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Objects and nothingness: Applicative-licensed nominal ellipsis

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Abstract. Existing accounts of Mandarin elided objects, such as true empty category (TEC), provide broad data coverage but face empirical and theoretical challenges. Observations show that some of the generalizations behind TEC may be refined, and that TEC overgenerates with objects of prepositions and object control verbs. This work proposes an applicative-licensed nominal ellipsis (ALNE) analysis, correlating elided objects with applicative constructions. Addressing TEC's overgeneration and nonlocal economy, ALNE offers a robust theoretical alternative, introducing a previously unrecognized ellipsis type.

Keywords. applicative; nominal ellipsis; null object construction; PRO; true empty category; Mandarin Chinese

1. Introduction. An exemplary case of form-meaning mismatches is elliptical constructions, where meanings are conveyed despite the absence of overt phonological materials. While canonical ellipses, such as VP ellipsis and sluicing, have been extensively studied across diverse constructions and languages, this paper argues that certain patterns in Mandarin motivate a novel ellipsis that has not been previously proposed.

Mandarin is known for allowing null elements across a wide range of structural domains (Huang 1982; Chao 1987), including null subjects and objects, as well as projections of varying sizes. This paper focuses on null objects, which I, following previous work (Huang 1992b; Li 2002; Liu 2014; Pan 2019), distinguish into two types that correspond to Hankamer & Sag's (1976) deep and surface anaphora.

Consider examples like (1–2), where a null object's interpretation is derived either from the context or from a syntactic antecedent.[1] These two types of null object constructions differ crucially in the availability of indefinite and sloppy readings. The phenomena of interest concern the construction that *does* allow indefinite and sloppy readings (2). I refer to this type of null objects as *elided objects* and direct the readers to Huang 1982, 1984, Huang & Yang 2024, and many others for an extensive discussion of the other type (1).

(1) (Li 2002:73)
(John looks at **his date** with deep affection.)

Bill ye xihuan **e**.
Bill also like
Strict: 'Bill also likes **[John's date]**.'
~~Sloppy: 'Bill also likes **[Bill's date]**.'~~

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1 Glossing abbreviations follow the Leipzig Glossing Rules.

(2) (Huang 1992b:64)
John kanjian-le **ta de mama**. Mary ye kanjian-le **e**.
John see-PFV 3SG POSS mother Mary also see-PFV
Strict: 'John$_i$ saw **his$_{i/k}$ mother**. Mary$_j$ also saw **[his$_{i/k}$ mother]**.'
Sloppy: 'John$_i$ saw **his$_i$ mother**. Mary$_j$ also saw **[her$_j$ mother]**.'

Several analyses of Mandarin elided objects have been suggested: for example, free empty category (Xu 1986, 2003; Zhang & Tang 2013), V-stranding VP ellipsis (Huang 1992b; Li 2002; Liu 2014; Pan 2019), and argument ellipsis (Cheng 2013; Pan 2019). (See also Li & Wei 2023, Simpson 2023, etc. for critiques of the aforementioned approaches.) Among these, the *true empty category* (TEC) approach (Li 2005, 2007, 2014; Aoun & Li 2008; Li & Wei 2023), summarized in (3), offers the broadest empirical coverage.

(3) *TEC approach*

a. A TEC is a last resort that can only be introduced where no empty categories can be.
b. A TEC has a D categorial feature and an uninterpretable Case feature.
c. A TEC does not have any other syntactic feature; most crucially, it does not have thematic features.
d. A TEC acquires its content via LF copying (e.g., Oku 1998).

This paper demonstrates the empirical and theoretical challenges that the TEC approach faces, and against this background, it proposes a novel analysis dubbed *applicative-licensed nominal ellipsis* (ALNE), illustrated in (4).

(4) *Applicative-licensed nominal ellipsis*
Mary ye [$_{\text{ApplP}}$ [$_{\text{NP}}$ ~~ta~~ ~~de~~ ~~mama~~] [$_{\text{Appl}^0}$ $\varnothing_{[\text{E}]}$] [$_{\text{VP}}$ kanjian-le]].
Mary also 3SG POSS mother see-PFV

The main idea is that verbs in Mandarin can optionally select a null Appl^0 that is subject to the same selectional constraints as overt applicatives. This null Appl^0 carries an [E] feature, which projects up and deletes the specifier of the ApplP at PF, provided that there exists an appropriate antecedent that satisfies identity constraints. This approach draws a correlation between constructions that allow elided objects and those that license applicative objects, attempting to provide a unified explanation for the observed distribution of Mandarin elided objects.

Section 2 establishes the empirical foundation. Section 3 lays out the theoretical implementation of TEC and highlights its limitations. Section 4 correlates elided objects with applicative constructions and spells out the full ALNE analysis. Section 5 concludes.

2. Empirical foundation. I begin by presenting the empirical foundation for both the TEC and ALNE approaches, proceeding in a comparative manner. For each piece of data, I briefly discuss how the two approaches account for it.

2.1. SUBJECT-OBJECT ASYMMETRY. The first point to address is the subject-object asymmetry. Specifically, the question arises as to why null subjects cannot exhibit some of the properties observed with null objects — namely, why null subjects fail to show the effects of surface anaphora. This asymmetry is illustrated in (5–6): null objects allow both indefinite and sloppy readings, whereas null subjects do not.

(5) *Indefinite reading* (Li & Wei 2023:14)

a. *Null subject:* ✗
Ta kandao **yi ge keren** dian-le longxia. Wo (ye) kandao *(**yi ge keren**) (ye) dian-le longxia.
3SG see one CLF guest order-PFV lobster 1SG also see one CLF guest also order-PFV lobster
'He saw that **a guest** ordered lobster. I (also) saw that **a guest** (also) ordered lobster.'

b. *Null object:* ✓
Ta kandao Zhangsan dailai-le **yi ge keren**. Wo (ye) kandao Lisi (ye) dailai-le (**yi ge keren**).
3SG see Zhangsan bring-PFV one CLF guest 1SG also see Lisi also bring-PFV one CLF guest
'He saw that Zhangsan brought **a guest**. I (also) saw that Lisi (also) brought **a guest**.'

In (5b), the null object has an interpretation where two instances of syntactically identical indefinite noun phrases refer to different entities, which is unavailable for null subjects (5a).

(6) *Sloppy reading* (Li & Wei 2023:15)

a. *Null subject:* ✗
Zhangsan [yinwei **ta de erzi** jiao-guo shuxue] hen gaoxing. Lisi [yinwei **e** jiao-guo yuyanxue] hen deyi.
Zhangsan because 3SG POSS son teach-EXP math very happy Lisi because teach-EXP linguistics very proud
'Zhangsan$_i$ is happy because **his$_i$ son** has taught math. Lisi$_j$ is proud because **[he$_j$/*his$_j$ son]** has taught linguistics.'

b. *Null object:* ✓
Zhangsan [yinwei wo jiao-guo **ta de erzi**] hen gaoxing. Lisi [yinwei wo mei jiao-guo **e**] hen bu gaoxing.
Zhangsan because 1SG teach-EXP 3SG POSS son very happy Lisi because 1SG not.PFV teach-EXP very not happy.
'Zhangsan$_i$ is happy because I have taught **his$_i$ son**. Lisi$_j$ is not happy because I have not taught **[his$_j$ son]**.'

In (6b), the null object allows a sloppy interpretation, where the pronoun contained within the missing object is coindexed with the matrix subject. By contrast, the null subject in (6a) is obligatorily interpreted as referring to some salient entity in the context, such as the matrix subject or a strict reference previously mentioned, thus failing to tolerate the sloppy reading.

The TEC approach adopts Huang's (1982) claim that the empty categories (i.e., PRO, pro, DP trace, and *wh*-trace) recognized in the Government and Binding (Chomsky 1981) framework are also available in Mandarin, with PRO/pro requiring licensing by the closest c-commanding DP under the Generalized Control Rule (GCR) as stated in (7).

(7) *Generalized Control Rule* (Huang 1992b:58)
Coindex an empty pronominal with the closest nominal element.

This, combined with the disjointness requirement on pronouns (i.e., Binding Principle B), prevents PRO and pro from occupying the object position: the GCR mandates that an object PRO or pro be coindexed with the closest c-commanding DP in the clause, which would often be the subject, while Binding Principle B requires disjoint reference between the two. As a result, when null objects are not derived from movement (DP trace or *wh*-trace), they cannot be any of the four types of empty category and default to TEC, the last resort mechanism. This is not the case for null subjects, as they do not face a conflict between the GCR and Binding Principle B, allowing them to be PRO or pro and thus avoiding the need for a last resort.

In contrast, under the ALNE approach, the subject-object asymmetry observed above arises from the absence of subject-introducing applicatives in Mandarin. Since subjects cannot be introduced by applicatives, they are not eligible for this particular type of ellipsis.

2.2. POSSIBLE ELIDED OBJECTS. The empirical domain of elided objects is not limited to simple transitives. In a double object construction (DOC), both the direct object and the indirect object can be null and allow indefinite and sloppy readings:

(8) *DOC* (Li 2014:58)

a. Wo gei-le yi ge nanhai **yi zhang piao**. Ta gei-le yi ge nühai **e**.
1SG give-PFV one CLF boy one CLF ticket 3SG give-PFV one CLF girl
'I gave a boy **a ticket**. He gave a girl **[a ticket]**.'

b. Wo gei-le **yi ge nanhai** yi zhang piao. Ta gei-le **e** yi zhi bi.
1SG give-PFV one CLF boy one CLF ticket 3SG give-PFV one CLF pen
'I gave **a boy** a ticket. He gave **[a boy]** a pen.'

The TEC approach predicts that both direct and indirect objects can be elided, as they satisfy the feature and position requirements: both exhibit a conflict between GCR and Binding Principle B that prevents occupancy by PRO or pro, can host Case-licensed referential DPs, and are not involved in additional theta role assignment. In contrast, the ALNE approach predicts the same possibility because both direct and indirect objects can be introduced by applicatives.

2.3. CLASS 1 IMPOSSIBLE ELIDED OBJECTS: IN THE PRESENCE OF AN ADDITIONAL ARGUMENT. Mandarin unaccusative verbs can take an additional experiencer argument, which surfaces in the subject position (9).

(9) (Huang 2007:8)
[$_{\text{experiencer}}$ Wang Mian] qi sui si-le [$_{\text{theme}}$ fuqin].
Wang Mian seven age die-PFV father
'Wang Mian experienced his father's death at the age of seven.'
Literal: 'Wang Mian at the age of seven died his father.'

When an unaccusative verb has an experiencer subject, its object cannot be null. In (10), the sentence is acceptable only under the reading where the subject of the second clause serves as the theme of the unaccusative verb. The reading parallel to that of the first clause, where the subject experiences the event conveyed by the unaccusative, is unavailable.

(10) *Elided unaccusative object:* ✗ (Li 2014:59)
Zhangsan si-le **yi zhi mao**. Lisi ye si-le (***e**).
Zhangsan die-PFV one CLF cat Lisi also die-PFV
'Zhangsan experienced **a cat's** death. Lisi also experienced (***[a cat's]**) death.'
Literal: 'Zhangsan died **a cat**. Lisi also died (***[a cat]**).'

A similar pattern is observed with transitive verbs. In Mandarin, a transitive verb can take an additional affected argument, which surfaces between the verb and the original object. In this construction, the additional argument is referred to as the *outer object*, while the original object is referred to as the *inner object*. The construction template is illustrated in (11).

(11) (Lu 2002:323)
Wo chi-le [$_{\text{outer}}$ Xiaowang] [$_{\text{inner}}$ san ge pingguo].
1SG eat-PFV Xiaowang three CLF apple
'I ate three apples from Xiaowang.'
Literal: 'I ate Xiaowang three apples.'

When a transitive verb has an affected outer object, the inner object cannot be null. Example (12) lacks a reading where the postverbal argument is interpreted as the affected one.

(12) *Elided inner object in an affective construction:* ✗ (Li 2014:58)
Wo chi-le ta **yi ge pingguo**. Ta ye chi-le wo (***e**).
1SG eat-PFV 3SG one CLF apple 3SG also eat-PFV 1SG
'I ate **an apple from** him. He also ate (***[an apple from]**) me.'
Literal: 'I ate him **an apple**. He also ate me (***[an apple]**).'

The TEC approach explains the impossibility of eliding Class 1 objects by proposing that TECs lack thematic features. While the exact implementation of thematic features remains unclear, this approach crucially claims that TECs cannot participate in theta role assignment. The ungrammaticality of Class 1 objects is thus attributed to the assumption that the original object in both unaccusative and affective constructions, together with the predicate, assigns a specific theta role to the additional argument. In contrast, the ALNE approach accounts for the impossibility of eliding Class 1 objects by noting that neither unaccusative objects nor inner objects in affective constructions can be introduced by applicatives.

2.4. CLASS 2 IMPOSSIBLE ELIDED OBJECTS: IN THE PRESENCE OF AN ADDITIONAL PREDICATE. This class again includes two cases: resultative objects and objects preceding a secondary predicate. For resultative objects, the construction involves a causer subject and a causee object that bears the result of the causation (13).

(13) (Liu 2021:115)
[$_{\text{causer}}$ Na ping jiu] he-zui-le [$_{\text{causee}}$ John].
that bottle wine drink-drunk-PFV John
'That bottle of wine made John drunk.'
Literal: 'That bottle of wine drank drunk John.'

The object in a resultative construction cannot be null (14).

(14) *Elided resultative object:* ✗ (Li & Wei 2023:8)
Zhe ping jiu he-zui-le **hen duo ren**. (*Na ping jiu ye
this bottle wine drink-drunk-PFV very many person that bottle wine also
he-zui-le **e**.)
drink-drunk-PFV
'This bottle of wine made **many people** drunk. (*That bottle of wine also made **[many people]** drunk.)'

In the case of the secondary predicate construction, this is possible in Mandarin with indefinites, as illustrated in (15).

(15) (Huang 1987:227)
Wo you yi ben shu hen youqu.
1SG have one CLF book very interesting
'I have a book that is very interesting.'

What (16) shows is that an object cannot be null when it is followed by a secondary predicate.

(16) *Elided object preceding a secondary predicate:* ✗ (Li 2014:61)
Ta kandao **yi ge haizi** hen keai. (*Wo kandao **e** hen huopo.)
3SG see one CLF child very cute 1SG see very lively
'He saw **a child** that is cute. (*I saw **[a child]** that is lively.)'

For resultative objects, the TEC approach inherits the explanation for Class 1 objects: the object, together with the predicate, assigns a specific theta role to the subject (in this case, cause). Since TECs lack thematic features, they cannot participate in theta role assignments, rendering null objects impossible. For objects preceding a secondary predicate, the TEC approach similarly attributes the ungrammaticality to the absence of thematic features in TECs, but here, the account requires an additional stipulation that the absence of thematic features results in the incapability of licensing a secondary predicate. In contrast, the ALNE approach makes two generalizations. First, objects preceding a secondary predicate cannot be introduced by applicatives. Second, Class 2 objects involve PRO binding by the object. This latter generalization is further supported by evidence from object control verbs, which is discussed in Section 3.

2.5. CLASS 3 IMPOSSIBLE ELIDED OBJECTS: NONREFERENTIAL. The third class of unattested elided objects, according to the generalization made by the TEC approach, involves cases where the objects are nonreferential (in the sense of Landau 2021 et seq.). Example (17) shows that measure phrases, names in naming verbs, and predicate nominals cannot be null.

(17) *Elided nonreferential object:* ✗ (Li & Wei 2023:10–11)

a. Zhangsan gao-le **yi chi**. Lisi ye gao-le (***e**).
Zhangsan tall-PFV one foot Lisi also tall-PFV
'Zhangsan became **one foot** taller. Lisi also became (***[one foot]**) taller.'

b. Wo jiao **Binbin**. (*Ta ye jiao **e**.)
1SG call Binbin 3SG also call
'My name is **Binbin**. (*Their name is also **[Binbin]**.)'

c. Zhangsan chengwei **yingxiong**. (*Lisi ye chengwei **e**.)
Zhangsan become hero Lisi also become
'Zhangsan became **a hero**. (*Lisi also became **[a hero]**.)'

Under the TEC approach, this constraint is attributed to the D categorial feature and the uninterpretable Case feature, or alternatively, a dedicated referential feature. In contrast, the ALNE approach refines the generalization. In Section 3, I demonstrate that nonreferential objects can be elided with the appropriate predicates, and the apparent constraint on nonreferential objects pertains to the properties of the predicate rather than the DP itself.

3. Challenges for the TEC approach. With the empirical foundation in place, we turn to challenges for the theoretical implementation of the TEC approach. As presented in (3), this approach consists of four key components, each addressing specific observations. Last resort accounts for the subject-object asymmetry. The D categorial feature and uninterpretable Case feature account for why Class 3 objects cannot be null. The lack of thematic features accounts for why Class 1 and Class 2 objects cannot be null. LF copying derives the indefinite and sloppy readings.

3.1. GENERALIZATION-LEVEL CHALLENGES. Recall from Section 2 that elided nonreferential objects, exemplified by measure phrases, names in naming verbs, and predicate nominals, are impossible. However, (18) shows that measure phrases and predicate nominals can in fact be elided, indicating that there is no inherent referential constraint on objects.

(18) a. *Possible elided measure phrase*
Zhangsan he ni de shengao cha chaoguo-le **shi limi**. Lisi he
Zhangsan and 2SG POSS height difference exceed-PFV ten centimeter Lisi and
wo de shengao cha ye chaoguo-le **e**.
1SG POSS height difference also exceed-PFV
'The height difference between Zhangsan and you exceeded **ten centimeters**. The height difference between Lisi and me also exceeded **[ten centimeters]**.'

b. *Possible elided predicate nominal*
Zhangsan dang-guo **laoshi**. Lisi ye dang-guo **e**.
Zhangsan work.as-EXP teacher Lisi also work.as-EXP
'Zhangsan has worked as **a teacher**. Lisi has also worked as **[a teacher]**.'

Instead, the unacceptability of eliding Class 3 objects arises from the predicates. In Section 2.5, the relevant predicates were dynamic adjectives (*gao* 'tall'), naming verbs (*jiao* 'call'), and linking verbs (*chengwei* 'become'). Notably, 'become' has been independently claimed to disallow null objects by Zhang & Tang (2013).

3.2. THEORY-LEVEL CHALLENGES. The current implementation of TEC predicts that all Case-licensed referential objects that do not assign a theta role or license a secondary predicate should be eligible for null object constructions. However, complications arise in three cases, one of which — a subset of stative verbs — has been discussed in the previous section. We saw that the object of *chengwei* 'become' cannot be null, and the same restriction holds for some other stative verbs, such as *shuyu* 'belong' (Zhang & Tang 2013).

The other two problematic cases involve objects of prepositions and objects of object control verbs. In both of these cases, the relevant positions meet the criteria for last resort under

TEC — that is, they exhibit a conflict between the GCR and Binding Principle B. They can host referential DPs, they are Case-licensed, and they do not involve theta role assignment or secondary predicate licensing. Despite satisfying these conditions, their objects cannot be elided, as in (19–20), posing a challenge to the TEC approach.

(19) *Elided object of prepositions:* ✗
Zhangsan tang zai **ta de chuang shang**. (*Lisi ye tang zai **e** (shang).)
Zhangsan lie at 3SG POSS bed on Lisi also lie at on
'Zhangsan$_i$ lies on **his$_i$ bed**. (*Lisi$_j$ also lies on **[his$_{i/j}$ bed]**.)'

(20) *Elided object of object control verbs:* ✗
Zhangsan bipo **ta de haizi** qu. (*Lisi ye bipo **e** qu.)
Zhangsan force self POSS child go Lisi also force go
'Zhangsan$_i$ forces **his$_i$ child** to go. (*Lisi$_j$ also forces **[his$_{i/j}$ child]** to go.)'

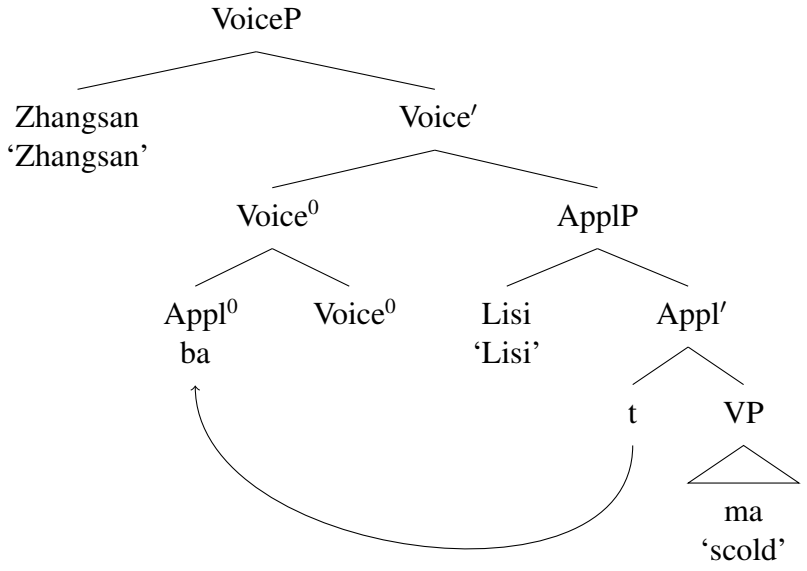
Setting aside its empirical overgenerations, the TEC approach is further problematic due to its reliance on the last resort mechanism, which implies that part of the Mandarin grammar must operate in a transderivational manner. When a syntactic structure is constructed, the grammar must simultaneously generate alternative syntactic structures, comparing *what could have been constructed*. The grammaticality of a given syntactic structure is then determined relative to the ungrammticality of at least one of these alternatives, introducing an additional level of complexity. Such a procedure is far from economical (Collins 1996; Potts 2001).

4. New analysis. On both empirical and theoretical grounds, I propose a new ALNE approach, highlighting the connection between applicative constructions and elided objects.

4.1. APPLICATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS. In Mandarin, *applicatives* include the functional markers *ba* (a.o.: Thompson 1973; Huang 1982; Sybesma 1992), *dui* (a.o.: Tsai 2021), and *gei* (a.o.: Paul & Whitman 2010; Tsai 2018), which can preverbally introduce a simple direct object (21a), a direct object of a psychological predicate (21b), and an indirect object (21c), respectively. These markers are traditionally treated as applicative heads that license arguments such as those bearing a thematic relation of affected, benefactive, or goal, depending on the predicate. Using (21a) as an example, (22) sketches the structure that I assume for applicative constructions.

(21) a. Zhangsan ba Lisi ma-le.
Zhangsan BA Lisi scold-PFV
'Zhangsan scolded Lisi.'
b. Zhangsan dui Lisi hen danxin.
Zhangsan DUI Lisi very worry
'Zhangsan worries about Lisi.'
c. Zhangsan gei Lisi song-le yi kuai shoubiao.
Zhangsan GEI Lisi give.as.a.gift-PFV one CLF watch
'Zhangsan gave a watch as a gift to Lisi.'

(22) *Applicative construction* (cf. Huang 1992a; Sybesma 1992; Chen 2023)



4.2. CORRELATION BETWEEN APPLICATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS AND ELIDED OBJECTS. The first observation is that both applicatives and the arguments they introduce can be null. When they are null, they allow for indefinite and sloppy readings, as demonstrated in (23).

(23) a. Zhangsan ba **ta** **de** **haizi** ma-le. Lisi ye **e** ma-le.
Zhangsan BA 3SG POSS child scold-PFV Lisi also scold-PFV
Strict: 'Zhagnsan$_i$ scolded **his**$_{i/k}$ **child**. Lisi$_j$ also scolded **[his**$_{i/k}$ **child]**.'
Sloppy: 'Zhagnsan$_i$ scolded **his**$_i$ **child**. Lisi$_j$ also scolded **[his**$_j$ **child]**.'

b. Zhangsan dui **ta** **de** **haizi** hen danxin. Lisi ye **e** hen danxin.
Zhangsan DUI 3SG POSS child very worry Lisi also very worry
Strict: 'Zhagnsan$_i$ worries about **his**$_{i/k}$ **child**. Lisi$_j$ also worries about **[his**$_{i/k}$ **child]**.'
Sloppy: 'Zhagnsan$_i$ worries about **his**$_i$ **child**. Lisi$_j$ also worries about **[his**$_j$ **child]**.'

c. Zhangsan gei **ta** **de** **haizi** song-le yi kuai shoubiao. Lisi ye **e**
Zhangsan GEI 3SG POSS child give.as.a.gift-PFV one CLF watch Lisi also
song-le yi kuai shoubiao.
give.as.a.gift-PFV one CLF watch
Strict: 'Zhangsan$_i$ gave a watch as a gift to **his**$_{i/k}$ **child**. Lisi$_j$ also gave a watch as a gift to **[his**$_{i/k}$ **child]**.'
Sloppy: 'Zhangsan$_i$ gave a watch as a gift to **his**$_i$ **child**. Lisi$_j$ also gave a watch as a gift to **[his**$_j$ **child]**.'

This observation holds even for predicates that introduce their internal argument exclusively through applicatives, such as *shiwang* 'disappointed' in (24), which can only introduce its internal argument using *dui* (25).

(24) Zhangsan dui **ta** **de** **haizi** hen shiwang. Lisi ye **e** hen shiwang.
Zhangsan DUI 3SG POSS child very disappointed Lisi also very disappointed
Strict: 'Zhangsan$_i$ is disappointed in **his**$_{i/k}$ **child**. Lisi is also disappointed in **[his**$_{i/k}$ **child]**.'
Sloppy: 'Zhangsan$_i$ is disappointed in **his**$_i$ **child**. Lisi is also disappointed in **[his**$_j$ **child]**.'

(25) *Zhangsan hen shiwang ta de haizi.
Zhangsan very disappointed 3SG POSS child
Intended: 'Zhangsan is disappointed in his child.'

The second observation is that there are no subject-introducing applicatives in Mandarin. While the passive marker *bei* might appear to be a strong candidate, it has been independently argued to differ significantly from standard applicatives (Tsai 2018). For example, *bei* uniquely allows the argument it introduces to be optional, whereas standard applicatives like *ba* do not:

(26) a. Zhangsan ba *(yi ge ren) ma-le.
Zhangsan BA one CLF person scold-PFV
'Zhangsan scolded someone.'
b. Zhangsan bei (yi ge ren) ma-le.
Zhangsan BEI one CLF person scold-PFV
'Zhangsan was scolded (by someone).'

Verb	Applicative	Elided object
chaoguo 'exceed'	✓	✓
chi 'eat'	✓	✓
dang 'work as'	✓	✓
danxin 'worry'	✓	✓
he 'drink'	✓	✓
ma 'scold'	✓	✓
xihuan 'like'	✓	✓
chengwei 'become'	✗	✗
jiao 'call'	✗	✗
shuyu 'belong'	✗	✗

Table 1. Some verbs presented so far and their compatibility with applicatives and elided objects

The third observation concerns the relationship between whether a construction allows applicative objects and whether it allows elided objects. Starting with simple transitive verbs, there is a clear correlation: verbs that allow applicative objects also allow elided objects, while those that disallow applicative objects likewise disallow elided objects. This pattern, summarized in Table 1, covers naming verbs like 'call' and the subset of stative verbs like 'become' and 'belong', discussed in Section 3. Expanding this observation to more complex constructions, we find that unaccusative objects (27), inner objects in an affective construction (28), objects preceding a secondary predicate (29), measure phrase arguments of dynamic adjectives (30), and objects of prepositions (31) cannot be introduced by applicatives, either.

(27) *Unaccusative object*

*Zhangsan ba yi zhi mao si-le.
Zhangsan BA one CLF cat die-PFV
Intended: 'Zhangsan experienced a cat's death.'

(28) *Inner object in an affective construction*

*Wo ba san ge pingguo chi-le ta.
1SG BA three CLF apple eat-PFV 3SG
Intended: 'I ate three apples from him.'

(29) *Object preceding a secondary predicate*

a. *Wo ba yi ge haizi kandao-le hen keai.
1SG BA one CLF child see-PFV very cute
Intended: 'I saw a child that is cute.'

b. *Wo ba yi ge haizi hen keai kandao-le.
1SG BA one CLF child very cute see-PFV
Intended: 'I saw a child that is cute.'

(30) *Measure phrase argument of a dynamic adjective*

*Zhangsan ba yi chi gao-le.
Zhangsan BA one foot tall-PFV
Intended: 'Zhangsan became one foot taller.'

(31) *Object of prepositions*

a. *Zhangsan ba ta de chuang shang tang zai.
Zhangsan BA 3SG POSS bed on lie at
Intended: 'Zhangsan lies on his bed.'

b. *Zhangsan ba ta de chuang tang zai shang.
Zhangsan BA 3SG POSS bed lie at on
Intended: 'Zhangsan lies on his bed.'

Apparent counterexamples like the copula and 'have' allow elided objects but not applicatives, likely because they license larger ellipsis sites (Xu 2003; Lee & Pan 2024). Conversely, resultative objects and objects of object control verbs allow applicatives but not elided objects, and I return to these cases in the next subsection.

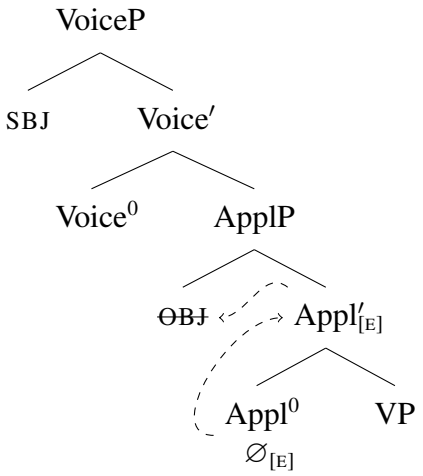
4.3. APPLICATIVE-LICENSED NOMINAL ELLIPSIS. The three observations above provide strong motivation for an analysis of Mandarin elided objects that captures their correlation with applicative constructions. While the analysis offered here is by no means intended to say the final word, (32) provides an informal sketch.

(32) *ALNE approach*

a. Verbs optionally select a phonologically null Appl^0, subject to the same selectional constraints on the overt applicatives.
b. The Appl^0 bears an [E] feature that projects up.
c. The [E] feature on Appl' deletes its sister at PF if it has an identical antecedent.

The diagram in (33) provides a visual illustration of the proposed analysis.

(33)



Under this approach, the subject-object asymmetry follows naturally from the lack of subject-introducing applicatives, and the impossibility of unaccusative objects, inner objects in affective constructions, objects preceding secondary predicates, and objects of prepositions is reduced to the selectional constraints on applicatives. As implementational alternatives, one may also consider having Voice^0 bearing the [E] feature licensed by Appl^0 (in the spirit of Aelbrecht 2010) or a reverse combining structure of applicatives (Wood 2013).

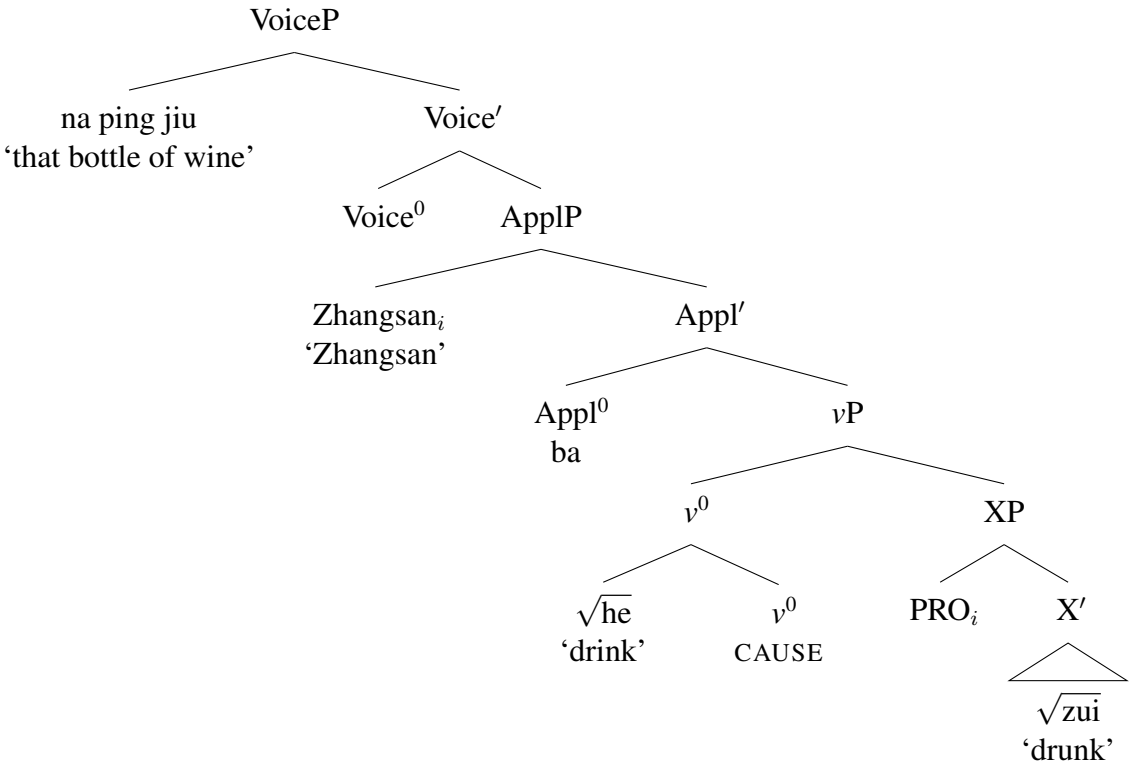
The discussion above leaves us with resultative objects and objects of object control verbs. While these objects cannot not undergo ALNE, they can be introduced by *ba*:

(34) *Resultative object*
Na ping jiu ba Zhangsan he-zui-le.
that CLF wine BA Zhangsan drink-drunk-PFV
'That bottle of wine made Zhangsan drunk.'

(35) *Object of object control verbs*
Zhangsan ba ta de xuesheng quan tuixue le.
Zhangsan BA 3SG POSS student urge drop.out.of.school PRF
'Zhangsan has urged his student to drop out of school.'

We hence reach the generalization that elided objects are disallowed when they need to bind PRO, assuming the base structure in (36) for resultative objects, taking (34) as an example. This generalization suggests that Appl^0 mediates object control, but the same Appl^0 cannot both mediate control and trigger ellipsis. The key takeaway, then, is that the ALNE approach identifies two factors governing the possibility of Mandarin elided objects: (a) whether the corresponding construction allows applicative constructions, and (b) whether the elided object participates in a control relation. These two factors lead to the derivation summarized in Table 2, accounting for all the data presented thus far.

(36) *Resultative construction* (cf. Liu 2021; Chen 2023)



	Appl^0	No PRO	Elided object
Direct object in a DOC			✓
Indirect object in a DOC			✓
Unaccusative object	*		✗
Inner object in an affective construction	*		✗
Object of some stative verbs	*		✗
Object of prepositions	*		✗
Object of object control verbs		*	✗
Resultative object		*	✗
Object preceding a secondary predicate	*	*	✗

Table 2. Predictions of the ALNE approach

5. Conclusion. The availability of Mandarin elided objects is closely tied to whether the construction allows applicatives and whether it involves control relations. The ALNE approach successfully captures the subject-object asymmetry by the lack of subject-introducing applicatives and accounts for the unavailability of the three classes of impossible elided objects, reducing their restrictions mostly to the selectional constraints of applicatives. Above all, ALNE avoids the empirical overgenerations and theoretical shortcomings of TEC, offering a more constrained analysis. Future research may investigate how ALNE interacts with null elements in other potential forms, such as implicit arguments, and explore crosslinguistic implications of ALNE.

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