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Shā–Z

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Xiaonong Zhu

## Topic and Comment

In his *Grammar of Spoken Chinese* (1968), still the best grammar of Mandarin available, Y.R. Chao states that all clauses in Chinese are topic-comment, and there are no exceptions, though there are some clauses that only have comments, as in (1):

1. 下雨了。  
Xià yǔ le.  
fall rain CSM  
'It's raining.'

Put very simply, the structure of the clause has two parts: the topic, which is reference to some referent available for comment; and the comment, which supplies some information about that topic. Chao (1955, 1959) argued that word order is not determined by and does not affect the interpretation of actor vs. non-actor; he saw the clause as analogous to a function in logic: the argument is an argument of the function, and the truth value is unaffected by its position in the clause (1959:254). Chao (1968), and Lǚ (1979:70–73), used the term ‘subject’ when writing in English, or *zhǔyǔ* 主語 when writing in Chinese, but they were simply talking about topic, not a grammaticalized subject such as that in English (see LaPolla 2006a, 2006b, → Notions of “Subject”) for discussion of the origin and nature of grammatical relations/referent tracking systems such as what is called “subject” in English and why that is different from what we find in Chinese). Lǚ (1979:72–73) also argued

that “subject” and “object” can both be filled by any semantic role, and are to a certain extent interchangeable. One of the examples of what he meant by “interchangeable” is the following:

2. a. 窗戶已經糊了紙。  
Chuānghu yǐjīng hú-le zhǐ.  
window already paste-PFV paper  
'The window has already been pasted with paper.'
- b. 紙已經糊了窗戶。  
Zhǐ yǐjīng hú-le chuānghu.  
paper already paste-PFV window  
'The paper has already been pasted on the window.'

The difference is just in which element is chosen to be the topic that the clause is about; there is no difference in the verb or any other marking or behavior. There are no grammaticalized selectional (subcategorization/argument structure) restrictions on the relationship between the topic and the comment, in the way there are in the subject-predicate structure and many other constructions in English. The topic may not even be an argument of the verb at all, as in the first part of (5) below. In Mandarin, the only requirement is that the addressee can infer the aboutness relation between the topic and the comment. This means that the structure does not assist in referent role tracking (does not constrain the inference of the role of referents in discourse) in Chinese the way it does in English; it is simply based on information structure (see Van Valin 1987; Comrie 1989; LaPolla 2006a, 2006b on grammatical relations as referent tracking devices restricting the interpretation of the role of referents in discourse). Tsao (1987, 1990) accepted the topic-comment nature of the Chinese clause and expanded it to define the sentence as a topic chain, where a single topic may have more than one comment. He also showed that a single clause may have up to three topics. I have argued a similar line (LaPolla 1993, 1995, 2009; LaPolla and Poa 2005, 2006), and will exemplify that view in this article. Li and Thompson (1976, 1978, 1981:15–20) also recognized that word order does not determine grammatical relations, and recognized topics in

Chinese, but also argued for subject in Chinese, distinguished from the use of the word by Chao and Lǚ, saying it must have “a direct semantic relationship with the verb as the one that performs the action or exists in the state named by the verb” (1981:15). They also distinguished it from the concept of subject in English, as in Chinese “subject’ is not a structurally definable notion” (1981:19) the way it is in English. In this view then the clause has a subject (defined on semantic rather than grammatical grounds, i.e., it is the actor), but there is often a topic (defined as some topical element other than “the one that performs the action or exists in the state named by the verb”) that precedes the subject as well. This is different from English and other European languages, and so they argued there are two types of language: “subject-prominent” (e.g., English) and “topic-prominent” (e.g., Chinese). Both types of language have both subject and topic, but the prominence of subject vs. topic differs in the two types. In saying that there is no grammatically definable subject, though, Li and Thompson are actually agreeing with Chao and Lǚ that there is no grammatical subject, but differ from Chao and Lǚ in defining subject as a particular semantic role, whereas Chao and Lǚ each explicitly said their conception of subject is not related to semantic role; Chinese subjects are simply topics. Many linguists, though, in China and without (e.g., Shi 2000; Liu 2001, 2004, 2009), incorrectly assume that what Li and Thompson meant by “topic-prominent” is that there is a grammatical subject-predicate relation, and only when a non-actor argument appears as topic is it a topic-comment construction, even though Chao and Lǚ showed there is no empirical justification for such a distinction, and Li and Thompson did not argue for such a grammatical subject.

In this article we will look at various constructions in Mandarin Chinese and show that the patterns found can all be explained using concepts of information structure, essentially topic-comment. As argued in LaPolla (2009), if information structure can explain all of the patterns found, then there is no justification for positing grammatical relations. We will be using the framework proposed by Lambrecht (1994)

for discussing information structure. The topic-comment structure, called “predicate focus” in Lambrecht’s framework, is seen as one of three types of information structure, and the most common type found in texts. The other two are less common, and have marked meanings/usages: narrow focus (or “argument focus”), in which a single argument or other element in the clause is singled out as the focus of information; and “sentence focus”, where there is no topic, and the entire clause is in focus. The latter is what we often find in presentational clauses and event-reporting, as with the example mentioned above, *Xià yǔ le* 下雨了 [fall rain CSM] ‘It’s raining’ (ex. 1) and also *yǒu rén zhǎo nǐ* 有人找你 [EXIST person look.for 2SG] ‘There is someone here looking for you’.

We will begin with the basic topic-comment structure, as in the bracketed parts of the following natural examples. In the second line of (4b) and in (5) there are two comments following one topic. (Note: the sources of the example sentences in this article are listed at the end of the article.)

3. 對不起，我累了。  
 Duibuqǐ, [wǒ]<sub>TOPIC</sub> [lèi le]<sub>COMMENT</sub>.  
 sorry 1SG tired CSM  
 ‘Sorry, I’m tired.’
4. a. 學生發了成績，孩子們的學習成績挺不錯的。  
 [Xuéshēng]<sub>TOPIC</sub> [fā-le  
 student distribute-PFV  
 chéngjì]<sub>COMMENT</sub>, [háizimende xuéxí  
 marks children ASSOC study  
 chéngjì]<sub>TOPIC</sub>, [tǐng bú-cuò  
 marks very NEG-wrong  
 de]<sub>COMMENT</sub>.  
 NMLZ  
 ‘The students were given their marks today,  
 the children’s marks were really not bad.’
- b. 老師發了成績單，我接過來馬上貪婪的看了起來。  
 [Lǎoshī]<sub>TOPIC</sub> [fā-le  
 teacher distribute-PFV  
 chéngjì-dān]<sub>COMMENT</sub>, [wǒ]<sub>TOPIC</sub>  
 marks-sheet 1SG

[jiē-guo-lai]<sub>COMMENT</sub> [mǎshàng tānlán  
receive-over-come immediately greedy  
de kàn-le-qǐlái]<sub>COMMENT</sub>  
ADV read-PFV-begin

‘The teacher distributed the marksheets,  
(and) I received (mine and) and immedi-  
ately greedily began to read it.’

c. 今天考試，成績發家長。

Jīntiān kǎoshì, [chéngjì]<sub>TOPIC</sub> [fā  
today test marks distribute  
jiāzhǎng]<sub>COMMENT</sub>.  
parents

‘Today (I take the) test, the marks will be  
sent to the parents.’

5. 英國泥菩薩過江，還為韓國操心？

[Yīngguó]<sub>TOPIC</sub> [nì púsà guò  
England clay bodhisattva cross  
jiāng]<sub>COMMENT</sub>, [hái wéi Hánguó  
river still for Korea  
cāoxīn]<sub>COMMENT</sub>?  
concerned

‘England can’t help itself (‘clay bodhisat-  
tva crossing the river’ is part of a longer  
expression for showing vulnerability), and  
yet is still worried about Korea?’

The topic can be any argument of the verb in the comment (compare (4a)–(4c)), but it does not have to be an argument of the verb, that is, it does not have to have a selectional relationship to the verb in the comment; there only needs to be an inferable topic-comment relationship, as in (5). Notice in comparing (4a)–(4c) that the interpretation of the role of the topic relative to the verb in the comment (i.e., that the student is a recipient but the teacher is an actor and the marks are the thing sent) is based entirely on inference from assumptions about the nature of the referents and the action involved; it is not marked grammatically anywhere in the clause, that is, the grammar does not constrain the inference of the relationship between the referent and the action, as it does, for example, in English.

There are a number of variations on this basic structure in terms of what appears in the comment. It can be a simple comment, as in (3)–(5), or the comment can be a complex structure which is an event structure or a construction

with a secondary topic such as the “double topic” construction or the *bǎ*-把 and *bèi*-被 constructions.

The double topic construction (sometimes called the “double subject” or “double nominative” construction—Teng 1974) is where the comment about the topic is in fact a topic-comment structure, i.e., [Topic [Topic-Comment]<sub>Comment</sub>]. The two topics often are understood to be related in some way, such as whole-part or possessor-possessed, and can often be rephrased as a single noun phrase. Related to this construction is another common clause pattern with two elements related as whole-part or possessor-possessed, the “retained object” (or “split referent”, “split topic”) construction (e.g., Liú 2001). The “double topic” and “retained object” constructions are actually variants of each other, though they are often treated as very different structures by grammarians. In the “retained object” construction the two elements do not appear together; one appears as a topic (often primary but sometimes secondary topic) and the other appears in the focus, instead of also being topical. Again, the difference between these two is simply whether a certain element is treated as a topic or as part of the focus. In the two examples in (6) the skin of the apple is treated either as part of the focus (6a) or as a secondary topic (6b). That is the only grammatical difference between these two structures.

6. a. 洛晚晴手中的蘋果已經削好了皮。

[Luò Wǎnqíng shǒu-zhōng de  
Luò Wǎnqíng hand-middle ASSOC  
píngguǒ]<sub>TOPIC</sub> [yǐjīng xiāo-hǎo-le  
apple already peel-complete-PFV  
pí]<sub>COMMENT</sub>.  
skin

‘The apple in Luò Wǎnqíng’s hand had  
already been peeled of its skin.’

b. 慕時清再次抬起頭的時候，手中的蘋果皮已經削好了。

Mù Shíqīng zài cì táiqǐ tóu  
Mù Shíqīng again time lift.up head  
de shíhòu, [shǒu-zhōng de  
ASSOC time hand-middle ASSOC  
píngguǒ]<sub>TOPIC</sub> [[pí]<sub>TOPIC</sub> [yǐjīng  
apple skin already

xiāo-hǎo-le]comment]<sub>COMMENT</sub>  
 peel-complete-PFV  
 ‘When Mù Shíqīng again lifted his head,  
 the apple in his hand, the skin was already  
 peeled.’

In other cases there are two topics, but they are not related as possessor-possessed or whole-part, as in Chao’s (1968:325) well known example, given in (7), often used in grammar texts as an example of an ambiguous sentence, as in different contexts it can mean either of the two translations given.

7. 這個人誰都不認得。  
 Zhè-ge rén shéi dōu bù rèn de.  
 this-CLF man who all NEG know  
 ‘Nobody knows this man.’ / ‘This man doesn’t  
 know anybody.’

The *bǎ*- and *bèi*-constructions also have a primary topic and a secondary topic. In the *bǎ*-construction (8) the primary (initial) topic is some sort of cause, and the secondary topic, which follows *bǎ*, is the one most affected by the action indicated in the comment (cf. Tsao 1987). As shown in LaPolla (2013), there is no necessary selectional relationship between the post-*bǎ* element and the main verb, and the element following *bǎ* does not have to be an NP. The use of *bǎ* is also optional in many cases (compare (9a–b)). In those cases the secondary topic nature of the post-*bǎ* constituent is very clear.

8. 因為這套衣服把我變的太可愛了, [...]  
 Yīnwéi zhè tào yīfu bǎ wǒ biàn  
 because this set clothing BA 1SG change  
 de tài kě’ài le, [...]  
 ADV too cute CSM  
 ‘Because these clothes made me (look) too  
 cute, [...].’

9. a. 我把錢都給了你了啊, 現在說我  
 沒錢。  
 Wǒ bǎ qián dōu gěi-le nǐ le  
 1SG BA money all give-PFV 2SG CSM  
 a, xiànzài shuō wǒ méi qián.  
 TOP now say 1SG not.have money  
 ‘I gave all the money to you, now you say  
 I have no money.’

- b. 我錢都給了你怕什麼啦!  
 Wǒ qián dōu gěi-le nǐ pà  
 1SG money all give-PFV 2SG fear  
 shénme la!  
 what UFP  
 ‘I gave all the money to you, what are you  
 afraid of!’

In the *bèi*-construction (10) the primary topic is the one most affected by the action of the comment, while the secondary topic is some sort of cause. As pointed out by Chao (1968:75), and as we have seen in the examples above, Chinese verbs have no predetermined “direction of action”, so these constructions can be used in order to make the direction of action explicit. Very often only the primary topic, the effected element, is mentioned, and there is no overt representation of a cause as secondary topic, so the use of *bèi*, which is optional in many cases, helps to constrain the interpretation of the role of the referent to non-actor rather than actor (see LaPolla 1992, 1994 on the frequency of such non-agentive marking in Sino-Tibetan languages).

10. 武漢“生命”雕塑被網友評為最丑雕塑。  
 Wǔhàn “shēngmìng” diāosù bèi  
 Wǔhàn life sculpture BEI  
 wǎngyǒu píngwéi zuì chǒu diāosù.  
 netizens judge.as most ugly sculpture  
 ‘The “Life” sculpture in Wǔhàn has been  
 judged as the most ugly sculpture by  
 netizens.’

The sentence-focus event-reporting structure, such as *xià yǔ le* [fall rain CSM] ‘It’s raining’ ((1) above), has the representation of the main participant of the action represented by the expression in post-verbal position to show that it is not the topic of the action. Compare the bracketed structures in the following examples, where in one case the referent of *qiāo-mén-shēng* 敲門聲 is a topic (9a), and in the other the referent of *qiāo-mén-shēng* is part of an event structure (10b) (in (10b) there is only the event/comment and no topic; the elements preceding the comment are temporal and spatial scene-setting elements, not topics in the sense of being what the comment is about).

11. a. 人口普查的敲門聲響起時，你會開門嗎？

[Rénkǒupǔchá de qiāo-mén-shēng]<sub>TOPIC</sub> [xiǎng-qǐ]<sub>COMMENT</sub> shí,  
census ASSOC knock-door-sound  
sound make.sound-INCHO time

nǐ huì kāi mén ma?  
2SG will open door Q

‘When the sound of the census (people) knocking at your door is heard, will you open the door?’

- b. 正說著，門外忽然響起了砰砰砰的急急的敲門聲。

Zhèng shuō-zhe, mén wài [hūrán xiǎng-qǐ-le pēngpēngpēng  
just talk-DUR door outside suddenly  
make.sound-INCHO-PFV ONOMA

de jí-jí de  
ASSOC urgent-urgent ASSOC

qiāo-mén-shēng]<sub>COMMENT</sub>  
knock-door-sound

Just as (he) was talking, suddenly outside there was the sound of urgent knocking on the door.

(Ōuyáng 1959:245)

In (11a), the knocking at the door is treated as a topic, and so appears before the comment *xiǎngqǐ* 響起 ‘begins to sound’. In (11b), on the other hand, the knocking at the door is treated as part of an event that suddenly happened, and so appears after *xiǎngqǐ* as part of the event structure. This simple difference explains the difference in word order.

Aside from being used in sentence focus situations (i.e., without a topic), the same event structure can also appear as the comment about some topic. For example, in (12), the dying of the horse is treated not as a comment about the horse (although that would be possible with a different word order); in this context the dying of the horse is treated as an event, and this event is made the comment about the woman in the story. The usual interpretation of this structure (topic + event structure) is that the event had an effect on the topic (often a negative one, as in this case, as shown by the second comment).

12. 她死了一匹馬，便這麼哭個不住。

[Tā]<sub>TOPIC</sub> [sǐ-le yī pǐ mǎ]<sub>COMMENT</sub>,  
3SG die-PFV one CLF horse

[biàn zhème kū ge bú-zhù]<sub>COMMENT</sub>,  
then this.much cry CLF NEG-stop

‘She had a horse die on her, (and she) cries this much without stopping.’

If we assume an SVO or any other subject-based analysis of Chinese, we run into serious problems with the type of structure in the first topic-comment structure of (12), which is quite common in Chinese. If we try to say that ‘she’ is the subject and ‘one horse’ is the object, then we must assume that ‘die’ is a transitive verb, or at least has a transitive use. But this goes against what Chinese speakers feel about this sentence. It isn’t that ‘she’ caused the death of the horse, or had anything to do with the death of the horse, but that the horse died, and this has affected her in some way, that is, she experienced the event of her horse dying. If we use the topic comment analysis, we can see that ‘she’ is the topic, and ‘die a horse’ is presented as an event. It is the horse that died, but the dying is not presented as a comment about the horse, that it died, but as an event of horse-dying, and this event functions as the comment about ‘she’.

In the following example we see both uses in a single stretch of discourse:

13. 特別喜歡下雪。喜歡下雪後白茫茫的一片很純淨的感覺。希望今年的第一場雪早點下吧！

1. Tèbié xǐhuān xià xuě.  
especially like fall snow

2. Xǐhuān xià xuě hòu bái máng máng  
like fall snow after glisteningly.white  
de yī piàn hěn chúnjìng  
ASSOC one CLF very pure

de gǎnjué.  
ASSOC feeling

3. Xīwàng [jīnnián de dì-yī chǎng  
hope this.year ASSOC ORD-one CLF  
xuě]<sub>TOPIC</sub> [zǎo diǎn xià ba!]<sub>COMMENT</sub>.  
snow early a.bit fall HORT

(I) especially like snow (lit: ‘the falling of snow’). (I) like the feeling of purity of the glisteningly white snow after a snowfall.  
 (I) hope this year the first snow (of the season) will fall a bit earlier!

In lines (13.1) and (13.2) ‘snow’ is not treated as topical, but is treated as part of the event ‘the falling of snow’, and so follows the verb, whereas in line (13.3) the (first) snow (of the season) is treated as topical, and so precedes the verb.

In this chapter we have discussed the major clause types of Mandarin Chinese, and shown how they can be explained using the concepts of topic and comment. We have also seen that word order does not determine, and is not determined by grammatical or semantic relations, so calling Chinese an “SVO” language, or even “topic-prominent” language, as this is often understood, is inappropriate. The appearance of what is called “SVO” is due to the fact that the topic precedes the verb and the focal elements follow it, and actors are much more frequent as topics and undergoers are much more frequent as focal elements (see Sun and Givón 1985 for statistics; see LaPolla and Poa 2005, LaPolla 2009 for more discussion on Chinese clause structure as being governed by information structure; LaPolla and Poa 2006 on why terms like “SVO” are inappropriate in word order typology; and see Lee 2001 for data showing that Cantonese is largely governed by the same principles).

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## Traditional Chinese Phonology

Chinese historical phonology differs from most domains of contemporary linguistics in that its general framework is based in large part on a genuinely native tradition. The non-Western outlook of the terminology and concepts used in Chinese historical phonology make this field extremely difficult to understand for both experts in other fields of Chinese linguistics and historical phonologists specializing in other language families.

The framework of Chinese phonology derives from the tradition of rhyme (= rime) books and