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An Interactive Perspective on Topic Constructions in Mandarin: Some New Findings Based on Natural Conversation*

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1 Introduction

Although there are disagreements among Chinese linguists concerning the nature and identity of topics and topic-comment constructions in Chinese (see Xu and Liu 1998/2007, Shi 2000, and LaPolla 2009 for comprehensive reviews), there is a near universal agreement that Chinese can be characterized as a 'topic-prominent' or 'topic-comment' language (Chao 1968; Li and Thompson 1976, LaPolla 2009). The literature on the various properties of 'topic' in Chinese is extensive, with attempts from a diverse range of theoretical persuasions (Chao 1968; Chen 1996; Chu 1993; Li and Thompson 1976; Tsao 1979; Shen 1988; Xu and Liu 1998/2007; Xu and Langendoen 1985; Huang 1984; LaPolla 1993, 1995, 2009, Shi 2000, among others; for the latest formalist account, see Tsai, this volume). However, given that topic is a discourse motivated notion, as Keenan and Schiefflin (1976) have long reminded us, it is rather surprising that most of the related research has focused on constructed sentences and/or narrative texts, and little has been done to investigate exactly how topic constructions are manifested in natural text/talk (for exceptions, see Shen 1988; Zhang and Fang 1996; LaPolla 2009; Liu 2010). In this paper I report findings based on spontaneous conversation (as well as written texts), trying to shed new light on two general issues: 1) to what extent we can claim, and what it means to say, that Chinese is a topic-prominent or topic-comment language; 2) what speakers actually do with topic constructions in conversational interaction. I will show that systematic examination of natural discourse yields surprising results, which challenge our conception of Chinese grammar. In the conclusion section, I discuss the implications of examining interactive discourse for understanding and reevaluating prevailing linguistic theoretical notions in general.

2 A brief review of existing research

A quick review shows that as most researchers simply accept the idea that Chinese is a topic prominent language, the focus of existing research is typically on the structural, semantic, and sometimes textual properties of identifying topic elements for Chinese. Shi (2000:384) summarizes the major features of topic constructions, which have been widely agreed upon, as follows:

- a. Topic invariably occupies the S-initial position of the first clause in a topic chain.
- b. Topic can optionally be separated from the rest of the sentence in which

- it occurs overtly by one of the four particles *a* (*ya*), *ne*, *me*, and *ba*.
- c. Topic is always definite.
 - d. Topic is a discourse notion; it may, and often does, extend its semantic domain to more than one clause.
 - e. Topic is in control of the pronominalization or deletion of all the coreferential NPs in a topic chain.
 - f. Topic, except in clauses in which it is also subject, plays no role in such processes as true reflexivization, Equi-NP deletion, and imperativization.

In this paper, I take characterizations such as the above as a starting point for identifying topic constructions, with necessary modification for natural conversation and in light of a prototype understanding of the construction (Chu 1993). In other words, this assumes, as Li and Thompson (1976) does, that topic is a slightly narrowly defined notion than some have assumed (see LaPolla (2009) and the references cited there for a broad account of ‘topic’ (and ‘comment’) and the relationship between ‘subject’ and ‘topic’ in Chinese). I will thus exclude any standard Subject-Predicate clauses, where the Subject, understood as a core argument of the verb predicate, is an agent, from being counted as topic constructions. Regardless of one’s understanding of ‘topic’ and ‘topic-comment construction’, one of the main issues with existing research is the lack of empirical evidence, i.e. attested uses in natural contexts. Among those that have touched upon the empirical basis of topic constructions in Chinese, various issues exist that make their generalization limited in different ways. For example, Shen (1988) is one of the few studies that take the empirical approach seriously, in that it contains exhaustive counts of topic and non-topic sentence patterns in both classical (as represented by *Zuo Zhuan* 左传 *Commentary of Zuo*) and modern (as represented by the novel *Jing* 井 *Well*) Chinese texts. However, Shen’s generalizations are seriously flawed as he adopts an extremely broad view of the topic construction, to the extent that at least ten of his fourteen topic construction types identified for modern Chinese (Shen 1988: 455) are unconventional (as characterized by Shi 2000) and debatable, rendering his counts highly unreliable. For example, his first type, 是认主题句 *shiren zhuti ju* ‘identifying topics’, include complex predicates sharing the same agent/subject without prosodic or syntactic breaks, as in 这小子是说起话来也是个世家子弟 *zhe xiaozi shuoqi hua lai ye shi ge shijia zidi* ‘This dude sounds very much like someone from a noble family when he talks’. Very few Chinese linguists would consider this a topic construction in the senses of, e.g. Chao (1968), Li and Thompson (1976), and LaPolla (2009). Yet, Shen goes on to make controversial claims that the prominence of topic constructions in the Chinese language system provides strong evidence for the proposal that Chinese thought patterns are strongly influenced by their language patterns and that both are radically different from their Western counterparts. On the other hand, the studies in both Zhang and Fang (1996) and Liu (2001) have taken Beijing Mandarin conversation as their data, yet the primary concerns of both are with cognitive and functional motivations of the topic constructions; as such, there are no exhaustive text counts that can be brought to bear on our objectives here. Finally, LaPolla (2009) provides a compelling case study of how information structuring impacts both word order and what he defines as topic-comment constructions in Chinese, with actual examples from modern fictions and contemporary

online uses. However, this study is limited in genre type and quantity. Thus, while most studies justify Chinese as a topic-prominent or topic-comment language on theoretical grounds, there is very limited usage-based investigation demonstrating 1) what this means for actual data; and 2) how general claims about Chinese can be contextualized in the face of naturalistic conversational data. This chapter intends to address the shortfalls of the current research by bringing in systematic empirical data from actual discourse: both spoken and written, with a focus on interactive conversational language.

3 Revisiting the notion of Chinese as a topic prominent language

3.1 Data and methodology

The first task of the paper, then, is to investigate what it means for Chinese to be called a topic-prominent language, understood in general terms outlined in Shi (2000). While various measures can be brought to bear on this issue, the first step I take is to look at the frequency of occurrence of topic constructions in natural text/talk compared to the frequencies of other types of constructions. In particular, I look at the frequency of topic constructions compared to the number of clauses in the same span of text/talk. Data for this analysis come from corpora of written and spoken Chinese, in multiple discourse genres. Specifically, four written genres from the UCLA Corpus of Written Chinese (Tao and Xiao 2007) - news reportage, fiction, law, and academia - are selected as representative text types. For quick coding of spoken texts, a telephone conversation from the LDC CallFriend corpus (Canavan and Zipperlen 1996) is selected. For ease of comparison, each genre is coded with a minimum of 100, and up to 150, clauses, depending on the natural topic boundary in the original text/talk with which the coding coincides.

For this study, I define a clause as a verbal predicate (mainly verbs and adjectives) in both single and complex clauses. The verbal component is identified as a clause if the predicate in which it appears either has a main or subordinate/dependent status, notwithstanding the controversies regarding subordination and clause dependency (Thompson 1984). Embedded verbal predicates in such structures as modifiers or relative clauses are excluded. Some coding sample segments from each of the five discourse genres are given below (bolded elements represent verbal predicates/clauses; ‘light verbs’ such as the no-motion 来 *lai* and 进行 *jinxing* are counted together with their adjacent verbal component as a single instance and not separately; T indicates a topic element).

(1) 伊拉克常驻联合国代表杜里 10 日说, 伊拉克政府已同意联合国武器核查人员使用美国制造的 U-2 侦察机在伊拉克境内进行核查。¹

The Iraqi ambassador to the UN said on the 10th that the Iraqi government has agreed to nuclear inspections to be conducted by UN nuclear arms inspectors using US made U-2 spy airplanes.

(News: 4 clauses, 0 topic constructions)

¹ Romanization and translation for lengthy examples are done in a selective manner in order to save space: some are without *pinyin* at all while others have only parts of the example translated. Repeated examples are generally not Romanized or translated twice.

(2) 亚表情麻木的来到远的住处，**整理**着远的遗物。(T) 很多东西，都是当时他们一起买的。原来远**知道**自己**时日无多**。远在他的电子信箱里**留**了最后一封没有发出的mail。写给他爱的人。

*Ya comes to Yuan's place emotionless, **sorting** out the stuff he has left. (T) Many of the things, **were** what they bought together at that time. It turns out that Yuen **knew** that his time was **running out**. Yuan **left** the last unsent mail in his e-mail box, **addressing** to the person he loved.*

(Fiction: 7 clauses, 1 topic construction)

(3) 第十六条 信息产业部应当自收到申请人的申请材料之日起 10 个工作日内，发出是否受理通知。自发出受理通知之日起 50 个工作日内，**完成**对申请材料的审查，作出批准或不予批准的决定。(T)予以批准的，发给申请人正式批准文件，并**抄送**相关省、自治区、直辖市通信管理局和相关基础电信业务经营者；(T)不予批准的，书面**通知**申请人并**说明**理由。

*Article 16. The Ministry of Information Industry shall **issue** a notice of acceptance within 10 working days from the date of receiving the applicant's application materials. Within 50 working days from the date of the notification of acceptance, **complete** the review of the application materials and **make a decision** on approval or disapproval. (T) (For) those approved (cases), formally approved documents will be **issued** to the applicant, and **copied** to the relevant provincial, autonomous regional, municipal and telecommunications control bureaus and related basic telecommunications business providers; (T) (For) those rejected cases, notifications in writing will be **sent** to the applicant and **explain** the reasons.*

(Law: 7 clauses, 2 topic constructions)

(4) 蝴蝶不仅用其华丽的翅膀来**求偶**，有些种类的雌蝶还可能会用翅膀上反射出的偏极光来**引诱**雄蝶。这是陆生动物对偏极光有反应的首例。

有些蝴蝶翅膀上的鳞片可以在**反射**单一平面的光波而**发出**蓝色的虹彩，但没有人知道为何要如此。杜克大学的 Alison Sweeney 等人利用中南美洲常见的蝴蝶 *Heliconius cydno* 进行的实验，让我们**了解**到其中的奥妙。

*Not only do butterflies **use** their gorgeous wings to **court**, some types of female butterflies may also **use** polarized light reflected from their wings to **lure** male butterflies. This is the first case of terrestrial animals responding to polarized light.*

*The scales of some butterfly wings can **emit** a blue iridescence by **reflecting** light waves in a single plane, but no one **knows** why. The experiments conducted by Duke University's Alison Sweeney and others using *Heliconius cydno*, a common butterfly in Central and South America, **let us understand** the mystery.*

(Academia: 11 clauses, 0 topic construction)

(5) (Telephone conversation from LDC CallHome)

B: 那个陈知明呐,

A: 啊。

B: 陈知明一直打听你,

B: 他要,他要你跟他介绍,在美国的项目。

A: 谁呀?
 B: 陈志明呐。
 B: (T)陈志明你不知道?
 A: 陈志明? 哦(T)陈志明我知道,知道。
 A: 对啊,对啊。
 B: 他一直打听要你的电话给不给?
 A: 啊,你可以给他嘛。

B: That Chen Zhiming,

A: Ah.

*B: Chen Zhiming has been **looking for** you,*

*B: He **wants**, he **wants** you to **introduce** him to projects in the US.*

A: Who?

B: Chen Zhiming.

*B: (T)Chen Zhiming, Don't you **know**?*

*A: Chen Zhiming? Oh (T)Chen Zhiming, I **know**, I **know**.*

*A: **Right, right**.*

*B: He's been **asking** for your phone number, should I **give** him?*

*A: Ah, you can **give** it to him. (LDC)*

(Conversation: 12 clauses, 2 topic constructions)

Based on the key coding categories, we can now tally the distribution of topic constructions in the relevant discourse genres. Table 1 presents the frequency of our sample textual counts.

| Types | News | Fiction | Law | Academia | Conversation | Total |
|------------|------|---------|-----|----------|--------------|-------|
| Clause (C) | 113 | 117 | 108 | 118 | 124 | 580 |
| Topic (T) | 0 | 5 | 15 | 0 | 6 | 26 |
| Ratio T:C | 0 | .04 | .14 | 0 | .05 | .04 |

Table 1. Frequencies of clauses and topic constructions in five written and spoken genres.

3.2. Discussion

From Table 1, we can see that overall, topic constructions are infrequent compared to the number of clauses: only 4% of the clauses are linked to a topic construction. This presumably means that there are many more other (non-topic-comment) types of clauses that are used in text/talk.² Looking at the sub-genres, we can see that there are major differences between fiction, law, and conversation on the one hand, and news and academia on the other.

² Interestingly, large scale natural language processing projects (syntactic tree banks) in Chinese rarely take the topic construction as a basic unit for syntactic tree annotation; most of them, as I do here, take the clause (小句 *xiaoju*) instead (Zhao et al. 1997; Luo and Zheng 1994). When some do choose to mark up the topic structure within the clause (Chen et al. 2003; Huang and Chen 2017), the overall frequency of topic structures can be quite low. For example, a search of the Sinica Tree Bank (<http://turing.iis.sinica.edu.tw/treesearch/>), which contains over sixty thousand syntactic trees, turned out only twenty-two topic structures (Chu-Ren Huang, personal communication, September 7, 2017).

The highest frequency of occurrence of topic constructions is associated with law texts, followed by conversation. As legal documents may have their own characteristics – for example, official law texts can be item-oriented - that require special attention (Wang et al. 1997; Wu 2002), we will leave this topic to another occasion. My focus for the rest of the paper will be on conversational use of topic constructions.

Before moving on to discussing conversational discourse, however, it is necessary to probe quickly what the corpus-based findings may mean for the widely accepted notion of Chinese as a topic-prominent or topic-comment language.

While there has been various research on the uniqueness of Chinese syntactic structures (see, e.g. Chao's (1968) distinction between major and minor sentences, where non-full clauses -NPs, verb-only constructions, etc.- can serve as predicates and utterances in various conversational sequences), it is Li and Thompson (1976) that brings to prominence the notion of topic-prominence as a parameter for a new typology of language. It should be noted that when Li and Thompson define what they call topic-prominent languages, a category to which Chinese belongs, they do so primarily in terms of what is basic, i.e. non-derivative, among the syntactic structures available in the language. Thus, in languages such as Chinese, it is argued that topic-comment constructions are independent of subject-predicate constructions as they cannot be attributed to some kind of variation or modification of the latter. Another feature associated with topic-prominent languages, according to Li and Thompson (1976), is that syntax is organized around the topic rather than the subject and the object, as evidenced in features associated with the passive voice, lack of dummy subject forms, common uses of initial double-nominals, and so forth.

Although Li and Thompson (1976) as well as the many studies spanning several decades appearing after it are not frequency-based, we still need to ask the question: what do our genre-based quantitative results suggest about the status of topic-constructions in Chinese? At least a few quick points can be made here. First, as stated earlier, from a frequency standpoint, it is clear that topic constructions are not as prominent as otherwise implied. They are instead a rather small fraction of the clause/utterance types found in actual texts. In some cases, such as academic discourse and news reportage, they are hardly observed at all. This suggests that we need to pay attention to attested use as well as typological considerations. Second, can we still call Chinese a topic-prominent or topic-comment language given the rarity of topic constructions in discourse? The answer depends on how one defines “topic-prominent” or “topic-comment”. Li and Thompson (1976) lay out clearly what they believe to be grounds for considering Chinese and other languages topic-prominent. Others may have been drawn to the fact that Chinese can allow the so-called dangling topic in utterances such as the following (Chao 1968; Li and Thompson 1976; see Tsai, this volume, for more detailed discussions on this issue), which represents a very loose semantic relationship between the utterance-initial nominal (the dangling topic) and the comment after it:

(6)那场火，幸亏消防队来得快。

Na_chang_huo,_xingkui_xiaofangdui_lai_de_kuai.

that_CLF_fire_fortunately_fire-brigade_come_COMP_quick

As for that fire, fortunately the fire brigade came quickly, (otherwise it) . . .

However, from an empirical point of view, again, this kind of construction is possible but not commonly seen in discourse. Thus, however one wishes to define topic prominence as a feature of the Chinese language, it would be necessary to distinguish the conceptual basis and the empirical basis of such claims. Third, as pointed out earlier, while some culture and thought pattern-inclined linguists such as Shen Xiaolong entertain the idea of an intimate linkage between linguistic features such as topic prominence and unique Chinese thought patterns, without solid empirical underpinnings such claims would be suspicious at best. Finally, in addition to the question of how Chinese syntax is organized around the topic rather than the subject and object, a more intriguing question to be asked would be: how do speakers actually deploy grammatical resources such as syntactic structures in conversational interaction? Thus the last point I wish to make is that instead of focusing our attention almost exclusively on the formal features of topic constructions and their typological consequences, as useful as these may be, it would be more productive, at least initially, to investigate why Chinese speakers use those topic or topic-like constructions to begin with, given the finding that the vast majority of utterances are not of the topic-comment type that syntacticians have been occupied with.

4 Main findings from conversational discourse

In the following sections, I will analyze conversational uses of topic constructions in more detail. It will be shown that the type of topic constructions found in conversation can be quite different from what is typically understood, as summarized in Shi (2000). Equally importantly, we will investigate the discourse pragmatic functions associated with such constructions in their actual contexts.

The database used for this part of the study comes from two different sets of spoken data. The first set contains spontaneous conversation among friends. They are audio- (and sometimes video-) recorded face-to-face conversations collected by the author. This data set has five segments, totaling about 70,000 words. The transcriptions in this dataset follow the Du Bois et al. (1993) system, where intonation units are taken to be the basic unit of speech (Tao 1996). The second set of data contains telephone conversations, with 10 segments totaling about 50,000 words. This is part of the CallFriend corpus (LDC96S55) from the Linguistic Data Consortium (LDC), hosted at the University of Pennsylvania.³ According to LDC, speakers were recruited from the internet and were given free call time to talk with family members or friends in China. The transcriptions were done at LDC, with a loose adherence to prosodic units. Combined, the overall size of my database is about 120,000 words.

4.1. Locus of topics in conversation

³ For a description of the data see Canavan and George Zipperlen (1996) and visit <http://www ldc.upenn.edu/Catalog/LDC96S55.html>. Some minor editorial changes are made on these transcriptions, e.g., each prosodic unit are more precisely represented, while some less relevant notations are omitted.

Due to the kinds of linguistic units examined, nearly all sentence-based studies identify the topic element in a topic-comment construction or in a topic-chain sequence (Tsao 1979) with the sentence (S)-initial position or something similar. When conversational discourse is examined, however, the notions of the sentence and the sentence initial position are often found to be problematic. One reason for this is that spoken language is hardly organized around the idea of a full sentence or clause (Tsao 1990; Tao 1996). Another reason is that conversation is an interactive process, involving multiple speakers in a turn-taking fashion (Sack, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974). Thus it is natural for us to look into properties in conversational structure and the activities speakers engage themselves in as a key to understanding topic constructions. The main concepts we will be using are: turn taking (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974), adjacency pairs (Schegloff and Sacks 1973), and speaker roles (Goodwin 1979, 1986; Duranti 1986). With these notions we can hope to pin down more precisely the problems with traditional views of the locus of the topic construction and give it a more realistic account.

When discourse data is examined, the first observation to be made is that the notion of 'sentence initial' ignores the role of previous turns in many topic constructions. I suggest that 'turn transition places' better describes the locus of many topic constructions. Let us examine some examples first.

(7) (Speakers chat about the geography of China. This is the beginning of the conversation.)

M: X, 今天我们来谈谈这个, .. 这个, .. 中国的地理的...(8) 事情。

X, _jintian_women_lai_tantan_zhege,..._zhege,..._Zhongguo_de_dili_de...(8)_shiqing.

X_today_1PL_come_talk_this_this_China_ATT_geography_matter

(NAME), let's talk about this today ... this ... **China's geography** ... (8) *stuff*.

F: ...(2.5) 地理这玩意儿=, ... 不光是地名啊, .. 包括的^很广。

Dili_zhe_wanyir=,..._buguang_shi_diming_a,..._baokuo_de_^hen_guang.

geography_this_thingy_not_only_COP_place.name_PRT_include_ATT_very_broad

Geography stuff=, ... is not just about place names .. (it) includes ^a lot of things.

(8) (Telephone conversation about job prospects.)

A: 什么那个, 那个日本的事儿怎么样?

Shenme_neige,_neige_Riben_de_shir_zenmeyang?

what_that_that_Japan_ATT_thing_how

What, what about that Japan thing?

B: 日本那事儿, 到现在没有音信.

Riben_na_shir,_dao_xianzai_meiyou_yinxin.

Japan_that_thing_till_now_NEG:have_news

The Japan thing, there is no news so far.

A: 哦 .

O.

RT

Oh. (LDC)

In both cases, the topic, though located at the initial position of the current speaker's turn, actually originates from the previous speaker turn. That is, these topics are prompted or elicited (Button and Casey 1984, 1985) by the previous speaker and function as echoes (Bland 1981) of the prompts from the previous speaker turn. A more accurate description of their location, for these cases at least, then, would have to evoke the system of conversation turns. It appears that the locus of these topic elements can best be characterized as at turn transition places. Turn transition place as used here is not to be confused with transition-relevance places, a well-known notion in Conversation Analysis (CA), which refers to potential places where a shift of conversation turn might take place (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974; Ford and Thompson 1995). Turn transition places refer to the actual transition places of turns, including both the end of the previous speaker turn and the beginning of the following speaker turn. The topic elements in examples (7) and (8) clearly occupy turn transition places.

Secondly, sentence-initial does not account for post-positioned topic elements, which are also at turn transition places. This kind of topic element refers to topics that are not evident in the previous speaker turn but are generated by the same speaker, at least lexically, and appear at places beyond turn initial places. One subtype is the so-called 'inverted' construction (Chao 1968; Tai and Hu 1991; Zhang and Fang 1996) or TCU-continuation increments (Luke 2012; Lim 2013, 2019; Ono and Couper-Kuhlen 2007), where the nominal referring to a participant or an object is postponed to the end of a turn.

(9) (Speakers talking about an acquaintance.)

A: 诶,真是奇怪,他为什么不发过来,我给他地址啊,

Ei, zhenshi qiguai, ta weisheme bu fa guolai, wo gei ta dizhi a,

INT_real:COP_weird_3SG_why_NEG_send_come.over_1SG_give_3SG_address_PRT

Look, it's strange. Why didn't he send it over? I gave him the address.

B: 诶,是啊,是啊,

Ei, shi a, shi a,

INT_COP_PRT_COP_PRT

Yeah, right, that's right,

A: 这样,你不管了,你发过来,我看了再说吧, 这个事。

Zheyang, ni buguanle, ni fa guolai, wo kanle zaishuo ba, zhege shi.

this.way, _2SG_NEG_worry_PRT, _2SG_send_come, _1SG_see_PRT_then_say_PRT, _this_thing

*Well, you don't worry about it; you just send it. I'll read it later, **this thing**.*

B: 他, 诶, 诶.

Ta, ei, ei,

3SG,_INT,_INT

He, well, what can I say. (LDC)

In this example, 这个事 *zhege shi* ‘this thing’ refers to the complication of mailing out a letter, something that Speaker A is asking Speaker B not to be concerned with. This topical nominal can be used at either the very beginning of A’s turn or after the verb of 管 *guan* ‘deal with’. By virtue of being the last element in the turn, ‘inverted’ or TCU-continuation (Ono and Couper-Kuhlen 2007) topic constructions are in line with the turn-transition place description. Lim (2013, 2019) identifies this type of element as rush-throughs before a potential completion, with various interaction functions. Tai and Hu (1991) suggests that “inverted constructions” signal turn ends to the co-participant. Zhang and Fang (1996) also identifies inverted items as having a thematic status, a concept that is similar, though not identical, to what is called ‘topic’ in this paper.

Third, even if one finds it controversial to treat the postponed item as a topic element, it is not uncommon for a topic item to appear throughout a speaker turn, i.e., not limited to the initial position. In such constructions, we often find an assortment of referential forms for the shared topic element.

(10) (Same as Extract 8.)

4B: 大概可能日本那边呢, 出问题了. 就是说他们那边可能经济不景气, 他们那边.

Dagai_keneng_Riben_na_bian_ni,_chu_wentile._Jiushi_shuo_tamen_na_bian_keneng_jingji_bu__jingqi,_tamen_na_bian._
probably_maybe_Japan_that.side_PRT,_have_problem_PRT._ADV_say_3PL_side
_probably_economy_NEG_prosper,_3PL_side
Maybe over there in Japan, something went wrong. Like, their side/over there economy might be down, their side.

5A: 嗯哼.

Enheng.

RT

Huh. (LDC)

In this extract we see the same topic element 日本那边 *Riben nabian* ‘Japan; over there in Japan’ appearing throughout the turn, first as a full NP, then as pronominals (他们那边 *tamen nabian* ‘over there (their side)’). In this case, the first mention corresponds to a turn beginning, and the last mention corresponds to the end of the speaker turn. The following example exhibits a similar pattern, with the co-referring nominals 美国 *Meiguo* ‘America’ and 这个国家 *zhege guojia* ‘this country’ used throughout the speaker turn.

(11) (Same as Extract 8.)

A: 诶, 不过美国一切都很好啦, 我很喜欢这个国家, 这个美国,

Ei,_buguo_Meiguo_yiqie_dou_hen_hao_la,_wo_hen_xihuan_zhege_guojia,
_zhege_Meiguo,
INT,_but_America_everything_all_very_good_PRT,_1SG_very_like_this_country,
_this_US

Uh, but US is fine with everything; I like this country, the US,

B: 嗯.
En
RT
Mm. (LDC)

The only difference between (11) and (10) is that in (11) the second reference to the topic element (*zhege guojia* ‘this country’) appears in a regular clause structure, as an object of a verbal predicate, and not in a topic construction.

The distribution of topic elements throughout the speaker turn, as exemplified here, can be considered an extension of the proposal that turn transition places are the locus of topic constructions since many of them appear at both the beginning and the end of the speaker turn, being associated with transition places. These are among the strongest challenges to the traditional notion of the topic, which is isolated and sentence-based, and with S-initial being regarded as the sole locus. At the same time, it constitutes a challenge to another assumption implied in the view that topics occur at sentence initial positions, which is: the topic, by virtue of appearing at the beginning of a sentence, serves as a link for the subsequent sentences in the topic chain (Tsao 1979, 1990), thus topics are implied to be a once-for-all stationary phenomenon. This is of course natural for isolated sentences or edited sentences in the writing mode. What the conversation data show, however, is that topics are subject to some “nomination and pursuit” processes (Button and Casey 1984, 1985), and one of the manifestations of this is that although topic elements tend strongly to appear initially at turn transition places, speakers are free to repeat them in an extended sequence. In the above examples (extracts 10 and 11) we saw that the same topic items are repeated within the same speaker turn. In the following, we will see an example where the topic item is not just being reiterated but also runs across multiple speaker turns: A (line 77, 79, 81) and C (line 80).⁴

(12) (Dinner party conversation.)

77. A : 今天那个女孩儿，叫=，
Jintian_nage_nùhai_er,_jiao=,
today_that_gal,_call
Today **this girl**, named

78. B : 一毛钱粥。
Yi_mao_qian_zhou.
one_unit_money_porridge
(Here is) our 10 cent porridge.

79. A : 那个，
Nage,

⁴ Of course the functions of the different mentions can vary, where in this case we can say that the initial mentions in lines 77 and 80 are for establishing an identity or common ground, whereas in line 81 it is a settled referent for predication. I thank the anonymous referee for drawing my attention to such differences.

that
that (girl),

80. C : 杨筠，
Yang Jun,
NAME

81. A : 她...她上楼上来叫，<Q 姚新 Q>，姚新不在，
Ta...ta_shang_lou_shanglai_jiao,<Q_Yao_Xin_Q>,_Yao_Xin_buzai
3SG...3SG_walk.up_floor_up.come_shout,_NAME,_NAME_NEG_present
she, she walked upstairs and yelled out, Yao Xin, but Yao was not in today.
(GRAD)

A similar case can be found in the next example, which involves the referent of 厨房 *chufang* 'kitchen' across both speakers B and C.

(13) (A couple have a dinner party at a friend's apartment and comment on the condition of the kitchen.)

1B 男: (对 A)你们的厨房好像小一些，
Nimen_de_chufang_haoxiang_xiao_yixie,
(to_A)_2PL_ATT_kitchen_seem_small_a.little
(To A) *Your kitchen seems a bit small.*

2 呵=。
he
RT
huh.

3 (对太太 C) 厨房，
chufang,
(to wife C) kitchen
(To wife C) *The kitchen,*

4 ..是不是比咱们的要小一些？
Shi_bushi_bi_zanmen_de_yao_xiao_yixie?
COP_NEG.COP_compare_1PL_ATT_about_small_a.bit
isn't it smaller than ours?

5C 女: 厨房小一些。
Chufang_xiao_yixie.
kitchen_small_a.bit
The kitchen is a bit smaller (than ours). (DINNER)

Lastly, another challenge to the sentence initial proposition is the fact that very often the

topic element is presented as part of an adverbial clause series and, again, across different turns and at turn transition places. E.g.,

(14) (Speakers talking about overseas graduate life.)

A1: 我工作不了啊,

Wo_gongzuo_buliao_a,
1SG_work_NEG_possible_PRT
I can't work,

B: 为什么?

Weisheme?
why
Why?

A1: 诶, 我因我那个**奖学金**现在拿着, 你不能, 因为**奖学金**他现在给你的话, 他也得

Ei,_wo_yin_wo_nage_jiangxuejin_xianzai_nazhe,_ni_buneng,_
_yinwei_jiangxuejin_ta_xianzai_gei_ni_dehua,_ta_ye_de
INT,_1SG_because_1SG_that_scholarship_now_have_PROG,_2SG_NEG_can,_
_because_scholarship_3SG_give_2SG_if,_3SG_then_need
*Well, I have **the scholarship**, because of that you can't, because if they give you **the scholarship** right now, they also need to*

有一年, 至少这一年你读下来, 否则的话, 他学校, 要要跟你罚款的啊,
youyi_nian,_zhishao_zhe_yi_nian_ni_du_xialai,_fouze_dehua,_ta_xuexiao,_
_yao_yao_gen_ni_fakuan_de_a,
have_one_year,_at.least_this_one_year_2SG_school_down.com,_NEG_if,_3SG_school,
_may_may_to_2SG_fine_PRT
have one year, at least this year you need to finish it; otherwise, the school, they will fine you if you don't. (LDC)

(15) (Speakers chatting about daily life situations.)

A: 我们这儿, 这儿月饼都很贵的, 一块要要三个美元,

Women_zher,_zher_yuebing_dou_hen_gui_de,_yi_kuai_yao_yao_san_ge_meiyuan,
1PL_here,_here_mooncake_all_very_expensive_PRT,_one_unit_need_need_three
_CLF_dollars
*In here, **the moon cakes here** are very expensive. One piece costs three dollars.*

B1: {laugh} 是吗 ? {/laugh}

Shi_ma?
COP_PRT
Really?

((ABOUT 31 LINES DELETED)).

A: 因为这儿的月饼就是, 只有中国人做, 做得不多, 所以他就贵,
 Yinwei_zher_de_yuebing_jiushi,_zhiyou_Zhongguoren_zuo,_zuo_de_bu_duo,_
 _suoyi_ta_jiu_gui,_because_here_ATT_mooncake_just_COP,_only_Chinese_
 people_make,_make_COMP_NEG_many,_so_3SG_then_expensive
*Because **the moon cakes here** are only made by the Chinese, and not much is available,
 so they're expensive. (LDC)*

In both examples the overall structure of the adverbial clause series can be schematized as follows:

INITIAL CLAUSE + **YINWEI** 'BECAUSE' CLAUSE

(Previous Turn) + (Next Turn)

Causal (“because”) clauses are usually favored in the final position in the adverbial clause sequence (Ford 1993; Song and Tao 2008, 2009), and it is in the 'because' clause where a topic element appears (Tsao 1988; Biq 1995; Wang 1995). In such cases it is difficult to maintain that topic elements occupy the sentence initial position as far as the whole adverbial sequence is concerned. Again here the data seems to show that the notion of 'turn transition places' (especially 'turn beginnings'), rather than 'sentence beginnings', better describes the locus of topic elements in discourse, as nearly all topic elements within the adverbial clause, as shown here, occupy the turn beginning position.

To recap, sentence-based descriptions of topic constructions often run into problems in dealing with conversational data. Instead, four kinds of conversation patterns have been presented that challenge the assertion that 'sentence' initial is the defining characteristic of the topic. They include 1) many topics originate in previous speaker turns; 2) post positioned topical elements are not uncommon; 3) topics may be repeated by the same speaker throughout the same speaker turn or run across different speaker turns; and 4) topics are often introduced in the second part of an adverbial clause sequence. Overall, topic constructions in conversation are much more dynamic and often subject to interactive nomination and pursuit (Button and Casey 1984, 1985, Bland 1981). As such, conversation structural notions, especially turn transition places, I contend, provide a unified and naturalistic account for their diverse placement patterns in conversation.

4.2. Information status of topic elements

Most existing research considers a topic to be definite, given, or shared, as it is supposed to be something that the speaker intends to talk about in the subsequent stretch of talk. However, due to the interactive nature of topics as illustrated in the preceding section, 'topic' in conversation may not possess such an information status - in fact sometimes the status can be new or indeterminate (see Bland 1981 for a similar discussion on English topic-comment constructions).

In (12) above, we saw a case of an apparently definiteness marked NP (with the demonstrative expression *nage* 那个 ‘that’), when the reference is first introduced into the conversation in line 77, yet it is clear that the participants are in search of the name of the person mentioned. In this sense it casts doubts on the given status (or identifiability) of the referent in question.

(12) (Dinner party conversation.)

77. A: 今天那个女孩儿，叫=，

78. B: 一毛钱粥。

79. A: 那个，

80. C: 杨筠，

81. A: 她...她上楼上来叫，<Q 姚新 Q>，姚新不在，

77A: Today **this girl**, named,

78.B: (Here is) our ten cent porridge.

79.A: **that (girl)**,

80.C: **Yang Jun**,

81.A: **she, she** walked upstairs and yelled out, Yao Xin, but Yao was not in today.

(GRAD)

What is more interesting is that the information statuses of topic elements, in the absence of clear morphological marking, may vary from speaker to speaker, depending on whose perspective is to be taken. Excerpt (16) illustrates this point.

(16) (Telephone conversation between friends about graduate admissions.)

21A: 所以，象今年我我们的，我们我们系，今年就是说，

Suoyi, xiang jinnian wo women de, women women xi, jinnian
_jiushi shuo,

so, like this year 1SG 1PL_ATT, 1PL 1PL_department, this year
_then COP_say

So, like us, us this year, we, our department, this year (has) like,

22A: {mouth_noise}五十五几个申请的，你知道吗？

wushiwushi ji ge shenqing de, ni zhidao ma?

fifty five more CLF_apply_ATT, 2SG know_PRT

fifty or fifty something applications, you know?

23A: 有有四十个就是，

You you sishi ge jiushi,

have have forty CLF_then COP

There are something like forty.

24B: 呃.

E.

RT

Uh.

25A: 两千多的.

Liang qian duo de.

two thousand more_PRT

More than two thousand.

26A: 就最后只要五个知道吧?
Jiu_zuihou_zhiyao_wu_ge_zhidao_ba?
then_last_only_admit_five_know_PRT
Only five eventually got in, you know?

27B: 呃.
E.
RT
Uh. (LDC)

Line 22 presents a topic-like NP, yet it is not clear whether it should be considered a definite or indefinite NP, as 1) the morphosyntactic marking itself is equivocal; and 2) the reference being conveyed can be considered known to Speaker A (identifiable) but not to Speaker B (non-identifiable).

Sometimes the information status of the referent can be fuzzy given the special form and situation involved. In Extract (17) below, the mention of *Luoshanji* 洛杉矶 ‘Los Angeles’ is the first time in the discourse (new), yet it is the city where the conversation took place. Thus the information status can be both new (indefinite) and identifiable (definite). Chafe (1987, 1994) has termed this kind of referent “accessible”, while traditional conceptualization of topic NPs would not have allowed this possibility. One possible explanation for such cases is that these NP forms are often used at the beginning of a conversation sequence whereby a new referent is being introduced and often pointing gestures are used to accomplish joint attention (see Tao 2020 for more cases studies). In (17), for example, the initial mention of the topic NPs *Luoshanji* ‘Los Angeles’ are accompanied by deictic gestures.

(17) (Three speakers are looking at a geological map on a university campus when F1 points to the city of Los Angeles on the map.)

1F1: 洛杉矶,
Luoshanji,
Los.Angeles
Los Angeles,

2F3: 这么红噢。
Zheme_hong_o.
this_red_PRT
So red.

3F1: 洛杉矶这个地方很，
Luoshanji_zhege_difang_hen,
Los.Angeles_this_place_very
*This place of **Los Angeles** is very,*



4 ..有时候会 ,
.. You_shihou_hui,
some.times_may
sometimes,

5 ..有龙卷风吧?
You_longjuanfeng_ba?
have_tornado_PRT
Are there tornadoes (here)?

6F2: 没有没有。 这是在- 这是在这些地方。
Meiyou_meiyou._Zhe_shi_zai-_zhe_shi_zai_zhexie_difang.
NEG_NEG_have._this_COP_in-_this_COP_in_these_places
No, no. This is in-this is in these places. (CALPER)

In short, contrary to commonly held beliefs, whether the information status of the topic NP is definite or not can be debatable in some instances (Bland 1981), and the overall picture is much less categorical than previously assumed. This is mainly due to the fact that in conversation, references are typically introduced and negotiated in a collaborative and gradual manner, until common ground and mutual understanding are reached (Clark & Wilkins-Gibbs 1986; Clark and Brenne 1991; Tao 1992, 1996, 2020. More on this in Section 4.3.1.). Furthermore, even if referents are shared or identifiable, there is the added layer of local contingencies: all candidates are not automatically becoming the topic of a conversation stretch for co-participants, unless they are ratified by participants (Button and Casey 1984, 1985). As such, it is natural for the speakers to start with an indeterminate referent and work their way toward a shared understanding and an agreed upon discourse topic.

4.3. Speaker roles and topic element functions

Topics in conversation do more than just convey information, as is implied in previous accounts of topic constructions. They contribute, and are sensitive, to participant interaction. Here, a useful distinction can be made, following Schegloff et al.'s (1977) taxonomy of repairs, which distinguishes between self-initiated and other-initiated. For topic constructions, self-initiated ones are those that do not have a clear origin in the other speaker's turn, while other-initiated ones do. In addition to this dichotomy, there is also a special case of self-repetition or resaying of the same topic by the current speaker, called self-repeated. In conversational interaction, whether a topic is self-initiated, self-repeated, or other-initiated is found to accomplish very different kinds of interactional work and implement different types of actions, which I discuss next (for discussions of similar issues but from a grammar-in-interaction point of view, see Tao 2020).

4.3.1 Discourse functions of self-initiated topic constructions: reference identification and negotiation

As defined earlier, self-initiated topics come from the same speaker's turn. These topic constructions usually have to do with referent identification and explication. One of the major interactive functions of self-initiated topics is to achieve joint attention and to solicit identification of referents.

As briefly discussed earlier, ample previous research has shown that speakers do not typically propose referents unilaterally; instead they often try to work together to reach common ground before proceeding, whether by drawing the attention of the recipient (Goodwin 1979; Tao 2020), or checking with the recipient (Clark & Wilkins-Gibbs 1986; Clark and Brenne 1991; Geluykens, 1988; Tao 1992, 1996). One way to check with the recipient is for the current speaker to initiate a topic and invite co-participants to jointly identify the referent conveyed in it. This is commonly done in roughly two ways, one explicit and the other implicit. One of the most explicit way is to use a topic plus an interrogative form referring back to the topic, as in (18).

(18) (Group chat about education in China)

1C: ...(.6) 结果呢, ... 上海...大学.

Jieguo_ne,..._Shanghai..._Daxue._
then_PRT,..._Shanghai..._University
As a result, ... Shanghai ... University.

2 ...(.5) 你知道上海大学吗?

Ni_zhidao_shanghai_daxue_ma?
2SG_know_Shanghai_University_PRT
Do you know Shanghai University?

3B: .. 嗯。

En.
RT
Hmm.

4 ((15 LINES DELETED))

5B: 热门的?

Remen_de?
hot_PRT
A big hit (I bet)?

6C: 最最热门儿! (笑)

Zui_zui_remenr!(Xiao)
most_most_hot
The biggest hit!' (Laughs) (JIAOYU)

In this case, the referent of 上海大学 *Shanghai Daxue* 'Shanghai University' is first proposed at line 1 and checked with a interrogative form by the current speaker (C) at line 2.

After an explicit acknowledgement by the recipient (B) in line 3, it is then commented on subsequently by both B and C.

Using deictic/pointing gestures is another explicit, visual, way to achieve joint attention and referent identification. In (17) just analyzed in the previous section, we saw a case of combining the pointing gesture with repeated referencing ('Los Angeles' at lines 1 and 3), plus an interrogative form (line 5, 'are there tornadoes (here)?').

Sometimes the invitation can be implicit and indirect. An example of this kind can be found in extract (12), which was given earlier, in which the co-participant supplies a name (杨筠 Yang Jun) after the first speaker pauses after the initial mention of a reference to person (今天那个女孩儿... *jintian nage nǚhai* 'the girl today (is called)') .

An even less explicit way to solicit joint identification is with multiple NPs (Tao 2020). By producing a succession of nominal referents, the speaker makes sure that what s/he is going to talk about is identifiable to the co-participant and at the same time it helps make the speaker's formulation of the referent more informative. I have elsewhere called this 'referent anchoring' (Tao 1996:91).

One common tendency in multi-NP topic construction is that the scope of the referent gets narrowed down as a result of the accumulation of nominals. This is the case in (19) given below (see also Tao 1996:92, 2020).

(19) (Speakers discuss education and school systems in China.)

1B: 然后呢？这高中呢，中途还能改报中专，那个还能改报，结果还是没人报。

2A: 噢，没人报高中，今年。

3B: 没人报高中。那么，这样一来，到末---- 到我爱人给我写信，我看看啊，

4 是九月一号，

5 写信的时候，四百分以上的，

xie_xin_de_shihou,_sibai_fen_yishang_de,

write_letter_MOD_time,_four_hundred_marks_above_NOM

At the time (my husband) wrote the letter, those with four hundred marks,

6 就是考生啊，

jiushi_kaosheng_a,

just.COP_applicant_PRT

those college applicants,

7 达到四百分以上的，

dadao_sibai_fen_yishang_de,

reach.up_four_hundred_above_NOM

those who have archived four hundred marks and above,

8 报职业高中的，

bao_zhiye_gaozhong_de,

apply_vocational_high.school_NOM

those who have applied to a vocational school,

- 9 还有好多，
 hai_you_haoduo,
 still_have_many
there are still a lot of them (out there),
- 10 就没有..... 根本就投档不出去，没法儿投，
 jiu_meiyou....._Genben_jiu_toudang_bu_chuqu,_meifar_tou,
 just_NEG_have..._basically_just_accept_NEG_out,_NEG_way_accept
(they) haven't, ... (they) have basically been accepted by nobody. (EDU)

In this case, in lines 5-8, the scope of the referents gets narrowed down from students taking the entrance examination, who scored 400 or above, to those who applied to a vocational school; in the process, more specific information is being introduced. After apparently sufficient information is provided, the referent is being commented on by the main speaker (B) in lines 9-10.

In the next example, we will see that the scope of the referent gets narrowed down from a general locative, 'this place,' (lines 2-3) to a much narrow item, 'the air conditioner in this place' (line 4).

(20) (Telephone conversation between friends about campus living.)

1A: 哦，那里，我，我 ((好象))鼻子不太好。
 O,_nali,_wo,_wo_((hao_xiang))_bizi_bu_tai_hao.
 INT,_what,_1SG,_1SG_((seem))_nose_NEG_very_good
Oh, there, me, I ((as if)) my nose isn't feeling so well.

2 因为这个，
 Yinwei_zhege,
 because_this
*because **this (place)**,*

3 这地方的那个吧，
 zhe_difang_di_nage_ba,
 this_place_ATT_CLF_PRT
This place,

4 空调老开，
 kongtiao_lao_kai,
 air.conditioner_always_on
the air conditioner here is always on,

5 所以鼻子不太好。
 suoyi_bizi_bu_tai_hao.
 so_nose_NEG_very_well

so my nose always has trouble. (LDC)

A special pattern of joint identification with multi-NP topic constructions involves the form of 'NP(s), Pronominal + Predicate', where the NP(s) and the pronominal element co-refer. This pattern can be said to be useful both by easing the processing burden on the part of the co-participant(s) and by buying time for the speaker to formulate the idea to be communicated (Bland 1981). This pattern often involves a non-human referent, and the anaphoric pronoun is a simple third person pronoun *ta* 'it,' as illustrated by the following example.

(21) (An overseas student talks about his workplace.)

A: ((然后))我原来那地方呢, 它又找了新的一个人进来.

(Ranhou))_wo_yuanlai_na_difang_ne,_ta_you_zhaole_xin_de_yige_ren_jinlai._
((then))_1SG_old_that_place_PRT,_3SG_already_find_PRF_new_ATT_one_CLF_
person_come.in

((Then)) *my original place, it found a new person to move in.*

所以, 我, 两头就 --

Suoyi,_wo,_liangtou_jiu--

so,_1SG,_both.sides_then

So, I, on both ends--

B: 哦.

O.

RT

Oh I see. (LDC)

Same speaker initiated topics, then, have a lot to do with joint attention and establishing common ground, through referent identification, negotiation, and explication.

4.3.2 Discourse functions of self-repeated topic constructions: tying back

A special case in topic constructions is when the topic element is initiated and repeated by the same speaker. These refer to cases where there is a co-participant intervention after the first topic is initiated by the initial speaker. The “intervention” can be a brief token of acknowledgment. A case in point is (22) below.

(22) (Conversation between a student and the visiting mother of her friend on a campus tour at an American college.)

1F1: 都说学校好呢, 都往这边跑,

Dou_shuo_xuexiao_hao_ne,_dou_wang_zhe_bian_pao,

all_say_school_good_PRT,_all_toward_this_side_run

They all say that this is a good school, so they all rush to come here,

2 [那没办法。]

na_mei_banfa.
that_NEG_way
This is hopeless.

3F3: [您是那个学校啊?]
Nin_shi_nage_xuexiao_a?
2SG_COP_which_school_PRT
Which school is yours?

4F1: 我们是- 在那边是算重点学校。
Women_shi-_zai_na_bian_shi_suan_zhongdian_xuexiao.
1PL_COP-_in_that.side_COP_probably_key_school_
*Ours is-, is like a designated **key school**.*

5F3: .. 噢。
O.
RT
Oh.

6F1: ... ()重点学校, 人家都往这里头挤, 那一挤就-
Zhongdian_xuexiao,_renjia_dou_wang_zheli_tou_ji,_na_yi_ji_jiu-
key_school,_people_all_toward_here_area_squeeze,_then_once_squeeze_then-
*(As a) **key school**, people are crowding here, and when they crowd,*

7F3: 噢. 中学是吗?
O._Zhongxue_shi_ma?_
RT._middle.school_COP_PRT
Oh. Is that a middle school?

8F1: 小学。
Xiaoxue.
elementary.school
An elementary school. (CALPER)

Here Speaker F1 repeats the same NP in both lines 4 and 6, when there is a brief reaction from Speaker F3 in line 5. Example (17) analyzed earlier also contains a case of self-resaying ('Los Angeles'), accompanied by a pointing gesture.

In such cases, we can see that the resaying by the same speaker functions to tie back to, or resume, the initial topic. These cases share the following properties 1) the topic in question is followed up with a nearly identical resaying, 2) there is an intervening turn contribution from another speaker, and 3) the comment after the repeated topic element is an extension with further information or a question expressed.

4.3.3 Discourse functions of other-initiated topic constructions: reacting and orienting to the previous speaker to display an affiliative stance

If a topic construction has a clear origin from the prior turn of a different speaker, I call this an other-initiated topic (construction). Other-initiated topics have a clear interactive function that differs from those of same speaker-initiated and self-repeated topic constructions. These constructions serve simultaneously as acknowledgements of the receipt of information from the prior speaker and displays of affiliative affective stance (Ochs 1996; Stivers 2008). Some of these constructions indeed function as what have been called reactive tokens (Clancy et al. 1996). E.g.,

(23) (Conversation between a student and the visiting mother of her friend on a campus tour at an American college.)

1F1: (松鼠)抱下来(桔子)之后呢, 吃上三分之一, 就不要了。就走掉了。

(Songshu)_bao_xialai_(juzi)_zhihou_ne,_chi_shang_sanfenzhiyi,_jiu_buyaole._
Jiu_zou_diaole.

(squirrel)_grab_down_(orange)_after_PRT,_eat_up_one_third,_then_NEG_want._
then_leave_away_PRT

(The squirrel) after fetching down (the orange), eats **a third of it**, just leaves.

2F3: 是嘛?

Shi_ma?

COP_PRT

Really?

3F1: 噯, 吃三分之一。每天吃三分之一。

Ai,_chi_sanfenzhiyi._Meitian_chi_sanfenzhiyi.

RT,_eat_one_third._every_day_eat_one_third

Yup, eating **a third of it**. Eating **a third of it** every day.

4F3: 三分之一, 就吃饱了。

Sanfenzhiyi,_jiu_chi_bao_le.

one_third,_then_eat_full_PRT_

Just **one third of it**, it's full.

(笑声)

(Xiao sheng)

(Laughs) (CALPER)

In Line 4, Speaker F3 repeats what speaker F1 has said in the preceding lines 三分之一 *sanfenzhiyi* 'one third' and shares laughter with the previous speaker to show her appreciation of the amusing story about a squirrel. This is a typical case of displaying affiliative affective stance with the previous speaker.

It is common to find that the recipient elaborates slightly on the repeated expression, showing an affiliative stance with materials in reference to local or self-related properties.

This is shown in the following extract.

(24) (Telephone conversation between friends.)

1B: 那个地方啊,

Nage_difang_a,

that_place_PRT

That place,

2A: Uh hm,

3B: 叫做骑士公园,

jiaozuo_qishi_gongyuan,

called_knight_park

*is called **Knight Park**,*

4A: 骑士公园儿, 好象我的,

Qishi_gongyuan_er,_hao_xiang_wo_de,

knight_park,_seem_like_1SG_NOM

***Knight Park**, it looks like our (place),*

5B: 骑马的 ,

Qi_ma_de,

ride_horse_PRT

Horse riding type,

6A: 哦,

O,

RT

Oh,

7B: 骑马的骑士,

Qi_ma_de_qishi,

ride_horse_ATT_knight

A knight on horseback. (LDC)

Here, upon hearing the mention of the referent 骑士公园 *Qishi Gongyuan* 'Knight Park' in line 3, the respondent repeats it in line 4 and makes a reference to herself (local situation, though apparently incomplete information is given here), demonstrating her epistemic access to the reference or intersubjectivity in the sense of Heritage (2007), but without further pursuit.

Another option the respondent has upon hearing a prompt from the prior speaker is to take it up as a topic and continue with it, resulting in what Bland (1981:40) calls the echoing pattern. This often takes the form of question and answer, or an adjacency pair, where the question part comes from the prior speaker and the answer, which echoes some reference

made in the prior turn, continues with the referent as a topic. A number of examples given earlier exhibit this pattern, as in (8) and (13). An extended version given below of examples (8) and (10) shows a similar pattern.

(25) (Telephone conversation between friends)

1A: 什么那个, 那个日本的事儿怎么样?

Shenme_neige,_neige_Riben_de_shir_zenmeyang?

what_that,_that_Japan_ATT_thingy_how

*What, what about **that Japan thing**?*

2B: 日本那事儿, 到现在没有音信.

Riben_na_shir,_dao_xianzai_meiyou_yinxin.

Japan_that_thingy,_till_now_NEG_have_news

***The Japan thing**, there is no news so far.*

3A: 哦 .

O.

RT

Oh.

4B: 大概可能日本那边呢, 出问题了. 就是说他们那边可能经济不景气, 他们那边.

Dagai_keneng_Riben_na_bian_ni,_chu_wentile._Jiushi_shuo_tamen_na_bian_

_keneng_jingji_bu_jingqi,_tamen_na_bian_

probably_maybe_Japan_that.side_PRT,_have_problem_PRT._ADV_say_3PL_side_

_probably_economy_NEG_prosper,_3PL_side

*Maybe over there in **Japan**, something went wrong. Like, **their side/over there** economy might be down, **their side**.*

5A: 嗯哼.

Enheng.

RT

Huh. (LDC)

In line 1, Speaker A proposes the topic in an interrogative form, forming what is called the first part of an adjacency pair (Sack, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974). In line 2, Speaker B picks it up with the second part of the adjacency pair. B then continues to treat it as a topic through lines 4 and 5, in multiple turn positions: turn-initial, -middle, and -final, with variation in referential forms. Throughout the sequence, however, we can see that the topical element has an origin from the previous speaker in line 1.

A somewhat implicit format involves one speaker expressing an opinion, or an assessment (Pomerantz 1984; Goodwin and Goodwin 1992), and the next speaker taking up the topic and expanding it with his/her own assessment or with further elaboration, resulting in some reuse-and-modification patterns (Su 2016). E.g.,

(26) (Telephone conversation between friends)

1A: 身体好, 有钱就行了,

Shenti_hao, _you_qian_jiu_xing_le,

body_well, _have_money_then_fine_PRT

(With) good health, and with some **money**, (he) should be fine.

2B: 啊, 啊, 啊, 那么钱么他也不是很多,

A,_a,_a,_name_qian_me_ta_ye_bushi_henduo,

INT,_INT,_INT,_then_money_3SG_either_NEG_COP_much

Well, actually, **moneywise** he doesn't have much,

3 那么他就自己反正能够过得过去么,

name_ta_jiu_ziji_fanzheng_nenggouguo_de_guoqu_me,

then_3SG_just_self_anyway_can_live_COMP_pass_PRT

he can still live by himself anyway,

4 可以嘞, 对不啦?

keyi_lei,_dui_bu_la?

possible_PRT,_right_NEG_PRT

Should be fine, right? (LDC)

Here the first speaker makes an assessment concerning 钱 *qian* 'money;' B follows it up and makes some further remarks on the same topic.

All of these cases in this section show that second speaker production of topic constructions is reactive and serves to display an affiliative stance, with various types of expanded materials.

4.3.3 Summary

In this section I have shown that topics in conversations can be grouped into three general categories based on speaker roles: self-initiated, self-repeated, and other-initiated topics. Self-initiated topics mostly constitute a checking strategy where co-participants negotiate the identification of reference and identify suitable candidates for a topic in a collaborative way. Self-repeated topics serve as a tying back device after a recipient intervention. In other-initiated topics, where the topic item originates from the first speaker and is picked up by the second speaker, it serves as an acknowledgement token signaling the receipt of information from the first speaker and displaying an affiliative stance, demonstrating intersubjective, and/or as a starting point for further elaboration.

5 Conclusions

This study shows that even though 'topic' may be a useful notion for describing some of the unique grammatical features of Chinese, natural text/speech data call for a re-examination of its nature and the ways in which it is manifested and deployed in discourse. My genre-based investigation shows that quantitatively speaking, topic constructions, at a ratio of 4% to all

clauses, are a very rare type of construction in discourse among all the possible types of syntactic constructions. As such, the status of topic constructions in Chinese needs to be rethought. I propose that there is a distinction between the conceptual basis and the empirical basis of the robustness of topic construction in Chinese, and that Chinese can be called a topic-prominent language only in the sense of topic constructions being an independent type of construction, as Li and Thompson (1976) argues; an attempt to extend the notion, linguistically or culturally, must be justified empirically in a systematic fashion. In this regard, whether the Chinese style topic-comment constructions (Chafe 1976) are uniquely Chinese may be cast into doubt with studies such as Bland (1981), where she shows that English conversational discourse also exhibits patterns commonly attributed to language such as Chinese. What is more productive is to examine this relatively infrequent type of construction and find out what speakers do with it in interactive contexts. This study shows a number of surprising patterns of topic constructions in conversational discourse that challenge traditional sentence-based conceptualizations of the topic, among which:

- Topic is best described as located at speaker turn transition places;
- Topical elements do not have to be definite, identifiable, or shared at the time of the utterance;
- Topical elements function quite differently depending on whether they are self-initiated, self-repeated, or other-initiated.

There are important implications of this study for conceptualizing Chinese grammar, one of which is regarding the role of naturalistic discourse data in understanding and reevaluating prevailing linguistic theoretical notions. Many widely held syntactic theoretical notions have been based on isolated and contrived data, which, though helpful in many ways, may not account well for actual language use, especially interactive conversation. This has been widely noted in previous studies on such issues as argument structure (Du Bois 1987), the status of SVO constructions in French (Lambrecht 1987), and gapping in English (Tao and Meyer 2006). Clearly our investigation of topic constructions in discourse presents yet another case showing a compelling need to examine discourse to reach a deeper understanding of language organization and use. While investigating language use may not necessarily result in changes in, or be considered relevant to, formal syntactic models and typological parameters, such endeavors can at least provide a realistic account of the empirical landscape on which any theoretical frameworks are to be adequately built or improved.

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Appendix A: Transcription conventions.

These transcription conventions are part of Du Bois et al. (1993), with slight modifications.

UNITS

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Intonation unit | { carriage return with a punctuation mark } |
| Truncated intonation unit | -- |
| Truncated word | - |
| Speaker identity/turn start | : |
| Speech overlap | [] |

UNIT TYPES

| | |
|-------------|---|
| Final | . |
| Continuing | , |
| Question | ? |
| Exclamation | ! |

ACCENT AND LENGTHENING

| | |
|----------------|---|
| Primary accent | ^ |
| Lengthening | = |

PAUSE

| | |
|------------------------------------|---------|
| Long (more than three seconds) ... | () |
| Medium (two seconds) ... | ... |
| Latching | (0) |

LAUGHTER

@

TRANSCRIBER'S PERSPECTIVE AND NON-VERBAL ACTIONS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Comment or non-verbal actions (in <i>italics</i>) | (()) |
| Uncertain hearing | <X X> |
| Indecipherable syllable | X |

Appendix B: Gloss symbols

| | |
|------|-------------------------------|
| 1st | 1st person singular |
| 1PL | 1 st person plural |
| 2sg | 2nd person singular |
| 2pl | 2nd person plural |
| 3sg | 3rd person singular |
| 3pl | 3rd person plural |
| ADV | adverb |
| ATT | attributive |
| CLF | classifier |
| COP | copula |
| COMP | complement |
| INT | interjection |
| NAME | personal or place names |
| NEG | negator |
| NOM | nominalization |
| PRF | perfective |
| PROG | progressive |
| PRT | utterance-final particle |
| RT | conversation reactive tokens |

