Chinese Cleft Constructions: Microparametric ‘Lateral’ Grammaticalization*

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Abstract
Historical-comparative analysis of Chinese cleft constructions shows that all Chinese dialects use the copula to select and assign focus to its clausal complement headed by the nominal particle (de (的) in Mandarin or ge (個/嘅) in southern dialects. However, there are micro-variations in that Mandarin de can either occur in sentence-final position (VOde) or as a verbal suffix (VdeO), whereas dialectal ge can only occur sentence-finally (VOge) and not elsewhere (*VgeO). This suggests that Mandarin de and dialectal ge are not identical. Indeed, their etymological roots indicate that while both are nominal elements, de and its original form di (底) do not have inherent deixis or quantificational force whereas ge being derived from the general classifier ge (個) does, which pre-empts its reanalysis as a clausal element. The dialectal distribution of Chinese clefts allows us to refine Simpson and Wu’s (2002) ‘lateral’ grammaticalization.

Key words
Chinese, clefts, copulas, nominalizers, syntax

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1. Introduction

Chinese cleft structures consist of the copula selecting a clausal complement headed by the nominal particle de in Mandarin or its dialectal equivalent ge in which there is a cleft bipartition of focus and presupposition, as schematized in (1) below (Lee 2005:133, Paul and Whitman 2008:430, Hole 2011:1710).

\[ \text{Subject } \text{COPULA} \text{ focus } \text{presupposition} \text{ DE/GE}^1 \]

There are dialectal microvariations here, since in northern varieties of Mandarin de can be affixed onto the verb in the embedded clause when it denotes past tense (2a-b), whereas ge is always sentence-final (2c-d).

(2a) 我是 昨天 買 票 的
\[ wo \text{ shi} \text{ zuotian mai piao de} \]
'I was yesterday that I bought a ticket.' (Mandarin) (Simpson and Wu 2002:169)

(2b) 我是 昨天 買-的 票
\[ wo \text{ shi} \text{ zuotian mai-de piao} \]

(2c) 佢係 琴日 買-嘅 书
\[ kui \text{ hai} \text{ kamyat maai-ge sue} \]
'It was yesterday that he bought a book.' (Cantonese)² (Lee and Yiu 1998:11)

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¹ The main difference between Chinese clefts and it-clefts is that although both involve the copula assigning focus to the relative clause, Chinese has prenominal relative clauses which leads to cleft bipartition within the relative clause as opposed to between the relativized noun and the relative clause as in it-clefts (Long 2013:436-440).
² The sentence-final nature of ge is widely attested in Chinese dialects (i-ii), despite some rare exceptions (iii):

i) 伊是 昨日 去 日本 個
\[ isi \text{ zonie qi Zeben ge} \]
'He was yesterday that he went to Japan.' (Shanghainese) (Wu 2004:131)

ii) 伊是 昨日 去 日本 個
\[ isi \text{ chahng khi jitpun e} \]
'He was yesterday that he went to Japan.' (Taiwanese) (Wu 2004:131)

iii) 我是 前年 到-個 北京
\[ ozi \text{ dzieie to-ke peqin} \]
'He was two years ago that I arrived at Beijing.' (Xinhua dialect) (Wu 2005:279)
Simpson and Wu (S&W) argue influentially that the formation of Mandarin clefts is a case of ‘lateral’ grammaticalization (LG) where *de* is reanalyzed from being a sentence-final nominalizer (VOde) to a clausal particle (VdeO), which represents a ‘lateral’ reanalysis of *de* from the nominal (DP) to the clausal domain (TP). However, the general ban on the clause-medial positioning of *ge* (see footnote 2) belies the null hypothesis that *de* and *ge* are identical across Chinese dialects. This paper proposes to investigate the diachronic and synchronic relationship between *de* and *ge* in Chinese clefts. Section 2 provides an empirical analysis and formal representation of Chinese clefts which are argued to be essentially copular constructions where the matrix copula verb assigns focus to its clausal complement headed by *de* or *ge*. Next, Section 3 examines the historical formation of Chinese clefts which are shown to be derived from nominalized clausal complements of the copula (Yap et al. 2010) and the different etymologies of *de* and *ge* seem to account for their different distributions in Chinese clefts. Finally, Section 4 discusses the theoretical implications of Chinese clefts for LG which seems to be parameterizable.

2. Chinese clefts (VOde/VdeO, VOge/*VgeO)

It is well known that the two types of cleft structures have different empirical properties (Paul and Whitman 2008, Hole 2011), since in addition to the fact that verbal suffix *de* (VdeO) obligatorily marks past tense (2a-d), VOde and VOge permit a range of tense, aspect and mood (TAM) values (3a-b, d-e) and negation (3g-h), all of which are prohibited in VdeO (3c, f, i).

(3a) 他 是 明天 才 會 去 北京 的  
‘It will be tomorrow that he will go to Beijing.’ (Mandarin) (S&W 2002:189)

(3b) 我 要 去 美國 啦  
‘It is the case that I will go to America.’ (Cantonese) (Fung 2000:149)

(3c) *他 是 明天 才 會 去-的 北京  
‘It is only tomorrow that he will go to Beijing.’ (Mandarin) (S&W 2002:177)

(3d) 張 三 是 上 個 星 期 去-了/過 北京 的  
‘It was last week that he went to Beijing.’ (Mandarin) (Hole 2011:1713)

(3e) 他 係 打-緊 字 嘅  
‘He is typing words.’ (Cantonese) (Fung 2000:151)
(3f) 是他打破(*-了/過)的杯子
shi ta dapo(-le/-guo) de beizi
COP he smash-ASP DE cup
‘It was he who smashed the cup.’ (Mandarin) (Paul and Whitman 2008:430)

(3g) 我是從來不抽烟的
wo shi conglaи bu chouyan de
I COP ever NEG smoke DE
‘I have never smoked.’ (Mandarin) (Paul and Whitman 2008:422)

(3h) 係唔關你事嘅
hai ng gwaan nei si ge
COP NEG concern you matter GE
‘It does not concern you.’ (Cantonese) (Fung 2000:151)

(3i) *他 是上個星期不沒去的學校
ta shi shang ge xingqi bu/mei qu-de xuexiao
he COP last CL week NEG go-DE school
‘It was last week that he did not go to school.’ (Mandarin) (Paul and Whitman 2008:430)

Moreover, while VOde and VOge allow for narrow focus on the subject (4a-b) and the adjunct constituent (4d-e) closest to the copula as well as broad focus on the entire embedded clause with or without an overt subject (4g-h, j-k), VdeO only permits narrow focus (4c, f, i, l).

(4a) 是張三寫詩的
shi Zhangsan xie shi de
COP Zhangsan write poetry DE
‘It is Zhangsan who writes poems.’ (Mandarin) (Hole 2011:1711)

(4b) 係我叫佢嘅
hai ngoh giu kui tau-ha sin ge
COP I call him rest-ASP first GE
‘It was I who told him to take a rest first.’ (Cantonese) (Fung 2000:151)

(4c) 是張三寫-的詩
shi Zhangsan xie-de shi
COP Zhangsan write-DE poetry
‘It was Zhangsan who wrote poetry.’ (Cantonese) (Hole 2011:1710)

(4d) 張三 是用毛筆寫詩的
Zhangsan shi yong maobi xie shi de
Zhangsan COP use brush write poetry DE
‘It is with a brush that Zhangsan writes poetry.’ (Mandarin) (Hole 2011:1711)
(4e) 張三係琴日打電報嘅
Zoengsaam hai kamyat daa dinbou ge
‘It was yesterday that Zhangsan sent a telegram.’ (Cantonese) (Lee and Yiu 1998:9)

(4f) 張三係用毛筆寫的詩
Zhangsan shi yong maobi xie-de shi
‘It was with a brush that Zhangsan wrote poetry.’ (Mandarin) (Hole 2011:1710)

(4g) 張三是看到王小姐的
Zhangsan shi kandao Wang xiaojie de
‘It is the case that Zhang saw Miss Wang.’ (Mandarin) (Hole 2011:1711)

(4h) 我係踢足球嘅
ngoh hai tek jukkau ge
‘It is the case that I play football.’ (Cantonese) (Fung 2000:145)

(4i) *張三是寫的詩
Zhangsan shi xie-de shi
‘It is the case that Zhangsan wrote poems.’ (Mandarin) (Hole 2011:1711)

(4j) 是希臘人最先開始釀酒的
shi Xilaren zui xian kaishi niang jiu de
‘It is the case that the Greeks were the first to brew wine.’ (Mandarin) (Cheng 2008:253)

(4k) 係咁都得嘅
hai gam dou dak ge
‘It is the case that this is also possible.’ (Cantonese) (Fung 2000:162)

(4l) *是張三寫的詩
shi Zhangsan xie-de shi
‘It is the case that Zhangsan wrote poems.’ (Mandarin) (Hole 2011:1711)

In conformity with the typological characteristics of clefts, which often consist of copulas assigning focus to relative clauses (see footnote 1), the Chinese copula may be argued to assign focus to its complement ([u-Foc]), wherein there may be left-dislocation in the form of A’-movement which derives cleft focus (cf. Kiss 1998). In this, VOde/VOge and VdeO can be argued to be CP and TP respectively (Paul and Whitman 2008:445-448) in which given Minimality the
closest constituent is attracted to the focus projection on the left-periphery of _de_ and _ge_.\(^3\) Because phrase-final _de_ and _ge_ have scope over the embedded clause, they allow for all TAM values and negation in the embedded clause as well as A’-movement for either individual constituents or the entire clause itself which constitute narrow and broad focus (5a). However, verbal affix _de_ bans all other TAM values and negation and only permits A’-movement for individual constituents (5b).

\(5a\)

![Diagram of VOde/VOge](image)

\(\text{Figure 1: VOde/VOge}\)

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\(^3\) This is supported by the fact that cleft bipartition only exists in the presence of the clausal particle (i) (_shi-de_ proper (Paul and Whitman 2008:414)), whereas its omission yields informational focus by association (ii) (bare _shi_ (Paul and Whitman 2008:415)), which suggests that _de_ and by extension _ge_ hold the landing-site for A’-movement:

(i) 他 是 在 北京 學 語言學 的, 不 是 在 上海 學 的

\[\text{ta shi zai Beijing xue yuyanxue de bu shi zai Shanghai xue de}\]

\he\ COP at Beijing learn linguistics\ DE NEG COP at Shanghai learn DE

\*不 是 在 北京 學 法文 的

\[\text{bu shi zai Beijing xue fawen de}\]

\NEG COP at Beijing learn French DE

‘It was in Beijing that he studied linguistics, not in Shanghai * (not French).’ (Paul and Whitman 2008:415)

(ii) 他 是 在 北京 學 語言學 不 是 在 上海 學 語言學

\[\text{ta shi zai Beijing xue yuyanxue bu shi zai Shanghai xue yuyanxue}\]

\he\ COP at Beijing learn linguistics\ NEG COP at Shanghai learn linguistics

也 不 是 在 北京 學 法文

\[\text{ye bu shi zai Beijing xue fawen}\]

\also NEG COP at Beijing learn French

‘He studies linguistics at Beijing, not in Shanghai, and not French either.’ (Paul and Whitman 2008:414)

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\(^4\) In representing copula _shi_, I adopt Bowers’ (1993) hypothesis that copulas instantiate unique functional heads (Pred) with the subject in its specifier, which is arguably superior to the raising verb analysis which entails problems for the adjacency in cleft-focus assignment (Paul and Whitman 2008:437-438).
Chinese clefts, then, are copular constructions whose clausal complements have different empirical properties due to the structural differences between sentence-final particles (VOde/VOge) and verbal suffixes (VdeO), which leads us to their diachronic formation.

3. Historical formation of Chinese clefts
Recent philological analyses point out that Chinese cleft constructions are reanalyzed from copular constructions in which the copula selects nominalized relative clauses headed by de and ge (Zhan 2012, Long 2013). While both de and ge are used as adnominalizers in Chinese, de is widely held to stem from the Medieval Chinese phrase-final nominalizer (n) di (底) (Liu 2008, cf. Aldridge 2008) and ge is commonly argued to be derived from the classifier (CL) ge (Cao 1995) which can stand as a phrase-initial determiner and assign specificity (del Gobbo 1999). De and ge, therefore, form different types of relative clauses when used as complements to the copula. VOde and VOge are regularly found in equative copular constructions where the clausal complement is reanalyzable as a cleft in contrastive contexts (7a) or when the nominal complement is omitted (7b-c), weakening their nominal character.

Figure 2: VdeO

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5 The inherent specificity of ge may have to do with the fact that it is originally used as a quantifier for countable nouns in Classical Chinese and is hence inherently individualizing (Yap et al. 2010, Bisang and Li 2012).
(7a) 非是菩萨行藏，此是俗门作底

NEG COP divinity behaviour this COP laymen do DE

‘This is not the behaviour of divinity; this is the doings of laymen (> ‘it was laymen who did this’).’ (*Dunhuang bianwenji 敦煌變文集*)

(7b) 師云：“人人盡有底衣即是。”

teacher say everyone all have DE clothes then SHI

僧云：“既是人人盡有底，用被作什摩？”

monk say as COP everyone all have DE use garment do what

‘The teacher says, ‘The clothes which everyone has it is then.’ The monk said, ’If it is the clothes which everyone has (> if it is the case that everyone has it), what use is there for garments?’” (*Zutangji 祖堂集*)

(7c) 師指面前狗子云:“明-明-個，明-明-個。”

teacher point face-LOC dog say bright-bright-GE bright-bright-GE

僧便問師:“既是明-明-個，

monk then ask teacher as COP bright-bright-GE

為個摩頭在裡許?”

for GE what head in inside within

‘The teacher points at the dog in front and say, ‘Fair-skinned, fair-skinned.’ The monk then asks the teacher, ‘If it is the one that is fair-skinned (> if it is the case that it is fair-skinned), why is its head inside?’” (*Zutangji 祖堂集*)

Clause-medial *de* and *ge*, on the other hand, are found in copular constructions where the subject and the complement are not co-referential (Long 2013:425). The contrast in deixis entails that *de* is attested with abstract and generic nouns and is hence reanalyzable as a cleft denoting past tense due to the fact that the object is the result of the verb (7d), *Ge*, on the other hand, tends to select specific and referential ones and its nominal character is hence retained (7e).

(7d) 娘原是氣惱上起的病

mother originally SHI angry-LOC contract DE illness

‘As for my mother, it was originally the illness that was contracted by getting angry (> it was by getting angry that my mother contracted illness).’ (*Jinping meici hua 金瓶梅詞話*)

(7e) 則是茶坊-裡見個粗-眉毛、大-眼睛、蹶鼻子、

then COP tea.lounge-LOC see GE thick-brow big-eye flat-nose
The difference in deixis between *de* and *ge*, therefore, seems to account for the discrepancy between VdeO and *VgeO in Chinese clefts, which has important implications for S&W’s LG.

4. ‘Lateral’ grammaticalization: microparametric view

The reanalysis of Chinese *de* and *ge* in clefts shows that while both seem to conform to S&W’s LG hypothesis of a ‘lateral’ reanalysis from nominal to clausal, the inherent deixis of *ge* ([i-D]) pre-empts its reanalysis as a clausal element in clause-medial position because it selects definite and specific objects. *De*, however, is reanalyzable in both clause-final and clause-medial positions due to its general lack of deixis, showing structural correlations between the nominal and clausal domains (n/CL > C, De > T/Asp). This can be schematized as shown below in (8).

![Figure 3: microparametric variation in ‘lateral’ grammaticalization](image)

LG, therefore, can be parameterized according to the hierarchy of nominal elements, as higher elements (CL) cannot be as easily reanalyzed ‘laterally’ as lower ones (De/n).

References


