

**Individual Paper Session 11**  
**Syntax**  
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**11:15-11:45am**

**The Topic Hypothesis: Syntactic development of Chinese as a second**

**Zhang, Yanyin**  
**University of Canberra**  
[yanyin.zhang@canberra.edu.au](mailto:yanyin.zhang@canberra.edu.au)

In the latest extension of Processability Theory (Pienemann 2005), the Topic Hypothesis was proposed to account for the L2 development of a number of syntactic phenomena. The hypothesis incorporates an interface between syntax and discourse pragmatics, taking note of "the speaker-induced discourse-pragmatic choices and their markings in syntactic and morphological structure" (Di Biase 2005) during actual communication-oriented language production. It claimed that the L2 learner goes through the following three phases, each corresponding to a PT-based stage:

1. Sentence Topic equals Subject (Stage 2. Canonical word order)
2. Sentence Topic equals Adjunct (Stage 3. Adjunct-initial, followed by canonical word order)
3. Sentence Topic equals Object (Stage 4. Object preposing)

The Topic Hypothesis has been applied to the analysis of L2 Japanese and Italian morphosyntactic development (Kawaguchi 2005, Di Biase 2005). Previous studies on German L2 and Swedish L2 also attested to the proposed developmental order (for example, the ZISA studies). The present longitudinal study applied the Topic Hypothesis to the analysis of syntactic development in the L2 Chinese of three adult English-speaking learners. As Chinese is a Topic-prominent language, while English is a Subject-prominent language (Li and Thompson, 1976, 1981), it would be interesting to see how the L2 syntax unfolds itself in the acquisition process.

The data corpus consisted of 24 sets of L2 oral Chinese by the informants, collected through communicative tasks over a period of one academic year. The analysis focused on such syntactic structures as canonical word order, interrogatives (both *yes/no* and *wh-*), adjunct-initial and word order scrambling (i.e., object preposing). The L2 Chinese developmental profile of the informants supported the principle of Topic Hypothesis. It demonstrated the successive disassociation over time between Topic and Subject elements in a sentence, and between grammatical functions and the sequential position in a sentence.