

Locative inversion in Mandarin Chinese

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This study is concerned with the locative inversion construction in Mandarin Chinese, an example is given as followed:

- (1) Zhuoshang fang -le/zhe yi ben shu.
table-on put PERF/IMPERF one CL book
'There is a book put on the table.'

As (1) suggested, in locative inversion constructions the subject is postverbal and the locative phrase is preposed in the first place. Bresnan and Kanerva (1989), based on Chichewa and English data, argue that certain conditions of locative inversion are satisfied in these two languages and the lexical mapping theory (LMT) is proposed to account for the peculiar properties of the inverted subjects. This article aims to explore locative inversion in Mandarin Chinese, mainly focusing on two questions: i) What does syntactic sentence structures of the locative inversion in Chinese look like? ii) What conditions should be satisfied or what restraints are imposed in Chinese locative inversion constructions?

To begin with, we should figure out what is subject and object in Chinese, the lexical mapping principles concern not only thematic structure but also syntactic sentence structures, which requires that argument structure is explicitly represented and subjects and objects are not fuzzy conceptions. However, it has long been controversial that subjects and objects are still barely definitely specified in Chinese. In this sense, we should first make this point clear before probing into further discussions on location inversions.

Then, we are asked to think about what conditions are needed to undergo location inversion in Chinese. To address this question, we are talking about the properties of locative inversion in Chinese and providing a principled explanation for them. Three characters are hypothetical involved and would be considered. First, we start with a comparison of verb classes involving this construction between English and Chinese. This observation comes from the fact that the lexical knowledge of verbs is assumed to be associated with the syntactic expressions of their arguments, verbs classes may have cross-linguistically different behaviors in location inversions. It is widely accepted that verbs in locative inversion construction are with mere exceptions intransitive, or say, unaccusative. Levin (1993) lists a class of semantically coherent English verbs found in locative inversion constructions. However, there is another story in the case of Chinese, in which not all verbs undergoing locative inversion are unaccusative. In this sense, we see to what extent would the Levin's classification of English verbs be applied to Chinese.

Second, we presume that the aspectual system also plays a role in determining the argument structures of verbs. Chinese aspect markers *le* and *zhe* interact differently with locative inversion constructions: they are obligatory in this construction on the one hand, and show different compatibility with verbs occurring in this construction. Examples are elicited from Du (1999):

- (2) zai wo de *dui-mian* zuo *le/zhe* yi ge ren.
at 1sg. GEN opposite sit PRF/DUR one CL person
'Opposite me sat a person.' (perfective/durative okay)

(3) men kou chu-xian le/*zhe yi ge ren.
door mouth appear PFV/*DUR one CL person

‘At the door appeared a person.’ (perfective/*durative)

Besides the co-occurrence pattern between aspect markers and verbs, the compatibility of aspect markers with the occurrence of agent in locative inversion would also be explored. The discourse function of locative inversion in Chinese would be discussed at last.

References

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