

Mandarin Chinese notes

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September 23, 2024

Chapter 1

Grammatical overview

1.1 Morphological typology

Mandarin lacks prototypical inflectional morphology but has rich derivational morphology. Compounding is the most frequent morphological device, and partly due to influences of European languages, partly due to grammaticalization, affixation is also frequently seen. Plus, reduplication plays an important role in Mandarin verbal and adjectival derivation.

One caveat about talking about derivational morphology is that it assumes the existence of a well-defined wordhood. It's often claimed that Mandarin lacks the word/phrase distinction. In this note, we will show that wordhood can indeed be clearly defined by syntactic, morphological and phonological standards. What makes Mandarin unique is that the three definitions of wordhood do not always overlap.

Box 1.1: Different standards of wordhood

Define

Because of this, Chinese lexicography is usually based on *morphemes*,

1.2 Clauses

1.2.1 Top-level concepts

Clauses are made of nucleus clauses and high-level categories A clause can be divided into several clauses linked by clause linking constructions.¹ Mandarin has ample information marking phenomena, and thus a clause can be divided into one or

¹Huddleston and Pullum (2002) uses the term *sentence* to refer to a natural unit in dialogue, which I refer to as a *utterance*. The term *sentence* here refers to a clause that qualifies as an utterance.

Some people, like Deng (2010, p. 140) as well as Dixon (2009), use the term *clause* for subject-predict constructions with no speech force marking. (Deng (2010) uses 句子 as the Mandarin counterpart of *sentence* and 小句 as the counterpart of *clause*.) In this way, sentence-final particles strictly shouldn't be regarded as a part of the clause, and they may be discussed together with other higher level constructions like clause linking. This notion of clause correctly highlights the hierarchy in clausal structures. The problem with this terminology however is that in traditional grammars, the term *clause* does refer to units that have SFPS.

This note therefore refers to all units larger than the subject-predicate construction as clauses, which may or may not be sentence. The subject-predicate construction is instead named the *nucleus* clause. The internal complexity of a clause is still relevant for example in clause combining.

more topics, if any, and a comment, the latter being the nucleus clause plus possible SFPS (1). Note that topicalization and coordination can happen successively (TODO: ref), and coordination can also happen inside the nucleus clause (TODO: ref).

- (1) [张三]_{topic,i}, [[他]_{subject,i} 就 是 [个 王八蛋]_{copular complement}]_{nucleus clause}
 NAME 3 just be CLS turtle-egg
 罢了!
 SFP
 ‘Zhang San is a son of a bitch!’

The nucleus clause is a subject plus a predicate The nucleus clause contains a subject (if any) and what is often known as a predicate,² which usually is a (extended) verb phrase but may also be a nominal. In the Mandarin simple nucleus clause, the definition of the subject, as opposed to the topic, is not trivially clear. The concept of the subject, and also the nominative-accusative typological classification of Mandarin, is justified in § 1.2.3.

When we have verbal prediction, the full, extended VP following the subject can be divided into an extension region and the core VP. The extension region contains TAME auxiliaries and adverbs not realized in the verbal complex (§ 1.2.4), and peripheral arguments like temporal and spatial locations (§ 1.2.5). Sometimes the object may be fronted and it’s also possible that a prepositional complement is fronted to this region.

Details in the extended verb phrase In the surface form, core VP contains the core arguments and the verbal complex³ (chap. ??). The verbal complex involves aspectual marking (§ 1.2.4), verb derivation and verbal complements (see below); lexical aspect is not grammatically marked but is important.

The argument structure (chap. ??), including both the roles of the arguments in the situation described by the verb (i.e. “deep argument slots”, like agent, patient, etc.),⁴ and the roles of the arguments in the clause (i.e. “surface argument slots”, like subject, object, etc.). The deep and surface positions of internal arguments are already treated in chap. ?? The subject is also a part of the argument structure; its properties as a clausal pivot however involve grammatical concepts beyond the scope of the VP (§ 1.2.3). The claim that there is no grammaticalized argument structure in Mandarin is examined in § ??.

Verbal complements, or complex predicates Mandarin has lots of clausal complements that are not prototypically arguments, known as 补语 in Chinese linguistic community.⁵ This is a rather heterogeneous category, its boundary (expectedly) being

²Dixon (2009) argues against the definition of *predicate* as the main verb (or adjective) plus somehow “internal” arguments. He uses the term *predicate* to refer to the verbal complex instead. However, since I will need to compare the topic-comment construction with the inner structure of the nucleus clause, the term *predicate* will still be used in the way Dixon (2009) dislikes, because it’s the counterpart of the comment role in the topic-comment construction.

³The term *verbal complex* is used to highlight its derivation from prototypical verb derivation and inflection. See the beginning of chap. ??.

⁴Note that these positions are still syntactic concepts, like AGENT or CAUSER in chap. ?? since they are determined at least partly by syntactic criteria; classification of truly semantic argument roles is much complicated.

⁵The term 补语 literally means ‘complementation speech’, and is therefore often translated as *complement*. In this note I use the term *complement* to refer to grammatical constituents that are somehow more closely related to the lexical head, and I choose the (somehow tedious but explicit) term *non-argument complement*.

somewhat unclear; it includes verbal complements or in other words complex predicates, complement clauses, and oblique arguments.

Examples of the nucleus clause (2) is an illustration of a complicated nucleus clause, whose constituent structure is shown in Fig. 1.1.

- (2) 我 [明天 可能 能 在我的 办公室 跟 你 [讨论
 1 tomorrow AUX:possible AUX:ability at my POSS office with 2 discuss
 一下]_{coreVP}]_{extended VP}
 a.little.bit

‘Tomorrow possiblity I can have a discussion with you in my office.’

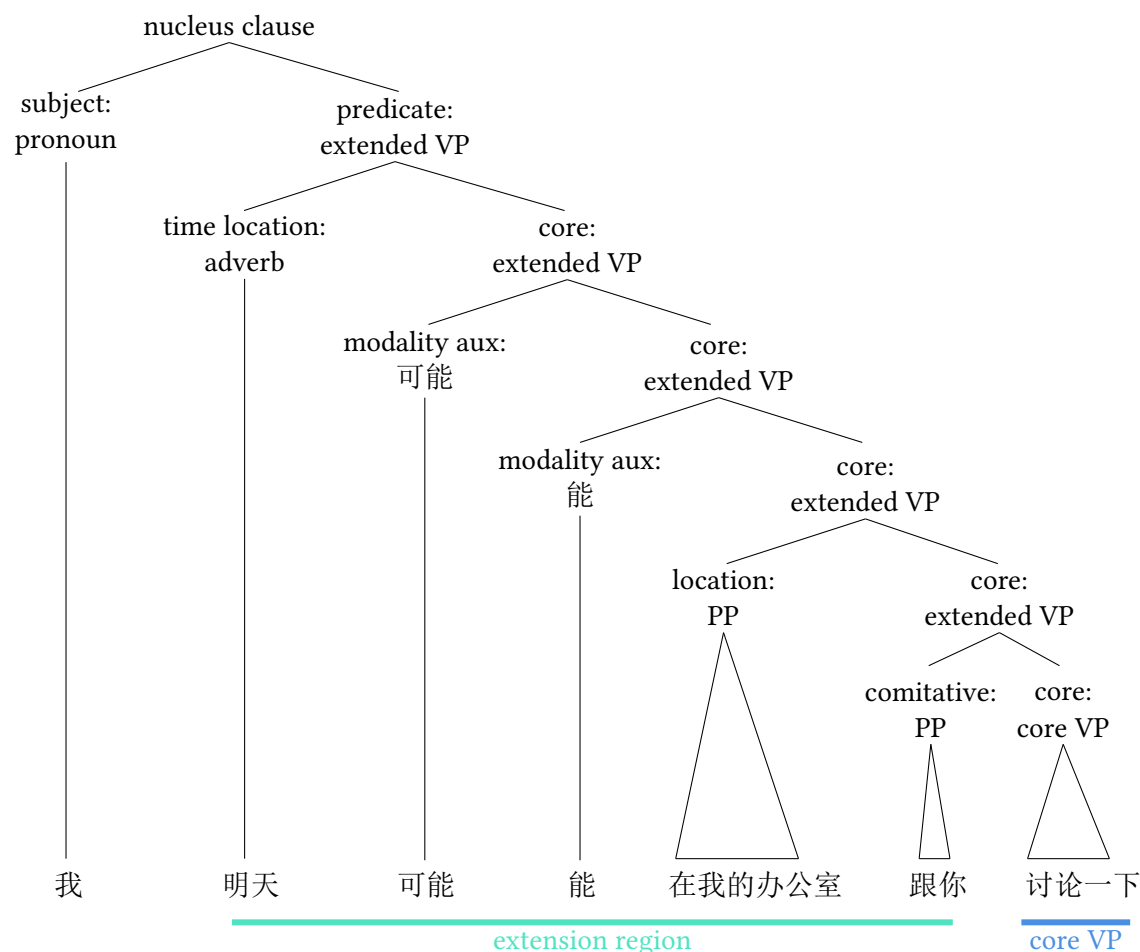


Figure 1.1: Tree diagram of (2)

It should be noted that in the disposal and passive constructions, the manner phrase may appear *after* the auxiliary (3), and in this case the boundary of the core VP can't be defined at the surface level. This hints at the existence of in-VP information structure marking in Mandarin (TODO: comparison with Latin).

- (3) 我 明天 可能 能 在我的 办公室 跟 你 [把]_{auxiliary}
 1 tomorrow AUX:possible AUX:ability at my POSS office with 2 BA
 这个 问题 [好好]_{manner} 讨论 一下
 this CLS problem good discuss a.little.bit
 ‘Tomorrow possiblity I can have a good discussion of this problem with you in my office.’

- 1.2.2 Clause types, clause combining, information structure, and sentence final particles**
- 1.2.3 The subject**
- 1.2.4 Tense, aspect and modality marking**
- 1.2.5 Peripheral arguments**

Chapter 2

Parts of speech