

Hello to the organizers and participants of the 8th International Symposium on Chinese Language & Discourse (ISCLD-8)! I'm sorry I can't be there with you, as it looks like it's going to be a great conference, and I would have liked to meet up with old friends and make new ones. Instead Taciana asked me to record a few words to all of you.

I'm happy to see that some people are now analyzing and teaching Chinese on its own terms, rather than imposing an Indo-European structure on the language, and are doing so using natural language data, the only really reliable data. I am also happy to see scholars turning to information structure to explain clause patterns in Chinese, with the theme of the conference being Topic-Comment in Chinese. 趙元任 (Y. R. Chao), the father of modern Chinese linguistics, was the first to look at Chinese in terms of information structure rather than syntactic relations and argument structures, though his work was generally misunderstood, as he used “subject” to talk about topic, even though he clearly defined and exemplified it as not a grammatical subject, and he used “object” for reference to any referent that appeared in post-verbal position, again, not a syntactic relation like direct object in English, but simply a non-topical referent. He argued all clauses in Chinese were simply Topic-Comment, but this has also caused problems, as some types of clauses have a different structure. Topic-Comment is the unmarked clause information structure pattern, but information structure also includes narrow focus constructions, which can be marked only with intonation, such as when asked 你要吃什麼?, and the answer is 我想吃麵, where 麵 is the only part in focus, filling an open proposition, or it can be marked with cleft constructions like 我買的是菜 and 菜是我買的, where only the referent of the post-copula phrase is in focus, as well as event presentative constructions such as 下雨了, and the predicate or comment of clauses like (王冕) ... 死了父親 and 我餓了肚子, where 死了父親 and 餓了肚子 are event presentative structures. I wrote a paper called 〈趙元任先生的句子和論元結構概念〉 for 《實驗語言學》 in 2023, in which I linked Chao's early analysis, which was not seen as an integrated system, with modern views of information structure, which see information structure as an integrated system. This paper is downloadable from my website, randylapolla.info.

Information structure is a core part of the interaction of people in communicating. It is usually seen as part of pragmatics, which is seen as something extra to syntax, and in fact in Chinese “pragmatics” is problematically translated as 語用學, when it actually is the core of interaction, and underlies clause patterns in all languages, as clause patterns emerge out of that interaction, and the clause patterns conventionalize (grammaticalization is simply conventionalization, like with any other part of our culture) to mark a particular information structure pattern. In some languages, though, such as English, there has been the conventionalization of the use of word order for marking the syntactic or semantic roles of referents in discourse (that is, they have grammaticalized syntactic relations and argument structures), and in English word order is also used to mark grammatical mood, leaving information structure to be marked mainly by intonation rather than word order. Chinese has not grammaticalized the use of word order for marking the syntactic or semantic role of referents in discourse, and so the clause patterns can all be easily explained using only information structure patterns.

This understanding is very important for many applications, such as teaching Chinese as a second (or even first) language, translating between Chinese and other languages, and for localization of new technologies, so I hope you all will continue doing research on Chinese by inductively analyzing natural language data, as Chao did. I say “inductively analyzing”, because that is the most empirical approach, not imposing any categories from other languages on Chinese, but letting the natural Chinese data teach you how the language works. Trust the language. It is your best teacher.

Thank you to Taciana for giving me this chance to address you all. I wish you all a successful conference with many interesting insights, new applications, and fruitful discussions.