Topics Prominence, “Double Nominative” Construction and Subject Importance in Mandarin Chinese

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Li & Thompson (1976) propose a typology of languages according to topic-prominence and subject-prominence. However, they inappropriately treat topic-prominence and subject-prominence as the two ends of the same continuum, and fail to make clear the criteria for identifying a language to be topic-prominent or subject-prominent. This article argues that topic and subject are notions at different levels, and consequently topic-prominence and subject-prominence should be treated as two distinct continua. More importantly, I propose two criteria for identifying a language to be topic-prominent and one criterion for identifying a language to be subject-prominent. Moreover, I argue that contra Shi (2000)’s claim, the ‘double nominative’ construction is one in which the topic is not necessarily anaphorically related to an element in the comment, and that the topic in this construction is base-generated.

1. Introduction

Li & Thompson (1976) claim that languages can be typologized according to whether they are subject-prominent, or topic-prominent, or both, or neither. A language is topic-prominent if its basic structure of sentences “favors a description in which the grammatical relation topic-comment plays a major role”; a language is subject-prominent if its basic structure of sentences “favors a description in which the grammatical relation subject-predicate plays a major role” (p. 459, emphasis original). On Li & Thompson’s typology, Chinese is a topic-prominent language whereas English is a subject-prominent language. Moreover, they claim that no noun phrase in a Mandarin sentence displays the “subject properties” proposed by Keenan (1976).

In this paper, I will first review the characterization of topic given by Li & Thompson (1976) and (1981), and point out that their former characterization is too narrow and that topic and subject are notions at different levels. Next, I will argue that

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1 I am grateful to Masha Babyonyshev, Larry Horn, Kuniyoshi Ishikawa, Dianne Jonas, Julie Legate for their valuable comments and suggestions. Abbreviations used in this paper are: CL=classifier; EXP=experiential aspect marker (guo); MM=modifier marker; PERF=perfective; POSS=possessive; SFP=sentence-final particle. Where permitted, the translation of the examples is deliberately literal.
Chinese is more topic-prominent than English in several respects. More importantly, I will propose two criteria for considering a language to be topic-prominent. Then, I will argue against Shi (2000)’s claim that without exception a topic is related to a position inside the comment. Finally, I will demonstrate that Li & Thompson (1976)’s claim that subject has no place in analyzing Mandarin sentences does not hold, and argue that subject is an important notion in describing and analyzing Chinese. And I will point out that based on the criteria I will propose, Chinese is not a subject-prominent language and there are aspects showing that Chinese is less subject-prominent than English along the subject-prominence continuum.

2. Characterization of topic by Li & Thompson (1976) and (1981)
From Li & Thompson (1976)’s phrasing (see the quotation in Section 1), it seems that they view both the relation between subject and predicate and that between topic and comment as grammatical relations, although they point out that topic is a “discourse notion” and subject is a “sentence-internal notion.” Instead of giving a purely syntactic or semantic definition, they list the following properties of topic:

(1) General properties of topic (Li & Thompson 1976)
   a. Topic is definite in the sense of Chafe (1976).  
   b. Topic need not have any selectional relation with any verb in a sentence. 
   c. Topic is not determined by the verb. 
   d. The functional role of a topic is setting the framework within which the predication holds, and this role is constant across sentences. 
   e. Topic does not control verb agreement. 
   f. Topic occupies the sentence-initial position. 
   g. Topic does not play a role in grammatical processes such as reflexivization, passivization, Equi-NP deletion, verb serialization and imperativization.

Note that according to Li & Thompson, these properties of topic hold cross-linguistically. However, a closer examination reveals that as far as Chinese is concerned, only the first “nominative” of such “double nominative” constructions as (2-3) qualifies as a topic, which is underlined in the examples.  

As for “single nominative” constructions such as (4-6), no NP qualifies as a topic.

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2 According to Chafe (1976: 39), a definite noun phrase is one for which the speaker assumes that the hearer not only already knows but also can identify its particular referent that the speaker has in mind.

3 Constructions like (2-3) which contain two consecutive NPs in the sentence-initial position are called “double nominative” constructions by Teng (1974) [cf. also Tsao (1978, 1979, 1990)] and are called “double subject” constructions by Li & Thompson (1976), for example. The reason why they are called “double subject” constructions is that traditionally (e.g., Zhang 1956, Chao 1968 and Teng 1974), the second NP [e.g., xiaofangdui ‘fire brigade’ in (2)] is analyzed as the
The initial NPs in (2-3) qualify as a topic because they meet the criteria in (1). On the other hand, the initial NPs in (4-6) are determined by the verb (have a selectional relation with the verb) and may play a role in one or more grammatical processes in (1g). As a result, they do not qualify as a topic, although intuitively they are all topics. Furthermore, they pass the “as for” test and the “say about” test given by Reinhart (1981) (also see Gundel 1988 [1974]), the tests for identifying the topic of a sentence. Take (4) for example. It can be paraphrased as (7) or (8). Further note that constructions like (4-6), especially (5-6) show common topic-comment structures of Chinese, although constructions like (2-3) are also productive.4

4 Chu (1998) argues that topic is a discourse notion and thus “in an isolated sentence with no discourse context, there is no need to decide whether a given nominal is a topic or not” (p. 250). However, we think that we can talk about both sentence topic and discourse topic, as maintained by Reinhart (1981). The former, as defined by Reinhart, is what a sentence is about. The topic (in

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4 Chu (1998) argues that topic is a discourse notion and thus “in an isolated sentence with no discourse context, there is no need to decide whether a given nominal is a topic or not” (p. 250). However, we think that we can talk about both sentence topic and discourse topic, as maintained by Reinhart (1981). The former, as defined by Reinhart, is what a sentence is about. The topic (in
The above considerations lead us to the conclusion that the properties of topic discussed by Li & Thompson (1976) are too rigid and as a result fail to identify the topic of most sentences in Chinese which have a topic-comment structure. An advance is made in Li & Thompson (1981: 86), where the authors identify a topic in terms of its semantic characteristics and formal properties.

The above characterization can indeed identify topics in Chinese. For example, it succeeds in identifying the initial NPs in (2-6) as topics because each of them is definite, occurs in sentence-initial position, and names what the sentence in which it occurs is about. However, it should be pointed out that topic is essentially a pragmatic notion, or “pragmatic aboutness” in Reinhart (1981)’s words, although it may have formal correlates such as occupying sentence-initial position and bearing an (optional) marker. Given this, it is important to note that topic and subject are notions on different levels. The former is a pragmatic notion, whereas the latter is a grammatical notion. Although we can still discuss whether a language is topic-prominent or subject-prominent, or both or neither, it should be borne in mind that the degree of topic-prominence and the degree of subject-prominence are also of different levels. That is, topic-prominence and subject-prominence are not on the two ends of the same continuum as Li & Thompson (1976) have assumed, but rather constitute two distinct continua. Therefore, I claim here that Li & Thompson (1976) improperly view both subject-predicate and topic-comment as the topic-comment structure) discussed in this paper is sentence topic. But even in this case we are in fact discussing topic in an unspecified (and unmarked) discourse/context which is proper for the relevant syntactic constituent to be the topic.

Cf. van Oosten (1984: 378)’s view that the necessary attribute of a prototypical topic is aboutness. See Strawson (1964/1971) for the source of Reinhart’s view.
grammatical relations. Rather, subject and predicate are concerned with grammatical
relations, and topic and comment are concerned with the distribution of information units.

3. Chinese as a topic-prominent language
In this section, I will address three issues: (i) what makes Chinese a topic-prominent
language in comparison with English; (ii) what are criteria for identifying a language as
topic-prominent; (iii) does the comment of the “double nominative construction” always
or never contain an element coreferential with the topic?

3.1 Chinese as a topic-prominent language in comparison with English
In comparison with English, the topic-prominence of Chinese demonstrates itself in at
least two respects. First, Chinese allows the so-called “double nominative”
constructions in which the topic and the subject of the sentence are two NPs used
consecutively. What is special about this construction is that the topic is not coreferential
with a complete argument constituent and the comment is a clause which has its subject.
“Double nominative” sentences like (10) below are quite acceptable and productive in
Chinese planned and unplanned discourses. However, in the corresponding English
sentence of (10), the initial NP, i.e., the topic, should be introduced by a preposition, at
least so in written language. On the other hand, the literal translation of the sentence
sounds odd, if not completely ungrammatical in planned discourses.

(10) Zhe-jian shiqing, ni bu neng guang ma fan yi-ge ren.
   this-CL matter you not can only bother one-CL person
   Literally: ‘This matter, you can’t just bother one person.’
   → ‘Concerning (or As for) this matter, you can’t just bother one person.’
   (Li & Thompson 1976: 479)

Second, Chinese displays the “topic-chain” construction, a typical English
translation of which often, though not necessarily, involves more than one sentence,
although the construction by itself is one sentence in Chinese.

Tsao (1990: xi) defines topic chain as “a stretch of discourse headed by one or more
topics, which are followed by one or more comment clauses” and as “a discourse unit
equivalent to the English surface sentence.” The following is an example of topic chain
drawn from a newspaper Zhonghua Dushubao. It is one sentence or a topic chain in

6 Clearly there is a difference in acceptability with respect to whether the literal translation of (10)
occurs in unplanned colloquial English or in planned English. In fact, unplanned colloquial
English does allow sentences like (10). The following are two attested examples from Bland
(i) The paper I’m working on, I can’t believe the detail that’s needed.
(ii) The course, we went too fast.
Chinese, but its English translation needs at least two sentences to avoid any awkwardness.

Einstein was a willful person. Unlike his good friend Grossman, who was well-organized and did well with every subject, he could study intensively the courses he liked to such a depth that adults would get surprised. However, as for the courses (he) did not like, (he) paid no attention to them at all and did not care about the bad grades.’ [From Zhonghua Dushubao ‘China Newspaper on Books,’ 07/30/03---Cong Aiyinsitan shi-bu-shi ben shuoqi ‘Begin the talk with whether Einstein was retarded or not.’]

The two respects I discussed are primarily concerned with topic-comment structures. While these structures are all natural, productive, and well-formed in Chinese, they are neither natural nor productive in English. This shows that Chinese is a topic-prominent language, a language more topic-prominent than English.

3.2 Criteria for identifying a language as topic-prominent
The discussion in the last section leads us to the question of whether both respects discussed are necessary conditions for a language to be topic-prominent and of what are the criteria for identifying a language as topic-prominent. It is important to note that this question is different from what the characteristics of topic-prominent languages are. Topic-prominent languages may happen to share some features which are not directly
related to the topic-comment structure. Rather, the criteria should be directly concerned with the topic-comment structure.

Since the two respects discussed in the preceding subsection are exclusively concerned with the topic-comment structure and they are prominent aspects of Chinese in comparison with English, I propose that both be necessary and sufficient conditions for a language to be considered topic-prominent, as stated in (12).

(12) Necessary and sufficient conditions for a language to be topic-prominent

(i) The “double nominative” construction is natural and productive both in planned and unplanned discourses in the language.

(ii) The topic-chain construction is a basic discourse unit in the language.

It should be pointed out that our proposal relies exclusively on the comparison between Chinese and English. Obviously, more languages, especially those claimed to be topic-prominent languages by Li & Thompson (1976) (e.g., Japanese, Korean, Lahu, Lisu), need to be carefully studied and compared to see whether our proposal holds. This certainly deserves a paper-length discussion and I will leave it to future research.

3.3 “Double Nominative” constructions in Chinese: a closer look

As argued in the preceding subsections, “double nominative” constructions like (13) make Chinese more topic-prominent than English. They clearly show topic-comment structures in which the initial NP is the topic and the rest of the sentence is the comment. Chafe (1976: 50-51) calls such constructions sentences containing a “Chinese-style topic” because the topics in these sentences “are not so much ‘what the sentence is about’ as ‘the frame within which the sentence holds.” Xu & Langendoen (1985) regard the “double nominative” construction as one in which the comment does not contain an element which is anaphorically related to the element in the topic. They use Chafe’s term “Chinese style topic” to refer to such topic structures.

(13) Na-chang huo, xiaofangdui lai de hen jishi.

    that-CL fire fire.brigade come DE very in.time

    Literally: ‘That fire, the fire brigade came in time.’

    → → ‘Concerning that fire, the fire brigade came in time.’

7 In fact, some of the characteristics of topic-comment languages discussed by Li & Thompson (1976) are of this nature. For example, Li & Thompson (1976: 467) observe that “dummy” or “empty” subjects, such as the English it and there, the French il and the German es, may be found in subject-prominent languages but not in topic-prominent languages. For another example, they find that topic-prominent languages tend to be verb-final. While these may be valid observations, on our view they are by no means necessary conditions for a language to be topic-prominent.
However, recently Shi (2000) argues that without exception a topic is related syntactically to a position inside the comment. More precisely, the comment is “an open clause that has a gap, namely, a position filled by an empty category or a resumptive pronoun, which is coreferential with the topic” (p. 388). Shi argues that this is also true of “double nominative” constructions. In this section I will demonstrate that this view, however, is not viable.

Shi uses the term “dangling topic” to mean a topic that is “not subcategorized by the verb in the comment” and is therefore “not related to any position inside the comment” (2000: 389). To my understanding, Shi’s dangling topic is essentially a topic in a “double nominative” structure. Shi identifies six types of dangling topic in the literature and argues that for each type the topic is in fact related to a position in the comment. In what follows, I will discuss two of his six types.

One type of dangling topic appears in sentences like (14), which contain adverbs like xingkui ‘fortunately,’ kexi ‘pitifully’ and yao-bu-shi ‘if not for.’

(14) Na-chang huo, xingkui xiaofangdui lai de kuai.
that-CL fire fortunately fire.brigade come DE quickly

‘That fire, fortunately the fire brigade came quickly.’

Shi argues that the adverbs mentioned above are in fact connective adverbs which work in pairs. For example, xingkui is part of the pair xingkui…buran ‘fortunately…otherwise,’ or of the pair xingkui…cai ‘fortunately…therefore.’ Each adverb of a pair introduces a clause. The clause introduced by the second adverb of each pair is the main clause. Sometimes the second adverb and the clause introduced by it can be omitted when the missing part is recoverable in an appropriate context. So in Shi’s view, the main clause in (14) is omitted, and a complete sentence would be like (15), in which the topic is clearly related to a position within the comment.

(15) [Na-chang huo], xingkui xiaofangdui lai de kuai, buran
that-CL fire fortunately fire.brigade come DE quickly otherwise

jiu hui shao-si bu-shao ren.
really will burn-die not-few people

‘That fire, fortunately the fire brigade came quickly, otherwise, (it) would have killed many people.’

However, it should be pointed out that although it is true that without context (14) is not complete in itself, (15) is by no means the only possible completion of (14). For example,

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8 Shi (2000: 393) says that sentence (14) has two interpretations. One is the interpretation in the translation, and the other is ‘At the time of that fire, fortunately the fire brigade came quickly.’ Here we restrict our discussion to the first interpretation.
(16) **Na-chang** huo, xingkui xiaofangdui lai de kuai, buran tamen dou jiu wan-le.

‘That fire, fortunately the fire brigade came quickly, otherwise they would have all died.’

Another type of dangling topic discussed by Shi (2000) occurs in sentences like (10) [repeated as (17) for convenience] in which the topic, the initial NP, is clearly not related to the subject and object positions of the verb in the comment.

(17) Zhe-jian shiqing, ni bu neng guang mafan yi-ge ren.

Literally: ‘This matter, you can’t just bother one person.’

→ → ‘Concerning (or As for) this matter, you can’t just bother one person.’

However, Shi points out that besides the subject and object positions of a verb, NPs may also occupy the position of the oblique object of adjunct PPs. As far as (17) is concerned, the topic may be related to the verb in the following way.

(18) **Wei** zhe-jian shiqing, ni bu neng guang mafan yi-ge ren.

‘For this matter, you can’t just bother one person.’

Since in many cases the preposition can be omitted from an adverbial PP in Chinese without changing its meaning, sentence (17), according to Shi, results from the omitting of the preposition **wei** ‘for.’ In other words, Shi regards (18) as the deep structure of (17). Given this analysis, the topic of (17) would be related to a position (object of a covert preposition) within the comment.

However, Shi’s treatment of the initial NP in (17) as both topic and object of a covert preposition is problematic, because whether an NP is introduced by a preposition or not has a great effect on whether it can function as topic. That is, although (17) and (18) have more or less the same interpretation, they may have different topic-comment structures. **Zhe-jian shiqing** ‘this matter’ in (17) can be argued to be the topic of the whole sentence, which can be seen more clearly in (19). If (17) results from (18) by omitting the preposition **wei** ‘for’, it should be expected that (19) results from (20) in the
same matter. However, the ungrammaticality of (20) shows that the prediction is not borne out.

(19) Zhe-jian shiqing, feichang nan ban, ni bu neng guang mafan
    this-CL matter very hard settle you not can only bother
    yi-ge ren. one-CL person
    ‘Concerning this matter, it is very hard to deal with and you can’t just bother one person.’

(20) *Wei zhe-jian shiqing, feichang nan ban, ni bu neng guang
    for this-CL matter very hard settle you not can only
    mafan yi-ge ren.
    bother one-CL person
    *‘For this matter, it is very hard to deal with and you can’t just bother one person.’

Examples (19) and (20) show that the presence or absence of a preposition has a great effect on the status of an NP as a topic and thus on the continuation of the discourse. A moral from this is that although the presence or absence of a certain element has little or no effect on the interpretation of a sentence, its presence or absence may lead to different analyses in terms of the topic-comment structure. Based on this, I think that Shi’s argument that the initial NP in (17) is related to a syntactic position inside the comment is not convincing. On the other hand, it would make more sense to say that the topic (i.e., the initial NP) in (17) is not related to a position within the comment because the comment itself is a complete clause.

As seen from the above discussion of two of his six types of dangling topics, Shi’s argument that the topic is always related to a position inside the comment does not hold. This is further corroborated by the fact that Chinese also allows what we might call “multiple nominative” constructions, in which at least two NPs qualify as dangling topics.9 The following are two examples.

(21) Na-pian senlin, na-chang huo, xiaofangdui lai de hen jishi.
    that-CL forest that-CL fire fire.brigade come DE very in.time
    ‘That part of the forest, that fire, the fire brigade came in time.’

9 Although they are acceptable, compared with “double nominative” constructions, “multiple nominative” constructions are rather marked.
(22) Zhe-ge zazhi, Zhang San de na-pian wenzhang, bianji dou kuai
qi-si le.
angry-die SFP
‘The editor of this magazine is very angry at that article of Zhang San’s.’

In both of these two examples, the first two NPs are arguably topics (with the first one
being the primary topic and the second one the secondary topic) and the rest of the
sentence is the comment. Since the topics are not related to a position within the
comment, these “multiple nominative” constructions further weaken Shi (2000)’s claim
that the topic is always related to a position within the comment.

Moreover, Shi’s view that the topic is always related to a position inside the
comment has the unattractive implication that every topic, including the one identical
with the subject, is moved out of the comment.10 However, unless evidence is given
showing that the initial NP of sentence (23) below, the topic ta ‘he,’ is moved out of its
comment, for the sake of economy there seems to be no good reason to assume that each
topic is coreferential with an element (whether deleted or not) in the comment.

(23) Ta feichang xihuan yuyanyue.
‘He likes linguistics very much.’

Before we end this section, I want to make one more point. That is, as far as
“double nominative” constructions are concerned, the topics in them can be argued to be
base-generated. To illustrate, I will use the type of constructions like (24) as an example.
Notice that in (24) the topic and the subject of the sentence form a possessor-possessed
relationship. Our question then is: Does (24) result from (25) through “possessor-raising”?

(24) Na-ke shu, yezi hen maosheng.
(Speaking of) that tree, (its) leaves are very exuberant.
‘(Speaking of) that tree, (its) leaves are very exuberant.’

(25) [Na-ke shu de yezi] hen maosheng.
The leaves of that tree are very exuberant.
‘The leaves of that tree are very exuberant.’

10 The argument would be more unattractive if one adopted the “Internal Subject Hypothesis.”
This is because on such a view, the initial NP in (23), when used as topic, would be first moved
from the Spec of VP to the Spec of IP, and then moved from the Spec of IP to the Spec of a “topic
phrase,” leaving two traces behind.
Given Shi’s definition of topic, presumably his answer to the above question is “Yes.” However, the following facts suggest that this answer is wrong. If (24) is derived from (25), we would expect (26), which belongs to the same type of construction as (24), is derived from (27). However, the unacceptability of (27) (and its English translation) shows that the derivational relation between (24) and (25) is apparent rather than real.

(26) Zhang San, toufa hen duan, shi ge shibing.
Zhang San hair very short is CL soldier
‘Speaking of Zhang San, (his) hair is very short and (he) is a soldier.’

(27) # Zhang San de toufa hen duan, shi ge shibing.
Zhang San MM hair very short is CL soldier
#‘Zhang San’s hair is long and is a soldier.’

In fact, as the translations show, (26) and (27) mean quite different things and have quite different topic-comment structures. In (26), the topic is Zhang San, and in (27) the topic is Zhang San de toufa ‘Zhang San’s hair.’ Based on the above observation, I conclude that the topic in the “double nominative” construction in (26) does not result from a “possessor-raising” process. Rather, it is base-generated and has the structure in (28). Meanwhile, I claim that the existence of the “double-nominative” construction is pragmatically motivated.

(28) [IP NP [IP NP VP]]

To summarize, in this subsection I have argued that contra Shi (2000)’s claim, the “double nominative” construction is one in which the topic is not necessarily anaphorically related to a position within the comment. Furthermore, the topic in this construction is base-generated and the existence of this construction is pragmatically motivated. The non-derivational analysis proposed indicates that the “double nominative” construction is kind of basic in Chinese. Since this construction shows the typical topic-comment structure, its basicness and the base-generatedness of the topic in this construction provide support for our proposal that the occurrence of this construction should be considered to be an important piece of evidence for the topic-prominence of Chinese and to be one of the criteria for identifying a language to be topic-prominent.

4. Importance of subject in Chinese and subject prominence

4.1 Importance of subject in Chinese
On Li & Thompson (1976)’s view, subject has no place in the description and analysis of Chinese. This view is challenged by Tsao (1978, 1979, 1990). On Tsao’s view, the
grammatical relation of subject and predicate also plays an important role in Chinese. In those works mentioned above, he characterizes subject as follows.

   a. Subject is never marked by a preposition.
   b. Subject can be identified as the animate NP to the left of the verb; otherwise, as the NP immediately before the verb.
   c. Subject always bears some selectional relation to the main verb of a sentence.
   d. Subject tends to have a specific reference.
   e. Subject plays an important role in the following coreferential pronominalization or deletion processes: reflexivization, serial verb construction, imperativization, and Equi-NP deletion (i.e., Control, as it would now be analyzed).

For example, in (30) the subject is *ta ‘he’* because it is preverbal and animate, and has a selectional relation with the verb. In (31), the subject is *wo ‘I’* because it is preverbal and animate. Although *zhe-ge ren ‘this person’* is also preverbal and animate, it is *wo ‘I’* that is closer to the verb. Therefore, the latter qualifies more as a subject. In (32), *ta ‘he’* is the subject because it is preverbal and animate and it acts as the controller of the deleted NP. Finally, in (33), the subject is *ta fuqin ‘his father’* because it is preverbal and animate and because it, rather than *Zhang San*, controls reflexivization.

(30) Ta zhidaom na-ben shu.
   he know that-CL book
   ‘He knows that book.’

(31) Zhe-ge ren, wo yiqian mei tingshuo-guo.
   this-CL person I before not hear.about-EXP
   This person, I did not hear about before.

(32) Ta, zou-jin wu, phi zuo-le xialai.
   he walk-enter room sit-PERF down
   ‘He walked into the room and sat down.’

(33) Zhang San, [ta fuqin], neng zhaogu zijii.
   Zhang San he father can look after self
   ‘Zhang San, his father can look after himself.’

Note that all the properties in (29) except the first one are among the thirty-odd qualities of subject discussed by Keenan (1976). Property (29b) has to do with the coding properties, or more specifically, with the position of subject. Properties (29c) and (29d)
have to do with the semantic properties of subject. Finally, (29e) relates to the control properties of subject. These indicate that Li & Thompson (1976: 479) are wrong to claim that “[t]here is simply no noun phrase in Mandarin sentences which has what E. L. Keenan has termed ‘subject properties.’” Meanwhile, these data show that subject is an important grammatical notion in the description and analysis of Chinese.

Although it is true that topic and subject overlap to a large extent (Chu 1998), this fact does not lead to the collapsing of the two notions into one. As we pointed out in section 2, topic and subject are notions on different levels. Subject is a grammatical notion and plays an important role in such grammatical processes as reflexivization, serial verb construction and Equi-NP deletion.

In fact, the distinction between topic and subject is most evident in the “double nominative” construction discussed in the previous section. As mentioned above, in (33) it is not the topic Zhang San, but rather the subject ta-fuqin that controls reflexivization. Similarly, in the following two examples of the “double nominative” construction, again it is not the topic (the initial NP) but rather the subject (the second NP) that controls serial verb construction and Equi-NP deletion, respectively.

(34)  Zhang San, [ta fuqin], jingchang wanshang chuqu φ*i/j sanbu.
Zhang San he father often evening go.out take.a.walk
‘Zhang San, his father often goes out and takes a walk in the evening.’

(35)  Zhang San, [ta fuqin], xiang φ*i/j zai kai yi-ge gongsi.
Zhang San he father want again open one-CL company
‘Zhang San, his father wants to open another company.’

These facts show that it is necessary and important to distinguish between topic and subject in Chinese and to reserve a place for subject in analyzing this language.

4.2 Chinese is less subject-prominent than English
In this subsection I will address the question of whether Chinese can be considered to be a subject-prominent language. The answer to this question clearly depends on what constitutes a subject-prominent language.

Here I very tentatively propose that for a language to be subject-prominent, it has to meet at least one of the following two conditions: (i) the language displays subject-verb agreement and (ii) the language has a subject marker. The motivation for proposing this criterion lies in the assumption that in terms of overt coding properties of subject, the coding by means of morphology is more grammaticalized than that through word order, an intuition also held by Givón (1997).

Based on the criterion above, Chinese would not be classified as a subject-prominent language because it meets neither of the two conditions. Actually the fact that Chinese lacks subject-verb agreement and any subject marker makes it hard to decide
whether an NP is subject or not in some cases. For example, in the “patient-initial zero-agent constructions” or the “pseudo-passives” [to use Li & Thompson (1976)’s term] given in (36-37), there are disagreements as to whether the only overt argument is grammatical subject or not. Fangzi ‘house’ in (36) and na-ben shu ‘that book’ in (37) are subjects according to the properties of subject given by Tsao (1978, 1979, 1990) because they are the only preverbal NPs. However, according to Li & Thompson (1981: 88-89), sentences like (36) and (37) have a topic but not a subject. In other words, they view the two NPs fangzi and na-ben shu as topics but not as subjects, because according to them, “[t]he subject of a sentence in Mandarin is the noun phrase that has a ‘doing’ or ‘being’ relationship with the verb in that sentence” (p. 87, emphasis original).

(36)  Fangzi  qunian  jian-le.
    house  last.year  build-PERF/SFP
    Literally:  ‘The house built last year.’
    →  →  ‘The house was built last year.’

(37)  Na-ben  shu  shangzhou  chuban-le.
    that-CL  book  last.week  publish-PERF/SFP
    Literally:  ‘That book published last week.’
    →  →  ‘That book was published last week.’

Besides the fact that unlike English, Chinese lacks subject-verb agreement and any overt case distinctions to mark a subject morphologically, there are at least two more respects which show that Chinese is less subject-prominent than English. First, Chinese has no “dummy subjects” while English has the “dummy subject” it. This shows that subject is more grammaticalized in English than in Chinese. Second, there are constructions in Chinese consisting of two NPs without being connected by a verb. The occurrence of sentences lacking overt verbal elements in Chinese as in (38-40) shows that the subject-predicate relation is not applicable to these sentences, on the assumption that a predicate must contain a verbal element. This indirectly confirms that Chinese is not subject-prominent since subject and predicate form a pair just as topic and comment do.

(38)  Zhe-dai  mi  shi  gongjin.
    this-CL  rice  ten  kilogram
    Literally:  ‘This bag of rice ten kilograms.’
    →  →  ‘This bag of rice weighs ten kilograms.’

11 Chao (1968) analyzes such constructions like (38-40) as sentences containing a nominal predicate. However, if predicates were necessarily VPs or APs, no single nominal in those sentences could qualify as a predicate.
(39) Na-ge zhuozi san-tiao tui.
    that-CL table three-CL leg
Literally: ‘That table three legs.’
→ ‘That table has three legs.’

(40) Zhe-ben shu ershi meiyuan.
    this-CL book twenty dollar
Literally: ‘This book twenty dollars.’
→ ‘This book is (worth) twenty dollars.’ OR ‘This book cost (me) twenty dollars.’

In sum, subject is an important notion in the description and analysis of the Chinese language. Even so, Chinese may not qualify as a subject-prominent language because it has neither subject-verb agreement nor any subject marker.

5. Summary and conclusion
Viewing topic-prominence and subject-prominence as two distinct continua, in this paper I have proposed explicit criteria for identifying a language to be topic-prominent or subject-prominent, throwing much light on Li & Thompson (1976)’s typology and making it more appropriate and practical.

More specifically, in this paper I have made the following points. First, the characterization of topic by Li & Thompson (1976) is too narrow and that topic and subject are notions on different levels. As a result, topic-prominence and subject-prominence should be treated as two distinct continua rather than as the two ends of the same continuum. Second, Chinese is more topic-prominent than English in two respects: the occurrence of “double nominative” constructions in both planned and unplanned discourses, and the occurrences of topic-chains. Based on this, I have proposed two criteria of considering a language to be topic-prominent. Third, I have shown that the “double nominative” construction is one in which the topic is not necessarily anaphorically related to an element in the comment, contra Shi (2000)’s claim. Moreover, the topic in this construction is base-generated. Finally, I have argued that contra Li & Thompson (1976)’s claim, the notion of subject has an important place in the description and analysis of Chinese, although based on the criteria I proposed Chinese is not a subject-prominent language and there are aspects showing that Chinese is less subject-prominent than English along the subject-prominence continuum.
References


When there are two years separated with a slash, the latter is the one cited and referred to and the former is either the year of completion (when the reference being a dissertation) or the year when a book is first published.
LI: TOPIC PROMINENCE


