

Units in Mandarin Conversation

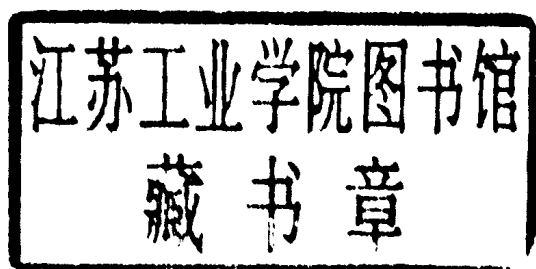
Prosody, discourse, and grammar

Hongyin Tao

UNITS IN MANDARIN CONVERSATION

PROSODY, DISCOURSE, AND GRAMMAR

HONGYIN TAO



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Preface

This book is a revised version of my dissertation at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Much of the work was done during my stay in Santa Barbara; this revision dealt mainly with some reorganization and smoothing out work. On the completion of this revision, I acknowledge with profound gratitude the many people who have helped me in making the original thesis possible and during the preparation of the manuscript.

First and foremost, I wish to thank Sandra Thompson, who has guided me throughout my dissertation process, and who has helped me much beyond this. Her contribution to the ideas in this work must be singled out, and her exemplary scholarship has been and will continue to be a great source of inspiration.

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Susan Strauss offered invaluable editorial assistance during the preparation of the manuscript; my sincere thanks to her for the superb job she has done.

Of course, I am the person who is solely responsible for all failings which may exist in this book.

Finally, I give special thanks to my wife Xiaoxin and my son Edwin for their understanding and support for my work, as well as for “suffering” with me during the past five years while I was sitting in front of the computer working on this. Xiaoxin also helped with editorial work on the *pinyin* Romanization and checking the transcription of the examples, for which I am deeply grateful.

List of Abbreviations

Grammatical Terms

1SG	first person singular
1PL	first person plural
2SG	second person singular
2PL	second person plural
3SG	third person singular (plural in some non-referential cases)
3PL	third person plural
ADV	adverb
ASSC	associative
CLF	classifier
COMP	complementizer
COP	copula
DAT	dative
EXPR	experiential
INT	interjection
MOD	modifier
NEG	negative
NOM	nominalizer
OBJ	object marker
POSS	possession
PRF	perfective
PROG	progressive
PRT	particle
REL	relativizer
STA	stative

Title of Transcripts

HK	Hongkong
JYU	Jiaoyu
SND	Sunday
TAI	Thai
TK	TKY
TK2	TKY2
TNJ	Tongji
WH	Wuhan

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1 Introduction

1.1. Objectives

This study is intended as a small step toward the understanding of Mandarin grammar from the point of view of discourse-functional linguistics. The data used in this study are of the most spontaneous type: all came from audio-recorded naturally-occurring interactional conversation; the decision on the choice of data reflects not just a matter of taste, but a shift of interest in what it is that constitutes 'language', the very object of linguistic research, from what is still commonly practiced in the field.

The importance of looking at natural speech, conversation in particular, is well known. As articulated by Levinson (1983:43-44),

(R)ather than look for a series of static functions or contextual parameters, one should attend directly to the single most important dynamic context of language use, namely conversation, or face-to-face interaction. The centrality of this functional matrix for language use hardly needs arguing: face-to-face interaction is not only the context for language acquisition, but the only significant kind of language use in many of the world's communities, and indeed until relatively recently in all of them.

Schegloff (1989:143) discusses the importance of interactional data at a more basic level,

If the conduct of language as a domain of behavior is biological in character, then we should expect it (like other biological entities) to be adapted to its natural environment. What is the primordial natural environment of language use, within which the shape of linguistic structures such as grammar, have been shaped? Transparently, the natural environment of language use is talk-in-interaction, and originally ordinary conversation.

Examination of language-in-use raises new questions about some of the long-held assumptions in the Bloomfield-Chomsky structuralist tradition of American linguistics. In this book, I will revisit two such issues: grammatical units and constituency. I seek to provide an accurate account of what the basic

grammatical units are in spoken Mandarin and what they imply for theories of syntax.

In grammatical theories, the 'sentence', typically conceived as consisting of a highly transitive clause, with two arguments expressed (SVO or NP₁+VP+NP₂), has been regarded as the most fundamental unit of syntax. However, recent research in discourse has provided convincing evidence of a need for a reexamination of the reality of such structural units. Du Bois (1987), for example, shows that, due to constraints on quantity of new information in an intonation unit (see below), clauses with two lexical arguments are rare in Sacapultec Mayan narrative discourse. Similarly, Lambrecht (1987) questions the status of SVO sentences in spoken French, finding that the preferred clause structure is a verb plus a clitic pronoun. In a more recent work, Chafe (1994:143) has provided new insights on the status of the sentence as a linguistic unit in spoken English:

It is interesting to find that a particular segment of experience does not necessarily dictate a particular division into sentences (prosodic, syntactic, or both). A speaker is likely to divide the same remembered or imagined experience into sentences in different ways at different times. This fact suggests that the material included in even a well-formed sentence does not necessarily represent a unit of perception, storage, or remembering, but results from an on-line, one time decision that something has been completed. What that something is may range from a single focus of consciousness, to a component of a topic, to an entire topic. But the same speaker may decide to draw the boundaries differently in different verbalizations of the same information at different times.

These findings, then, suggest essentially that what has been thought of as a fundamental notion of grammatical analysis is in fact a highly localized, context-dependent construct in discourse. Yet, mainstream syntactic theory relies crucially on the notion of a single static structure. How should this gap between the fundamental unit in what has been called syntax and units of language use be bridged? Is the clause a universal level of structure at which grammars emerge? If, as many researchers are discovering in many languages of the world, the natural unit in discourse is not what has been assumed in syntactic theories, how will a theory of syntax be developed to account for it? I will attempt to answer these questions by analyzing interactional data from Mandarin.

A related issue to structural units is that of constituency. The standard conception of constituency is built upon the basic sentence structure just described. Core elements in the sentence are grouped into phrasal units,

NP+VP, with hierarchical relations assumed: the VP consists of a main verb and its objects. However, as Langacker (forthcoming) points out, this abstract representation does not have much bearing on the reality of speech; real language is much more diverse than this model would imply, and the diversity is discourse motivated. In this study, I will examine the Mandarin data to test the validity of such a classic model. Eventually, we will propose our own view of constituency with regard to spoken Mandarin.

What makes this study different from most traditional works in grammar is the direction it takes: rather than starting from traditionally established grammatical notions (often based on Indo-European languages) and matching them to prosodic structures, I start from prosodically segmented speech units, and proceed to look for grammatical patterns which correlate with prosody. I will then take the recurrent units, where prosody and syntax align, as the locus to look for basic units of grammar.¹

Clearly, we are not the first to study grammar based on prosodic segments. Linguists have long noticed that connected speech is not realized in a continuous speech stream, but rather arranges itself in a series of phonologically/intonationally aligned chunks or spurts (see, for example, Jones 1914, Boomer 1965, Halliday 1967, Laver 1970, Chafe 1980, Schuetze-Coburn 1993, Schuetze-Coburn et al. 1991). It is such prosodic units that are coming to be realized as significant with respect to cognition (Chafe 1980, 1987, 1994), informational and grammatical patterning (Du Bois 1987), as well as interaction (Orestöm 1983, Ford and Thompson forthcoming).

The basic prosodic unit assumed here is the *Intonation Unit* (IU), defined as a stretch of discourse falling under a single coherent intonation contour (Chafe 1980, 1987, 1994, Du Bois et al. 1993, Schuetze-Coburn 1992, 1993, Schuetze-Coburn et al. 1991). In this study, then, I use data that are carefully-transcribed, according to intonation units, to investigate (1) what grammatical elements tend to correlate with the intonation unit; (2) what kind of patterns are found in these intonational-grammatical correlations; and (3) what answers the intonational-grammatical correlations may provide for the theoretical questions raised above. More broadly, it is hoped that our investigation of Mandarin discourse can shed new light on the nature of grammatical units and what discourse can tell us about grammar (Ono and Thompson forthcoming).

1.2. Organization of the book

The book is organized in the following way. In the next chapter, theoretical assumptions and methodological issues are first addressed. Chapter 3 gives a brief description of the features of Mandarin intonation units. Chapter 4 provides a quantified overall review of the grammatical exponents of the Mandarin intonation unit. Starting from Chapter 5, we will examine the discourse patterns associated with each of the major structural types of the intonation unit: Chapter 5 focuses on nominal IUs, Chapter 6 discusses issues regarding the preferred clause structure in conversational discourse; Chapter 7 deals with elliptical clausal IUs, and Chapter 8 full clausal IUs. Chapter 9 contains reflections on the relationship between speech units and grammatical units. Finally, Chapter 10 presents the conclusions.