
ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Topic as Subjective Reference Point and Its Constraints

Linjun Liu*

Beijing Language and Culture University

Langacker (1991) technically defines topic as a kind of “subjective reference point”, where “subjective” roughly refers to the maximized observer’s role or the minimized role as object or observation of the topic entity. While this definition successfully captures the dynamic aspect and cognitive salience of topic, it is based more on reasoning than on naturally occurring language data. This paper presents some practical work concerning Beijing Mandarin, i.e., Mandarin spoken by Beijing locals, with a view to arguing that topic may function as objective as well as subjective reference point in discourse use. Given the wide variety of topic expressions in this topic-prominent language, it is highly probable for some topics not to refer their respective comments in the subjective manner, especially when the topic entity and its target entity in a topic-comment construction manifest such objective relationship as possessor-possessed, part-whole, etc. In addition, the semantics of some topic types and the accessibility of the topic entity may impose further constraint on the speaker’s choice of conceptual reference point.

INTRODUCTION

Langacker (1991) technically defines topic as a kind of “subjective reference point” (p. 314). In this definition, “reference point” means that the topic is used “to establish mental contact with another entity”, while “subjective” is used in opposition to

*Correspondence should be sent to: Dr. Linjun Liu, English Department, Beijing Language and Culture University, 15 Xueyuan Road, Haidian District, Beijing, P. R. China, 100083. Email: linjunliu@126.com

“objective”, roughly referring to the maximized observer’s role or the minimized role as object or observation of the topic entity. This definition successfully captures the dynamic aspect and cognitive salience of topic. On the other hand, however, it is based more on reasoning than on naturally occurring language data. Cross-linguistically, topic-prominent languages as termed by Li and Thompson (1976) differ systematically from subject-prominent languages. Given the whole range of topic expressions in topic-prominent languages, it might not be entirely unexpected to find topics that refer their respective comments not merely in a subjective manner. For instance, the topic entity and its target entity in a topic-comment (TC) construction may sometimes show an objective relationship, e.g. possessor-possessed, part-whole, etc. Based on this line of thinking, the paper presents some evidence from spoken Beijing Mandarin to prove that topic may function as objective as well as subjective reference point in topic-prominent languages.

Following this introduction is a review of Cognitive Grammar (CG) on reference point and Langacker (1993) on topic as subjective reference point. The paper then briefly outlines the research methodology. Following that, it is devoted to some construction types in Beijing Mandarin where the topics are best interpreted as non-subjective reference points. The final section concludes the paper.

COGNITIVE GRAMMAR ON TOPIC AS REFERENCE TOPIC

Cognitive Grammar on Reference Point

Langacker (1993) proposes that a conceptual reference point is a construct of general psychological significance. Reference points are basic to both linguistic and cognitive organization, and “the reference point phenomenon is so fundamental and ubiquitous in our moment-to-moment experience that we are largely oblivious to it” (Langacker, 1993, p. 5).

Conceptualization as viewed by Langacker is “inherently dynamic”, in that it develops and manifests itself through processing time. According to Langacker (1998), “One aspect of dynamic conceptualization is our very general cognitive ability to direct attention to some entity for purposes of then establishing ‘mental contact’ with another” (p. 7). In this context, Langacker speaks of a conceptual reference point as providing mental access to a target found in its dominion. When talking about its operation, Langacker (1998) holds, “By serving as an initial focus of attention, the reference point tends to activate an array of associated entities which collectively constitute its dominion. This enables attention to shift to a secondary focus within it, the target (which activates its own dominion and may in turn function as a reference point)” (p. 7). In this manner, the reference point has a certain cognitive salience as well as a dynamic aspect to it.

Van Hoek identifies three general considerations that underlie the reference point patterns, namely prominence, linear word order and conceptual connectivity.

Prominence. *X* is likely to be taken as a reference point relative to *Y* if *X* is prominent in the context which includes *Y*.

Linear Word Order. Other things being equal, *X* is more likely to be taken as a reference point in relation to *Y* if *X* is introduced into the conceptualizer's awareness before *Y* is.

Conceptual Connectivity. The extent of a reference point's dominion is determined by the interaction of conceptual (semantic) connectivity and linear word order (van Hoek, 1997, pp. 58-59).

Moreover, the reference point-target relationship can be manifested at different levels of organization: "Roughly speaking, the higher the level of organization, the looser the connection may be between a nominal reference point and a process in its dominion" (Langacker, 1998, p. 16). Of particular interest here is the level of clause. As the expression of a single proposition, a clause is "the smallest unit of discourse over which a topic functions as the active reference point; at the same time, a clause is the largest unit for which we can posit a single overall trajector" (Langacker, 1998, p. 19). Therefore, clause constitutes a unit ideal for grammatical as well as discourse analysis. In this particular research, spoken data are analyzed at the clause level to show how the reference point function is performed in dynamic discourse.

Cognitive Grammar on Topic

Langacker (1993) acknowledges that the very definition of reference point recalls the notion of topic: "A salient entity evoked for purposes of mentally accessing another can also be thought of as providing a mental 'address' to which some notion is 'delivered' (i.e., as being what an expression 'is about')" (p. 24). In defining topic technically as a kind of "subjective reference point", Langacker explains that "reference point" means that the topic is used "to establish mental contact with another entity" and "subjective" has a two-fold meaning:

This reference point is subjective in two respects. For one thing, it remains offstage and often unmentioned. Rather than being explicitly discussed, an established topic is presupposed as part of the common background that the speaker and hearer rely on for making sense of the material presented overtly. A topic is also subjective in that the basis for its reference point function resides in speaker/hearer knowledge per se. In contrast to possessive expressions, where the possessor serves as reference point by virtue of some objective relationship it bears to the possessed (ownership, part/whole, kinship, etc.), it may be the

organization of knowledge itself — even a relationship of class membership — that allows a topic to serve this function (Langacker, 1991, p. 314).

Langacker (1991) also identifies four topicality factors, and among the four, the entity's semantic role is ranked as the most objective “in the sense of being intrinsic to the event described (not just a matter of how it is construed)” (p. 306), followed in turn by the empathy hierarchy, definiteness and figure/ground organization in order of declining objectivity or ascending subjectivity (pp. 306-307).

From the cognitive perspective, topic is a notion beyond the syntactic level, and two phases are distinguished in a topic's career: “At some point in the flow of discourse, an entity is first established as a topic, often by a special marking or grammatical construction... Once established, a topic holds sway over a certain stretch of discourse (perhaps until another one replaces it). There may be little need to mention the topic explicitly during this phase of career” (Langacker, 1991, p. 313). The career of a topic actually reflects the dynamic aspect of the reference point model.

In addressing the levels of organization for reference point, Langacker (1998) illustrates topics at various levels, from Brown and Yule's (1983) discourse topics to clause-internal topics. He makes a distinction between a clause-internal discourse topic and a subject. He argues that a discourse topic can serve as reference point for any number of comment clauses, and the nominal establishing it is usually external to each of them. By contrast, a subject specifically functions as such only for a single clause, as an inherent part of its internal structure (p. 18). He then concludes that “starting from the extremes, these two functions converge at the level of the clause — the smallest unit expressing a full proposition, and the largest one with a single overall trajectory” (Langacker, 1998, p. 20).

While Langacker's reference point model offers a coherent, integrated view of topic-like elements at the lexical, grammatical and discourse levels, and explains and clarifies the special relationship among topic, subject and possessor as affinitive but non-equivalent, Langacker himself also acknowledges that detailed analyses are required of individual languages of diverse types in order for the model to be widely accepted as a viable and well-supported characterization of topic. Therefore, this research represents some practical work aimed at revealing how topics in some construction types function as conceptual reference point in spoken Mandarin discourse.

Insights of the Reference Point Model for Topic Study in Mandarin

Though Langacker's cognitive account of topic as conceptual reference point is not specifically oriented for topic-prominent languages like Mandarin, it does offer some guiding principles for analyzing naturally occurring data from topic-prominent languages.

First, the affinities and non-equivalence between topic and subject as revealed under the reference point model may settle the controversy over the subject/topic categorization of the sentence-initial NP in Mandarin. Although topic is in general external to the comment clause, it can also be conflated with the subject, in which case the topic holds sway for just one clause and has a central grammatical role to play.

Second, it offers some guiding principles for topic identification, especially when the data are “dynamic” in the terminology of cognitive linguistics. Langacker distinguishes two distinct phases in a topic’s “career”, the establishing phase and the holding phase respectively. At the establishing phase, he mentions two often observed means, special marking and grammatical construction; once established, a topic can take a zero form in an ensuing stretch of discourse. Though topic marking is not obligatory in Mandarin, when topic markers do appear, they should be taken as valid means for topic identification. When spontaneous speech is concerned, topic markers abound, and so do zero-form topics. In addition to these two coding features of topic construction, Langacker also hints at the possible semantic relationships between topic and the clause-internal target entity (e.g. class membership). This also helps with topic identification, though how the reference point model operates in TC constructions in spoken Beijing Mandarin has to date not been clear.

Finally, Langacker (1998) gives primacy to the semantic role of topic over other topicality factors. This stance may help explain why topic may conflate with subject (e.g., Li & Thompson, 1981) as well as how other elements with a non-subject role can also become topical — the joint work of the other three topicality factors, namely, empathy hierarchy, definiteness and figure/ground organization, may motivate a non-subject element to topichood.

Insightful as Langacker’s interpretation of topic as conceptual reference point is, it might be a bit too narrow to limit topic to subjective reference point only. First, Langacker (1998) has shown that topic is affinitive to possessor in the possessive construction. If possessor falls under the category of objective reference point, why should topic be subjective all the time? In the meantime, topic is also affinitive to subject, which is “intrinsic” to the clausal target (Langacker, 1998). It not only tends to be “onstage”, but also may function as object or observation, rather than as observer or Langacker’s “subjective” entity. Given the nature of topic and the definition of subjective reference point, it might not be accurate enough to confine the cognitive role of topic to subjective reference point only.

Second, some domains in human cognition might be better interpreted as objective, instead of subjective, conceptual reference point. It is known that time and space are two basic domains and probably among the most frequently used reference points, which, I think, explains why temporal-spatial expressions tend to occur early in discourse. In some cases, their discourse-initial position can be a matter of conventionalization or repeated entrenchment. For instance, time adverbials such as *once upon a time*, *long long ago*, etc. are observed without fail to occur at the very beginning of a narrative, indicating that time is ready reference point for narratives.

Third, given the fact that topic in topic-prominent languages can be quite varied in grammatical function and semantic role, it is highly probable for some topic expressions to resemble possessors and subjects so closely that they function as objective reference point. In this particular research, two construction types in Beijing Mandarin are of focal attention.

In these two constructions, topic and subject co-occur, and more often than not occur in one order instead of the reverse (e.g., Chen, 2004). It is argued that these constructions are conventionalized expressions, and most probably not entirely the outcome of the speaker's subjective construal. The following section presents a sketch of the two constructions and the research methodology.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data: The Beijing Corpus

The data used for this research are part of a 1.8 million character corpus, The Corpus of Modern Spoken Beijing Mandarin (henceforth the Beijing Corpus), which is sponsored by the Language Research Institute at Beijing Language and Culture University, Beijing. All language informants are Beijing locals, sampled across all urban and near suburban areas of the city. They were asked to talk on six different topics, and their monologues were recorded without intervention from the language investigator. The corpus takes the form of 374 monologues recorded in the 1980s and transcribed in Chinese characters, maintaining slips of the tongue, repetitions, and redundant and unfinished stretches of utterances without any editing.

Altogether 45 monologues, with a total of slightly over 200,000 characters, were randomly sampled from the Beijing Corpus for the purpose of this research. Following the corpus's designation, these monologues are on six different topics. The age of the 45 informants ranges from 25 to 84, and there are 24 males and 21 females. The informants are of three different nationalities, namely Han, Hui and Man, and live in different parts of Beijing city. They have different education background, 6 with primary education, 31 with secondary education, and 8 with college or university education. They work in different professions, such as teacher, official, engineer, worker, driver, etc.

The monologues from the corpus are available as transcripts from recordings without tagging or annotation. The transcripts are punctuated to indicate pauses and other prosodic features, such as the different intonations, sentence boundaries, etc. In this study, the researcher segments each and every monologue into clauses by referring to the transcribers' punctuation pattern but without changing the original narrative order. For examples appearing throughout this paper, the transliteration and translation are done by the researcher.

Coding Properties as the Primary Concern

Ever since Li and Thompson (1976) laid the foundation for a typology on the basis of the grammatical relations of subject-predicate and topic-comment, Mandarin Chinese has been predominantly taken as a topic-prominent language; that is, in Mandarin Chinese, “the basic constructions manifest a topic-prominent relation” (Li & Thompson, 1976, p. 459). However, a consensus has never been reached on how to define topic as a notion within the language. Among all the controversies, there seem to be two consensuses on topic in Mandarin, namely, the topic precedes the comment and the topic can be separated from the comment with a pause or pause particle (e.g., Chao, 1968; Li & Thompson, 1981; Tsao, 1979; Chu, 1998; among others). These two consensuses, under closer scrutiny, collapse into one — the coding property of the topic expression.

When studying subject cross-linguistically, Keenan (1976) maintains that subject can be defined in terms of coding properties, behavior/control properties, and semantic properties. Of the three types of properties, the coding properties play a central role on account of the fact that the behavior properties may differ from language to language and semantic properties from construction to construction. Hence the Promotion to Subject Hierarchy: Coding Properties > Behavior and Control Properties > Semantic Properties (Keenan, 1976, p. 324).

Of the coding properties (CPs), Keenan lists position, case marking and verb agreement; of the behavior properties are deletion, movement, case changing properties, control of cross-reference properties, etc; and the semantic properties include agency, autonomous existence, selectional restrictions, etc. Since topic also embodies features in these three aspects, the researcher assumes that the coding properties of topic may take primacy over its behavior properties and semantic properties as well.

Of the CPs listed by Keenan, position is of relevance to Mandarin, in that Mandarin topics precede comments. In this study, another coding property stands out, that is, the frequent occurrence of pause and pause particles in the Beijing corpus. Another item that can be added to the CP list for Mandarin is the grammatical construction of some well established TC expressions irrespective of the use of pause and/or pause particles. In fact, to take typical TC constructions as means of topic identification is also in agreement with Langacker’s (1991) observation that “grammatical construction” is an often used means of topic establishment. In total, this study identifies three CPs for topic identification, namely initial position, pause and/or pause particle, and grammatical construction.

There are at least two advantages in granting CPs the primary status in identifying topics in Mandarin. First, the CPs are more tangible, which renders them more reliable than other less obvious properties. Perhaps this is why the two consensuses reached so far by various studies on topic characterization are both regarding coding properties. Second, these CPs, pause and pause particles in particular, may reveal how Mandarin speakers organize information. Tao (1996) has shown that “particles correlate to an overwhelmingly large degree with the end of intonation units” (p. 52), and according to Chafe (1979, 1987, 1994), intonation units or speech units cut across several dimensions of language production,

including prosody, syntactic structure, cognition, and interaction, and have a cognitive basis, whose formation reflects speakers' focus of consciousness. Therefore, through observing pause and pause particle use, we can see how cognition is at work in discourse organization.

Delineating Some Construction Types

Double-subject construction

The double-subject construction is identified by the co-occurrence of a topic and a subject irrespective of the name to the construction. According to Li and Thompson (1981), there is a 'part-whole' relationship between the topic and the subject in the double-subject construction. Otherwise, this type of construction is "just like all the other topic-comment sentences being considered: the topic is the definite noun phrase that is what the sentence is about, and the subject is the noun phrase in a 'doing' or 'being' relationship with the verb" (p. 93). The double-subject construction is considered a typical topic-comment construction in Mandarin Chinese (e.g., Li & Thompson, 1981; Chu, 1998; Tsao, 1979; among others).

A comprehensive cross-linguistic characterization of this type of construction is as follows, though in Mandarin the coding forms for the topic and the subject are not limited to NPs only:

- (a) NP1 and NP2 both have some claim to subjecthood.
- (b) NP2 and the predicate can themselves constitute a clause.
- (c) The entire structure also has clausal status.
- (d) NP1 is a topic with respect to the inner clause.
- (e) NP1 is typically a possessor with respect to NP2.
- (f) Body-part relationships between NP1 and NP2 are prototypical.
- (g) NP1 is commonly an experiencer with respect to the inner clause.
- (h) These sentences are always stative.
- (i) They often translate naturally with *have*, despite the absence of a possessive verb (Langacker, 2007, p. 243).

For instance, (1) below is an example from the Beijing Corpus. The context of use is given within the parentheses, where the part preceding the colon indicates the code number of the speaker and the figure following the colon the number of the paragraph in which the example utterance occurs. This notation applies to all examples from the Beijing Corpus.

- (1) *ta shenti bu tai-hao ba,*
 She body not too-good SFP¹
 ‘She is not very healthy.’
 (057-H20:3)

In this double-subject construction, NP1 *ta* ‘she’ and NP2 *shenti* ‘body’ are respectively the topic and subject expression, with NP2 being part of NP1 in denotation.

Set-member construction

The set-member construction is used here to refer to a Chinese style TC construction where the topic and the subject are in the set-member relationship; that is, the topic specifies the set and the subject identifies a member in the set. In this sense, the topic and the subject in this construction type can be said to show the part-whole relationship, also an objective relationship in Langacker’s categorization. Like the double-subject construction, there are also two NPs that co-occur at the beginning of the clause and NP1 is a topic with respect to the inner clause. Unlike the double-subject construction, NP1 has no claim to subjecthood and is thus external to the clausal core. See (2) for illustration:

- (2) *Lia guye ne,*
 Two son-in-law PART
Laosan zhege guye ne shi ge daxuesheng-r,
 Laosan this son-in-law PART is CL universityman-RETRO
 ‘Of the two sons-in-law, the husband of the third child is a university man.’
 (085-H14:2)

¹ See the list below for the abbreviations used in the gloss line.

Abbreviation	Term
ASP	Aspect marker
AUX	Auxiliary
CL	Classifier
COMP	Comparative
CSC	Complex stative construction (<i>de</i>)
FS	False start
GEN	Genitive (<i>-de</i>)
NOM	Nominalizer (<i>de</i>)
PART	Pause particle for topic marking
PF	Pause filler
RETRO	Retroflex
SFP	Sentence-final particle
SUF	Suffix

In (2), the two underlined NPs, i.e., the topic and the subject, are in the set-member relationship, where the set consists of two members and the subject makes up half of the set. Unlike (1) where the predicate expression *bu tai-hao* applies to both the topic and the subject, the predication in (2) applies to the subject only; that is, the other son-in-law may not be a university man.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

On the Double-Subject Construction

In the corpus secured for this study, there are altogether 99 clauses identified as double-subject constructions. Though not very large in number, they show some complications of the construction in real-time spoken discourse.

Semantic relationship between topic and subject

By definition, there is semantically a part-whole relationship between the topic and the subject in this construction (Li & Thompson, 1981). Langacker (2007) also takes body-part as the prototype. For example, in (1), the topic *ta* ‘she’ is the whole and the subject *shenti* ‘body’ is part of the topic entity. It should be noted, however, that part-whole happens to fall under the category of objective relationship in Langacker’s classification (see Section 2.2). Moreover, in this construction type, the topic always stays “onstage”, which makes it go against Langacker’s (1991) “offstage” characterization of subjective reference point. Therefore, the so-called double-subject construction in Mandarin Chinese constitutes counterevidence to subjective reading of topic as conceptual reference point.

The present corpus also shows that the semantic relationship between the topic and the subject in the construction of concern can be more varied than has been acknowledged. For instance, the semantic relationship between topic *ni* ‘you’ and subject *shuijiao* ‘sleep’ in (3) is subject-predicate, in that the former undergoes the process of the latter.

- (3) *ni* *shuijiao* *dou* *bu* *tashi*,
 You sleep even not free from anxiety
 ‘You can’t even sleep free from anxiety.’
 (120-H15:5)

The logical relationship between the topic and the subject in (4) is one of patient-action; that is, the topic is the grammatical object of the subject VP.

- (4) tamen-de sangshi, jiejue ne, jiushi dao jiali weiwen,
 They-GEN funeral solve PART namely go house condole
 ‘As for their funeral, the solution is for us to go to their households and
 express our condolence.’
 (309-X12:7)

The semantics between the topic and the subject in (5) is quite extraordinary.

- (5) Laosi liangkouzi dou shi junren,
 The fourth child the couple both are army men
 ‘As for the fourth child, the couple (the child and his wife) are both in
 the army.’
 (057-H20:5)

In reverse to the presumed relationship between the two NPs, i.e., the topic represents the whole while the subject part of the whole, the topic in (5) *laosi* ‘the fourth child’ can only be half of the couple as indicated by the subject *liangkouzi* ‘the couple’. Cognitively, the topic is used to introduce the couple of which the topic referent is a half. There is a good reason to orient the couple by means of *laosi* ‘the fourth child’, rather than the couple, because as an offspring of the speaker, the fourth child is more accessible than the couple of which he makes a half. In this manner, a chain of reference points is observed in this example, first from the situationally anchored speaker to her fourth child, then from the child to the couple, i.e., the child and his wife.

From the above illustration, it can be seen that the semantic relationship between the topic and the subject of the double-subject construction in Beijing Mandarin is indeed more varied than the prototypical part-whole relationship. Nonetheless, there is no denying that part-whole is the prototype relation between the two elements. As a matter of fact, of the 99 instantiations of the double-subject construction in the present corpus, 76 show that relationship, which means in prototypical cases, the topics are objective, rather than subjective, reference points for their target subjects.

Word order flexibility and its impact on construction semantics

Given the chained reference point relationship as shown in (5), it seems that the topic and the subject need to occur in a particular order in the double-subject construction. This supposition is indeed true with some, though not with all.

- (1') shenti ta bu tai-hao ba,
 (3') shuijiao ni dou bu-tashi,
 (4') *jiejue ne, tamen-de sangshi, jiushi dao jiali weiwen,
 (5') *liangkouzi laosi dou shi junren,

It is very interesting to see that the primed examples show a unidirectional scale from (1') to (5') in acceptability judgment. The more typical the construction is, the more acceptable the swapped double-subject construction. A tentative explanation is that in clauses such as (4) and (5), the time factor plays a more important role than in other utterances; that is, the solution of a problem cannot precede the problem, or only after one is married can there be a couple. In contrast, a person must be co-existent with his or her body, as in (1'), so that a swap in the order of occurrence does not result in semantic anomaly. Likewise, sleep is among the most conventionalized activities of mankind, i.e., human beings inevitably perform this activity.

In addition to this limited freedom of swapping between the topic and the subject, there are also some changes in the semantics of the construction after swapping. Take (1) and (1') for example. In (1), the 'body' must be the topic referent's, whereas in (1'), the body is used for general reference and the referent of the original topic is just one instance of all that have a body. The same is true with *shuijiao* 'sleep' in (3), where it indicates the activity undergone by the preceding pronoun; in (3'), by contrast, it can refer to anyone's activity so long as the activity can be categorized as 'sleep'. In both cases, the primed expressions are no longer double-subject constructions; they would be best taken as more general TC constructions for contrastive use. As a result of swapping, the first element in each case just specifies the 'frame' within which the ensuing proposition is to be interpreted; it is no longer an instance that can be predicated upon, or in Langacker's terminology, it has given up its "claim to subjecthood".

Summary

Based on the Beijing Corpus, the topic and the subject in the double-subject construction are prototypically in the part-whole relationship, thus instantiating one kind of Langacker's objective relationship. In less typical cases such as (5), the relative accessibility of the topic and subject entities also has some bearing on reference point choice. Then it seems that topic-subject organization is not entirely the speaker's subjective "organization of knowledge itself".

Since the double-subject construction is a subset of TC constructions, if it shows objectivity in reference point organization, perhaps topics are more varied than subjective reference points. The double-subject construction, therefore, constitutes a challenge to Langacker's subjective characterization of topic.

Set-Member Construction

As described above, the set-member construction is named after the semantic relation between the topic and the subject; that is, the topic specifies a set and the subject singles out a member from the set. It is not a high frequency construction type, instancing altogether 51 times in the Beijing Corpus. Unlike the double-subject construction, none of

them allows for topic-subject swap. Compare (2') with (2), which is reproduced below for convenience of reference.

- (2) Lia guye ne.
 Two son-in-law PART
Laosan zhege guye ne shi ge daxuesheng-r,
 Laosan this son-in-law PART is CL university man-RETRO
 'Of the two sons-in-law, the husband of the third child is a university man.'
 (085-H14:2)
- (2') *Laosan zhege guye ne, lia guye ne shige daxuesheng-r,

The unacceptability of (2') is due to the swap of the original topic and subject expression. This is perhaps not difficult to explain: the set-member relation is analogous to Langacker's dominion-target relation. When talking about the operation of a conceptual reference point, Langacker (1998) maintains that the reference point "tends to activate an array of associated entities which collectively constitute its dominion" (p. 7). A set as the dominion activated by itself is perhaps the most ready mental access to its members.

In addition to its readiness as mental access, a set once named is singled out as identifiable to both parties of communication. This is particularly important in cases where the subject expression is indefinite in reference, as in (6) and (7).

- (6) Jingju henduo de bu-bu-jiao-chang.
 Beijing Opera many NOM FS-not-let-sing
 'As for Beijing Opera plays, many were not allowed to be performed.'
 (001-N07:2)
- (7) Tamen youxie ne yibufen qingnianren jiu youshihou-r
 They some PART some youths thensometimes-RETRO
jiu kandao ne, zhege zhengqian duo de zhexie-ge,
 then see PART PF make money much NOM these-SUF
 'As for them, some (young people) sometimes just see those who have made more money.'
 (085-H14:5)

In (6), the topic expression *Jingju* 'Beijing Opera plays' is used for generic reference, while the nominalization subject expression refers to many of the plays, without specifying the referents. (7) is similar to (6), in that the subject is also indefinite in reference. What differs (7) from (6) is that the topic expression, by taking the form of a pronoun, refers to some definite entities in the discourse context.

Given the one-to-many property of a set vs. its members, the set-member construction also turns out to be an effective means of discourse organization, as is illustrated in (8).

- (8) *Beijing de siji fanzheng, nage chunji ne,*
 Beijing GEN four seasons in any case PF spring PART
shi-shi-zhege, bi yiqian ne,
 FS-is-PF COMP before PART
shi haoxiang yao wandian-r shide le,
 is seem should a bit later-RETRO like ASP
 ‘When it comes to the four seasons of Beijing, spring seems to come a
 bit later than before.’
 (162-H37:5)

In this example, the sentence-initial topic expression indicates a set of four members and initiates a discourse stretch of ten clauses which flows in order from spring to summer, and from fall to winter. It should be noted that the topic expression occurs only once (i.e., in the example clause), with the other clauses taking the form of subject-predicate or topic-comment. This is actually in agreement with one aspect of subjectivity; that is, an established topic may be offstage but still presupposed as part of the common background of communication. In (8), it is onstage as a discourse organizer and refers the ensuing clauses to the specified frame.

In summary, the set-member construction acquires its name from the semantic relation between the topic and the subject, and it is the semantic relation that predetermines the relative ordering of the two elements. The indefinite information status of some subject expressions offers further support for the unidirectional set-member ordering. When the set-indicating topic functions as a discourse organizer, it needs to be onstage, as opposed to the offstage aspect of subjectivity. It seems that the speaker’s conceptualization of the clausal (and in some cases super-clausal) situation is restrained by the set-member organization.

Some Other Conventional Topic Types

In this section, some conventional topic types are scrutinized to see if they are completely the speaker’s subjective choice. The types included are TIME topics, PLACE topics and chained topics.

TIME topics

A TIME topic refers to a time-indicating expression that is clause-initial and marked off from what remains of the clause with a pause or pause particle. TIME topics are a frequently occurring topic category, mainly used to refer the clausal events to the time scale or the chronological order of the narrative. According to Langacker (1987), time and space are two basic domains of human cognition, meaning that they cannot be fully reduced to another, and of the two, time is “in some sense more fundamental than space” (pp. 148-149). Although not all researchers agree with Langacker in this regard, it is most probably true

that time is more relevant than space to narrative discourse. This is actually reflected in the present corpus, in that TIME topics with 580 instantiations are far more frequently seen than PLACE topics which instantiate 96 times altogether.

Also, as mentioned above, time adverbials such as *once upon a time*, *long long ago*, etc. occur without fail at the very beginning of a narrative. Their discourse-initial position seems to be a matter of conventionalization or repeated entrenchment. There are also Erteschik-Shir's (2007) permanently available topics, as in (9).

- (9) Jiu-xianzai-laishuo ne,
on-now-speaking of PART
bi bie-de danwei ne, haishi cha-yidian-r de.
COMP other-NOM unit PART still bad-a little-RET CSC
'Speaking of the present time, our unit is still a bit worse than others.'
(162-H37:3)

The feature of interest here is that the expression *xianzai* 'now' indicates the time of speaking, an indispensable element of the speech event. Also note that the time topic is framed with *jiu...laishuo* 'speaking of', which is a lexical topic marker accompanied by the pause particle *ne*. The double marking emphasizes the topic-marked time *xianzai* 'now' with respect to other points on the time scale.

In addition to permanently available topics, the TIME topic may also be context-based, as in (10).

- (10) Ranhou ne, *xie* *nage* *biaoyu*,
Then PART write PF slogan
'Then we wrote the slogans.'
(288-N40:3)

In (10), the TIME topic occurs in the middle of a clause serial and is coded in the form of an adverb, indicating the chronological order of the narrated event. It is obvious that the semantics of the topic expression is explicitly related to the preceding discourse by the time order, which is a narrative convention, rather than the speaker's subjective choice.

To sum up, the topic status of time-indicating expressions is not only predetermined by their semantics, but also by its entrenched use in narrative discourse. Moreover, they frequently stay onstage. Then it is arguable whether the TIME topic as a category is entirely subjective in Langacker's sense.

PLACE topics

As the category name suggests, PLACE topics are those place-indicating clause-initial elements. (11) is a prototypical example of PLACE topic, given that the preposition *zai* 'in' is used to precede the place-indicating NP.

Chained topics

To this point, we have seen mainly examples of single topics as reference points. In addition to the one-step mode, the reference point may also operate in a chained manner in one single clause; that is, one reference point may shift the focus of attention to its target, and the target may in turn serve as the reference point for a new target, as in (14).

- (14) Youqi wo-na-laoda ya, zhe xifu-r ne,
 Especially my first child PART, this wife-RETRO PART,
ta jiu youdian-r xiangfa.
 she then a little-RETRO dissidence
 ‘Especially my first child, his wife has some dissidence.’
 (057-H20)

In this example, a reference point chain is observed, which starts from the speaker to her first child, and proceeds to the wife of the first child.

In (15), the entities in the reference point chain are made up of both human and non-human entities.

- (15) Ai, ta-muqin ne, jiushi wo-airen ne,
 PF his mother PART that is my spouse PART
 ai, ta suo congshi de gongzuo a, xianzai kanlai,
 PF she AUX undertake NOM work PART now appear
wanshang xuexi de shi-r bijiao qing yixie.
 evening study NOM thing-RETRO comparatively light some
 ‘As for his mother, that is, my wife, what she’s doing now doesn’t need her to do heavy study work in the evenings for the moment.’
 (057-H20:5)

In this example, the reference point chain consists of four links, i.e., the four underlined elements. Since the previous discourse has had the wife’s child as the topic, the reference point chain starts from the child (coded in the pronominal form *ta* ‘he’) in the first topic expression *ta-muqin* ‘his mother’. The second topic expression, like appositives generally, has a clarification purpose. Then attention is extended from the human entity to her work (i.e., the possessor-possessed relationship), and finally to a section of her work (whole-part).

A closer examination of (14) and (15) shows that the chaining is unidirectional and that the reverse order is most probably unacceptable. In (14), the chain starts from the situationally available first person speaker and through two steps ends with the wife of the first child of the speaker. The chain in (15) begins with the already activated entity, i.e., the speaker’s child, and closes at a section of the child’s mother’s work. Thus, the general rule is for the chain to proceed from the more accessible to the less accessible.

Nonetheless, this unidirectional chaining rule does not necessarily imply that the initial focus must be discourse-old or situationally available to the speech event as is the case in (14) and (15). In (16) we see a new entity occurring in the topic position.

- (16) You yi-jia ha, jiushi, ta zhege gonggongpopo ba,
 Have one-family PART PF her this parents-in-law PART
dou ting nenggande,
 both very capable CSC
 ‘There was a family, and the parents-in-law of the woman were both very capable.’
 (057-H20:5)

This utterance occurs at the beginning of a story told by the speaker for illustration purposes. The presentative *you* ‘have’ in the utterance-initial position indicates that the referent is neither definite nor specific. But the presentative construction itself is an efficient means for introducing new entities into discourse (e.g., Du Bois, 1987). When it is marked by the ensuing pause particle *ha*, the newly introduced entity is promoted to topichood. Once the entity has been established in the mental space of the hearer, it can function as the reference point for the ensuing target entities. Of course, the successful establishment of association between the two underlined expressions presupposes such world or encyclopaedic knowledge that parents-in-law live together with the young couple in some households.

Given the unidirectional feature, reference point chains are in themselves reflections of dynamic conceptualization, just as Langacker has noted:

Invoking a reference point relation is thus an inherently dynamic process involving a shift in focus from the more readily accessible reference point to a target accessed through it. Since the target is then in focus, it has the potential to function in turn as reference point in its own right, giving access to another target. We thus encounter *chains* of reference point relations... (Langacker, 1999, pp. 363-364)

Given the dynamic nature of conceptualization and the accessibility constraint on topic sequencing, perhaps more quest needs to be made into the phenomenon of topic before limiting it as a category to subjective reference point.

Summary

The three types of topics examined in this section all reveal objectivity in functioning as conceptual reference points. The TIME topic is constrained not only by its semantics as a basic domain, but also by narrative conventions. Likewise, place-indicating topics also observe the same constrains on TIME topics, with some boundary cases

resembling certain intrinsic components of the clausal process. Multiple topics that are organized in the chain mode are further constrained by the accessibility of the topic entities. In one word, the speaker does not have complete freedom in choosing reference points.

CONCLUSIONS

Langacker (1991) makes a binary distinction between “subjective” and “objective” reference point, and takes topic as subjective reference point. Given the multitudinal manifestations in naturally occurring Beijing Mandarin, we have seen that some topic types can function as objective reference points for their target comments.

This paper has focused on two TC construction types, namely the double-subject construction and the set-member construction, in a spoken corpus of Beijing Mandarin. The double-subject construction stands as a counterexample to Langacker’s subjective reading of topic as conceptual reference point, in that the topic and the subject manifest the objective relationship of part-whole. The challenge from the set-member construction comes from the fact that no swap is allowed between the topic and subject expression, which consequently calls into question the subjective conceptualization of the discourse situation. In other words, human conceptualization is not free from constraints; people tend to retrieve something by means of the set it belongs to.

Following this, the researcher has highlighted two semantically defined categories of topics, i.e., TIME topics and PLACE topics. It is pointed out that the speaker’s choice of such topics is constrained by their semantics as basic domains and narrative conventions. Some boundary cases are not peripheral to the clausal process; instead, they may be intrinsic components and function as the observed in construal, thus functioning more objectively than subjectively.

The mode of reference point organization in real-time data also poses as a problem for Langacker’s subjective reference point characterization of topic as a category. In the chain mode of multiple topic sequencing, unidirectionality is observed. It seems that the accessibility hierarchy has prevailed over the speaker’s subjectivity in accessing his mental target.

It is true that topics as discussed here are all marked, either by the pause and/or pause particle or by the construction type, as a result of which they are all onstage. However, this is not to deny the existence of offstage topics in Mandarin. Instead, they abound in the Beijing Corpus, especially at the super-clausal level. It is also obvious that topics are mainly discussed at the clause level in this paper, while Langacker’s topics cover the whole range from discourse topics to clause-internal ones. We may very well anticipate that topics at different levels function somewhat differently, but given the topic types elaborated here, their semantics in particular, there is no denying the fact that there are instantiations of topic in spoken Beijing Mandarin that seem to defy Langacker’s subjective interpretation. It might be good to see the multitude of topics manifest themselves in a diverse manner in naturally occurring discourse.

REFERENCES

- Brown, G. & Yule, G. (1983). *Discourse analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chafe, W. L. (1979). The flow of thought and the flow of language. In T. Givón (Ed.), *Discourse and syntax* (pp. 159-181). New York: Academic Press.
- Chafe, W. L. (1987). Cognitive constraints on information flow. In R. Tomlin (Ed.), *Coherence and grounding in discourse* (pp. 21-51). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Chafe, W. L. (1994). *Discourse, consciousness, and time: The flow and displacement of conscious experience in speaking and writing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Chao, Y-R. (1968). *A grammar of spoken Chinese*. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Chen, P. (2004). Hanyu shuangxiang mingci ju yu huati-chenshu jiegou [Double nominal constructions and topic-comment constructions in Mandarin]. *Zhongguo Yuwen [Journal of Chinese Philology]*, 303, 493-507.
- Chu, C. C. (1998). *A discourse grammar of Mandarin Chinese*. New York/Washington: Peter Lang.
- Cruse, A. (2006). *A glossary of semantics and pragmatics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Erteschik-Shir, N. (2007). *Information structure*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Keenan, E. L. (1976). Towards a universal definition of "subject". In C. N. Li (Ed.), *Subject and topic* (pp. 303-333). New York: Academic Press.
- Langacker, R. W. (1987). *Foundations of cognitive grammar, Vol. 1*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Langacker, R. W. (1991). *Foundations of cognitive grammar, Vol. 2*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Langacker, R. W. (1993). Reference-point constructions. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 4, 1-38.
- Langacker, R. W. (1998). Topic, subject, and possessor. *Linguistic Notes from La Jolla*, 19, 1-28.
- Langacker, R. W. (1999). *Grammar and conceptualization*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Langacker, R. W. (2007). *Ten lectures on cognitive grammar*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Li, C. N. & Thompson, S. A. (1976). Subject and topic: A new typology of language. In C. N. Li (Ed.), *Subject and topic* (pp. 457-489). New York: Academic Press.
- Li, C. N. & Thompson, S. A. (1981). *Mandarin Chinese: A functional reference grammar*. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Tao, H. (1996). *Units in Mandarin conversation*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Tsao, F. (1979). *A functional study of topic in Chinese: The first step toward discourse analysis*. Taipei: Student Book Co.
- van Hoek, K. (1997). *Anaphora and conceptual structure*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press.