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## An Outline of Mandarin Syntax

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## An Outline of Mandarin Syntax

The syntax of Colloquial Mandarin has been treated in various textbooks and articles,<sup>1</sup> but to our knowledge, it has never been formed as the object of systematic study. The purpose of these partial descriptions of Mandarin sentences and their structure has been chiefly pedagogical, with no attempt to give a unified account of Mandarin syntax as a whole. The present paper is conceived as a first step toward such an account. It presents as briefly as possible an outline of the general structure of the Mandarin sentence, omitting many details, but providing a system in which all the details may be integrated.

### 1 SENTENCE AND WORD

**1.1** A Mandarin sentence ends in the three following intonations:

(a) Falling, with the last syllable lower in pitch than the second last. Meaning: conclusive. Symbol /./, e.g., *shì wǒ*. 'It is I.'

(b) Rising, with the last syllable considerably higher than the second last. Meaning: animation. Symbol /?/, e.g., *shì wǒ?* 'Is it I.'

(c) High-falling, with interval between the highest pitch and the lowest (on the last syllable). Meaning: emotion. Symbol /!/, e.g., *shì wǒ!* 'It certainly is I.'

**1.2** A stretch of speech between pauses which ends with one of the preceding intonations is a *sentence*.

**1.3** A sentence boundary is also a word boundary. Within a sentence, if insertion of a syllable (morph) between any two syllables (morphs) is possible, then there exists a word boundary. The stretch between two adjacent word boundaries is a *word*.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Yuen-Ren Chao, *Mandarin Primer* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948); M. A. K. Halliday, "Grammatical Categories in Chinese," *Transactions of the Philological Society* (1956), 176-224; M. G. Tewksbury, *Speak Chinese* (New Haven, 1948).

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the concept of word in Chinese, see E. S. Liu, "Frequency Dictionary of Chinese Words" (doctoral dissertation, Stanford University, 1965), which applies the general theory outlined by A. Juillard, *The Concept of Word* (in preparation).

## 2 THE SENTENCE

Every sentence contains a *predicate* (§3). Predicates are different in form, and can be preceded by one or more *predicate attributes* (§3.5). A sentence without a predicate is a *semi-sentence* (§5).

## 3 THE PREDICATE

Every predicate contains a *verbal expression*. Mandarin distinguishes three types of verbal expressions: *stative*, *equative*, and *functive*.

### 3.1 Stative verbal expressions

A stative verbal expression is a *stative verb* or a *stative verbal phrase*.

Stative verbs are words which occur in the environment *hěn . . #*, e.g., *hǎo* 'good,' *máng* 'busy.'

A stative verbal phrase consists of a stative verb preceded by a *stative verb modifier* or a word sequence which ends in the marker *de*, to form a *modifying sequence*. Examples: *hěn hǎo* 'very good,' *fēicháng hǎo* 'unusually good,' *shuō bù chīng de hǎo* 'unspeakably good.'

3.11 *Stative verb modifiers* are words which precede only stative verbs, and never end in a predicate. Examples: *hěn* 'very,' *dzuwèi* 'most.'

3.12 A *marker* is a syntactic sign which indicates that the preceding sequence modifies the single word which occurs after the marker. Together with the marker, it constitutes the *modifying sequence*. There is only one such marker in Colloquial Mandarin, *de*.

### 3.2 Equative verbal expressions

An equative verbal expression is an *equative verb* or an *equative verbal phrase*. There is only one equative verb in Colloquial Mandarin, *shì*. The function of the equative verb is to link two *nominal expressions* (§4) which are to be equated. Example: *wǒ shì yāngsyàrén* 'I am a farmer.'

3.21 An equative verbal phrase consists of an equative verb preceded by an *equative verb modifier*. There are two equative verb modifiers, the negative *bu* and the intensifier *jyōu*. Examples: *wǒ bú shì yāngsyàrén* 'I am not a farmer,' *wǒ jyōu shì nèige yāngsyàrén* 'I am that farmer.'

3.22 The equative combined with the marker in the same predicate form the syntactic pattern of emphasis. The emphasized expression occurs immediately after the equative verb. The marker occurs after the *functive* verbal expression (§3.3). Examples: *tā shì dzuwótyān lái de* or *shì dzuwótyān tā lái de*, both meaning 'It was yesterday that he came.'

### 3.3 Functive verbal expressions

A functive verbal expression is a *functive verb* or a *functive verbal phrase*.

3.31 *Functionive verbs* are words which occur in the environment *neng* ... #, e.g. *mǎi* 'buy,' *yǒu* 'exist.'

3.32 *Functionive verbal phrases* consist of a functionive verb preceded by a *functionive verb modifier* or a modifying sequence, a functionive verb followed by a nominal expression, or a functionive verb preceded by a functionive verb modified and followed by a nominal expression. Examples: *tā néng mǎi* 'He can buy,' *tā mǎidì* 'He buys land,' *tā néng mǎi nèi kǔài* 'He can buy that piece of land' or *jèi jǔng shìchíng bú huì yǒu* 'This kind things can not exist.'

3.33 *Functionive verb modifiers* are groups of words together with their negated forms. Members of the group can only occur before functionive verbs but never in the final position of a predicate construction. Examples: *néng* 'can' *bù néng* 'can not,' *kěyì* 'may,' *bù kěyì* 'may not.'

3.34 A functionive verb can be followed by a functionive or stative verb forming a verbal complex to indicate either potentiality or result of the verbal expression. Called a *resultative construction*, this construction can be simple or complex.

3.341 A *simple resultative construction* consists of a functionive verb indicating the action, followed by a functionive or stative verb indicating the result. Examples: *sýwe hǎu* 'learn it and learn it well,' *kàn wán* 'read it and finish it.'

3.342 A *complex resultative construction* consists of a functionive verb and a stative or functionive verbal expression linked by a marker or negative. The sequence *functionive + marker + stative (functionive) verb* indicates potential possibility whereas the sequence *functionive verb + negative + stative (functionive) verb* indicates potential impossibility. Examples: *kàn de jiàn* 'See it and be able to perceive it,' *kàn bú jiàn* 'See it but not be able to perceive it,' *kàn de wán* 'Read it and can finish it,' *kàn bú wán* 'Read it but can not finish it.'

A simple resultative construction has always its complex counter-part—the complex resultative construction, but the contrary is not true.

3.35 The functionive verb is the only verbal form which can be reduplicated. Semantically, the *reduplicated form* indicates extension of the action. Examples: *kàn* 'look,' *kànkàn* 'look it over,' *dzǒu* 'walk,' *dzódzou* 'walk around, take a stroll.'

3.36 One of two words, the directional indicators *lái* and *chǜ* can occur at the end of every functional verbal expression: *lái* signifies the action is toward the speaker, *chǜ*, that the action is away from the speaker. Examples: *tā mǎi dūngsyi lái* 'He comes to buy things,' *tā mǎi dūngsyi chǜ* 'He goes to buy things.'

### 3.4 Predicate Particles

The effect of predicate particles is a certain semantic coloring of the predicate to which they are attached. With or without predicate particles,

the denotation of a predicate is largely the same. Predicate particles are monosyllabic words which never occur predicate-initially, are atonal, and never stressed. The most common particles are: *ma*, which signifies a question, e.g., *tā néng mǎi ma?* 'Can he buy it?'; *le*, which signifies change of status, e.g., *tā bìng le* 'He is sick,' *píngdz pwò le* 'The bottle is broken.' When two *le* occur in the same predicate, one is placed after the functive verb, the other after the following nominal expression, to indicate that the action is completed up to the present, e.g., *tā chī le fàn le* 'He has eaten the meal'; *ba*, which denotes probability, e.g., *tā lái le ba* 'He has come, hasn't he?'; *je* and *ne*, which denote continuity, e.g., *tā chī je*, *tā chī ne*, or *tā chī je ne* 'He is eating.' If a nominal expression is necessary, it is placed between *je* and *ne*, e.g., *tā chī je fàn ne* 'He is eating the meal.'

### 3.5 Predicate attributes

A predicate can occur by itself, or it can be preceded by one or more words. The words preceding the predicate constitute the predicate attributes. Predicate attributes are of four kinds: *place word sequence*, *time word sequence*, *predicate connectives*, and *nominal expressions*.

3.51 A *place word sequence* consists of three components: first, the invariable *dzai*, which indicates this particular kind of word sequence; second, a place word; and third, an optional *localizer*. Example: *dzài chéng lítou jù* 'Live in the city.'

The most common localizers are: *shàng (tou)*, 'above,' *syà (tou)* 'below,' *lǐ (tou)* 'inside,' *wài (tou)* 'outside,' *chǎn (tou)* 'front,' *hòu (tou)* 'back.'

3.52 The *time word sequence* exhibits the same pattern as the place word sequence, except for the second component, which is a time word. Example: *dzài chwěntyan hwār dōu kāi le* 'In spring, the flower blooms.'

3.53 *Predicate connectives* are words which occur between the predicates of the same sentence. Examples: *nèi ge hái dz yòu shòu yòu gāu* 'That child is thin and tall,' *jèi ge yě bù hǎu yě bú huài* 'This is neither good nor bad.'

3.54 *Nominal expressions* are dealt with separately in the following section.

## 4 NOMINAL EXPRESSIONS

A nominal expression is a *sentence*, a *pronoun* (§4.1), a *question word* (§4.3), or a *nominal*. Nominals are endocentric phrases whose heads consist of a single noun (§4.2), or of two or more nouns in *apposition* (§4.5). In its simplest form, a nominal consists of a single noun which may be preceded by one or more nominal modifiers (§4.4).

A series of two or more nominal expressions can be joined by an *inter-nominal operator* (§4.6). In a predicate with a functive verb, the nominal expression can have a label (§4.7).

4.1 *Pronouns* are words which occur only before the plural suffix *-men*, and are never preceded by a modifier. The commonest pronouns are: *nǐ* 'you,' *wǒ* 'I,' and *tā* 'he.'

4.2 A *noun* is a word which occurs in the environment *jei* X . . #, or *yi* X . . #,<sup>3</sup> and is never preceded by a negative. Examples: *rén* 'man,' *shǒu* 'hand.'

4.3 A *question word* can not be preceded by a modifier. A sentence which contains a question word is an interrogative sentence. Example: *tā shì shéi?* 'Who is he.'

4.4 A *nominal modifier* is a *modifying sequence* (§3.12), or a *determiner*. A determiner has three components: (1) Demonstrative, (2) Numeral, (3) Quantifier.

*Demonstratives* are words which do not occur predicate-finally and before functive verbs, e.g. *jèi* 'his,' *nèi* 'that,' and *něi* 'which.'

*Numerals* are defined extensionally by listing, e.g. *yī* 'one,' *èr* 'two,' *sān* 'three'.

*Quantifiers* are words which occur only between numerals and nouns. The most common quantifier is *ge*. The possible sequence of the three components are: (1)(2)(3), (1)(3), and (2)(3).

4.5 The head of certain nominals consists of two or more nouns between which there is no pause. Such nouns are considered to be in *apposition*.

Nouns in apposition are often names of persons, i.e., a family name followed by a given name, or a name followed by a title, e.g., *Chāng Dà-míng* 'Chang Da-ming,' *Chāng syànshèng* 'Mr. Chang.'

4.6 In certain nominal expressions, the head consists of a series of two or more nominals which, except for the last, are followed by *inter-nominal operators*. When a sentence with operators is being negated, the negatives occur before the operators, not before the verbal expressions.

The most common inter-nominal operators in Mandarin are: *gēn* 'and, with,' *gěi* 'for,' *dwèi* 'to,' and *bǐ* (used when two nominals are compared). Examples: *nǐ gēn wǒ dou chū* 'You and I both go,' *wǒ gěi tā syě wán le* 'I finished writing it for him,' *jèi ge dwèi wǒ méiyòng* 'This to me is useless,' *jèr li nèr ywan* 'It is far from here to there,' *jèi ge bǐ nèi ge cháng* 'This one is longer than that one.'

4.7 In a functive verbal expression, a *label* can occur either before or after a nominal expression. There are four labels, one pre-nominal, *bǎ*, and three post-nominal, *bèi*, *ràng*, and *jyàu*. A labeled nominal expression can occur only before the functional verbal expression and only when the

<sup>3</sup> X is any single word. # is a pause.

functional verbal expression is followed by an obligatory *verbal complement* rather than by another nominal expression.

A *verbal complement* is a particle, a reduplicated form of the preceding functional verb, or a stative or functional verb which combines with the preceding functional verb to form a resultative construction. Examples: *wǒ bǎ tā dǎ le* 'I hit him,' *tā ràng wǒ dǎ le* 'I hit him,' *tā bǎ wǒ hèn tòu le* 'He hates me with piercing hatred.'

## 5 THE SEMI-SENTENCE

A sentence which contains no predicate is a semi-sentence. In Mandarin semi-sentences are rare. The commonest type of semi-sentence consists of two nouns. Example: *wǒ dōngfēng* 'I eastwind' (expression used in mah-jyang playing).

## 6 SAMPLE TEXT

To illustrate the application of the model outline in this paper, we analyze in this section a number of sentences in terms of the categories defined above. The text is a Chinese folktale, in the colloquial version printed by Wang.<sup>4</sup> The characters are transcribed as they stand.

In every sentence, the major constituents are marked by prefixing one of the following symbols:

P	Predicate
PA	Predicate attribute

When the same sentence contains two or more constituents of the same kind, their symbols are distinguished by subscript numerals: PA<sub>1</sub> and PA<sub>2</sub> identify the first and the second predicate attributes in a given sentence.

Each Mandarin sentence is followed by a free translation, together with an explanation of its general structure.

(1) Tsúngchán yǒu yī gè rén, sòng Jāng, Jyàu Dà-míng.

PA            P<sub>1</sub>            P<sub>2</sub>            P<sub>3</sub>

Before, there was a man, named Jang, called Da-ming.

PA: time word sequence: time word tsúngchán 'before'

P<sub>1</sub> verbal expression: functional verbal expression + nominal expression  
          functional verbal expression: functional verb yǒu 'there was'  
          nominal expression: numeral yī 'one' + quantifier ge + noun rén 'man'

<sup>4</sup> Wang Fang-yu, *The Lady in the Painting* (New Haven, 1957).

- localizer: lǐ 'in'

- P: verbal expression: stative verbal expression + nominal expression  
 stative verbal expression: intensifier *jyòu* 'only'  
 + stative verb *shì* 'is'  
 nominal expression: noun + nominal (in apposition)  
 noun: *tā* 'he'  
 nominal: numeral + quantifier + noun  
 numeral: *yí* 'one'  
 quantifier: *gè*

(5) *yě méiyóu chǎn.*

P

Also had no money.

- P: Functionive verbal expression: functionive verbal modifier + functionive verb  
 + nominal expression  
 functionive verbal modifier: *yě* 'also'  
 functionive verb: *méiyóu* 'had no'  
 nominal expression: noun *chǎn* 'money.'

(6) *Tā měitiān dzǎushang dzài lù shàng kànkàn shān, kànkàn shwěi.*

PA<sub>1</sub> PA<sub>2</sub> PA<sub>3</sub> P<sub>1</sub> P<sub>2</sub>

Every morning on his way, he looked the hill, and looked the water (river).

PA<sub>1</sub>: nominal expression: pronoun *tā* 'he'

PA<sub>2</sub>: time word sequence: time word

time word: nominal: nominal modifier *měi* 'every'  
 + noun *tiān* 'day' + noun *dzǎushang* 'morning'

PA<sub>3</sub>: place word sequence: *dzài* + place word + localizer *shàng* 'on'

place word: nominal: noun *lù* 'way, road'

P<sub>1</sub>: verbal expression: functionive verbal expression

functionive verbal expression: functionive verb + nominal

functionive verb: reduplicated form *kànkàn* 'looked'

nominal: noun *shān* 'hill'

P<sub>2</sub>: verbal expression: functionive verbal expression

functionive verbal expression: functionive verb + nominal

functionive verb: reduplicated form *kànkàn* 'looked'

nominal: noun *shwěi* 'water'.

(7) *Tā yǒu yí wèi péngyou, shì yí wèi lǎu syānshèng.*

PA P<sub>1</sub>

P<sub>2</sub>

He had a friend, an old gentleman.

PA: pronoun tā 'he'

P<sub>1</sub>: verbal expression: functive verbal expression

functive verbal expression: functive verb + nominal expression

functive verb: yǒu 'had'

nominal expression: nominal modifier + noun

nominal modifier: numeral yī 'one' + quantifier wèi

noun: péngyou 'friend'

P<sub>2</sub>: verbal expression: equative verbal expression

equative verbal expression: equative verb + nominal expression

equative verb: shì 'is'

nominal expression: nominal modifier + noun

nominal modifier: numeral yī 'one' + quantifier wèi

noun: lǎu syānshèng 'old gentleman!'

(8) Gāu lǎu syānshèng kàn Jāng Dà-míng jyā lǐ méiyǒu tàitai méiyǒu

PA

P

háidz.

Old Mr. Gau saw that in his family Jang Da-ming had no wife and children.

PA: nominal: noun gāu (name) + noun syānshèng 'mister' (title), (in apposition)

P: functive verbal expression: functive verb kàn 'saw' + nominal: sentence

sentence: Jāng Dà-míng jyā lǐ méiyǒu tàitai méiyǒu háidz.

PA<sub>1</sub>

PA<sub>2</sub> P<sub>1</sub>

P<sub>2</sub>

PA<sub>1</sub>: noun + noun (in apposition)

noun: jāng (family name)

noun: Dà-míng (given name)

PA<sub>2</sub>: place word sequence; place word jyā 'family'

+ localizer lǐ 'in'

P<sub>1</sub>: functive verbal expression: functive verb méiyǒu

'had no'

+ nominal

nominal: noun tàitai 'wife'

P<sub>2</sub>: functive verbal expression: functive verb méiyǒu

'had no'

+ nominal

nominal: noun háidz 'children'

- (9) Tā gěi Jāng Dà-míng hwà le yí jāng hen hāukàn de měirēn.

PA

P

He painted a lovely beauty for Jang Da-ming.

PA: pronoun + inter-nominal operator + nominal

pronoun: tā 'he'

inter-nominal operator: gěi 'for'

nominal: noun Jāng (family name) + noun Dà-míng (given name)

P: functive verbal expression: functive verb + particle + nominal expression

functive verb: hwà 'painted'

particle: le

nominal expression: nominal modifier + modifying sequence + noun

nominal modifier: numeral yí 'one' + quantifier jāng

modifying sentence: stative verb modifier hěn 'very'

+ stative verb hěukàn 'lovely'

+ marker de

noun: měirén 'beauty.'

- (10) Tā bǎ hwà le wán le.

PA P

He finished the painting.

PA: pronoun tā 'he'

P: functive verbal expression: label + nominal + resultative construction

+ verbal complement

label: bǎ

nominal: noun hwà 'painting'

resultative construction: functive verb hwà 'paint'

+ functive verb wán 'finish'

verbal complement: particle le.

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