style topics as base-generated but to derive English-style topics from topicalization. This has been the standard view, and has been assumed by J. Huang (1982), T-C. Tang (1989), and others. The other view is to treat both types of topics as base-generated. This latter view has been argued by Xu and Langendoen (1985). The debate and the issues involved are complex, and beyond the scope of the present study. For the present purposes, I am assuming the standard view.¹

There is another type of topics intermediate between the 'Chinese-style topics' and the 'English-style topics'. C-R Huang (1989) identified a subset of topics which he has convincingly shown to bear subcategorization relations with predicates. Two of his examples are given in (5) and (6)

C. Hybridized Topics ('Subcategorized Topics')

(5) Zhei-jian shi, ni zuo-zhu.

(this-CL matter, you decide)

'On this matter, you decide.'

but: *Ni zuo-zhu. (*you decide)

*Ni zuo-zhu zhei-jian shi. (*you decide this-CL matter)

(6) Nide haoyi, wo xin-ling-le.

(your good-intentions, I appreciate ASP)

'Your good intentions, I appreciate *them*.'

but: *Wo xin-ling-le. (*I appreciate-ASP)

*Wo xin-ling-le nide haoyi. (*I appreciate-ASP your good-intentions)

The issue then is whether this type of topics is base-generated, or derived through topicalization. In agreement with C-R Huang, I am inclined to treat this type as base-generated. While several reasons can be offered, the main one is the undesirability of needing to apply topicalization obligatorily for this type of predicates. I have labeled this subset as 'hybridized topics' because this type of topics appear to be transitional between the prototypical Chinese-style topics and the prototypical English-style topics.

In this paper, I will make further proposals with respect to noun phrases serving as topics: one, that a Chinese-style topic cannot be an argument of a

1. However, as a result of the exploration in this paper, it might turn out that Xu and Langendoen's view merits further investigation.

verb; and two, that an English-style topic is a topicalized argument.

2. Distinction Between Topic and Subject

Li and Thompson (1976) propose that Chinese is a topic-prominent language in that topic plays a more important role than subject in the description of Chinese grammar. They compare some essential semantic and functional differences between topic and subject and then made the following conclusion: “the topic is a discourse notion, whereas the subject is to a greater extent a sentence-internal notion” (p.466). However, in their reference grammar, Li and Thompson (1981) introduce topic both as a discourse notion and a syntactic one. Thus, while still claiming topic is a discourse notion, they attempt to distinguish topic from subject at the sentence level. Topic is identified as the preverbal noun phrase appearing in the sentence-initial position. Subject is then defined as the noun phrase which bears a “doing” or “being” relationship with the verb. While they give a number of arguments based on functional, semantic, and typological considerations, they give only one syntactic test to distinguish topic from subject.

According to Li and Thompson (1981), topic has priority over the subject as the controller of a missing coreferential noun phrase in a sentence. They illustrate this test with sentence (7).

- (7) NEI-KE SHU yezi da; (suoyi) wo bu xihuan _____.
 (that-CL tree leaf big; (so) I not like _____)
 ‘That tree, the leaves are big; (so) I don’t like *it*.’

In (7), the missing noun phrase can only be understood to refer to the topic *nei ke shu*, and not to the subject *yezi*. However, upon closer examination, the controller of a missing coreferential noun phrase need not be topic. Consider, for example, sentence (8):

- (8) Nei-ke shu-de yezi da; (suoyi) wo bu xihuan _____.
 (that-CL tree’s leaf big; (so) I not like _____)
 ‘That tree’s leaves are big; (so) I don’t like *it*.’

In (8), the noun phrase, *nei-ke shu* is a modifier of the subject *yezi*, but it is still the controller of the missing noun phrase. Therefore, (7) and (8) together show that the controller is a discourse topic, and *not* a syntactic topic.

Furthermore, there are cases where both topic and subject exist but the subject rather than the topic is the controller of the missing NP. For example, in (9), *Zhangsan* is the topic and *nü-pengyou* is the subject, but the controller of the

missing noun phrase is obviously the subject *nüpengyou*, and not the topic *Zhangsan*.

- (9) Zhangsān nǚpēngyóu hěn piàoliang, wǒ hěn xǐhuan _____.
 (John girlfriend very pretty, I very like _____)
 'John's girlfriend is very pretty, I like *her* very much.'

Considering sentences (7), (8), and (9) together, one can only infer that the controller is the topic at the discourse level, but cannot infer that the controller is the topic at the syntactic level. Therefore, the only syntactic test given by Li and Thompson is not a viable one for distinguishing topic from subject at the sentence level. In short, while Li and Thompson have attempted to distinguish topic from subject at the sentence level, they have, in fact, confused topic as a *syntactic* notion at the sentence level with the topic as a *discourse* notion.

Li and Thompson's failure to distinguish syntactic topic from discourse topic has also led Lapolla (1990) to argue against the existence of subject in Chinese. Lapolla argues that subject and object as syntactic functions do not exist in Chinese grammar, since they do not serve as syntactic pivots in a number of reference-related constructions, such as cross-clause coreference, relativization, subject-raising, reflexives. In other words, according to Lapolla, in the reference-related constructions, there is no grammatical neutralization of different semantic roles into subject or object, and the only relevant notion in these reference-related constructions is topic. However, while Lapolla has shown that Chinese grammar is more discourse-oriented than English, his notion of topic is obviously anchored on the discourse plane, and not on the syntactic plane.

To the best of my knowledge, Jiang Zixin's dissertation (1991) represents the first serious attempt to distinguish topic from subject at the sentence level. I agree with Jiang that the notion of topic at the sentence level can capture topic structures not describable within the framework of a subject-only grammar. Nonetheless, there are some problems in the syntactic tests that Jiang has designed to distinguish topic from subject.

Jiang defines topic as the preverbal NP that is the sister of the S node. The subject is then defined as the preverbal NP that is the sister of the VP node. As a crucial test for distinguishing topic from subject, he observes that VP modifiers such as *guyi*, *bu*, and *hui* can only occur after the subject, and not before the subject or the topic. This is illustrated in the examples in (10) and (11).

- (10) a. Zhāngsān bīkai Lǐsī.
 (John avoid Richie.)

- ‘John avoids Richie.’
- b. Zhangsan guyi bikai Lisi.
(John deliberately avoid Richie)
‘John deliberately avoids Richie.’
- c. *Guyi Zhangsan bikai Lisi.
- (11) a. Nei-chang huo xiaofang-dui guyi bu lai.
(that-CL fire fire-brigade deliberately not come)
‘That fire, the fire brigade deliberately didn’t come.’
- b. *Nei-chang huo guyi xiaofang-dui bu lai.
- c. *Guyi nei-chang huo xiaofang-dui bu lai.

In (10), *Zhangsan* is the subject. The VP adverb *guyi* can only occur after the subject, as shown in (10b). Similarly, in (11) *guyi* can occur after the subject *xiaofangdui*. However, *guyi* cannot occur either before the subject, *xiaofangdui* in (11b), or before the topic, *nei-chang huo* in (11c).

It appears that the VP modifiers such as *guyi*, *bu*, *hui*, and *neng* are not the most suitable tests for distinguishing topic from subject. The reason is that these VP modifiers must occur somewhere between the subject and the VP, but not before subject or topic. Thus, using this type of VP modifiers as a test has also led Jiang to treat as topics both NP’s, *Zhangsan* and *jisuanji* in sentence (12).

- (12) a. Zhangsan jisuanji guyi bu xue.
(John computer deliberately not learn)
‘John deliberately doesn’t learn (to use) computers.’
- b. *Zhangsan guyi jisuanji bu xue.
- c. *Guyi Zhangsan jisuanji bu xue.

I would like to suggest a different kind of VP modifiers for the test, namely, manner adverbs that can be moved in front of a subject but not in front of a topic. Examples include: *hen kuai-de*, *jing-jing-de*, and *tou-tou-de*. The placement of these manner adverbs can be illustrated by sentences (13) and (14).

- (13) a. Nei-chang huo xiaofang-dui *hen kuai-de* lai-le.
(that-CL fire fire-brigade very quickly come-ASP)
‘That fire, the fire brigade came very quickly.’
- b. Nei-chang huo *hen kuai-de* xiaofang-dui lai-le.
- c. **Hen kuai-de* nei-chang huo xiaofangdui lai-le.
- (14) a. Wanfan wo *tou-tou-de* chi-le liang-ge dangao.
(dinner I stealthily eat-ASP two-CL cakes)
‘At dinner I stealthily ate two cakes.’

- b. Wanfan *tou-tou-de* wo chi-le liang-ge dangao.
 c.* *Tou-tou-de* wanfan wo chi-le liang-ge dangao.

In addition to VP-modifiers, Jiang has also examined the possibility of using the placement of sentence modifiers to distinguish topic from subject. He gives example (15), and concludes that sentence modifiers cannot serve as a test, since they can appear in all three positions concerned.

- (15) a. *Weile renmin* nei-chang huo xiaofang-dui lai-de hen zao.
 (for people that-CL fire fire-brigade come very early)
 ‘For the sake of the people, (as for) that fire, the fire brigade came very soon.’
 b. Nei-chang huo *weile renmin* xiaofang-dui lai-de hen zao.
 c. Nei-chang huo xiaofangdui *weile renmin* lai-de hen zao.

However, some sentential adverbs can occur before the subject but not before the topic, and thus can serve as a test. Consider the placement of the sentential adverb *xingkuai* in (16).

- (16) a.* *Xingkuai* nei-chang huo xiaofang-dui lai-de zao.
 b. Nei-chang huo *xingkuai* xiaofang-dui lai-de zao.
 (that-CL fire fortunately fire-brigade come early)
 ‘That fire, fortunately the fire brigade came early.’
 c. Nei-chang huo xiaofang-dui *xingkuai* lai-de zao.

Therefore, barring some complicating pragmatic factors, sentential adverbs can be used as a syntactic test to distinguish topic from subject.

In sum, I would like to suggest that both movable VP manner adverbs and sentential adverbs can serve as suitable tests for distinguishing topic from subject in Chinese-style topic structures. It appears that both types of adverbs can also serve as appropriate tests for distinguishing topic from subject in English-style topic structures. Sentence (17) and (18) illustrate our point.

- (17) a. Yifu Zhangsan *tou-tou-de* xi-le.
 (clothes John stealthily wash-ASP)
 ‘The clothes, John stealthily washed *them*.’
 b. Yifu *tou-tou-de* Zhangsan xi-le.
 c.* *Tou-tou-de* yifu Zhangsan xi-le.
 (18) a. Yifu Zhangsan *dagai* xi-le.
 (clothes John probably wash-ASP)
 ‘The clothes, John probably washed *them*.’

- b. Yifu *dagai* Zhangsan xi-le.
- c. **Dagai* yifu Zhangsan xi-le.

To conclude this section, on the basis of the general strategy adopted by Jiang Zixin, I propose to use the placement patterns of both VP manner adverbs and sentential adverbs as syntactic tests for distinguishing topic from subject in Chinese sentences. In the next section, I will deal with argument selection within a Chinese sentence, focussing on the distinction between subject and object.

3. Distinction Between Subject and Object

As noted earlier, Lapolla (1990) argues that in a number of reference-related constructions in Chinese, there are no 'syntactic pivots', such as 'subject' and 'object', which neutralize different semantic roles. As a result, the notions of 'subject' and 'object' as syntactic functions independent of their semantic roles simply do not exist in Chinese. My own observation, however, is that while subject and object as syntactic pivots may not play as important a role in Chinese as they do in English, it can still be argued that the distinction between subject and object not only can be, but needs to be made in Chinese.

First, recall in Chomsky's *Aspect* (1965), that the subject is the NP immediately dominated by the S node, while the object is the NP immediately dominated by the VP node. Subsequently, Keenan (1976) has adopted the concept of 'immediate dominance' as one of the most important structural properties of subjects. Furthermore, Sanders and Tai (1972) have shown that the concept of immediate dominance is needed to explain identity deletion in coordinate structures and relative clauses in Chinese and other languages. Recently, J. Huang (1988) has further applied Sanders and Tai's immediate dominance as a condition on identity deletion in Chinese to make an important distinction between two kinds of A-not-A questions.

Second, the asymmetry between subject and object with respect to a number of grammatical patterns in Chinese has been observed in both GB and non-GB literature. To wit, J. Huang (1984) shows an asymmetry between subject and object with respect to pro-drop; McCawley (1988) observes the asymmetry in Chinese comparatives; and J. Tang (1989) observes the asymmetry in Chinese reflexives.

Third, as pointed out by Chomsky (1986), in terms of semantic compositionality, the object is the internal argument that combines with the verb, while the subject as external argument is compositionally determined by

the whole VP. Thus, similar to Chomsky's English example in (19), the subject Zhangsan in the Chinese sentence (20) can either bear an agent role, as in (20a), or a patient role, as in (20b).

(19) John broke his arm (broke the window).

(20) a. Zhangsan daduan-le Lisi-de shou.

(John break-ASP Richie's hand)

'John broke Richie's arm.'

b. Zhangsan daduan-le (ta-de) shou.

(John break-ASP (his) arm)

'John broke his arm.'

Thus, as in English, in NP-V-NP sequences in Chinese, the V-NP string functions as a semantic unit first, and then compositionally determines the NP before the V-NP string. In essence, the distinction between 'internal argument' and 'external argument' needs to be made in the description of Chinese grammar, even if Lapolla is correct in arguing that there is no clear syntactic pivots such as 'subject' and 'object' in Chinese.

In order to understand the distinction between 'internal' and 'external' arguments in Chinese, we need to address the question of argument selection in the language. For this purpose, it is desirable to refer to Dowty's (1991:576) proposal for a universal argument selection principle. This principle is stated in (21).

(21) In predicates with grammatical subject and object, the argument for which the predicate entails the greatest number of Proto-Agent properties will be lexicalized as the subject of the predicate; the argument having the great number of Proto-Patient entailments will be lexicalized as the direct object.

Dowty's argument selection principle is based on a theory of thematic roles in which traditional role types are not discrete categories; rather, they are cluster concepts, similar to prototype categories in Rosch's (1978) theory of human categorization. These cluster concepts are identified in terms of a number of verbal entailments. Dowty gives two preliminary lists of verbal entailments that characterize the two proto-role types. They are given in (22) and (23).

(22) Contributing Properties for the Agent Proto-Role:

a. volitional involvement in the event or state

b. sentience (and/or perception)

c. causing an event or change of state in another participant

- d. movement (relative to the position of another participant)
- (e. exists independently of the event named by the verb)
- (23) Contributing Properties for the Patient Proto-Role:
 - a. undergoes change of state
 - b. incremental theme
 - c. causally affected by another participant
 - d. stationary relative to the movement of another participant
 - (e. does not exist independently of the event, or not at all)

Each of the contributing properties in (22) and (23) can be shown to be independently motivated in Chinese grammar as well. Because of space limitations, I will not discuss each of these properties in Chinese grammar. Instead, I will simply use one example to illustrate how Dowty's selection principle can help us identify subject and object in Chinese. Consider *wo* and *xin* in (24).

- (24) *Wo xie-le xin le.*
 (I write-ASP letter PRT)
 'I wrote the letter.'

Wo and *xin* are arguments of the verb. With respect to the properties listed in (22) and (23), the argument *wo* has greater number of Proto-Agent properties than the argument *xin*. Conversely, the argument *xin* has a greater number of Proto-Patient properties than the argument *wo*. By the argument selection principle stated in (21), the argument *wo* is selected as the subject, while the argument *xin* is selected as the object.

The selection principle in (21) further shows that in the SVO word order, the preverbal position is reserved for the subject, and the postverbal position reserved for the object.

Now, what about the so-called pseudo-passive sentences, such as those in (25) and (26)?

- (25) *Xin xie-le.*
 (letter write-ASP)
 'The letter is written.'
- (26) *Yifu xi-le.*
 (clothes wash-ASP)
 'The clothes are washed.'

Li and Thompson (1981) treat *xin* in (25) and *yifu* in (26) as topics. However, if we apply the same tests that I have adopted for distinguish topic from subject, both

xin and *yifu* behave like subjects. This can be seen in the placement of adverbs in (25') and (26').

- (25') a. *Xingkui xin xie-le.*
 (fortunately letter write-ASP)
 'Fortunately the letter is written.'
 b. *Xin xingkui xie-le.*
- (26') a. *Hen kuai-de yifu (jiu) xi-le.*
 (very quickly clothes (then) wash-ASP)
 'Very quickly the clothes are washed.'
 b. *Yifu hen kuai-de xie-le.*

From this point of view, I am tempted to propose an amendment to Dowty's selection principle. This amendment can be stated as in (27).

(27) Amendment to Dowty's Argument Selection Principle:

With two-place predicates, the argument with Proto-Patient properties can be lexicalized as the subject if the competing argument with Proto-Agent properties is not present.

The amendment in (27) means that in a language such as Chinese, when there is only one argument, this argument should be selected as the subject, and it can be placed before the preverbal position. Given this amendment, sentences such as (25) and (26) would automatically be analyzed as having subjects rather than topics. Furthermore, we do not need to invoke the concept of passives, or pseudo-passives, to treat such sentences.

Although Dowty's argument selection principle and the amendment (27) have been proposed to account for two-place predicates, they can be extended to account for one-place predicates as well as three-place predicates. For the present purposes, I will be concerned with one-place predicates only. Thus, a corollary to Dowty's principle can be stated as in (28).

(28) Corollary to Dowty's Argument Selection Principle:

With a one-place predicate, if the argument has more Proto-Agent properties, it will be selected as the subject; if the argument has more Proto-Patient properties, it will be selected as the object.

Corollary (28) accounts for the word order differences between the two types of one-place predicates, namely intransitive verbs, as illustrated in (29), and ergative verbs, as illustrated in (30) and (31).

- (29) a. Keren ku-le.
 (guest cry-ASP)
 'The guest cried.'
- b. *Ku-le keren.
 c. You yi-ge keren ku-le.
 (exist one-CL guest cry-ASP)
 'There is a guest who cried.'
- d. *Ku le yi-ge keren.
- (30) a. Keren lai-le.
 (guest come-ASP)
 'The guests came.'
- b. Lai-le keren.
 (come-ASP guest)
 'Some guests came.'
- (31) a. Zhangsan zou-le.
 (John leave-ASP)
 'John left.'
- b. Lisi lai-le.
 (Richie come-ASP)
 'Richie came.'
- c. Zou-le Zhangsan, lai-le Lisi.
 (leave-ASP John, come-ASP Richie)
 'John has left, (and) Richie arrived.'

In (29), the argument of an intransitive verb such as *ku* has more Proto-Agent properties than Proto-Patient properties. Therefore, regardless of whether the argument has definite or indefinite reference, it must be selected as the subject. In contrast, the argument of the ergative verb, *lai*, in (30) is neutral with respect to either Proto-Agent or Proto-Patient properties. As observed by Audrey Li (1990), Chinese ergative structures argue for a functional and interpretative approach—rather than a structural approach—to the definiteness effect in existential sentences in both Chinese and English. Sentence (31c) provides another kind of evidence for the functional approach. Observe that even definite NP's (*Zhangsan* and *Lisi* in (31c)) can be selected as objects of ergative verbs to achieve an indefinite effect. In short, for sentences containing ergative verbs, an argument, whether definite or indefinite, will be selected as the subject if it acquires more Proto-Agent properties by having existence independent of the event named by the verb. On the other hand, if the argument combines with the

verb to describe what has happened at a given location, it will exhibit indefinite effect. As a result, it loses its independent existence, and will be selected as the object.

The definite noun phrases in (31c) have a presentative function; that is, they are used to describe what has happened to a location. This contrasts with (31a) and (31b), in which the sentences describe the action performed by the actors. In fact, subjectless sentences, as exemplified by (30b), are also used to describe what has happened to a place rather than what has happened to the actor.²

The above observations lead us to question the status of the locative NP in (32).

- (32) *Jia-li lai-le keren.*
 (house-in come-ASP guest)
 ‘Some guests came to the house.’

Audrey Li (1990) treats the locative NP *jia-li* in (32) as the subject. Using *dagai* ‘probably’ in the adverbial placement test, *jia-li* indeed behaves like a subject. This can be seen in (33).

- (33) a. *Jia-li dagai lai-le keren.*
 b. *Dagai jiali lai-le keren.*

However, since *jia-li* is not an argument of the verb, it cannot be selected as the subject within our adopted framework of argument selection theory. How do we solve the problem? I propose to treat the locative phrase in (32) as a base-generated topic that takes the subject position when the position is not filled by an argument. This proposal allows us to base-generate the locative NP in (32) above, as well as that in (34) below, as the topic.

- (34) *Jia-li keren lai-le.*
 (house-in guest come-ASP)
 ‘At the house, the guests have come.’

In the same vein, the initial NP *wu-ge pingguo* in (35a) and (35b) are base-generated as topic. In (35b), however, the base-generated topic serves as the subject by occupying the subject position.

2. See Hu (1995) for a detailed treatment of this type of subjectless sentences from cognitive and functional perspectives.

- (35) a. Wu-ge pingguo san-ge lan le.
 (five-CL apple three-CL rotten PRT)
 'Of the five apples, three are rotten.'
 b. Wu-ge pingguo lan le san-ge.

Let us now analyze sentences (36) and (37).

- (36) Lisi xin xie-le.
 (Richie letter write-ASP)
 'Richie has written the letter.'
 (37) Zhangsan yifu xi-le.
 (John clothes wash-ASP)
 'John has washed the clothes.'

Lisi in (36) is a topicalized subject; that is, it was first selected as the subject via the argument selection principle, and then promoted to topic status. After *Lisi* was topicalized, the original object, *xin*, is moved to the subject position vacated by the original subject, *Lisi*. Thus, *xin* is treated as a subject, and not as an object or topic in (36). Sentence (37) can be analyzed in the same way. As a result, *xin* in (36) and *yifu* in (37) are analyzed as surface subjects, just as they are in sentences (25) and (26) respectively, discussed earlier. Thus, I have consistently analyzed the argument position immediately before the verb as the subject position in Chinese.

Now, what happens when there are two animate NP's before the verb, as in (38)? There are two interpretations, as given in (39) and (40).

- (38) Zhangsan Lisi da-le.
 (John Richie hit-ASP)
 (39) Lisi da-le Zhangsan. (Reading 1 of sentence (38).)
 'Richie hit John.'
 (40) Zhangsan da-le Lisi. (Reading 2 of sentence (38).)
 'John hit Richie.'

The normal interpretation of (38) is that Lisi is the agent and Zhangsan is the patient (=Reading 1). In this interpretation, Zhangsan is the topicalized object. There is also another interpretation of sentence (38), namely, one in which Zhangsan is the agent and Lisi the patient (=Reading 2). In this second reading, Zhangsan is the topicalized subject (i.e., the subject has been moved to topic position), and Lisi is the base-generated object that has been moved to the vacated subject position. In other words, reading 1 of sentence (38) is derived from (39)

through topicalization of the base-generated object. Reading 2 of sentence (38), on the other hand, is derived from (40) through topicalization of the subject, and the movement of the object to the vacated subject position. The fact that reading (2) of sentence (38) is not as normal as reading cannot be understood in terms of allowable routes of derivation. It can be better accounted for by the typicality condition in that Chinese typically topicalize the object, but not subjectivize the object in movement.

4. Conclusion

The pivotal role of 'topic' in Chinese grammar has been pointed out by Chao (1968), Li and Thompson (1976, 1981), and Tsao (1979, 1990). While Li and Thompson (1981) have shown that 'topic' must be distinguished from 'subject' on grounds of their functional and semantic differences, it is Jiang (1991) who has launched a thorough, systematic search for syntactic tests to distinguish 'topic' from 'subject' at the sentence level. In this paper, I have modified Jiang's tests and proposed using the placement of movable manner adverbs and sentential adverbs as tests. I have then further adopted, with some modifications, Dowty's (1991) argument selection principle to decide the selection of 'subject' and 'object' in Chinese grammar.

To summarize, examples are presented in (41) to illustrate the proposed analysis of 'topic', 'subject', and 'object' in Chinese. In the illustration in (41), the following four conventions are used:

UPPER CASE and { }	for the base-generated 'topic'
UPPER CASE alone	for the 'subject'
< >	for the 'object'
UPPER CASE and []	for topicalized argument

- (41) a. {NEI-CHANG HUO} xingkui XIAOFANG-DUI lai-de zao.
 (that-CL fire fortunately fire-brigade come early)
 'That fire, fortunately the fire brigade came early.'
- b. {ZHEI-JIAN SHI} NI zuo-zhu.
 (this-CL matter you decide)
 'This matter, you decide.'
- c. ZHANGSAN xi-le <yifu>.
 (John wash-ASP clothes)
 'John washed the clothes.'
- d. YIFU xi-le.

- (clothes wash-ASP)
 ‘The clothes are washed.’
- e. Lai-le <keren>.
 (come-ASP guest)
 ‘Some guests came.’
- f. {JIA-LI} lai-le <keren>.
 (house-in come-ASP guests)
 ‘At the house some guests came.’
- g. [ZHANGSAN] YIFU xi-le.
 (John clothes wash-ASP)
 ‘John washed the clothes.’
- h. [YIFU] ZHANGSAN xi-le.
 (clothes John wash-ASP)
 ‘The clothes, John washed *them*’
- i. [ZHANGSAN] LISI da-le.
 (John Richie hit-ASP)
 ‘John, Richie hit *him*’. / ‘Richie, John hit *him*.’

Two small notes are needed here. First, for (41f), *jia-li* is the base-generated topic that fills the subject position. And second, for (41i), there are two readings. In reading 1, Zhangsan is the topicalized object (Lisi da-le Zhangsan). In reading 2, Zhangsan is the topicalized subject (Zhangsan da-le Lisi).

In this paper, I have tacitly sets up a scheme having three levels of grammatical representation, roughly equivalent to the thematic, functional, and constituent structure representations in LFG or the theta roles, argument structure, and phrase structure in GB. Then, I have the thematic structure agent role mapped to the functional structure subject, and the theme and patient roles to object. In certain contexts, the functional structure object is moved to become constituent structure subject or topic, and the subject is moved to become topic, sometimes replacing base-generated original topic. The validity of my analysis is however, subject to further verification in different formal frameworks of Chinese grammatical analyses. I hope that I have shed some light on this fundamental aspect of Chinese grammar for further exploration in the formal study of Chinese syntax.

REFERENCES

- Chao, Yuen Ren. 1968. *A Grammar of Spoken Chinese*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Chafe, Wallace. 1976. "Givenness, contrastiveness, definiteness, subjects, topics and point of view." In Li (1976):27-55.
- Chomsky, Noam. 1986. *Knowledge of Language: Its Nature, Origin, and Use*. New York: Praeger.
- Dowty, David. 1991. "Thematic proto-roles and argument selection." *Language* 67.3:547-619.
- Hu, Wenzhe. 1995. *Functional Perspectives and Chinese Word Order*. Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio State University.
- Huang, Chu-Ren. 1989. "On Mandarin Chinese predicates with subcategorized topics." Paper presented at Center for the Study of Language and Information, Stanford, CA, November 28, 1989.
- Huang, James. 1982. *Logical Relations in Chinese and the Theory of Grammar*. Ph.D. Dissertation, MIT.
- . 1984. "On the distribution and reference of empty pronouns." *Linguistic Inquiry* 15:531-574.
- . 1988. "Chinese A-not-A questions: a modular approach." In C. Georgopoulos and R. Ishihara (eds.), *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Language: Essays in Honor of S.Y. Kuroda*. Dordrecht: Reidel.
- Jiang, Zixin. 1991. *Some Aspects of the Syntax of Topic and Subject in Mandarin Chinese*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago.
- Keenan, Edward. 1976. "Towards a universal definition of 'subject'." In Li (1976):303-334.
- Lapolla, Randy. 1990. *Grammatical Relations in Chinese: Synchronic and Diachronic Considerations*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.
- Li, Audrey. 1990. *Order and Constituency in Mandarin Chinese*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Li, Charles (ed.). 1976. *Subject and Topic*. New York: Academic Press.
- Li, Charles and Sandra Thompson. 1976. "Subject and topic: a new typology of language." In Li (1976):457-489.
- . 1981. *Mandarin Chinese: A Functional Reference Grammar*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- McCawley, James D. 1989. "Notes on Li and Thompson, Mandarin Chinese: A Functional Reference Grammar." *Journal of the Chinese Language Teachers Association* 24.1:19-42.
- Rosch, Eleanor. 1978. "Principles of Categorization." In Eleanor Rosch and Barbara B Lloyd, eds., *Cognition and Categorization*, 27-47. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum.
- Sanders, Gerald and James Tai. 1972. "Immediate dominance and identity deletion." *Foundations of Language* 8:161-198.
- Tang, Chih-Chen Jane. 1989. "Chinese reflexives." *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory*

6.4:93-122.

Tang, Ting-chi. 1989. *Studies on Chinese Morphology and Syntax*. Volume 2. Taipei: Student Book Co., Ltd.

Tsao, Feng-fu. 1979. *A Functional Study of Topic in Chinese: The First Step Towards Discourse Analysis*. Taipei: Student Book Co., Ltd.

———. 1990. *Sentence and Clause Structure in Chinese: A Functional Perspective*. Taipei: Student Book Co., Ltd.

Xu, Liejiong and D.T. Langendoen. 1985. "Topic Structures in Chinese." *Language* 61.1:1-27.

(編輯部按：本文實際出版日期為 1998 年 3 月。)

漢語句法中「主題」、「主語」以及「賓語」的鑒定

戴浩一

中正大學語言所

摘 要

「主題」、「主語」以及「賓語」雖是漢語語法中極為重要的概念，但是五十年來，漢語語法學家對這些概念的界定及在形式上的檢驗，不僅意見分歧，而且觀念模糊。本文試圖釐清這三個基本概念在形式語法上的體現，並提出一個鑒定的方法，以供形式語法研究者參考。此外，本文並探討不同的論元在漢語中如何被選為「主語」和「賓語」，進而修訂論元選定的普遍原則。

關鍵詞：主題、主語、賓語、論元選定原則