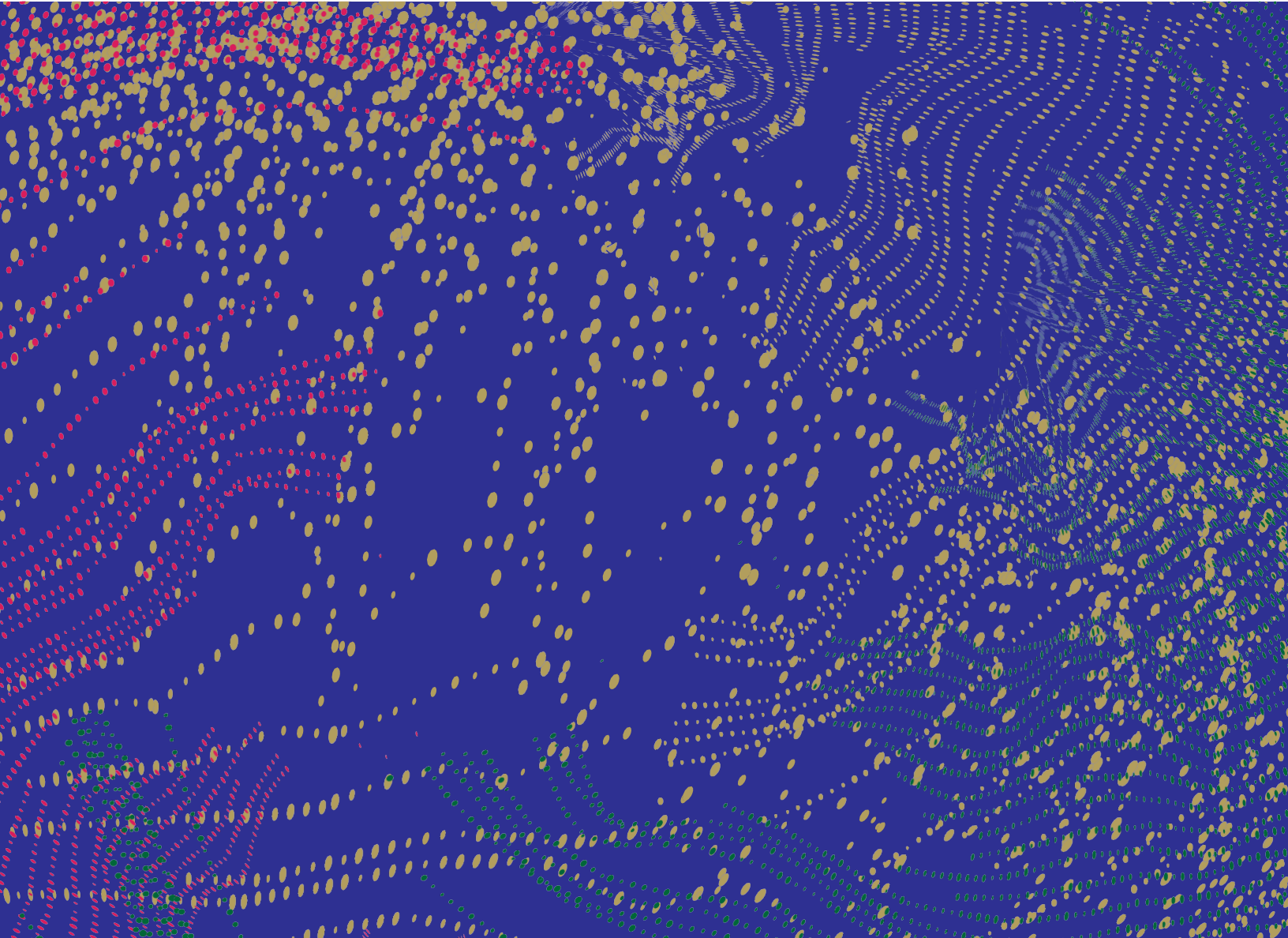


The World Humanities Report

# Modern Chinese Language

Zhang Bojiang



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# Modern Chinese Language

Zhang Bojiang Institute of Linguistics, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

Studies of modern Chinese language emerged soon after the popularization of the written form of *baihua*, or “plain language,” in humanities education.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of the New Culture movement in the early twentieth century, the written form of *baihua* became the standard form for written communication and naturally became an object of study in linguistics. The first Chinese study of Chinese grammar was *Ma shi wentong* [Basic principles for writing clearly and coherently by Mister Ma; often translated as “Comprehensive grammar”] by Ma Jianzhong, published in 1898, that concerned itself with *wenyan* [literary language].<sup>2</sup> The printing in 1924 of *Xinzhū guóyǔ wénfǎ* [New Chinese grammar (literally, New grammar of the national language)] by Li Jinxi, an active champion of the New Culture movement, inspired broad-ranging studies of modern Chinese. Books by two eminent linguists mark the highest achievements in the field in the early twentieth century: Lǚ Shuxiang wrote *Zhōngguó wénfǎ yāolǚe* [Basic principles of Chinese spoken grammar] between 1942 and 1944, and Wang Li published *Zhōngguó xiandai yǔfǎ* [Modern Chinese grammar] in 1943 and a sister volume, *Zhōngguó yǔfǎ lilun* [The theory of Chinese grammar], in 1944.

The most significant findings of studies of modern Chinese centered on Chinese grammar. Since the 1990s researchers have strived to fully investigate Chinese grammatical usage and have actively taken part in international conferences on linguistic theory and method, bringing a cross-language and global vision to examine Mandarin Chinese. At the same time, major research findings for Chinese grammar have enriched and revised general linguistic theory.

<sup>1</sup> The term *baihua* has a range of meanings from “plain speech” to “clear talk” to “nonsense” that do not map against the Western “vernacular.” In reference to speech, it is the language of North China with an addition of foreign loan words. The written form of *baihua* is defined in opposition to literary Chinese [*wenyan*], but it draws on literary forms and novels.—Trans.

<sup>2</sup> The term *wenyan*, “literary language,” is often called Classical Chinese. Linguists define Classical Chinese as writings of the Warring States period (475–221 BCE). *Wenyan* was increasingly dissociated from speech after the Han dynasty, third century CE on. It is concise and compact and differs greatly from *baihua*.—Trans.

## Structural Linguistics Research

Structural linguistics research was the mainstream in the field at the end of the twentieth century. Yuen Ren Chao (also spelled Zhao Yuanren) was the first linguist to explore this methodology for Mandarin Chinese, and his works, along with those of Ding Shengshu and Zhu Dexi, are representative of the time. Yuen Ren Chao established the framework for research on Chinese structural linguistics. Ding Shengshu then pioneered the method and led a team of researchers in the Linguistics Institute of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and presented their findings between 1952 and 1953 in the journal *Zhongguo yuwen* [Chinese language], in a series of essays titled “Yufa jianghua” [Talks on grammar], which gave detailed interpretations of structural linguistics as a system.<sup>3</sup> Through his analysis of adjectives, the empty particle *xuci* [“de”], and the problem of structural ambiguity, Zhu Dexi produced brilliant examples that show the depth of structural linguistics as a methodology.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, Lǚ Shuxiang comprehensively discussed the theory and methods of structuralism in linguistics.

Their preliminary research paved the way for overall expansion in the 1980s and 1990s. Among these, studies by Lu Jianming were the most faithful representatives of Zhu Dexi’s research methods; his work was an exemplar for research in structural linguistics. Working within the grammatical framework that Zhu Dexi defined, Lu Jianming did valuable research on the issue of nested phrases in Mandarin syntax, the syntactical phenomenon of place changing, various aspects of sentence structure formation in Chinese, and the structure of information in Chinese sentences. He also published a volume that gave a systematic overview of the theory and methods of research on modern Chinese grammar in the period immediately after the 1979 economic reform and opening up.<sup>5</sup> Ma Qingzhu and Shao Jingmin are also outstanding scholars of structural grammar. Early works that are representative of Ma Qingzhu’s approach are *Hanyu dongci he dongci xing jiegou* [Chinese verbs and verbal constructions]

<sup>3</sup> Ding Shengshu et al., *Xiandai Hanyu yufa jianghua* [An introduction to contemporary Chinese grammar] (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1962).

<sup>4</sup> Zhu Dexi contributed to a series of three articles titled “Hanyu jufa qiyi xianxiang” [Ambiguity in Chinese syntax]. The essays bear his imprint, if not his name. He noted ambiguity in an early lecture coauthored with Lǚ Shuxiang, where they view ambiguity as a flaw to be avoided. See “Yufa xiuci jianghua” [A brief introduction to grammar and rhetoric] (Beijing: Kaiming shudian, 1951).—Trans.

<sup>5</sup> Lu Jianming, *Bashi niandai Zhongguo yufa yanjiu* [Studies of Chinese grammar in the 1980s] (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1993).

and *Hanyu yuyi yufa fanchou wenti* [The semantic scope of grammatical categories in Chinese].<sup>6</sup> These books systematically explore the semantic patterns of Chinese objects and experimental verification of their syntax, analysis of various forms of double-object constructions, grammatical expression of the sense of time, the issue of word order in putative verbal constructions, and the question of referential terms in narrative, among other issues. Shao Jingmin is a noteworthy figure in the area of structural grammar research. Some of his representative works are *Xiandai Hanyu yiwen ju yanjiu* [Modern Chinese interrogative sentences] and *Hanyu yuyi yufa lunji* [Essays on semantics in Chinese grammar],<sup>7</sup> where he addresses various types of interrogatives. His analysis of the semantic orientation of adverbs in modern Chinese and sentence pattern transformation are particularly detailed and thorough.

## Research on Formal Syntax

Following the findings of structuralism, a brand-new trend to study formal syntax emerged. We started to see sporadic research findings in the mid- and late 1980s, and their significance gradually became apparent in the mid-1990s.

The first reason for the shift was the state of the field of linguistics in mainland China. With the end of the Cultural Revolution, there were renewed opportunities that opened our eyes to trends in linguistics research overseas in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Chomskyan revolution of the 1960s was another factor, since it led to disorientation in the mainstream of international research on syntax until the early 1980s, when the notion of principles and parameters (that generate the grammatical or well-formed sentences of a language and are innate, also called “universal grammar”) had gradually matured, and scholars around the globe were interested to test these hypotheses in research on their native languages.<sup>8</sup> Against this background, a widely influential study of formal syntax in Chinese was *Logical Relations in Chinese and the Theory of*

<sup>6</sup> Ma Qingzhu, *Hanyu dongci yu dongci xing jiegou* (Haidian: Beijing yuyan xueyuan chubanshe, 1992); Ma Qingzhu, *Hanyu yuyi yufa fanchou wenti* (Beijing: Beijing yuyan wenhua daxue chubanshe, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Shao Jingmin, *Xiandai Hanyu yiwen ju yanjiu* (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 1996; revised ed. Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2014); Shao Jingmin, *Hanyu yuyi yufa lunji* (Shanghai: Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> The theory of principles and parameters, or “universal grammar,” refers to the idea that humans have innate ability to learn language, as Noam Chomsky and Robert B. Lees proposed in “Syntactic Structures,” *Language* 33, no. 3 (1957): 1–357.

*Grammar*, written by C.-T. James Huang (also written Huang Zhengde).<sup>9</sup> Huang's writings provoked theoretical debate internationally and led to debate in the field of Chinese linguistics concerning the many situations in Chinese that involve the empty category (*kongyu*, termed “null words” by Noam Chomsky),<sup>10</sup> and mainland Chinese scholars joined these discussions.

Distinctly from Yuen Ren Chao, who influenced the field from the 1950s to 1970s, C.-T. Huang did not propose forms that were widely accepted, and instead his chosen mode of research was to identify issues that were increasingly cast in doubt and came to have progressively more impact on the field of Chinese grammar over time. A fair number of overseas scholars took part in these discussions. In mainland China the main contributors to this area of study were Xu Liejiong, Wang Jialing, Pan Haihua, and Hu Jianhua, among others. The trend to adopt formal linguistic theory led scholars from China to engage in direct dialogue with the mainstream thinkers in linguistics. More important, it deepened understanding of facts relating to modern Chinese language.

Investigations in this area centered on two issues: First is the issue of the correlation of reflexive pronouns (*fanshen daici*, also termed self-referential pronouns). The second set of issues concern various syntactic phenomena related to null words (*kongyu*, translated “empty category” above); a series of findings touch on issues such as the topic sentences and syntactic process,<sup>11</sup> the occurrence of empty subjects in subsentences, and the distinction between finite verbs (which take a subject) and the infinitive (which can be the subject).

In regard to reflexive pronouns, beginning in 1983, Wang Jialing and other scholars showed that the patterns of self-reference using the binome *ziji* [one-self/one's own] in Chinese were exceptions to Chomsky's proposed three principles of restraint. In the ten-odd years following these findings, people attempted to use “anaphora changing position” and other purely syntactic interpretations to resolve the problem in Chinese, but they were repeatedly contradicted by new linguistic phenomena. In brief, overseas scholars (represented by C.-T. James Huang and Chih-Chen Jane Tang [also written Tang

<sup>9</sup> Cheng-teh James Huang, *Logical Relations in Chinese and the Theory of Grammar* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982).

<sup>10</sup> The notion of empty categories is extremely important in generative grammar. These categories are phonetically null, or unpronounced, and yet function objectively at the syntactic and semantic level.—Trans.

<sup>11</sup> Topic continuity and topic shifting are key pragmatic functions in discourse, particularly in Chinese, where topic-comment sentences are common; thus syntactic restraints for topic sentence are of interest.—Trans.



Zhizhen]) tended to use points in syntax to address the issue, while scholars in mainland China (taking Xu Liejiong, Pan Haihua, Hu Jianhua, and Huang Yan [who studied and then taught in the UK] as representative figures) were inclined to view “the question of self-referential pronouns in Chinese as a non-syntactic problem and posited that language usage and nonsyntactic factors had significant bearing on the issue.”<sup>12</sup>

The notion of a category of empty words has key significance in Chomsky’s investigation of the autonomy of universal grammar (that is, the innate capacity for human language), and this subsequently drew attention to the notion that the empty category enables the acquisition of grammar. The core issue is: What type of null word belongs to the category of null words in modern Chinese? If it is possible to prove that a distinction between PRO and pro exists in Chinese,<sup>13</sup> then verbs in Chinese also possess a distinction between finite and infinitive forms, and this would dramatically change our approach to understanding Chinese grammar as a whole. C.-T. Huang’s identification of this issue<sup>14</sup> led to a series of discoveries of cases and theoretical debates that gave rise to findings in regard to the nature of the verb that governs the object in a subsentence, the expressive status within a subsentence, and its temporal characteristics, among other aspects. Although scholarly views of the nature of null words (also translated “empty category” above) in Chinese differ, in particular regarding the question of whether it is free or constrained, this line of questioning deepened our understanding of the facts of the Chinese language.

## Cognitive Grammar Research

In the mid-1990s Chinese cognitive grammar came onstage, announced by two works: Shen Jiaxuan’s article “‘Youjie’ yu ‘wujie’” [“Bound” and “unbound”] and Zhang Min’s book *Renzhi yuyan xue yu Hanyu mingci duanyu* [Cognitive linguistics and noun appositive phrases in Chinese]. Shen Jiaxuan used the notion of cognition of *youjie xing* (what is “bounded in nature”) to broadly define three categories of verbal, nominal, and adjectival content words (*shici*, literally “solid words,” as opposed to function words, *xuci*, also called “particles,” literally

<sup>12</sup> Hu Jianhua, “Hanyu chang juli fanshen daicihua de jufa yanjiu” [The syntax of long-distance anaphora in Chinese], *Dangdai Yuyan Xue*, no. 3 (1998): 33–40.

<sup>13</sup> In generative linguistics, “PRO” refers to “pronominal determiner phrase,” without phonological content, while “pro” is a little pronominal determiner phrase occurring in speech. Chomskyan linguistics terms PRO “null nouns.”—Trans.

<sup>14</sup> Huang, *Logical Relations in Chinese*.

“empty words”), and supplied an explanation of a series of related issues in grammar that had profound impact on subsequent studies of Chinese grammar.<sup>15</sup> Zhang Min’s monograph was the first to offer a comprehensive introduction to the theory of cognitive grammar and its application to Chinese.<sup>16</sup> The book starts with a discussion of the linguistic perspective of a nonobjective subject and touches on topics that are core concerns in cognitive linguistics, such as the issues of categorization, implied comparison, and syntagmatic similarity. A monograph of this quality was a great boon to the field of Chinese linguistics and meant that cognitive linguistics was introduced to Chinese linguists in its true form.

Zhang Min’s book is also an exemplary study of syntactic resemblance. Yet the fundamental aspects of cognitive experience—the gestalt feature, the highlighting feature, and the notion of grammatical metonymy—are shown to have interpretive force in Shen Jiaxuan’s discussion of sentence forms using *zai* (a locative word) and *gei* (“give,” in some instances indicating passive mode of the verb), and the choice between sentence forms using the verbs *tou* [steal] as opposed to *qiang* [steal/wrest], and in her discussion of referential transfer and metonymy.<sup>17</sup>

Two other aspects where cognitive grammar led to significant advances are the view that language is subjective and the notion of three realms. After the results of Shen Jiaxuan’s study of disposal [*chuzhishi*] were published, the grammatical expression of linguistic subjectivity in Chinese became a hot topic.<sup>18</sup> Shen Jiaxuan and Wang Wei introduced the notion of three realms from cognitive linguistics to the study of Chinese linguistics, observing that the realm of physical objects or physical states, the realm of mental states or states of consciousness, and the realm of objective states of thought, that is, the linguistic

<sup>15</sup> Shen Jiaxuan, “‘Youjie’ yu ‘wujie,’” *Zhongguo yuwen*, no. 5 (1995): 367–80 (reprinted in Ma Qingzhu, ed., *Ershi shiji xiandai Hanyu yufa lunwen jingxuan* [Selected papers on modern Chinese grammar in the twentieth century] [Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2005]).

<sup>16</sup> Zhang Min, *Renzhi yuyan xue yu Hanyu mingci duanyu* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> See the discussion in Shen Jiaxuan, “Zhuanzhi he zhuan yu” [Referential transfer and metonymy], *Dangdai yuyan xue*, no. 1 (1999): 3–15.

<sup>18</sup> The issue of disposal occurs in *ba* sentences, where the empty particle *ba* marks the object to be disposed. Shen Jiaxuan found “subjectivity disposal” by comparing ordinary verb–predicate–objects sentences with *ba* sentences. The speaker had subjective feelings about subject A disposing [*ba*] the object. See Shen Jiaxuan, “Ruhe chuzhi ‘chuzhishi’” [How to deal with “disposal”], *Zhongguo yuwen*, no. 5 (2002): 387–99.—Trans.



realm, correspond to the realms of mobility, knowledge, and speech, respectively.

## Functional Linguistics Research

Beginning in the mid-1980s, functional linguistic theory was introduced. The notion of dynamic syntax quickly developed in Chinese linguistic research. Functionalism is a loose school of thought that is based on a shared belief that syntax is not autonomous. This type of dynamic (also called liberal) view of syntax saw dramatic development in three areas.

The first area is the view of syntax as discourse. Scholars of Chinese noted the tendency for “the subject to be transitive, with no designated object,” but applying the notion of pragmatics to syntax in this case would generate too many exceptions to the rule. Functional linguistics explains the structure of information in a sentence in terms of the principle “from old to new” and notes that the subject and the object, sentence patterns using *ba* (“dispose,” a function word to identify the object) construction and sentence patterns using *bei* (also called the passive mode), and the object-modifier sequence all could be explained essentially on the same ground. At the same time, linguists considered the nature of nominal elements that “build on what precedes” and “link to what follows” from the perspective of discourse and offered essential explanations of phenomena involving nominal elements, such as their introduction, nominal referents following words or phrases, omission of the noun, and non-referential nouns.

The second area is the view of historical syntax. The notion of grammaticalization is widely accepted. With an eye to development as a starting point, it is possible to explain the degree to which historical syntax is retained in modern Chinese syntagmatic systems and, beyond that, also observe grammatical change presently underway. This perspective has helped set a number of milestones in Chinese modal syntax that open up an entirely new understanding. One by one, we have been able to explain questions of what is “emptying out” following the rules of normal modal syntactic development,<sup>19</sup> what constitute cases of language usage being absorbed into grammar, and what changes are caused by language contact.

<sup>19</sup> “Emptying out” [*xuhua*] is another way to refer to the process of language change called “grammaticalization,” where words and phrases referring to objects and actions become grammatical markers.—Trans.

The third area involves comparison between typologies of grammar. Studies of language typology began in the 1970s and focused on languages that had marked differences in respect to the degree of modality. They yielded findings beneficial to our understanding of Chinese. Lateral comparison of syntax typologies made it possible to identify the expression of grammar at every level of Chinese. The most pronounced result of these studies was to sketch a preliminary framework for grammatical surveys to be used in comparison of languages and comparison of dialects, to make systematic description of grammar possible.

### Research on Semantics

Zhu Dexi initiated grammatical studies of the semantics of verbal nouns in modern Chinese in his 1978 study of judgment sentence patterns using the particle *de* (modifier/possessive).<sup>20</sup> This article notes that verbs could be classified as one-way implicative verb, two-way, or three-way verb, depending on the noun with which they are related. Moreover, the verb could use a latent subject or a latent object to address the actor or recipient of an action. In actuality, this draws directly on case grammar that was proposed by Charles J. Fillmore. With this, a closely guarded secret related to problems in semantics was brought to the attention of those studying syntax, and the aim of looking at syntax in greater detail was clear—the aim of formal analysis is to reveal semantic relationships. Zhu Dexi's study of self-referentiality and referential transfer advanced interpretations of the role of semantics and its relation to syntactic structure one step further and systematically discussed the notion of component extraction; this series of studies became the model for the notion of compartmentalized relations that profoundly influenced studies of Chinese syntax.<sup>21</sup>

Chen Ping investigated the newest development in theories concerning the role of semantics in a 1994 article and used the idea of case grammar in his research on Chinese.<sup>22</sup> His article applied the American linguist David Dowty's method of analyzing the “prototype agent” and “prototype recipient” to the

<sup>20</sup> Zhu Dexi, “De' zi jiegou yu panduan ju” [The structure of clauses using “de” and judgment sentences], *Zhongguo yuwen*, nos. 1–2 (1978): 23–27, 104–9.

<sup>21</sup> Zhu Dexi, “Zizhi yu zhuanzhi” [Self-reference and transfer-reference—the grammatical and semantic functions of nominalization markers “de,” “zhe,” “suo,” and “zhi” in Chinese], *Fangyan*, no. 1 (1983): 16–31.

<sup>22</sup> Chen Ping, “Shilun Hanyu zhong sanzong juzi chengfen yu yuyi chengfen de peiwei yu-anze” [A tentative discussion of the coordinating principle of three syntactic elements with semantic elements in Chinese], *Zhongguo yuwen*, no. 3 (1984): 161–68.

verification principle for syntactic elements in Chinese and successfully explained the general rules of word order in the major sentence patterns in Chinese. This study showed strong interpretive ability and possibilities for further study. Xu Liejiong and Shen Yang introduced contemporary thematic theory and studies of nominal and verbal in their discussion of thematic theory and the issue of coordinating value in Chinese, where they discussed the issue of its application for Chinese.<sup>23</sup>

The teachings of pragmatic linguistics were introduced in the early 1980s. Over the past thirty years, “derivation” and other concepts have shown to be exceptionally effective in studies of the meaning of negation (that can be called a “stative definition”). The first linguist to examine the semantics of negation in Chinese syntax was Shi Yuzhi. Shi Yuzhi observed the asymmetry of negation and affirmation in the major types of verbal, adjectival, and nominal categories and viewed them from the perspective of “measurement” in his 1992 monograph *Kending he fouding de duicheng yu bu duicheng* [Symmetry and asymmetry in affirmation and negation].<sup>24</sup> In a series of studies in the 1990s, Shen Jiakuan used the notion of pragmatic linguistics to reveal the origin of the special semantic formulations in Mandarin Chinese phrases, in particular the formation of meaning outside speech and studies on such issues as polarity terms and related sentence types, as well as pragmatic negation, which demonstrate the enormous potential of the tenets of pragmatic linguistics for Chinese grammar studies.

Linguistic philosophy has consistently been concerned with the issue of the referent of nominal elements. Scholars of grammar who emphasized pragmatic linguistics took note of the issue of the referent from the perspective of discourse, bringing the connection between the referent and syntax to the foreground. Chen Ping gave a methodical account of the notion of four categories as it relates to nominal elements in modern Chinese. As the first application of the notions of referential and nonreferential, universal referent and sole referent to Chinese, the article went one step further to indicate the forms of usage and sentence types these discourse referents tend to choose and had far-reaching influence on later studies of referents in Chinese.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Xu Liejiong and Shen Yang, “Tiyuan lilun yu Hanyu peijia wenti” [The  $\theta$ -role theory and Chinese valence issues], *Dangdai yuyan xue*, no. 3 (1998): 1–21.

<sup>24</sup> Shi Yuzhi, *Kending he fouding de duicheng yu bu duicheng* (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1992).

<sup>25</sup> Chen Ping, “Shi Hanyu zhong yu mingcixing chengfen xiangguan de si zu gainian” [Explicating the notion of four groups related to nominal elements in Chinese], *Zhongguo yuwen*, no. 2 (1987): 81–92.

In this time period, studies of the formalization of focus became the subject of great interest in the international linguistics community, and studies of the semantics of adverbs cumulatively laid a foundation in the field of Chinese linguistics. Thus, the relation of the adverb to the focus in Chinese became a topic of intensive debate. Pan Haihua borrowed the method of three-part structure to approach situations where enumeration using *dou* (meaning “all,” “every”) is involved to come up with an integrated interpretation.<sup>26</sup> In the past few years, three-part structure (*sanfen jiegou*, also called “the semantic triple”) has become a general tool for scholars of Chinese linguistics when they analyze the semantic orientation of the focus operator.<sup>27</sup>

The focus is a semantic notion that has inevitable influence on syntax and is of concern to several different schools of thought. Functional grammar centers on the information structure of the sentence and emphasizes the natural focus of the sentence (the information focus) from the perspective of the expressive center of the whole sentence. The formalist school in linguistics tends to be concerned with the phenomenon of focus that influences the semantic equivalent of the topic. The book *Jiaodian jiegou he yiyi de yanjiu* [Focus structures and meaning], edited by Xu Liejiong and Pan Haihua, introduces the distinction among various notions of focus and, importantly, introduces scholarly teachings about focus from the perspective of logical semantics.<sup>28</sup> It also analyzes a number of issues connected to focus in Chinese, particularly the issue of focus in relation to negation.

## Studies of Chinese Based on Linguistic Variation

After more than a half-century of exploration, linguists realized that variability in the structure of language surpassed anything they ever imagined. Shen Jiaxuan proposed that the true universality in language did not inhere in linguistic structure, but rather in the use of language for communication. It was feasible, within limits, to propose the notion of abstract categories that could not be

<sup>26</sup> Pan Haihua, “Jiaodian, sanfen jiegou yu Hanyu ‘dou’ de yuyi jieshi” [The focus, three-part structure, and the semantic interpretation of “all/every” in Chinese], *Yufa yanjiu yu tansuo*, no. 13 (2006): 163–84.

<sup>27</sup> The semantic triple, or three entities of predicate-verb-object in an English sentence, lends itself to encoding as a machine-readable format. Chinese sentences often have two-part structure, and this has sparked discussions of suitable ways to encode Chinese texts for computer input and readability.—Trans.

<sup>28</sup> Xu Liejiong and Pan Haihua, eds., *Jiaodian jiegou he yiyi de yanjiu* (Beijing: Waiyu jiaoxue yu yanjiu chubanshe, 2005).

perceived on the surface of language, in order to construct abstract principles, but if this were taken too far, it is extremely problematic and would harm the variability of language.

As Shen Jiaxuan has noted, studies of Chinese grammar since the completion of *Ma shi wentong* in the late nineteenth century basically adopted the grammatical categories and framework of Western linguistics (i.e., Indo-European languages). As an explanation of the workings of the Chinese language this is like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole, an impenetrable area. Computer analysis of information delivery in Chinese also encountered hiccups, since the rules of sentence formation in Indo-European languages “subject + verb” is necessarily “noun + verb.” However, this restriction does not apply to Chinese. You can form a sentence using “noun + noun”: *Lao Wang Shanghai ren* [Old Wang is Shanghainese]; “verb + verb”: *Da ren budui* [Hitting someone is not right]; and verb + noun: *Tao, cantou!* [Run, you coward!]. For the past century or more, we have desired to free ourselves from the strictures of the Indo-European bias and view Chinese with a simple gaze, seeking patterns for forming vocabulary and creating sentences in Chinese on its own terms, and this aspiration has never faltered. Late in his life, Lǚ Shuxiang urged scholars of Chinese grammar to dare to break the mold and establish new models and not allow the concepts of predicate [*weiyu*], subject [*zhuyyu*], verb [*dongci*], and adjective [*xingrongci*] introduced with Western grammar to take us by the nose and drag us along with them. In recent years these efforts have led to considerable progress.

First, a new understanding of the “chronicle sentence” that is characteristic of Chinese came about, which challenged linguists’ long-standing view of the language. In modern Chinese, most sentences are the “zero sentence” (*lingju*, also called “minor sentence”) defined by Yuen Ren Chao, some of which have a subject with no predicate or a predicate with no subject, and these minor sentences [*xiaoju*] are positioned one after the other and can be independent or linked, or they can seem to be isolated yet linked and can express the idea of linkage without using a preposition. For instance, *Ni bu qu, bieren ye bu qu, shiqing zhongyao, wo qu* [If you do not go, other people will also not go, this is an important matter, I will go]. This type of chronicle sentence is a common style of expression in Chinese. The statement *Ta de weiren, ni keyi xinlai* [His behavior you can trust] also joins two minor sentences. At one time, people proposed that this manner of joining minor sentences, or zero sentences, was suitable for “simple” societies and “naïve” cultures and was frequently found in

the Americas among aboriginal languages. The Chinese language challenges this supposition and thus has major significance.

Second, there is a new understanding of the relation between the noun and verb that has great significance for the theory of language evolution. In the field of Western linguistics, a majority of scholars posit that the mutual opposition of noun and verb is necessary to maintain the life of a language and that the verb is the central element of the sentence. However, recent discoveries suggest this is not the case for many languages. The so-called verb in fact possesses characteristics of a noun, much as in the case of the “verbal noun” in English language. For instance, *si* [dying/death] is both “[to] die” and also “death,” as in the statement, *Si bu kepai, wo bu pa si* [Death is not frightening; I do not fear dying]. It is much like cells dividing: The verb in Indo-European languages is already a descendant of the noun, and this shapes the juxtaposition of noun and verb. The verb in Chinese has not split away from the noun and is still contained within the noun. This aspect doubtless has significance for theories of the evolution of human language.

In fact, the major distinction between Chinese and Indo-European languages is imbricated with Eastern and Western thinking habits, the categories they draw, and their spiritualism or philosophy. Western scholars’ understanding of the actual situation of Chinese cannot rival our understanding of Western languages, and, moreover, the reference works they commonly use for Chinese grammar were originally written with reference to Indo-European language. It is, in a way, similar to Chinese restaurants outside of China, which try to suit people’s palate, so that they no longer serve authentic Chinese food. Chinese linguistics should actively join in international linguistics community and research Chinese against the broader background of the transformation of world languages. This is a means to overcome the restrictive notion that one should study Chinese language from the experience of Chinese, and this also enables us to cast off the restraints of the “Indo-European gaze” to make the contribution we should to the study of human language.

*Translated from the Chinese by Kathryn Lowry*



**Zhang Bojiang** is a researcher and director of the Institute of Linguistics, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and the dean of the College of Arts and Letters and head of the Department of Linguistics at the University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. He is engaged in the study of modern Chinese usage, and his representative work is *Hanyu gongneng yufa yanjiu* [Study of Chinese functional grammar] (1996).