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Title: A minimalist account of indefinite pre-verbal Subjects in Mandarin.

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Abstract

Mandarin is a language that manifests both the definiteness effect (DE) (Milsark, 1974), whereby definite but not indefinite arguments are excluded from post-verbal 'Subject' positions, and an indefiniteness effect (IE) whereby indefinite nominals are generally restricted to precisely those positions in which definite nominals do not appear (Longobardi, 1994; Cheng and Sybesma, 1999; Li, 1999).

In the pre-minimalist framework of Principles and Parameters, the DE and the IE are explained in terms of quite different mechanisms; the former by reference to case theory (Belletti, 1988) the latter by reference to the ECP (Longobardi, 1994; Cheng and Sybesma, 1999) but neither account is entirely satisfactory. Among other things, the former cannot readily account for definites that do appear as post-verbal Subjects, or exceptional indefinites that do occur sentence-initially, and the latter cannot explain why indefinites containing a covert D are excluded from positions where the completely covert 'little pro' can occur. Moreover, basic assumptions underlying these accounts - optional assignment (deletion) of partitive case, and the ECP - are not valid constructs in the more recent minimalist framework (Chomsky, 1999).

A comparison is made of the semantic and pragmatic differences between Mandarin constituents that are forced to remain in post-verbal position, and those, sometimes formally identical constituents that are forced to move out of that position into sentence-initial position. It is shown that the only consistent difference between constituents in these positions is a contrast in topicality. A covert Topic feature is proposed, that accounts for the facts of distribution within a minimalist framework. As a result of this analysis it is also possible to draw some conclusions about the minimal set of ϕ -features necessary for Mandarin.

References

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