

BERKELEY MODELS OF GRAMMARS 9

Chinese Syntactic Grammar

Functional and
Conceptual Principles

Jian Kang Loar

PETER LANG PUBLISHING

Preface

This book is concerned with the organizational principles underlying Chinese surface syntax, therefore it can be used as a textbook for word order study and teaching. It is also useful as a reference book for scholars and intermediate/advanced students of Mandarin Chinese.

My interest in and study of word order teaching was inspired by Rutherford's (1988) viewpoint on pedagogical grammar which he stated in his article on "Functions of Grammar in a Language-Teaching Syllabus". Rutherford expressed his critical attitude to common approaches to pedagogical grammar which regard language as consisting of a group of items and units. He doubts the effectiveness of teaching grammar in a piecemeal fashion, and of focusing on discrete units of low-level syntax, such as subject-verb agreement, plural and possessive markers, parts of speech, etc. He argues that the makeup of these rules can be easily observed at the level of surface syntax, and a cumulative mastery of the discrete units does not mean successful learning of a language, because there are unobservable properties of language system that are crucial to the use of language. Therefore, Rutherford urges that our pedagogical grammar should turn attention to the most important thing to the effective use of language, that is: "Through what means the target language conceptualizes reality and the grammaticalization of those concepts". Ways of conceptualization of reality and syntactic organizational principles are unobservable properties of language system, or properties of a language in its deep grammar. They are not amenable to an item/unit approach in pedagogy, so they cannot be taught in a piecemeal fashion. This kind of deep grammar of English is exemplified by the fundamental principle that word order is used to signal grammatical relationships, so there is a loose relationship in English between semantic content and its syntactic realization. Another unobservable property of English is that basic to the English sentence is the notion of subject, but not topic, so the subject position must always be filled, and SVO is the stable word order. The learner of English must have knowledge of these properties and know that this overriding characteristic of English necessitates that there be a large battery of rules for moving constituents around to meet the requirements of discourse and maintain, at the same time, the strict word order of SVO.

I am in favor of Rutherford's point of view, and maintain that in our Chinese pedagogical grammar, attention should be given to Chinese conceptualization of reality and the organizational principles underlying surface syntax. It is more practical and feasible to do this as the Chinese language, compared with English and other Indo-European languages, is more iconic in the sense that expressions of a sentence-size are structured by organizational principles that are motivated

by some conceptual or perceptual mechanisms, rather than based on logic-mathematical principles.

The three conceptual principles proposed by Tai (1985) (the Principle of Temporal Sequence, the Principle of Temporal Scope, and the Principle of Whole-Before-Part) are among the iconic principles that govern and control the sequence of word order in a sentence. An expression organized according to a conceptual principle is more iconic because the word order mirrors somewhat closely the situation in the real world. In Mandarin Chinese, iconicity-motivated principles are used so extensively in grammar that abstract principles become secondarily important (Hsieh, 1989). In this book, we concentrate on a discussion of three sets of principles that play a crucial role in the organization of word order and syntactic structures. We have revealed and demonstrated that the conceptual principles are the requirements to be met when we organize our ideas and bring units (such as subject, verb, adverbial and complement) together to form grammatical sequences. Functional principles are the requirements of how ideas are to be presented, and how the clause units are shifted and ordered so as to ensure easy and effective communication between the speaker and hearer. As the conceptual and functional principles that play a key role in organizing Chinese syntax are universal and necessary laws independent of particular languages, we believe our discussion will make Chinese more readily accessible to non-native speakers.

The book is explicitly designed for professional Chinese teachers, and for intermediate and advanced Chinese learners who want to continue to study the language and to have a better understanding of the grammar and nature of Chinese. Linguists who are interested in studying Chinese word order from the perspective of cognitive grammar may also find the book useful as a reference. The use of technical linguistic terms is minimized, but when they do occur because of the necessity of explication, they are carefully defined. As the book attempts to provide generalizations and reasons why Chinese grammar functions as it does, rather than merely enumerate grammatical rules, linguistic knowledge necessary for understanding the reasons is selectively introduced, appropriately simplified and presented in such a way that it is accessible to readers without linguistic background so long as they follow the explanations and the steps of reasoning carefully.

Focusing on reasons and guiding principles (rather than merely on rules) is the primary characteristic of the book. We firmly believe that teachers (and consequently their students) will benefit greatly from rules and generalizations that are made at the highest possible level of language. Therefore, in this book, what the author endeavors to do is to give reasons, not just rules, for why Chinese syntax is structured and functions as it does. Rules are difficult to apply if they are arbitrary statements that have to be remembered individually and are used in apparently capricious ways. However, rules are easier to apply if one knows about the general principles upon which they are based. For example, students are told that in the *De* complement construction, the object NP can never appear after the complement, instead, it must occur before the verb or be fronted in the sentence, as in ‘Zhāng Sān Hànzì xiě de piàoliang’ (Z. S. writes Chinese charac-

ters beautifully), or ‘Hànzi Zhāng Sān xiě de piàoliang’ ((As for) Chinese characters, Z. S. writes beautifully); but we cannot say *‘Zhāng Sān xiě de piàoliang Hànzi’ (*Z. S. writes De beautifully Chinese characters). By contrast, in the potential complement sentence, we can say ‘Wǒ kàn de qīngchū hēibǎn shàng de zì’ (I can see the words on the blackboard clearly). The rule that governs the order of the object in the two seemingly similar constructions appears to be arbitrary and hard to remember. However, if one knows the topic-prominent nature of Chinese and views this very same rule from an information processing perspective, he/she can see that the rule is a manifestation of the general functional principle of ‘initial topic (start a sentence/utterance with something known) and end-focus (place new information at the end of a sentence to achieve an information climax)’. The functional principle is easy to understand and remember. Therefore, when we know the reason or principle underlying the rule, at least, some of the arbitrariness of the rule disappears and word order study becomes easier.

We believe that teachers who have a firm grounding in the grammar of the language which they are teaching, will more expeditiously raise students consciousness about how the language works, and will be better prepared to meet the learning needs of their students. The more a teacher knows about the grammar, the more capable he/she will be to focus learners’ attention on the distinctive features of a particular grammatical form in less time than it would take for the learners to notice on their own. It is our hope that the book will help teachers be better equipped with theoretical knowledge to answer students’ questions about grammar, and to make accurate diagnoses of students’ errors, so that they will be able to give students correct guidance in understanding and applying grammatical rules.

In this book we have tried to embrace the observations of our own and those of other linguists and scholars regarding generalizations or “rules” of Chinese grammar. But as for the applicability of rules, we have to make a qualification that rules are not ‘airtight’ formulations. They always have ‘exceptions’. The general function of rules is to act as a traffic officer, whose signals and rules will allow students to self-monitor their progress and to avoid practicing errors. But it is important for us to understand that almost every linguistic category or generalization has fuzzy boundaries. This is not odd or strange, as language is ‘mutable—organic, even’. Therefore its categories and rules are often non-discrete (Rutherford 1987; Larsen-Freeman 1997).

Because of space limitations, this book is not complete, just like grammar books tend to be; nor is it intended to be a comprehensive grammar book, so it cannot be expected to give a systematic account of all the grammatical particulars of the Chinese language. Nevertheless, it does provide a new approach to the study of word order in Chinese and some constructions peculiar to the language. On many controversial issues in Chinese grammar, the author has ventured to voice her opinions and offer accounts. The accounts include the following areas: the motivation for the division of the clause element of adverbial and complement, the semantics of V1 in the RVC/DVC (resultative/directional verb compounds) construction, the semantics and function of the directional verb

complements in the DVC construction, the semantic reference of the complement in the De complement construction, the nature of the predicate-focused De complement sentence, the De complement sentence used as a derived stative sentence, the nature of the Bǎ, Bèi and null Bèi sentences, etc. Most of the hypotheses, like all hypotheses and theories, are tentative, so they are subject to refinement, revision and even refutation. Hence readers' comments and opinions are encouraged and will be welcomed sincerely and considered seriously. It is in the hope that our effort may spur others on to further research and findings in the study of Chinese word order. In the spirit of 'pāozhuānyǐnyù' (to cast a brick to attract the jade) that I have written the book and dedicate it to my colleagues who have been struggling in the forefront of teaching Chinese.

The writing of the book started in 2004, and it took six years for me to complete the research and the composition. I would feel extremely happy and rewarded if my book can, without distorting the facts of Chinese language, provide some sound, easily comprehensible accounts for some of the problems that are daily encountered in the classroom, and if my efforts could contribute a little to the promotion of the Chinese language teaching and learning worldwide.