

## The Autonomy of Sentences with Substantive Predicates in Chinese\*

### AUTONOMIE DES PHRASES AVEC DES PRÉDICATS SUBSTANTIFS EN CHINOIS

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**Abstract:** Sentences with substantive predicates (SSP), or nominal sentences as Otto Jespersen once called, are common in Chinese. Monographs and textbooks dealing with Chinese grammar have regarded SSP as an important grammatical item. But why can substantives act as predicate? Why cannot two substantives or nominal expressions in principle cannot appear freely in the same SSP. In other words, why is the word order relatively stable and cannot be altered? This paper is an attempt to expound and prove those issues, i.e. the autonomy of SSP.

**Key words:** Substantive predicate; Autonomy; Substantives; Nature

**Resumé:** Les phrases avec des prédicats substantifs (PPS), ou les phrases nominales comme appelé une fois par Otto Jespersen, sont communes en chinois. Les monographies et des manuels qui traitent de la grammaire chinoise ont toujours considéré les PPS comme un élément grammatical important. Mais pourquoi les substantifs peuvent agir en tant que des prédicats? Pourquoi deux substantifs ou des expressions nominales ne peuvent pas, en principe, apparaître librement dans les mêmes PPS. En d'autres termes, pourquoi l'ordre des mots est relativement stable et ne peut pas être modifié? Cet article est une tentative d'exposer et de prouver tous ces problèmes, à savoir les problèmes de l'autonomie des PPS.

**Mots-clés:** prédicats substantifs; autonomie; substantifs; nature

Sentences with substantive predicates in Chinese<sup>2</sup> (SSP) refer to those in which substantives act as the predicates other than verbal or adjectival elements . Otto Jespersen (1924) and Bussmann (2000:327) used

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nominal sentences to call a sentence without a verb<sup>3</sup>. This phenomenon is common in Chinese. For instance,

(1a) jintian xingqitian<sup>4</sup>

(Today is Sunday. )

(1b) \*xingqitian jintian.<sup>5</sup>

(Sunday today.)

(2) xinlaide changzhang sishi laisui.

(The newly come factory director is in his forties.)

(3) zheren haodade jiazi

(What airs the man put on!)

(4a) Tamen ban nüsheng wuren (/wuge).

(There are 5 girl students in their class. )

(4b) \*tamen ban nüsheng wu.

(There are 5 girl students in their class. )

(4c) Tamen ban nüsheng wushi .

(There are 50 girl students in their class.)

But I find not all nominal elements may act as predicates. There must exist some mechanism which is essential to the autonomy of SSP.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The study of SSP may date back to the early 1940s. Lü Shuxiang (1982:55) proposed the grammatical phenomenon "Nouns may act as predicates". This phenomenon is also widely discussed by ChaoYuen Ren (1952:17), Gao Mingkai (1948:88-91), *et al.* They use terms like 'nominal predicate', 'nominal sentences without copula' respectively. Ding Shengshu(1961) put forward "sentence with nominal predicate" and discussed it at length. Later on other scholars like Chen Jianmin (1986), Liu Shun (2001), Liu Yuehua (1983), Fang Yuqing(2008), Shi Dingxu(2002:29) have all discussed the phenomenon. In the past scholars' research mainly centers on the following aspects: (1) How to define SSP: for example, ChaoYuen Ren (1952:17) , Zhu Dexi (1982:102), Liu Yuehua (1983: 418), Gao Mingkai (1948: 87); (2) the structure of SSP: Zhu Dexi (1982:102-103), Fang Yuqing (2008: 157-159); (3) the classification of SSP: ChaoYuen Ren (1980: 50-52), Zhou Ri'an (1994), Shi Dingxu (2000:19). As regards the classification of SSP, scholars have discussed the issue from the viewpoint of function. (4) the nature of SSP: Zhu Dexi (2005:245); Shi Dingxi (2009:31) (5) the autonomy of SSP: Tang Sze-wing(2002: 217), Chen Manhua (2008:169). What interests us most is about the autonomy of SSP, because I have found that not all nominal elements may serve as predicates in Chinese. Tang Sze-wing(2002) has discussed and analysed some constraints on temporal predicative sentences in Chinese. He holds that deictic expressions cannot act as predicate. His principle may explain why (1a)(4a) are OK while (1b) is ungrammatical. In (1a) 'jintian' belongs to deictic expression and cannot act as predicate. But why is sentence (4b) unacceptable. Tang's proposal seems

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<sup>2</sup> We don't make a distinction between nominal sentence and SSP, though they are not absolutely identical. Nominal expressions denote substantive, but substantive has broad denotation. In Chinese, noun, pronoun, numeral, quantifier are all be grouped into substantive. In addition, we only study modern mandarin Chinese other than classical Chinese or dialects. Chinese idioms relevant to SSP are not discussed in the paper.

<sup>3</sup> Jespersen discussed nexus without a verb. He elaborated on nominal sentences, which are used to express strong emotion, eg. Quite serious all this..

<sup>4</sup> For the sake of prominence, we underline nominal expressions, which act as predicate in each sentence.

<sup>5</sup> Asterisk before each sentence shows that no Chinese can produce such a sentence.

unable to work. Chen Manhua(2008: 169-183) has expounded and proved the factors that may explain why some substantives can function as predicates. He discussed two main types: factors related to semantics & linguistic forms. In the main, Chen's analysis is thorough. Nevertheless, the solutions presented by Chen cannot work out all problems. I intend to make further explorations of SSP by applying other relevant theories in order to deepen the study of the topic.

## 2. THE NATURE OF SSP

As for the nature of SSP, I intend to explore the issue: why can SSP appear in Chinese? Why can substantives or nominal elements serve as predicates in Chinese?

### 2.1 Ellipsis

Why can some substantives or nominal expressions act as predicates in Chinese? Some scholars have attributed it to ellipsis. For example,

(5) ta laopo henan ren.

(His wife is a Henaner or a native of Henan Province).

(6) ni dou sange haizi de baba le, hai zheme ai nao.

(You are three children's father. How should you show interest in fooling around?)

One idea is that in (5)(6), the copula 'shi'<sup>6</sup> is ruled out. We may reconstruct them without changing their meaning and get (5a) (6a),

(5a) ta laopo shi henan ren.

(His wife is a Henaner. )

(6a) ni dou shi sange haizi de baba le<sup>7</sup>, hai zheme ai nao.

(You are or have become three children's father. How should you show interest in fooling around?)

Another type of sentence is as follows,

(7) yige zhuan-gan hao jibaijin .

(A drill rod weighs several hundred jin.)

(8) xuexi riyu yijing bannian le.

(It has been half a year since I began to learn Japanese.)

Shi Dingxu (2009:29-40) holds that existential content verb 'you'(=exist)can be omitted. As for (7) (8), we can rephrase them like this,

(7a) yige zhuan-gan you hao jibaijin .

(A drill rod weighs several hundred jin.)

(8a) xuexi riyu yijing you bannian le.

(It has been half a year since I began to learn Japanese.)

As for other sentences, it is possible that verbs other than copula or existential verb can be considered to be omitted. For example,

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<sup>6</sup> 'shi' is functionally similar to English verb 'be'. But they are different in many aspects.

<sup>7</sup> In this sentence, besides that we may think 'shi' can be filled in, verbs like 'chengle or dangle' (have become).

(9) tamen jia tiantian dayu darou.

(Every day they eat plenty of meat and fish or rich food).

(10) ta bushi qu yixueyuan jiangke le ma? meige libai liangsan jie ke.

(Hasn't he gone to the medical college for lecturing? Every week he gives two or three hours' lectures.)

Likewise we can rewrite the sentence by inserting content verbs,

(9a) tamen jia tiantian *chi* or *you* dayu darou. (*chi* means 'eat'; *you* means 'have')

(Every day they eat (have) plenty of meat and fish.)

(10a) ta bushi qu yixueyuan jiangke le ma? meige libai *shang* liangsan jie ke. (*shang* used with 'ke' means 'conduct, give')

(Hasn't he gone to the medical college for lecturing? Every week he gives two or three hours' lectures.)

Some scholars like Shi Dingxu, *et al* do support the idea. It seems that they deny that there exist SSP in Chinese. Nevertheless most Chinese scholars do believe in the existence of SSP. In the author's opinion, I subsume it into quasi-SSP or non typical SSP.

## 2.2 Conversion

In Chinese, there exist a kind of pseudo SSP. For example,

(11) hao, women jiu shenshi yici, bangbang xiaojie.

(OK, we behave in a genteel way once, and help the young lady.)

(12) ta tai jiaotiao le, quanpan jieshou le laoshi guanshu gei tade lilun.

(She is extremely dogmatical, having thoroughly accepted the theories with which her teacher imbued her.)

In (11) (12), *shenshi* and *jiaotiao* are not true nouns. They are not viewed as nouns any more but as verb and adjective respectively largely due to conversion. As for (11) *shenshi* has turned into intransitive verb with the meaning 'do sth like a gentleman or in a genteel way'. Conversion is temporarily applied owing to the communicative need. In contrast, *jiaotiao* can be modified by intensifiers like 'tai' (means 'too') or 'hen' (means 'very') and bear the property of both noun and adjective. Further examples,

(13) wo jiu name fantong, you shifu? (n→adj)

(Am I so good-for-naught, Mr. You?)

(14) ni zhege ren tai liumang le. (n→adj)

(You are truly a hoodlum.)

The examples in 2.2 appear to be SSP. In fact, they are pseudo SSP. That's to say, they are general sentences with verb predicates. Superficially the predicates are nouns, actually they have undergone conversion based on communicative need. Their word class has changed.

## 2.3 Theoretical explanation on the basis of DSSWP

In 2000, Shi Dingxu published a paper "*The Flexibility of Chinese Syntax and the Theory of Syntax*(2000:18-26). He stressed the point that Chinese syntax is more flexible than other languages because Chinese syntax system provides more adjunct positions for nominals to move in from their original position. In Shi's paper, he elaborated upon different cases in terms of SSP. To some extent his views help to explain the existence of SSP, i.e. substantives may function as syntactic predicates. Shen Jiaxuan(2009:1-12) advanced the idea that adjectives is a subcategory of verbs in Chinese, which in turn is

a subcategory of nouns. The essential difference between Chinese and Indo-European languages lies in the fact that the former is constitutive while the latter is realisable in mapping a concrete category onto an abstract one. Shen's expounding is based on the assumption that Chinese is a language without morphological inflections owing to the deep cognitive motivation. Though Shen's view encountered strong criticism from linguists studying English linguistics in China, I think Shen's hypothesis is relatively reasonable. Based on Shen's proposal, noun is treated as an umbrella word class, which contains verbs. Verbs can serve as predicate, naturally nouns should be able to function as predicate. Here I don't want to make comments on Shen's view. What I remain to concern is why we cannot change the word order at will in the same SSP although substantives may serve as predicates?

According to the theory *the Dynamics of the Syntax and Semantics of Words and Phrases* (DSSWP)<sup>8</sup> by Guo Rui (2002) and Lu Jianming (2004:17-19), a word may acquire a special property at syntactic level. Both Guo and Lu hold that the essence of a word class features in predicative function, which can be further divided into four types: statement, reference, modification, and concomitant. The function as regards statement is relating to internal function and external function. The former also called intrinsic function, is what a word class acquires as it is invented. In the main, the views of DSSWP can be summed up in this way:

- (1). The words of certain word class may experience grammatical functional change.
- (2). Changes may occur concerning the arguments (or valences) of the words which precede or follow verbs or adjectives.
- (3). Lexical semantical roles may change.

Based on Guo and Lu, a word if it is coined as noun, it is sure to act as subject, object, etc. The external function cannot be realized until a word class is placed at certain grammatical position, say, at predicative position or at concomitant position, etc. Now the word tends to gain special property other than its inherent quality. This rule can help us to explain why substantives may act as predicates. For example,

(15) *ta yitou huang toufa.*

(She wears her hair yellow.)

In (15), the sentence consists of subject *ta* and predicate *yitou huang toufa*. The predicate contains two noun phrases: 'yitou(n.)' and 'huang(adj.)+toufa(n.)', which must be regarded as a whole, namely a construction. The predicate, originally a nominal phrase, composed of two modifiers and a head word noun, bears the internal function of acting as subject or object in a sentence. In (15) it acquires function of statement as predicate, because it is located after subject acted by the pronoun *ta*. In actual discourse, based on DSSWP, the substantive can acquire a new grammatical function---predicate statement. This tells why substantives in Chinese can serve as predicate and vice versa. For example,

(16) *nin de baifang ling hanshe pengbi shenghui.*

(My humble house is honored with your visit.)

*baifang*, which means 'visit', is a verb, but it acts as subject (substantive) when it is put before the predicate verb *ling* (let). This is due to the working of DSSWP.

Otto Jespersen (1924) and Bussmann (2000:327) have noticed a similar phenomenon: sentences without verbs. For example,

(17) Very interesting, those books.

It's called a nominal sentence by the two linguists. According to Bussmann, a sentence consisting of a subject and complement without a linking verb is a nominal sentence. But in terms of frequency and type relating to nominal sentences, owing to GSSWP motivation, Chinese boasts of abundance. The fact that substantives act as predicate shows that Chinese syntax is really flexible as Shi Dingxu (2000) says.

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<sup>8</sup> Originally, the theory was founded by Guo Rui (2002), Prof. Lu Jianming (2004) has further improved. The ideas we cited are based on both scholars' expounding.

### 3. ON THE AUTONOMY OF SSP

In Section 2 I have explored the issue: why substantives can act as predicates in Chinese. But as for the same SSP, I find the word order is relatively stable. The sentence elements cannot be moved at will. Otherwise the sentence will be ungrammatical. For example,

(1b) \*xingqitian jintian.

(Sunday is today.)

(4b) \*tamen ban nūsheng wu.

(There are 5 girl students in their class.)

Based on Ma Qingzhu (1991), Tang Sze-wing(2002) and Xiang Kaixi(2001), Chen Manhua (2008) has studied the phenomenon at length and presented detailed explanation regarding semantic meaning and linguistic form. Analysis relating to semantic meaning concerns cognitive factors like with or without boundary; logical factors : genus and species; pragmatic factor:being deictic and not deictic, etc.. Analysis relating to linguistic forms concerns the application of auxiliary words, phonological factors: stress, pause, word order, and so on. I presume Chen Manhua's explanation is comprehensive and his views have strong explicative force. For example, based on the motivation of pragmatic factor "being deictic and not deictic", in (1b) *jintian* serves as a deixis, so its referential force is strong and its predicative force diminishes and is weak. Thus it cannot act as predicate. Therefore (1b) is ungrammatical. Clearly (4b) is ungrammatical. Chen Manhua(2008) stated that mono-syllabic numerals cannot serve as predicate. But why is it so?

#### 3.1 Explanation based on the principle of sequential iconicity

Dai Haoyi (1988) elaborated upon the principle of temporal sequence (PTS). PTS means that the relative temporal sequence of two grammatical units is determined by the domain of the temporal sequence exhibiting concept. That is the principle of sequential iconicity in cognitive linguistics. For example,

(8) "xuexi riyu yijing bannian le"

(It has been half a year since I began to learn Japanese.)

'bannian' (half a year) designates the time spent on the event of 'xuexi riyu' (to learn Japanese). It's clear that the event 'xuexi riyu' takes place first, then we can switch to time-counting. Thus the sentence conforms to PTS. It's wrong to say,

(8b) \*yijing bannian le *xuexi riyu*.

(already half a year to learn Japanese)

(8c) \*bannian le yijing xuexi riyu.

(half a year already to learn Japanese)

In (8a,b), we have moved the temporal expressions to the initial position of the sentence, it's clear that PTS has been violated. So (8b,c) are unacceptable.

#### 3.2 Uniqueness of Chinese grammar

Chinese is a topic-prominent language, which has its own characteristics. De zi jiegou (or structure)(word A+de <auxiliary>+ word B<head word>)<sup>9</sup> and 'ba zi ju'<sup>10</sup> are two typical structures in Chinese. SSP can

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<sup>9</sup> *De zi jiegou* is a structure with the auxiliary 'de'. There are two kinds of *de zi jiegou*, among one of which *de* is inserted between two substantives. The structure can function as subject, object, etc. E.g. ta de maozi diule(His cap is

contain one or two *De zi jie*gou. If the structure itself is not autonomous, i.e. ungrammatical, the autonomy of SSP cannot be granted and SSP is also unacceptable. For example,

(18) *huanghuang de toufa*

(yellow hair)

(18a) \**huanghuang toufa*

(yellow hair)

It is clear that (18a) is ungrammatical at lexical level. If a sentence contains an ill-formed phrases, certainly it is unacceptable. For example,

(18b) \**ta huanghuang toufa*.

(He wears yellow hair.)

But if we insert 'de' between *huanghuang* and *toufa*, the sentence becomes correct. (18b) is not accepted, because it violates the grammatical rule (Lü Shuxiang, 1984: 134):

The adjective in the structure "adj. + *de* + noun" can be reduplicated, but the rule does not apply to the simplex structure "adj. + noun".

Also according to Chen Manhua (2008:162), mono-syllabic numerals (1-10) cannot act as predicates in Chinese unless they are combined with quantifiers and form a numeral-quantifier phrase, which functions as nominal modifiers. However this rule does not have constraints on 2-syllable numerals, which are more than ten. Therefore (4a) and (4c) are OK

(4a) *Tamen ban nüsheng wuren* (/wuge).

(There are 5 girl students in their class.)

(4c) *Tamen ban nüsheng wushi*.

(There are 50 girl students in their class.)

Here *ren*, *ge* are both quantifiers. (4b) below is not permitted in Chinese, because the quantifiers are missing.

(4b) \**tamen ban nüsheng wu*

However, (4c) is really acceptable in Chinese, although quantifier is not used. Why? Besides, we can add quantifiers *ming*, *ren* to the numeral *wushi*. I think it relates to prosodic law. Whether the deletion of quantifier takes place or not is determined by whether it agrees with prosodic rules<sup>11</sup>.

## 4. CONCLUSION

As the types of SSP vary, the factors influencing the autonomy of SSP are also different. Our conclusion is that factors concerned with cognition, semantic meaning and linguistic forms as well as others only constitute partial mechanism which constrains the autonomy of SSP. In fact, the uniqueness of Chinese grammar also affects the autonomy of SSP to some extent. More often than not the autonomy of SSP is determined by the interaction of many factors.

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lost.) *de*, as an auxiliary, is often viewed as a marker of modifier. There are three corresponding characters with the same sound 'de'. The other two are attached to adjective, verbs, adverbs, etc.

<sup>10</sup> *ba*, is a preposition, which is frequently used to make *ba zi ju*. E.g. *ta ba shu mai le*. (He has sold the books.). In the example, *ba* introduces prepositional object (patient or theme) 'shu' (book), and the prepositional phrase must be put before the transitive verb, which differs from Indo-European languages.

<sup>11</sup> For limited space, the topic 'Constraints on the deletion of Chinese quantifiers and others will not be analyzed in the paper.

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