

Four Theories about SUBJECT and TOPIC in Chinese Linguistics

汉语语言学中有关主语和话题的四个理论

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There are some theories about SUBJECT and TOPIC already in the Chinese linguistics literature: (1) In a grammatical sense, A Subject in English-like languages is a Topic in Chinese -like languages, they are both syntactic constituents in the same grammatical sense (e.g., Chao 1968, Xu 1997); (2) Topic is a pragmatic conception while Subject is a grammatical one, and they should be tackled from these two different dimensions (Zhu 1985, and Lu 1986); and (3) No matter whether Topic could be a pragmatic concept or not, both Topic and Subject are important syntactic constituents, independent from each other (Li and Thompson 1976, Huang 1982, and Xu and Langendoen 1985). In this article, we have noted some theoretical and empirical problems that these theories may cause or may involve, and proposed that the while Subject is a syntactic constituent in a traditional sense, Topic, coded as [+TOPIC], is a syntactic feature on a par with [+FOCUS] for the syntactic feature of “Focus” (both are fundamentally different from [+Interrogative] and [+NEG]). Cross-linguistic arguments have been constructed to support this [+TOPIC] as a syntactic feature theory, and similarities and differences between this proposal and the cartographic approach on the issues have also been briefly discussed in this article.

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