Focus-Marking in Chinese and Malay: A Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

Cross-linguistically, there are two devices for grammar to process the focus mark [+Focus]: the fronting of focused constituents and the insertion of a Focus Mark such as the English 'be' before focused constituents. In this mode of formulation, a comparative study of Focus and Focus-Marking in Chinese and Malay has been conducted. These two languages are similar and different. They are similar in opting for the use of Focus Mark instead of focused constituents movement. They are different in the nature of Focus Mark itself. Focus mark is the copular verb SHI 是 in Chinese, but, as the language simply does not have a copular verb, in Malay two complementary particles KAH/LAK are chosen, and all other contrasts in Focus-Marking between the two languages are demonstrated to follow from the difference in the nature of Focus Mark and some other independently motivated conditions in a modularized theory of grammar.

1 Introduction

In the literature, 'Focus'- related issues have been studied from different perspectives. Following Culicover and Rochemont (1983, 1990) and Horvath (1986), we in this paper assume that this essentially semantic conception of 'Focus' can be characterized as a purely formal syntactic feature [+Focus] or [+F], which gets assigned to constituents at a certain appropriate level of syntactic representation, triggering such syntactic operations such as 'Movement' and 'Adjoining' under the general syntactic principles and constraints.

This paper is organized as follows: In Section 2 we will first review some basic assumptions about the formal characterization of [+FOCUS], then moving quickly onto the question of how [+FOCUS] is reflected in the formal syntax, especially how it is marked syntactically. Section 3 is devoted to a discussion of the nature of Focus Mark *shi* 是 in Chinese. Comparable phenomena in Malay are viewed from a comparative perspecitve in Section 4. We will demonstrate that question words are inherently assigned the focus feature in Section 5. Section 6 is a short one on some remarkable and relevant phenomena from historical and dialectal grammars of Chinese. Our major conclusions are summarized briefly in Section 7.

2 [+FOCUS]: From a Pragmatic Conception to a Purely Syntactic Feature

It is noted in some early generative literature that one aspect of semantic interpretation of a sentence is a division of its reading into FOCUS and PRESUPPOSITION. As a working definition, we follow Jackendoff (1972) to assume (1) below.

(1) FOCUS: The information in the sentence that is assumed by the speaker not to be shared by him and the hearer.

PRESUPPOSITION: The information in the sentence that is assumed by the speaker to be

shared by him and the hearer.

According to (1), for a normal sentence, the matter is whether the FOCUS or FOCI is reflected syntactically or not, rather than whether it has a FOCUS at all. Sentence (2) below, for example, may be analyzed as (3) in terms of FOCUS and PRESUPPOSITION, although it only has phonological but no syntactic FOCUS marking (The capitalized word represents the main stress and the highest pitch of the sentence).

(2) Mary hit JOHN.
(3) PRESUPPOSITION: Mar hit someone
FOCUS: John

The unshared information is assumed by the speaker to be known to the speaker himself in declarative sentences, whereas it is known to the hearer but not to the speaker in interrogative sentences. e.g.

(4) Who did Mary hit?
(5) PRESUPPOSITION: Mary hit someone
FOCUS: who

Note that Jackendoff's definition of Focus as in (1), although being quite consistent with the intuition, is given more semantically or pragmatically than formal-syntactically. Given the line of pursuit adopted in this study, we here would follow Culicover and Rochemont (1983, 1990) and Horvath (1986) to postulate that Focus can also be characterized as a purely formal syntactic feature [+FOCUS] or [+F], which gets assigned to constituents at an appropriate level of syntactic representation. We will refer to the process of associating the feature [+FOCUS] with particular constituents as 'Focus-Assignment'. We assume, leaving arguments and motivations to be offered later, that Focus-Assignment takes place at the level of D-Structure, and not until then does the issue of 'Focus' turn into a syntactic one. If so, (6) below can be taken as the DS representation of sentence (2) above if the information about 'Focus' is to be included.

(6) Mary hit John$^{[+F]}$.

Although every sentence by definition has at least one focused constituent, degree of focalization (i.e., the degree of emphasis) on constituents may vary from one sentence to another. For expository convenience, we assume that there are two types of Focus which are formal-linguistically relevant: 'Strong Focus' and 'Weak Focus' (henceforth, "Fs" and "Fw" respectively when necessary). We assume that this information is also available at D-Structure to trigger certain syntactic processes. Also, given the existence of multiple wh questions, a single sentence may have more than one constituent assigned the feature [+FOCUS].

3 The Chinese Copular Verb *Shi* 是 as a Focus Mark

The [+F] marking, resulting from Focus-Assignment may trigger phonological or/and syntactic operations. The phonological operations of [+F] such as primary stress and higher pitch have been well noted in the literature (e.g., Jackendoff (1972), Culicover and Rochemont (1983) among others). As for syntactic operations, the most conceivable one is simply to insert an overt Focus mark in the sentence whatever the marker is in a particular language. This possibility is attested in Chinese. e.g.

(7) 是我明天乘火车去广州
Shi wo mingtian cheng huoche qu Guangzhou.

SHI I tomorrow ride train go Guangzhou
'I will go to Guangzhou by train tomorrow /
It is I who will go to Guangzhou by train tomorrow."

(8) 我是明天乘火车去广州
Wo shi mingtian cheng huoche qu Guangzhou.
I SHI tomorrow ride train go Guangzhou
'I will go to Guangzhou by train TOMORROW /
It is tomorrow when I will go to Guangzhou by train.'

(9) 我明天是乘火车去广州
Wo mingtian shi cheng huoche qu Guangzhou.
I tomorrow SHI ride train go Guangzhou
'I will go to Guangzhou BY TRAIN tomorrow /
It is by train that I will go to Guangzhou tomorrow.'

(10) 我明天乘火车是去广州
wo mingtian cheng huoche shi qu Guangzhou.
I tomorrow ride train SHI go Guangzhou
'I will go to GUANGZHOU by train tomorrow /
It is to Guangzhou that I will go by train tomorrow.'

As seen in the above examples, *shi* 是 (literally 'to be') is employed to mark the focused constituents in Chinese. Of course, this is not the only usage of *shi* 是 in Chinese. *Shi* 是, just like its English counterpart *to be*, may also be a regular copular verb as in '*Ta shi yige xuesheng*' 他是一个学生 ('He is a student'). We may call the *shi* 是 in copular usage 'Copular *shi*' and that in emphatic usage 'Emphatic *shi*'. In terms of parts of speech, *shi* 是 is a verb in both usages. It also should be noted that the status of the emphatic *shi* 是as a Focus Marker is controversial in the literature. To my knowledge, it is Teng (1979) who first calls it a 'Focus Marker'. But, Huang (1989), among others, argues that *shi* 是cannot be analyzed as a pure Focus Marker, since it exhibits a whole set of features of regular Chinese verbs. For example, it may enter the so-called 'V-neg-V' questions as in (11) below; it can be negated by a negative adverb such as *bu* 不'not' as in (12). More importantly, argues Huang, the distribution of emphatic *shi* is very much restricted. It can be placed only before the subject NP or somewhere between the subject and the main verb, but never between a verb and its object as in (13) nor between a preposition and its object as in (14).

(11) 是不是他昨天借了你的书?
Shi bu shi ta zuotian jie-le ni de shu?
SHI not SHI he yesterday borrow-Asp your book
'Was it he who borrowed your book yesterday?'

(12) 他不是怪你。
Ta bu shi guai ni.
he not SHI blame you
'He does not blame YOU / It is not you that he blames.'

(13) *我昨天在学校碰见了是他。
*Wo zuotian zai xuexiao pengjian-le shi ta.
I yesterday on campus meet-Asp SHI him
'Intended: I met HIM on the campus /
It was him whom I met on the campus yesterday.'

(14)*我被是他骗了。
*Wo bei shi ta pian-le.
I by SHI him cheat-Asp
'Intended: I have been cheated by HIM /

It was he who has cheated me.'

These observations are true. All they suggest to us, however, is only that *shi* 是syntactically behaves as a verb while functioning as a Focus Marker, but don't contradict the claim that *shi* 是 is a Focus Marker. The initial purpose of inserting *shi* 是 may well be just to mark the focused constituent. But after being inserted into the sentence, *shi* 是 takes up its own way of life, so exhibiting a set of properties of regular copular verbs. This is expected. Putting it in different words, we can say that the ungrammaticality of sentences like (13) and (14) has nothing to do with the insertion of *shi* 是 as a Focus Marker. Rather, that they are ungrammatical is because such verbs as *pengjian* 碰见'meet' may only have an NP but not a VP as its complement. In short, seen from different perspectives, *shi* 是 could be different things. In terms of grammatical operations of [+F], *shi* 是 is a Focus Marker. In terms of parts of speech, it is simply a verb. In employing this lexical item *shi* 是 as a Focus Marker, the grammar automatically places it under the constraint of the conditions which govern verbs in general.

Theoretically, every and each sentence has at least one focused constituent. Superficially, some sentences don't appear to have focused constituents. But in fact it may be the case that they don't have presuppositions. The whole sentences, at least their predicates, are focused. But we all know that not all Chinese sentences employ the Focus Marker *shi* to mark the constituents. Here the division between Strong and Weak Focus proposed earlier in this paper plays crucial role in determining whether a focused constituent is syntactically processed through the insertion of Focus Marker *shi* in Chinese. Suppose that all focused constituents are all somehow phonologically reflected in the component of PF. The formal syntax is sensitive only to the marking of [+Fs] (Strong Focus). Assuming that *zai bangongshi li* 在办公室里'in the office' is the focused constituent in both (15) and (16) below, and that it is strong (15), but weak in (16), we can analyze them as followings at different levels of representation.

(15) 我昨天在办公室里等你。
DS: Wo zuotian [zai bangongshi li] $^{[+Fs]}$ deng ni.
SS: Wo zuotian shi [zai bangongshi li] $^{[+Fs]}$ deng ni
PF: Wo zuotian SHI ZAI BANGONGSHI LI deng ni.
I yesterday SHI in office wait-for you
'I waited for you IN THE OFFICE yesterday.' OR
'It was in the office that I waited for you yesterday.'

(16) 我昨天在办公室里等你。
DS: Wo zuotian [zai bangongshi li] $^{[+Fw]}$ deng ni.
SS: Wo zuotian [zai bangongshi li] $^{[+Fw]}$ deng ni
PF: Wo zuotian ZAI BANGONGSHI LI deng ni.
I yesterday SHI in office wait-for you
'I waited for you IN THE OFFICE yesterday.'

We propose that the insertion of Focus Marker *shi* 是 is triggered by the [+Fs] marking from the DS representation. The process of Focus Mark insertion, we assume, is an instance of Adjoin-α in the sense of Lebeaux (1991), which, along with Move- α and Project- α, takes place in the course of derivation of SS from DS. i.e. (17) (Lebeaux (1991)).

(17) DS
↓ *Move- α, Project- α, and Adjoin- α*
SS

This proposal amounts to saying that the Focus Marker *shi* 是 is not present at DS, but be adjoined-in later in the course of derivation. According to Lebeaux's Principle of Licensing Well-Formedness as in (18), for an element to be present in the phrase marker, it has to be properly licensed perhaps in different ways for different grammatical elements. An element cannot be present until the relevant licensing relation allowing or requiring it into the phrase marker has applied.

(18) *PRINCIPLE OF LICENSING WELL-FORMEDNESS (UG)*
A subtree Ts may not appear in a major tree Tm prior to the point in the derivation that Ts is licensed in Tm (Ts, Tm relative).

Note that neither the Projection Principle nor anything else requires the presence of *shi* 是 in the DS representation. *Shi* 是 as an emphatic verb has to be analyzed not to participate in the Argument Structure, otherwise the obvious similarities among sentences (7) (8) (9) and (10) above which differ in nothing but in the Focus-Marking cannot be properly captured. We assume that these sentences share the same common DS representation in terms of the basic structure, but have different assignments of [+Fs], the latter eventually triggers the insertion of Focus Marker *shi* 是 before different constituents, perhaps to satisfy an SS condition like (19) below.

(19) *A constituent with [+Fs] marking must be reflected with Focus Marker shi 是 at SS in Chinese.*

Also note that the Focus Marker *shi* 是 is absent at DS. But the [+Fs] marking has to be assigned or/and checked at the level to provide proper triggering for the insertion of *shi* 是. This proposal represents a nontrivial departure from those of Chomsky (1981), Jackendoff (1972) and Horvath (1986) who all explicitly or implicitly assume that Focus Assignment takes place at SS. One reason that forbids us from adopting the SS-Focus-Assignment approach is that it will put us in a dilemma in handling the Chinese case, since if so, *shi* 是 will have to be pre-existing at DS on one hand because the necessary triggering which calls for its insertion will not be available before SS, but we know it cannot be there on the other hand as its licensing takes place at SS. Additional arguments will be provided for our DS-Focus-Assignment approach as we proceed.

The placement of the Focus Marker *shi* 是 in linear word order is determined jointly by two factors: [1] As a verb in terms of parts of speech, *shi* 是 has to observe all relevant syntactic conditions governing verbs in Chinese. For example, it cannot be inserted between a verb and its object even the object NP has an [+Fs] mark from DS representation. In this case, *shi* 是 normally is placed immediately before the verb; [2] *Shi* 是 is to be placed as close as possible to the focused constituent in a sentence should applicable conditions allow so.

A single sentence, as noted above, may have two or more focused constituents. Now it should be pointed out that only one of the several focused constituents can be marked overtly with *shi.* 是 The following sentences are unacceptable.

(20)*我是昨天是在办公室里等你。
*Wo shi zuotian shi zai bangongshi li deng ni.
I SHI yesterday SHI in office wait-for you
"Intended: I waited for your IN THE OFFICE YESTERDAY."
(21)*是我是没买那本书。
*Shi wo shi mei mai na ben shu.
SHI I SHI not buy that book
'Intended: It is I who did not buy THAT BOOK.'

To account for this phenomenon, we propose a condition on Focus-Assignment (22).

(22) *The Unique Strong Focus Condition*
A simplex sentence can only have one constituent assigned a Strong Focus Mark [+Fs].

If so, then we can say that the Unique Strong Focus Condition is violated in (20) and (21) so that they are ungrammatical. Also note that (22) should be taken as a condition on clauses, i.e., unembedded simplex sentences. A sentence with embedded clauses, of course, may have two or more strongly focused constituents, and consequently may have two or more constituents being syntactically marked with *shi* 是. e.g.

(23) 是张三知道是李四打碎了那个杯子。
Shi Zhangsan zhidao [shi Lisi dasui-le nage beizi].
SHI Zhangsan know SHI Lisi break-Asp that cup
'It is Zhangsan who knows that it is Lisi who broke the cup.'

4 Focus-Marking in Malay

Further language facts from the Malay language also support our general claims and arguments made on the basis of the Chinese facts. Very much like Chinese, Malay is also a Focus-Marking language in which focused constituents are marked with *lah* in declarative sentences as in (24-29) below or *kah* in interrogative sentences as in (30-34).

(24) Saya-lah yang akan pergi ke Kuala Lumpur.
I-FM who will go to Kuala Lumpur
'It is I who will go to Kuala Lumpur.'
(25) Pada esok-lah akan saya pergi ke Kuala Lumpur dengan keretapi.
On tomorrow-FM will I go to Kuala Lumpur with train
'It is tomorrow when I will go to Kuala Lumpur by train.'
(26) Die-lah yang saya berjumpa di kampus kelmarin.
He-FM who I met at campus yesterday
'It was him whom I met on the campus yesterday.'
(27) Abu belajar di bilik itulah tadi.
Abu study at room that-FM just-now
'It was in that room that Abu was studying just now.'
(28) Abu belajarlah di bilik itu tadi.
Abu study-FM at room that just-now
'It was studying that Abu did in that room just now.'
(29) Abu belajar di bilik itu tadilah.
Abu study at room that just-now-FM
'It was just now that Abu was studying in that room.'
(30) Dia itu Abu-kah?
He that Abu-FM
'Is he ABU?'
(31) Kucing-kah awak nampak di situ tadi?
Cat-FM you see at there just-now
'Was it a cat that you saw over there just now?'
(32) Kamu mahu copi-kah atau teh-kah?
You want coffee-FM or tea-FM
'Do you want coffee or tea?'
(33) Siapa-kah guru itu?

Who-FM teach that
'Who is that teacher?'

(34) Dia bertanya orang itu guru-kah atau bukan.
He ask person that teacher-FM or not
'He asked if that person is a teacher.'

The two Focus Marks, *Lah* and *kah,* are in strict complementary distribution. Here is a minimal pair.

(35) Gadis itu guru Ali-lah.
Girl that teacher Ali-FM
'That girl is ALI.'S TEACHER.

(36) Gadis itu guru Ali-kah?
That girl teacher Ali-FM
'Is that girl ALI'S TEACHER?'

The Unique Strong Focus Condition (as given in (22) above) also applies in Malay just as in Chinese. A simplex Malay sentence can only have one constituent assigned a Strong Focus Mark [+Fs], and thus can only have one consitituent marked overtly with the Focus Mark. The contrast in well-formedness between (37) and (38) exemplifies this point.

(37) Amin sakit-kah kelmarin? (Kader (1981))
Amin sick-FM yesterday
'Was Amin SICK yesterday?'

(38) *Amin sakit-kah kelmarin-kah?
Amin sick-FM yesterday-FM

There are some interesting contrasts between Chinese and Malay in Focus Marking.

1. The two language differ in the nature of Focus Mark. As noted above, the Chinese Focus Mark *shi* 是 is a copular verb, but the Malay Focus Mark *lah/kah* is a suffix-like particle. Since it is a cross-linguistic phenomenon that copular verbs often function as Focus Mark, the Chinese choice is quite natural and understandable. The reason why the same choice is not made in Malay is simple too. Malay, just like Archaic Chinese, does not have a typical copular verb.

(39) Azmin pelajar.
Azmin student
'Azmin is a student.'

(40) Siapa-kah guru itu?
Who-FM teach that
'Who is that teacher?'

(41) Kuala Lumpur ibunegara Malasia.
Capital Malaysia
'Kuala Lumpur is the capital of Malaysia.'

2. In linear placement, the Chinese Focus Mark is placed before the focused constituent and as close as possible to the focused constituent, whereas the Malay Focus Mark comes right after the constituent. This is because Chinese is by and large a head-final language, whereas Malay is largely a head-initial language. In Malay, not only the Focus Mark, any modifying syntactic elements are placed after the head words. E.g.

(42) Azmin berjumpa gadis cantik.
Azmin met girl beautiful

'Azmin met a beautiful girl.

(43) Bangunan bara lebih mahal.
Building new more expensive
'New buildings are more expensive.'

(44) Abu belajarlah di bilik itu tadi.
Abu study-FM at room that just-now
'It was studying that Abu did in that room just now.'

3. As a result of 1 and 2 above, the insertion of Malay Focus Mark is subject to different condition from Chinese. For instance, the distribution of the Chinese *shi* 是 is very much restricted. It can be placed only before the subject NP or somewhere between the subject and the main verb, but never between a verb or a preposition and its object. Contrastively, since the Malay Focus Mark is just a particle, it is used much more freely than its Chinese counterpart. It can well be inserted right after an object.

(45) Die-lah yang saya berjumpa di kampus kelmarin.
He-FM who I met at campus yesterday
'It was him whom I met on the campus yesterday.'

(46) Kamu mahu copi-kah atau teh-kah?
You want coffee-FM or tea-FM
'Do you want coffee or tea?'

(47) Abu minum air itu-kah tadi?
Abu drink water that-FM just-now
'Did Abu drink THAT WATER just now?'

(48) Anak itu sudah pergi ke sekolah-kah? (Kader 1981)
Child the already go to school-FM
'Was it to school where the child already went?

(49) Awak beli kereta yang besar itu-kah kelmarin?
You buy car which big that-FM yesterday
'Which car did you buy yesterday?'

4. Lastly, but most interestingly, Focus-Marking as a Focus device may be used in conjunction with Focus-Fronting in Malay but not in Chinese. As is generalized in Xu and Li (1993), cross-linguistically, there are two devices for grammar to process the Focus Feature [+Focus]: (i) moving the [+FOCUS]-marked constituents to a more prominent position which may vary from one language to another (as instantiated in Hungarian and Archaic Chinese in examples (50-53)), and (ii) inserting a Focus Mark either before or after the focused constituents (as in Modern Mandarin Chinese and Malay illustrated above in this paper). And English is a unique language in which (i) and (ii) are used jointly. In this sense, we find that Malay patterns with English in the joint usage of the two Focus devices, but differs from English in that Focus-Fronting is obligatory in English but optional in Malay while Focus-Marking is obligatory in both languages. Also, English Focus Mark, like its Chinese counterpart, is the copular verb *be*, but Malay Focus Mark is a suffix-like particle as discussed above (see examples (54-59) below). [1]

[1] There seems to be another difference between Malay and English in that pronoun *it* has to *be* used in addition to the copular verb be as a Focus Mark in English, whereas what is inserted there is simply the Focus Mark *kah/lah*. But we take this as one of the side effects of their difference in the nature of Focus Mark rather than as an independent difference. In English, the initial purpose of the *be* insertion could well be just to mark the focused constituents, but it automatically creates a predicate which, by a condition completely independent of the issue concerning us here, demands an insertion of 'dummy subject' *it* (just as the *it* inserted in *it is raining* and in *it is said that he won't make it*).

Hungarian (Horvath (1986))

(50) Attila A FOLDRENGESTOL$_i$ felt t_i.
Attila the earthquake-from feared
'Attila was afraid of THE EARTHQUAKE /
It was the earthquake that Attila was afraid of .'

(51) Mari mit$_i$ telt az asztalra t_i ?
Mary what-Acc put the table-onto
'What did Mary put on the table?'

Archaic Chinese

(52) 吾谁欺 t ? 欺天乎? (《论语》)
Wu shui qi? qi tian hu?
I who cheat cheat God Q-Particle
'Who do I cheat? Do (I) cheat the God?'

(53) 我无尔诈 t, 尔无我虞 t (《左转》)
Wo wu er zha, er wu wo yu.
I not you cheat you not me cheat
'I won't cheat you, and you won't cheat me.'

English

(54) It is the new house$_i$ that John will buy t_i for his mother.

(55) What$_i$ is it that you bought t_i yesterday?

Malay

(56) Dia-lah$_i$ yang saya berjumpa t_i di kampus kelmarin.
He-FM who I met at campus yesterday
'It was him whom I met on the campus yesterday.'

(57) Kucing-kah$_i$ awak nampak t_i di situ tadi?
Cat-FM you see at there just-now
'Was it a cat that you saw over there just now?'

(58) Abu belajar di bilik itu tadi-lah.
Abu study at room that just-now-FM
'It was just now that Abu was studying in that room.'

(59) Awak beli kereta yang besar itu-kah kelmarin?
You buy car which big that-FM yesterday
'Which car did you buy yesterday?'

5 *Wh*-Phrases as Inherently Focus-Marked Phrases

It is perhaps a cross-linguistic phenomenon that question words pattern with focused constituents systematically in Focus-Marking and Focus-Fronting. *Wh*-questions and cleft sentences exhibit a whole

set of similarities which clearly demand a unified account. It should be noted also that in *wh*-questions, only the *wh*-phrases but not any others could be the strongly focused constituents. We propose that this is because those *wh*-phrases have been assigned the Strong Focus mark [+Fs] already in the lexicon and carry the mark into syntax when they themselves are composed into the phrase marker. Such a lexical marking interacts with the syntactic marking in an interesting way. e.g.

(60) 谁[+Fs]买了那本字典？
Shui[+Fs] mai-le neiben zidian?
who buy-Asp that dictionary
'Who bought that dictionary?'

(61) 你什么时候[+Fs]念的大学？
Ni shenme shihou[+Fs] nian-de daxue?
you what time attend-Asp college
'When did you attend college?'

If necessary, the Focus Marker *shi* 是 may also be inserted to intensify the focus marking, giving rise to sentences like the following.

(60') 是谁[+Fs]买了那本字典？
Shi shui[+Fs] mai-le neiben zidian?
SHI who buy-Asp that dictionary
'WHO bought that dictionary?'

(61') 你是什么时候[+Fs]念的大学？
Ni shi shenme shihou[+Fs] nian-de daxue?
you SHI what time attend-Asp college
'WHEN did you attend college?'

In case the *wh*-phrase is in an object position, the Focus Mark will have to be placed before the main verb rather than before the *wh* object.

(62) 张三是买了什么[+Fs]？
Zhangsan shi mai-le shenme[+Fs] ?
Zhangsan SHI buy-Asp what
'WHAT did Zhangsan buy?'

The constituents with [+Fs] mark in sentences (60') (61') have double focus marking, one is brought in along with the *wh*-phrases from the lexicon, and another obtained through a syntactic process ---- the insertion of Focus Mark *shi* 是.

The Unique Strong Focus Condition as stated in (22) above which disallows a single clause to have more than one strongly focused constituent and the assumption that *wh*-phrases are assigned [+Fs] in the lexicon so that they carry the mark inherently jointly makes an interesting prediction: the Focus Mark *shi* 是 can be inserted only to mark the *wh*-phrases in *wh* questions. This prediction is borne out in Chinese as seen from the ungrammaticality of the following sentences.

(63) *是张三[+Fs]骗了谁[+Fs]？
*Shi Zhangsan[+Fs] pian-le shui[+Fs] ?
SHI Zhangsan cheat-Asp who
'Intended: *Is it Zhangsan who has cheated who? /
Who has ZHANGSAN cheated?'

(64) *你是什么时候[+Fs]是在美国[+Fs]工作？
*Ni shenme shihou[+Fs] shi zai Meiguo[+Fs] gongzuo?
you what time SHI in America work
'Intended: When did you work IN AMERICA?'
(65) *谁[+Fs]是买了那么多书[+Fs]？
*Shui[+Fs] shi mai-le nenme duo shu[+Fs]?
who SHI buy-Asp so many book
'Intended: Who bought SO MANY BOOKS.'

The ungrammaticality of the above sentences may represent a puzzle for an alternative analysis of the Focus Assignment, since the Focus Mark *shi* 是 in general may be inserted to mark any constituent which is strongly focused in a sentence. Given that the Unique Strong Focus Condition is independently motivated, the phenomenon can be taken as a strong argument for our assumption that *wh*-phrases are marked [+Fs] in the lexicon and carry the mark along into the syntax.

As will be demonstrated later in this paper, some language facts from historical and dialectal grammars of Chinese even suggest that those question words have a Focus Mark directly incorporated lexically.

6 Some Remarkable Phenomena from the Historical and Dialect Grammars of Chinese

6.1 Further weakening of shi 是 to become a particle-like pure Focus Mark in Middle Chinese and in the Minnan Dialect

We have argued that the Chinese Focus Mark *shi* 是 is not merely a Focus Mark. *Shi* 是syntactically behaves as a verb while functioning as a Focus Mark. In employing this lexical item *shi* 是 as a Focus Mark, the grammar automatically places it under the constraint of the conditions which govern verbs in general. This explains naturally the observed phenomenon in Mandarin Chinese that *shi* 是 can be placed only before the subject NP or somewhere between the subject and the main verb, but never between a verb or a preposition and its object.

However, this generalization holds true only in Mandarin and perhaps in some other varieties of the Chinese language but certainly not in all varieties of the language. The logical possibility cannot be excluded, it is not realized in one, but it may be realized in another language. As reported in Shi and Xu (2000), *shi* 是once weakened by a step further and developed to be an almost pure particle-like Focus Mark, loosing its original properties as a copular verb in Middle Chinese and it is not subject to the conditions on verbs and can be placed between a verb and its object as in examples (66) and (67) below.

(66) 我即仰问，汝为是谁。（《贤愚经》）
Wo ji yang wen, ru wei shi shui.
I then look-up ask you are FM who
'I then looked up and asked who you are.'
(67) 此为是谁？（《贤愚经》）
Ci wei shi shui.
This is FM who
'Who is this (person)?'

Very much similar phenomenon has also been observed in a Minnan (Southern Min) dialect （黄丁华（1963））。

(68) 外面在拍门兀是是谁?
Outside asp knock door is FM who
'Who is knocking at the door outside?'
(69) 或本册着找是谁借则借有里?
That CL book should look for FM who borrow then borrow have asp.
'Who should I look for to borrow that book from?'

6.2 The Historical Orgin of Shenme 什么 'What'

It is noted above that question words must be considered as being marked the Focus feature [+Focus] inherently in the lexicon so that some of its properties can be explained. This conclusion comes up largely as a result of our theoretical analysis of the modern Mandarin Chinese data. Those question words in fact don't have a lexical element which can be associated with Focus, and some indirect effects suggest so. Interestingly to us, this proposal is supported by the historical fact that *shenme* 什么 'what', according to Lu (吕叔湘 (1985), originated as *shi he wu* 是何物 ' Focus + what/which + things' so it has a Focus Mark lexically incorporated in it.

(70) 是何物 ⟶ 是物 ⟶ 什么
shi he wu — shi wu — shenme
FM what thing — FM thing — what

As reported in Fang (方环海(1998)), similar phenomenon has also been observed in some modern Chinese dialects in Northern Jiangsu Province whereby *shi wu*'是物'meaning 'what' is still used in the form of 'Focus Mark + thing', meaning 'what'.

(71) 小张，你来看看是物站在那里?
Xiaozhang, ni lai kankan shi wu zhan zai nail?
Xiaozhang, you come look FM thing stand over there
'Xiaozhang, would you come and see what is standing over there?'
(72) 如果这也是假的，那是物不是假的?
Ruguo zhe ye shi jia de, na shi wu bu shi jia de.
If this also is fake, then FM what not is fake
'If this is also fake, then what is not to fake.'
(73) 你手里拿的是是物? 我猜是本书。
Ni shou li na de shi shi wu? Wo cai shi ben shu.
Ni hand-in hold is FM thing? I guess is CL book
'What are you holding in your hand? I guess it is a book.'
(74) 王主任昨天下午做是物? 连上班都迟到了。
Wang zhuren zuotian xiawu zuo shi wu? Lian shangban dou chidao le.
Wang director yesterday afternoon did FM thing? Even works even late
'What did Director Wang do yesterday afternoon? He even was late for his works.'
(75) 我想问问刚来的这个年轻老师叫是物名字。
Wo xiang wenwen gang lai de zhege nianqing laoshi jiao shi wu mingzi.
I want ask just came this young teacher call FM thing name
'I want to ask what is the name of the young teacher who just came here.'

7 Conclusion

The essentially semantic/pragmatic conception of 'Focus' can be characterized as a purely formal

syntactic feature [+Focus], which gets assigned/checked to constituents at the DS level of syntactic representation, triggering different syntactic operations such as 'Movement' (= moving the focused constituents upward to a more prominent syntactic position) or/and 'Adjoining' (= inserting a Focus Mark before or after the focused constituents) in different natural languages under the general syntactic principles and constraints.

The two languages of Chinese and Malay pattern in that they both employ Focus Mark to realize their focused constituents, but contrast minimally in (i) the nature of Focus Mark itself, which is the copular verb *shi* 是 in Chinese but two complementary particles *kah/lah* in Malay, which in turn is due to another simple difference between the two languages: Malay simply does not a copular verb which is most commonly chosen by Chinese and many other languages as a Focus Mark; and (ii) the linear positioning of the Focus Mark, it is placed before focused constituents in Chinese but comes after their counterparts in Malay. As suffix-like particles, the Malay Focus Mark *kah/lah* is used much more freely than the Chinese copular verb *shi* 是, whereby the latter cannot come in between a verb or a preposition and its object but the former can.

We also have argued that question words (i.e., *wh*-phrases) must be inherently assigned the focus feature [+FOCUS] in the lexicon and carry the feature into syntax when those question words themselves are composed into the phrase markers otherwise certain language facts cannot be properly accounted for. Finally in the paper, some remarkable and relevant phenomena from historical and dialectal grammars of Chinese are drawn to support our basic claim about the nature of *shi* 是 as a Focus Mark in Chinese and the claim that question words are inherently Focus-Marked in the lexicon.

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