



香港中文大學
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Complex sentences in Mandarin Chinese

Prof. Waltraud PAUL

Senior Researcher, Centre de recherches linguistiques
sur l'Asie orientale (CRLAO), Paris

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Abstract

Complex sentences in Mandarin Chinese are a challenge for the traditional analysis of complex sentences into a “subordinate” and a “main” clause. When subordinate is taken as a syntactic term referring to a position that is lower than the main clause, this cannot apply to an adverbial clause such as a conditional clause in Chinese, whose default position is the sentence-initial Topic Phrase, more precisely its specifier. Since the “main clause”, i.e. TP, is a complement to the head of TopP, Topic°, it is clearly lower than the adverbial clause: [TopP [adv.cl. ...] [Top' [Top° ...] [main cl. TP....]]].

- (1) [TopP [cond.clause Rúguǒ dìtiě bà gōng] [Top' [TP wǒ bù chūqù]]
if subway stop work 1SG NEG go.out
'If the subway is on strike, I won't go out.'

In fact, as argued for by Haiman (1978), conditional clauses in English (and other languages) can be analysed as topics from a semantic and morphosyntactic point of view. Furthermore, when Greenberg's (1963) universal 14 (“In conditional statements, the conditional clause precedes the conclusion as the normal order in all languages”) is transposed into structural terms, the conditional clause occupies a position higher than the consequent clause, as demonstrated by Whitman (2008: 235) with the following example:

- (2) [S' If conditionals are specifiers of S' [S they precede the consequent]].

The configuration in (2) is the same as in (1) where the conditional clause is hosted in the specifier of the same head that selects the consequent clause as complement.

Naturally, this does not imply a “reversal” of hierarchical relations such that now the main clause is subordinate to the adverbial conditional clause. Instead, an adverbial clause as topic can serve as a (modifying) frame for the TP, like “simple” topics such as *jīntiān* ‘today’:

- (3) [TopP [NP Jīntiān] [Top' [TP wǒ bù chūqù]] 'Today I won't go out.'
Today 1SG NEG go.out

A comparison between (3) and (1) also shows that a sentence with an adverbial clause as topic is precisely not more complex structurally than the corresponding “simple” sentence with an adverbial NP as topic. The only difference concerns the type and projection of the topic XP itself, i.e. an NP in (3) and a clause in (1).

In addition, the clause “linking” items constitute a heterogeneous group as well and are not necessarily “subordinating” in the sense that they select a clausal complement. Instead, besides the categories adposition and complementiser, adverbs, i.e. phrases, likewise serve as “clause linkers” (cf. Paul 2015: ch. 8.3.4.3). This phenomenon also holds for English: items with lexical content such as *before*, *after* are in general analysed as prepositions (with a clausal complement), in contrast to *that* and *if* analysed as complementisers, while *whether* and *when* are not heads, but phrases.

Based on a detailed analysis of Mandarin “complex” sentences, *subordinate clause*, *adjunct clause* and the like are shown to be foremost semantic labels which do not necessarily reflect the structural hierarchy. The same holds for the labels *conjunctions* and *adverbial subordinators*, which as in English do not identify a unique category in Chinese, either. Instead, they serve as cover terms for items belonging to different categories whose only common denominator is a “clause linking” function. In other words, all these terms are non-operational notions and should therefore be avoided.

Speaker

Waltraud PAUL is a senior researcher at the French National Center for Scientific Research (*Centre national de la recherche scientifique*, CNRS) and affiliated to the *Centre de recherches linguistiques sur l'Asie orientale* (CRLAO), Paris. Her main interest is the syntax of modern Mandarin, with occasional excursions into the diachronic syntax of Chinese. She has worked extensively on a large variety of subjects in Chinese syntax: topic, focus, clefts, split CP, double object construction, verb gapping, adjectival modification, DP, serial verb construction etc. Her recent book *New perspectives on Chinese syntax* (De Gruyter, 2015) is a summation of her research over the past twenty years and sets out to demystify Chinese; it places controversial issues in the context of current syntactic theories and offers precise analyses based on a large array of representative data. (For downloadable articles, cf. her website at: <http://crlao.ehess.fr/index.php?177>.)

With Guido Vanden Wyngaerd, she served as interim editor-in-chief of the new open access journal *Glossa* (<http://www.glossa-journal.org>) in November and December 2015 and ensured the transition from Elsevier's *Lingua*, after *Lingua*'s complete editorial team had resigned. She is now associate editor of *Glossa* and member of the *ad hoc* committee (with Guido Vanden Wyngaerd and the editor-in-chief Johan Rooryck) during the first year of *Glossa*.

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Enquiries

Department of Linguistics and Modern Languages, CUHK.

Tel: (852)3943 7911/7025 Fax: (852)2603 7755 E-mail: lin@cuhk.edu.hk

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