

The copula and the copular construction in Mandarin Chinese

This paper looks at copular sentences with a [NP₁ COP NP₂] prototypical configuration in Mandarin Chinese (henceforth MC). It asks the following question: *What syntactic structure does the Mandarin copula spell out?* Moro (1997: 248-261) draws a conclusion that copulas are morphological realization of agreement and tense properties based on the investigation of various data from Indo-European languages. However, this view is not universally tenable given the fact that MC verbs do not show inflection and that the copula *shi* does not supply tense nor other verbal inflectional properties (e.g. agreement), as seen in (1a).

Nevertheless, copulas are required for nominal predicates (Zhan and Sun 2013, Wilhelm 2014, Welch 2016a). Therefore, I argue that the MC copula *shi* is an instantiation of a Pred head (Bowers 1993) and that it functions as a syntactic predicate by establishing structural relationships between subjects and non-verbal categories in copular clauses.

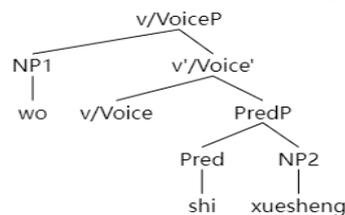
In MC, the copula *shi* is obligatory, as shown in (1), taken from Zhan and Sun (2013: 762). The same phenomenon has also been documented in Dene languages such as Tłı̨cẖ Yatı̨ (Welch 2012, 2016a, b) and Dënesų́łíné (Wilhelm 2014). The copula is required in (1a) because NPs (e.g. *xuesheng* ‘student’) cannot serve as syntactic predicates on their own (Zhan and Sun 2013, Welch 2016a, Zhan and Traugott 2019, Paul 2021). So (1b) is ungrammatical.

(1) **MC copular sentence** (Zhan and Sun 2013: 762)

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|----|-------------------------|----|----------------------|
| a. | <i>Wo shi xuesheng.</i> | b. | <i>*Wo xuesheng.</i> |
| | 1SG COP student | | 1SG student |
| | ‘I am a student.’ | | |

The evidence that MC nominal projections are ungrammatical as predicates without *shi* suggests that nouns are inherently non-predicational categories (Baker 2003). That is, NPs are purely argumental type <*e*> (Chierchia 1998, Wilhelm 2014). To be predicates, the insertion of *shi* is required. I propose that the obligatory insertion of *shi*, even in the absence of tense and agreement features, suggests that it is a Pred head (Bowers 1993) rather than a higher projection such as T, creating predicate nominals via a merge operation with an NP of type <*e*>. This yields a PredP of type <*e,t*>. MC copular sentences have an external subject argument that needs a functional head to introduce (Chomsky 1995). I consider that the Pred head is separated from the little *v* or Voice head because the former introduces a predicate complement whereas the latter introduces an external subject argument (Kratzer 1994, 1996, Pylkkänen 2002, 2008), as shown in (2).

(2) **Tree structure of MC copular sentence**



This paper shows a structural analysis suggesting that MC copula marks a predicational relation in the sense of Bowers (1993), den Dikken (2006), and Baker and Vinokurova (2012). Furthermore, the proposed analysis also suggests that MC is a [+arg, -pred] language (Chierchia 1998) given the evidence that MC nouns are inherently argumental (type <*e*>) but not predicative (type <*e,t*>). In a larger-scale context, this research continues the discussion on the relationship between copula and non-verbal predicates both in MC and cross-linguistically.

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Glossing Abbreviations

- 1 first person
COP copula
SG singular