Adjectives as a dao-luan-fenzi ‘troublemaker’ in Chinese linguistics and beyond

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1. Introduction. The purpose of this paper is to show that various current analyses in Chinese linguistics need to be revised and that typological generalizations are challenged once adjectives are acknowledged as a separate class distinct from stative verbs in Chinese.

2. Adjectives as a separate part of speech. The very existence of non-predicative adjectives such as yuanlai ‘original’, gongtong ‘common’, the availability of a distinct reduplication pattern for adjectives and the possibility of de-less modification constitute major arguments against the common assumption (cf. e.g. McCawley 1992) that adjectives are to be conflated with stative verbs.

2.1. Non-predicative adjectives. Since this type of adjectives is precisely unable to function as a predicate (even with shi...de) (cf. (1a)), it is excluded to analyse them as relative clauses when in adnominal position (cf. (1b)):

(1a) *Zhei-ge yuyan shi gongtong de (1b) gongtong de yuyan
this -CL language be common DE common SUB language
‘a common language’

2.2. Verbal vs. adjectival reduplication. While verbs are repeated as a whole, each syllable is iterated with adjectives i.e., for a disyllabic verb noted as ‘AB’, we obtain ‘AB AB’ (taolun taolun ‘discuss’, not: *taotao lunlun), but AABB for a disyllabic adjective (ganganjingjing ‘clean’; not: *ganjing ganjing). This formal difference is accompanied by an interpretational difference; while the repetition of the verb gives rise to the so-called “tentative aspect” (cf. Chao 1968: 204), reduplication of adjectives is said to involve a higher degree of liveliness or intensity (cf. Chao 1968: 209; Tang 1988, Zhu 1956).

2.3. de-less modification. Adjectives can modify nouns without the subordinator de: ‘A N’ (cf. the vast literature in Chinese starting with Zhu Dexi 1956), whereas for relative clauses de is obligatory. Extensive evidence will be given to show that the de-less modification structure ‘A N’ is a phrase and cannot be analysed on a par with the richly attested ‘A N’ compounds. The special semantics obtained in [NP A N], the “gaps” observed concerning the acceptability of modification without de (cf. congming (de) haizi ‘intelligent child’ vs. congming *(de) dongwu ‘intelligent animal’) and the constraints governing the de-less modification structure (systematically excluding modifier-head compound adjectives such as bing-liang ‘ice-cold’) are all accounted for within our phrasal analysis of ‘A N’ and cannot be derived from an alleged compound status of these ‘A N’ sequences (cf. Paul 2005).

3. Important consequences. To acknowledge adjectives as a separate class does not only make revisions necessary within Chinese linguistics, but also presents a challenge for certain analyses claiming crosslinguistic validity.

3.1. Adnominal modifiers cannot be uniformly reduced to relative clauses (contra Sproat & Shih 1988, 1991; Duannmu 1998, Simpson 2001). More generally, this sheds doubt on the general validity of Kayne’s (1994) relative clause analysis of adjectival modifiers, where the adjective functions as a (copula-less) predicate to the head noun as its subject. (2) indicates the derivation of lü de huaping ‘green vase’ as proposed by Simpson (2001: 148) in the spirit of Kayne (1994):

(2)  [DP [IP tì lü m D de [CP huaping, t_m]]
    green SUB vase

Besides the analysis of de as D° which in itself is very problematic (cf. 3.3 below), this scenario cannot account for modification (both with and without de) involving non-predicative adjectives at all, nor can it derive the modification structure without de available
for both predicative and non-predicative adjectives. Furthermore, it is also completely unclear how this analysis should deal with NP and PP modifiers subordinated to the head noun by de. (Cf. Aoun & Li (2003: 151ff.) who likewise reject Kayne’s proposal, and Yamakido (2002) who challenges an overall relative clause analysis for attributive adjectives in Japanese.)

3.2. The typology of adjectival modification. The absence or presence of de naturally induces an interpretational difference. With the de-less modification structure a new sub-category is established, where the modifier is presented as a defining property of this new sub-category: congming haizi ‘intelligent children’, fang panzi ‘square plate’, ganjing yifu ‘clean clothes’. This is reminiscent of the semantics of prenominal adjectives in Romance (cf. Bouchard 1998, Klein-Andreu 1983): French la blanche neige ‘the white snow’ vs. la voiture blanche ‘the white car’; Italian dolce miele ‘sweet honey’ vs. vino dolce ‘sweet wine’. With the notable difference that in Chinese, modifiers referring to an intrinsic property of the noun are excluded from the de-less modification structure, because it is impossible to establish a new sub-category by using an intrinsic property of the category concerned: tian *(de) fengmi ‘sweet DE honey’ = ‘sweet honey’. Against this background, it is obvious that both types of modification, with and without de, have to be taken into account for typological studies of adjectival modification and that the associated semantics must be controlled in order to obtain meaningful results. This view is in direct contradiction to Sproat & Shih’s (1988, 1991) claim that only the de-less modification structures are relevant crosslinguistically. Furthermore, given that individual as well as stage-level predicates (e.g. congming ‘intelligent’, ganjing ‘clean’) are acceptable in both types of modification structures, with and without de, the Chinese data are problematic for Cinque (1994, 2002) who - based on Romance languages - establishes a correlation between individual-level predicates and (designated) specifier positions (for prenominal adjectives in Romance), on the one hand, and between stage-level predicates and relative clause source (for postnominal adjectives in Romance), on the other.

3.3. The status of the subordinator de. Simpson’s analysis of de as D° is not compatible with the semantic differences observed between modification with and without de. Likewise, Den Dikken & Singhapreecha’s (2004) approach does not work for de in Chinese. Aiming at a unifying analysis for “linker” elements occurring in a variety of typologically different languages: French de, Thai ขี้, Chinese de, Japanese no, they claim that the linker element is a reflex of a DP-internal predicate inversion where the modifier originates as the predicate in a small clause with the (surface) head noun as its subject. As a result, the entire DP receives a contrastive interpretation and the modifier is construed as carrying old information. This analysis can, however, not be applied to Chinese, because first, it makes wrong predictions for the semantics associated with the presence/absence of de, and second, because the clausal origin they postulate for modifiers is not feasible for non-predicative adjectives (nor for NP and PP modifiers).

3.4. Morphological processes in so-called “isolating” languages. Acknowledging adjectives as a distinct part of speech in Chinese enables us to take the data seriously and to recognize the existence of two classes of adjectives, simple (e.g. ganjing ‘clean’) and reduplicated ones (e.g. ganganjingjing). While adjectival reduplication has been described in great detail in the literature in Chinese, this description has never gone beyond listing the properties of simple vs. reduplicated adjectives. In particular, the semantic and syntactic differences observed have not been interpreted as what they really are i.e., as arguments providing evidence for the reduplication of adjectives as a genuine morphological process resulting in a new class of derivatives with predictable semantic and syntactic properties (cf. Paul 2004). Taking reduplication into account allows us to obtain a more accurate picture of the characteristics of “isolating” languages such as Chinese.