



# The thematic and non-thematic verbs asymmetry in L2 Chinese: An abstract features non-droppability account<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

The availability of Universal Grammar (UG) in adult second language acquisition (SLA) has received considerable attention in recent years. In this article, we investigate the interpretation of Chinese thematic and non-thematic verbs by adult English speakers in relation to two UG-related theories, namely the Valueless Features Hypothesis (Eubank, 1993/94, 1994, 1996) and the Interpretability Hypothesis (Tsimpli and Dimitrakopoulou, 2007). Two groups of adult English speakers of L2 Chinese were invited to take part in a grammaticality judgement test consisting of thematic and non-thematic verbs. Their responses were compared with those of a native control group. It was found that there is an asymmetry in the non-native speakers' mental representation of the grammars concerned. They allow thematic verbs to remain *in situ* but non-thematic verbs to raise. Results of the study argue against the Valueless Features Hypothesis, which posits that the L1 syntactic features of INFL are initially inert and are not transferred. Instead, the results support the Interpretability Hypothesis, which argues for the inaccessibility of uninterpretable features beyond a critical period. In particular, the study pursues a possible scenario not made explicit by the Interpretability Hypothesis whereby syntactic features selected during early stages of primary language acquisition would be difficult to lose if those features did not exist in L2 (Kong, 2011b).

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## 1. Introduction

The article presents an empirical study addressing some asymmetries found in the way adult speakers of L1 English establish when tested on thematic and non-thematic verbs used in L2 Chinese. While thematic verbs (lexical verbs like *drink*, *eat*, *walk*, etc., which have a semantic content) are not allowed to raise in English, non-thematic verb raising (auxiliary verbs and modal verbs like *have*, *will/would*, *shall/should*, etc., which have no semantic content but help make distinction in Aspect and Voice) is possible. This is contrary to the status of thematic verbs in Chinese where neither thematic nor non-thematic verbs are allowed to raise. Ever since the publication of a series of studies by White (1990), White (1991), White (1992) on the acquisition of English verb placement by L1 French speakers, recent years have seen an increasing number of studies focusing on the so-called 'verb raising' phenomenon in L2 acquisition of thematic verbs by speakers of various L1 backgrounds (Hawkins et al., 1993; Trahey, 1996; Eubank and Grace, 1996; Eubank et al., 1997; Yuan, 2001).

These studies all seem to argue for the thematic verb raising inevitability in L2 acquisition. That is to say, thematic-verb raising occurs in L2 acquisition by speakers whose first language (L1) allows thematic verbs to raise, as well as by speakers whose L1 disallows thematic verbs to raise. However, all these studies restricted their focus to the thematic verbs only;

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the acquisition of thematic and non-thematic verbs in relation to verb raising has received little attention in L2 research. [Chu and Schwartz \(2005\)](#) is a recent exception focusing on the L2 acquisition of English thematic and non-thematic verbs by adult Chinese speakers. The current study is intended to fill in the gap. The results of the experiment show that while thematic verb raising is largely dispreferred in the L2 Chinese of English speakers, non-thematic-verb remaining *in situ* becomes persistently difficult for those learners. The observations concerning asymmetrical thematic and non-thematic verb raising in the L2 Chinese by adult English speakers call into question a claim made by [Yuan \(2001\)](#) which argues against L1 transfer with regard to thematic verbs. One question that such native non-native grammatical knowledge of adult L2 learners of Chinese poses for researchers arguing against L1 transfer concerns the kind of mental representations giving rise to target-like performance in thematic verb use but non-target like performance in non-thematic verb use.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 compares the syntactic differences between English and Chinese in relation to the use of thematic and non-thematic verbs. Section 3 presents two different positions concerning the availability of Universal Grammar (UG) in second language acquisition (SLA). Section 4 reviews a study which investigates the acquisition of L2 Chinese thematic verbs by speakers of other languages. Sections 5 and 6 present the study and its results. Section 7 offers explanations for what is observed in the study.

## 2. Linguistic background

### 2.1. Thematic verbs in English and Chinese

It has long been observed that English and Chinese adverbs are similar in the way they are placed in relation to thematic verbs.<sup>1</sup> Adverbs in the two languages can occur in sentence-initial position as well as precede thematic verbs but cannot occur between thematic verbs and their direct objects, as in 1 and 2:

- 1a. **Quickly**, the man drank his coffee.<sup>2</sup>
- 1b. **Hen kuai de** Zhangsan chi wan le mian.  
quickly Zhangsan eat finish ASP noodle  
Quickly Zhangsan finished the bowl of noodles.
- 1c. The man **quickly** drank his coffee.
- 1d. Zhangsan **hen kuai de** chi wan le mian.  
Zhangsan quickly eat finish ASP noodle  
Zhangsan quickly finished the bowl of noodles.
- 2a. \*The man drank **quickly** his coffee.
- 2b. \*Zhangsan chi wan le **hen kuai de** mian.  
Zhangsan eat finish ASP quickly noodle  
Zhangsan quickly finished the bowl of noodles.

At the same time, the two languages differ in allowing adverbs to occur in sentence-final position. While adverbs are allowed to occur in sentence-initial position (as in 1a and 1b) both in English and Chinese, they can also occur in sentence-final position in English but not in Chinese, as can be seen in 3:

- 3a. The man drank his coffee **quickly**.
- 3b. \*Zhangsan chi wan le mian **hen kuai de**.<sup>3</sup>  
Zhangsan eat finish ASP noodle quickly  
Quickly Zhangsan finished the bowl of noodles.

<sup>1</sup> The analysis of English and Chinese thematic and non-thematic verbs in this paper is widely accepted by researchers. However, there appears to be different views in the literature about how the properties in question should be treated. A review of all the alternative analyses of the syntax is beyond the scope of this paper. For different analyses of the syntax, see [Eubank et al. \(1997\)](#), [Trahey \(1996\)](#), [Tang \(1990\)](#), and [Soh \(1998\)](#).

<sup>2</sup> The abbreviations used in the examples in the paper are: ASP = perfective aspectual marker; CL = classifier; Aux = auxiliary verb.

<sup>3</sup> Frequency Adverbs can occasionally appear after the second object in Chinese. For example:

- (i) Wo shang-gei ta jinyinzhubao yijing liang ci le.  
I award-give him money.jewelry already two time SFP  
I already awarded him money and jewelry twice. ([Huang et al., 2009:93](#))

However, it is noted in [Huang et al. \(2009\)](#) that Frequency Adverbs like *yijing liang ci* are adjuncts which modify the whole clause *wo shang-gei ta jinyinzhubao* and not just the verb *shang-gei*. Therefore, (i) is structurally different from 3b in the text and offers no obvious counterargument against treating adverbs as ungrammatical in sentence final position in Chinese. Manner adverbs can sometimes be placed in the sentence final position, as in (ii) and (iii):

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