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Null subject, null topics and topic prominence in Mandarin Chinese and beyond

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Date: May 27, 2016 (Friday)
Time: 15:30 – 17:15
Venue: Rm 101, Leung Kau Kui Building,
            The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Abstract

This talk examines recent analyses of the null subject and the null topic (Jiang Li 2012, Huang & Yang 2013, Barry C. Yang 2014) which appeal to *topic prominence* and *discourse configurationality* as central typological properties of Chinese. These *analyses* are shown to be problematic for two reasons.

First, neither *topic prominence* nor *discourse configurationality* (be it in É. Kiss' 1995 original conception or in Miyagawa's (2010) minimalist implementation) constitute typological features on a par with e.g. "agglutinating" or "tonal" taken to classify whole languages. On the contrary, languages generally designated as topic prominent and/or discourse-configurational (Chinese, Japanese, Korean) display considerable differences with respect to the syntactic and semantic properties of the XPs situated in the sentence periphery above the subject (cf. Paul & Whitman (to appear) for extensive discussion). These differences are completely unexpected against the backdrop of the claim that these languages instantiate one and the same (topic-prominent and/or discourse-configurational) type.

Second, the phenomena of null subject and null topic said to be tightly linked to topic prominence and discourse-configurationality are heterogeneous across languages. In fact, these phenomena result from the interaction of independent derivational operations and do not represent primitive entities which in turn can be predicted on the basis of the presence or absence of another single property. This is clearly the case for the null subject (*pro* drop). Initially, *pro* drop was assumed to be possible for two opposite types of languages, *viz.* those with rich inflection (e.g. Romance languages) and those without any inflection at all (e.g. Chinese) (cf. Huang 1982: 348ff.). However, this approach glosses over the phenomenon of partial *pro* drop, where the null subject is possible only in certain tenses or for certain types of subjects. Likewise, a careful comparison between the null topics in Chinese and German demonstrates that different syntactic and semantic constraints are at play in each language.

Note that "null topic" here refers to a covert topic, on a par with the "null subject" referring to a covert subject; accordingly, "null topic" is not meant to denote the absence of a topic position. Furthermore, the term *topic* is used here as short for a constituent occupying the topic position (Spec,TopicP) to the left of the subject, i.e. in the sentence periphery. More precisely, the topic occurs in the specifier position of *Topic Phrase*, a projection whose head (Topic°) can optionally be realized by so-called pause particles (*ne, me, a* etc.) and selects as complement a TP or - in the case of multiple topics - another TopP (cf. Gasde & Paul 1996; Paul 2015, chapter 6). This syntactic definition of the topic must be distinguished from semantic definitions of topic as conveying given information (cf. among others Krifka 2007, Erteschik-Shir et al. 2013), where any XP within a sentence (TP) can be a topic.

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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