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ON DEGREES OF GIVENNESS: AN ANALYSIS OF NOUN PHRASES IN SOME CHINESE CONSTRUCTIONS

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1. Introduction. Many linguists have treated given versus new information as a binary distinction. However, in recent years other linguists have realized the problems of that distinction. They began to consider the degrees of givenness. Among those arguing for degrees of givenness are Jones & Jones 1979, Givon 1987, Gundel 1989, Prince 1981, 1992. Prince (1981) argues that NPs which represent discourse entities are impossible to be grouped into 'two homogeneous and discrete sets' (234). Some NPs are felt to be familiar to the hearer, but they are familiar in a number of different ways; some are somehow felt to be unfamiliar to the hearer, yet they are new in different ways. She therefore proposes a taxonomy of assumed familiarity which consists of three big categories of New, Inferable, and Evoked.

Her category New is subdivided into Brand-new and Unused. In the case of Brand-new the hearer has to create a new entity in order to comprehend a text. In the case of Unused, the hearer may be assumed to have the corresponding entity in his/her model. Unused entities are, according to Prince (1992), Discourse-new but Hearer-old;¹ that is, they may not be textually evoked at the moment of utterance, but the hearer is familiar with the entities as in (1) from Prince (1981:233). If the utterances are in a discourse initial position, *Noam Chomsky* is Unused and *a bus* is Brand-new:

- (1) a. Noam Chomsky went to Penn.
b. I got on a bus yesterday and the driver was drunk.

Brand-new entities are further subdivided into Brand-new Anchored and Unanchored. An NP in Brand-new Anchored category is linked to another discourse entity by means of another NP. For example, the hearer creates a new entity *a guy* in a *guy I work with* by relating it to the old entity I, the speaker, which makes it seem less new than entities without such an anchor.

The category Inferable contains Noncontaining Inferable and Containing Inferable. Prince (1981) defines inferable entities as those that the hearer is assumed to be able to infer through logical reasoning. Later she (1992) further discusses Inferable and Containing Inferable and makes a distinction between the two subcategories. An entity is inferable if the speaker is sure that the hearer can, based on his background knowledge, relate a Discourse-new entity to a 'trigger' entity which is Discourse-old (evoked), and therefore able to infer the entity in question as in (2) from Prince (1992:305) where *the door* is inferable from *the Bastille*:

- (2) He passed by the Bastille and the door was painted purple.

Containing Inferable works in the same way as Inferable except that 'the entity which triggers the inference is not, as in the case of the Inferable, necessarily in the prior discourse, but is rather *within the NP itself*' (Prince 1992:307).

(3) The door of the Bastille was painted purple. (Prince 1992:307)

Finally the category of Evoked is subdivided into Textually Evoked and Situationally Evoked. It is an Evoked entity if the NP representing it has its coreferent in the prior discourse. 'Situationally Evoked entities represent discourse participants and salient features of the extratextual context' (Prince 1981:236). Prince then offers the following familiarity scale: Evoked > Unused > Inferable > Containing Inferable > Brand New Anchored > Brand New.

This paper reports the result of an application of Prince's taxonomy of assumed familiarity into the study of some Chinese NPs and argues that although Prince's taxonomy works well for some cases, for other cases, it needs to be refined. Specifically, Prince's category of Evoked cannot distinguish different levels and degrees of givenness among evoked NPs in Mandarin Chinese.

2. Data. The NPs discussed here represent four construction types. They include subject NPs of the motion verb lai 'come', and NPs in the you 'exist', ba, and bei constructions. The data for this study were drawn from twelve published short stories and one novel. I included all NPs in these constructions in the twelve stories and in Part 1 of the novel, which consisted of 101 pages. In addition, I included all subject NPs of lai in the entire novel, which was 353 pages long, and in two published audio tapes of children's stories. The examples were analyzed according to Prince's criteria, and put into different categories according to Prince's taxonomy. The number and percentage of occurrence in each category were recorded.

3. Subjects of lai. The verb lai 'come' in this construction is an intransitive verb signaling motion. The NPs involved in the motion are subjects and are found to be both in the postverbal and preverbal position. The data show that a difference in position signals a difference in the NPs' definiteness-status and degree of familiarity. A typical example is given in (4), where word order variation signals definiteness (Chinese has no articles).

- (4) a. ren lai le.
 people come PFV (Perfective)
 'The person has come.'
- b. lai ren le.
 come people PFV
 'There is somebody coming.'

The NP ren in (4a) has definite status; to make the sentence comprehensible the speaker must assume that the hearer is able to locate the person the speaker is talking about. So the utterance is appropriate when ren has been evoked in the prior discourse. The NP ren in (4b) has indefinite status and the hearer is not able to locate the person in his discourse model.

Chinese, as Li and Thompson (1981) and Gundel (1988) indicate, is a topic prominent language. Sentence initial position is usually reserved for the topic. Since Chinese requires definite NPs or generics in the topic position, we would expect that only NPs representing the leftmost entities in Prince's familiarity scale would appear before verb lai and only NPs signaling the rightmost entities would appear after lai.

Table 1. Analysis of Postverbal & Preverbal lai NPs (by Number and Percentage)

	Postverbal NPs (12)		Preverbal NPs (39)	
Evoked				
E	0	0.0%	27	69.2%
E + A	0	0.0%	4	10.3%
Total	0	0.0%	31	79.5%
Unused	0	0.0%	7	18.0%
Inferable				
Ic	0	0.0%	1	2.6%
New				
BN	7	58.3%	0	0.0%
BNa	1	8.3%	0	0.0%
BN + A	4	33.3%	0	0.0%
Total	12	100.0%	0	0.0%

*Notations as follows: BN=Brand-new BNa=Brand-new Anchored U=Unused I=Inferable Ic=Containing Inferable E=Evoked Es=Situationally Evoked A=Attribute

The results confirm this expectation. Of 51 naturally occurring tokens, 39 NPs are preverbal and 12 postverbal. As expected, only NPs representing the leftmost entities appear before lai. Most of these are textually evoked, some in the category of Unused, and one in Containing Inferable. The 12 NPs that appear after lai are all New, with some Brand-new and others Brand-new Anchored.

31 NPs (79.5%) out of 39 are textually evoked, which shows that NPs representing Discourse-old entities have the strongest tendency to be placed before motion verb lai as in (5).

- (5) yitian daoshang lai le yi wei
 one-day island-on come PFV one CL (Classifier)

guairen. zhe guairen yi lai ya,
 strange-man this strange-man once come RF (Reduced forcefulness),
 dahai jiu xianqi le dalang.
 big-sea then surge PFV big-wave
 'One day a strange man came to the island. Once this strange man
 came big waves began to surge on the sea.' (Small Flying Dragon)

The strange man in (5) is first introduced into the discourse by means of an indefinite NP being placed postverbally. Once it is textually evoked it becomes a topic NP in preverbal position.

The NPs placed after lai represent new entities and have numerals plus classifiers as a signal of indefiniteness as in (6):

- (6) a. yingmian guo lai yi wei mantou baifa
 toward-face over come one CL all-over-head white-hair
 de laoyeye.
 NOM (Nominalizer) old-grandpa
 'An old man with white hair all over his head walked toward us.'
 (Small Flying Dragon)
- b. you lai liang ming tanjian de.
 more come two CL visit-prisoner NOM
 'Here came two more persons visiting the prisoners.'
 (Zhonghua Erni 12)

The data further show that highly salient entities with a form of pronominalization occur preverbally without exception as in (7). Postverbal pronominalization is ungrammatical in the lai construction as this position is reserved for unfamiliar entities only.

- (7) a. ta lai le, hu you zou le;
 she come PFV, suddenly again walk-away PFV
 ta zou le, \emptyset hu you lai le.
 she walk-away PFV, \emptyset suddenly again come PFV
 'She came, and suddenly walked away; she walked away and
 suddenly came back again.' (Xing: 85)
- b. *lai ta le, hu you zou le;
 come she PFV, suddenly again walked-away PFV

As shown in Table 1, seven preverbal NPs (18%) fall into the category of Unused. Prince's category of Unused can explain very well why some NPs representing Discourse-new and Hearer-old entities can appear before verb lai, while they are ungrammatical in postverbal position. An Unused entity is one which the speaker assumes that the hearer has in his/her discourse model although

it has not been textually evoked in the prior discourse. According to Prince's familiarity scale, NPs in the Unused category have a very high degree of familiarity, next only to evoked NPs. This explains why Unused NPs can appear in a topic position not in a postverbal position as in (8).

- (8) a. "ni meimei lai le."
 your younger-sister come PFV
 "shi ma?" wo shifen jingcha "nei ge meimei?"
 BE Q I greatly surprised which CL younger-sister
 "Your younger sister has come."
 "Really," I was greatly surprised, "Which sister?" (Xing: 63)
- b. * lai ni meimei le
 come your younger-sister PFV

Example (8) appears at the very beginning of a dialogue. The hearer did not have this entity in mind at that moment, but obviously his own sister is familiar to him. Thus the speaker utters this as an initial sentence of a dialogue, assuming that the hearer can locate without mistake the entity the speaker is referring to. (8b) is unacceptable because an NP with high degree of general familiarity is placed in a position for unfamiliar NPs.

The seven cases of Unused NPs in preverbal position would have to be categorized as New if we define given as what is in the listener's consciousness at the moment of speech and new as not in the listener's consciousness at that moment, as is observed by Prince (1981). Under this analysis it is difficult to explain why new entities appear in topic position. Prince's distinction between Unused and New better handles the Chinese data.

4. The you Construction. The existential you construction has a subtype involving two verbs: you + NP + VP:

- (9) you yi ge ren zai waimian jiao men
 exist one CL person at outside call door
 'There's someone outside knocking at the door.' (Li & Thompson: 510)

The existential verb you has the function of introducing a new entity into discourse, so the NPs representing the entity are usually indefinite. The second verb describes this indefinite direct object.

Table 2. Analysis of you NPs (by Number and Percentage)

<u>you</u> NPs (103)		
Evoked	0	0.0%
Inferable		
I	3	2.9%
Ic	8	7.8%
I + A	2	1.9%
Total	13	12.6%
New		
BN	74	71.8%
BN + A	16	15.5%
Total	90	87.4%

Ninety NPs (87.4%) fall into the category of New. This figure makes sense as it correlates the levels of familiarity of you NPs with the NPs' property of being introduced into the discourse for the first time. Further elaboration and description of the NPs depend on their succeeding verbs. In the discourse the you NPs serve as cataphoric grounding as in (10).

- (10) *huran you yang dongxi jielian reng le guolai* \emptyset
 suddenly exist CL something continuously throw CRS across-come \emptyset
da zhong le ta de tui, \emptyset shi ta shuai le
 hit right PFV his NOM leg \emptyset cause him fall CRS (Currently relevant)
yi jiao.
 one CL
 'Suddenly some things continuously came flying over, and hit him right in the leg, causing him to fall down.' (Cheng: 16)

In (10), *yang dongxi*, which is a new NP following the verb you, starts a topic chain which subsequently takes the form of zero anaphora in the succeeding discourse.

Although the majority of you NPs represent new entities, some are less unfamiliar. Prince's category of Inferable captures this difference. The Inferable category enables us to see different degrees of familiarity. NPs in this category show some connections with evoked, Discourse-old entities and therefore they do not sound totally new to the hearer. Without the category of Inferable we would have to group all the you NPs as homogeneously new, thus failing to capture the different degrees of givenness. Especially significant in this construction is the Containing Inferable as in (11).

- (11) diaocha zhizhong, jing you 90% de haizi
 investigation during to-one's-surprise exist 90% NOM kids
 gaosu wo ...
 tell me
 'During the investigation, there were 90% of the kids telling me ...'
 (Zhonghua Ernü 30)

In (11) *90% de haizi* '90 percent of the kids' falls into the category of Containing Inferable. *The kids* is the container and *90%* is contained. The evoked entity *kids* functions as a link contributing to familiarity.

Prince's Inferable category also captures paired relationships among NPs, such as doctor and patient, buyer and seller. When one is textually or situationally evoked the other can be inferred and therefore will not appear as a surprise to the hearer, as in (12).

- (12) a. shichang you maike tingjian shi wan le ... xin yi
 often exist buyer hear moment late CRS heart one
 ji jiu ... han qilai: aizi! li dougao!
 hurry then shout up Dwarf green cake
 'Often some buyers found it too late when they heard him ... then
 they would hurriedly shout, Dwarf! green bean cake!'
 (Xiaoshuo Yubao: 73)
- b. you huanzhe lai kan bing le. wo ba xin sai jin chouti.
 exist patient come see illness CRS I BA letter put in drawer
 'There is a patient coming to see the doctor. I put the letter into
 a drawer.' (Xiaoshuo Yubao: 87)

In (12a) the whole previous context is about a Dwarf who sells green cakes for a living, so the seller is situationally evoked. The seller becomes a trigger entity which is not Hearer-new and the buyer's relationship with the trigger entity makes it inferable. In (12b) the whole context establishes the first person narrator in the story as a doctor who was on a night shift. The patient who comes to see her seems to be expected.

The finding of less unfamiliar entities represented by existential NPs as mentioned above encourages us to take a new look at this subtype of the existential construction in Chinese, especially when it is examined within a discourse context. In (12a) and (b), buyers and patients are not new foci; rather they are expectable. In contrast, the subsequent information that describes the hearing in (12a) and coming to see the doctor in (12b) are new foci. The degree of familiarity embodied in this paired relationship is greater than that of other you NPs. Prince's inferable category captures this difference.

5. The ba NP. The most basic word order in Chinese is SVO. In the ba construction a direct object is fronted and placed after ba and before the verb: subject + ba direct object + verb as in (13):

- (13) ni ba ta de _____ yisi jiang chu lai le
 you BA 3sg GEN (Genitive) meaning talk exit come CRS
 'You have explained what s/he meant.' (Li & Thompson: 463)

Li and Thompson (1981) claim that the ba NP is generally definite, specific or generic. For a direct object to be fronted as a ba NP, the object must be very prominent, gaining immediate attention in the discourse. Moreover, the more the verb elaborates or specifies how the direct object is being handled, the more appropriate it is to use the ba construction. From the perspective of topic-comment relations, some linguists (e.g. Wei 1989) argue that ba construction marks the direct object as a secondary topic. The direct object is fronted for certain pragmatic purposes such as emphasis and topic functions. Fahn (1993) argues that ba NPs share many properties with topics. Bearing all these properties of ba NPs in mind, we would expect them to represent entities at the leftmost end of Prince's familiarity scale.

Table 3. Analysis of ba NPs (by Number and Percentage)

<u>ba</u> NPs (125)		
Evoked		
E	65	50.0%
Es	1	0.8%
E + A	14	11.2%
Total	80	64.0%
Unused	3	2.4%
Inferable		
I	12	9.6%
I + A	12	9.6%
Ic	6	4.8%
Ic + A	2	1.6%
Total	32	25.6%
New		
BN	1	0.8%
BN + A	7	5.6%
BNa	2	1.6%
Total	10	8.0%

In 125 naturally occurring tokens, 80 (64%) fall into the category of Evoked. Although they are all textually evoked NPs, they express different degrees of givenness in different ways. The different devices the NPs use to express such degrees seem to follow very well Givon's (1987) scale of topic continuity devices:

MOST PREDICTABLE TOPIC

- a. zero anaphora
- b. unstressed/clitic pronouns
- c. stressed/independent pronouns
- d. definite nouns
- e. modified definite nouns

LEAST PREDICTABLE TOPIC (Givon: 177)

(No zero anaphora is found in this construction). Degrees of givenness vary. Different degrees are expressed by syntactic marking, such as by pronouns, definite nouns, short modified nouns, and long modified nouns, ranging from definite NPs preceded by a long modifier to overt pronouns. Prince's category of including Evoked and Evoked plus attribute does not seem to be able to make a distinction between already-established salient entities and entities no longer in active status; that is, the distinction between active and 'semi-active' entities or the distinction between a close-by coreferent and a distant coreferent. Chafe (1992) states that 'Sooner or later, every active idea loses its active status ... When an idea ceases to be fully active it becomes for a time semi-active. This is a state that functions as a holding area for ideas that may later be reactivated as they reenter the discourse' (270). The data show that for a semi-active idea to reenter the discourse it needs long modifiers to help the hearer to ease the process of retrieving the information which is in its holding status in his/her discourse model, as in (14).

14. wo die ba li fu xianzhang gei wang changzhang xie de
 my father BA Li vice county-leader give Wang director write GEN
 tiaozhi nachu lai, qing wang changzhang bangmang. ta ba
 note take-out come ask Wang director help he BA
 "ren naodai cha dianer da chu le gou naozi" de qingxing
 people head miss little beat out CRS dog head GEN situation
 you shuo yi bian.
 again say one time
 'My father took out the note written by Vice County Director Li to
 factory director Wang, and asked Wang for help. He then described
 again how the farmers' heads were beaten like dogs' heads in a fight
 for the chemical fertilizer...' (Xiaoshuo Yubao 39)

In (14), although tiaozhi 'note' is evoked, the second mention occurs some distance after the first, that is, 97 sentences or 18 paragraphs later. The use of a definite noun tiaozhi alone can cause confusion or takes longer to locate the referent. The same is true of NP qingxing 'situation'.

Moreover, when a pronominal is used as in (15b), not only has its referential salience been established, but it is also the center of the discourse topic and gains immediate attention, being in the hearer's consciousness:

15. henjiu yilai wo yizhi xiang zhe ba (a) zhe duan he
 very-long ever-since I always thinking DUR BA this CL with
bianzhu, Luobinxun yiqi shi de jingli yi wengxue
 Bianzhu, Robinson together moment GEN experience use literature
 de xingshi biaoqian chu lai, ceng ji ci bu
 GEN way present exit come ever several times not
 shizhen de shi zhe ba (b) ta jilu zai gaozhi shang ...
 lose-truthfulness Adv try DUR BA it record at paper on
 'For a long time I have been thinking of recording my stay with
 Bianzhu and Robinson in a story form, and I have tried several times
 to record it on paper...' (Xiaoshuo Yubao 88)

The above examples show that although certain NPs have been homogeneously put into the category of Evoked they are not homogeneously given. What they demonstrate is different levels of givenness. In Prince's taxonomy, the category of Textually Evoked does not account for the difference between the use of definite nouns and overt pronouns.

6. The bei Construction and Zero Anaphora. The bei construction is a kind of adversative 'passive' expressing unfortunate consequences in which the direct object is fronted to function as a topic. The basic formula for the bei construction is: NP1 + bei + NP2 + VP as in (16). My analysis focuses on the fronted direct object -- NP1 -- which I term the bei NP.

- (16) ta bei jiejie da le.
 3sg by elder-sister beat PFV
 'He/She was beaten by his/her elder sister.'

As is predicted, a majority of the bei NPs -- 118 (81.4%) out of 145 -- fall into the category of Evoked. These NPs have been promoted into topic position by passivization, and as Gundel et al. (1989) claim, shared familiarity appears to be a necessary precondition for topichood. Of 118 tokens, 50 tokens (42.4% of the Evoked) use zero anaphora. Again the data show that within the category of Evoked there are different levels of givenness, with some NPs representing more given entities than others.

Table 4. Analysis of *bei* NPs (by Number and Percentage)

<i>bei</i> NPs (145)		
Evoked		
E	118	81.4%
Inferable		
I	8	5.5%
I + A	7	4.8%
Ic	1	0.7%
Ic + A	1	0.7%
Total	17	11.7%
New		
BN	2	1.4%
BN + A	4	2.8%
BNa	4	2.8%
Total	10	7.0%

As Gundel et al. (1989) state, ‘the most highly activated entities are not only in the speaker and hearer’s awareness, but are also at the center of attention at the current point in the discourse’ (90). This status ‘is a necessary condition for null anaphora’ (90). My data show that in the *bei* construction when zero anaphora is used the hearer must have a very conscious awareness of that entity and realize its relevance in the discourse as a topic.

- (17) a. \emptyset *bei* lingru, \emptyset *bei* zaige, \emptyset *bei* ansuan. qi feng
 \emptyset BEI insulted \emptyset BEI oppressed \emptyset BEI plotted-against chilly wind
ku yu zhi zhong, yi bai wushi tian piaoyao er qu.
bitter rain of midst one hundred fifty day float then go
‘(He) had been insulted, oppressed, and plotted against; one hundred
and fifty days passed by in the midst of chilly wind and bitter rain.’
(Xing: 62)

- b. *ta* *bei* lingru, *ta* *bei* zaige, *ta* *bei* ansuan.
he BEI insulted he BEI oppressed he BEI plotted-against

Example (17) is the first sentence in Chapter 5, Part 1, in the novel *Snow*. When the referent is highly activated and is in the hearer’s consciousness zero anaphora can even appear in chapter initial position. The familiarity of the referent of the zero subject is so taken for granted that it does not need to be overtly expressed, and this allows extra attention to be drawn toward the forms of suffering the referent underwent. In contrast, with an overt pronoun subject as in (b), that referent needs to be kept in view and therefore it can’t be taken for granted.

In Prince's Taxonomy, the category of Textually Evoked would have to cover both the use of zero and of pronouns in Chinese, thus failing to distinguish when each is appropriate or preferred in discourse. It thus seems that we need to subdivide this category further to show that the use of zero vs. an overt pronouns in Chinese involves different degrees of familiarity. Although Prince considered her scale to consist of discrete categories, what this may suggest is that it is best to view the scale as a continuum.

7. Conclusion. In this paper, I discussed NPs in four Chinese constructions and showed that they involve different levels of familiarity. Prince's category of Unused works well to explain such differences in degrees of givenness, especially in the *lai* construction. The category of Unused distinguishes Discourse-new and Hearer-new entities from Discourse-old and Hearer-old entities and therefore different levels of familiarity. Prince's category of Inferable plays the same role as Unused, distinguishing Brand-new entities from less unfamiliar ones. Specifically, it allows us to distinguish information statuses of different NPs in the same construction type, i.e. the *you* construction.

However, to account for the Chinese data Prince's taxonomy needs to be refined, especially the category of Evoked. The Chinese data show that NPs within the Evoked category express different degrees of givenness. In Chinese this distinction is linguistically significant since it is necessary to distinguish those evoked NPs expressed as definite NPs and overt pronouns from those represented in the form of zero anaphora.

NOTES

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¹ Prince (1992) proposes four categories to describe old/new information statuses: Hearer-old, Hearer-new, Discourse-old, and Discourse-new. Hearer-old and Hearer-new define what is assumed by the speaker to be or not to be already known to the hearer, while Discourse-old and Discourse-new signal whether an entity has already been evoked in the prior discourse or not.

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