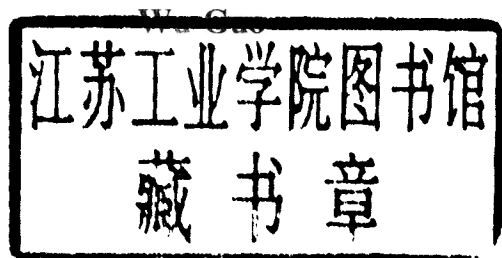


# INFORMATION STRUCTURE IN CHINESE

WU GUO

PEKING UNIVERSITY PRESS

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by Wu Guo

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This book develops an information-structure based theory for the analysis of Mandarin Chinese. It explores ways in which the same syntactic structure may convey different messages when used in different contexts, and the fact that the same propositional content needs to be packaged in different syntactic patterns to express what is appropriate for a given situation. In this book Wu Guo examines, in particular, how messages are organized in two major groups of syntactic structures in Chinese—the pragmatically unmarked structures represented by the double nominative construction, and the pragmatically marked ones represented by the *shi... de* construction. The focus patterns which emerge from the analysis in fact cover the basic information structures of Chinese. The study aims to reveal the motivating forces underlying grammatical structures in the language, thereby contributing to the description and understanding of Chinese grammar.

## Preface

This book is based on my PhD dissertation (the University of Newcastle, Australia, 1992). I am deeply indebted to Geraldine MacNeill for her guidance and generous support as well as for encouraging me to publish my results. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my colleagues at the University, in particular, Peter Peterson, Ray Cattell and George Horn, who took the time to discuss with me the many issues involved. I also benefited from discussions with Andy Kirkpatrick and Tim Shopen of the Australian National University. Thanks are also due to the University of Newcastle for awarding me the postgraduate scholarship that financed the original research.

Draft portions were presented to audiences at the University of Newcastle, Griffith University, the University of Sydney, Macquarie University, Murdoch University, Chiang Mai University, the National University of Singapore, City Polytechnic of Hong Kong, Charles University (Prague) and the University of Cordoba. The feedback helped, enormously, to improve the final result.

I received special encouragement from Professor Wu Tieping of Beijing Normal University, who made a number of insightful suggestions, and it is with particular pleasure that I express my gratitude for these as well as for his continuing support. Moreover, I must also acknowledge my debt to Peter Collins of the University of New South Wales and Professor Hu Zhuanglin, a no-longer-anonymous reviewer for Peking University Press, for their constructive comments. Thanks must also go to Sue Wiles for her editorial assistance. Any mistakes that remain are, of course, all mine.

Finally, I want to thank the University of Western Sydney, Nepean, for a grant which facilitated finalizing the manuscript as well as Guo Li at Peking University Press for her professional assistance.

## Abbreviations and Glosses

Chinese examples in this book are transcribed in pinyin, the Chinese romanization system, with tones suppressed. Each Chinese example has two lines of English glosses below it. The first line glosses individual Chinese words and the second offers a translation of the utterance. The translation is done in a way that tries to reflect the original structure of the utterance, sometimes at the sacrifice of idiomatic English. The abbreviations used in glosses are:

Abbreviations	Terms
ASP	Aspect marker
BA	<i>Ba</i> in the <i>ba</i> construction
BEI	"Passive" marker
CON	Conjunction
DE	Modification marker, or Nominalizer, or Sentence particle
CL	Classifier
PAR	Sentence particle
SHI	Copula or Focus marker
TM	Topic marker

Aspect markers are gathered under the blanket abbreviation ASP without specifying individual functions since this is not the major concern of the book. The sentence particle *le* is also abbreviated as ASP for convenience on the grounds that it could be seen as marking perfect aspect (Li, Thompson & Thompson 1982). Similarly the modification marker *de*, the nominal *de* and the sentence particle *de* are all glossed as DE, their different uses explained in the text.

The third-person singular pronoun in Chinese *ta* makes no distinction between animate and inanimate or between masculine and

feminine. Depending on the context, *ta* is glossed as 'he', 'him' or 'she' 'her' or 'it'. A neuter third-person animate *ta* will be glossed as 'he' or 'him' for convenience.



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## Introduction

This book develops an information-structure based theory for the analysis of Mandarin Chinese through examining, in particular, patterns of “information packaging” (Chafe, 1976, 1987) in two major grammatical constructions: the double nominative construction and the *shi...de* construction. The study aims to reveal the motivating forces underlying grammatical structures in the language and contributing to the description and explanation of Chinese Grammar.

I have chosen this area of study because, firstly, the ultimate goal of linguistic communication is to effect changes in the pragmatic information<sup>①</sup> of the discourse participants. Thus the pragmatic functions of grammatical structures are essential for communication. Secondly, traditional grammar is mainly structural, and formal grammar, as a recent development from the structural tradition, shares with structural grammar the focus on the “packaged” linguistic forms, i. e. on the syntactic, and sometimes semantic functions of grammatical structures. The pragmatic functions of such structures are relatively less explored. Thirdly, unlike English, Chinese is more pragmatically controlled (Chao 1968, Tsao 1977, Li & Thompson 1981, Lapolla 1990, Wu 1995). Pragmatic motivation is often manifested in Chinese grammatical structures. Thus, the study on this level not only contributes significantly to the overall description of Chinese grammatical structures, but may also, to a certain extent, explain in terms of their pragmatic functions why structures are organised the way they are.

Dik (1983:3) points out:

Among the many cross-cutting and intertwining develop-

---

① According to Dik(1981:128), the full body of knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions available to an addressee is pragmatic information.

ments characterising modern linguistics, one which stands out rather clearly is a shift of interest away from a purely formal approach to language, towards more functionally, pragmatically, and discourse-oriented conceptions of the nature of human language.

... the basic assumption is that linguistic expressions are not arbitrary formal objects, but that their properties are sensitive to, and co-determined by, the pragmatic determinants of human verbal interaction. The structure of the instrument is judged to be at least in part explainable in terms of the conditions under which, and the purposes for which, it is put to use.

Underlying various functional analyses and statements is the view of language as comprising multi-functional systems, of which the system of communication function is fundamental.

Linguists of the Prague School adopt a three-level approach to syntax. For each sentence, they distinguish three patterns: the Semantic Sentence Pattern (SSP), the Grammatical Sentence Pattern (GSP) and the Communicative Sentence Pattern (CSP), which is best known as functional sentence perspective (FSP), concerning the distribution of information in sentences (Firbas 1974:16, Daneš 1966). The concept of FSP was first suggested and elaborated by Mathesius, and further developed by Czech scholars such as J. Firbas, who has advanced and refined the FSP-analysis by introducing the notion of communicative dynamism (CD) (Daneš 1987:23ff). According to Firbas (1992:7), communicative dynamism is:

... a phenomenon constantly displayed by linguistic elements in the act of communication. It is an inherent quality of communication and manifests itself in constant development towards the attainment of a communicative goal; in other words, towards the fulfilment of a communicative purpose. Participating in this development, a linguistic element assumes some position in it and in accordance with this position displays a degree of communicative dynamism.

Halliday has also developed the ideas of Mathesius and his Czech followers and regards (1967:199) the English clause as the domain of three main areas of syntactic choice: transitivity, mood and theme. He sets up four components in English grammar, representing four functions: the experiential, the logical, the speech-functional or interpersonal and the discoursal (1968:210). The transitivity systems represent the experiential and logical elements in the clause, and the mood systems, the interpersonal function. His theme systems represent the discoursal function:

Theme is concerned with the information structure of the clause; with the status of the elements not as participants in extra linguistic processes but as components of a message; with the relation of what is being said to what has gone before in the discourse, and its internal organization into an act of communication. (1967:199)

Dik (1983:7) also distinguishes three types of function in his "Functional Grammar":

- (a) Semantic functions (Agent, Goal, Recipient etc.), which define the roles that participants play in states of affairs, as designated by predictions.
- (b) Syntactic functions (Subject and Object), which define different perspectives through which states of affairs are represented in linguistic expressions.
- (c) Pragmatic functions (Theme and Tail, Topic and Focus), which define the informational status of constituents of linguistic expressions as used in given settings.

Lambrecht (1994:xiii) proposes a theory of the relationship between the structure of sentences and the linguistic and extralinguistic contexts in which sentences are used as information units. He uses Halliday's term "information structure" to name the grammatical

component which governs this relationship:

**INFORMATION STRUCTURE:** That component of sentence grammar in which propositions as conceptual representations of states of affairs are paired with lexicogrammatical structures in accordance with the mental states of interlocutors who use and interpret these structures as units of information in given discourse contexts. (1994:5)

The present study makes similar assumptions that clause structures are the domain of choice on three levels—syntactic, semantic and pragmatic—that correspond to Dik's three types of function and the Prague school's grammatical, semantic and communicative patterns. It focuses on what Dik calls pragmatic functions, which correspond to the Prague School's functional sentence perspective, Halliday's theme, and Lambrecht's information structure: why the same syntactic structure may have different information patterns and why the same propositional content may be packaged in different forms. The term information structure as used in this book, however, also refers to information patterns on Dik's pragmatic level and to the information structure of the clause as in Halliday's original formulation.

Recognition of this level of language function is witnessed by various dichotomies used in the description of information structure: theme vs rheme (Mathesius 1975, Daneš 1974, Kuno 1976; Quirk et al 1985; Halliday 1967, 1985, 1994; Firbas 1992), topic vs comment (Lyons 1977, Dahl 1974, Gundel 1977), topic vs focus (Sgall 1975, Sgall et al 1987; Lambrecht 1986, 1994), presupposition vs focus (Chomsky 1968, Akmajian 1979). However, the proliferation of terms also causes confusion. For the present study, I will define my use of terms in Part I of the book.

The main body of the book consists of three parts. Part I contains three chapters, dealing with theoretical and terminological preliminaries. Chapter I distinguishes between the cognitive status and informational status of referents, conventionally covered under the



terms old or given, and new. The cognitive status of referents has two aspects: locatability and accessibility. Locatability, based on Hawkins' location theory (1978), is a necessary condition for topic acceptability. Accessibility is based on Chafe's (1987) activation states of concepts and Prince's (1987, 1981) taxonomy of given-new information in terms of "Assumed Familiarity", and is a preferred condition for topic well-formedness. The informational status of referents is determined by whether a referent is in the scope of focus (Lambrecht, 1986). Chapter 2 distinguishes between two levels of grammatical analysis - syntactic and pragmatic - and defines subject as a syntactic term and topic as a pragmatic one. Chapter 3 describes various focus patterns and the thematic-categorical distinction as expressed in Chinese sentences. It is emphasized that in identical grammatical structures, their constituents will have the same syntactic relations, but their information structures may vary with the context.

Based on the theoretical preliminaries presented in Part I, Parts II and III discuss two syntactically distinct but pragmatically related grammatical constructions: the double nominative construction and the *shi...de* construction. Part II covers Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, on the double nominative construction and the *ba* construction respectively. The latter is regarded as a special case of the former, where the second nominative is marked by *ba*. Both the double nominative construction and the *ba* construction typically display a double topic-comment (T-C(t-c)) structure, as well as a topic-comment (T-C) or a comment (C) structure on the pragmatic level in different contexts.

Part III deals with the *shi...de* construction. While *shi* functions as a focus marker, *de* is a sentence-final particle expressing certainty, often serving as a special topic marker. Due to this topic-marking function of *de*, the *shi...de* construction usually has as well an underlying double topic-comment structure with the VP marked by *de* as a secondary topic. This may be interpreted as a pragmatic compromise to maintain the basic syntactic structure with subject preceding predicate and modifiers preceding the modified.