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Doctoral Dissertation
Abstract

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**The syntax of focalization and topicalization in the *shi...de* construction of
Mandarin Chinese**

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This dissertation examines the two distributional possibilities for assigning focus within *shi...de* cleft constructions in Mandarin Chinese when the subject precedes *shi*. Through a comprehensive empirical investigation spanning a wide range of sentence types—including mono-transitive constructions, simple ditransitives, and various serial verb constructions (notably *song* ‘send’-type dative ditransitives and instrumental *yong* ‘use’-type SVCs)—this study offers a more complete picture of how focus is distributed in *shi...de* clefts.

The results show that contrary to existing literature, this study finds that the post-*shi* position is considerably more flexible with focus assignment. It can accommodate narrow focus not only on the maximal constituent adjacent to T but also on subcomponents within it. These subparts may include verbal segments, or arguments of various types (e.g., Theme, Goal, Beneficiary, Instrument), provided they remain *in situ* inside the maximal constituent adjacent to T and receive prosodic prominence. In contrast, the post-*de* position, while more restricted, is shown to be capable of hosting nominal elements beyond just direct objects. Various argument types—such as Themes, Goals, and Instruments—can surface post-*de*.

Following Erteschik-Shir’s (1997) f-structure theory, I propose that *shi* in *shi...de* constructions is the lexical realization of the functional head T within the main clausal spine. More precisely, once the hierarchical structure of the clause is built syntactically, *shi* is introduced as the overt exponent of T, feeding directly into both the PF and semantic interfaces. At PF, *shi* assigns prosodic prominence to the maximal constituent structurally adjacent to T. As a result, that constituent is the designated focus position. Crucially, prosodic focal stress may also target a subpart of this constituent, yielding narrow focus readings on internal elements. Importantly, the exhaustiveness implicature associated with the post-*shi* focus arises not from lexical semantics at LF, but from the structural configuration created by syntax and its mapping at PF—underscoring the view that this implicature is discourse-driven and construction-specific.

The post-*de* placement of a nominal candidate for focus is, first and foremost, argued to be the result of *LD*, a post-syntactic morphological operation within the framework of Distributed Morphology. LD applies after syntactic structure is complete, manipulating only the linear ordering of morphological elements without affecting syntactic constituency or semantic interpretation. I observe that only nominal elements that are strictly sandwiched between a verbal element and *de* at the point of linearization can undergo LD to the post-*de* position. Critically, because LD is purely morphological, it does not contribute to interpretation at the PF-semantic

interface and therefore cannot itself license focus interpretation or the implicatures typically associated with focus. I propose that the focus reading arising from a post-*de* nominal is not structurally licensed, but rather emerges as a last-resort effect, made available only when the canonical focus site—namely, the post-*shi* position—is independently ineligible for focus assignment (e.g., due to being occupied by just a head-level element).

At the heart of this investigation is the insight that Mandarin *shi...de* focus constructions provide a unique lens into how focus can be realized post-syntactically. Specifically, focus in the post-*de* position emerges through Local Dislocation at the morphological level, after syntactic linearization. In contrast, the post-*shi* position reflects a syntactic configuration where *shi*, as the lexicalization of T, feeds directly into both PF and the semantic interface. This configuration establishes a syntactically defined focus domain, giving rise to the conversational implicature of exhaustiveness—not as a product of lexical semantics, but as a construction-specific effect resolved at the syntax-prosody-discourse interface. Mandarin draws on a wide range of syntactic strategies for encoding ditransitive constructions—including applicative structures, adjunctive configurations, and small clause analyses. This structural diversity allows for considerable flexibility in how syntax maps onto prosody, particularly in accounting for focus interpretation in *shi...de* constructions.

This thesis has demonstrated that Mandarin supports a mono-clausal analysis of focus clefts, utilizing a copula-like element (*shi*) and multiple lexical verbs within a single clause—enabled by its typological nature as a serializing language. In contrast to English, where focus clefts typically require a bi-clausal structure due to a strict one-to-one correspondence between T(ense) and finite verbs, Mandarin permits a one-to-many relationship between T and multiple finite verbs. This structural feature opens the door for copular focus strategies to be realized mono-clausally in serializing languages.

In the analysis proposed here, *shi* is treated as the lexical exponent of T, marking finiteness. Crucially, its presence does not prevent other finite verbal expressions from appearing in the same clause. This leads to a broader prediction, also argued for in the context of Mandarin resultative constructions by Xing & Den Dikken (2025): only for multi-verb constructions of serializing languages—those that allow multiple verbal heads to be represented under a single T—can productively derive mono-clausal syntax. At the same time, the prediction is asymmetrical: not all serializing languages are expected to have mono-clausal copular focus

constructions. The observation that adjunction can vary in size, as demonstrated in *yong-* instrumental constructions, supports this asymmetry and provides independent evidence for Kayne's (1994) universal left-adjunction hypothesis.

To conclude, this thesis not only deepens our understanding of how the focus system in Mandarin operates—particularly how *shi...de* constructions can achieve focus post-syntactically and allow in-situ focus interpretation at the syntax-prosody interface—but also demonstrates how Mandarin, as a serializing language, can employ a mono-clausal strategy to realize copular focus constructions. More broadly, the findings speak to larger theoretical questions about how typological variation—such as the contrast between serializing and non-serializing languages—shapes the structural possibilities for focus realization. Specifically, they suggest that the availability of mono-clausal copular focus constructions may depend on whether a language permits serialization, thus expanding the typological landscape of focus strategies and their grammatical underpinnings.

References

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