

How to Define and Identify Clause Elements in Mandarin Chinese

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Abstract

Defining and identifying clause elements is essential to analyzing and understanding a language, in particular in the practice of teaching and learning the language as a second/foreign language. Despite this, it remains obscure how to define clause elements in Mandarin Chinese in a way operationalizable enough so that these elements can be located efficiently. The present study is intended to examine major existing definitions and identifying principles of clause elements in Mandarin Chinese (mainly the subject, the predicate, the adverbial, the complement, and the object). With a focus on the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese as a second/foreign language, we explore potential problems in these definitions and principles and provide preliminary proposals for improving the definitions and identifying principles of certain elements.

Keywords: Subject, Predicate, Adverbial, Complement, Object, Clause element, Chinese

1. Introduction

A kernel or simple clause is a syntactic unit comprised of a subject and a predicate. A kernel clause and some peripheral elements could form a more complicated clause or a sentence, which is the largest syntactic unit that can function independently in a discourse (Zhan & Bai, 2016). Hypotheses on clause elements are the basis in analyzing and explaining grammatical features of any language and the foundation in describing how information is structured and packed in that language. Not a few previous studies thus explored clause elements in Mandarin Chinese (e.g., Chao, 1965; Li & Thompson, 1989; Liu *et al.*, 2004; Wang & Chen, 2018), but it is unknown yet how those elements can be defined in a succinct and operationalizable way so that the elements can be identified efficiently. As definitions and identifying principles of clause elements in Mandarin Chinese are particularly important to the practice of teaching and learning Chinese as a second/foreign language (L2 for short henceforth), the present study is intended to critically review major definitions of clause elements in Mandarin Chinese as well as ways to identify them, focusing on potential problems in applying these definitions and identifying principles to the practice of teaching and learning Chinese as L2. Besides, the current study attempts to offer preliminary proposals on how the definitions and identifying principles of some clause elements could be improved.

2. Subject and Predicate

2.1 Traditional Hypotheses

Chao (1965: 60-67; 94-104) proposed that “a full sentence”, similar to the kernel/simple clause aforementioned, consisted of a subject and a predicate. In a full sentence, the subject was a topic or a question to be answered, and the predicate was a comment on the topic or an answer to the question. Similar to Chao’s hypothesis, Liu *et al.* (2004: 20-24) also proposed that in a clause, the subject is what the clause is about (that is, the topic) and the predicate is a statement about the subject. These two proposals on definitions of the subject and of the predicate in a Mandarin Chinese clause, along with their hypotheses on the relations between the subject and the topic, can be valid until they are adopted in analyzing the following pair of clauses.

[1] a. 他吃了煎饼。¹

ta1 chi1 le0 jian1bing3

he eat LE battercake

b. 煎饼他吃了。

jian1bing3 ta1 chi1 le0

battercake he eat LE

¹ Most of the examples cited hereafter were taken from the Center for Chinese Linguistics Corpus of Chinese Texts (Zhan *et al.*, 2003) with a limited amount of modification due to space considerations. Made-up sentences are supplemented occasionally based on the authors’ careful examination of their distributional patterns in China. None of the examples cited in the current study are single instances of language use. Instead, they represent a set of similar examples from the corpus.

According to the aforementioned hypotheses, 他 *ta1* ‘he’ is the topic of [1a] and thus the subject of this clause, which is commented on by the predicate 吃了煎饼 *chi1 le0 jian1bing3* ‘eat LE battercake’; similarly, 煎饼 *jian1bing3* ‘battercake’ is the topic of [1b] and thus the subject of this clause, with 他吃了 *ta1 chi1 le0* ‘he eat LE’ as the predicate since this part is a statement about the subject. A question, however, is raised why the subject and the predicate differ between these two clauses when the propositions in [1a] and [1b] are the same. In the framework provided by either Chao (1965) or Liu *et al.* (2004), such a question cannot be answered appropriately.

In fact, two tests can show that the hypothesis by Chao (1965) and the one by Liu *et al.* (2004) were problematic. In the first test, if an element is the predicate in its clause (such as 来 *lai2* ‘come’ in [2a]), it can be negated when we insert negative morphemes (of which the most common ones in Mandarin Chinese are 不 *bu4* ‘not’ and 没有 *mei2you3* ‘not’ as in [2b]) (Li & Thompson, 1989: 70-73). In the second test, a predicate could be transformed into a V-not-V alternative structure so that a closed interrogative sentence is generated (such as [2c]). In this V-not-V alternative structure, the V part is the main verb in the predicate and is reduplicated following a negative morpheme.

[2] a. 他来了。

ta1 lai2 le0

he come LE

b. 他没有来。

ta1 mei2you3 lai2

he not come

c. 他来不来?

ta1 lai2 bu4 lai2

he come not come

When we negate the predicate in [1a] or change it into the predicate of a closed interrogative clause as illustrated above, we can attain grammatically acceptable clauses as in [3a] and [3b].

[3] a. 他没有吃煎饼。

ta1 mei2you3 chi1 jian1bing3

he not eat battercake

b. 他吃不吃/吃没吃煎饼?

ta1 chi1 bu4 chi1/mei2 chi1 jian1bing3

he eat not eat/eat not eat battercake

As it is shown in [4a] and [4b], however, we cannot get grammatically acceptable clauses when we negate the predicate in [1b] or when we change the predicate into the predicate of a closed interrogative clause. These results demonstrate that 他吃了 *ta1chi1 le0* ‘he eat LE’ is not the predicate in [1b] and thus the subject here is some other part of the clause rather than 煎饼 *jian1bing3* ‘battercake’.

[4] a. *煎饼没有他吃。

jian1bing3 mei2you3 ta1 chi1
battercake not he eat

b. *煎饼他吃没有他吃?

jian1bing3 ta1 chi1 mei2you3 ta1 chi1
battercake he eat not he eat

2.2 Interim Conclusion

Hypotheses such as Chao (1965) and Liu *et al.* (2004) that took a traditional account of clause elements in Mandarin Chinese regarded the subject as equivalent to the topic in a clause and considered the rest of this clause as the predicate. These hypotheses, based on which subject identification and topic identification are closely related to one another, are invalid at least when used to analyze a clause at the beginning of which there are more than one noun/noun phrase or pronoun (in particular when one of them is the receiver of the action delivered by the predicate).

2.3 Further development

Besides Chao (1965) and Liu *et al.* (2004), Li & Thompson (1989: 85-100) also illustrated on the issue of clause elements in Mandarin Chinese. On the subject and the predicate in a simple declarative sentence (which referred to a declarative sentence with only one verb/verb phrase as the predicate), Li & Thompson introduced the following four proposals:

- (1) The subject and the predicate were equivalent to each other in the sense of syntactic significance;
- (2) A simple declarative sentence was comprised of a verb/verb phrase and nothing but the subject, with the subject being simultaneously the topic of the clause except in so-called “double-subject” clauses (Li & Thompson 1989: 92-94);
- (3) The term “predicate”, which emphasized its function in syntax, did not mean that only a verb/verb phrase could be the predicate; instead, a predicate could be phrases of other types such as a noun/noun phrase or an adjective/adjective phrase;
- (4) The subject was a noun/noun phrase that had a “‘doing’ or ‘being’ relationship with the verb” (Li & Thompson 1989: 87) in a clause.

Although these proposals attempted to be more operationalizable (in particular by investigating the relation between the subject and the topic in double-subject clauses), they

still had problems in at least three aspects. First, the second proposal and the third one were contrary to each other. According to the second proposal, elements not considered as the subject or the topic of a clause were verbs/verb phrases serving as the predicate. This was inconsistent with the third proposal that the predicate was not necessarily verbs/verb phrases. The predicate can be, for example, an adjective/adjective phrase 高 *gao1* ‘tall’ or 矮 *ai3* ‘short’ as in [5].

[5] 张三高，李四矮。

zhang1san1 gao1, li3si4 ai3
Zhangsan tall, Lisi short

Second, in double-subject clauses such as [6]², Li & Thompson (1989: 92-94) claimed that as 这个女孩 *zhe4ge0 nv3hai2* ‘this girl’ possessed the latter 眼睛 *yan3jing1* ‘eye’ (that is, 这个女孩 *zhe4ge0 nv3hai2* ‘this girl’ was a whole, and 眼睛 *yan3jing1* ‘eye’ was part of this whole), 这个女孩 *zhe4ge0 nv3hai2* was the topic of the clause and 眼睛 *yan3jing1* ‘eye’ was the subject. Nevertheless, as the term “subject” emphasizes the syntactic role a certain element plays in a clause while the term “topic” demonstrates its role in discourse, how Li & Thompson (1989) distinguished the subject from the topic would lead to a question they could not answer, that is, what clause element is a topic (or what syntactic role does a topic play) in [6]?

[6] 这个女孩眼睛很大。

zhe4ge0 nü3hai2 yan3jing1 hen3 da4
this classifier girl eye very big (Li & Thompson 1989: 92)

Apart from not being operationalizable in [6] and the like, the proposal on double-subject clauses by Li & Thompson (1989) was not applicable to [1b], either, since 煎饼 *jian1bing3* ‘battercake’ is obviously not a part of 他 *ta1* ‘he’.

The third problem in Li & Thompson (1989)’s proposals was that the subject was made exclusive to a noun/noun phrase/pronoun. In fact, it can also be a verb/verb phrase (such as 吃野生动物 *chi1 ye3sheng1 dong4wu4* ‘eat wild animal’ in [7]), an adjective/adjective phrase, or a clause (Shi 2016: 205-206).

[7] 吃野生动物是不文明的行为。

chi1 ye3sheng1 dong4wu4 shi4 bu4 wen2ming2 de xing2wei2
eat wild animal is not civilized DE behavior

Besides, we cannot locate all subjects by examining the “doing” or “being” relation between the noun/noun phrase and the verb/verb phrase. For instance, in [8a] when we examine and

² According to Li & Thompson (1989: 92-93), the reason why they used the term “double-subject” was that earlier research did not know well about the topic in Mandarin Chinese clauses and thus believed clauses like [6] had two subjects. No definition of a double-subject clause was provided in Li & Thompson (1989). According to the features described, however, we know that a double-subject clause had more than one noun/noun phrase or pronoun at the beginning of the clause and in front of the main verb/verb phrase of the predicate.

compared the relation between 谁 *shui4* ‘whoever’ and 认识 *ren4shi* ‘know’ and the relation between 他 *ta1* ‘he’ and 认识 *ren4shi* ‘know’, we find that both 他 *ta1* ‘he’ and 谁 *shui4* ‘whoever’ had reasonable doing relations with the verb 认识 *ren4shi* ‘know’. We do not, however, accept the proposition “Everyone knows him” but we accept “He knows everyone” in [8a]. By contrast, in [8b] where both 他 *ta1* ‘he’ and 谁 *shui4* ‘whoever’ also have valid doing relations with the verb 认识 *ren4shi* ‘know’, ambiguity is generated, that is, we could accept both “He knows everyone” or “Everyone knows him” as the proposition in this clause. These suggest that examining the “doing” or “being” relation between the noun/noun phrase and the verb/verb phrase cannot help us identify the subject in every clause, or cannot explain the following grammatical phenomenon: when more than one noun/noun phrase (particularly at the beginning of a clause) has a reasonable doing and being relation with the verb/verb phrase, why some constituent order of these nouns/noun phrases could lead to ambiguity in meaning while some order would not.

[8] a. 谁他都认识。

shui2	ta1	dou1	ren4shi
whoever	he	all	know

b. 他谁都认识。

ta1	shui2	dou1	ren4shi
he	whoever	all	know

2.4 Interim Conclusion

Compared to the previous two hypotheses, Li & Thompson (1989) explored more in depth the relation between the subject and the topic in a clause in Mandarin Chinese. Their hypotheses, however, could still be improved if they answered the questions or solved the problems as follow: (1) what part of speech can be the subject and what part of speech can be the predicate; (2) how to locate the subject and the topic when there are two (or more than two) nouns/noun phrases at the beginning of a clause and in front of the main verb/verb phrase of the predicate; (3) how to explain a grammatical phenomenon that some constituent order of nouns/noun phrases (particularly at the beginning of a clause) could lead to ambiguity in meaning while some order would not.

2.5 Recent Development

Recent studies identifying the subject in Mandarin Chinese on the basis of how likely nouns/noun phrases with different features can be this clause element. According to different semantic elements that a noun/noun phrase possibly took priority in, Chen (1994: 162-167) proposed that in a clause with more than one noun/noun phrase, the noun/noun phrase featuring the semantic element(s) on the left of the following inequality was more likely to be the subject of this clause than the noun/noun phrase featuring the semantic element(s) on the right of the inequality:

Participating in an activity spontaneously, showing feeling/emotion/affection, doing an action that leads to a certain outcome or an action that changes the state of affairs, changing position, existing before and independent from an activity (“施事”) > Showing feeling/emotion/affection (“感事”) > Doing an action that leads to a certain outcome or an action that changes the state of affairs, changing position (“工具”) > Not having any direct relation with the verb/verb phrase (“系事”) > Existing before and independent from an activity, not changing position (“地点”) > Receiving an action or influenced by an event, generated gradually, existing before an action or event (“对象”) > Changed in state, generated gradually, receiving an action or influenced by an event, not changing position, not existing before an action or event (“受事”) (adapted from Chen 1994: 162-163)

Chen also proposed that the noun/noun phrase featuring the semantic element(s) on the left of the following inequality was more likely to be the topic of this clause than the noun/noun phrase featuring the semantic element(s) on the right of the inequality:

Not having any direct relation with the verb/verb phrase (“系事”) > Not changing position, existing before and independent from the activity (“地点”) > Doing an action that leads to a certain outcome or an action that changes the state of affairs and changing position (“工具”) > Receiving an action or influenced by an event, generated gradually, existing before the action or event (“对象”) > Showing feeling/emotion/affection (“感事”) > Changed in state, generated gradually, receiving an action or influenced by an event, not changing position, not existing before the action or event (“受事”) > Participating in an activity spontaneously, showing feeling/emotion/affection, doing an action that leads to a certain outcome or an action that changes the state of affairs, changing position, existing before and independent from the activity (“施事”) (adapted from Chen 1994: 162-164)

Compared with the hypotheses reviewed above, Chen (1994) conducted a more thorough comparison of the noun/noun phrases in a Mandarin Chinese clause in their semantic features, but Chen's proposals were still problematic mainly due to two reasons. First of all, Chen (1994: 162) claimed that the topic, the subject and the predicate were all elements at the structural level and thus can all be fully identified by examining their relative positions in clauses. As discussed before on Li & Thompson's claim about “double-subject” clauses (1989), such a hypothesis considering the topic as one syntactic/structural element confused the syntactic role, the semantic role, and the discourse role each clause element played. Chen's proposals needed improving also because they relied on semantic relations as largely as the previously-reviewed hypotheses did, so the proposals still failed to explain the grammatical phenomenon as in [8a] and [8b], that is, despite 他 *ta1* ‘he’ and 谁 *shui4* ‘whoever’ being similar in terms of semantic emphases (or sharing similar positions in Chen's inequalities), their constituent order does not lead to ambiguity in [8a] but does in [8b].

Liu (2005: 1-4) ranked phrases of different features as below on how likely they can be a sentence-beginning subject (which was defined as the first important element in a subject-predicate structure):

- (1) A noun/noun phrase was more likely to be the subject;
- (2) The more animacy a noun/noun phrase had, the more likely it should be the subject;
- (3) The first-person pronoun was more likely to be the subject than the second-person pronoun, and the second-person pronoun was more likely than the third-person pronoun;
- (4) Agent of an action was more likely to be the subject.

Besides the subjectivity and vagueness in the definition of the sentence-beginning subject (for example, how important an element should be so as to be counted as an “important element”), Liu’s principles in identifying the subject, which was not based on any corpus, was untenable even in clauses that are not rare in daily communication, such as [7], [9a] and [9b]. As illustrated before, the verb phrase 吃野生动物 *chi1 ye3sheng1 dong4wu4* ‘eat wild animal’ is the subject in [7] instead of 野生动物 *ye3sheng1 dong4wu4* ‘wild animal’ or 行为 *xing2wei2* ‘behavior’, showing the first ranking principle by Liu is invalid in this clause and the like.

[9] a. 图形吸引幼儿。

tu2xing2	xi1yin3	you4er2
shape	attract	children

b. 他吸引我。

ta1	xi1yin3	wo3
he	attract	me

In [9a], 图形 *tu2xing2* ‘shape’ has much less animacy than 幼儿 *you4er2* ‘children’, but the former is the subject delivering the action 吸引 *xi1yin3* ‘attract’ and the latter is the object receiving this action. This clause thus demonstrates that the second ranking principle is invalid. In [9b], 他 *ta1* ‘he’, which is a third-person pronoun, acts as the subject instead of the first-person pronoun 我 *wo3* ‘me’, indicating the third ranking principle proposed by Liu (2005) was not valid here, either.

In their optimality-theoretic account of subject identification in Mandarin Chinese, Pan & Liang (2002: 3-5) proposed six hierarchical constraints in locating the subject of a clause. Furthermore, they asserted that the more constraints a phrase (called a “candidate” in their proposal) can meet, especially constraints of higher rank of importance, the more likely this candidate should be the subject (that is, becoming the “optimal candidate” in their proposal). From the most important one to the least, the six criteria included:

- (1) Compatibility constraint, based on which the phrase serving as the subject was supposed to be consistent with the predicate in semantics;
- (2) Subcategorization constraint, based on which there were supposed to be phrases in the position of argument, either in an overt form (that is, a lexical form) or in a covert/empty form (that is, by using the empty category);
- (3) Parallel constraint, that is, in parallel clauses, the clause element from different clauses but at the same position in these clauses were supposed to be filled by the same part of speech;
- (4) Topic constraint, according to which the predicate was an open proposition with a semantic or syntactic gap in which the topic could fill;
- (5) Locality constraint, that is, the closer the candidate was to the predicate, the more likely this candidate was the optimal one;
- (6) Part of speech constraint, which meant among candidates positioned to the left of the predicate, those locating on the left of the following inequalities were more likely to be the optimal candidate than those locating on the right of these inequalities.
 - a. First-person and second-person pronoun > third-person pronoun > noun phrase;
 - b. Non-interrogative expression > interrogative expression

Compared to the previous hypotheses in locating the subject as well as elaborating the relation between the subject and the topic, Pan & Liang's proposal had better operationalizability due to its flexibility in allowing constraints to be violated (that is, not all constraints are met by each subject). Furthermore, the six constraints along with their hierarchical order offered an explanation for the grammatical phenomenon in [8a] and [8b]. First of all, both 他 *ta1* 'he' and 谁 *shui4* 'whoever' in [8b] meet the compatibility constraint. Besides, if 他 *ta1* 'he' is the subject, the locality constraint is violated since 谁 *shui4* 'whoever' is closer to the predicate than 他 *ta1* 'he'; if 谁 *shui4* 'whoever' is the subject, the part of speech constraint is violated since 他 *ta1* 'he' is not an interrogative expression but 谁 *shui4* 'whoever' is. As the locality constraint enjoys almost the same importance as the part of speech constraint, both 他 *ta1* 'he' and 谁 *shui4* 'whoever' are the optimal candidates, and the ambiguity in this clause is thus generated. On the contrary, 他 *ta1* 'he' in [8a] meets both the locality constraint and the part of speech constraint, while 谁 *shui4* 'whoever' does not meet either of them, so 他 *ta1* 'he' becomes the optimal candidate for sure, which prevents the ambiguity as in [8b].

These hierarchical constraints, however, relied largely (if not totally) on the semantic role rather than the syntactic role or the role in the whole discourse played by each phrase. Therefore, the constraints could still be improved in its operationalizability, particularly the operationalizability in the practice of teaching and learning Chinese as L2 when learners were at the elementary or intermediate level and thus cannot fully grasp semantic features of each phrase in a clause. Moreover, Pan & Liang (2002) did not illustrate their reasoning process

before attaining these criteria, which means these criteria were yet to be examined by further research.

3. Adverbial, complement, and object

Liu et al. (2004) offered a major investigation on the adverbial and the complement in Mandarin Chinese. They defined an adverbial as the clause element followed by a predicate and modifying this predicate or the whole clause, and a complement as the element usually following a predicate and providing supplementary and explanatory information of the predicate (ibid.: 20-22). Accordingly, when an adverbial (such as 在床上 *zai4chuang2shang4* ‘in bed’ in [10a]) and a complement resemble each other in form (such as 在床上 *zai4chuang2shang4* ‘in bed’ in [10b]) and modify the same predicate (躺 *tang3* ‘lie’ in both [10a] and [10b]), we have to rely on the position of this modifying element relative to the predicate it modifies so as to decide whether this modifying element is an adverbial or a complement. To be specific, it is an adverbial if it is followed by the predicate, or else a complement.

[10]a. 我们在床上躺着。

wo3men0 zai4chuang2shang4 tang3 zhe0

we in bed lie ZHE

b. 我们躺在床上。

wo3men0 tang3 zai4chuang2shang4

we lie in bed

To further distinguish a complement from an adverbial and to tell apart a complement from an object, which is another clause element usually following a predicate, the researchers further divided complements in Mandarin Chinese into seven subtypes, including result complements (“结果补语”), directional complements (“趋向补语”, a sub-type of complement defined as a verb/verb phrase showing the direction of the predicate), possibility complements (“可能补语”), modal complements (“情态补语”), degree complements (“程度补语”), number complements (“数量补语”), and prepositional-phrase complements (“介词短语补语”). Moreover, they illustrated in detail the features of all these sub-types in form and their semantic relations with the subject, with the predicate and with the object. Since the object which mainly refers to the receiver of an action, is another clause element following a predicate, Liu *et al.* (2004: 518-522; 533) also attempted to distinguish a complement from an object by claiming that an object was usually a noun/noun phrase or a pronoun, while the complement was seldom a noun/noun phrase or a pronoun.

Liu *et al.*'s classifying framework of complements and the aforementioned viewpoints were not without problems mainly out of the following four reasons: First, in the classifying framework, six of these sub-types were classified according to their semantic features, while one (that is, prepositional phrase complement) was so classified due to its form or structural features. There were thus overlaps between prepositional phrase complements and the other

sub-types. For instance, 向目的地 *xiang4 mu4di4di4* ‘towards destination’ as in [11] was classified as a prepositional phrase complement by Liu *et al.* (2004), but since it delivers information about the direction of the verb 驶 *shi3* ‘drive’, it could also have been considered as a directional complement.

[11] 船驶向目的地。

chuan2	shi3	xiang4	mu4di4di4
ship	drive	towards	destination

Second, in the practice of Chinese L2 teaching and learning, the classifying framework of complements seems too sophisticated, if not impossible, to Chinese L2 learners. In fact, when (1) what a “complement” modifies is the same predicate as what an adverbial modifies, and (2) both the “complement” and the adverbial share the same structure (for example, the result complement 在床上 *zai4chuang2shang4* ‘in bed’ in [10b] and the adverbial 在床上 *zai4chuang2shang4* ‘in bed’ in [10a]; the degree complement 很 *hen3* ‘very’ as in [12b] and the adverbial 很 *hen3* ‘very’ in [12a]), it is probably redundant for us to deliberately separate these “complements” from the adverbial, particularly in L2 teaching and learning. It is possible that “complements” as in [10b] and [12b] and the like are in essence adverbials, whose positions in clause are relatively flexible. That means in order to properly classify elements like 在床上 *zai4chuang2shang4* ‘in bed’ in [10b] and 很 *hen3* ‘very’ as in [12b], what we need to do is not to generate some subtype of complements, but to allow certain flexibility in the position of adverbial in Mandarin Chinese clauses.

[12]a. 他很高兴。

ta1	hen3	gao1xing4
he	very	happy

b. 他高兴得很。

ta1	gao1xing4	de0	hen3
he	happy	DE	very

Third, Liu *et al.*'s claim aforementioned on what word class can be a complement was not concordant with what their ideas (Liu *et al.* 2004: 546-579) on the position of an object relative to the position of the directional complement in a clause like [13a] and [13b].

[13]a. 我回家去了。

wo3	hui2	jia1	qu4	le0
I	go	home	go to	LE

b. 客人走进大厅。

ke4ren2	zou3	jin4	da4ting1	
guest	walk	enter	hall	(adapted from Liu <i>et al.</i> 2004: 572-573)

Liu *et al.* (2004) claimed that in [13a], 回 *hui2* ‘go’ was the predicate and 去 *qu4* ‘go to’ the directional complement. 家 *jia1* ‘home’, which was supposed to locate between the predicate and the directional complement, was the object here. Similarly, they saw 走 *zou3* ‘walk’ in [13b] as the predicate, 进 *jin4* ‘enter’ as the directional complement, and 大厅 *da4ting1* ‘hall’, which was supposed to follow the directional complement, was the object in this case. Contrary to how the researchers defined an object as above, neither 家 *jia1* ‘home’ nor 大厅 *da4ting1* ‘hall’ was a receiver of the action respectively delivered by 回 *hui2* ‘go’ or by 走 *zou3* ‘walk’. In fact, both 回 *hui2* ‘go’ and 走 *zou3* ‘walk’ are intransitive verbs here. Moreover, both 家 *jia1* ‘home’ and 大厅 *da4ting1* ‘hall’ refer to locations that, along with 去 *qu4* ‘go to’ and 进 *jin4* ‘enter’, provide supplementary information about the direction of the predicate 回 *hui2* ‘go’ and 走 *zou3* ‘walk’. Such a mistake in taking a complement (or part thereof) as an object not only demonstrates problems in Liu *et al.*’s definition of an object, but it also indicates weaknesses in claiming that the complement was exclusively a verb/verb phrase.

Fourth, the proposal by Liu *et al.* (2004) on complements also needs improving with respect to what a complement can modify. In [14] and the like, 傻瓜 *sha3gua1* ‘fool’ is a noun phrase providing more explanatory information about the object 我 *wo3* ‘me’ instead of the predicate 当 *dang1* ‘take’, suggesting that a complement is able to modify non-predicate elements.

[14] 你当我傻瓜。

ni3	dang1	wo3	sha3gua1
you	take	me	fool

Meanwhile, two features in a complement could have been emphasized in its definition so that the complement of a real sense will not be mistaken as an adverbial or an object, in particular by L2 learners. The first is the syntactic role played by a complement in modifying the subject (as 傻瓜 *sha3gua1* ‘fool’ in [15], which modifies the subject 我 *wo3* ‘me’) or modifying the object (as 傻瓜 *sha3gua1* ‘fool’ in [14], which modifies the object 我 *wo3* ‘me’). Such a syntactic function, on the other hand, cannot be accomplished by any adverbial since they cannot be a noun/noun phrase, a pronoun, or an adjective/adjective phrase.

[15] 我被当成傻瓜了。

wo3	bei4	dang4cheng2	sha3gua1	le0
I	BEI	take as	fool	LE

The second feature is the obligatoriness of a complement in clauses of certain types. For example, [16a] is illegal with its complement (in blanket) missing, while a clause is still grammatically acceptable with its adverbial (in blanket) removed (as in [16b]).

[16]a. *我把他当成（你）了。

wo3	ba3	ta1	dang4cheng2	(ni3)	le0
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I BA him take as (you) LE

b. 他高兴（得很）。

ta1 gao1xing4 (de0 hen3)

he happy (DE very)

With the two aforementioned features highlighted in its definition, a complement can immediately tell itself apart from an adverbial and an object (especially when the complement is a noun/noun phrase or a pronoun as in [14], [15] and [16a]). Two major differences among a complement, an adverbial, and an object are thus presented: (1) The three play different syntactic and semantic roles in clauses, that is, while an object is usually the receiver of an action illustrated in a predicate and an adverbial mainly modifies the predicate, a complement provides supplementary and explanatory messages about the subject or the object; (2) A complement in Mandarin Chinese can be realized by a much larger range of parts of speech, including a noun/noun phrase (as in [14] and [15]), a pronoun (as in [16a]), a verb/verb phrase (as 活得充实 *huo2 de chong1shi2* ‘live DE full’ in [17a]) or an adjective/adjective phrase (as 不安 *bu4 an1* ‘anxious’ in [17b]).

[17]a. 阅读使我活得充实。

yue4du2 shi3 wo3 huo2 de0 chong1shi2

reading make me live DE full

b. 消息使人不安。

xiao1xi0 shi3 ren2 bu4an1

news make people anxious

4. Conclusions

Although the hypotheses reviewed above vary in what features they focus on when defining and identifying the same clause element, a careful examination of the hypotheses on the subject and the predicate demonstrates that these hypotheses share all or part of the following weaknesses:

- (1) lacking in means of identifying the subject and means of identifying the topic that can make identification of either the subject or of the topic independent from each other;
- (2) inaccuracy in what part of speech can be a certain clause element;
- (3) relying largely on semantic analyses, which reduces the operationalizability of these hypotheses in Chinese L2 teaching and learning;

On the adverbial, the complement, and the object, our critical review indicates that further research may be needed mainly exploring essential differences among these three elements, which are probably not their positions in clauses, but their syntactic functions, semantic roles and even roles in the whole discourse. Although we have not proposed definitions and

identifying principles that can avoid or solve all the problems in the hypotheses we reviewed, hopefully the current review has provided some useful suggestions on how we can generate a more operationalizable and comprehensive account of clause elements in Mandarin Chinese, and, perhaps more importantly, approaches that researchers, language teachers and L2 learners can use when evaluating existing definitions and identifying rules of Chinese clause elements.

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