Chinese cleft constructions: microparametric ‘lateral’ grammaticalization*

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Abstract
Historical-comparative analysis of Chinese cleft constructions shows that although all Chinese dialects use the copula to select and assign focus to its clausal complement headed by the nominal particle (de (的) in Mandarin, ge (個/慨) in southern dialects), there are microvariations 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). All this suggests that Mandarin de and dialectal ge are not identical, and 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 ‘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 below (Lee 2005:133, Paul and Whitman 2008:430, Hole 2011:1710):

(1)  Subject  COPULA  focus  presupposition  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) 我是昨天买票的
wo shi zuotian mai piao de
I COP yesterday buy ticket DE

(2b) 我是昨天买的票
wo shi zuotian mai-de piao
I COP yesterday buy-DE ticket

‘It was yesterday that I bought a ticket.’ (Mandarin) (Simpson & Wu 2002:169)

(2c) 佢係琴日買書嘅
kui hai kamyat maai sue ge
he COP yesterday buy book GE

(2d) *佢係琴日買嘅書
kui hai kamyat maai-ge sue
he COP yesterday buy-GE book

‘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
i si zonie qi Zeben ge
he COP yesterday go Japan GE

‘It was yesterday that he went to Japan.’ (Shanghainese) (Wu 2004:131)

ii) 伊是昨日去日本個
i si chahng khi jipun e
he COP yesterday go Japan GE

‘It was yesterday that he went to Japan.’ (Taiwanese) (Wu 2004:131)

iii) 我是前年到个北京
o zi diezie to-ke peqin
I COP two.years.ago arrive-GE Beijing

‘It 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*; 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; section 4 discusses the theoretical implications of Chinese clefts for LG which seems to be parameterisable.

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
     ta shi mingtian cai hui qu Beijing de
     ‘It will be tomorrow that he will go to Beijing.’ (Mandarin) (S&W 2002:189)

(3b) 我 係 要 去 美 國 嘅
     ngoh hai yiu hui meigwok ge
     ‘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
     *ta shi mingtian cai hui qu-de Beijing
     ‘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
     Zhangsan shi shang ge xingqi qu-le/guo Beijing de
     Zhangsan COP last CL week go-ASP Beijing DE
     ‘It was last week that he went to Beijing.’ (Mandarin) (Hole 2011:1713)

(3e) 佢 係 打-緊 字 嘅
     kui hai daa-gan ji ge
     ‘He is typing words.’ (Cantonese) (Fung 2000:151)
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 嗰 叫 先 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.’ (Mandarin) (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)
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]) in which there may be left-dislocation in the form of A’-movement which derives cleft focus (cf Kiss 1998), and 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,\(^3\) and since 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) whereas verbal affix de bans all other TAM values and negation and only permits A’-movement for individual constituents (5b):

\[
(5a)\quad \text{PredP} \quad \text{SpecPred} \quad \text{Pred'} \\
\quad \text{subject} \quad \text{Pred}\,^4 \quad \text{FocP} \\
\quad \text{shi} \quad \text{SpecFoc} \quad \text{subject}_j \quad \text{Foc'} \\
\quad [\text{u-Foc}] \quad \text{adverb}_k \quad \text{Foc} \quad \text{CP} \\
\quad \text{TP}_i \quad \text{TP}_i \\
\quad [\text{i-Foc}] \\
\]

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  
他 COP at Beijing learn linguistics DE NEG COP at Shanghai learn DE  
不 是 在 北京 學 法文 的  
 Nel COP at Beijing learn French DE  
他 studies linguistics at Beijing, 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  
他 COP at Beijing learn linguistics NEG COP at Shanghai learn linguistics  
也 不 是 在 北京 學 法文  
他 studies linguistics at Beijing, not in Shanghai, and not French either.* (Paul and Whitman 2008:414)

\(^4\) 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).
Figure 2: VdeO

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 adnominalisers in Chinese, de is widely held to stem from the Medieval Chinese phrase-final nominaliser (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).\(^5\) 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 reanalysable as a cleft in contrastive contexts (7a) or when the nominal complement is omitted (7b-c), which weakens their nominal character:

\(^5\) 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).
‘This is not the behaviour of divinity; this is the doings of laymen (> ‘it was laymen who did this’).’ (Dunhuang bianwenji 敦煌变文集)

‘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)

‘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)

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)

Then COP tea.lounge-LOC see GE thick-brow big-eye flat-nose
略绰口的官人
luechuo-kou de guanren
sharp-mouth DE official
‘Then it was the case that in the lounge he saw a thick-browed, big-eyed, flat-nosed, sharp-mouthed official.’ (Nansong Huaben Xuanji 南宋話本選集)

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 Chinese 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 as it selects definite and specific objects whereas de is reanalyzable in both clause-final and clause-medial positions due to its general lack of deixis, which shows structural correlations between the nominal and clausal domains (n/CL > C, De > T/Asp), which can be schematized thus:

(8)

Figure 3: microparametric variation in ‘lateral’ grammaticalization

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


