

A Discourse Approach to Causal Sentences in Mandarin Chinese

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Abstract

This paper argues that the word order of adverbials can be captured only when the causal clauses are analyzed as focus. Previous studies on Chinese causal sentences usually treat the causal clauses on a par with other types of adverbial clauses. This means that they are considered as topics and predicted to precede the main clauses. However, this account does not hold for the causal clauses. According to recent corpus-based studies, they actually take up both pre-posed and post-posed positions with respect to their main clause. If the adjunct-preceding-main order is overwhelmingly used in Mandarin complex sentences, what can be the reason for that causal sequencing is different from the conditional or concessive one? We will show that it is the focal status of the causal clauses that can account for their distribution.

1. Introduction

Most previous studies on Chinese causal sentences treat the causal clauses on a par with other types of adverbial clauses. (cf. Chao 1968, Tsao 1979, 88, Li & Thompson 1981) This means that they are supposed to be topics and manifest the adjunct-preceding-main order as shown in (1).

- (1) *yinwei shengbing le, suoyi ta liu zai jia-li.*
because sick ASP so he stay at home-in
'Because he was sick, he stayed at home.'

However, as noticed by recent corpus-based studies, while the adverbial clauses commonly precede the main clauses, the causal ones take up both pre-posed and post-posed positions outside of their main clause. Biq (1995), for example, points out that in both spoken and written data, reason before main point is not necessarily the preferred order for expressing the causal relation. Wang (1995, 96) makes the same claim.

If the adjunct-preceding-main order is overwhelmingly used in Mandarin discourse, what can be the reason for that causal sequencing is different from conditional and concessive one? We will show that the traditional analysis which treats adverbial clauses as topic in the topic-comment utterance cannot capture the behavior of causal clauses. Instead, our investigation on the interaction between the syntactic and semantic properties of adverbial clauses in written discourse leads to the two following findings that offer a more comprehensive account of the syntax and semantics of the causal sentences:

- i. The causal clauses cannot be the topic of the sentence.
- ii. The causal clauses may be the focus of the sentence.

2. Causal clauses are not topic

There are two arguments to show that the causal clauses cannot be the topic of the sentence: the first based on topic chain, and the second based on cleft sentences.

First, following Chao (1968), Tsao (1988) argues that the adverbial clauses in Chinese should be more appropriately analyzed as topic. Nevertheless, he points out some counterexamples. For instance, the topic in the causal sentence (2) is the topicalized NP *ta* 'he' rather than the causal clause *ta yinwei shengbing le* 'because he was sick', as illustrated in (3a) and (3b).

(2) *ta yinwei shengbing le, suoyi liu zai jia-li*
 he because sick ASP so stay at home-in
 'Because he was sick, he stayed at home.'

- (3) a. $\langle ta \rangle_i$ yinwei shengbing le, suoyi e_i liu zai jia-li
 b. * $\langle ta$ yinwei shengbing le \rangle_i , suoyi e_i liu zai jia-li

Thus it is clear that only the former can constitute the topic chain going through whole proposition.

Tsao assumes that sentences like (2) are related to sentences like (4) where the subordinate subject is moved out of the causal to be topic. Being identical to the topic, the main subject is deleted.

(4) yinwei **ta_i** shengbing le, suoyi **ta_i** liu zai jia-li

In our account, the topic *ta* ‘he’ does not come from the subordinate clause, but from the main clause. This statement can be easily justified by sentences like (5) which involve non co-referential subjects.

- (5) *yinwei ta shengbing le, suoyi Meili liu zai jia-li.*
 because he sick ASP so Mary stay at home-in
 ‘Because he was sick, Mary stayed at home.’
- (6) a.* *ta, yinwei t_i shengbing le, suoyi meili liu zai jia-li*
 he because sick ASP so Mary stay at home-in
 b. *Meili, yinwei ta shengbing le, suoyi t_i liu zai jia-li*
 he because Mary sick ASP so stay at home-in
 ‘Because Mary was sick, he stayed at home.’

The contrast between (6a) and (6b) shows that it is the main subject *Meili* ‘Mary’ rather than the subordinate subject *ta* ‘he’ that is moved to the front of the sentence to become a topic.

Adopting this analysis, we can give a straightforward account to the ill formedness of (7b).

- (7) a. *Meili liu zai jia-li, yinwei ta shengbing le.*
 Mary stay at home-in because he sick ASP
 ‘Mary stayed at home because he was sick.’
 b.* *Meili liu zai jia-li, ta yinwei shengbing le*
 Mary stay at home-in he because sick ASP

When the causal clause occurs at the end of the sentence (7a), instead of occurring in the sentence-initial position (5), the topicalization of the subordinate subject is also ruled out. The data shows that a topic can be obtained from the main clause regardless of the position of the causal clause. The causal clause, on the other hand, does not figure in the topic chain and cannot be a topic.

Second, the topic in (6b) *Meili* ‘Mary’ cannot be introduced into the clefting structure *shi...de* (8). However, the causal clause *yinwei ta shengbing le* ‘because he was sick’ takes such a construction without any problem (9).

- (8)* *shi Meili yingwei ta shengbing le, suoyi liu zai jia-li de*
 be Mary because he sick ASP so stay at home-in DE

- (9) *shi yinwei ta shengbing le, suoyi Meili liu zai jia-li de.*
 be because sick ASP so he stay at home-in
 'It is because he was sick that he stayed at home.'

Take note that *shi...de* construction marks focus function in Mandarin Chinese. Thus it can be predicted that an element with the discourse function of topic cannot be a focus at the same time. Upon closer inspection of cleft sentences, we confirm that topic elements are not allowed in this construction. As example (10) shows, a base-generated topic like *shuiguo* 'fruit' cannot be focused on.

- (10) a. *shuiguo Meili xihuan fengli.*
 fruit Mary like pineapple
 'As for fruits, Mary likes pineapples.'
 b.* *shi shuiguo zhangsan bu chi fengli*
 be fruit John not eat pineapple

It holds true for topicalized elements. (cf. Paris & Tsai 1994, Tsai 1995) Normally we can focus on adverbial entities like *zuotian* 'yesterday' in (11). However, (12) shows that once we place the constituent in the head of the sentence, i.e. topic position, the same manipulation doesn't work any more.

- (11) a. *ta zuotian liu zai jia-li.*
 he yesterday stay at home-in
 'He stayed at home yesterday.'
 b. *ta shi zuotian liu zai jia-li de.*
 he be yesterday stay at home-in DE
 'It is yesterday that he stayed at home.'
- (12) a. *zuotian ta liu zai jia-li.*
 yesterday he stay at home-in
 'Yesterday he stayed at home.'
 b.* *shi zuotian ta liu zai jia-li de*
 be yesterday he stay at home-in DE

It is clear from the above two arguments that although causal clauses are traditionally considered as topic, they do not behave the same way at all. If causal clauses are different from topic elements, what could they be? Since they can easily undertake the cleft structure, we propose that they represent focus in complex sentences.

3. Causal clauses as focus

Biq (1995) has argued that it is due to the speaker's interest to "get to the point" that the preferred sequencing of causal sentences in conversation data is main point before reason. However, this order is favored in written texts as well as in speech. Instead of extending Biq's proposal and assuming that the same communicative strategy is used in both modes of language, we will give additional reasons in support of the focus analysis.

First, causal clauses can be quite easily associated with the verb that marks the focus, namely *shi* 'be' (13).

- (13) *Meili shi yinwei ta shengbing le, suoyi liu zai jia-li*
Mary be because he sick ASP so stay at home-in
'As for Mary, it is because he was sick that she stayed at home.'

Next, this focus marking verb becomes indispensable if the clause in question is post-posed, as illustrated in (14).

- (14) *Meili suoyi liu zai jia-li *(shi) yinwei ta shengbing le*
Mary so stay at home-in be because he sick ASP
'The reason why Mary stayed at home is due to the fact that he was sick.'

Finally, the focus analysis captures very nicely another important distinction between causal clauses and other types of adverbial clauses. While causal clauses admit clefting (8), the same construction is not possible for conditional and concessive clauses (15)-(16).

- (15) a. *ruguo ta shengbing le, name Meili hui liu zai jia-li.*
if he sick ASP then Mary will stay at home-in
'If he is sick, then Mary will stay at home.'
b.* *shi ruguo ta shengbing le name Meili hui liu zai jia-li de*
be if he sick ASP then Mary will stay at home-in DE
- (16) a. *suiran ta shengbing le, raner Meili haishi liu zai jia-li.*
though he sick ASP but Mary still stay at home-in
'Though he was sick, Mary still stayed at home.'
b.* *shi suiran ta shengbing le, raner Meili haishi liu zai jia-li de*
be though he sick ASP but Mary still stay at home-in DE

In other words, due to their topic status, conditional and concessive clauses cannot be associated with any focus device, such as clefting.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to show that causal clauses should not be treated on a par with other types of adverbial clauses. The difference involving sequence order can be best accounted for if the causal clauses are analyzed as the focus of the sentence. This account also provides a strong argument for the necessity to make distinction between the different types of adverbial clauses regarding their discourse function.

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