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

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CHAPTER 7

Conclusion

7.1 General conclusions

This thesis has provided a study of Mandarin copula *shì* 是 and copular sentences containing *shì*, focusing on the most essential properties of the copula and the copular structures in Mandarin. In addition to descriptions of the basic properties of *shì* in Chapter 2, three main issues are addressed in the remaining chapters. First, what is the nature of *shì*? Second, how many types of copular sentences are there in Mandarin? How are they structurally related? Third, how are copular sentences temporally encoded?

The first question is discussed in Chapter 4. In previous studies, copulas in the world's languages have been proposed to instantiate various functional heads, including Pred, *v/V*, T, Fin, and SUBJ. I argue that *shì* cannot instantiate Pred or T. In addition, it does not head VP either. In fact, I propose that the copular structures do not contain VP at all. *Shì* is proposed to head a functional projection that is identical to SUBJP, a projection that has been argued for in Cardinaletti (2004), Rizzi (2015b), and Shlonsky and Rizzi (2018). The current analysis of Mandarin *shì* and the relevant structure is consistent with what has been

proposed for other pronominal copulas such as Hebrew *hu* and Polish *to*. Specifically, these types of copulas occupy a high position in the structure. These pronominal copulas are supposed to lexicalise one of the SUBJ heads in the structure. A spec–head relation between the subject of a copular sentence and the copula is established. Furthermore, a sentence containing only a pronominal copula contains no VP structure. Hence, in addition to their origins, pronominal copulas share semantic and syntactic properties and can thus be analysed in the same way.

The second question is addressed in Chapters 3 and 5. Chapter 3 provides an extensive description of properties of different types of copular sentences in Mandarin. On semantic grounds, a three-way taxonomy of Mandarin copular sentences can be observed: predicational, specificational, and equative. These three types show clear-cut distinctions in terms of types of nominals flanking *shì*. However, equative sentences in Mandarin always require an additional adverb: *jiù* ‘exactly’. Furthermore, they present a number of other distinctions from both predicational and specificational copular sentences. For instance, they are independently reversible between the two word orders; both nominals flanking *jiù-shì* are referential and discourse-old; and the postcopular nominal of either order cannot be topicalised. Therefore, in structural terms, equative sentences should be analysed in a way different from the other two types of copular sentences.

Although predicational sentences and specificational sentences also have distinct properties, they are closely related. A unified structural analysis is proposed for them in Chapter 5, which accounts for the following distinctions between the two types of sentences. First, predicational and specificational sentences present different patterns of focus. The postcopular nominals in specificational sentences are always in identificational focus, which is associated with the exhaustive interpretation. Second, *shì* in predicational clauses can be omitted in a number of contexts, but *shì* in specificational clauses is always obligatory. Third, the postcopular nominals in predicational sentences can be topicalised, while those in specificational sentences cannot.

As for the structures of Mandarin copular sentences, this thesis proposes that the two types of sentences share the same base structure. It is an asymmetric structure mediated by a functional head Pred. The two NPs flanking *shì* are merged in a fixed word order. The referent nominal

is the specifier of PredP and the predicative nominal is the complement of the Pred head. *shi*P is on top of PredP. Both of the nominals can raise to [Spec, *shi*P] via A-movement. In addition, a low FocP on top of PredP is proposed for the inverse structure. The derivation of copular sentences is regulated by information-structural rules. Particularly, I argue that predicate inversion is motivated by the identificational focus on NP1. In addition, the precopular nominal must bear the [Top]/[Foc] feature corresponding to that of the *shi* head. Specifically, when the referential NP1 bears the corresponding [Top]/[Foc] feature, it is this NP that moves to [Spec, *shi*P] so the [Top]/[Foc] feature can be checked. The corresponding uninterpretable feature on *shi* as well as the EPP feature can be eliminated. Meanwhile, the predicate NP2 remains put. The spell-out of such a structure is a canonical copular sentence. When the subject NP1 has identificational focus, exhaustivity motivates it to move to the low FocP on top of PredP. As NP1 gets frozen in FocP, the EPP feature of the head of *shi*P requires the predicative NP2 to move to the specifier of *shi*P so as to eliminate the EPP feature. Crucially, as *shi*P creates a criterial configuration, the nominal it attracts must have the same criterial feature as it. In other words, the NP2 must bear the corresponding [Top] or [Foc] feature; otherwise the derivation crashes.

(1) and (2) below present the structures for predicational/canonical and specificational/inverse copular sentences, respectively.

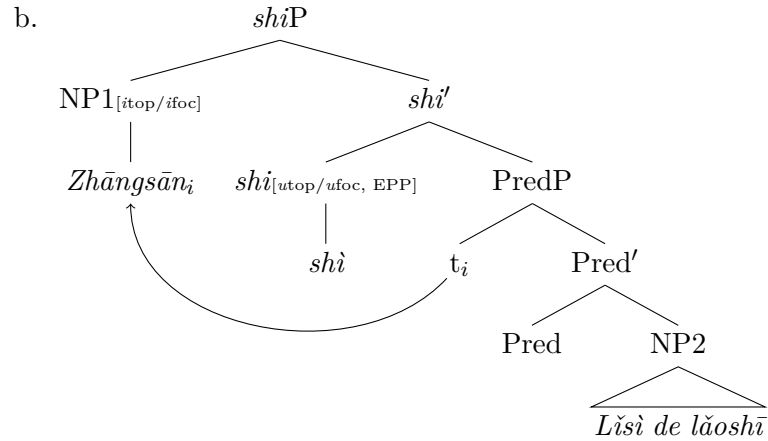
(1) Predicational/Canonical

a. 张三是李四的老师。

Zhāngsān shì Lǐsì de lǎoshī.

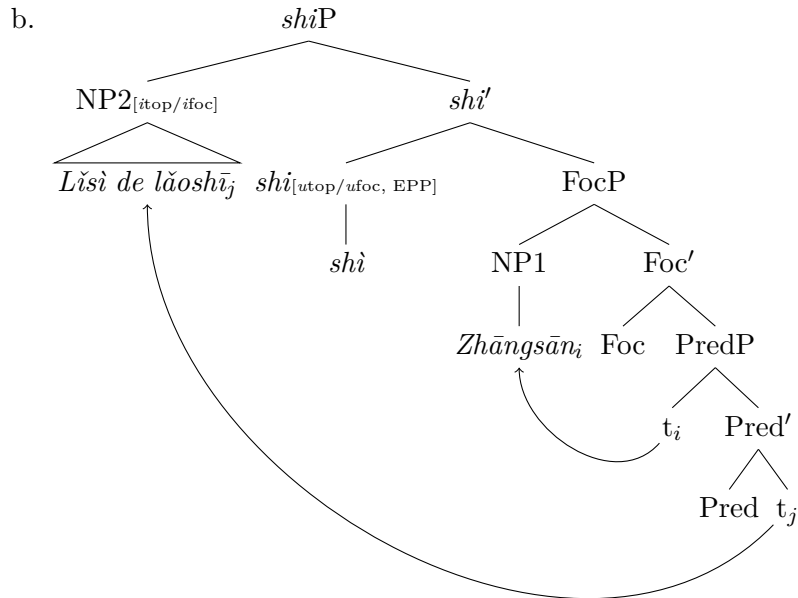
Zhangsan COP Lisi SUB teacher

‘Zhangsan is Lisi’s teacher.’



(2) Specificational/Inverse

- a. 李四的老师是张三。
Lǐsì de lǎoshī shì Zhāngsān.
 Lisi SUB teacher COP Zhangsan
 'Lisi's teacher is Zhangsan.'



The third question is discussed in Chapter 6. In Mandarin, copular sentences and non-copular sentences do show individual-level and stage-level distinction, according to the diagnostics defined in this chapter. Crucially, ILP sentences and SLP sentences behave differently in terms of temporal interpretation. For one thing, SLPs can combine with temporal adverbials, while ILPs cannot. Moreover, when uttered in isolation, the subject of an SLP sentence (without a temporal expression) must be alive. In contrast, the subject of an ILP sentence can be either alive or dead. To account for this phenomenon, I propose that Mandarin ILP sentences do not have TP in the structure, in contrast to SLP sentences, which do.

7.2 Remaining questions and future research

In the course of working on the three core issues concerning Mandarin copula *shì* and copular sentences, many interesting questions arise. As solving all these questions is a task beyond the scope of a single thesis, they are left for future research.

7.2.1 Other copular elements in Chinese

Since this thesis focuses on *shì* and copular sentences containing *shì*, the other copular elements in Mandarin and other Chinese varieties are not touched upon. As mentioned in the introduction, Mandarin does have a number of other copulas, such as *wéi* 为 and *nǎi* 乃. Historically, these copulas were used frequently, but their use in contemporary Mandarin is constrained. For one thing, they are confined to formal contexts. Furthermore, they seem to be restricted to only one type of copular sentence. *Wéi* seems to occur only in specificational copular sentences, as in (3a), while *nǎi* seems to occur only in predicational sentences, as in (3b). At least two issues are worth exploring. First, were they restricted to the same distribution diachronically? Second, as *wéi* originates from a verb and *nǎi* originates from an adverb, how did they behave differently from pronominal copulas such as *shì* (when they were still frequently used)? Additionally, how did they pattern with other verb copulas or those with other origins?

- (3) a. 最高价为 3000 元。
Zuì gāo jià wéi 3000 yuán.
 most high price COP 3000 RMB
 ‘The highest price is 3,000 RMB.’
- b. 此乃天上仙境也。
Cǐ nǎi tiānshàng xiānjìng yě.
 DEM COP sky fairyland SFP
 ‘This is a fairyland!’

With regards to copulas in other Chinese varieties, H. Zhang and Deng (2011) note that *hai* in Cantonese and its variants differ from *shì* in Mandarin in terms of empty category licensing. They also ascribe the differences to the fact that *hai* is a verbal copula while *shì* is a pronominal copula. I am also interested in the distribution of *hai* in comparison to that of *shì* in relation to what has been discussed in Chapter 4.

In addition to copulas, research on other elements associated with the predication relation is also fascinating. For instance, Mandarin *zuò* 作 frequently occurs in small clause contexts, exemplified in (4). It originates from a verb meaning ‘do’.¹ However, unlike *wéi*, *zuò* has never developed into a copula. In addition, *zuò* can combine with verbs such as *dāng* ‘consider’, *kàn* ‘look, see’, *xiě* ‘write’, and *chàng* ‘sing’. At least three questions arise. First, how should *zuò* be analysed in both cases? Second, why *zuò* is obligatory in (4), and what role does it play? Third, does *zuò* in (5) also mediate a predication relation?

- (4) 我们选迈克作组长。
Wǒmen xuǎn Màiike zuò zǔzhǎng.
 1PL elect Mike as team.leader
 ‘We elected Mike team leader.’
- (5) 我把迈克当作组长了。
Wǒ bǎ Màiike dāng-zuò zǔzhǎng le.
 1SG BA Mike consider-as team.leader PFV
 ‘I (mistakenly) took Mike as the team leader.’

¹There are two characters pronounced as *zuò* with the interpretation of ‘do’ in Mandarin, namely, 做 and 作. 做 is mentioned a few times in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 along with another verb, *dāng*. It cannot occur in contexts like (4) and (5). Conversely, the word 作 discussed here cannot function as the matrix verb.

7.2.2 Copular and non-copular differences

In the literature on Chinese syntax, copular sentences have long been overlooked. In fact, copular sentences may differ drastically from the non-copular sentences. Assuming copular sentences have distinctive structures from non-copular sentences in Mandarin, the two types of sentences may have distinct syntactic distributions. For instance, a number of behaviours distinct between copular and non-copular sentences have been reported in the previous chapters. I would like to highlight one case where a contrast is observed between copular and non-copular sentences.

As mentioned in a footnote in Chapter 3 (fn. 13 on page 65), alternative questions are actually blocked at the precopular position except when they are echo questions. The relevant examples are repeated here as (6).

- (6) a. */?? 张三还是李四是你的老师?
 */?? *Zhāngsān hái shì Lǐsì shì nǐ de lǎoshī?*
 Zhangsan or Lisi COP 2SG SUB teacher
 Intended: ‘Is Zhangsan or Lisi your teacher?’
- b. * 你的老师还是你的学生是张三?
 * *Nǐ de lǎoshī hái shì nǐ de xuéshēng shì Zhāngsān?*
 2SG SUB teacher or 2SG SUB student COP Zhangsan
 Intended: ‘Is Zhangsan your teacher or your student?’

In non-copular sentences, however, alternative questions about the subjects are acceptable.²

- (7) 张三还是李四要去北京?
 Zhāngsān hái shì Lǐsì yào qù Běijīng?
 Zhangsan or Lisi will go Beijing
 ‘Will Zhangsan or Lisi go to Beijing?’

I close my thesis with this puzzle that associates with both copular/non-copular distinctions and predicational/specificational distinctions. I leave my mind open for more puzzles.

²Shao (1994) points out that the alternative questions about the subjects in non-copular sentences are not always good. The bottom line here is that some non-copular sentences can serve as good alternative questions about the subjects. In contrast, few predicational copular sentences and no specificational copular sentence can do so.

