An Outline of Mandarin Syntax

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The syntax of Colloquial Mandarin has been treated in various textbooks and articles, 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., shè wǒ. 'It is I.'
(b) Rising, with the last syllable considerably higher than the second last. Meaning: animation. Symbol /[?], e.g., shè 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., shè 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

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 hén...#, e.g., hâu ‘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: hén hâu ‘very good,’ fēicháng hâu ‘unusually good,’ shwō bù chīng de hâu ‘unspeakably good.’

3.1.1 Stative verb modifiers are words which precede only stative verbs, and never end in a predicate. Examples: hén ‘very,’ dzwèi ‘most.’

3.1.2 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: wō shr syāngsyārēn ‘I am a farmer.’

3.2.1 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: wō bù shr syāngsyārēn ‘I am not a farmer,’ wō jyou shr nèige syāng syārēn ‘I am that farmer.’

3.2.2 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 dzwōtyān lài de or shr dzwōtyān tā lài 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. māi ‘buy,’ yǒu ‘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: tā néng māi ‘He can buy,’ tā māidi ‘He buys land,’ tā néng māi nēi kwāi ‘He can buy that piece of land’ or jēi juŋ shìchíng bū hwēi yǒu ‘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,’ kēyi ‘may,’ bù kēyi ‘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: sywe hāu ‘learn it and learn it well,’ kàn wān ‘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 (functive) verb* indicates potential impossibility. Examples: kàn de jiàn ‘See it and be able to perceive it,’ kàn bū jiàn ‘See it but not be able to perceive it,’ kàn de wān ‘Read it and can finish it,’ kàn bū wān ‘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 reduplicated. Semantically, the *reduplicated form* indicates extension of the action. Examples: kàn ‘look,’ kànkan ‘look it over,’ dzōu ‘walk,’ dzōudzou ‘walk around, take a stroll.’

3.36 One of two words, the directional indicators lāi and chyù can occur at the end of every functional verbal expression: lāi signifies the action is toward the speaker, chyù, that the action is away from the speaker. Examples: tā māi dūngsyi lāi ‘He comes to buy things,’ tā māi duīngsyi 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 nèng māi ma?* ‘Can he buy it?'; *le*, which signifies change of status, e.g., *tā bīng le* ‘He is sick,’ *pīngdzī pīng 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., *tī chī le fān 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 fān 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 *dzài*, which indicates this particular kind of word sequence; second, a place word; and third, an optional *localizer*. Example: *dzài chēng litōu jū* ‘Live in the city.’


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 chhwèntyān 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 hālīdz you shōu you gāu* ‘That child is thin and tall,’ *jèi ge yè bū hāu yè bū hwāi* ‘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: ni 'you,' wǒ 'I,' and tā 'he.'

4.2 A noun is a word which occurs in the environment jei X ... #, or yi X ... #, 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 shèi? '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. jì 'his,' nèi 'that,' and něi 'which.'

Numerals are defined extensionally by listing, e.g. yī 'one,' èr '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 yìshèng '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: ni gēn wǒ dou chyu 'You and I both go,' wǒ gěi tā syé wán le 'I finished writing it for him,' jìe gěi dwèi wǒ méiyòng 'This to me is useless,' jër li nèr ywan 'It is far from here to there,' jēi 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, bì, and three post-nominal, bèi, ràng, and jyàu. A labeled nominal expression can occur only before the functional verbal expression and only when the

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: 

- \( \text{wō bā tā dā le} \) ‘I hit him,’
- \( \text{tā ràng wō dā le} \) ‘I hit him,’
- \( \text{tā bā wō hên tòu le} \) ‘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: \( \text{wō dūngfēng} \) ‘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:

- \( \text{P} \) Predicate
- \( \text{PA} \) Predicate attribute

When the same sentence contains two or more constituents of the same kind, their symbols are distinguished by subscript numerals: \( \text{PA}_1 \) and \( \text{PA}_2 \) 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) Tsúngchýán yōu yī gè rén, sying Jaṅg, Jyáu Đà-míng.

\[
\text{PA} \quad \text{P}_1 \quad \text{P}_2 \quad \text{P}_3
\]

Before, there was a man, named Jang, called Da-ming.

\( \text{PA} \): time word sequence: time word tsúngchýán ‘before’

\( \text{P}_1 \) verbal expression: functive verbal expression + nominal expression

functive verbal expression: functive verb yōu ‘there was’

nominal expression: numeral yī ‘one’ + quantifier ge + noun rén ‘man’

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P₂ verbal expression: functive verbal expression + nominal expression
  functive verbal expression: functive verb saying 'named'
  nominal expression: noun Châng
P₃ verbal expression: functive verbal expression + nominal expression
  functive verbal expression: functive verb jyau ‘called’
  nominal expression: noun Dâ-ming.

(2) Tâ méiyōu gēge, méiyōu didi.
  PA P₁ P₂
  He had no older brothers, had no young brothers.

PA: nominal expression: nominal: pronoun tâ’he’
P₁ verbal expression: functive verb + nominal expression
  functive verb: méiyou ‘had no’
  nominal expression: noun gēge ‘older brothers’
P₂ verbal expression: functive verb + nominal expression
  functive verb: méiyou ‘had no’
  nominal expression: noun didi ‘younger brothers.’

(3) Fūchin mn̄chin dōu gwô chû le.
  PA PA P
  Father mother also passed away.

PA: nominal expression: noun fūchin ‘father’
PA: nominal expression: noun mn̄chin ‘mother’
P: verbal expression: functive verbal expression + particle
  functive verbal expression: functive verb modifier + functive
  verb + directional indicator
  functive verb modifier: ye ‘also’, dōu ‘all’
  functive verb gwô: ‘passed’
  directional indicator: chû ‘away’
  particle: le (change into the status of past)

(4) Jyâ lî jyōu shē tâ yî gè rēn.
  PA P
  At home, he was the only person.

A: place word sequence: place word + localizer
  place word: jyâ ‘home’
  localizer: lî ‘in’
P: verbal expression: stative verbal expression + nominal expression
   stative verbal expression: intensifier jyòu ‘only’
   + stative verb shè ‘is’
   nominal expression: noun + nominal (in apposition)
   noun: tà ‘he’
   nominal: numeral + quantifier + noun
   numeral: yì ‘one’
   quantifier: gè

(5) yě méiyou chýán.
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) Tá méiýtán dzáushang dzal lù shàng kãikan shán, kankan shwèi.
P_A₁ P_A₂ P_A₃ P₁ P₂
Every morning on his way, he looked the hill, and looked the water
(river).

P_A₁: nominal expression: pronoun tâ ‘he’
P_A₂: time word sequence: time word
   time word: nominal: nominal modifier méi ‘every’
   + noun tyán ‘day’ + noun dzáushang ‘morning’
P_A₃: place word sequence: dzái + 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 kankan ‘looked’
   nominal: noun shán ‘hill’
P₂: verbal expression: functive verbal expression
   functive verbal expression: functive verb + nominal
   functive verb: reduplicated form kankan ‘looked’
   nominal: noun shwèi ‘water’.

(7) Tà yòu yì wèi péngyou, shè yì wèi lâu syànshèng.
P  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: shè ‘is’
   nominal expression: nominal modifier + noun
   nominal modifier: numeral yī ‘one’ + quantifier wèi
   noun: lǎo sīnshēng ‘old gentleman’.

(8) Gāu lǎo sīnshēng kàn Jāng Dà-míng jyā lǐ mèi yōu tāitai mèi yōu
   PA          P       P
   hǎidì.
   Old Mr. Gau saw that in his family Jang Da-ming had no wife and
   children.

PA: nominal: noun gāu (name) + noun sīnshēng ‘mister’ (title), (in
   apposition)
P: functive verbal expression: functive verb kàn ‘saw’ + nominal:
   sentence
   sentence: Jāng Dà-míng jyā lǐ mèi yōu tāitai mèi yōu hǎidì.
   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 mèi yōu
   ‘had no’
   + nominal
   nominal: noun tāitai ‘wife’
P2: functive verbal expression: functive verb mèi yōu
   ‘had no’
   + nominal
   nominal: noun hǎidì ‘children’
(9) Tā gěi Jāng Dā-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 Dā-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 yí 'one' + quantifier jāng
    modifying sentence: stative verb modifier hēn 'very'
    + stative verb hāukàn 'lovely'
    + marker de
    noun: měirēn 'beauty.'

(10) Tā bā hwâr hwâ wān le.

PA P
He finished the painting.

PA: pronoun tā 'he'

P: functive verbal expression: label + nominal + resultative
  construction + verbal complement
  label: bā
  nominal: noun hwâr 'painting'
  resultative construction: functive verb hwâ 'paint'
    + functive verb wān 'finish'
  verbal complement: particle le.

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