

“Subject” in Mandarin¹

Introduction

- Subject: subject and subjecthood in Mandarin
N.B.:
 - a) With no mention on objects, due to lack of time and space
 - b) Mainly on nominal subjects (see Conclusion), assuming that “nouns” do exist in Mandarin
- Aims:
 - a) syntactic properties of subjects in Mandarin;
 - b) syntactic alignment of Mandarin
- Framework: Typology
- Structure:
 - Section 1: Overview of previous studies on subjects in Mandarin
 - Section 2: Typological studies on subjects
 - Section 3: Syntactic properties of subjects in Mandarin and the syntactic alignment of Mandarin
 - Conclusion: Implications and perspectives

1. Previous studies on subjects in Mandarin

- 吕叔湘(1946): two criteria (agentivity and position) and four possible analyses ([±agent, ±preverbal], i.e. 纯依施受关系、全凭位置前后、相对主语主义和绝对主语主义), but no explicit conclusion
- 《语文学学习》(1950s)《汉语的主语宾语问题》: three viewpoints (agentivity and/or word order)
- Chao (1968: 69): “The grammatical meaning of subject ... in a Chinese sentence is topic...”
- 吕叔湘(1979): “主语二重性”, i.e. tension between semantics (i.e. agentivity) and syntax (i.e. word order) (cf. 李临定(1985))
- Li & Thompson (1981: 87): “The subject of a sentence in Mandarin is the noun phrase that has a ‘doing’ or ‘being’ relationship with the verb in that sentence”, so subject ≠ topic
- 朱德熙(1982, 1985), 胡裕树(1984), 陆俭明(1986), 常理(1992), 范晓(1998), 王一平(1998): “三个平面理论”

semantic	syntactic	pragmatic
↓	↓	↓
agent	subject	topic

- 范晓(1998): argument, agent, before the predicate and often with no adposition
- Lin (2001) and Yip & Rimmington (2004): no further discussion or definition

2. Typological studies on subjects and syntactic alignment

- Greek-Latin tradition: subject = nominative
- Factual challenges: absolutive-ergative languages (cf. Dixon 1994), e.g. Basque (cf. Bossong 1984)

- (1) *Zakurr-a-Ø etorri da.*
U
dog-DEF-ABS come.PTCPL AUX
‘The dog came.’

¹ I would like to thank the laboratory LACITO (CNRS - UMR 7107) for having financed this study.

(2) *Gizon-a-k* *zakurr-a-Ø* *ikusi* *du.*
 A P
 person-DEF-ERG dog-DEF-ABS see.PTCPL AUX
 'The person saw the dog.'

i.e. U (unique argument of intransitive verb) = P (patient-like argument of transitive verb) ≠ A (agent-like argument of transitive verb)

- Theoretical development: Relational Grammar, i.e. a syntactic theory which considers grammatical relations (i.e. subject, object, dative ...) as primitives (cf. Perlmutter 1980)
- Keenan (1976: 305, 306):
 "...a definition of the notion "subject of" which will enable us to identify the subject phrase(s), if any, of any sentence in any language"
 "...universally valid criteria for identifying subjects ... in any L[anguages]"
 30 odd properties: autonomy properties (independent existence, indispensability, autonomous reference), case-marking properties, semantic role, immediate dominance
- Later studies (Palmer (1994), Givón (1995, chapter 6; 2001, chapter 4), Whaley (1997, part 4), Van Valin & LaPolla (1997, chapter 6), Van Valin (2001, chapter 2), Croft (2003, §5.5), Farrell (2005), Creissels (2006, chapter 16), Andrews (2007))
 - a) adopted some of Keenan's criteria and abandoned the others
 - b) "subject" as a syntactic notion, not a semantic notion or a pragmatic notion, in spite of its semantic and pragmatic properties and its close relationship with "agent" and "topic"
 - c) "subject" as a set of properties, so there are prototypical subjects and less prototypical ones (cf. Prototype theory in cognitive science)

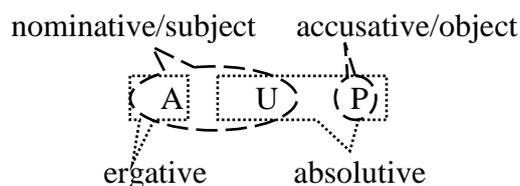
N.B.: b) and c) are similar to "Three-level theory"

- Syntactic alignment: how A, U and P are morphosyntactically distinguished and arranged
 - Morphological marking: nominative-accusative, i.e. *I/he* vs. *me/him* in English

(3) *I came.*
 (4) *He saw me.*
 (5) *I saw him.* } A = U ≠ P

absolutive-ergative: Basque, i.e. U = P ≠ A

(6) Syntactic alignments:



- Syntactic behavior: syntactic pivot

3. Subject: where Mandarin and Typology converge

3.1. Semantic properties, pragmatic properties and morphological marking

N.B.: only tendencies, but neither sufficient conditions nor necessary conditions, so not conclusive though useful for the identification of subjects

- Semantics
 Typology: semantic role hierarchy (Dik 1997: 266)

(7) agent > goal/patient > recipient > benefactive > instrument > location > time

Mandarin: corpus-based study needed, but impressionistically right (cf. 范晓(1998))

- Pragmatics: typology = Mandarin
 Typology: often subject = topic, no language that forbids subjects to be topics, or topics to be subjects
 Mandarin: topic-dominant (cf. Li & Thompson 1975)
- Morphological marking: case and verb agreement
 - Case
 Typology: case marking, e.g. in Latin

(8)

	sg	pl
NOM	-a	-ae
ACC	-am	-ās

Mandarin: hardly applicable, except for 把 for some objects, 给 for some datives, and adpositions for some obliques

- Verb agreement
 Typology: subject-agreement, e.g. English, French
 Mandarin: inapplicable

3.2. Syntactic properties

3.2.1. Word order

Typology = Mandarin

Typology: few languages have a strict and unique word order, for example Maninka (Creissels (2009)), but most languages can have more than one word order, depending on information structure, for example, Topic-Focus-Predicate in Hungarian (Abondolo (1998))

Basic word order: most frequent, pragmatically neutral, no special phonological, semantic and morphological marking, affirmative, independent clause (cf. Dryer 2007: 73-78)

According to Dryer (2005), 932/1228 languages have SV order

Mandarin: more than one word order, depending on information structure, often Topic-Comment (cf. Li & Thompson (1981)), but SVO (still impressionistically speaking) as basic word order (cf. Givón 1995: 250, 2001: 177)), and independently of transitivity:

(9) *che_U lai le*

car come TAM

'The car_U has come.'

(10) *che_A zhuang ren_P le*

car hit, strike person TAM

'The car_A has hit the person_P.'

In Mandarin (and in English), concerning the word order, $U = A \neq P$, i.e. nominative-accusative alignment

Word order in syntactically ergative language, e.g. Dyirbal (Dixon 1994: 160-161):

(11) *ɲuma banaga-n^yu*

father.ABS return-NONFUT

U

'Father returned.'

(12) *ɲuma yabu-ɲgu bura-n*

father.ABS mother-ERG see-NONFUT

P A

'Mother saw father.'

$U = P$ (initial) $\neq A$, i.e. absolutive-ergative-verb

3.2.2. Behavioral properties

Behavioral properties: range of constructions that subjects may be involved in (cf. van Valin 2001, §2.2.2, Creissels 2006, §16.3).

N.B.:

- a) no single construction can be conclusive
- b) some constructions may not apply in some languages, i.e. tension between typological tendency and language particularity (cf. Comrie 1989: 66)

3.2.2.1. Reflexivization

himself/herself and 自己

Typology = Mandarin

Typology: the antecedent/binder can but do not have to be the subject, but the subject is always a possible antecedent/binder

(13) *James_i saw himself_i.*

(14) *Sam_i told Miriam_j about herself_j/*_i.*

Mandarin: long-distance binding (cf. Huang, Li & Li 2009, §9.2), and U = A (nominative)

(15) *lisi_i taoyan ziji_i*

Lisi dislike self

A

'Lisi dislikes himself.'

(16) *lisi_i juede zhangsan_j taoyan ziji_{i/j}*

Lisi find, think Zhangsan dislike self

A

'Lisi finds that Zhangsan dislikes him(eslf).'

(17) *lisi_i tingshuo wangwu_j juede zhangsan_k taoyan ziji_{i/j/k}*

Lisi hear Wangwu find, think Zhangsan dislike self

A

A

'Lisi hears that Wangwu finds that Zhangsan dislikes him(self).'

(18) *lisi_i wei ziji_i gongzuo*

Lisi for self work

U

'Lisi works for himself.'

(19) *lisi_i xiwang zhangsan_j wei ziji_{i/j} gongzuo*

Lisi hope Zhangsan for self work

A

U

'Lisi hopes that Zhangsan works for him(self).'

(20) *lisi_i tingshuo wangwu_j xiwang zhangsan_k wei ziji_{i/j/k} gongzuo*

Lisi hear Wangwu hope Zhangsan for self work

A

A

U

'Lisi hears that Wangwu hopes that Zhangsan works for him(self).'

3.2.2.2. Control structure (equi-NP deletion)

Typology = Mandarin

(21) *Tom_i hoped/wanted/trying _{-i/*j} to do better.*

(22) *zhangsan_i xiwang /xiang /changshi _{-i/*j} zuo de geng hao*
 Zhangsan hope want try do ADV still more well, good

U

'Zhangsan hopes/wants to/tries to do better.'

- (23) *Zhangsan_i xiang _i da lisi*
Zhangsan want hit Lisi
A
'Zhangsan wanted to hit Lisi.'

It is possible to add an emphatic *ziji* before the second verb (i.e. the infinitive in English)

- (24) *zhangsan_i xiwang ziji_i zuo de geng hao*

A note on the raising construction (or subject control)

According to LaPolla (1993: 785-786), "in Chinese ... the P role NP raised, and ... the A role NP raised, are both perfectly acceptable:

- (25) *haoxiang Paul mai le chezi.*
seem buy ASP vehicle
It seems Paul bought the car.
- (26) *Paul haoxiang mai le chezi.*
seem buy ASP vehicle
Paul seems to have bought the car.
- (27) *Chezi haoxiang Paul mai le.*
vehicle seem buy ASP
The car seems Paul to have bought.

As we can see from these examples, either of the referential constituents [i.e. subject or object] ... can appear before *haoxiang* 'seem' in Chinese, no matter what the semantic role ... As there is no restriction on the semantic roles which can be involved in raising, no evidence can be found for identifying a pivot for this construction, and thus there is no evidence from raising for establishing a subject in Chinese."

!!! LaPolla admits, without discussing, *haoxiang* is a raising verb, equivalent to *seem*. *Seem* is indeed a verb but *haoxiang* is not:

- (28) *It *seem/seems that Paul bought the car. (agreement)*
- (29) *Paul and Mary seem/*seems happy. (agreement)*
- (30) *It seemed that Paul was happy. (TAM marked)*
- (31) **lisi haoxiang le/guo mai che (incompatible with TAM marking)*
Lisi HAOXIANG TAM buy car
Intended. 'Lisi seemed to buy a car.'
- (32) **lisi bu/mei haoxiang mai che (incompatible with negation)*
Lisi NEG HAOXIANG buy car
Intended. 'Lisi does/did not seem to buy a car.'

If *haoxiang* is not a verb, it is meaningless to identify examples like (25)-(27) as raising constructions. Rather, *haoxiang* seems to be an adverb, like *probably*:

- (33) *Probably Paul bought the car.*
- (34) *Paul probably bought the car.*
- (35) *The car, probably, Paul bought it.*

Thus, it seems wrong to say that "there is no evidence from raising for establishing a subject in Chinese", because raising seems inexistent in Mandarin, at least not for *haoxiang*. *Haoxiang*, like morphological marking, is simply not relevant for the identification of subjects in Mandarin.

3.2.2.3. Relative clauses

(36) *the man [that came yesterday]*_{RC}

(37) [*zuotian lai guo de*]_{RC} *na ge ren*
 yesterday come TAM REL DEM CL person
 'the person that came yesterday'

Typology = Mandarin

Typology (cf. Keenan & Comrie (1977, 1979))

- a) In nominative-accusative languages, subjects are more accessible than other positions, i.e. if there is only one position relativizable in a language, it must be subjects
- b) The most frequent strategy in subject relativization is gap

In English, almost all positions can be relativized on and there is almost always a gap in the relative clause for the position relativized on, so relativization is not a conclusive criterion for the identification of subjects in English.

In Mandarin (cf. Wu 2006), almost all positions can be relativized on, but only subjects (i.e. U and A) necessitate the gap:

(38) _{-U} *zuotian lai guo de na ge ren*
 yesterday come TAM REL DEM CL person
 'the person that came yesterday'

(39) _{-A} *da le lisi de na ge ren*
 hit TAM Lisi REL DEM CL person
 'the person that hit Lisi'

Objects can choose between the gap and the resumptive pronoun (Keenan & Comrie 1979: 334):

(40) *wo da le (ta) yidun de na ge nan haizi lai le²*
 1SG hit TAM 3SG once REL DEM CL man child come TAM
 'The boy that I hit once came.'

Indirect objects and adjuncts necessitate the use of resumptive pronouns (Li & Thompson 1981: 584):

(41) *wo song gei *(ta) yi ben xiaoshuo de ren*
 1SG offer DAT 3SG one CL novel REL person
 Lit. 'the person that I offered a novel to him'

(42) *wo wen le *(tamen) liang ge wenti de xuesheng*
 1SG ask TAM 3PL two CL question REL student
 Lit. 'the students that I asked two questions to them'

(43) *wo gen *(tamen) da qiu de yundongyuan*
 1SG with 3PL play ball REL sportsman
 Lit. 'the sportsmen that I played ball with them'

LaPolla (1993, §2.2) thinks that benefactives do not need resumptive pronouns:

(44) *wo gei bangman de na ge ren yijing zou le³*
 1SG BEN help REL DEM REL person already leave TAM
 Lit. 'The person that I lent a hand to has already left.'

² To my ear, the gap is better than the resumptive pronoun but both are accepted by some native Mandarin speakers.

³ To my ear, the resumptive pronoun is better than the gap.

In syntactically ergative languages, for example, Dyirbal, the head noun must be absolutive (i.e. U or P) both in the matrix and in the relative clause (Foley & van Valin 1984: 112):

- (45) *ɲadʷa bayi yaɾa bani-ŋu buɾa-n*
 1SG man.ABS come-REL see-REAL
 P/U
 'I saw the man that came.'
- (46) **bayi yaɾa balan dʷugumbil buɾa-ŋu bani-nʷu.*
 man.ABS women.ABS see-REL come-REAL
 U/A P
 Intended: 'The man that saw the woman came.'

3.2.2.4. Conjunction reduction

- Coordinate reduction

In English: A = U (i.e. subject) ≠ P (i.e. object), subject-subject reduction is Ok, but subject-object reduction is impossible

- (47) *Sally_i saw Pam_j and _{-i/*j} left.*
 A P U
- (48) *Sally_i saw Pam_j, and _{-i/*j} greeted her.*
 A P A
- (49) **Sally_i saw Pam_j and she_i greeted _{-j}.*
 A P A P

In Mandarin: A = U (i.e. subject) ≠ P (i.e. object), subject-subject reduction is Ok, but subject-object reduction is impossible

- (50) *lisi_j kanjian le zhangsan _{-j} ganjin paokai le*
 Lisi see TAM Zhangsan at once run away TAM
 A P U
 'Lisi saw Zhangsan and ran away at once.'
- (51) *lisi_j kanjian le zhangsan _{-j} mei dali ta*
 Lisi see TAM Zhangsan NEG pay attention to 3SG
 A P A
 'Lisi saw Zhang but did not pay attention to him.'
- (52) **lisi_i kanjian le zhangsan_j ke ta_i mei dali _{-j}*
 Lisi see TAM Zhangsan but 3SG NEG pay attention to
 A P A P
 Intended: 'Lisi saw Zhang but did not pay attention to him.'

- Subordinate reduction

In English: A = U (i.e. subject) ≠ P (i.e. object), subject-subject reduction is Ok, but subject-object reduction is impossible

- (53) *The student_i watched the guard_j while _{-i/*j} killing the prisoner.*
 A P A P
- (54) *The student_i watched the guard_j while _{-i/*j} running.*
 A P U

In Mandarin: A = U (i.e. subject) ≠ P (i.e. object), subject-subject reduction is Ok, but subject-object reduction is impossible

(55) *ruguo lisi qifu le zhangsan _ jiu yinggai peilidaoqian*
 if Lisi bully TAM Zhangsan then should apologize
 A P U

'If Lisi bullied Zhangsan, he should apologize.'

(56) *lisi budan qifu le zhangsan erqie _ hai weixie ta de jiaoren*
 Lisi not only bully TAM Zhangsan but also still threaten 3SG GEN family
 A P A

'Lisi not only bullied Zhangsan but also threatened his family.'

As has been pointed out by many, coreference in Mandarin cannot be determined so simply, for example, according to 于根元、苏培实、徐枢 & 饶长溶 (2003: 89-91), subject coreference is frequent but far from being exclusive:

(57) *budui_i ba ta_j peiyang chengwei yi ming jianqiang de zhanishi*
 army ACC 3SG train become one CL strong ADJ soldier
 *{i/j} *cengjing duoci zai zhandou zhong ligong*
 ever many times ADP battle ADP perform deeds of merit

'The army trained him as a forceful soldier and he performed deeds of merits in many battles.'

I observe that if there are explicit conjunctions in the second clause (and in the first clause), subject coreference is stronger:

(58) *budui_i ba ta_j peiyang chengwei yi ming jianqiang de zhanishi*
 army ACC 3SG train become one CL strong ADJ soldier
suoyi?(ta_j) cengjing duoci zai zhandou zhong ligong
 so 3SG ever many times ADP battle ADP perform deeds of merit

'The army trained him as a forceful soldier so he performed deeds of merits in many battles.'

(59) *yinwei budui_i ba ta_j peiyang chengwei yi ming jianqiang de zhanishi*
 because army ACC 3SG train become one CL strong ADJ soldier
suoyi(ta_j) cengjing duoci zai zhandou zhong ligong*
 so 3SG ever many times ADP battle ADP perform deeds of merit

'The army trained him as a forceful soldier so he performed deeds of merits in many battles.'

(60) *fumu xiang ba ta peiyang chengwei daxuesheng keshi?(ta) zuizhong que*
 parents want ACC 3SG educate become student but 3SG finally but
lian gaozhong dou mei biye
 even high school even NEG graduate

'His parents wanted him to become a student, but at last, he did not even graduate from high school.'

(61) *suiran fumu xiang ba ta peiyang chengwei daxuesheng keshi *(ta) zuizhong que*
 even if parents want ACC 3SG educate become student but 3SG finally but
lian gaozhong dou mei biye
 even high school even NEG graduate

'His parents wanted him to become a student, but at last, he did not even graduate from high school.'

I also observe that subject coreference is mandatory if the subject of the first clause is before the conjunction:

(62) *lisi ruguo dashang le zhangsan jiu yinggai mashang song yiyuan*
 Lisi if hurt TAM Zhangsan then should immediately send hospital
 'If Lisi_i hurt Zhangsan_j, he_{i/*j} should be sent to hospital immediately.'

LaPolla (1993, §2.1) argues that coreference in Mandarin does not depend on grammatical relations, but on semantics:

- (75) *muqin_i kanjian le fuqin_j ranhou _{-i/*j} jiu huilai le* (cf. (73))
 mother see TAM father then then return TAM
 Subj (A) Obj (P) Subj (U)
- (76) **muqin kanjian le fuqin haizi tingjian le* (cf. (74))
 mother see TAM father child hear TAM

Conclusion

First, subject coreference: dominant pattern but with exceptions, so subjecthood does exist in Mandarin

Second, syntactic alignment in Mandarin: nominative-accusative. Note that since Li & Thompson (1975)'s study, Mandarin has been considered as topic-dominant, but subjecthood does exist and is not buried under topicality. Comrie (1989, §3.5) shows that even if English and Russian are both nominative-accusative languages, English grammar depends more on syntactic relations while Russian, like Mandarin, gives more weight to semantic roles and pragmatic roles.

Questions for further research:

- Non-nominal subjects
 Possible solution: substitution

- (77) *Zhangsan dui lisi bangzhu hen da*
 Zhangsan towards Lisi help very big
 subject
 'Zhangsan helped Lisi a lot.'

Zhangsan → *paobu* 'to run'

- (78) *paobu dui lisi bangzhu hen da*
 run

Problem: semantic acceptability

- “主宾可换位结构”

- (79) *yi zhuo fan chi le san ge ren*
 one table dinner eat TAM three CL person
 'Three persons ate a whole dinner.'

If checked against reflexivization, control structure, relative clauses and conjunction reduction, neither of the two arguments is really subject:

Reflexivization: not applicable

Control structure: not applicable

Relativization: ungrammatical

- (80) **chi le san ge ren de (na) yi zhuo fan*

- (81) **yi zhuo fan chi le de (na) san ge ren*

Conjunction reduction: problematic

- (82) ??*yi zhuo fan chi le san ge ren, ranhou jiu zou le*
 then then leave TAM

On the contrary, in the corresponding SVO sentence (83), '*san ge ren*' show clear subjecthood:

- (83) *san ge ren chi le yi zhuo fan*

Reflexivization: ok

- (84) *zhe san ge ren mei xiangdao ziji chi le yi zhuo fan*
DEM three CL person NEG imagine self eat TAM one table dinner
'These three persons did not imagine that they ate a whole dinner.'

Control: ok

- (85) *zhe san ge ren chengren chi le yi zhuo fan*
avow

Relativization: ok

- (86) *chi le yi zhuo fan de (na) san ge ren*

Conjunction reduction: ok

- (87) *san ge ren chi le yi zhuo fan, ran hou jiu zou le*

It is worth asking whether there are really a subject and an object in the so-called “主宾可换位结构”, and if not, what the so-called “主宾可换位结构” is.

Abbreviations

- 1: first person
- 3: third person
- A: agent(-like) argument of transitive clauses
- ABS: absolutive
- ACC: accusative
- ADJ: adjective
- ADP: adposition
- ADV: adverb
- ASP: aspect
- BEN: benefactive
- CL: classifier
- DAT: dative
- DEF: definite
- DEM: demonstrative
- GEN: genitive
- NEG: negative
- NOM: nominative
- NONFUT: non-future
- NONHUM: non-human
- P: patient(-like) argument of transitive clauses
- PASS: passive
- PL: plural
- PTCPL: participle
- REAL: realis
- REL: relativizer
- SG: singular
- TAM: tense-aspect-mode
- U: unique argument of intransitive clauses

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