Specificity and Temporal Reference
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For the past two decades the specificity of indefinite NPs has received much interest, mostly on their wide-scope taking potentials (see, for example, Fodor & Sag 1982, Abusch 1993-1994, Reinhart 1997, Kratzer 1998, among others). In Mandarin Chinese, while it is generally assumed that the Isomorphic Principle (Huang 1982, Aoun and Li 1993) regulates the scope interaction of quantifier phrases (e.g., the S-S c-commanding subject always scopes over the object), the wide-scope indefinites still surface and parallel with their English counterparts. In this study, I show that being a language without (in)definite articles, Mandarin Chinese has to resorts to temporal reference to derive the specificity of its indefinite NPs. Besides, the temporal reference itself also introduces various operators to mark the scope of indefinite NPs. In this sense, what seems to be the puzzling scope phenomenon turns out to be the conspiracy of temporal reference in various disguises.

Diverging from the already hot-debated issue of scopal interaction, I start from clarifying three readings of Chinese indefinite NPs with the help of temporal reference, i.e., the specific reading (referential in Fodor & Sag’s 1982 sense), the nonspecific reading (existential in F&S’s sense), and the cardinal reading (denoting quantity only). The specific reading is best derived when the indefinite NP in question falls within the time frame ET=RT (cf. Reichenbach 1947); the nonspecific reading surfaces within the time frame ET<RT; whereas the cardinal reading is left to the "generic" time frame, e.g. aspectless constructions, modality constructions, and generic constructions. The temporal reference is substantiated through aspectual operators, e.g., zai (progressive), -le (perfective), and -guo (perfective/experiential), in accordance with temporal adverbials or even a null tense operator.

Having singled out the specificity of the indefinite NPs, I proceed to work on the scope issue. I suggest that Chinese indefinite NPs should be treated as variables (cf. Kamp 1981, Heim 1982). Being so, they have to be bound by certain operators to get licensed, i.e., aspectual operators, existential operators, or a tense operator, all of which are introduced by temporal reference. This immediately accounts for the subject specificity effects in Chinese, where the indefinite subject is beyond the scope of the aspectual operators and is thus ruled out. Moreover, being variables, the indefinite NPs do not have their own quantificational force to trigger the scope-taking mechanism, Quantifier Raising (QR). The lack of island effects for them is then naturally accounted for simply because they do not move to take the scope. The scope in turn is marked by the positions of their corresponding operators introduced by temporal reference.

All in all, the intriguingly scopal phenomenon of indefinite NPs in Mandarin Chinese results from the dual status of temporal reference, which on the one hand licenses the specificity of indefinite NPs while on the other hand introduces various operators to mark the scope. We believe only by such investigation into the temporal reference, which contributes to the interwoven plot of indefinite NPs, can the revelation on such intriguing (and sometimes confusing) topic be promising.
Selected References