

Agreement in imperative clauses: Evidence from object resumptive pronouns in Mandarin Chinese *

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1. Introduction

While imperative/jussive clauses are known to have interaction with (null) subjects, verbal morphology, modals, negation, and speaker-addressee relations (Potsdam 1996, Portner 2007, Zanuttini 2008, Zanuttini et al. 2012, Pak et al. 2024, Kaufmann 2012, Alcázar and Saltarelli 2014, Liao and Wang 2022, *i.a.*), whether *objects* interact with jussive clauses is, however, less understood.¹

This study reports such a case of interaction with objects, which is observable in a particular movement context. The core data come from non-agreeing resumptive pronouns (NRPs) in Mandarin Chinese (first reported in Xu (1999)), exemplified in (1a). An NRP is strongly preferred when an *object* is topicalized in an imperative (vs. 1b).²

- (1) a. Zhexie shu_i, ni shao-le ??(ta_i)! (3PL antecedent vs. 3SG NRP)
these books 2SG burn-PFV 3SG
Lit.: ‘These books, you burn it!’ (i.e., These books, burn them!)
- b. Ni shao-le zhexie shu (*ta_i)!
2SG burn-PFV these books 3SG
‘You burn these books!’

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¹While receiving less attention, null objects, with a definite interpretation, may also be exceptionally licensed in imperatives clauses in English. For a recent discussion, see Bošković (2024).

²The data in this study are confirmed by seven native speakers of Mandarin Chinese. Discrepancies in judgment are indicated by “%”.

Mandarin Chinese does not have *overt* syntactic marking of the imperative/jussive clause type (except prohibitive negation, Yuan 1993, Liao 2023; also Liao and Wang 2022 for Taiwan Southern Min). As we will show, the licensing environment of NRPs exactly aligns with *jussive (imperative, promissive, exhortative) clauses*. This striking sensitivity of NRPs to jussives suggests that jussive is a syntactically active notion even in a language without inflectional morphology.

In this study, we show that the NRP exhibits a multifaceted empirical profile that involves: (i) licensing by jussive clauses (section 2), (ii) patient roles of objects (section 3), and (iii) movement-derived properties (section 4). We argue in section 5 that the intricate pattern can be accounted for by an Agree relation between the NRP and jussive head, coupled with interface conditions on partial Copy Deletion. The findings suggest that NRPs can be viewed as syntactic markers of jussive clauses in Mandarin Chinese, which offers support for jussive being a *syntactic* clause type with interaction with *objects*. Finally, we conclude in section 6 and briefly discuss the interaction of jussive with objects in other languages.³

2. Jussives as the licensing condition of NRPs

We show that NRPs always occur in a jussive clause, and other clause types (or the lack of directive force associated with jussives) cannot license NRPs. That is, the occurrence of NRPs is dependent on jussives.

2.1 Matrix clause types

First, NRPs in Mandarin are licensed only in *jussive* clauses. In root clauses, NRPs are licensed in *imperatives*, as we have already seen (reproduced below). In (2), the obligation is placed on the *addressee*. Here, an agreeing resumptive pronoun (ARP) is also acceptable for some speakers.

- (2) Zhxie shu_i, **ni** shao-le {**ta_i**/%tamen_i}! (obligation on addressee)
 these books 2SG burn-PFV 3SG/3PL
 Lit: ‘These books, you burn it/them!’

NRPs are also licensed in other jussive clauses, like *promissives* where the obligation is placed on the *speaker* (with ‘I’ as the subject), and *exhortatives* where the obligation is placed on both the *speaker* and the *addressee* (with ‘we’ as the subject), as in (3).

³Two notes are in order. First, the use of NRPs here should be distinguished from a non-referential, expletive use of *ta* ‘it’, as in *Women he ta ge san bei*, literally “we drink **it** three glasses (of wine)” (e.g., Lin and Zhang 2006). This use of *ta* imposes an *indefinite* constraint on the object (i.e., the sentence “*we drink **it** these three glasses of wine” with a definite object is not acceptable in Mandarin). As far as we know, the NRP use of *ta* requires a *definite* object being displaced instead.

Second, NRPs in other Sinitic languages (e.g. Cantonese/Shanghainese) are reported to have a wider distribution (Xu 1999, Yip and Ahenkorah 2023, Zhu 2023), but they are also required in imperatives.

- (i) a. Nidi syu_i ne, nei siu-zo ***(keoi_i)**! b. Diqng meqzy_i nung gue-teq ***(i_i)**!
 these books TOP 2SG burn-PFV 3SG these things 2SG throw-PFV 3SG
 Lit.: ‘These books, you burn it!’ (i.e., These books, burn them!) (Cantonese) Lit.: ‘These things, you throw it away!’ (i.e., These books, throw them away!) (Shanghainese)

- (3) Zhexie shu_i, **wo/women** shao-le {**ta_i**/%tamen_i}!
 these books 1SG/1PL burn-PFV 3SG/3PL
 Lit: ‘These books, I burn it/them!’/‘These books, we burn it/them!’ (i.e., Let’s burn these books!)
 (obligation on speaker/speaker+addressee)

Crucially, the obligation cannot be placed on a non-discourse participant (i.e., ‘he/she/they’):⁴

- (4) *Zhexie shu_i, **tamen** shao-le **ta_i**! (*obligation on non-participant)
 these books 3PL burn-PFV 3SG
 Lit: ‘These books, they burn it/them!’

Moreover, declaratives and interrogatives do not license NRPs, as shown in (5).

- (5) a. Zhexie shu_i, wo yijing shao-le {***ta_i**/tamen_i}. (declarative)
 these books 1SG already burn-PFV 3SG/3PL
 ‘I already burnt these books.’
 b. Zhexie shu_i, ni yijing shao-le {***ta_i**/tamen_i} ma? (interrogative)
 these books 2SG already burn-PFV 3SG/3PL SFP
 ‘Have you burnt these books?’

2.2 Performative modals

NRPs are also licensed under *performative uses* of modals. It is well-known that deontic modals can be used *descriptively* or *performatively*, the latter resulting in a jussive/directive force (Kamp 1973, Portner 2007, Kaufmann 2012, *i.a.*).

- (6) a. You **should** go to confession, but you’re not going to. (descriptive, Portner 2007, ex.31a)
 b. You **should** sit down right now. (performative, Portner 2007, ex.28)

On its descriptive use, the sentence *reports* a pre-existing obligation/permission, to which the speaker may or may not be committed. On its performative use, the speaker *issues* a command/permission with commitment to it. With NRPs, the modalized sentence in (7a) can *only* be performative, rendering continuation like ‘but I think you do not need to’ in (7b) and responses like ‘True!/False!’ in (7c) infelicitous.

- (7) a. A: Zhexie shu_i, ni **yao/yinggai** shao-le **ta_i**! (deontic modals)
 these books 2SG must/should burn-PFV 3SG
 Lit.: ‘These books, you must/should burn it!’
 b. A: ... # but I think you don’t need to burn them.
 c. B: # True!/False!

Notice that with the presence of a plural ARP, the descriptive reading is possible and even sometimes preferred, as in (8). The descriptive reading can be facilitated under a context where the obligation is sourced from some regulations that the speaker does not agree with.

⁴This is different from Italian (and English to a limited extent), where root jussives with third-person subjects like *Che venga anche lui* ‘(See to it that) he comes as well!’ in Italian or *Someone seat the guests!* in English are acceptable (Zanuttini et al. 2012).

- (8) a. A: Zhexie shu_i, ni **yao/yinggai** shao-le **tamen_i**. (deontic modals)
 these books 2SG must/should burn-PFV 3PL
 ‘(According to these *ridiculous* rules,) these books, you must/should burn them.’
 b. A: ... but I think you don’t need to burn them.
 c. B: True!/? False!

Permission modal *keyi* ‘may’ and disposition modal *hui* ‘will’ also license NRPs under a performative reading: suggestion for *keyi* ‘may’ (=9a) and promissive for *hui* ‘will’ (=9b).

- (9) a. Zhexie binggan_i, women **keyi** chi-le **ta_i**. (permission modals)
 these cookie 1PL may eat-PFV 3SG
 Lit.: ‘These cookies, we can eat it.’ (let’s do it.)
 b. Zhexie shu_i, wo jintian **hui** kan-le **ta_i**. (disposition modals)
 these books 1SG today will read-PFV 3SG
 Lit.: ‘These books, I will read it today.’ (you have my word.)

This contrasts with epistemic and dynamic modals. While they do not license a performative/directive use (Portner 2007), they also do not license NRPs as in (10a)-(10b).

- (10) a. Zhexie shu_i, ni/wo/yuehan {keneng/ yiding} shao-le {***ta_i/tamen_i**} (1e).
 these books 2SG/1SG/John probably/ definitely burn-PFV 3SG/3PL SFP
 ‘You/I/John {probably/definitely} burnt these books.’ (epistemic modals)
 b. Zhexie shu_i, ni/wo/yuehan {gan/ neng} jiu zheyang shao-le {***ta_i/tamen_i**}.
 these books 2SG/1SG/John dare/ can then like.this burn-PFV 3SG/3PL
 ‘You/I/John {dare to/can} burn these books just like that.’ (dynamic modals)

2.3 Negation

Another piece of evidence comes from negation. Mandarin has three forms of negation: *bu* ‘not’, *mei(you)* ‘didn’t’, and *bie* ‘don’t’. *Bie* ‘don’t’ is a *prohibitive negation* that only occurs in jussive clauses (strictly speaking, only imperatives and exhortatives; see also Liao and Wang 2022, Liao 2023). The other two, *bu* (neutral negation) and *meiyou* (perfective negation), do not occur in jussives.⁵

- (11) Ni {**bie/ *bu/ *meiyou**} shao-le zhexie shu!
 2SG PROH not not.PFV burn-PFV these books
 ‘(You) don’t burn these books!’

Importantly, with the presence of NRPs, only the prohibitive negation *bie* ‘don’t’ is allowed. *Bu* and *meiyou* are banned. (12b) is unacceptable regardless of the intended meaning (either as a command or assertion).

- (12) Zhexie huaping_i, ni {**bie/ *bu/ *meiyou**} za-le **ta_i**!
 these vase 2SG PROH not not.PFV break-PFV 3SG
 Lit.: ‘These vases, (you) don’t break it!’

⁵Except for *bu* in *buyao* ‘don’t’ where the deontic modal *yao* ‘must’ is negated to express prohibition.

2.4 Embedding predicates

The final licensing condition concerns embedding. NRPs can only be embedded under *advise predicates* like ‘advise/order’, as illustrated in (13). These predicates are argued to embed imperatives (as evidenced by, for example, the clause type markers in Korean, Portner 2007; see also Crnič and Trinh 2009, Kaufmann and Poschmann 2013).

- (13) Zhexie shu_i, Xiaoming **mingling/jianyi** ni/wo/yuehan [shao-le {**ta_i**/tamen_i}].
 these books Xiaoming order/advise 2SG/1SG/John burn-PFV 3SG/3PL
 ‘Xiaoming ordered you/me/John to burn these books.’

Other examples of the licensing predicates are listed in (14).

- (14) a. Object control: *jiao* ‘ask (someone to do something)’, *yao* ‘demand’, *yaoqiu* ‘request’, *rang* ‘let’, *quan* ‘urge’
 b. Subject control: *jihua* ‘plan’ c. Non-control: *xiwang* ‘hope’

Importantly, doxastic predicates like ‘believe’ in (15) do not license an embedded NRP. Hence, NRPs can only be licensed in *embedded jussives* but *not* in embedded declaratives.

- (15) (Zhexie shu_i) Xiaoming **xiangxin** [(zhexie shu_i) wo shao-le {***ta_i**/tamen_i}].
 these books Xiaoming believe these books 1SG burn-PFV 3SG/3PL
 ‘Xiaoming believed that I burnt these books.’

Taking stock, NRPs are licensed by jussives, as summarized in Table 1, suggesting that they establish some syntactic dependency with the jussive projection:

- (16) [CP C-jussive ... [TP ... [VP V **NRP**]]]

Licensing conditions		Non-agreeing RPs	Agreeing RPs
Matrix clause type	Jussive	✓	✓/✗
	Declarative	✗	✓
	Interrogative	✗	✓
Modal	Performative	✓	✓
	Descriptive	✗	✓
Negation	Prohibitive	✓	✓
	Non-prohibitive	✗	✓
Embedding predicates	‘advise/order’-type	✓	✓
	‘believe’-type (doxastic)	✗	✓

Table 1: Jussives as the licensing condition of NRPs

3. The patient object restriction on NRPs

The distribution of NRPs is not only restricted by clause types, but also by grammatical functions and theta roles: only *direct objects* that bear a *patient role* may be an NRP.

First, as illustrated in (17), neither *subjects* nor *indirect objects* can be NRPs. As in (17c), even an object of a preposition also cannot be an NRP, which is striking given that Mandarin disallows preposition stranding. All the sentences below would be grammatical with the NRPs replaced by ARPs. Note that all the displaced arguments are constructed as inanimate to avoid violations of an anti-animacy constraint (see footnote 6).

- (17) a. *Zhaxie taifeng_i, wo xiwang **ta_i** bie chuidao-le zheke shu! (subj.)
 these typhoons 1SG hope 3SG PROH blow.down-PFV this tree
 Lit.: ‘These typhoons, I hope it won’t blow down this tree!’
- b. *Zhe jibu diannao_i, ni yinggai gei **ta_i** yidian naixin! (indirect objects)
 this several computer 2SG should give 3SG a.bit patience
 Lit.: ‘These several computers, you should give it some patience!’
- c. *Zhe-jizhi bi_i, ni yinggai [yong **ta_i**] xie zuoye! (objects of P)
 this-several pen 2SG should use 3SG write homework
 Lit.: ‘These several pens, you should use it to do your homework!’

Second, only a *patient/theme (object)* may be an NRP. In (18a), the object is a *causee* rather than a patient. Crucially, only the ARP *tamen* ‘they’ is allowed in (18b).

- (18) a. Ni qu qi-lei **zhaxie ma!**
 2SG go ride-tired these horse
 ‘You go ride these horses until they
 get tired!’ (i.e., go cause these horses
 to be tired by riding them!)
- b. **Zhaxie ma_i**, ni qu qi-lei
 these horse 2SG go ride-tired
 { ***ta_i**/tamen_i }!
 3SG/3PL
 ‘Ride these horses ’til they get tired!’

The same applies to applicative objects with an instrumental role (“non-canonical objects”).

- (19) a. Ni qie **zhaxie caidao_i** ba.
 2SG cut these knife SFP
 ‘(You) use these knives (to cut something).’
- b. #**Zhaxie caidao_i**, ni (qu) qie(-le) **ta_i** ba!
 these knife 2SG go cut-PFV 3SG SFP
 ONLY: ‘You go cut these knives!’ (=patient)
 BUT NOT: ‘You go use these knives to cut something!’ (=instrument)

In short, together with the jussive licensing, the NRP always refers to the *patient object* upon which the addressee or the speaker (or the matrix subject, as in embedded jussives) is obligated to impose actions. This can be understood as an interaction of *addressee/speaker* with *argument structure* in *jussive* clauses.⁶

⁶ There is an additional (anti-)animacy constraint. Human objects with NRPs are generally not acceptable, whereas non-human animate objects like ‘chicken’ may accept NRPs *modulo* speaker variations and the choice of the predicate as in (i). While we cannot give a full explanation here, we note that the plural marker *-men* in Mandarin shows a mirror image: it generally attaches to human but not inanimate common nouns, and there are also speaker variations in non-human animate nouns. This link between anti-animacy and plural mismatches is curious and invites future research. We thank Željko Bošković for the discussion.

4. The movement properties of NRPs

We now move on to the resumptive properties of NRPs, which we argue to be movement-derived instead of base-generated. That is, they are more trace-like than pronoun-like. First, the NRPs may be separated from the antecedent (i.e., topic DP) across a clause boundary, as in the embedded jussives above (e.g., (13)). Importantly, no island boundaries may intervene between the antecedent and NRP, as shown by the complex DP island in (20).

- (20) Zhexie shu_i, wo tingshuo-le [DP [CP Lisi mingling ni shao-le
these books 1SG hear-PFV Lisi order 2SG burn-PFV
{*ta_i/tamen_i}] de xiaoxi].
3SG/3PL DE news
'(As for) these books, I heard the news that Lisi ordered you to burn {*it/them}.'

Second, idiomatic meaning is preserved with the use of NRPs. (21) shows an idiom 'to blow bull leather' which idiomatically means 'to brag'.

- (21) %Ni qu chui-le zhexie niupi!
2SG go blow-PFV these cow.skin
Lit.: 'You go blow these bull leather (i.e. cow skins)!'
Idiom.: 'You go brag about these things!'

The idiomatic reading 'to brag' is only available with the NRP, but not with the ARP in (22). The latter only gives rise to the odd literal reading 'to blow bull leather'.

- (22) Zhexie niupi_i, ni qu chui-le {ta_i/#tamen_i}! (idiomatic: ^{OK}NRP/*ARP)
these cow.skin 2SG go blow-PFV 3SG/3PL
Lit.: 'These bull leather (i.e. cow skins), you go blow it!' (NRP ta, ARP tamen)
Idiom.: 'These things, you go brag about!' (NRP ta)

Summing up, NRPs are movement-derived, behaving like a trace/lower copy:

- (23) ... [TopP DP_[TOP] [Top [TP ... [VP V NRP=*ta*]]]] (topicalization)

5. Proposal: jussive agreement

To account for the empirical patterns above, we argue that the NRP establishes two separate dependencies: (i) *agreement* with the *jussive C head*, and (ii) a *movement* dependency with the topic antecedent, as in (24). We propose that the *non-agreeing form* of the NRP is derived by *partial Copy Deletion*. The proposal involves three key ingredients in (25).

- (24) [CP C-jussive [TopP <DP>_[TOP] [Top [TP ... [VP V <DP>=NRP_{[TOP][JUSSIVE]}]]]]

- (ii) a. Context: A dialogue in a movie:
Zhexie ren_i, ni qu zai-le {*ta_i/tamen_i}!
these person you go kill-PFV 3SG/3PL
'You go kill (lit. butcher) those people!'
b. Zhexie ji_i, ni qu zai-le {%ta_i/tamen_i}!
these chicken you go butcher-PFV 3SG/3PL
'You go butcher those chickens!' (more acceptable if
the chickens are perceived as meat)

- (25) a. The [JUSSIVE] feature on the NRP: only present on objects with a patient role
 b. The lower copy but not the higher copy agrees with the jussive C head
 c. Two interface conditions on chain resolution: give rise to partial Copy Deletion

First, the [JUSSIVE] feature on the NRP captures its licensing condition: there must be a jussive C head to agree with the NRP. We further stipulate that only objects with a patient role (i.e., “disposal” objects) bear this feature (see section 6 for discussion).

Second, we assume that the higher copy of the topicalized object does *not* agree with the jussive C head. We suggest that it only agrees with the topic head and the [JUSSIVE] feature is no longer accessible, in a sense similar to Criterial Freezing (Rizzi 2006). For concreteness, we assume with Obata and Epstein (2011) that only A'-features are active on A'-moved elements (though nothing hinges on it). Thus, the higher copy only carries [TOP], but not (active) [JUSSIVE] (which consists of [1/2] person (A-)features, Zanuttini et al. 2012). [JUSSIVE] only stays at the lower copy, as in the configuration in (26).

- (26) [CP C-jussive [TopP DP_[TOP] [Top [TP ... [VP V <DP>_{[TOP][JUSSIVE]}]]]]

Third, we further borrow the insight from Fanselow and Ćavar (2001, 2002), van Urk (2024) that partial Copy Deletion (CD) may apply over full CD when the two copies agree with different heads, as given in (27). In the case of NRPs, the higher copy agrees with Top and the lower copy agrees with C_{jussive}, hence both copies need to be spelt out.

- (27) *Realize Goal* (simplified from Fanselow and Ćavar 2002:88)

In a chain <C₁, C₂>, spell out both C₁ and C₂ if they agree with different heads.

Instead of pronouncing the *whole* lower copy (i.e., doubling), an economy principle like (28) (Landau 2006, van Urk 2018; or MaxElide in Scott 2021, vs. Georgi and Amaechi 2023) forces spelling out the lower copy in its *minimal* form: a default pronoun with only [D] and no phi-features, the 3SG *ta*. A derivation is given in (29).

- (28) *Economy of Pronunciation* (simplified from Landau 2006:57)

Delete as many parts of chain copies as possible.

- (29) *A schematic derivation of NRPs in a root jussive clause*

- a. [CP C-jussive [TopP [Top [TP ... [VP V DP_{[TOP][JUSSIVE]}]]]] (Narrow Syntax: Baseline)

- b. [CP C-jussive [TopP **DP**_[TOP] [**Top** [TP ... [VP V <DP>_{[TOP][JUSSIVE]}]]]] (NS: Topicalization)

- c. [CP **C-jussive** [TopP DP_[TOP] [Top [TP ... [VP V <DP>_{[TOP][JUSSIVE]}]]]] (NS: Jussive agr.)

- d. [CP C-jussive [TopP DP_[TOP] [Top [TP ... [VP V <[DP [D]=**ta** NP]>_{[TOP][JUSSIVE]}]]]] (PF: Partial CD)

cf. ... *_{[VP V <DP>_{[TOP][JUSSIVE]}]} (Full CD: violates (27) → **gap disallowed in (1a)**)

cf. ... *_{[VP V <DP>_{[TOP][JUSSIVE]}]} (No CD: violates (28))

The proposal predicts that locality effects should be found not only for topicalization (as in section 4) but also for the jussive agreement. The prediction is borne out. In (30), the NRP cannot agree with the matrix jussive C when they are intervened by a declarative C, suggesting that agreement is blocked by the embedded CP phasal boundary.

- (30) [CP C_{jus.} [(zhexie shu_i) nei yao shengcheng [CP C_{decl.} [(zhexie shu_i) ta
these book 2SG must claim these book 3SG
shao-le { *ta_i/tamen_i }]]]].
burn-PFV 3SG/3PL
‘(These books), you must claim that (these books) s/he burnt { *it/them }.’

6. Concluding remarks

To conclude the paper, we have provided novel evidence that the clause type *jussive* (cf. Zanuttini et al. 2012, *i.a.*) is syntactically active in Mandarin Chinese, which interacts intricately with *object* non-agreeing resumptive pronouns *via* partial Copy Deletion (e.g., Fanselow and Ćavar 2002, van Urk 2018).

The remaining question is why objects, specifically *inanimate direct objects with a patient role*, are privileged in NRPs. We would like to end the paper by remarking that the special behavior of objects is not just a quirk in Mandarin, but other languages also show comparable patterns. Den Dikken (1992) observes that right-peripheral objects in Dutch are only allowed in imperatives but not declaratives. Intriguingly, they are only limited to *direct objects*, as in (31). Therefore, the interaction between jussives and objects is cross-linguistically robust (see also Bošković 2024 for null objects) and deserves more attention.

- (31) a.*Stuur dat boek op **die jongen!** (IO) b.?Stuur die jongen op **dat boek!** (DO)
send that book up that boy send that boy up that book
(Dutch, Den Dikken 1992, ex.23b-c)

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