

A Comparative Study of Subject Pro-drop in Old Chinese and Modern Chinese

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Chinese is a Pro-drop language, in that the subject of a clause need not be overt. Thus a Chinese speaker can use either a null subject or an overt pronoun in the subject position of a sentence, as in

ta kanjian yige nuhaizi, 0/ta daizhe yiding xiaohongmao.
he see one-classifier girl, 0/she wear one-classifier small red hat.
He saw a girl; she is wearing a red hat.

Unlike Italian or Turkish, which also have subject Pro-drop, Chinese has no inflections to mark subject-verb agreement. Huang 1984 and 1989 argued from a syntactic perspective that for languages like Chinese, a null subject is identified by an NP in a superordinate clause, due to the lack of Agr. Tsao 1979 and Li 1981 observed that subject Pro-drop in Chinese was actually Topic-NP deletion, which is an optional process, alternating with use of overt pronoun in subject position. Li 1985 and Chen 1986 proposed from a discourse perspective that null subject in Chinese is more likely in cases of topic continuity, in which the information represented by the subject is the component of a series of related actions, events or states. Crosslinguistically, DiEugenio 1998 and Prince 1999, in their studies of Italian and Yiddish, respectively, tried to address subject pro-drop in terms of Centering Theory (Grosz, Josh & Weistein, 1995).

All the previous studies are based on Modern Chinese (MC), which has significantly increased the use of pronominal and nominal anaphors, as compared to Old Chinese (OC), where subject pro-drop is more frequent. It is therefore worthwhile to pose two questions on the subject pro-drop phenomena of OC and MC: 1) Can we explain the subject Pro-drop of both OC and MC in terms of Centering Theory? 2) If so, then in which way does the subject Pro-drop in OC differ from that in MC?

To answer these two questions, I present a corpus-based analysis of subject Pro-drop in both OC and MC. The corpus is composed of 429 clauses from 16 parallel texts: one in OC and the other in MC. Each clause was coded for 5 factors, with subject type being the dependent variable. The independent variables covered syntactic information, pragmatic information (based on Centering Theory) and focus information. A multivariate analysis was run on the data twice, the dependent variable being subject type of OC and MC respectively. The results show that OC had a higher rate of null subject than MC in terms of all the variables that were considered in this paper. Subject Pro-drop in both OC and MC was constrained by Centering Theory, in that Continue and Smooth-shift transition favor null subject while Rough-shift and Retain transition disfavor it. These results seem to exhibit a different hierarchical order of preference for subject Pro-drop, whereby Smooth-shift was more likely to favor null subject than Retain. Null subject is much more likely in OC when the

subject is a global focus and discourse focus. This corpus study therefore provides evidence that focus type should be taken into account for discourse study of OC.

KEYWORDS: PRODROP, HISTORICAL PRAGMATICS, CHINESE

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