



# The deconstruction of Chinese *shì*...*de* clefts revisited

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## ABSTRACT

The article presents an analysis of Chinese cleft sentences. Building on work conducted in the past decade, this work sets out to present a new account of Chinese cleft sentences in terms of overt movement, output-oriented linearization constraints and a presuppositional uniqueness requirement on events. I present a syntactic proposal which leads to an overt bipartition of cleft focus phrases and cleft presuppositions in syntax, mediated by the functional element *de*. The compositional semantic implementation of Chinese clefts derives the exhaustiveness associated with this pattern from a presuppositional uniqueness condition on events. This renders the exhaustiveness tied to Chinese clefts maximally similar to the uniqueness presupposition of definite determiners.

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## 1. Introduction

Despite intensive efforts made over the past three decades or so we still lack a satisfactory analysis of Mandarin *shì*...*de* clefts as in (1).<sup>1</sup>

- (1) *Zhāngsān shì zuótiān lái-de.*<sup>2</sup>  
 Zhangsan COP yesterday come-DE  
 'It was yesterday that Zhangsan came.'

In traditional grammar writing, *shì*...*de* clefts were seen as a construction with a function attributable to the construction as a whole. However, both *shì*, the copula, and *de* occur in other contexts expressing information-structural categories which are sometimes hard to distinguish from *shì*...*de* clefts. Two such examples are provided in (2).

- (2) a. Bare *shì* Focus Construction<sup>3</sup>  
*Zhāngsān shì míngtiān lái.*  
 Zhangsan COP tomorrow come  
 'Concerning Zhangsan, it is the case that he will come tomorrow.'

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the overview over the research tradition in Paris (1979:92–105), Lee (2005:34–43) and Paul and Whitman (2008).

<sup>2</sup> The following abbreviations are used in glosses: ASP – aspect suffix; CL – classifier; COP – copula; CRS – currently relevant state.

<sup>3</sup> I borrow the term from Paul and Whitman (2008). The authors dub the *shì* in (2a) "Sentence-medial Bare *shì*" and distinguish the pattern in which it occurs from another pattern with *shì* preceding the subject ("Sentence-initial Bare *shì*").

b. Bare *de* Construction

Zhāngsān zuótiān lái-de.

Zhangsan yesterday come-DE

'It was yesterday that Zhangsan came.'

In (2a), material to the right of *shì* can be in focus. This variability of focus assignment is typical of adverbial association-with-focus patterns (Rooth, 1992), and therefore Paul and Whitman (2008) analyze Bare *shì* Focus Constructions in terms of association-with-focus. It is sometimes assumed in the literature (recently by Lee, 2005:77, 134) that Bare *shì* sentences as in (2a) have the same discourse function as *shì*...*de* clefts. In the present paper I will assume, together with Chiu (1993) and Paul and Whitman (2008), that the Bare *shì* Focus Construction differs in felicity conditions from *shì*...*de* clefts (most notably in terms of exhaustiveness; cf. section 2.4). By contrast, Bare *de* sentences as in (2b) are analyzed as instances of *shì*...*de* clefts with the copula dropped.

Both *shì* and *de* have other uses in the grammar of Mandarin. *Shì* is a plain copula in other contexts, and *de* is an element which mediates in contexts of adnominal modification and relativization, and in contexts of nominalization. These uses are illustrated in (3) and (4).

(3) Zhāngsān shì wǒde lǎoshī.  
Zhangsan is my teacher  
'Zhangsan is my teacher.'

- (4) a. hóng-de huāpíng (adnominal modification)  
red-DE vase  
'red vase'
- b. [[zuótiān lái]-de nánrén] (relativization)  
yesterday come-DE man  
'the man who came yesterday'
- c. chī-de (nominalization)  
eat-DE  
'the thing eaten'

It is a recurrent super-theme in the literature to aim at overarching analyses which reduce the amount of polysemy needed to cover all uses of *shì* and *de*, respectively. In this vein, Cheng (2008) has recently developed an analysis which reduces the function of *shì* – not just in clefts – to mediating between subjects and predicates in Canonical Predication (Stowell, 1981; Moro, 1997), whereas *de* is analyzed as denoting a predicate abstractor across different contexts. On the empirical side, researchers like Lee (2005) or Paul and Whitman (2008) continue to add new observations to the set of descriptive generalizations to be accounted for in the context of *shì*...*de* clefts. This leads to a very involved data situation.

In the light of the state of the art just sketched – aiming at highly reductionist proposals for a body of complicated descriptive generalizations which is still growing – the aim of the present contribution is as follows. First, I want to provide a simplified statement of the descriptive generalizations pertinent to *shì*...*de* clefts which are known to date. Given the complicated or incomplete statements in this area that are found in the literature such an overview is a desideratum. Second, I want to make syntactically informed proposals for lexical entries of *shì* and *de* as found in *shì*...*de* clefts in a formal semantics spirit à la Heim and Kratzer (1998). The entries that I propose allow for compositional derivations of sentence meanings with *shì*...*de* clefts. This is, to the best of my knowledge, the first attempt of this kind. In the case of *shì* the proposal will amount to a plain mediating function of the copula between topics and comments, or subjects and predicates. This is no different from other proposals. In the case of *de*, the analysis will be one in terms of presuppositionality. According to my proposal, *de* in *shì*...*de* clefts encodes a uniqueness and familiarity presupposition for events. This renders its semantics similar to that of definite determiners, but without leading to the definite reference to particulars typical of definite determiners.

I attempt to achieve the two goals of (i) a simplified statement of descriptive generalizations and (ii) a syntax-semantics implementation for *shì* and *de* as found in *shì*...*de* clefts against the background of three articles on *shì*...*de* clefts that were published in prominent places over the past decade (Simpson and Wu, 2002; Paul and Whitman, 2008; Cheng, 2008). The proposals made by other researchers are discussed in a more cursory way. The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 states the descriptive generalizations. Section 3 discusses the three competing proposals just mentioned. Section 4 presents the new analysis. Section 5 concludes.

In the remainder of the present introductory section I will specify my assumptions concerning the make-up and function of cleft constructions in general, and I will introduce the terminology adopted in subsequent sections. I take the criteria in (5) to be definitional of clefts, and I will illustrate these criteria using the example in (6).

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