

# **Some common features of Asian Language syntax**

## **Classifiers**

## **Topic-Prominence**

## **Utterance-Final Illocutionary Particles**

### **1 Classifiers**

- 1) Grammatically necessary when quantifying a noun
- 2) Classifier choice based on noun class, in turn based on shape, size, usage, material, or other properties
- 3) Can serve as a marker of definiteness or specificity
- 4) Over time, the set of nouns to which a classifier can be applied can be extended by analogy, metonymy, or metaphor
- 5) Classifiers develop through the process of grammaticalization of nouns and verbs
- 6) Like other typological features, the existence of classifiers can change in the history of a language

Exercise 1: For concrete nouns, describe the two classes that takes classifiers tiáo and zhī. Can you explain the polysemous extensions?

tiáo 條 ‘twig, strip’

pants

fish

road

carton (e.g. cigarettes)

news item

proposal/suggestion

zhī 枝 ‘branch’

rifle

candle

pen

light bulb

chopstick

contingent of troops

Exercise 2: Explain the motivation for the use of classifier kǒu for these two nouns.

kǒu 口 ‘mouth’

person (as members of a family or a village)

well (from which you draw water)

## 2 Topic

English **S**: **NP** (“subject”) plus **VP** (“predicate”)

What exactly is a “subject” in English?

- *Syntactically* easy to define:

The pre-verbal NP with which the verb agrees in person/number/gender

- *Semantically* harder to define:

Prototypically the intersection of *agent* (doer of action) and *topic* (what the sentence is about)

But many subjects don't fit the prototypical usage.

In *topic-prominent* languages, discourse (i.e. informational context) determines sentence structure rather than a formal relationship between an **NP** and a **VP**. Sentences may consist of **topic** plus **comment**.

- The context of the conversation as a whole determines the semantic relationship between the topic and the comment
- Both the topic and the comment can be nearly any sort of constituent phrase -- for example, each can be a whole sentence, a verb phrase, or a noun phrase
- Topic-comment sentences may be ambiguous when taken out of context, especially when there is *ellipsis*

### **Mandarin Chinese examples (in *pinyin*)**

Each sentence consists of a topic and a comment.

*Jīnnián*                      *hǎo.*

this.year                      good

1) “This year is good/better (than other years)”

2) “As for this year, (something we’ve been discussing) is good/better (than it was in other years)”

*Mary*                      *bù zhīdào.*

Mary                      not know

1) “Mary doesn’t know (whatever it is we’ve been discussing)”

2) “As for Mary, we don’t know (about her in relation to whatever it is we are discussing)”

*Xiǎo hái zi*              *bù jiāo.*

small children      not teach

1) “Little children don’t teach (this class)”

2) “We/they/I *etc.* don’t teach little children”

In the above, topics are NPs and comments are VPs.

*Xiàng*                      *bízi cháng.*

elephant              nose long

“Elephants have long noses” (comment is S)

*Kàn nà yàng de diànyǐng wǒ bù xǐhuan*

Watch that-kind POSS movie I not like

“As for watching that kind of movie, I don’t like it”

(topic and comment are both S)

## Japanese

Topics are explicitly marked with *wa*. Compare:

*Zoo-wa hana-ga nagai.*

elephant-Top nose-Subj long

“As for elephants, they have long noses.”

So what is a topic?

- Something already in the discourse
- Already a given for speaker and listener
- Provides context for the comment that follows
- Can be translated as “As for TOPIC, ....”

### 3 Utterance-final Illocutionary Particles

*LESA*: “little words which express a speaker’s emotions, thoughts, and desires toward what he or she is saying”;  
“In English, similar features are expressed by intonation”

How would you say “I did well on the test” with:

- certainty
- disbelief
- excitement

*Intonation*: pitch pattern superimposed on a sentence.

- Universal feature of language
- It seems that all languages make use of intonational differences in statements and questions
- Many Asian languages also use illocutionary (= modal) particles at end of sentences to express emotions, attitudes, or intentions

Why do Cantonese and Mandarin have so many sentence-final particles? Why doesn't English?

*Perhaps:*

- Because they are tonal languages
- Each morpheme must be pronounced with a certain pitch pattern (the tone)
- The possible range of variation in overall sentence intonation is constrained (but not eliminated)
- Sentence-final particles compensate to help express the same things that intonation otherwise would

Mandarin has 4 tones.

Cantonese has 6 to 9 (depending on how you count).

Could this help explain why Cantonese has more particles of this sort than Mandarin?