

B-6 On the discourse functions of the [*yào shì* + P + *ne?*] structures in Chinese A functionalist perspective

Zhonglin SANG (Nagoya University)
sang.zhonglin@i.mbox.nagoya-u.ac.jp

Abstract

This current research focuses on the independent structures formed by the conditional conjunctive particle *yào shì* “if” in Chinese mandarin. These structures formally seem dependent structures but are used independently in Chinese speech, performing some discourse functions expressing the speaker’s attitude and emotion. By investigating the literary category of the corpus *Center for Chinese Linguistics PKU*, it was found that these structures mainly function to resist to the listener’s thoughts and to enquire further information related to the preceding utterance. The independent [*yào shì* + P + *ne?*] structures can be thought to be formed by the process of topicalizing and contrasting which is marked by the final particle *ne*. Also, the interrogative mood plays an essential role to request the listener’s response. These structures show a forming mechanism of insubordination (Evans 2007, 2009) and suspended clauses (Ohori 1995, 2002), but this mechanism seems not compatible in other languages, such as Japanese and English.

1 Introduction

The phenomenon of dependent clauses being used as independent clauses has been raising the attention of linguistic researchers in recent years. It is widely studied as insubordination (Evans 2007, 2009), defined as “the conventionalized main clause use of what, on prima facie grounds, appear to be formally subordinate clauses” (Evans 2007: 367) and suspended clauses (Ohori 1995, 2002) as a construction (Goldberg 1995, 2006) because it shows the habituality between dependent clauses in form and discourse functions.

As a conditional conjunctive particle, *yào shì* “if” is commonly used in Chinese speech to form complex sentences with apodoses, as shown in (1) and (2). It is completely used in spoken language, which makes it distinguished from another conditional conjunctive particle *rú guǒ* “if” that can be used in both spoken language and written language.

- (1) *Nǐ yào shì qù Guì lín,*
you if go Guilin
néng bú néng bāng wǒ zhǎo yī xià nà gè nǚ hái ?
could or could not help me look for that girl

(*Nǚ Jì Zhě Yǔ Dà Dú Xiǎo Liú Zhāo Huá Miàn Duì Miàn*)

‘If you to Guilin, could you help me find that girl?’

- (2) *Nà yào shì zhēn de wàng le yě méi bàn fǎ. (Lǚ Yù Yǒu Yuē)*
so if really forgot cannot do anything

‘If I really forget it, there is nothing I can do.’

Although the *yào shì* “if” clauses are not supposed to stand alone, they are widely used independently with conventional forms to express the speaker’s attitude and emotion.

(3) *Nà yào shì zài bài le ne?* (*Liǔ Jiànwěi: Tū Chū Chóng Wéi*)
 so if again lose FP
 ‘(Lit.) **So if we lose again?**’ (i.e. ‘I’m worried that we lose again.’)

(4) *Wǒ yào shì bú fàng ne?* (*Mò Yán: Hóng Shù Lín*)
 I if NEG release FP
 ‘(Lit.) **If I don’t release (him/her)?**’ (i.e. ‘I don’t want to release him/her.’)

(3) is an example expressing the speaker’s emotion of worry and (4) shows the speaker’s attitude of resistance. Both examples are naturally used, though they formally appear as dependent clauses. These structures satisfy the definition of insubordination (Evans 2007, 2009) and suspended clauses (Ohori 1995, 2002) because of their independence and the habituality between form and functions. The consisting method is conventional which can be stylized as [*yào shì* + P + *ne?*], P representing an assumption, *ne* being a final particle and the question mark representing the interrogative mood. This paper is going to discuss the structures’ discourse functions and their forming mechanism based on their relations with context and the consisting components.

2 The Discourse Functions

In previous studies, the [*yào shì* + P + *ne?*] structures have been mentioned as special forms of hypothetical complex sentences. Xing (2001) points out that they are used independently for questioning when main clauses’ contents have appeared in the preceding context. However, this argument does not describe these structures’ real characteristics because they do not need to use any content in the preceding context as main clauses. As shown in (5) and (5’), although the main clause can be added as *nǐ néng bǎ wǒ zěn me yang* “what can you do to me” or *nǐ néng zěn me yang* “what will you do”, it has nothing to do with the preceding context *Nǐ gěi wǒ gūn chū qù!* “You get out here!”. Moreover, the function of questioning that Xing (2001) points is not detailed enough to cover all the discourse functions of the [*yào shì* + P + *ne?*] structures.

(5) “*Nǐ gěi wǒ gūn chū qù!*”
 you get out here
 “*Wǒ yào shì bú gūn ne?*” (*Wáng Xùfēng: Chá Rén Sān Bù Qǔ*)
 I if NEG get out FP
 ‘You get out here!’
 ‘(Lit.) **If I don’t get out?**’ (i.e. ‘I don’t want to get out.’)

(5’) *Wǒ yào shì bú gūn nǐ néng bǎ wǒ zěn me yàng ne?*
 I if NEG get out you can PREP I how to do FP

‘If I don’t get out what can you do to me?’ (i.e. ‘I won’t get out and you can do nothing about it.’)

By investigating the literary category of the *Center for Chinese Linguistics PKU (CCL)* corpus, the [yào shì + P + ne?] structures were found to possess four discourse functions. These functions convey the speaker’s resistance to the listener’s thoughts, enquiry of further information about the preceding utterance, worry about the listener’s ideas and proposals replying to the listener’s request.

The former two discourse functions are most observed, whose example are shown in (6) and (7). In (6), the speaker conveys his resistance to the listener’s idea of earning the silver dollars. This idea was not acceptable in the old period of China as described in the novel *Chá Guǎn*. (7) does not convey resistance but make an enquiry for the further information. The speaker shows some confusion to the preceding utterance about manners and try to find the answer by using the [yào shì + P + ne?] structure.

(6) Páng Sì Nǚnǚ: Lǎo tài tài, nín gēn wǒ qù, chī hǎo de hē hǎo de,

Mrs. Pang: old lady you with me go live a rich life

dōu ér lǐ lǎo dài zhe nà me jǐ kuài dāng dāng xiǎng de yáng qián,
in the pocket often exist many cling-clang silver dollar

gòu duō me hǎo ā!
how good FP

Kāng Shùnzi: Wǒ yào shì bú gēn nǐ qù ne? (Lǎo Shě: Chá Guǎn)

Kang Shunzi: I if NEG with you go FP

‘Mrs. Pang: Lady, please go with me. You will live a rich life with many silver dollars in your pocket.
How great it is!’

‘Kang Shunzi: (Lit.) **If I don’t go with you?**’ (i.e. I don’t want to go with you.)

(7) Yī: yō! Hái tǐng fù zá de.

B: EXCLAM very complicated FP

Jia: Tīng lái hěn fù zá, xí guàn chéng zì rán.

A: sound very complicated be accustomed become natural

Yī: Yào shì bú jiǎng lǐ mào ne?

B: if NEG be polite FP

Jiǎ: Jiù huì nào xiào huà, zāo bǐ shì,

A: so be laughed be scorned

shèn zhì lián zhǎo duì xiàng yě kùn nán. (Fú Jiàn Rì Bào)
even find boyfriend or girlfriend also hard

‘B: Wow! That sounds complicated.’

‘A: Yes, it does, but you behave naturally like that if you get accustomed.’

‘B: (What will happen) **if I don’t keep these manners?**’

‘A: If so, you will be laughed and looked down, and it gets even harder to find a girlfriend.’

(8) is an example showing the speaker's worry about the listener's idea of making someone stay at home. The listener gives out his idea, which is not ideal to the listener, in the preceding utterance and that causes the listener's worry. (9) is an example of giving proposals. This function is different with the other three because the listener does not expose an idea but tries to import a proposal in the preceding utterance. The listener requests a proposal by the utterance *Nǐ xiǎng zěn me yang* "What do you think" and the speaker replies to it by a [*yào shì* + P + *ne?*] structure. This function is rarely found with the number of only four, which makes it a peripheral case.

(8) “*Bǎ tā liú zài jiā lǐ ,jiào tā shǎo chū qù diǎn jiù xíng le.*”
 PREP him stay home PREP him go out less ADV OK FP
 “*Yào shì liú chū bìng lái ne*”
 If be made to stay and get ill FP
 ‘We can just make him stay home and go out less.’
 ‘(Lit.) **If that makes him ill?**’ (i.e. ‘I’m worried that he gets ill.’)

(9) *Lǐ Yá: Wǒ de zhàn zhǎng ya, xìn rèn kě shì yào yǒu xiàn dù de.*
 Li Ya: my stationmaster EXCLAM believe should have limit FP
Zhàn zhǎng zhuó mó: Nǐ xiǎng zěn me yang?
 stationmaster think: you want how
Lǐ Yá sī kǎo piàn kè: Yào shì zài zuǒ lán hé yú zhǔ rèn zhī jiān xià diǎn gōng fū ne?
 Li Ya think for a while if PREP between Zuo Lan and Director Yu do something FP
 ‘Li Ya: Oh, my stationmaster. There should be limits even if you want to believe him.’
 ‘The stationmaster thinks: What do you think?’
 ‘Li Ya thinks for a while: (Lit.) **If we do something between Zuo Lan and Director Yu?**’
 (i.e. ‘I suggest we do something between Zuo Lan and Director Yu.’)

3 The Forming Mechanism

Although the [*yào shì* + P + *ne?*] structures perform various discourse functions, they share a common meaning frame, that is, the functions convey an assumption antagonizing to the preceding utterance and request a response from the listener. However, the degree of antagonism varies by the discourse functions. The function of resistance is supposed to show the highest degree and the functions of enquiry and worry show lower ones. The functions of enquiry and worry presents the speaker's confusion and doubt which can be regarded as a kind of weak antagonism. The function of giving proposals differs for not showing any antagonism, instead, it corresponds to the preceding utterance as a response to the proposal request. However, as discussed above, it is rarely found so that it can be treated as a special case.

This frame meaning is supposed to due to the final particle *ne*. It is ordinarily used after a subject to mark a new topic that contrasts with the preceding context (Xyu 2008; Liu et al. 2004; Lyu 1999). In (10), *ne* marks the subject *Mei* as a contrastive topic that contrasts with the preceding topic *ni* “you”. In (11), the preceding topic is not reflected by text, but it is naturally inferred to be *hái zǐ men* “children”.

- (10) *Nǐ biǎo xiàn dé xiàng gè wú lài, ér ā méi ne,*
 you behave like rogue while Mei ne
yě zuò dé bú hǎo, xiàng gè zī chǎn jiē jí xiǎo jiě. (Xyu 2008)
 also do not well like lady in the capitalist class
 ‘You acted like a rogue, while, **Mei**, she didn’t behave well either.
 She was like a capitalist class lady.’

- (11) *Dà rén ne?* (Xyu 2008)
 adult ne
 ‘(But how about) **adults?**’

Xyu (2008) points out that final particles in Chinese neither change the syntactic structures nor affect the proposition’s semantic meanings. That means *ne* performs its function in pragmatic field, in that, it is not constrained by syntactic and semantic structures. The function of marking contrastive topic can logically be applied to the [*yào shì* + P + *ne?*] structures, by which these structures’ forming mechanism is made clear. The speaker raises an assumption P as a new topic, makes it contrasted with the listener’s preceding idea and require the listener’s response about that topic. This mechanism is marked by three necessary elements which are the processes of topicalizing and contrasting marked by final particle *ne* and the process of response-requesting marked by the interrogative mood.

4 Comparing with Other Languages

The [*yào shì* + P + *ne?*] structures specify a forming mechanism of insubordination (Evans 2007, 2009) and suspended clauses (Ohori 1995, 2002) which can be summarize as a process of topicalizing and contrasting with interrogative mood. However, this mechanism seems not compatible with other languages. In Japanese, similar structures formed by conditional conjunctive particles *-ba* and *-tara* with interrogative mood are found (Shirakawa 2009), as shown in (12) and (13), but they mainly perform the function of giving proposals, which is rarely observed in *yào shì* “if” structures. The reason should be that they do not hold the process of contrasting with the preceding utterance. Although the speaker can be thought to arise an assumption P as a new topic and request a response about this topic, yet he does not make it contrastive. The discourse functions do not have to express antagonism to the lister’s preceding utterance, giving possibility for the function of giving proposals’ being mainly performed.

- (12) *Kanozō-demo saso-e-ba?*
 she-AP invite-AUX-CONN
 ‘(Lit.) **If you invite her?**’ (i.e. ‘I suggest you invite her.’)

- (13) *Syawaa tsukat-tara?* (Shirakawa 2009)
 shower use-CONN

‘(Lit.) **If you use the shower?**’ (i.e. ‘I suggest you use the shower.’)

Similar structures are also found in English. These structures have some conventional forms, such as [*If you’d like to...*] (Stirling 1999; Kaltenböck 2016; Cristina 2018) and often function to make requests, as shown in (14).

(14) **Okay if you’d like to get dressed now.** (Stirling 1999)

This discourse function is not observed in the *yào shì* “if” structures and it does not convey a nuance of antagonizing to the listener’s preceding utterance or requesting the listener’s response. Also, not any components presenting contrast and interrogative mood are found in them. Therefore, these structures are probably formed by different mechanism from the [*yào shì* + P + *ne?*] structures.

5 Conclusion

The [*yào shì* + P + *ne?*] structures formally appear to be dependent clauses that should connect with apodoses but are naturally used as independent structures in Chinese speech, performing some discourse functions. That corresponds to the definition of insubordination (Evans 2007) and suspended clauses (Ohori 1995, 2002). These structures tend to appear in the context where the speaker gives an assumption antagonizing to the listener’s preceding utterance, despite the different degree varying by the discourse functions. The final particle *ne* functions to mark a contrastive topic and the interrogative mood requests the speaker’s response about that topic. That builds the forming mechanism of these structures, that is, the speaker raises a topic, makes it contrasted with the preceding utterance and request a response from the listener.

This forming mechanism seems not to happen in other languages such as Japanese and English. Although their independent conditional structures show some similarities in forms, yet they differ from the *yào shì* “if” structures for not holding any elements of marking contrastive information or interrogative mood, resulting in their discourse functions’ being different from the *yào shì* “if” structures.

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