Preferred Clause Structure in Mandarin Spoken and Written Discourse

Shu-Mei Liu
Graduate Program of Linguistics, National Chengchi University
and
Institute of Information Science, Academia Sinica
Taipei, Taiwan

1. Introduction[1]

This paper studies the preferred clause structure in Mandarin. Tao's [1] pioneering work proposed the following "preferred clause structure in conversational Mandarin":

(1) The preferred clause structure in conversational Mandarin:
   i) in the form of XV, where
   ii) V is a verb on the lower extreme of the transitivity scale, and
   iii) X is a pronoun on A in low transitives,
       a full noun on the O role in high transitives, and
       the only argument in non-transitives

Several crucial theoretical issues remain to be solved in the above definition. The fundamental issue is if there is a preferred clause structure for Mandarin in general. A more immediate question is if there is any contrast between the preferred structures of spoken and written discourse, and if the contrast can be explained. In other words, if we find the same tendencies in written discourse, Tao's "preferred clause structure of conversational Mandarin" can be expanded as the "preferred clause structure of Mandarin." If the result is opposite, it indicates that these tendencies are not characteristics of Mandarin in general; rather, they might be spoken features distinguishing spoken modes from written ones ([2], [3]). This paper thus will focus on the comparison between the preferred clause structure of spoken discourse and that of written discourse.

2. Database and Methodology

Two sets of data are examined in this study: one spoken, and the other one written. The spoken data is about five minutes of daily conversation held between three female graduate students in Taiwan, and the written one comes from randomly selected seven pages (p. 107-113) of a lyric prose entitled *Yanzhi Pendi* [胭脂盆地], written by *Jian Zhen* [簡媜]. Both of them are calculated in terms of clausal units ([4]). The spoken data comprises 277 clauses, and the written, 278.

Each clause is coded in terms of clause types, grammatical roles and the status of arguments. The status of arguments is either Ov(ert) or Z(ero), leading one of the three grammatical roles: S(ubject), A(gent), and O(bject). Five clause types are introduced: high transitivity clauses (HTR), low transitivity clauses (LTR), intransitive clauses (INT), stative clauses (STA), and copular clauses (COP). All of them but two have their coding principles following Tao's [1]. The two different from Tao's are HTR and LTR clauses. For us, the original definitions of HTR and LTR are vague and make the job of classification rather difficult;

therefore, we, borrowing Hopper and Thompson's [5] parameters of transitivity, define HTR as clauses which have feature A (two or more participants) and at least another five high transitivity features in the parameters listed in Table 1. LTR, on the contrary, are clauses which have feature A but contain fewer than five other high transitivity features. In this way, we have clear criteria distinguishing HTR from LTR. Yet, this is only for convinience of coding, and one must bear in mind the continuum nature of the transitivity of clauses.

Table 1. Parameters of transitivity (Hopper and Thompson 1980: 252)

	High	Low
A. Participants	2 or more participants	1 participant
B. Kinesis	action	nonaction
C. Aspect	telic	atelic
D. Punctuality	punctual	nonpunctual
E. Volitionality	volitional	nonvolitional
F. Affirmation	affirmative	negative
G. Mode	realis	irrealis
H. Agency	A high in potency	A low in potency
I. Affectedness of O	O totally affected	O not affected
J. Individuation of O	O highly individuated	O nonindividuated

3. Results and Discussion

The preferred clause structure in Mandarin conversation illustrated in (1) implies three important tendencies: First, One Lexical Argument Constraint ([6], [7]) is observed. Second, high transitivity clauses are disfavored. Finally, with one argument omitted, HTR and LTR behave differently in selecting their sole overt arguments. This section presents the results of our analysis and examines the three tendencies respectively.

3.1 One Argument per Clause?

Being a general constraint on information flow, One Lexical Argument Constraint is expected to be observed in both spoken and written discourses. Our data, be it written or spoken, support this expectation. Table 2 indicates that over half of non-transitive clauses have their only argument overt[2]. The same tendency is observed in all types of transitive clauses except spoken LTR clauses (Table 3). The percentage of Ov+Z is LOWER than that of Ov+Ov in spoken LTR clauses. Does that mean that One Lexical Argument Constraint does not hold in Mandarin discourse? Our answer is NO. In next section, we will show that there exists one special type of verbs in LTR which yields the superficial violation of One Lexical Argument Constraint.

Table 2. Distribution of argument types in non-transitive clauses

		INT		STA		TOTAL	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
SPOKEN	Ov	30	58%	17	52%	47	55%
	Z	22	42%	16	48%	38	45%
	TOTAL	52	100%	33	100%	85	100%
WRITTEN	Ov	39	57%	12	48%	51	54%
	Z	30	43%	13	52%	43	46%
	TOTAL	69	100%	25	100%	94	100%

Table 3. Distribution of argument types in transitive clauses

		HTR		LTR		TOTAL	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
SPOKEN	Ov+Ov	32	37%	47	55%	79	46%
	Ov+ Z	39	**45%**	34	*40%*	73	42%
	Z + Z	16	18%	4	5%	20	12%
	TOTAL	87	100%	85	100%	172	100%
WRITTEN	Ov+Ov	21	40%	44	40%	65	40%
	Ov+ Z	28	**53%**	62	**57%**	90	56%
	Z + Z	4	7%	3	3%	7	4%
	TOTAL	53	100%	109	100%	162	100%

3.2 Uniqueness of Cognition Utterance Verbs

This special type of verbs are verbs like *shuo* 'say,' *xiang* 'think,' and *juede* 'feel,' etc, called cognition-utterance (CU) verbs in Givon [8]. They are special in two ways: Firstly, most of the CU verbs have both A and O arguments overt, yielding the superficial violation of One Lexical Arugment Constraint in spoken LTR clauses. In fact, if we exclude CU verbs from our counts, the tendency of One Lexical Argument manifests itself again. Givon [8], in studying the binding strength of verb complement clauses, states that CU verbs stand in the lower position of the binding hierarchy and actually behave in some way rather like an adverbial-subordinate clause. This possibly explains the peculiarity of CU verbs.

Table 4. Distribution of argument types in LTR clauses

		NON-CU		CU		ALL=LTR	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
SPOKEN	Ov + Ov	21	**44%**	26	**70%**	47	55%
	Ov + Z	23	**48%**	11	**30%**	34	40%
	Z + Z	4	8%	0	**0%**	4	5%
	TOTAL	48	100%	37	100%	85	100%
WRITTEN	Ov + Ov	30	**35%**	14	**58%**	44	40%
	Ov + Z	52	**61%**	10	**42%**	62	57%
	Z + Z	3	4%	0	**0%**	3	3%
	TOTAL	85	100%	24	100%	109	100%

Secondly, CU verbs have epistemic use which typically occur in spoken context, and can be considered as a spoken feature. Observing the metalinguistic use of *ni* 'you,' Biq [9] mentions that with 1st- or 2nd-person subjects, the Mandarin verbs *shuo* 'speak,' *xiang* 'think,' and *kan* 'see' (which are CU verbs, in our classification) can function epistemically to express the speaker's emphasis on his/her upcoming speech. This makes it more plausible that they function like an adverbial clause. In addition, the occurrence of CU and the frequency of

Table 5. Cognition utterance (CU) verbs in LTR clauses

	LTR				
	NON-CU		CU		ALL
	N	%	N	%	N
SPOKEN	48	56%	37	**44%**	85
WRITTEN	85	78%	24	**22%**	109

CU's taking Ov+Ov arguments are higher in spoken discourse than in written ones (Table 4, 5 and 6). They can thus be regarded as a spoken feature.

Table 6. The agent argument of CU verbs

	SPOKEN		WRITTEN	
	N	%	N	%
1st	30	81%	14	58%
2nd	0	0%	2	8%
3rd	5	14%	5	21%
full NP	2	5%	3	13%
TOTAL	37	100%	24	100%

3.3 High Transitivity Disfavored?

Contrary to Tao's low frequency of HTR (6.9%), Table 7 shows a surprising high frequency of our HTR clauses. It indicates that Tao's claim in this respect isn't true in Mandarin discourse. In fact, it can't even be a tendency of spoken discourse, as the frequency of HTR ranks highest in one spoken corpus (ours) but lowest in another one (Tao's). Apparently, neither Mandarin clause structure nor language modes is the factor determining the preference or dispreference of certain clause types.

Table 7. Distribution of each clause types in spoken and written discourse

	WRITTEN		SPOKEN	
Clause Type	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
HTR	53	19.1%	87	31.4%
LTR	109	39.2%	85	30.7%
INT	69	24.8%	52	18.8%
STA	25	9.0%	33	11.9%
COP	22	7.9%	20	7.2%
TOTAL	278	100.0%	277	100.0%

3.4 Overt A in Low Transitives and Overt O in High Transitives?

Table 6. Overt argument forms on A and O roles

		HTR		LTR		TOTAL	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
SPOKEN	A	7	18%	12	35%	19	26%
	O	32	82%	22	65%	54	74%
	TATOAL	39	100%	34	100%	73	73%
WRITTEN	A	3	11%	7	11%	10	11%
	O	25	89%	55	89%	80	89%
	TOTAL	28	100%	62	100%	90	100%

HTR and LTR show different tendencies in their selecting sole overt arguments in Tao's data. However, our LTR, as well as HTR, tends to pick an overt O as its sole argument instead of an overt A (Table 6). Yet, we believe this result to be reasonable and natural. In Mandarin A tends to occur in preverbal position, identified with given information whereas O tends to occur in postverbal position, associated with new information. It is thus natural that O, the one bringing new information, should be selected first if there is only one overt role. This explains why HTR clauses in both Tao's and our data have Os as their sole

overt arguments, and we find no reason why LTR should not observe the same tendency.

4. Conclusions and Implications

Let us summarize our findings: (1) The preferred clause structure of Mandarin IS XV, and One Lexical Argument Constraint is generally observed in Mandarin Chinese. (2) CU verbs, leading an adverbial clause with epistemic use, should be viewed as a spoken feature. (3) Neither Mandarin clause structure nor language modes determines the preference/dispreference of certain clause types. (4) O role tends to be the sole overt argument not only in HTR clauses but also in LTR clauses.

There are two important implications in this study: First, our finding XV as the preferred clause structure in Mandarin supports Du Bois's ([6], [7]) claim that the concept of basic word order (SVO, SOV, etc) is invalid and misleading. Second, following the researches of Chafe [2] and Chang [3], we find another spoken feature in our study of the contrast between spoken and written discourses: The high occurrence of CU verbs tallys with the interactive, situated, and immediated characteristics of spoken language.

Notes

1 I would like to thank Prof. Chu-Ren Huang, Prof. Hong-Yin Tao, Prof. Vincent Chang and Joy Wu for their comments and advisements.

2 Here we don't explain statistics in detail. Important figures are printed in bold-face or italics.

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