NP Interpretation and the Word Order Constraint in Mandarin Chinese

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the constraint on the postverbal position in Mandarin Chinese via paying particular attention to the interaction between NP interpretation and the word order constraint in three different types of constructions in Mandarin. The phenomenon of definiteness tendency has been a hot topic and several approaches within different theoretic frameworks have been proposed to account for this cross-linguistic tendency, such as the analysis based on information structure (Chafe 1976, Li and Thompson 1980; Lambretch 1996, Belletti 2001, Xu 2004, among others), the syntax-semantics Mapping Hypothesis (Diesing 1992, Tsai 1994, 2004), etc. However, no approach has given us a precise prediction concerning the kind of NPs that is allowed in the postverbal positions in Mandarin, including the ‘V NP Duration/Frequency NP’ construction, the double object construction and the non-standard construction involving an intransitive verb and an agent-like postverbal NP. Unlike previous studies, the present thesis characterizes two distinct types of constituents in terms of presupposition instead of definiteness, and defines the presupposition using Zucchi’s (1995) term of non-emptiness, which is originated from Heim (1982). The presuppositional and non-presuppositional NPs can thus be characterized as follows:

Unlike previous studies, the present thesis characterizes two distinct types of constituents in terms of presupposition instead of definiteness, and defines the presupposition in the semantic-pragmatic way with Zucchi’s (1995) term of non-emptiness, which is originated from Heim (1982). The distinction between presuppositional and non-presuppositional NPs thus can be characterized by the following rule:

**NPs are presuppositional if and only if the set of discourse referents denoted by the NP is unambiguously non-empty; otherwise, they are non-presuppositional.**

and the process of NP interpretation in Mandarin can be stated as in the following chart:
Dissimilar to Diesing’s (1992) VP-boundary hypothesis or Tsai’s (2004) IP-boundary mapping analysis, the thesis advocates further that it is the VP-innermost XP position that is the syntactic boundary for the distinction between the presuppositional and non-presuppositional indefinite NPs, and the postverbal formations or the word order constraints in above three types of constructions in Mandarin as a matter of fact is syntactically-semantically rooted, which uniformly are restricted to the NP interpretation Constraint, as stated below:

**The indefinite must be located at the VP-innermost XP position for non-presuppositional interpretation**

The significance of the present research is two-fold. Firstly, the above assumption discloses the relationship between NP interpretation and the word order constraint in Mandarin. In brief, the ordering of two object NPs in double object constructions is constrained by the NP interpretation condition and thus is quite restricted to be constructed as presuppositional $NP_2 > (\text{non-})$ presuppositional $NP_1$; the agent-like NP ends up with being realized at the postverbal position if it is non-presuppositional in constructions with unergative verbs; and similarly the postverbal co-occurrence of the
duration/frequency and normal object NP is allowed unless the normal object NP can be understood as presuppositional. Therefore, the above assumption theoretically makes a good prediction of the word order structuring in Mandarin postverbal positions and reveals its syntactical-semantic root. In other words, the NP interpretation constraint that the indefinites should be located at the VP-innermost XP position for a non-presuppositional interpretation results in the liner order of an utterance, say, presuppositional constituents must precede non-presuppositional ones.
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