An Outline of Mandarin Syntax

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The syntax of Colloquial Mandarin has been treated in various textbooks and articles,[1] but to our knowledge, it has never been formed as the object of systematic study. The purpose of these partial descriptions of Mandarin sentences and their structure has been chiefly pedagogical, with no attempt to give a unified account of Mandarin syntax as a whole. The present paper is conceived as a first step toward such an account. It presents as briefly as possible an outline of the general structure of the Mandarin sentence, omitting many details, but providing a system in which all the details may be integrated.

1 SENTENCE AND WORD

1.1 A Mandarin sentence ends in the three following intonations:

(a) Falling, with the last syllable lower in pitch than the second last. Meaning: conclusive. Symbol /./, e.g., *shì wǒ*. 'It is I.'

(b) Rising, with the last syllable considerably higher than the second last. Meaning: animation. Symbol /?/, e.g., *shì wǒ*? 'Is it I.'

(c) High-falling, with interval between the highest pitch and the lowest (on the last syllable). Meaning: emotion. Symbol /!/ e.g., *shì wǒ*! 'It certainly is I.'

1.2 A stretch of speech between pauses which ends with one of the preceding intonations is a *sentence.*

1.3 A sentence boundary is also a word boundary. Within a sentence, if insertion of a syllable (morph) between any two syllables (morphs) is possible, then there exists a word boundary. The stretch between two adjacent word boundaries is a *word.*[2]

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[1] See, for instance, Yuen-Ren Chao, *Mandarin Primer* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948); M. A. K. Halliday, "Grammatical Categories in Chinese," *Transactions of the Philological Society* (1956), 176–224; M. G. Tewksbury, *Speak Chinese* (New Haven, 1948).

[2] For a discussion of the concept of word in Chinese, see E. S. Liu, "Frequency Dictionary of Chinese Words" (doctoral dissertation, Stanford University, 1965), which applies the general theory outlined by A. Juilland, *The Concept of Word* (in preparation).

2 THE SENTENCE

Every sentence contains a *predicate* (§3). Predicates are different in form, and can be preceded by one or more *predicate attributes* (§3.5). A sentence without a predicate is a *semi-sentence* (§5).

3 THE PREDICATE

Every predicate contains a *verbal expression*. Mandarin distinguishes three types of verbal expressions: *stative, equative,* and *functive.*

3.1 Stative verbal expressions

A stative verbal expression is a *stative verb* or a *stative verbal phrase.*

Stative verbs are words which occur in the environment hĕn . . .#, e.g., *hău* 'good,' *máng* 'busy.'

A stative verbal phrase consists of a stative verb preceded by a *stative verb modifier* or a word sequence which ends in the marker *de*, to form a *modifying sequence.* Examples: *hĕn hău* 'very good,' *fēichăng hău* 'unusually good,' *shwō bù chīng de hău* 'unspeakably good.'

3.11   Stative verb modifiers are words which precede only stative verbs, and never end in a predicate. Examples: *hĕn* 'very,' *dzwèi* 'most.'

3.12   A marker is a syntactic sign which indicates that the preceding sequence modifies the single word which occurs after the marker. Together with the marker, it constitutes the *modifying sequence.* There is only one such marker in Colloquial Mandarin, *de.*

3.2   Equative verbal expressions

An equative verbal expression is an *equative verb* or an *equative verbal phrase.* There is only one equative verb in Colloquial Mandarin, *shr.* The function of the equative verb is to link two *nominal expressions* (§4) which are to be equated. Example: *wŏ shr syāngsyàrén* 'I am a farmer.'

*3.21   An equative verbal phrase consists of an equative verb preceded by an *equative verb modifier.* There are two equative verb modifiers, the negative *bu* and the intensifier *jyou.* Examples: *wŏ bú shr syāngsyàrén* 'I am not a farmer,' *wŏ jyòu shr nèige syāng syàrén* 'I am that farmer.'

*3.22   The equative combined with the marker in the same predicate form the syntactic pattern of emphasis. The emphasized expression occurs immediately after the equative verb. The marker occurs after the *functive* verbal expression (§3.3). Examples: *tā shr dzwótyān lái de* or *shr dzwótyān tā lái de,* both meaning 'It was yesterday that he came.'

3.3   Functive verbal expressions

A functive verbal expression is a *functive verb* or a *functive verbal phrase.*

3.31 Functive verbs are words which occur in the environment neng
. . .#, e.g. *măi* 'buy,' *yŏu* 'exist.'

3.32 Functive verbal phrases consist of a functive verb preceded by a
functive verb modifier or a modifying sequence, a functive verb followed by
a nominal expression, or a functive verb preceded by a functive verb
modified and followed by a nominal expression. Examples: *tă néng măi*
'He can buy,' *tā măidì* 'He buys land,' *tā neńg măi nèi kwài* 'He can buy that
piece of land' or *jèi juńg shrchíng bú hwèi yŏu* 'This kind things can not exist.'

3.33 Functive verb modifiers are groups of words together with their
negated forms. Members of the group can only occur before functive
verbs but never in the final position of a predicate construction. Examples:
néng 'can' *bù néng* 'can not,' *kĕyi* 'may,' *bù kĕyi* 'may not.'

3.34 A functive verb can be followed by a functive or stative verb
forming a verbal complex to indicate either potentiality or result of the
verbal expression. Called a *resultative construction,* this construction
can be simple or complex.

3.341 A *simple resultative construction* consists of a functive verb
indicating the action, followed by a functive or stative verb indicating the
result. Examples: *sýwe hău* 'learn it and learn it well,' *kàn wán* 'read it and
finish it.'

3.342 A *complex resultative construction* consists of a functive verb and
a stative or functive verbal expression linked by a marker or negative. The
sequence *functive + marker + stative (functive) verb* indicates potential
possibility whereas the sequence *functive verb + negative + stative* (func-
tive) *verb* indicates potential impossibility. Examples: *kàn de jtàn* 'See it and
be able to perceive it,' *kàn bú jyàn* 'See it but not be able to perceive it,' *kàn
de wán* 'Read it and can finish it,' *kàn bú wán* 'Read it but can not finish it.'

A simple resultative construction has always its complex counter-part
—the complex resultative construction, but the contrary is not true.

3.35 The functive verb is the only verbal form which can be reduplica-
ted. Semantically, the *reduplicated form* indicates extension of the action.
Examples: *kàn* 'look,' *kànkan* 'look it over,' *dzŏu* 'walk,' *dzóudzou* 'walk
around, take a stroll.'

3.36 One of two words, the directional indicators *lái* and *chyù* can occur
at the end of every functional verbal expression: *lái* signifies the action is
toward the speaker, *chyù,* that the action is away from the speaker.
Examples: *tā măi dūngsyi lái* 'He comes to buy things,' *tā măi dūngsyi chyù*
'He goes to buy things.'

3.4 Predicate Particles

The effect of predicate particles is a certain semantic coloring of the
predicate to which they are attached. With or without predicate particles,

the denotation of a predicate is largely the same. Predicate particles are monosyllabic words which never occur predicate-initially, are atonal, and never stressed. The most common particles are: *ma*, which signifies a question, e.g., *tā néng mǎi ma*? 'Can he buy it;' *le*, which signifies change of status, e.g., *tā bìng le* 'He is sick,' *píngdz pwò le* 'The bottle is broken.' When two *le* occur in the same predicate, one is placed after the functive verb, the other after the following nominal expression, to indicate that the action is completed up to the present, e,g., *tā chī le fàn le* 'He has eaten the meal'; *ba*, which denotes probability, e.g., *tā lái le ba* 'He has came, hasn't he;' *je* and *ne*, which denote continuity, e.g., *tā chī je*, *tā chī ne*, or *tā chī je ne* 'He is eating.' If a nominal expression is necessary, it is placed between *je* and *ne*, e.g., *tā chī je fàn ne* 'He is eating the meal.'

3.5 Predicate attributes

A predicate can occur by itself, or it can be preceded by one or more words. The words preceding the predicate constitute the predicate attributes. Predicate attributes are of four kinds: *place word sequence*, *time word sequence*, *predicate connectives*, and *nominal expressions*.

3.51 A *place word sequence* consists of three components: first, the invariable *dzai*, which indicates this particular kind of word sequence; second, a place word; and third, an optional *localizer*. Example: *dzài chéng lǐtou jù* 'Live in the city.'

The most common localizers are: *shàng (tou)*, 'above,' *syà (tou)* 'below,' *lǐ (tou)* 'inside,' *wài (tou)* 'outside,' *chyán (tou)* 'front,' *hòu (tou)* 'back.'

3.52 The *time word sequence* exhibits the same pattern as the place word sequence, except for the second component, which is a time word. Example: *dzài chwēntyan hwār dōu kāi le* 'In spring, the flower blooms.'

3.53 *Predicate connectives* are words which occur between the predicates of the same sentence. Examples: *nèi ge haídz yòu shòu yòu gāu* 'That child is thin and tall,' *jèi ge yě bù hǎu yě bú hwài* 'This is neither good nor bad.'

3.54 *Nominal expressions* are dealt with separately in the following section.

4 NOMINAL EXPRESSIONS

A nominal expression is a *sentence*, a *pronoun* (§4.1), a *question word* (§4.3), or a *nominal*. Nominals are endocentric phrases whose heads consist of a single noun (§4.2), or of two or more nouns in *apposition* (§4.5). In its simplest form, a nominal consists of a single noun which may be preceded by one or more nominal modifiers (§4.4).

A series of two or more nominal expressions can be joined by an *inter-nominal operator* (§4.6). In a predicate with a functive verb, the nominal expression can have a label (§4.7).

4.1 *Pronouns* are words which occur only before the plural suffix *-men*, and are never preceded by a modifier. The commonest pronouns are: *nǐ* 'you,' *wǒ* 'I,' and *tā* 'he.'

4.2 A *noun* is a word which occurs in the environment jei X . . .#, or *yi* X . . .#,[3] and is never preceded by a negative. Examples: *rén* 'man,' *shǒu* 'hand.'

4.3 A *question word* can not be preceded by a modifier. A sentence which contains a question word is an interrogative sentence. Example: *tā shr̀ shéi?* 'Who is he.'

4.4 A *nominal modifier* is a *modifying sequence* (§3.12), or a *determiner*. A determiner has three components: (1) Demonstrative, (2) Numeral, (3) Quantifier.

Demonstratives are words which do not occur predicate-finally and before functive verbs, e.g. *jèi* 'his,' *nèi* 'that,' and *něi* 'which.'

Numerals are defined extensionally by listing, e.g. *yī* 'one,' *er̀* 'two,' *sān* 'three'.

Quantifiers are words which occur only between numerals and nouns. The most common quantifier is *ge*. The possible sequence of the three components are: (1)(2)(3), (1)(3), and (2)(3).

4.5 The head of certain nominals consists of two or more nouns between which there is no pause. Such nouns are considered to be in *apposition*.

Nouns in apposition are often names of persons, i.e., a family name followed by a given name, or a name followed by a title, e.g., *Chāng Dà-míng* 'Chang Da-ming,' *Chāng syànshèng* 'Mr. Chang.'

4.6 In certain nominal expressions, the head consists of a series of two or more nominals which, except for the last, are followed by *inter-nominal operators*. When a sentence with operators is being negated, the negatives occur before the operators, not before the verbal expressions.

The most common inter-nominal operators in Mandarin are: *gēn* 'and, with,' *gěi* 'for,' *dwèi* 'to,' and *bǐ* (used when two nominals are compared). Examples: *nǐ gēn wǒ dou chỳu* 'You and I both go,' *wǒ gěi tā syě wán le* 'I finished writing it for him,' *jèi ge dwèi wǒ méiyùng* 'This to me is useless,' *jèr li nèr ywan* 'It is far from here to there,' *jèi ge bǐ nèi ge cháng* 'This one is longer than that one.'

4.7 In a functive verbal expression, a *label* can occur either before or after a nominal expression. There are four labels, one pre-nominal, *bǎ*, and three post-nominal, *bèi*, *ràng*, and *jyàu*. A labeled nominal expression can occur only before the functional verbal expression and only when the

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[3] X is any single word. # is a pause.

functive verbal expression is followed by an obligatory *verbal complement* rather than by another nominal expression.

A *verbal complement* is a particle, a reduplicated form of the preceding functional verb, or a stative or functional verb which combines with the preceding functional verb to form a resultative construction. Examples: *wǒ bǎ tā dǎ le* 'I hit him,' *tā ràng wǒ dǎ le* 'I hit him,' *tā bǎ wǒ hèn tòu le* 'He hates me with piercing hatred.'

5 THE SEMI-SENTENCE

A sentence which contains no predicate is a semi-sentence. In Mandarin semi-sentences are rare. The commonest type of semi-sentence consists of two nouns. Example: *wǒ dūngfēng* 'I eastwind' (expression used in mah-jyang playing).

6 SAMPLE TEXT

To illustrate the application of the model outline in this paper, we analyze in this section a number of sentences in terms of the categories defined above. The text is a Chinese folktale, in the colloquial version printed by Wang.[4] The characters are transcribed as they stand.

In every sentence, the major constituents are marked by prefixing one of the following symbols:

<div align="center">

P   Predicate
PA   Predicate attribute

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When the same sentence contains two or more constituents of the same kind, their symbols are distinguished by subscript numerals: PA_1 and PA_2 identify the first and the second predicate attributes in a given sentence.

Each Mandarin sentence is followed by a free translation, together with an explanation of its general structure.

(1) Tsúngchyán yǒu yī gè rén, syìng Jǎng, Jyàu Dà-míng.
    PA P_1 P_2 P_3
    Before, there was a man, named Jang, called Da-ming.

PA: time word sequence: time word tsúngchyán 'before'
P_1 verbal expression: functive verbal expression + nominal expression
         functive verbal expression: functive verb yǒu 'there was'
         nominal expression: numeral yī 'one' + quantifier ge + noun rén
         'man'

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[4] Wang Fang-yu, *The Lady in the Painting* (New Haven, 1957).

P$_2$ verbal expression: functive verbal expression + nominal expression
        functive verbal expression: functive verb syìng 'named'
        nominal expression: noun Chāng
P$_3$ verbal expression: functive verbal expression + nominal expression
        functive verbal expression: functive verb jyàu 'called'
        nominal expression: noun Dà-mìng.

(2) Tā méiyǒu gēge, méiyǒu dìdi.
     PA P$_1$ P$_2$

     He had no older brothers, had no young brothers.

PA: nominal expression: nominal: pronoun tā'he'
P$_1$ verbal expression: functive verb + nominal expression
        functive verb: méiyou 'had no'
            nominal expression: noun gēge 'older brothers'
P$_2$ verbal expression: functive verb + nominal expression
        functive verb: méiyou 'had no'
            nominal expression: noun dìdi 'younger brothers.'

(3) Fùchìn mǔchìn dōu gwò chỳu le.
     PA   PA   P

     Father mother also passed away.

PA: nominal expression: noun fùchin 'father'
PA: nominal expression: noun mǔchin 'mother'
P: verbal expression: functive verbal expression + particle
        functive verbal expression: functive verb modifier + functive
                                                verb + directional indictor
            functive verb modifier: ye 'also', dōu 'all'
            functive verb gwò: 'passed'
            directional indicator: chỳu 'away'
            particle:le (change into the status of past)

(4) Jyā lǐ jyòu shὶ tā yī gè rén.
     PA   P

     At home, he was the only person.

  A: place word sequence: place word + localizer
        place word: jȳa 'home'
        localizer: lǐ 'in'

P: verbal expression: stative verbal expression + nominal expression
         stative verbal expression: intensifier jyòu 'only'
                                                  + stative verb shŕ 'is'
         nominal expression: noun + nominal (in apposition)
               noun: tā 'he'
               nominal: numeral + quantifier + noun
                    numeral: yí 'one'
                    quantifier: gè

(5) yě méiyou chýan.
     P

     Also had no money.

P: Functive verbal expression: functive verbal modifier + functive verb
                                                  + nominal expression
         functive verbal modifier: yě 'also'
         functive verb: méiyou 'had no'
         nominal expression: noun chýan 'money.'

(6) Tā měityān dzăushang dzaì lù shàng kànkan shān, kànkan shwěi.
     PA₁ PA₂   PA₃   P₁   P₂
     Every morning on his way, he looked the hill, and looked the water
     (river).

PA₁: nominal expression: pronoun tā 'he'
PA₂: time word sequence: time word
        time word: nominal: nominal modifier měi 'every'
                    + noun tyān 'day' + noun dzăushang 'morning'
PA₃: place word sequence: dzài + place word + localizer shàng 'on'
          place word: nominal: noun lù 'way, road'
P₁: verbal expression: functive verbal expression
        functive verbal expression: functive verb + nominal
            functive verb: reduplicated form kànkan 'looked'
            nominal: noun shān 'hill'
P₂: verbal expression: functive verbal expression
        functive verbal expression: functive verb + nominal
            functive verb: reduplicated form kànkan 'looked'
            nominal: noun shwěi 'water'.

(7) Tā yoǔ yī wèi péngyou, shŕ yí wèi lāu syānshèng.
     PA P₁   P₂
     He had a friend, an old gentleman.

PA: pronoun tā 'he'
P₁: verbal expression: functive verbal expression
      functive verbal expression: functive verb + nominal
      expression
         functive verb: yǒu 'had'
         nominal expression: nominal modifier + noun
            nominal modifier: numeral yī 'one' + quantifier wèi
            noun: péngyou 'friend'
P₂: verbal expression: equative verbal expression
      equative verbal expression: equative verb + nominal
      expression
         equative verb: shr̀ 'is'
         nominal expression: nominal modifier + noun
            nominal modifier: numeral yī 'one' + quantifier wèi
            noun: lǎu syānshèng 'old gentleman!'.

(8) Gāu lǎu syānshèng kàn Jāng Dà-míng jyā lǐ méiyǒu tàitai méiyǒu
    PA   P
    háidz̀.
    Old Mr. Gau saw that in his family Jang Da-ming had no wife and
    children.

PA: nominal: noun gāu (name) + noun syānshèng 'mister' (title), (in
    apposition)
P: functive verbal expression: functive verb kàn 'saw' + nominal:
   sentence
      sentence: Jāng Dà-míng jyā lǐ méiyǒu tàitai méiyǒu háidz̀.
         PA₁   PA₂ P₁   P₂
        PA₁: noun + noun (in apposition)
            noun: jāng (family name)
            noun: Dà-míng (given name)
        PA₂: place word sequence; place word jyā 'family'
                                + localizer lǐ 'in'
        P₁: functive verbal expression: functive verb méiyǒu
        'had no'
                               + nominal
            nominal: noun tàitai 'wife'
        P₂: functive verbal expression: functive verb méiyǒu
        'had no'
                             + nominal
            nominal: noun háidz̀ 'children'

(9) Tā gěi Jāng Dà-míng hwà le yí jāng hen hāukàn de měirēn.
    PA   P

He painted a lovely beauty for Jang Da-ming.

PA: pronoun + inter-nominal operator + nominal
        pronoun: tā 'he'
        inter-nominal operator: gěi 'for'
    nominal: noun Jāng (family name) + noun Dà-míng (given name)
P: functive verbal expression: functive verb + particle + nominal
    expression
        functive verb: hwà 'painted'
        particle: le
        nominal expression: nominal modifier + modifying sequence +
        noun
            nominal modifier: numeral yī 'one' + quantifier jāng
            modifying sentence: stative verb modifier hěn 'very'
                . + stative verb hěukàn 'lovely'
                + marker de
            noun: měirén 'beauty.'

(10) Tā bǎ hwaȑ hwà wán le.
    PA P

He finished the painting.

PA: pronoun tā 'he'
P: functive verbal expression: label + nominal + resultative
    construction
                                        + verbal complement
        label: bǎ
        nominal: noun hwàr 'painting'
        resultative construction: functive verb hwà 'paint'
                                        + functive verb wān 'finish'
        verbal complement: particle le.

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