

УДК 811.581'367.7:81'42:94

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.32589/2412-9321.32.2026.363211>

K. L. GEVORGIAN

PhD, Associate Professor, Head of the Department of Chinese Philology,
Kyiv National Linguistic University (Ukraine, Kyiv)
e-mail: karina.gevorgian@knlu.edu.ua
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1977-743X>

I. D. POLISHCHUK

Lecturer at the Department of Chinese Philology,
Kyiv National Linguistic University (Ukraine, Kyiv)
e-mail: polishchuk72@ukr.net
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-9583-3732>

**SPECIFICS OF TOPIC-COMMENT ORGANIZATION
OF CHINESE HISTORICAL DISCOURSE TEXTS:
A THEORETICAL ASPECT**

Abstract

The purpose of the article is to provide a detailed disclosure and justification of the specifics of the topic-comment organization in Chinese historical discourse texts. The objectives involve identifying the specific features of such texts' organization, analyzing the theoretical significance of the topic-comment structure, and providing practical recommendations for their further linguistic analysis. **The methodology is based on** distributive, discursive, and contextual analysis. The study relies on the theory of functional sentence perspective, the concept of "micro-topic schemes" (MTS), and a pragma-discursive approach that views the text as a complex communicative event and a hierarchical network of topics and comments. **The scientific novelty** lies in the comprehensive synthesis of structural-syntactic and pragma-discursive approaches to studying historical discourse as an integrated phenomenon. It is substantiated that the traditional imposition of the SVO (subject-verb-object) grammatical structure onto classical Chinese historical texts leads to a distortion of their informational essence. It is proven that temporal and spatial adjuncts, as well as subordinate conditional constructions, function as full-fledged macro-topics that establish the conceptual framework for the narrative unfolding. **Results of the study.** It was found that classical Chinese historical discourse functions based on "topic chains," where the paragraph, rather than the individual sentence, is the basic functional unit of meaning. Here, the topic emerges primarily as a macrostructural discursive concept, the boundaries of which were historically marked by pauses or specific particles (也, 者). Furthermore, it was established that constructions with 把 bǎ and 被 bèi markers are best treated as specific structures with a double topic, which eliminates the need for the artificial application of Western categories of the passive voice. For accurate syntactic and discursive analysis, as well as the translation of Chinese historical texts, scholars should abandon the formal SVO approach in favor of the pragma-discursive one.

Keywords: Chinese language, text, history, discourse, syntax, topic-comment.

Каріна ГЕВОРГЯН

доктор філософії з галузі Філологія, доцент, завідувач кафедри китайської філології,
Київський національний лінгвістичний університет (Київ, Україна)
e-mail: karina.gevorgian@knlu.edu.ua
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1977-743X>

І. Д. ПОЛІЩУК

викладач кафедри китайської філології,
Київський національний лінгвістичний університет (Київ, Україна)

e-mail: polishchuk72@ukr.net

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-9583-3732>

СПЕЦИФІКА ТОПІК-КОМЕНТАРНОЇ ОРГАНІЗАЦІЇ КИТАЙСЬКОМОВНИХ ТЕКСТІВ ІСТОРИЧНОГО ДИСКУРСУ: ТЕОРЕТИЧНИЙ АСПЕКТ

Анотація

Метою статті є детальне розкриття та обґрунтування специфіки топік-коментарної організації китайськомовних текстів історичного дискурсу. Завдання полягають у виявленні специфічних рис організації таких текстів, аналізі теоретичного значення топік-коментарної структури та наданні практичних рекомендацій для їхнього подальшого лінгвістичного аналізу. **Методологія** базується на застосуванні методів дистрибутивного, дискурсивного та контекстуального аналізу. Дослідження спирається на теорію актуального членування речення, концепцію «мікротопікових схем» (MTS) та праґма-дискурсивний підхід, що розглядає текст як складну комунікативну подію та ієрархічну мережу топіків і коментарів. **Наукова новизна** полягає у комплексному синтезі структурно-синтаксичного та праґма-дискурсивного підходів до вивчення історичного дискурсу як цілісного феномену. Обґрунтовано, що традиційне накладання граматичної структури SVO на класичні китайські історичні тексти призводить до викривлення їхньої інформаційної сутності. Доведено, що обставини часу та простору, а також підрядні умовні конструкції в них діють як повноцінні макротопіки, які задають концептуальну рамку для розгортання наративу. **Результати дослідження.** З'ясовано, що класичний китайський історичний дискурс функціонує на засадах «топікових ланцюгів», де базовою функціональною одиницею смислу є абзац, а не окреме речення. Топік тут постає передусім макроструктурним дискурсивним концептом, межі якого історично маркувалися паузами або ж специфічними частками (也, 者). Крім того, встановлено, що конструкції з маркерами 把 *bǎ* та 被 *bèi* доцільно трактувати як специфічні структури з подвійним топіком, що нівелює потребу в штучному застосуванні західних категорій пасивного стану. Для точного синтаксичного та дискурсивного аналізу, а також перекладу китайських історичних текстів науковцям варто відмовитися від формального SVO-підходу на користь праґма-дискурсивного.

Ключові слова: китайська мова, текст, історія, дискурс, синтаксис, топік-коментар.

Introduction. Modern linguistics, in its study of syntax and text structure, increasingly moves away from the traditional understanding of the sentence solely through the lens of the «subject-predicate» (SVO) structure, turning instead to information structure and pragmatics, where topic-comment organization plays a key role (Fisac & Moratto, 2023). In turn, the comment is the message or statement that adds new information regarding the given topic. Research into topic-comment structure has deep theoretical roots in linguistics, originating from the works of G. von der Gabelentz (1901), C. Hockett (1958), M. Halliday (1985). Researchers have demonstrated that the topic is not merely a syntactic element but primarily a discursive one, as its function lies in linking the sentence to the preceding discourse. Consequently, the topic takes precedence over the grammatical subject in determining coreference during text construction.

Despite a solid theoretical foundation regarding topic-prominent languages and information structure in general, the problem of the specific nature of such organization within historical discourse remains insufficiently explored. Historical texts demonstrate a unique method of information presentation, where topic-comment structure has been fundamental since the very beginning of written literacy. In classical texts, basic discursive relations were constructed through topics without the use of modern punctuation, relying

on simple juxtaposition. The specificity of historical discourse lies in the fact that it often employs temporal and spatial expressions not merely as adverbials, but specifically as topics that set extensive frameworks for the subsequent description of events. Furthermore, historical narrative actively utilizes «topic chains,» where a single topic extends its influence over numerous subsequent comments within an entire paragraph, while the topic itself may be omitted as it is already known from the context. The lack of a clear theoretical understanding of how exactly topic-comment relations constitute a historical text leads to significant difficulties in linguistic analysis, interpretation, and, notably, the translation of historical monuments into languages of a different typology.

Analysis of the latest research and publications. The study of the specific nature of the topic-comment organization of text is based on fundamental works in general linguistics, discourse analysis, and syntactic typology. The basic principles for understanding topic-comment structures were laid down by Zhao Yuanren (1979), who was the first to argue that the grammatical meaning of the subject and predicate in a Chinese sentence is, in fact, a relationship between topic and comment rather than between agent and action. This idea was conceptualized by C. Li and S. Thompson (1981), who introduced the typological division of languages into subject-prominent and topic-prominent. They defined the topic as an element that establishes spatial, temporal, or individual boundaries within which the main predication operates. Subsequently, the development of topic theory followed two paths: structural-syntactic and pragma-discursive. Xu Liejiong and D. T. Langendoen (1985) investigated the topic from the perspective of generative grammar, analyzing its syntactic links with the comment. In contrast, Tsao Feng-fu (1990) and Shi Dingxu (2000) emphasized the discursive nature of the topic.

Understanding the specifics of historical discourse requires the involvement of a broader linguistic paradigm. As modern researchers note, discourse is a complex communicative phenomenon that combines linguistic units with extralinguistic, sociocultural, and pragmatic factors. Regarding the material of historical and classical Chinese texts, significant contributions to the study of their information structure have been made by scholars such as E. Pulleyblank (1995), Chou Fa-kao (1961), and C. Harbsmeier (2008).

Recent approaches to the formalization of discursive structure are offered by Xi Xiaoming and Zhou Guodong (2017), who developed the «Micro-Topic Scheme» (hereafter MTS). It relies on the theory of functional sentence perspective (theme-rheme structure) and examines the unfolding of discourse through dynamic models of thematic progression.

The main purpose of the article is to provide a detailed disclosure and justification of the specifics of the topic-comment organization in Chinese-language texts of historical discourse.

Presentation and discussion of the main research material. In the modern paradigm of linguistic knowledge, discourse is viewed as a multifaceted phenomenon – a complex communicative occurrence that includes both the text and the extralinguistic factors (sociocultural, pragmatic, psychological) necessary for its comprehension. Discourse is not merely a sequence of sentences, but an array of thematically related texts “embedded in life,” underpinned by a specific grammar, lexicon, and rules of syntax. When analyzing historical discourse texts created in different sociocultural and linguistic realities, the traditional syntactic approach based on the “subject-predicate” (SVO) structure often proves insufficient. Instead, analysis through the lens of topic-comment organization serves as a more adequate theoretical tool.

The fundamental theoretical distinction between subject-prominent and topic-prominent languages was proposed by linguists C. Li and S. Thompson (1981). The specificity of topic-comment organization lies in the fact that the topic always acts as definite, known, or

identified information that establishes the starting point for the message. According to W. Chafe's (1976) definition, the topic is not necessarily what the sentence is «about»; rather, it sets the spatial, temporal, or individual framework within which the main predication (comment) operates.

In modern generative and functional linguistics, several structural types of topics are distinguished, among which the so-called «topics of relevance,» or «Chinese-style topics» (first described by W. Chafe (1976) and C. Li & S. Thompson (1981)), are of key importance for historical discourse. Unlike Left Dislocation or Hanging Topics, where the topic must have a syntactic link to the comment (e.g., via a pronoun or null anaphora), «topics of relevance» have no direct grammatical connection to the verb or any other element in the comment. This proves that in historical discourse, the topic is primarily a discursive concept marking an information domain boundary rather than a syntactic position.

An important theoretical property of historical discourse is that subordinate clauses within the information structure function precisely as topics. J. Haiman (1978) demonstrated that conditional constructions are inherently «givens» that form a coordinate system for the main clause. In historical chronicles, the description of events is often built through a chain of preconditions. According to Haiman's (1978) concept, conditions and temporal adverbials in such texts are not merely syntactic markers but full-fledged topics that actualize shared background knowledge or establish a new temporal frame so that the subsequent comment can convey new information.

In historical discourse, the following patterns of thematic progression are most frequently observed:

1. Constant Progression: The topic of the first sentence becomes the topic of subsequent ones ($T1 > T2$). This is a classic mechanism for creating biographies of historical figures, where the same individual ($T1$) remains an implicit or explicit topic for a series of event-comments.

Example: 秦始皇统一了中国, [Ø]废分封, [Ø]代以郡县。 Qin Shi Huang unified China, [Ø] abolished the feudal system, [Ø] replaced [it] with a system of commanderies and counties.

T1: 秦始皇 – explicit macro-topic.

T2: [Ø] – null topic ($T1=T2$). Instead of repeating the name or using the pronoun “he” (他), the topic is simply omitted in Chinese because the focus of attention remains unchanged.

2. Simple Linear Progression: The rheme (comment) or a part of the rheme of the preceding statement becomes the topic (theme) for the next one ($R1 > T2$). In historical chronicles, this mechanism is the primary tool for detailing: a comment introduces a new event or person, which immediately transforms into the topic of the next sentence, allowing the narrative to move forward continuously.

Example: 秦朝末年爆发了农民起义, 起义中涌现了一位领袖叫刘邦。刘邦后来建立了汉朝。 At the end of the Qin Dynasty, a peasant uprising broke out. During the uprising, a leader named Liu Bang emerged. Liu Bang later established the Han Dynasty.

T1: 秦朝末年 – initial temporal macro-topic.

R1: 爆发了农民起义 – new information regarding T1.

T2: 起义 – the final word of the previous comment (R1) instantly becomes the new (embedded) topic for the next part of the statement.

R2: 涌现了一位领袖叫刘邦 – this comment describes the new topic (the uprising), not the initial one.

T3: 刘邦 – the final word of the previous comment (R2) becomes the new topic for the subsequent part of the statement.

R3: 建立了汉朝 – comment regarding T3.

3. Derived Progression (Nested Topics): A global macro-topic (e.g., an era or a war) is split into micro-topics in subsequent comments, allowing for the description of different aspects of a large-scale historical event without losing coherence.

Example: 唐朝, 文化, 诗歌, 水平最高。Regarding the Tang Dynasty, [its] culture, [specifically] poetry, [has] the highest level.

T1: 唐朝 – macro-topic establishing the global frame for the entire statement. It declares the historical period under discussion. Everything following in the sentence pertains to the Tang Dynasty.

T2: 文化 – secondary micro-topic that narrows the macro-topic T1 to a specific aspect: culture.

T3: 诗歌 – tertiary micro-topic that further details the characteristic of micro-topic T2: poetry.

R1: 水平最高 – the only piece of new information, which syntactically relates only to T3 but is logically subordinate to the global macro-topic T1.

Researchers emphasize that in languages and texts with a topic-comment dominance, the basic functional unit is not the sentence but the paragraph (or “topic chain”). Furthermore, the application of modern Western punctuation (oriented toward SVO structure) to classical historical texts often distorts their true information structure. In the original topic-comment organization, pauses separated not grammatical parts of a sentence, but specifically topics from comments, or marked the boundaries of information domains. A single macro-topic could encompass information that, by modern standards, would be broken down into several separate sentences, leading to an artificial severance of semantic links during the translation or interpretation of the text.

Expanding the theoretical framework of topic-comment structure requires addressing syntactic typology and the architectonics of discourse. In modern linguistics, three main types of topics are distinguished:

1. Left Dislocation. Left dislocation is characterized by the fact that the topic leaves behind an empty category in the comment, as it is the result of syntactic movement.

Example: [《史记》]_i, 他研究了多年 $e_i e_i$ 。Shiji [Records of the Grand Historian], he has studied [it] for many years. In this example, the index *i* indicates the topic, and $e_i e_i$ (empty category) marks the position in the comment that refers to the same denotatum. This serves as a graphical confirmation that the element was syntactically moved, leaving behind a «trace.» In this sentence, the object Shiji is syntactically moved from its base position after the verb 研究 to the beginning of the sentence into the topic position. Since this is precisely a case of left dislocation, an empty category remains in the position after the verb. We do not place the pronoun “它”/“it” there, as the structure is a direct result of a syntactic shift.

[从长安]_i, 张骞出发去西域了 $e_i e_i$ 。From Chang'an, Zhang Qian set out for the Western Regions.

A special place in historical discourse is occupied by these “Aboutness Topics,” which have no direct grammatical connection to the verb or any other syntactic element in the comment. They are linked solely through semantic and pragmatic means. Their function is to establish a conceptual frame for the utterance, allowing the author to introduce macro-themes without rigid grammatical constraints.

During the analysis of complex event descriptions, specific constructions with the markers 把 *bǎ* and 被 *bèi* merit particular attention.

Example: 商鞅把法律修改了。Shang Yang changed the laws.

Traditionally, 把 *bǎ* is considered a marker for object preposing, but from a discourse standpoint, two topics are present here:

T1: 商鞅 – a macro-topic that establishes the global frame for the entire utterance.

Influence Marker: 把 *bǎ* – signals that the subsequent element is a definite object undergoing manipulation.

T2: 法律 – a specific, identified referent that is affected.

R: 修改了 – the comment, directly revealing the result of the action, which logically pertains to both topics.

Similarly, 被 *bèi* constructions are double-topic structures where the first topic is the patient (the entity targeted by the action), and the second topic acts as the cause or source of influence.

Example: 蜀国被魏国灭亡了。(The Kingdom of Shu was destroyed by the Kingdom of Wei.)

T1: 蜀国 – the macro-topic, a definite object under discussion in the discourse and the target of the action.

T2: 魏国 – the second definite object, introduced as the cause or source of influence on T1.

R: 灭亡了 – provides new information about what happened to T1 because of T2.

This approach allows for an adequate explanation of information organization in historical texts without an artificial reliance on Western categories of the passive voice.

The existence of a sentence-level topic (clausal topic) localized in the lower inflectional zone is well-founded. A crucial regularity is that within this zone, the sentence topic always hierarchically dominates the sentence focus and precedes it. This explains the complex hierarchy of historical narratives, where an additional object of attention can be introduced after the main subject.

While the topic identifies known information, the focus highlights the new, most important information within the comment. Historical texts frequently employ contrastive topics (e.g., marked by the particle 也 *yě*), which single out a certain element to contrast it with another object. Furthermore, specific comment markers such as 是 *shì*, 就 *jiù*, or 都 *dōu* function as focus markers. They shift the communicative emphasis to a specific part of the comment while leaving the overall macro-topic unchanged.

Discursive markers and the phenomenon of ellipsis play a significant role in the macro-structural unfolding of discourse. Certain conjunctions (e.g., 所以 *suǒyǐ* “therefore” or 然后 *ránhòu* “then”), through the process of grammaticalization, have expanded their functions from expressing direct consequence or sequence to acting as topic initiators or means of resuming a previous theme after a digression. They mark the boundaries of discourse domains and manage topic shifts within the text.

Conclusions and prospects for further research. In conclusion, the theoretical understanding of the topic-comment organization in historical discourse requires a shift from a narrow syntactic approach toward a pragma-discursive one. A historical text unfolds as a hierarchical network of topics (including spatio-temporal circumstances and conditional constructions) and their respective comments. Recognizing the specific nature of topics, the mechanisms of thematic progression, and the role of the paragraph as the basic unit of information structure is key to adequate linguistic analysis and the preservation of the authentic logic of historical narratives.

The specificity of such texts lies in their construction around «topic chains»—segments of discourse headed by one or more topics followed by a series of comments, frequently utilizing null anaphora. In historical monuments, topics were often marked not syntactically but through specific discursive particles (notably 也 *yě* and 者 *zhě*) or pauses. Furthermore,

a distinctive feature is the foregrounding of constructions, which acquire the status of full-fledged topics, establishing global frames for the further unfolding of historical events.

Theoretical analysis demonstrates that in historical discourse, the topic is primarily a macro-structural, discursive concept rather than a mere syntactic position. The topic-comment organization serves the function of information structuring, where the topic acts as a point of reference and the comment as the focus. This proves that the cohesion and coherence of a historical Chinese text are achieved through the semantic-pragmatic alignment of information domains rather than formal grammatical government.

Recommendations for linguists and translators are proposed:

1. Rejection of the SVO framework: During the syntactic and discursive analysis of Chinese historical texts, it is essential to avoid the artificial imposition of Western European «subject-predicate» structures. This prevents the erroneous search for «hidden» grammatical subjects where only a topic-comment frame exists.

2. Shifting the basic unit of analysis: Instead of the isolated sentence, the basic unit of analysis should be the paragraph or a discourse fragment unified by a single topic chain.

3. Application of Micro-Topic Schemes (MTS): To track the dynamics of historical narratives, it is recommended to use micro-topic schemes based on the theory of theme-rheme progression. This allows for the formalization of the process where information transitions from a historical fact (rheme) to the status of background knowledge (theme/topic) for subsequent utterances.

4. Pragmatic analysis of markers: Special attention should be given to discursive markers (e.g., focus adverbs or particles), treating them not merely as lexical units but as indicators of the boundaries of information structures.

Prospects for further research in this direction lie in conducting corpus studies of thematic progression across various genres of ancient Chinese writing and creating formalized models for the machine analysis of the information structure of classical Chinese texts.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

No artificial intelligence tools or materials were used in the manuscript.

REFERENCES:

- Chafe, W. L. (1976). Givenness, contrastiveness, definiteness, subjects, topics, and point of view. In C. N. Li (Ed.), *Subject and topic* (pp. 25–55). Academic Press [in English].
- Fisac, T., & Moratto, R. (Eds.). (2023). *Fundamental structures of Chinese language: Topic-comment and other key structures*. Routledge [in English].
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003439271>
- Gabelentz, G. von der (1901). *Die Sprachwissenschaft: Ihre Aufgaben, Methoden, und bisherigen Ergebnisse*. Gunter Narr Verlag [in English].
- Haiman, J. (1978). Conditionals are topics. *Language*, 54(3), 564–589. [in English]
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1985). *An introduction to functional grammar*. Edward Arnold. [in English]
- Harbsmeier, C. (2008). The philosophy of post-nominal zhě 者. In S. Wang (Ed.), *Páng pǔ jiàoshòu bāshí shòuchén jìniàn wénjí* (pp. 301–308). Baifan Printing Co., Ltd. [in English]

- Hockett, C. F. (1958). *A course in modern linguistics*. Macmillan. [in English]
- Hsu, Y.-Y. (2008). The Sentence-Internal Topic and Focus in Chinese. *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*, 34(1), 164–175. [in English]
<https://doi.org/10.3765/bls.v34i1.3588>
- Li, C. N., & Thompson, S. A. (1981). *Mandarin Chinese: A functional reference grammar*. University of California Press. [in English]
- Liu, D. (2016). Topic markers in Classic Chinese and distinctions between subject and topic. *Gu HanYu yanjiu*, 2, 2–16. [in English]
- Pulleyblank, E. G. (1995). *Outline of Classical Chinese grammar*. The University of British Columbia Press. [in English]
- Shi, D. (2000). Topic and topic-comment constructions in Mandarin Chinese. *Language*, 76(2), 383–408. [in English]
<https://doi.org/10.2307/417661>
- Tsao, F.-F. (1990). *Sentence and clause structure in Chinese: A functional perspective*. Student Book Co. [in English]
- Wang, C.-c., & Huang, L. M. (2006). Grammaticalization of connectives in Mandarin Chinese: A corpus-based study. *Language and Linguistics*, 7(4), 991–1016 [in English]
- Xi, X., & Zhou, G. (2017). Building a Chinese discourse topic corpus with a micro-topic scheme based on theme-rheme theory. *Big Data Analytics*, 2(9), 1–14.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s41044-017-0023-7> [in English]
- Xu, L., & Langendoen, D. T. (1985). Topic structures in Chinese. *Language*, 61(1), 1–27.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/413419> [in English]
- Zhou, F. (1961). *Zhōngguó gǔdài yǔfǎ (zàojù biān) [A historical grammar of Ancient Chinese; part one: syntax]*. Academia Sinica Institute of History and Language [in English]
- 陈平. (2004). 汉语双向名词与话题-陈述结构. *中国语文*, (5), 412-422. [in Chinese]
- 赵, 元任. (1979). *汉语口语语法*. 商务印书馆出版. 北京. [in Chinese]

Дата надходження до редакції 09.12. 2025
Ухвалено до друку 24.12.2025



CC Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)