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All structures great and small: on copular sentences with shì in Mandarin

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Hang Cheng

All structures great and small



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On copular sentences with *shì* in Mandarin

This dissertation provides a description and analysis of the Mandarin copula *shì* and copular structures containing it. On the basis of a comprehensive description of the syntactic distribution of *shì* and properties of different types of copular sentences (predicational, specificational, and equative), this study proposes a unified structural analysis for predicational and specificational copular sentences in Mandarin.

It is proposed that *shì* is a functional element in the structure of the clause, whose role is to establish the subject--predicate relation. Importantly, *shì* is not a verb, and copular structures in Mandarin contain no verb phrase at all, which is consistent with proposals about pronominal copular elements in other languages, such as Hebrew and Polish. Specificational copular sentences are analysed as inverted predicational copular sentences, derived via predicate inversion. This analysis captures both the underlying similarities and the differences between the two types of copular sentences. It is also pointed out that the third type of copular sentences, equatives, is clearly distinct from both predicational and specificational copular sentences and should thus be analysed in a different way.

The dissertation also proposes that tense is not always syntactically expressed in Mandarin copular structures. While sentences with a stage-level predicate express tense syntactically, those with an individual-level predicate do not.

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