Definiteness Effects on Chinese Word Order

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It is universally acknowledged that subjects tend to be definite and objects indefinite in Chinese. This observation can be generalized to account for a wide range of otherwise unrelated facts. Adjuncts as well as arguments display definiteness effects. Frequency adverbials like liang ci and duration adverbials like san tian take postverbal position because they are indefinite. Their definite counterparts the liang ci, na san tian occur preverbally. Within adjective phrases and noun phrases a definite modifier tends to precede the head while an indefinite one tends to follow it. Universally quantified NPs behave like definibles and existentially quantified ones like indefinites. Alternative approaches, e.g. Case theory, can hardly account for such facts. 

Key words: syntax; Mandarin Chinese; word order; definiteness effect.

Il est généralement admis qu'en chinois les sujets ont tendance à être définis alors que les objets sont plutôt indéfinis. Cette observation, si on la généralise, est à même de rendre compte de beaucoup d'autres phénomènes apparentement indépendants, concernant par exemple les arguments et les compléments périphériques. Ainsi, les circonstants de fréquence comme liang ci et les circonstants de durée comme san tian sont postverbaux parce qu'ils sont indéfinis. Leurs correspondants définis (ex. : zhei liang ci, na san tian), sont, eux, préverbaux. Au sein même des groupes adjectivaux et nominaux, un modifieur défini a tendance à précéder le centre (la tête du syntagme), alors qu'un modifieur indéfini suit le centre. Les GN à quantifieur universel se comportent comme des définis tandis que les GN à quantifieur existentiel sont comme des indéfinis. Il est difficile à des approches différentes, comme la théorie des cas, par exemple, de rendre compte de ces phénomènes.

Mots-clés : syntaxe; chinois moderne; effet de définitude.
0. INTRODUCTION

An observation, informally stated in (1) below, has been claimed by traditional grammarians, Chao (1968), Zhu (1982) among others, as characteristic of Chinese word order.

(1) There is a tendency for subjects to be definite and for objects to be indefinite.

The following minimal pair is a classic example.

(2) a. Ke lai le
guest come
"The guest has come"

b. Lai ke le
"Here comes a guest"

The same bare noun phrase ke is interpreted as definite when it is preverbal and indefinite when postverbal. This is a special case of definiteness effects or definiteness restrictions. It has received little attention in the linguistics literature.

The purpose of this article is to argue that (1) can be generalized to cover a wide range of facts which otherwise would appear to be unrelated. Definiteness effects will shed light on a number of long-standing puzzles with regard to word order. Section 1 shows that such definiteness effects on word order are found with adjunct NPs as well as with argument NPs. Section 2 shows that in adjective phrases and noun phrases as well as in verb phrases, definites and indefinites tend to occur on different sides of the head. Section 3 shows that universally quantified NPs behave like definites while existentially quantified NPs behave like indefinites. Some concluding remarks are made in Section 4.

Throughout the discussion, it should be borne in mind that we are dealing with a tendency only, not the sole factor in the determination of word order. The tendency as it is expressed in (1) leaves a number of questions open. Should the distinction be drawn between definite and indefinite, or between specific and