

# Finished with Finiteness: Mandarin Modals, Control, and Propositionality

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The question of whether or not Mandarin exhibits a finiteness contrast has divided linguists for several decades. The marked lack of tense and inflectional morphology in the language (C.-T. J. Huang, Li, & Li, 2009) has forced researchers to primarily consider the distribution and properties of modality and control. The present study employs the feature-theoretic mapping of the INFL domain as proposed by Cowper (2005) to bear on whether or not the Mandarin INFL system displays a clausal contrast focussed around a [FINITE] feature. To do so, I consider three empirical sources: (1) the asymmetric distribution of epistemic vs. root modals in putatively non-finite clauses, (2) licensing of lexical subjects in control vs. raising environments, and (3) passivisation of clauses containing epistemic vs. root modals. The study concludes that Mandarin does not exhibit a contrast on finiteness, but rather on the presence of a [PROPOSITION] feature.

Researchers who have found a finiteness distinction include Huang (1984, 1989 *etc.*) who argues that lexical subjects are only licensed by a case-assigning AUX category which may be modal, aspectual or covert, and appears only in finite contexts. T.-H. J. Lin in a (2011) paper on Mandarin finiteness, and later in a (2012) discussion of multiple modality, posits that Mandarin modals are verbal, and that epistemic modals are raising verbs while root modals are control verbs. Lin notes that Epistemic modals appear only in putatively finite contexts, while root modals may appear in either, and on this basis, posits that a finiteness distinction is necessary to explain this asymmetry.

However, literature which argues against a finiteness distinction relies on several empirical observations that challenge the generalisations of Huang and T.-H. J. Lin *inter alia*. Hu et al. (2001) find that Huang's assertion that modals only appear in traditionally finite clauses is simplistic, as root modals may appear in the complements of control verbs like 'xuyao' *need*:

- (1) Wo xuyao ni yuanyi / nenggou / keyi daibiao women.  
I need you willing / can / able represent us  
'I need you to be willing / able to represent us.'

Grano (2015, p. 140) argues that the syntactic split around the licensing of embedded subjects in verbal complements is not due to a finiteness distinction but rather a monoclausal vs. biclausal contrast. Grano remarks that this parallels Landau's (2000) exhaustive vs. partial control classes, and divides Mandarin verbal-embedding predicates into two categories: monoclausal raising verbs and biclausal obligatory / exhaustive control verbs. A finiteness distinction is then theoretically superfluous.

The present study follows R. Li (2003) in taking Mandarin modals to be a closed-class set of functional projections, rather than lexical verbs. I furthermore follow Butler (2003) in positing that while root modal quantifiers scope solely over the verbal domain, epistemics scope over INFL at LF. Empirical data in Mandarin suggests that when clauses containing epistemics are passivised, they remain truth-conditionally synonymous, while clauses with root modals do not. This suggests that epistemics – but not root modals – obligatorily scope over a saturated predicate. Taken in conjunction with the fact that root modals (and not epistemics) appear in putatively non-finite contexts, it emerges that the more fundamental dividing factor is the propositionality of the clause, not finiteness. This is in harmony with the cross-linguistic research on the topic of finiteness by Cowper (2016) who takes finiteness to be a purely syntactic function responsible for case licensing, which is in turn a dependant of a more fundamental [PROPOSITION] feature in the INFL feature hierarchy. While a syntactic split in Mandarin is clearly observed in the distribution of epistemic modals and aspectual morphology, there is no motivation to centre the contrast around a feature traditionally associated with case and verbal inflection while evidence suggests that the only contrast is in the propositional status of the clause.

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