Subjectivity in Mandarin Auxiliaries: Syntax as a Reflection of Semantics

Louis Wei-lun Lu（呂維倫）

National Taiwan University

bigmacw@sinamail.com

1. Introduction

Syntax highly pertains to semantics, and the behaviour of syntactic units should reflect, or at least be accounted for by, their semantics.   Fillmore (1981:143) indicates that: "Some syntactic facts require semantic and pragmatic explanations."

In this paper, I will take up the "subjective" approach (Langacker 1985, 1990) to provide a semantic account of some syntactic characteristics of Mandarin auxiliaries. This is because what is being dealt with, the syntax of an auxiliary, seems to covary with its extent of subjectivity.   In addition, Palmer (1986) proposes that there exists three types of modality: dynamic, deontic, and epistemic modality.   Such criterion of classification will be employed in this research since the above classification reflects an increasing degree of subjectivity (speaker involvement), and the development of modality is highly related to subjectivity (Traugott 1995).   Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca's diachronic study (1994) also relates modality to scope and subjectivity.   I believe such a combined theoretical framework will suffice to tackle the interplay of the syntax and semantics, as seen in Mandarin auxiliaries.

Under such a framework, four peculiar syntactic characteristics of Mandarin auxiliaries will be closely examined and discussed from a semantic point of view, hoping to arrive at a satisfactory account of the interface of syntax and semantics.

2. Subjectivity

As criticised in Langacker 1990, language in the objectivist view, which has prevailed since the formal logic based on truth conditions, has been deemed purely objective, and one would be quite wrong in claiming meaning to involve any thoughts or concepts in the semantic theories of the twentieth century. From this perspective, language seems lifeless and machine-like in the sense that it is nothing more than a tool employed by human beings in the process of information exchange. Language is thus considered purely proposition-based and computer-like regardless of its interactional nature.

Maynard (1993) further claims that, facing linguistic signs such as functional words and attitudinal phrases, we must somehow contend with how the language producer expresses his or her attitude through these signs, among other things, and must confront the necessity to analyze them under some heading within a linguistic theory. That is, one can understand a language more comprehensively when one's theory of language becomes a thought-process that embraces the sense of the language producer's "subjectivity". By this Maynard refers to grammatical units without true semantic content, such as modals, as markers of speaker's subjectivity.

2.1 Definition of Subjectivity

Subjectivity relates to the representation of a speaker's perspective in discourse and expression of self. Subjectification concerns the strategies and structures that language evolves in order to linguistically realise the centrality of the speaker in language (Finegan 1995).

Langacker (1985:109) argues that "subjectivity pertains to the observer role in viewing situations where the observer/observed asymmetry is maximized". But who

plays the role of the observer, and the observed?   What is the relation between such observation and meaning?   To make better sense of such questions, one must first introduce two essential elements: ground (2.2) and scope of predication (2.4).

2.2 Ground

In this paper, Langacker(1985:113)'s definition of ground will be adopted:

> I will use the term ground to indicate the speech event, its setting, and its participants.   The ground is therefore multifaceted…   Among the elements of the ground, the speaker can be regarded as central, and reference to the ground can often be interpreted as reference to the speaker.

That is, the term "ground" mainly refers to *where* a speaker anchors himself when uttering a linguistic expression, and *how* he conceptualises it.   In brief, the ground of the speaker is the perspective he takes in uttering/interpreting a sentence.

Let us try to *look at*, or to *conceive* a speech event in terms of a *theatre* metaphor. Suppose we are in a theatre watching a performance.   The performance would be the utterance the speaker and the hearer exchange; the audience, mostly the speech act participant, would be the person trying to interpret the utterance.   The speaker would be most subjective when viewing the play (producing/construing the sentence).   He would be so engrossed in the play on stage and lose his awareness of self.   In this way, he himself is not part of the play being viewed.   The observer (speaker)/ observed (linguistic expression) asymmetry is thus maximal, which expresses the greatest extent of subjectivity.   Now imagine another situation.   Suppose the speaker is moved onto the stage and participates in the performance.   He would be part of the play on stage to be viewed and should become more aware of himself, causing a reduced degree of subjectivity.   Subsequently, the observer/observed

distinction is minimised, and the speaker is least subjective.

From the above metaphor, we can easily see that the degree of subjectivity of the speaker pertains to his locus (ground).   If the ground, or any part of it, is conceptualised as an entity being looked at (on stage), the "observer/observed asymmetry" would erode.   Consequently, the speaker would become less subjective. If the ground is entirely off stage, the "observer/observed asymmetry" stays unaffected, and the speaker may retain a high degree of subjectivity.

2.3 Modality

Modality is a semantic concept concerning propositional content.   According to Rescher (1968), modality refers to further qualification of a proposition.   Bybee and Fleischman (1995) regards modality as a semantic domain with a set of gram-types associated with typical means of expression and identifiable by their semantic foci. Also, Perkins (1983) claims that modality is a conceptual context or framework within which a certain significance or truth-value of a proposition holds.

Palmer (1986:16) further argues that:

"Modality in language is, then, concerned with subjective characteristic of an utterance, and it could even be further argued that subjectivity is an essential criterion for modality.   Modality could, that is to say, be defined as the grammaticalization of speakers' (subjective) attitudes and opinions."

This is the definition of modality I shall adopt here, since the aim of this paper is to investigate the syntactic behaviour of Mandarin auxiliaries and their degrees of subjectivity.   Hopefully this correspondence between syntax and semantics can shed light on the cognitive basis language.

2.3.1 Subjectivity in Modality

Palmer (1986) proposes a distinction between dynamic, deontic, and epistemic modality.　Dynamic modality codes the ability, desire, or volition of the subject. Deontic modality concerns influencing actions, states or events, while epistemic modality involves the speaker's subjective attitude toward truth of the proposition. Likewise, Lyons (1977) claims that epistemic modality has to do with speaker's knowledge and belief, whereas deontic modality refers to the possibility or necessity of acts performed by morally responsible agents.

Hoye (1997:43) also characterises the distinction between deontic and epistemic modality as follows: "Subjectivity is an essential feature of epistemic modality since the speaker is expressing judgements in accordance with his own (subjective) set of beliefs…　There are problems, however, with subjectivity when it comes to an analysis of deontic modality, for here there are varying degrees of speaker involvement."　From his argument, it is reasonable for one to relate modality to subjectivity.　In other words, the degree of subjectivity serves as an important criterion in telling deontic and epistemic modalities apart.

In this paper, I will adopt the model proposed by Palmer (1986), where it is argued that there exists three types of modality: dynamic, deontic, and epistemic modality. Under this framework, I will propose several syntactic tests to prove the validity of such classification, and also to prove that it represents not merely a semantic distinction but a syntactic realisation of subjectivity.

My first type of modality, dynamic modality, refers to the most external, physical, and concrete ability or desire of the agent.　Such reports code the lowest degree of subjectivity.　As for the second, deontic modality, the expression becomes more

abstract, more mental, and less objective.   The speaker is more involved, and thus there exists a stronger degree of subjectivity.   Finally, epistemic modality concerns the speaker's subjective opinion and attitude, which carries the highest degree of subjectivity.

The relation between modality and subjectivity is hence clear.   In the development from the most concrete domain to the most abstract domain, higher degrees of subjectivity are derived.   Therefore, as indicated in previous studies, it is well justified in viewing such development path of modality as a realignment of subjectification along the subjective axis (Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca 1994; Langacker 1990).

2.3.2 Scope of Predication and Scope Shift

In 2.2, we have discussed "ground as the speaker's anchor point" in conceptualising a speech event; that is, where the audience sits while watching the play.   However, what is it that draws the audience's attention?

Langacker (1985) claims that the semantic value of a linguistic expression derives from the imposition of a profile on a scope of predication.   Therefore, in our study of modals, the question of "scope" arises, since it indicates how the speaker conceptualises the speech event and undoubtedly stands out.   In a sentence, predicate is the core of sentential meaning which receives most attention.   If the scope of the modal is the verb only, then it is within the predicate.   We can thus regard it *on stage* as in the theatre metaphor.   That is, the modal (part of the ground) tends to be less subjective.   On the contrary, if the scope of the modal is beyond the entire predication, the ground stays entirely *off stage*, which carries a higher degree of subjectivity.

Let us consider different types of modality for further illustration:

(1) ta   hui   changge. (他會唱歌)

   he   can   sing

   'He has the ability to sing.'

(2) ta   mingtien   hui lai   kan women (他明天會來看我們)

   he   tomorrow   will come   see us

   'He will come and see us tomorrow.'

In (1), the scope of *hui* is within the predicate.   It modifies the action of singing only.   In addition, the modal counts as an objective report on the agent's concrete ability.   Hence the situation described is less subjective.   But in (2), the scope of *hui* is already beyond the verbal predicate, and incorporates the entire sentence.   That is, it modifies the entire possibility of his coming to see us tomorrow.   Also, the modal codes the speaker's subjective belief and attitude toward the proposition, and is thus more subjective.   Therefore, from the above analysis, we can clearly see the correlation between scope of the modal and degree of subjectivity.

Diachronically, Bybee, Perkins and Pagliuca's study (1994) reports that the development from agent-oriented to epistemic modality involves a gradual shift of scope.   They examine the Middle English text *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and find out that about one third of the *may* used in the text can be interpreted both as agent-oriented and epistemic modality, and that the alternation from agent-oriented to epistemic meaning is associated with a change of scope.   "The agent-oriented modal is part of the propositional content of the clause and serves to relate the agent to the main predicate.   The epistemic modal, on the other hand, is external to the

propositional content of the clause and has the whole in its scope." (Bybee, Perkins and Pagliuca 1994:198-9)   This implies that the semantic change of modals involves a shift of scope, which reflects the increasing extent of speaker's subjective attitude toward the entire proposition.

3. Methodology

To tackle the interface of syntax and semantics of Mandarin auxiliaries, modality and subjectivity are indispensible.   If we wish to get a whole picture of the relation between subjectification and the syntactic distribution of a certain grammatical element, grammaticalisation is worth more effort.   Furthermore, a diachronic approach of grammticalisation would seem promising.   However, due to limit of length, I can hardly choose but focus simply on the relation between subjectivity and syntactic behaviour.   For further study of modals and subjectivity, I think the rest of the above-mentioned will be credited with further pursuit.

Therefore, I will simply adopt the theoretical framework introduced, especially Palmer (1986) and Langacker (1985, 1990), and investigate some unique syntactic distributions of modals in Mandarin.

Also, aside from the following syntactic distinction I am to propose, Mandarin modals have many other interesting behaviours which suffice to entitle them to a well-defined grammatical category.   But again, due to limit of length, these less relevant details will be omitted here.

4 Syntactic Examinations on Mandarin Auxiliaries

To a certain extent, the syntactic behaviour of a grammatical unit should reflect its cognitive basis and discourse function when used by a speaker.   To prove this, I

will carry out several syntactic tests on types of modality and try to offer

an adequate account from a semantic perspective.　　In the following, I shall try to

deal with this issue in the following four subsections: 1) incompatibility with aspect

markers, 2) unique compatibility of dynamic modals and intensifiers, 3) requirement

of grounding element by deontic modals, and 4) intrinsic rearrangement of juxtaposed

modals of different degrees of subjectivity.

4.1 Aspect Markers

　　　　a) Mandarin auxiliaries cannot carry aspect markers, such as *-le*, *-zhe*, *-guo*,

　　　　　and the like.

The phenomenon is elsewhere indicated in Li and Thompson (1980) and Fu and

Zhou (1991).　　This can be fully accounted for from a "subjective" viewpoint.

(Langacker 1990)　　The reason is that modals themselves bear a grounding function.

They combine with tense and aspect to form complex grounding predications.

Therefore, if viewed subjectively, modals should subsume such element in their

content, instead of carrying them as morphologically explicit forms.　　Consider:

　　(3)　*wo hui　guo　　　　　　chi　jiaotache (*我會過騎腳踏車)

　　　　　I　can　(aspect marker)　ride　bike

　　(4)　*ta　hui　le　　　　　　mingtien　　lai (*他會了明天來)

　　　　he　　will　(aspect marker)　tomorrow　　come.

In the same vein, modals cannot reduplicate to arrive at a tentative form since

reduplication of a verb also counts as an aspect marker:

(5)*wo hui hui   chi jiaotache   (*我會會騎腳踏
車)

I   can (aspect marker) ride bike.

However, a modal without such aspectual or temporal markers in a sentence, is considered grammatical:

(6) wo hui chi jiaotache (我會騎腳踏車)

I   can ride bike

'I can ride a bike.'

Therefore, the phenomenon that modals can never carry an aspect marker or can never reduplicate, can be related to and explained by grounding predication, an essential element of subjectivity.

4.2 Adverbs of Degree

b) Only dynamic modals may be modified by intensifiers *hen* or *tai*, while others may not.

This is similarly mentioned also in Li and Thompson (1980) and Hu and Fan (1995).   This fact is highly connected with the scope of a modal and the subjectivity incorporated thereof.   uch adverbs of degree:

(7)ta hen   neng   pau(他很能跑)

he very   can   run

'He is very good at running.'

(8)ta hen   hui shuo yingwen(他很會說英文)

he very   can speak English

'He is at home in English. (His English ability is good.)'

Some *neng* and *hui* can be modified by *hen* and *tai*, as illustrated above.
However, sometimes their co-occurrence with such modifiers results in ill-formed
sentences.   In the succeeding sentences, *neng* and *hui* accompanied by *hen* are
ungrammatical:

(9)*wo   mingtien   hen   hui lai (*我明天很會來)

   I   tomorrow   very   will come

(10) *ni hen   neng   likai(*你很能離開)

   you very   can   leave

The discrepancy between (7), (8) and (9), (10) concerns the scope of modals.
Interestingly, the modals in (7) and (8) are part of the clausal predicate.   That is, they
only serve to relate the subject and his ability to the main predicate.   Therefore, *hen*
may function to intensify the degree of the agent's ability.   On the other hand, the
modals in (9) and (10) subsume the whole predicate in its scope and modify the
possibility and necessity of the clausal predicate.   Intensifiers function to describe the
extent of the verbal element in the predicate, and should occur within it.   The
anomaly of (9) and (10) can thus be partly explained from the syntactic misplacement
of intensifiers.

Semantically, the modals in (7) and (8) bear more semantic content than those in
(9) and (10).   In (7) and (8), they code the agent's real-world ability and are thus
more semantically concrete.   In (9) and (10), nevertheless, they portray simply the
speaker's subjective mental attitude, and are actually semantically 'empty'.   It seems
implausible for a semantically empty element to be further intensified.   Hence it

makes good sense that *hen*, an intensifier of degree can only modify a semantically concrete element rather than a relatively emptier element.

The above result coincides with the classification of modality in Palmer (1986). The former modals will be put into the category of dynamic modality, while the latter will count as deontic or epistemic modality.　Therefore the syntactic test (b) helps to distinguish dynamic modals from deontic and epistemic modals.　Modality, as aforementioned, pertains highly to subjectivity.　The above test thus serves as solid evidence that from the development of dynamic to deontic and epistemic modality, as subjectivity increases, the scope of the modal will gradually shift and finally include the predication in its scope, as Bybee, Perkins and Pagliuca (1994) points out.

4.3 Adverbs and Epistemic Predications

Up to now, we have applied the syntactic test (b) to tell dynamic modals from the other two.　It follows that, a test should suffice to tell deontic and epistemic modals apart, so that a comprehensive picture of modality, subjectivity, and syntactic representation, can be achieved:

c) Only deontic modals can combine with the adverbs *hai*, *jiu*, *you*, and *cai*.

This is elsewhere described in Hu and Fan (1995), but no clear account was offered.　Combination of such adverbs and modals modifies the necessity or obligation of the predicate.　The modals are in this sense deontic.　Consider examples (11) and (12):

(11) deng　ni　lai　　cai　　　hui　kaishi (等你來才會開始)

　　　wait　you　come　(marker)　will　start

　　'We will start when you come. (We will never start unless you come.)'

(12) ta   hui   kaishi (他會開始)

   he   will start

  'He will start.'

It is worth noting that such adverbs require a clausal element serving as the ground. In (11), such combination enables the hearer to infer the necessity or obligation of the initiation understood after the agent's arrival.　The agent's arrival is the grounding element lead by the adverbs.　That is, the modals automatically gain a deontic meaning in such contexts when accompanied by these adverbs and the grounding elements required by their syntax.　However, absence of such elements yields to an epistemic reading, as in (12).

According to Langacker (1985:116), the above adverbs are termed "epistemic predications", since they "pertain to the speaker's knowledge of other entities and his assessment of their status."　The occurrence of the adverbs and their required grounding information indicates the speaker's knowledge of the proposition and brings it to hearer's attention.　Thus, the anchor point of the speaker and hearer has changed, with part of the ground moved onto the stage and becoming the target observed.　The subjectivity coded is consequently lower than that of (12), in which the ground remains entirely off stage and out of the scope of predication.　Therefore, the presence of *jiu*, *cai*, and other similar adverbs may help us distinguish deontic modals from epistemic ones.

4.4 Co-occurrence Restriction

Matthews (1993) indicates that, English modals can never co-occur in a simple clause.　However, In Mandarin, there is no such restriction.　Modals are allowed to

co-exist.   Compare (13) and (14) as illustrations:

(13) *He may will come.

(14) ta   yinggai   keyi lai (他應該可以來)

　　he   should   can come

　　'He should be able to come.'

Even so, the co-occurrence of modals is not absolutely free.   Some restriction, nevertheless, seems to stand:

(15) *wo neng   hui lai (*我能會來)

　　　I can   will come

It is evident that in (14), the first modal *yinggai*, is an epistemic modal, coding the possibility of the proposition included in its scope.   Meanwhile, it signals a higher degree of subjective attitude than the second modal *keyi*, which is simply a deontic modal.   While in (15), the deontic modal *neng* subsumes the epistemic *hui* in its scope.   In other words, in this ill-formed sentence, the more subjective modal is embedded in the scope of the less subjective one.   If this is indeed what causes the anomaly, we may propose a criterion that constrains the co-occurrence of Mandarin modals:

d) When two modals are juxtaposed, the outer (i.e., first) modal must bear the higher degree of subjectivity.   That is, the more subjective modal should include the other one in its scope.

The above constraint is cognitively significant.   If a modal carries a higher degree of subjectivity, it is bound to have a relatively larger scope than the other modal in the same sentence.   This is a reasonable syntactic reflection of the subjectivity of the

speaker.　　That is, the grammatical and seemingly natural ordering of modals is the result of syntactic manipulation on the part of the speaker.

5. Conclusion

In the foregoing sections, I have proven the strong correlation between subjectivity and the syntactic behaviour of Mandarin auxiliaries by proposing four syntactic criteria: a) inability to carry aspect markers, b) unique compatibility of dynamic modals and intensifiers, c) grounding information (markers) required by deontic modals only, and d) automatic rearrangement of juxtaposed modals of different extents of subjectivity.　　These syntactic criteria should suffice to distinguish various types of modality and different extents of subjectivity incorporated thereof.　　It thus seems plausible to argue for a strong correlation between the syntactic behaviour and the subjectivity coded in Mandarin auxiliaries.

This can, of course, serve as a valid semantic and cognitive account for syntactic phenomena, as is mentioned in Fillmore (1981).　　The above syntactic arrangments and constraints of modals are not arbitrary but semantically based.　　That is, the distribution of Mandarin auxiliaries is not merely a matter of syntax.　　It is a semantic-based reflection of a speaker's unconscious manipulation of syntactic devices for expression of a certain linguistic end, i.e., subjectivity in language.

References

Bybee, Joan L., Revere Perkins, and William Pagliuca.　　1994.　　*The Evolution of Grammar: Tense, Aspect, and Modality in the Languages of the World*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Bybee, Joan L.　　1995.　　The Semantic Development of Past Tense Modals in English.

Modality in Grammar and Discourse, eds. by Joan L. Bybee and Suzanne Fleischman.   Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Fillmore, C.J.   1981.   Pragmatics and the Description of Discourse.   *Radical Pragmatics*, ed. by P.Cole, 143-66.   New York: Academic Press.

Finegan, Edward.   1995.   Subjectivity and Subjectivisation: An Introduction. *Subjectivity and Subjectivisation*, eds. by Dieter Stein and Susan Wright, 1-16. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Goossens, Louis.   1982.   On the Development of the Modals and of the Epistemic Functions in English.   *Papers from the Fifth International Conference on Historical Linguistics,* ed. by Anders Ahlqvist, 74-84.   Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Hopper, Paul, and Elizabeth C. Traugott.   1993.   *Grammaticalzation*.   Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hoye, Leo.   1997.   *Adverbs and modality in English*.   London: Longman.

Langacker, Ronald W.   1985.   Observations and Speculations on Subjectivity. *Iconicity in Syntax*, ed. by John Haiman, 109-50.   Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Langacker, Ronald W.   1990.   Subjectification.   *Cognitive Linguistics* 1:5-38.

Li, Charles, and Sandra Thompson.   1981.   *Mandarin Chinese: A Functional Reference Grammar.*   Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Matthews, Richard.   1993.   *Papers on Semantics and Grammar.*   Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

Maynard, Senko K.   1993.   *Discourse Modality: Subjectivity, Emotion, and Voice in*

the Japanese Language. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Palmer, F. R.   1986.   *Mood and modality.*   Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Perkins, Michael R.   1983.   *Modal Expressions in English*.   New Jersey: Ablex.

Rescher, Nicholas.   1968.   *Topics in Philosophical Logic*.   Dordrecht : D. Reidel.

Sweetser, Eve Eliot.   1990.   *From Etymology to Pragmatics: Metaphorical and Cultural Aspects of Semantic Structure*.   Cambrige: Cambridge University Press.

Traugott, Elizabeth Closs.   1989.   On the Rise of Epistemic Meanings in English: An Example of Subjectification in Semantic Change.   *Language* 65:31-55.

Traugott, Elizabeth Closs.   1995.   Subjectification in Grammaticalisation. *Subjectivity and Subjectivisation*, eds. by Dieter Stein and Susan Wright, 31-55.   Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

張先亮。   1998。   理論語法研究與比較。   浙江教育出版社。

Fu, Yuxian, and Zhou Xiaobing.   1991.   Auxiliary Verbs in Spoken Chinese.   *Yufa Yanjiu He Tansuo*: 5:184-97.

胡裕樹，范曉。   1995。   動詞研究。   河南大學出版社。