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**THE TYPOLOGY OF THE CHINESE LANGUAGE: THE  
HOLISTIC IN DETAILS**

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**Abstract**

The typology of the Chinese language is a systemic phenomenon (not an “exoticism”) due to its external and internal determinants, which have influence at all levels: topic-comment syntax, “banal metaphor”, a lack of agreement in syntax, an absence of “usual” words and sentences, as well as different values of language levels, and so forth. In modern practical textbooks of the Chinese language (isolating, topic-prominent): a) theory and typology are not sufficiently covered, b) grammar is explained as similar to the grammar of “European” (inflectional, subject-prominent) languages. The goal of this paper is the typological justifying of the minimal necessary set of linguistic features which could form the basis for Chinese language textbooks, using the methods of systemology, topic-subject analysis, and the contrastive comparison of typologically different languages. As a result, brief descriptions of Chinese syntax and syllable structure, in addition to parts of the speech morphology and the “value” of language levels (which include “strong” and “weak” ones, and their properties and order in Chinese are directly opposite to such properties and order in European languages) are presented.

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## 1. Introduction

In modern Chinese language textbooks and theoretical works, issues of general theory are covered either chaotically, or sparsely, or in accordance with the minimal guidelines of 20th-century structuralism. An orientation towards classical structuralism implies only minor deviations from the norms established in the Course in General Linguistics by F. de Saussure. Thus, by default, it is assumed that all languages have levels, including phonemic, morphemic, and lexemic ones, as well as words, stable “vocabulary fixed” parts of speech, and a sentence structure which may be described by the terms “subject and predicate”. A similar system of description is usually applied to the Chinese language.

If, however, some phenomena in Chinese simply do not fit into the “traditional” system, then either insufficiently explained terms such as “additional element” or “modifier” are introduced. Alternatively, the description is built on (simplified) schemes that are close to generative grammar, and the norms established by Noam Chomsky, which do not involve broad theoretical generalizations.

A number of my works are devoted to the problems of the systematic coverage of Chinese grammar, including, in particular, A Course in Theoretical Chinese Grammar (Kurdyumov, 2005), which is widely known in Russia and recommended as a textbook for universities. In line with the ideas of the Soviet and Russian systemologist Gennady Melnikov (2000), I proceed from the fact that there are key factors influencing the formation of the structure of the language. Melnikov called the main external factor an “external determinant” and usually proceeded from the fact that these are geographical elements that form communication situations which are normative for a certain language. Under the influence of an “external” one, an internal determinant is produced in the language – a key system feature that forms more particular characteristics of the language. Thus, a systemic typology of languages is developed.

From my point of view, the internal determinant of the Chinese language is its topic-prominent typology, most clearly described in the works of Chao (1968) and Li and Thompson (1976; as well as Kotcik, 2017, 2018): the fundamentally “segmented” syntax of sentences which may not allow the very idea of a formally agreed subject and predicate. Taking into account a certain theoretical non-systematic nature of the descriptions of the structure of the Chinese language in existing textbooks, I would like to offer a list of the most typical features of this language, directly related to its topic-prominent typology. Such a set of features can later be used as a working scheme for compiling courses and textbooks on the theory of the Chinese language, incorporating grammar, phonetics and stylistics, as well as summarizing texts, and so forth.

## 2. Problem Statement

The problem lies in the adequacy/inadequacy of a certain minimum set of features that correspond both to the main determinant of the Chinese language typology and to the particular features dictated by it. Such a set does not as yet exist and theoretical knowledge is still not based on the latest (i.e., dating from after the 1960s) scientific ideas about the typology of the language. At best, such a picture is formed in the student’s mind when mastering a practical language course, or when studying theoretical disciplines using archaic textbooks (for example, in Russia this is a series of textbooks by V. I. Gorelov, where the Chinese grammar completely copies that of the Russian language from school textbooks).

The second aspect of the problem is to overcome the conservatism of thinking and the bias of ideas in the field of grammar theory. This applies to both students and teachers, who, when studying the Eastern language, proceed either from an intuitive rejection of theoretical generalizations, or, again, from the tenets of the school grammar of their native European language.

The next aspect is to demonstrate and prove the right to the existence of concepts and theories that would “contradict” most of the simplified formulations from practical textbooks with their unscientific terms such as “modifier”, “additional element”, and so forth. Thus, another task is to logically explain the relationship between the determinant and particular phenomena at different levels of the language.

The Chinese language is a topic-prominent language. Therefore, it has (1) no agreed-upon “soldered” sentences, (2) no imitation of the doer and action, (3) no words in the usual sense (with a morphological structure like “root + affixes”), (4) language levels with different elements of significance in the mind of the speaker, (5) no banal (“linguistic”) metaphor, and (6) a syllable that is soldered and is built according to a certain formula of phoneme positions: 1234.

### **3. Research Questions**

Based on the available theoretical sources and my own experience of more than 40 years in studying the Chinese language, the question can be formulated as follows: how can a minimum amount of fundamental theoretical ideas be constructed in relation to the nature of the Chinese language and its particular typological features, based on the principles of Melnikov’s (2000) systemology and descriptions presented in the writings of Chao (1968) and Li and Thompson (1976)? How can such a presentation be offered in the form of brief abstracts that can be introduced into the educational process, including textbooks for a practical course in the Chinese language? This article proposes a minimum set of characteristics based on the topic-prominent nature of the Chinese language and ideas about the differing significance of the system of language levels in languages of different typologies.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this article is the proposal and description of a minimum basic set of formal typological features that are based on the determinant of the Chinese language, which can be the most important aspect for students, teachers, and anyone who wants to form an unbiased opinion about it. The Chinese language is a topic-prominent language. Therefore, it has (1) no agreed-upon “soldered” sentences, (2) no imitation of the doer and action, (3) no words in the usual sense (with a morphological structure like “root + affixes”), (4) language levels with differing significance in the mind of the speaker, (5) no banal (“language”) metaphor, and (6) a syllable that is soldered and built according to a certain formula of phoneme positions: 1234.

### **5. Research Methods**

The methodological bases include a comparative study of languages within the framework of Melnikov’s (2000) systemology concept and the principles of systemic analysis of the Chinese language

according to Chao (1968). In addition, a contrastive comparison of languages within the dynamic topic- and subject-based typology developed by Li and Thompson (1976) is also undertaken.

In addition, I use the principles of theoretical analysis within the framework of the predicational concept (or theory) of language (Kurdyumov, 2013, 2021), with the following main principles: all the languages have everything, only in different proportions; following Li and Thompson (1976) and Chao (1968), languages may be divided (at least) into topic- and subject-prominent types and, therefore, Chinese cannot be described by the rules of Russian or any European (= inflectional) language; and the topic and comment, originally proposed on the basis of the Chinese language, are universal categories and suitable for creating a new framework of general linguistics (Simatova, 2019). According to such a theory, the language in general can be considered neither a product nor a static system, but a “flow” or set of processes of generation and perception, the “key” points of which are topic-comment structures. The analysis of the system of language levels was carried out in accordance with the principles previously proposed in my works: each language level can be represented by its own level unit, the system of levels far exceeds the limits set by F. de Saussure in the *Course in General Linguistics* (that is, syntax, text, and discourse levels and above are included), and the level (“vertical”) axis is non-discrete, as it includes many intermediate levels and is infinite. According to A. M. Efremov (as cited in Kurdyumov, 2013, 2021), the significance of language levels in each specific language depends on the typology and is itself a typological feature. If discussing metaphor, then I rely on the currently widespread classification of Lakoff/Johnson, highlighting, nevertheless, within it, the opposition of banal and artistic metaphor that is more significant for us.

### **5.1.Melnikov’s Systemology**

As in the framework of the Schleicher-Humboldt typology, the number of language types is limited. The typology is determined by some external determinant: usually geographical and demographic ones that form the situation of communication. Under the influence of an external determinant, an internal determinant of the language typology is formed, which, in turn, determines all the particular features (Melnikov, 2000). In addition, if the provisions of the concepts of Li and Thompson (1976) and Melnikov (2000) are applied in a complex manner, then discussions regarding which particular feature (phonetic, morphological, or syntactic) should be considered a reference point and an internal determinant are not very important. In relation to the Chinese language, first of all, the consistency and non-disintegration of features are critical. Following Li and Thompson (1976), I consider the main nature of syntax to be an internal determinant of the Chinese language (perhaps quite conditionally).

### **5.2.Contrasting Subject and Topic According to Chao’s Concept**

As syntactic and conceptually different from the categories of Given and New / Theme and Rheme by Prague linguistic school, the topic and comment categories appeared in the works by Lyons and Hockett (as cited in Kurdyumov, 2013, 2021). In the grammar composed by Chao (1968), these categories were first generalized in relation to the Chinese language, however still using the terms “subject” and “predicate”. Chao indicates that in Chinese they do not imitate the actor and action (as in Russian, English and other European/inflectional languages), but represent a topic and a comment, that is,

elements of being characterized and characterizing binary opposition. Subsequently, the “semantic” aspect was forgotten and withdrawn from the linguistics, and after Chao, when describing the topic and comment, the emphasis was usually placed on formal characteristics.

### 5.3. The Topic Typology of Languages by Li and Thompson

In the central article of the famous 1976 collection, Li and Thompson proposed the principles of a new typology of languages, dividing them into four types, the same number as in the typology of W. von Humboldt. Based on what syntactic strategy a typical speaker chooses in a typical situation in a particular language, this particular language can be classified either as a “subject-prominent” one (like literary Russian or English), or a “topic-prominent” (such as Chinese or Vietnamese), as well as an intermediate type: with the prominence of both subject and topic (like Korean or Japanese), or without (such as Ilocano or Tagalog). Most likely, these four types correspond to four morphological ones: inflectional, isolating, agglutinating, and possibly incorporating, but there are still no detailed and substantiated studies on the matter. From the point of view of Li and Thompson (1976), languages move “in a circle”: changing typology in time – with varying degrees of stability, which, again, does not contradict the postulates of Schleicher-Humboldt. Thus, the Chinese language hypothetically is increasing agglutination (but as yet without the agreement in the sentence) and moving towards the “Turkish” type, English (analytic inflectional) approaches the “Chinese” one, and Russian (inflectional with increasing analytic features) shifts towards the “English” one. In addition, according to the degree of cohesion inside the being predicated and predicating components (topic and comment), isolating languages can be combined with incorporating (separated syntagmas with a strong bond inside), and the inflectional type – with agglutinating (a holistic sentence with agreement). Li and Thompson (1976) proposed a number of formal features that distinguish the topic from the subject (such as a pause, a lack of agreement, the topic as Given, possible pronominalization of the topic in a comment, etc.)

### 5.4. Lakoff and Johnson’s Theory of Metaphor

The descriptions of metaphor and classification offered by Lakoff and Johnson (2003) are classic and generally accepted. For our study, the most important is the description of the so-called “language” metaphor, that is usually not noticed and not distinguished by native speakers, as it plays a only grammatical role. These are verbs like “to stand”, “to lie down”, “to run”, which are widespread, for example, in Russian, or the copula verb in English (Kurdyumov, 2021).

Examples (from Russian):

За окном стоит хорошая погода. *There is good weather outside the window.*

Literally: *Good weather **stands** outside the window.*

На столе лежит телефон. *There is a phone on the table.*

Literally: *A phone **lies** on the table.*

Время бежит быстро. *Time **runs** fast.*

## 5.5. The Differing Significance of Language Levels in Terms of Typology

A comparison of the system of “strong” and “weak” levels in Chinese and Russian was first conducted by A. M. Efremov (as cited in Kurdyumov, 2013, 2021). I later repeatedly referred to his thesis in our works and clarified certain assertions. Usually the terms “strong” and “weak” cause misunderstanding among linguists, although I think that these terms are the most convenient. The “strong” ones are the sign units representing a level, which are perceived by native speakers as something meaningful, and as whole, stable and appropriate system formulas and rules. Weak level units, on the contrary, are not noticed and are not distinguished by native speakers as significant.

### 5.6.E. D. Polivanov’s Syllable Formula

In the classical works of Chinese phonology, the Chinese syllable is described as a unity of stable positions: initial + medial + central + final, or in similar terms. The Chinese medieval transcription 反切 fǎnqiè reflects the (archaic) sound of the syllable – as two characters corresponding to the initial and the final. The Chinese alphabet 注音符號 zhuyin fuhao or bopomofo, introduced in 1921 and now widely used in Taiwan, also reflects the formula (three letters – initial, medial, and final, including positions 3 + 4). In the version of E. D. Polivanov’s syllable formula (cited in Kurdyumov, 2021) is 1234 (in full; variants are possible, with empty positions, except for the third, syllable-forming one). In this formula, #1 is a consonant sound, #2 is a non-syllabic vowel (i, u, ü), #3 is a syllabic vowel, and #4 is a sound that E. D. Polivanov called “sonant”, and in the textbooks of our time is often mistakenly called “a consonant” (-n, -ng, -r, and also -p, -t, -k, -m, -r): 黃 huáng yellow h+u+á+ng: 1234; 准 zhǔn allow zh+u+ě+n: 1234; 翠 cuì emerald c+u+è+i: 1234; 無 wú none ú: 0030; 三 sān three s+ā+n: 1034.

## 6. Findings

Chinese is a topic-prominent language: a typical speaker in a normal situation will choose the structure 這本書 I 我還沒看完 This book | I haven’t read yet as an equivalent of the English structure “I haven’t read this book yet” (in English – with subject and predicate and subsequent revealing of Given and New – by the listener or researcher). As the topic-prominent typology is taken as an internal determinant and a starting point, then two theoretical extensions are possible: a) to the system of norms, rules and units of the Chinese language, or b) to the system of general linguistics as a whole.

When describing the Chinese language, all the characteristic features are described as related to and conditioned by the topic-prominent typology. In constructing a new system of general linguistics, the categories of topic and comment can be considered universal and initial for identifying the essence of language as a dynamic phenomenon, or process, when describing the system of language levels, as well as parts of speech, positions in a sentence, and processes of generating and perceiving speech, in addition to text structure, and so forth.

### **6.1.General Linguistics: The Predicational Concept of Language**

Topic-prominent typology is one of the prerequisites for the formation of a predicative concept (or theory, in which language is not considered a static system (“warehouse”) of signs, but an (infinite) set of processes of (idea) generation and (idea) perception, where the idea is structurally formed of topic and comment. In (literary) inflectional languages, topic structures at one of the stages of generation are transformed into subjects, with all the excesses of this type of speech, in isolating – speech on the surface remains topical, more often more “direct” and (in an illusory manner) more understandable.

### **6.2.“Canonically Split” Versus “Canonically Joint” Sentences**

Topic-prominent typology, of course, is in close connection with the systemological views of Gennady Melnikov (2000): “Chinese” sentences are a “canonically split” form that requires conjoining in the mind of the listener, and “European” (English, Russian, etc.) ones are “canonically conjoined”, requiring splitting during perception (into Given and New, or Theme and Rheme).

### **6.3.“Actor–Action” Versus Being Described and Description: “Zero” Banal Metaphor**

Topic-prominent typology is closely related to the forgotten thesis of Chao (1968): any subject-prominent sentence inevitably imitates the situation of the actor and action (see above), while the topic structure is nothing else than description or characterization; “Russian” “actions” are impossible for everyday speech and are curious for native Chinese speakers. Russian and inflectional languages in general are filled with a banal metaphor: a constant imitation of an action that speakers do not notice.

The Chinese language, in principle, “avoids action”, it is “non-verbal” (or “less verbal” than inflectional ones): for example, when adding aspect and resultative “suffixes”, the original “qualitative adjectives” do not become actions (in clauses like 天黑了 The sky darkened). In Chinese, to the maximum extent, no action comes from anything (except, apparently, “direct”/obvious situations).

### **6.4.Copula in Chinese: No “Existence”/“Being”**

Sentences with the copulas 是/係 shì/xì/hai in Chinese have little in common with their “European” counterparts: the copula is not a verb and does not come from it, and it has nothing to do with the idea of “being” (which is explicit, for example, in English), only fixing: “Something corresponds to something” (analogous to the sentence final copula/“dot” 也 yě in the literary language Wenyan).

### **6.5.Levels of Language: Strong Versus Weak Ones**

In different types of language, levels of varying degrees of significance are distinguished: the “Russian” phoneme, lexeme, and clause are “strong”: speakers track the clarity of the single sounds, “sacralize” the word, and agree the formal categories in the sentence to provide the conjoining. The structure of a morpheme or phrase is quite arbitrary and not very significant. For the “Chinese”, the morpheme (which necessarily corresponds to a syllable and a hieroglyph), a phrase (syntagma), as well as levels above the sentence, where, for example, verb tenses are being agreed, are strong. A Chinese native

does not attach importance to the phoneme, either as a sound type or as a semantic distinction element: he puts up with an infinite number of “local” allophones (accents), for example, and a native teacher from China usually does not control a single sound spelling. As the Europeans sacralize the word, so the Chinese do it with the morpheme (= syllable) – with the strong formula 1–2–3–4 (with possible zeros), where the sounds do not combine in random order, the number of syllables is limited, positional transformations are unreal or insignificant, and the entire syllable is united by toning.

### 6.6. Words Versus Non-Words

In relation to lexemes in Chinese, one should not speak of a “word”: polysyllabic lexical units are characterized by varying degrees of cohesion (similar to phraseology units in Russian), and monosyllabic ones balance on the verge of morpheme and lexeme. With regard to the Chinese language, it is more correct to speak of “lexical units”, which do not obey the formulas of morphology with root and affix morphemes, but the rules of micro-syntax. Such units can be built as complexes of synonymous, antonymic morphemes, constructed according to verb-object, subject-predicate, and resultative models, and so forth.

Example:

投幣式自主洗 Self-service laundry: two lexical units, unit #1 投幣式 literally: throw + coins+ type, unit #2 自主洗 literally: self +owner + laundry.

### 6.7. Positional Parts of Speech

Chinese is characterized by “positional morphology”: a part of speech that is not stable and corresponds to the usage in a syntax context, but not to a unit “from vocabulary” (in Russian it is to the contrary), although there are relatively stable diapasons in modern language (unlike the literary language Wenyan, which has almost total parts of speech flexibility), so I can assume the morphological categories of position, range, and route.

Positions: 中國 Zhōngguó: China/related to China

中國是一個大的國家。 China is a big country: a noun China (1)

中國人民 Chinese people or people of China: a relative adjective Chinese or something like possessive case of a noun (2)

她很中國 She is very Chinese: a quantitative adjective Chinese (3)

\* 她中國了 She got sinicized : something like a verb sinicized, only in spontaneous speech (4)

So positions 1–3 form a parts-of-speech diapason: noun–adjective, and position shows how a unit in expressive or spontaneous speech can go outside the frames of diapason.

## 7. Conclusion

Whatever feature is placed at the centre of the system as an internal determinant: phonological, syntactic, morphological, or external determinant (a typical situation of communication, due to synchronous geography or diachronic changes), the typology of Chinese, like any other, is systemic and



cannot be regarded as a combination of random features. The characteristics of Chinese are not dictated by “exoticism”, but are quite explicable – within the framework of the typological theory.

This work proposed a minimal set of features for the Chinese language, with a topic-prominent syntax typology as a determinant one, as well as “derived ones”: canonically split sentences requiring conjoining during perception, as well as a lack of “actor-action”, in addition to banal (“language”) metaphor, the non-verb and non-existential nature of the copula, a system of strong and weak language levels with stress on the morpheme, phrase, units above the sentence, a lack of real “words” due to an inner micro-syntax, and positional but not “vocabulary” parts of speech. Such a set of characteristics, along with, for example, the genealogical classification of the language, could be integrated both into ordinary practical course textbooks and theory textbooks as elementary knowledge necessary for each student or teacher

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