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汉语文化研究

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Indefinite Subjects and Modality in Mandarin Chinese (汉语的不定主语与情态)

Hua Dongfan (花东帆)

摘要: 本文对汉语不定主语与句子情态的关系做了比较分析,具体涉及非疑问用法的疑问代词词组及数量词+名词词组充当的句子不定主语。文章对这两类不定主语在认识情态、义务情态及能动情态条件下的不同分布特点和分布限制,做了具体的举例论证,指出它们在三种情态条件下的分布基本上是互补的。文章最后从非疑问用法的疑问代词及数量词+名词词组中的数词“一”的词汇语义角度,尝试对所观察到的有关现象做一解释。

关键词: indefinite subject modality cooccurrence restriction

1. Introduction

In this paper, I intend to explore effects of different types of modality on wh-indefinite subjects in Mandarin Chinese. I will show that there are cooccurrence restrictions holding between different types of modality and wh-indefinite subjects. Interestingly, these restrictions are different from those for indefinite numeral NP subjects. In fact, wh-indefinite subjects

and indefinite numeral NP subjects are in general complementary in distribution in different modal contexts. In what follows, I will first define the relevant terms. I will then consider wh-indefinite and indefinite numeral NP subjects in epistemic, deontic and dynamic modal contexts. Finally, I will attempt an explanation of the observed cooccurrence restrictions.

2. Types of modal expressions

I will restrict the discussion in this paper to epistemic, deontic and dynamic modal expressions. Following common practice, I will define epistemic modal expressions as those expressions expressing possibility or necessity relative to some state of knowledge. In Mandarin Chinese, they include expressions like *hui* ‘will’, *haoxiang* ‘seem’, *keneng* ‘possible’ and *kending* ‘must’. Deontic modal expressions are those expressing what is required or allowed by some normative system. Examples are *yinggai/dei* ‘should’, *bixu* ‘must’. Dynamic modal expressions express the abilities and dispositions of the subject. They are expressions like *hui/neng* ‘can’, *xiang* ‘want’, *keng/yuanyi* ‘willing’.

The term ‘wh-indefinite subject’ is used to refer to wh-expressions like *shui* ‘who’, *na-ge xuesheng* ‘which student’, etc. which are interpreted as noninterrogatives and are used as subject of a sentence. So, the usual interrogative pronoun

shui, for example, is to be understood as meaning ‘somebody’ rather than ‘who’. The term ‘indefinite numeral NP subject’ refers to expressions like *yī-ge rén* ‘a man’ (as opposed to *hā-ge rén* ‘that man’) which are used as subject of a sentence.

3. Indefinite subjects and modality

There is evidence that in Mandarin Chinese, wh-indefinite subjects and indefinite numeral NP subjects are in general complementary in distribution in various modal contexts. Wh-indefinite subjects are possible in epistemic and dynamic modal contexts, whereas indefinite numeral NP subjects in deontic modal contexts. And when wh-indefinite subjects occur in deontic modal contexts, they are marked, and must be interpreted partitively, i. e. as part of a pre-established set in the discourse. Let's first consider data involving epistemic modal expressions.

3.1. Epistemic modal contexts

Suppose we have the following conversational background. One comes into his office and sees a piece of traveling luggage with an air ticket and a linguistics conference program on it. And suppose things are closest to their normal course of events in this world. One may infer from what he sees that somebody may be leaving for a linguistics meeting, and may say something like (1) below in Mandarin Chinese. This is an epistemic modal sentence with a wh-indefinite subject. It

expresses degrees of possibility or necessity of a future event, relative to the speaker's knowledge of the particular situation and to his knowledge of the world at large.

(1) Shui keneng yao qu canjia yi-ge huiyi.^①

who possible will go attend one-CL meeting

'Someone will possibly go to attend a meeting.'

The same idea cannot be expressed by a sentence like (2), however, with an indefinite numeral NP subject, unless it is preceded by *you* 'have', a word that is often taken as an existential quantifier (see, for example, Cheng 1991, Tsai 1994).

(2) *Yi-ge ren keneng yao qu canjia yige huiyi.^②

one-CL person possible will go attend one-CL meeting

The marginality of indefinite NPs as subjects in Mandarin Chinese, as shown in (2), is not something new. It has long been pointed out in the literature that in Mandarin Chinese there is a tendency for subjects to be definite (see, for example, Chao 1968, Zhu 1982, Li and Thompson 1975, Xu 1995). Counter examples are also given and discussed (see, for example, Lee 1986, Fan 1986, Xu 1996, Li 1996a, 1996b, 1997). For instance, Li (1996a) gives convincing evidence that indefinite numeral NP subjects are licensed in Mandarin

Chinese when they are interpreted quantitatively, and Xu (*ibid.*) indicates that increased informativeness by way of adding modifiers to an indefinite numeral NP subject increases the acceptability of the sentence.

The issue we address here seems to be a new one. First, both the wh-indefinite subject and the indefinite numeral NP subject are indefinite, non-specific, and their referents are unknown to the speaker. Nevertheless, one is acceptable and the other is unacceptable in sentences like (1 - 2). Second, the (un) availability of quantity reading is not a crucial factor. While forcing a quantity reading can render (2) acceptable, it does not explain why (1) is acceptable, as here no issue of quantity is involved. The relevant wh-indefinites do not contain numerals. Third, as will be shown below, increased informativeness of the indefinite numeral NP subject will improve the sentence to some extent, but compared with its counterpart holding a wh-indefinite subject, the sentence is still not as natural. Thus consider the following conversational background and the utterances given in (3 - 6).

Suppose you go to a big party held at a friend's home. When you go in, you see three black jackets hanging behind the door along with some other clothing. After an hour's singing and dancing, you come near the door and notice that there are now two black jackets rather than three hanging there. You may make a remark like (3) or (4) below, but a remark like

(5) with an indefinite numeral NP subject sounds marginal, if not at all ungrammatical. And a remark like (6) with a modified indefinite numeral NP subject sounds better than (5), but is still not as natural as (3) or (4).

(3) Shui keneng yijing zou le.

who possible already go ASP

‘Someone might have already left.’

(4) Na-ge chuan hei xizhuang de ren keneng yijing zou le.

which-CL wear black jacket DE person possibly already go ASP

‘Someone wearing a black jacket might have already left.’

(5) * Yi-ge ren keneng yijing zou le.

one-CL person possibly already go ASP

(6) ? Yi-ge chuan hei xizhuang de ren keneng yijing zou le.

one-CL wear black jacket DE person possibly already go ASP

So, it seems that what is at issue here is not the (un)availability of a quantity reading, or the informativeness of the subject to a greater extent, but rather the unidentifiability of the referent of the subject and its interaction with a particular kind of modality. In epistemic modal contexts, when the referent of the subject is unidentifiable, Mandarin Chinese opts for wh-indefinite subjects and generally disfavors indefinite numeral NP subjects unless it is preceded by *you* ‘have’.

But how about sentences like those in (7) and (8), where indefinite numeral NP subjects can well cooccur with epistemic modal expressions?

- (7) Yi-ge wo gang renshi de pengyou xia xingqi keneng yao jiehun.

one-CL I just know DE friend next week possible will marry

'A friend of mine, whom I've just got acquainted with, will get married next week.'

- (8) Yi-ge jiao-le women san nian de shuxue laoshi keneng yushang-le

one-CL teach-ASP us three year DE math teacher possible meet-ASP mafan.

trouble

'A teacher that has taught us math for three years probably has got himself in trouble.'

I would argue that these actually are not counterexamples for the generalization just drawn. As Fan (1986) points out, though subjects like those in (7 - 8) are indefinite in form, their referents should be regarded as known, and identifiable to the speaker. In the normal course of things, if you have just befriended someone, then you are supposedly able to identify him. And the same should be true with someone who has taught you math for three years. So, these sentences are

different from sentences (1 – 6) above. The referents of the subjects in sentences (1 – 6) are unidentifiable to the speaker. Also in sentences (7 – 8), there is good reason to think that the epistemic modals actually operate on the predicate rather than the whole sentence. They express possible states of affairs a particular person is in, rather than possible states of affairs *per se*. In other words, the modals in (7 – 8) have different underlying argument structures from those in (1 – 6). They are predicate-operators whereas the modals in (1 – 6) are sentence-operators.

The suggestion that epistemic modals may be predicate-operators as well as sentence operators is a bit disconcerting, as it is not in accord with the general view that epistemic modals are monadic sentence operators. But consider the following sentence from Brennan (1993):

(9) The bartender may be drinking a martini.

This sentence is actually ambiguous. In one reading, it can mean something like ‘it is possible that the bartender is drinking a martini.’ This is the reading where the modal takes wider scope than the subject, and where the subject gets an intentional reading. In another reading, the sentence amounts to saying something like ‘As for the bartender, it is possible that he is drinking a martini.’ In this case, the subject takes wider scope relative to the modal, and the subject gets an

extensional reading whereas the object an intentional reading. This actually accounts for why sentence (9) can have both the *de dicto* and the *de re* reading, and why inference from (10a – b) to (10c) below is valid only on the *de re* reading, a phenomenon well-observed by Brennan, but not readily-explained.

(10) a. The bartender may be drinking a martini.

b. The proprietor is the bartender.

Therefore:

c. The proprietor may be drinking a martini.

Now let's consider inference possibilities for (4) and (7) (repeated here as (11 a) and (12a)). To me, (11 a) seems to only permit a reading corresponding to the *de dicto* reading of (9), and valid inference from (11a – b) to (11c) via substitution of extensionally equivalent expressions is impossible. That is, if the speaker of (11a) thinks that it is probable that someone wearing a black jacket has already left, it does not necessarily follow that he thinks that it is probable that Zhang San has already left, even if the person who has left happens to be Zhang San. Sentence (12a), on the other hand, seems to me to only admit of a reading corresponding to the *de re* reading of (10a), with the subject of the sentence interpreted extensionally. In other words, the sentence means "As for a specific friend of mine, whom I have just made

friend with, it is probable that he will get married next week". Now if that specific friend refers to Zhang San, then we may infer from (12a) that the speaker of this sentence thinks that Zhang San will probably get married next week.

- (11) a. Na-ge chuan hei xizhuang de ren keneng yijing zou le.
 which-CL wear black jacket DE person possible
 already go ASP
 ‘Someone wearing a black jacket might have already left.’
- b. Na-ge chuan hei xizhuang de ren = Zhang San
 Not necessarily therefore:
- c. Zhang San keneng yijing zou le.
- (12) a. Yi-ge wo gang renshi de pengyou xia xingqi keneng yao jiehun.
 one-CL I just know DE friend next week possible will
 marry
 ‘A friend of mine, whom I’ve just got acquainted with, will get married next week.’
- b. Yi-ge wo gang renshi de pengyou = Zhang San
 Therefore:
- c. Zhang San xia xingqi keneng yao jiehun.

As further evidence that the modals in (1 - 6) have different scope from those in (7 - 8), let’s try adding *you* ‘have’ to the initial positions of these sentences to form the so-