

Identifying Subject and Object in Chinese

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Abstract

The identification of subject and object has been one of the major grammatical issues in Chinese linguistics, and that although many Chinese linguists have put forward various solutions to it, this problem has not yet been resolved satisfactorily. Chao's *A Grammar of Spoken Chinese* (1969, p. 70), for example, points out that it is appropriate to associate topic with subject, and comment with predicate, since "in Chinese, the proportion of applicability of the actor-action meanings,....., is still very low, perhaps not much higher than 50 per cent,..." More straightforwardly, what he indicates is that by employing the idea of word order parameter, anything that precedes the verb in a sentence can be regarded as the subject of the sentence, while anything that follows the subject as the predicate.

In this paper, I would like first to examine the approaches put forward by the following linguists: Li jinxu, Wang li, Y.R. Chao, and Li & Thompson, and second, to bring up a suggestion concerning the treatment of the issue and, furthermore, to argue its applicability.*

Key words: subject, object, topic, wh-word, selection restrictions

* I would like to thank an anonymous JCLA reviewer for the helpful comments on this paper. The author is definitely responsible for any remaining errors.

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0. Introduction

What is a subject? What is an object? The answers for these two long-standing questions are so far divergent and seem entirely to depend on how one defines what a subject or an object is. In a sentence such as *kerenmen fan chiwanle* (The guests have had their meals), for example, Li jinxi (1931), Wangli (1957), and Lyu shuxiang (1969) would consider *kerenmen* subject and *fan* object; while on the contrary Chao (1969) and several others would treat *kerenmen* as a subject, *fan chiwanle* a predicate, grammatically speaking. Still, some modern linguists may have the same opinion as what Chomsky (1996) suggests that functionally the specifier in [Spec, IP] is seen as a subject, whereas an object is the nominal complement of VP.

This paper, therefore, proposes to provide a proposition that is able to regulate the definitions of subject and object in an effort to make a systematic approach possible. This paper is divided into three sections. In section one an examination is taken to briefly review some traditional views on the identification of subject and object in Mandarin Chinese. In section two an explanation of the issue is assumed in terms of ‘yiwenci ceshi fa’ (wh-words test approach). This paper is then concluded in section three.

1. Some Traditional Treatments to the Subject and Object

Identification

1.1. Li jinxi's Approach

Following Li (1931), subject and object are defined respectively as follows:

subject is the main part of a sentence and it is a noun or pronoun that indicates person or thing in the sentence, while object (noun or pronoun) is a receiver that receives an action expressed by a verb (i.e. like a transitive verb in English) in the sentence. Therefore, in a sentence like:

- (1) baba kai che.
 father drive car
 My father drives.

the noun baba, according to Li, would be the subject, and che the object. Apparently, Li's definition of subject seems to be an approach that identifies the semantic relationships among agent-action-goal, though Li's expression in the definition "main part" does not clearly point out what exactly it should be. More specifically, this approach appears to simply transfer the "agent" role to the subject, and the "goal" to the object. One might question then, if Li appoints whatever is the "goal" to the object, why does he treat the following underlined phrase in each sentence as a subject.

- (2) a. gua feng le.
 blow wind aspect
 It's blowing.
- b. xia yu le.
 down rain aspect
 It's raining.
- c. xiang lei le.
 sound thunder aspect
 It's thundering.

As a matter of fact, Li maintains that the sentences in (2) have underwent subject

inversion due to the long-standing practice. In the beginning (i.e., before inversion) they might look like (3) below:

- (3) a. feng gua le.
 wind blow aspect
- b. yu xia le.
 rain down aspect
- c. lei xiang le.
 thunder sound aspect

In this way, there seems to be no contradiction in Li's definition. The problem is that, however, if Li takes the right position, how can the subject and object in (4) be defined?

- (4) a. yizhi jiuyou nameduo ren.
 all along have so much people
 There have been so much people all along.
- b. laoshi wangji nide mingzi.
 always forget your name
 (I've) always forgot your name.
- c. congmei ting guo zhege ren.
 never hear aspect this man
 (I've) never heard of this man.

According to Li, the underlined phrases in (4) would be objects, yet no subject can be defined in the sentences. A problem that arises with Li's definition comes into view that Li not only defines object as a receiver that receives an action expressed by verb, but also points out that the "wai dong ci" (i.e. transitive verb) can be divided into eight classes (or, eight groups of verbs). The relevant claim that I am

making is that one might get confused about the sentences in (4) because these verbs are all “wai dong ci,” nevertheless they do not necessarily refer to “action,” though they might be categorized into those eight divisions. This, however, still contradicts Li’s own definition of “wai dong ci” since some verbs may not at all refer to “dong zuo” (action).

1.2 Wang li’s Approach

According to Wang (1957), subject is a constituent of a sentence, normally expressed by a noun, pronoun, or their equivalent, and it is a sign of the behavior, property or nature of the predicates. Obviously, a definition like this would allow for a possibility that any random NP might be the subject. In other words, the (unclear) definition shows scarcely any useful function of locating the subject. The following examples may make this claim clear.

- (5) a. ta lian you zang le.
 he face again dirty CRS (Currently Relevant State)
 His face is dirty again.
- b. Lisi neibenshu fang cuo le.
 Lisi that book put wrong CRS
 Lisi put that book in the wrong position.
- c. Zhangsan hua jiang duo le.
 Zhangsan word talk much CRS
 Zhangsan talked too much.

In each of the sentences in (5), either underlined NP can serve as the subject simply because they all satisfy Wang’s definition. Thus, the statement defining the subject seems to be too meager to identify. Wang (1957) also indicates that Chinese has many subjectless sentences, which is a prominent feature that the missing subject is usually understood from certain context or without having a

context. The sentences in (4) may therefore be defined as subjectless structure in terms of Wang's following conditions:

- (6) a. the subject need not be repeated when it is the same as that
in the previous sentence
- b. when the situation is sufficient to provide the knowledge,
the subject "I" or "you" is often omitted
- c. when the subject is a thing and is understood by both speaker and hearer, it
is usually omitted

Notice that, however, in (4a) there should be no underlying subject, and should then be regarded as a genuine subjectless sentence. Wang calls subject in such kind of sentence "unknown."

1.3. Chao's Approach

As I noted in the beginning, Chao asserts that as for the grammatical meaning of subject and predicate in Chinese, it is much more suitable to associate "topic" and "comment" with them rather than "actor" and "action." Furthermore, he considers that any part preceding a verb in a sentence as a discourse topic is the subject, and any part following it as a comment on the subject is a predicate. Thus, in accordance with Chao's approach, we would expect the following underlined part in each of the sentences in (7) is the subject.

- (7) a. wuge pinguo, sange bujian le.
five apple three disappear
The five apples, three of them disappeared.
- b. yizhi jiuyou name duo ren.
all along have so much people
There have been so much people all along.

c. qianmian you shengme xiaoxi ma?

in front have what news Q

Is there any information in front?

d. ta lian you zang le.

he face again dirty

His face is dirty again.

e. Zhangsan hua jiang duo le.

Zhangsan word talk much

Zhangsan talked too much.

f. wo ren di shengshu.

I people place unfamiliar

I am unfamiliar with the place and the people.

g. guoqu yinian wo dule bushao shu.

Last year I read many book

I read lots of books in last year.

As a result of Chao's analysis, we might observe that some predicates contain subject-predicate structure, as in (a), (d), (e), and (g). In fact, Chao specifies that there are also subjects that contain subject-predicate structure as the examples shown in (8).

(8) a. ni zoule wo zenmeban?

you leave I what to do

What shall I do if you leave?

b. gou na haozi (ni) duoguanxianshi.

dog catch mice (you) mind others' business

You poke your nose into other people's business.

To make distinction between the subject of the sentence and the subject in the

subject-predicate construction(in predicate part), Chao identifies the former as “big subject” and the latter “small subject.” For example, in (8a) ‘ni zoule’ is a big subject and ‘wo’ is a small subject. Chao’s approach, as I see it, has the following two advantages:

- (9) a. It is simple and clear.
 b. It can standardize the system of the identification of subject and object in Chinese.

Nevertheless, a rather usual question to ask is whether this approach can in effect account for all the sentence structures in question in Mandarin.

Before this question can be possibly justified, let’s first consider the following sentences.

- (10) neibenshu zuotain Lisi you fang cuo le.
 that book yesterday again put wrong
 Lisi put that book wrong again yesterday.

According to Chao, ‘neibenshu’ in (10), undoubtedly, would be the subject, and ‘zuotain’ would be the small subject. We note, however, that dictionary entries should include information concerning “selection restrictions,” which says that the relationship between a verb and its object must be semantically relevant so that we will not make a sentence like (11) below.

- (11) qunian bing le yici.
 last year sick once
 (I)was sick once last year.

Sentence (11) would be considered semantically anomalous if ‘qunian’ is the subject of the sentence in the definition of Chao. This sentence is apparently odd because the word ‘bing’ (sick) imposes a selection restriction on its subject to the

effect that it requires an animate subject rather than anything else.

In a like manner, sentence (10) can be seen as a violation of the selection restrictions in view of the fact that the verb ‘fang’ (put) requires an animate subject, and that ‘Lisi’ is the only qualified NP in the sentence. However, if we take Chao’s position to analyze the sentence, ‘Lisi’ would not become the subject and therefore the selection restrictions would not be fulfilled. Chao’s approach, accordingly, may seem to face one type of problem with the selection restrictions. That is, the condition would wrongly predict that a sentence like (11) is semantically well-formed. To summarize, Chao’s approach would still fail to handle the problem in a certain respect, though his principle has at least two advantages.

Thus far we have investigated briefly three traditional approaches contributed by Li, Wang, and Chao. We will next turn to see how Li and Thompson give an account of the problem.

1.4. Li and Thompson’s Approach

A characterization of subject provided by Li and Thompson (1981:87) is as follows: “the subject of a sentence in Mandarin is the noun phrase that has a “doing” or “being” relationship with the verb in that sentence.” On the surface this mode of definition appears to be quite plausible since it can account for most of the sentence structures in Chinese. However, if we look upon the entire situation relating to this assumption more carefully, we would find that some reconsideration might be required for this definition. For example, consider first the sentences in (12).

- (12) a. niao fei le.
bird fly Asp
The bird has flown.
- b. diandeng dakai le.
light turn on
The light has been turned on.

It is correct, following Li and Thompson, that the one doing the flying in (12a) is the NP ‘niao,’ and the one doing the turning in (12b) is an understood subject which does not show up in the sentence. Thus, ‘niao’ is the subject in (12a), while no overt subject but a topic ‘diandeng’ is in (12b)(see Li and Thompson (1981:88-89)). Consider now what would happen if we apply the definition to the sentences such as (13).

- (13) a. qian fei le.
money fly
The money is gone.
- b. yinhang guanmen le
bank close
The bank is closed.

The result cannot be justified then, since the one doing the flying can not be ‘money’ in (13a), and since no understood subject can be possibly considered in (13b), needless to say that the one doing the closing can never be ‘bank’ itself. Apparently, thus, in terms of the definition of subject given by Li and Thompson, it turns out that their explanation also fails to satisfactorily identify subject in Mandarin.

Thus far we have observed certain facts concerning subject and object in

Chinese, and have also seen some possible explanations for them, suggested respectively by Li (1931), Wang (1957), Chao (1968), and Li and Thompson (1981). It seems to be the case, however, that none of these approaches seems to be able to provide a completely capable identification of subject and/or object in Chinese. In the next section, I shall present a different approach to the analysis of the problem in Chinese.

2. Towards a Simple Solution

2.1 Background

As I noted in the previous section, the controversy of the identification of subject and object in Mandarin has long existed. It thus seems that no one so far can satisfactorily propose a favorable way out of the difficulty. The reason accounting for such occurrence is, as I see it, that Mandarin, unlike those Indo-European languages, still has no consistent system of grammar to analyze sentence structures. Take for example the issue in this paper, the prospects of linguists (or grammarians) are still divergent on its explanation. In this section, the solution I am going to suggest is not intended to be achieved via certain formal syntactic theory; rather it is intended for a general level purpose. The reason lies in the fact that it is essentially a problem that has to do with not only linguists but also non-linguists. Yuen-ren Chao is the best example of this intention. The approach Chao suggested is the simplest one, yet it explains most of the sentences. The significance of Chao's approach suggests that the problem can be solved in a simple way without rigidly adhering to some kind of complicated syntactic explanation, say, a highly theoretical assumption that only a small group of people realize how it works. Instead, this is a matter that non-linguists should know too, needless to say the pedagogical need in this respect. Chao's attitude toward the

solution is of concern to our understanding of the issue. This is also an attitude I am taking on in this paper.

2.2 An Approach to a Definition of Grammatical Subject and Object

At this point I basically take up the notion of subject-verb-object relationships. More straightforwardly, this is in fact an approach that is similar to the recognition of meaning relationships among agent-action-goal. Let us begin with the following simple sentence.

- (14) jinri wo dao beijing lai.
 Today I arrive Beijing come
 I come to Beijing today.

If we ask ‘shei dao beijing lai?’ (Who came to Beijing?), the answer must be ‘wo’ (I); and if we ask ‘dao nali?’ (Where to?), the answer must be ‘Beijing.’ This idea of noun-verb-noun relationships is not new, of course. As is well known, in English (see Norman (1978), for example) this approach is often taken to identify the subject (but it is not exactly the same method as I employ here). One might question its applicability in Chinese. I would assume, however, that it is possible to make a use of the approach in Chinese if we make some slight refinements. In this paper I would like to name the revised model as ‘yiwenci ceshi fa’ (wh-words test approach). But what are ‘yiwenci’ (wh-words)? In terms of Chinese grammar, ‘yiwenci’ are those interrogative pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs. Going back to the sentence (14), for example, the interrogatives we employ to test ‘shei’ and ‘nali’ are the members of ‘yiwenci’ in Chinese. According to this approach, thus, any category in the sentence that is tied to the verb is the subject(when ‘yiwenci’ is used before verb in testing), and that any category in the sentence which is tied to the verb is the object(when ‘yiwenci’ is used after the verb in testing). Hence, the pronoun ‘wo’ is the subject, and the noun ‘beijing’ is the object in sentence

(14). One question arises then: what is the grammatical function of 'jinri'(today) in (14)? I would like to define it as the topic of the sentence since, according to Li and Thompson (1981), it satisfies all the two semantic characteristics that a topic should have, as shown in (15).

(15) a. a topic always occurs in sentence-initial position.

b. a topic can be separated from the rest of the sentence by a pause or by one of the pause articles—a, me, ne or ba. (Li & Thompson 1981, p. 86)

(16) below explains the characteristic of (15b).

(16) a. jinri, wo dao beijing lai.
 Today I arrive Beijing come
 Today, I come to Beijing.

b. jinri ne wo dao beijing lai.
 Today pause prt I arrive Beijing come
 As for today, I come to Beijing.

.It is well known that topic could belong to the conception of discourse function (i.e. it is the subject of a talk), while subject could belong to the conception of grammatical relationship in a sentence. Therefore, a grammatical subject can sometimes be a discourse topic in a sentence simultaneously. For example,

(17) niao fei le.
 bird fly Asp
 The bird has flown.

In (17) the word 'niao' is the subject according to the 'yiwenci ceshi fa' (wh-words test approach), but it is also the topic in this sentence. On the contrary, however, a discourse topic may not be a grammatical subject in a sentence at the same time. Sentence (14) exemplifies this fact: the topic is 'jinri,' while the

subject is ‘wo.’ There shows no confusion here since subject, unlike topic, is not always in the initial position of a sentence. ‘yiwenci ceshi fa’ is able to identify the subject (and object) in various types of sentences, regardless of the position of the subject. For instance, in a sentence like:

- (18) qunian, bingle wo yichang.
 last year sick I once
 I was sick once last year.

if we ask ‘shei bingle?’ (Who was sick?), the answer must be ‘wo,’ which, according to our approach, is the subject; and if we ask ‘bingle jici?’ (How many times were you sick?), the answer must be ‘yichang’ (or ‘yici’) and it is therefore the object. On the other hand, ‘qunian’ is defined as the topic since it occurs in the sentence initial position, and since it can be separated from the rest of the sentence by a pause.

We might wonder, then, what criterion we can use to choose an appropriate wh-word to test? Recall that a general rule requires that any dictionary entry should include information about selection restrictions, so that we do not make a sentence that is semantically anomalous. This is also true here. Whenever we choose a wh-word to test the subject or object in a sentence, it must obligatory conform to the selection restrictions. No more examples will be given here to explain this fact.

Before moving on to possible analyses, I will first instantiate the basic sentence constructions from Chinese.

2.3 The Eight Basic Sentence Patterns in Chinese

Roughly speaking, following Yue (1991), Chinese sentences may be classified into eight patterns as shown in (19).

- (19) a. NP + V
 b. V + NP
 c. Loc/NP1 + V + NP2
 d. NP1 + V + NP2
 e. Time/NP1 + V + NP2
 f. NP1 + NP2 + V
 g. NP1 + NP2 + V + NP3
 h. NP1 + NP2 + NP3 + + V

These eight patterns would correspond to the respective examples (20a-h) below.

- (20) a. chaoshui zhang le.
 tide flowing
 The tide is flowing.
- b. xia yu le.
 down rain
 It's raining.
- c. taishang zuozhe zhuxituan.
 stand sit presidium
 The presidium sat on the stand.
- d. Lisi you qian.
 Lisi have money
 Lisi has money.
- e. yiuqian fasheng quo huozai.
 before happen asp fire
 A fire occurred before.

f. Zhongguo renkou you zengjia le.

China population again increase

The population of China has gone up again.

g. zheshi zheli laile yige ren

now here come one man

A man comes here now.

h. neibenshu zuotain Lisi mai gei Zhangsan le

that book yesterday sell to

Lisi sold that book to Zhangsan yesterday.

Let's first put all the pieces about the 'yiwenci ceshi fa' (wh-words test approach) together to see how it will work on the above eight basic sentence patterns in Chinese. For convenience, I will reproduce sentences in (20) one by one in the course of examination.

(21) NP + V

chaoshui zhang le.

tide flowing

The tide is flowing.

According to 'yiwenci ceshi fa' (wh-words test approach), if we ask 'sheme zhang le?' (What's flowing?), and the answer, naturally, must be 'chaoshui,' and from which we therefore derive the subject. Correspondingly, object can be obtained by asking 'zhang sheme' (what's flowing?). The answer to this question is the same as the subject: 'chaoshui.' It seems implausible to treat the NP in the pattern of (21) as a subject and object simultaneously. To solve this problem, I assume that a choice has to be taken when an NP serves as a subject and object at the same time. Following Huddleston (1984), the first priority should be the subject owing to the following reasons.

- (22) a. The standard notional definition of subject equates it with the ‘topic’ of the sentence, i.e., what the sentence is about (though subject may not necessarily be topic in every sentence). This apparently reveals its significance of status in a sentence.
- b. Object can sometimes be a topic as in a sentence “Lisi, wo hen xihuan” (Lisi, I like very much). The proportion of such construction is still lower than subject.
- c. In general, subject itself already implies that it is the main part of a sentence, but never object.

In keeping with these reasons, subject obviously holds all the preference to object and should therefore be the first alternative.

- (23) V + NP
xia yu le
It’s raining.

Let us first begin with Chao’s idea regarding (23). Chao (1968) interprets the sentence in (23) in terms of a verbal expression (i.e. a VP), and calls this type of sentences ‘minor sentences’ (see Chao (1968) p.60). What exactly Chao points out is that in a minor sentence the subject part does not show up and may or may not be supplied. Wang (1957), on the other hand, regards (23) as a subjectless sentence. According to him, the subject of this type of sentences is ‘unknown.’ In Wang’s view, there is no need to supply a subject in a sentence such as (23).

Returning to our ‘yiwenci ceshi fa’ (wh-words test approach), we seem to find that an identification of subject in (23) is not impossible nor implausible. In accordance with the priority assumption we have just adopted (i.e. subject first where there is a decision needs to be made), we are able to and only need to locate the subject in (23). Hence, if we ask ‘sheme xia le?’ (What’s coming down?), the

answer is ‘yu,’ the subject of the sentence.

- (24) Loc/NP1 + V + NP2
 taishang zuozhe zhuxituan
 The presidium sat on the stand.

By asking ‘shei zuozai taishang?’ (Who sat on the stand?), we likely locate the subject the NP2 ‘zhuxituan.’ Since the priority assumption does not apply to the pattern (24), object identification should be ignited. We therefore ask ‘zuozai nali?’ (Where to sit on?) and the test points out ‘taishang’ as the object in (24).

- (25) NP1 + V + NP2
 Lisi you qian
 Lisi is rich.

In a like manner, if we ask ‘shei you qian?’ (Who is rich?), Lisi clearly is the subject. ‘qian’ then is located by the question ‘Lisi you sheme?’ (What does Lisi have?) as the object in the sentence (25).

- (26) Time/NP1 + V + NP2
 yiqian fasheng guo huozai.
 A fire occurred before.

Recall that we must conform to the selection restrictions when we choose a wh-word to test subject and object. Therefore, the verb ‘fasheng’ should impose a selection restriction on its subject or object to the effect that it requires an NP rather than a time adverb as subject or object. Thus, we ask ‘shenme fasheng?’ (What’s happened?), we locate the subject ‘huozai’ in (26). The priority assumption then is applied here to block the repetition. According to the earlier discussion, the time adverb ‘yiqian’ here is defined as a topic.

(27) NP1 + NP2 + V

Zhongguo renkou you zengjia le

The population of China has gone up again.

In (27) we easily locate the subject ‘renkou’ by asking ‘sheme zengjia le?’ (What is increased?). Again, the priority assumption is applied here. ‘Zhongguo’ is therefore a topic.

(28) NP1 + NP2 + V + NP3

zheshi zheli laile yige ren.

A man comes here now.

‘shei lai?’ (Who has come?) if we ask, then we know ‘yige ren’ is the subject. ‘lai nali?’ (Where did he come to?) the test helps us locate the object ‘zheli.’ And ‘zheshi’ is the topic accordingly.

(29) NP1 + NP2 + NP3 + ... + V ...

Neibenshu zuotain Lisi mai gei Zhangsan le.

Lisi sold that book to Zhangsan yesterday.

Likewise, we can locate the subject ‘Lisi’ if we ask ‘shei mai?’ (Who sold?), and the object is ‘neibenshu’ if we ask ‘mai sheme?’ (What is sold?).

In spite of the examinations presented in this section, we still need more evidence in favor of this ‘yiwenci ceshi fa’ (wh-words test approach). Further discussion will be in the following section.

2.4 Empty Category in Chinese

In Chinese, sentences may have no subject, no object, or no subject and object. In general these empty categories are understood. We can often tell what the empty elements refer to from the appropriate context. Following Huang (1984),

for example, all of the hearers' responses in (30) are acceptable.

(30) Speaker A: Zhangsan kanjian Lisi le ma?

see

Did Zhangsan see Lisi?

Speaker B: a. Sentence with no subject

e kanjian Lisi le.

(He) saw Lisi.

b. Sentence with no object

ta kanjian e le.

He saw (Lisi).

c. Sentence with no subject and object

e kanjian e le.

(He) saw (Lisi).

We now may wonder how subject and object can be located in sentences with empty categories such as (30). If we ask 'shei kanjian le?' (Who saw?), taking for example (30Ba), then there seems no relevant NP that can satisfy the answer. Thus no subject (at least no overt subject) in this sentence. Notice that we cannot use 'Lisi' as the answer since this violates the general semantic ability. That is, our intuition about well-formedness would not agree to that interpretation. The same explanation applies to the rest of examples in (30). Nevertheless, let's consider the following sentences in (31).

(31) a. yizhi jiu you name duo ren.

There have been so many people.

b. qianmian you sheme xiaoxi ma?

Is there any news in front?

Whatever the question ‘sheme you?’ or ‘nali you?’ or even ‘shei you?’ is tested, no relevant phrase can seem to serve as the subject in sentence (31a). On the other hand, we are not allowed to choose the NP ‘name duo ren’ as the subject because of the violation of semantic well-formedness condition. Thus, no subject can be identified in (31a). (31b) can have ‘qianmian’ as the subject because selection restrictions allow the verb ‘you’ to take the locative adverb ‘qianmian’ as its subject. The adverb ‘yizhi’ in (31a), however, is not qualified to function as the subject.

2.5 Ambiguous Sentences

As is well known, the subject and object of an ambiguous sentence can be distinguished by way of D-Structure proposal. As a matter of fact, this distinction can also be done by ‘yiwenci ceshi fa’ (wh-words test approach). Take for instance the following sentences.

(32) ji chi le.

chicken eat

The chicken was eaten.

The chicken has eaten something.

Recall that the priority assumption requires that the subject be first identified. Thus, if we ask ‘shei chi le?’ (Who ate?), the answer is ‘ji,’ and it is therefore the subject of the sentence. Clearly this interpretation implies the following reading: The chicken has eaten something. The second priority will then impose us to locate the object and from which we obtain the second reading. That is, ‘chi sheme?’ (What did you eat?) if we ask, then ‘ji’ is the object. This answer explains the second reading: The chicken was eaten (by me or someone). (33) below is another example.

(33) fangwen meiguo de pengyou.

visit America friend

He is my friend who is going to visit the States.

He is going to visit his friend who is in the States.

Again, we can locate the first reading ‘He is my friend who is going to visit the States’ by way of employing the first priority. When ‘pengyou’ performs as the subject, we get the first reading. However, if ‘meiguo de pengyou’ acts as the object (i.e. ‘fangwen shei?’ if we ask), we acquire the second reading.

3. Summary

On the basis of facts relating to the problem of the identification of subject and object in Chinese, I argue that the traditional approaches, provided by such linguists as Li jinxu, Wang li, Chao, and Li and Thompson, cannot handle the problem satisfactorily. In this paper I adopt an idea from English (see Norman (1978)) and revise it so as to conform to Chinese sentence structure. I name this approach ‘yiwenci ceshi fa’ (wh-words test approach). The examinations of the approach in this paper reveal that it seems to be plausible to identify subject and object in Chinese by means of ‘yiwenci ceshi fa’ (wh-words test approach). This revised approach has the following advantages:

- (34) a. It is easy and simple.
 b. It can standardize the system of the identification of subject and object in Chinese.
 c. There seems no contradictory concept in this approach.

However, in pursuing a unified definition, the presented examinations in this paper are by no means sufficient. To be sure, further investigation and analysis shall be demanded. This presentation would then be best seen as a starting point

for the approach.

Finally, the ‘yiwenci ceshi fa’ (wh-words test approach) and its related definitions I suggest are in (35).

(35). ‘yiwenci ceshi fa’ (wh-words test approach)

To locate the subject, use a ‘yiwenci’ before the verb, while to locate the object, use a ‘yiwenci’ after the verb. The former must precede the latter in its applying order.

A definition of topic in this paper (following Li and Thompson (1981))

A topic is in the sentence initial position; it can be separated from the rest of the sentence by a pause when it performs like a topic only. When a topic is also a subject in the sentence simultaneously, it can not be separated from the rest of the sentence.

The Priority Assumption

When a phrase can be qualified as subject and object in a sentence simultaneously, the subject has the first priority to be chosen.

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