

Research on Sentence Construction Rules in Standard Chinese

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Abstract

The rules of sentence construction in standard Chinese are subject to various conditions, including the existence of function words and modal particles, the influence of notional words and adverbs, the difference in word order, as well as the impact from different rhythms. In this article, we discuss the rules of Sentence construction in standard Chinese from several different perspectives.

Key words: Sentence construction; Modal particles; Adverbs; Word order; Rhythms

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INTRODUCTION

Sentence is a vital language unit, is the highest level of language unit, and is the language unit that is directly used in communication. The conditions of sentence construction are important in the study of languages.

Sentences in standard Chinese are composed of words and phrases, and they can be categorized into two types according to their structure: simple sentence and compound sentence. In this paper, our major focus is the sentence construction of simple sentences. Simple sentences are categorized into subject-verb Sentences and non-subject-verb Sentences. There are both similarities and differences between the rules of sentence construction of subject-verb sentences and non-subject-verb sentences.

Moreover, according to purposes, sentences can be categorized into declarative sentences, interrogative sentences, imperative sentences, exclamatory sentences and onomatopoeic sentences. Purposes affect the rules of sentence construction in standard Chinese.

Sentences are different from words and phrases in the way that sentences have prosody. In modern Chinese, prosody also contribute to the rules of sentence construction.

In this paper, we illustrate the conditions of sentence construction in standard Chinese from various perspectives.

1. THE ROLE OF MODAL PARTICLE IN SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION

In standard Chinese, sentences can be formed by word or phrases, combined with prosody. However, not all combinations can form sentences. Some examples of subject-verb sentences are given below.

“Flowers bloom.”

“花开。”

“The new term begins.”

“新学期开始。”

“The sun rises.”

“太阳出来。”

“Spring comes.”

“春天来。”

The above three examples cannot construct sentences. They require a letter “了” at the end of the sentence to construct a valid sentence. Take some other examples,

“Flowers bloom.”

“花开了(le)。”

“The new term begins.”

“新学期开始了(le)。”

“The sun rises.”
“太阳出来了(le).”
“Spring comes.”
“春天来了(le).”
“He has been working in Beijing for many years.”
“他在北京工作很多年了(le).”
“He has finished reading this book.”
“他读了这本书了(le).”

The above examples can construct valid clauses. Here we illustrate one of the rules of sentence construction in standard Chinese: in some scenarios like verbal sentences, the presence of modal particles is required for sentence construction.

Of course, in certain scenarios, such as conversation, the title and poetry, Sentences can be constructed without modal particles. For example,

“Where are you going?”
“你去哪？”
“I am going to Beijing.”
“我去北京。”
“You are going?”
“你去？”
“I am going.”
“我去。”
“I only wish to face the sea, with spring flowers blossoming.”
“我只愿面朝大海，春暖花开。”

In standard Chinese, modal particles are a subgenre of expletives. Other than the function of expressing emotions, they also serve an important role in sentence construction.

Other than verbal sentences, there are some other types of sentences that require modal particles to finish sentence construction. Such as:

“Do you want to eat?” (interrogative)
“你想吃饭吗？”
“Is it Saturday today?” (interrogative)
“今天是星期六吧？”
“Eat faster!” (imperative)
“快吃啊！”
“Study!” (imperative)
“学习吧！”
“Give me a bowl of water from the long river.”
(imperative)
“给我一瓢长江水啊！”
“How beautiful these little flowers are.” (exclamatory)
“多漂亮的小花呀！”
“What a beautiful sea.” (exclamatory)
“美丽的大海呀！”
“Sing! Study! Be moved!” (three imperatives)
“歌唱吧！学习吧！感动吧！”

“This is the hometown that I miss so much.”
(exclamatory)
“我思念的故乡啊！”

With the help of modal particles, sentences can express more accurate meanings in standard Chinese.

2. THE ROLE OF ADVERB IN SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION

In this section we discuss the role of adverbs in sentence construction in standard Chinese.

“He visited China four times.”
“他四次访华。” does not construct a valid clause.
“He visited China four times.”
“他[曾]四次访华。” constructs a valid clause.

This is another important rule of sentence construction in standard Chinese: The existence of adverbs is required to construct a valid clause.

“Teachers teach.”
“老师们教书。” does not construct a valid clause.
“Teachers are teaching.”
“老师们[在]教书。” constructs a valid clause.
“Mr. Wang works.”
“王先生工作。” does not construct a valid clause.
“Mr. Wang is working.”
“王先生[在]工作。” Constructs a valid clause.

Since adverbs in standard Chinese can serve as parts of sentences by themselves, they are considered content words. Adverbs usually serve as adverbial or complement in a sentence, and in rare cases, modifier. Moreover, adverbs also possess the function of sentence construction. That is to say, adverbs in standard Chinese have textual function.

Here we give some more examples.

“They visited all these city.”
“这些城市他们[都]去过。”
“We agree with all these points.”
“这几点我们[都]同意。”
“The sun rose at five o'clock.”
“五点钟天[才]亮。”
“She sometimes goes to walk.”
“她[偶尔]去散步。”
“She often goes to walk.”
“她[经常]去散步。”
“They sang the song again.”
“他们[又]唱了一遍。”
“They are not only tough but also brave.”
“他们[即]勇敢[又]坚强。”
“Sam always comes up with novel ideas during group meetings.”

“山姆在开会时[总是]想出来心音的想法。”

Those sentences are only valid for an adverb. As we can see from the examples above, adverbs play a crucial role in sentence construction.

3. THE ROLE OF WORD ORDER IN SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION

In standard Chinese, word order is also a vital condition of sentence construction. Among the methods of expressing grammatical meaning, the word order is the most important one. Different word orders lead to different meanings, and also affect the construction of sentence. Take the following two sentences as an example.

“The client came here.”

“客人来了。”

“Here came a client.”

“来客人了。”

The first sentence is a subject-verb sentence, while the second one is a non-subject-verb sentence. In the first sentence, the subject “client” “客人” is definite, while in the second sentence, the object “client” “客人” is indefinite.

“He saw her going into the cinema.”

“他看见她走进电影院。” constructs a valid clause.

“He saw her to the cinema going into.”

“他看见她电影院走进。” does not construct a valid clause.

“She saw him going into the cinema.”

“她看见他走进电影院。” constructs a valid clause, but expresses a different grammatical meaning.

Word order, as the most important grammar form the standard Chinese, has an important role in sentence construction. This phenomenon is caused by the thought process of Chinese. Languages are reflections of thought process. As the most important tool of communication and thinking, languages can reveal how people recognize the outside world, and how outside world produces people’s inner feelings. Furthermore, the way people perceive the outside world differs in cultural groups. These differences in thought process lead to different language rules.

The thought process of Chinese is focused on intuition, instead of logic reasoning. Intuition is closely related with the direct input from human eyes. As a result, in the thought process of Chinese, information is perceived in order of what we see. This thought process reflect on the word order in standard Chinese: the viewpoint decides word order. That is to say, in standard Chinese, sentences are constructed in order of the narrator’s viewpoints.

For instance, in the sentence “She saw him going into the cinema.” “她看见他走进电影院.”, the word order reflexes the change in the narrator’s viewpoint.

If Chinese is indeed a pictorial language, then the depiction of reality in standard Chinese must be related to the order we perceive the reality (Zhang, 1997).

Intuition is the inner feeling of people, as a result, the subject is vital in standard Chinese. Consequently, in standard Chinese, there are much more subject-verb sentences than non-subject-verb sentences. In subject-verb sentences, the subject must be in consistent with the content of the sentence, and the position of the subject is the most important aspect in word order.

The narrators usually choose what they know as the topic of what they say. In consequences, in standard Chinese, the subject is usually definite, while the object is often indefinite (Zhu, 1982). For example:

“My friends are going to Shanghai tomorrow.”

“我的朋友明天要去上海。”

“She only likes the spring and the autumn.”

“她只喜欢春天和秋天。”

“Miss Chen wrote a poem.”

“陈小姐写了一首诗。”

“They are going to the North Pole for excursion purposes.”

“他们要去北极科考。”

“They have discussed this issue yesterday.”

“他们昨天讨论了这个问题。”

“This kind of rose not only smells good, but also have a stunning tint.”

“这种玫瑰花味道很香,颜色也好看。”

“He wrote a song.”

“他写了一首歌。”

“I like ice cream.”

“我喜欢吃冰淇淋。”

“It is this brand of ice cream that I like.”

“这个牌子的冰淇淋我喜欢吃。”

Moreover, Chinese perceive the outside world from a global perspective first, then move to local perspectives. This characteristic also reflex on word order. For instance,

“Flowers bloom in the park”

“公园里开满了鲜花。”

“There are some tourists at the shore.”

“海边有一些游人。”

“There are some tourists near the sea.”

“海边有一些游人。”

“On the wasteland of the north, lies the brave footsteps of our ancestor.”

“北方的原野上,有我们祖先坚韧的足迹。”

To sum up, word order plays an important role in sentence construction in standard Chinese.

4. THE ROLE OF METRE IN SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION

Sentence construction in standard Chinese is also closely linked to metres.

Metres have important function in standard Chinese. To be specific, in sentences, metre is a condition of sentence construction.

The combination of word and phrases forms sentences. In standard Chinese, the bisyllablization of vocabulary leads to a huge amount of disyllabic words. Of course, the amount of monosyllabic words is also large. When monosyllabic, disyllabic, and multisyllabic words are mixed together, the metre is required for sentence construction. For example,

“I saw a seagull flying over the sea.”

“我/看见/海鸥/在/海面上/飞翔。” constructs a valid clause.

“I saw a seagull.”

“我/看见/海鸥。” does not construct a valid clause, and the grammatical meaning is not completely expressed.

“I saw a seagull.”

“我/看见了/海鸥。” constructs a valid clause.

“The spring has arrived.”

“春天/来/了。” constructs a valid clause.

In these two cases, “了” serves not only as a modal particle, but also as a metre component.

Only sentences with metres can provide complete grammatical meanings in standard Chinese. Metres fulfill not only the need of language habit, but also the need of expression.

Metres are present in both oral and written language in standard Chinese. However, metres are more important in written language, since written language has more long sentences than oral language, and metres are more prevalent in long sentences.

Pronunciation is the shell of a language, and pronunciation is produced by human vocal organs. As a result, the characteristics of human vocal organs determines the characteristics of metres in a language. Affected by respiration, human has to pause when speaking long sentences. The pauses in long sentences are the source of metres.

Chinese is a language that is highly musical. This characteristic reflexes in metres, especially in the metres of written language. Sentences in standard Chinese are required to have a clear structure, and to be highly rhythmic (Xu, 2014). For example,

“The flowers in May, bloom all over the mountain.”

“五月的鲜花, 开遍了原野。”

“Hawthorn trees are decorated with fruits like maroon diamonds.” (Xu, 2014)

“山楂树上缀满了一颗颗红玛瑙似的果实。”

“After much longing and anticipation, the arrival of east wind heralds the footsteps of spring are fast approaching.”

“盼望着, 盼望着, 东风来了, 春天的脚步近了。” (朱自清, 《春》)

“It is always my stance that, countries are equal despite of their different sizes. Neither strong bullying the weak nor rich oppressing the poor is tolerated.” (Xu, 2014)

“我们历来主张, 国家不分大小, 一律平等, 不应以大欺小, 以强凌弱, 以富压贫。”

“I love this beautiful and untraversed seashore.”

“我爱这片美丽的人迹罕至的海滩。”

Metres are structures that are brought by pronunciation. Also, they affect the completeness of the expression of grammatical meanings. This characteristic is illustrated by complements in standard Chinese.

In a sentence, not only is the complement related to the center word, but also related to the metre of the sentence. The presence of such complement is necessary for sentence construction. For instance,

“He took out a book.”

“他拿<出>一本书<来>。”

“The view outside the window is gorgeous.”

“窗外的风景好看<极了>。”

“They finally walked out of the jungle.”

“他们终于走<出>了森林。”

“He went to the south for five times.”

“他曾经去南方<五次>。”

Besides, in standard Chinese, conjunctive adverbs are a major component in the formation of metres. Conjunctive adverbs not only helps deliver grammatical meaning, and complete the sentence structure, but also contribute to the metre of the sentence, hence affecting the rules of sentence construction. In compound sentences, conjunctives are usually necessary for sentence construction. In some extreme cases, conjunctive adverbs are required in simple sentences as well. For example,

“Because we like flowers, we like the spring”

“因为我们喜欢鲜花, 所以我们喜欢春天。”

“People like fruit and grains, hence we all love the autumn.”

“人们喜欢水果与粮食, 所以喜欢秋天。”

“No matter who you are, you have to practise thrift.”

“无论谁都应该节约。”

“If you are happy, clap your hands.”

“如果幸福, 你就拍拍手吧。”

In summary, to construct valid sentences, especially long sentences, it is requires that the sentences possess proper metres.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have analyzed the rules of sentence construction in standard Chinese from various perspectives. We have illustrated the four basic aspects that are crucial for sentence construction: The modal particles, the adverbs, the word orders, and the metres. In addition, we summarized what the rules are required to construct valid sentences under each aspect. Moreover, we analyzed the reason why such rules exist. In general, understanding the sentence construction problem is an important research area in standard Chinese, which is a

stepping stone for a comprehensive understanding of the standard Chinese language.

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