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Chinese Topic Chains: An Analysis of the Topic Chains Used in *Fortress Besieged*

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The functional typologists divide the languages in the world into two groups, one is the subject-prominent language group and the other is the topic-prominent group. English belongs to the subject-prominent language and Chinese to the topic-prominent language. This paper aims to discuss and summarize the types and functions of topic chains on the basis of analyzing the topic chains used in the novel *Fortress Besieged* written by Chinese famous writer Zhongshu Qian.

Keywords: Functional Typology; Topic Chains; Types of Topic Chains; Functions of Topic Chains

Introduction

Functional typologists Li & Thompson (1976) divided the natural languages into two groups: one is subject-prominent language group; the other is the topic-prominent group. They also pointed out that Chinese language belonged to the topic-prominent group. Just based on Li and Thompson's research, many Chinese scholars, such as Nansong Huang, Jiujiu Xu, Yulong Xu etc., began to study the Chinese topics and topic chains. They made researches about the types, the internal structures and discourse functions of topic chains. But there is no consensus among these researchers as far as these things are concerned, such as the classification criteria, the discourse functions and rationale for the choice of topic chains. In addition, these researchers resort to the qualitative research, not based on the quantitative research. Henceforth, this paper aims to discuss the classifications and functions of Chinese topic chains based on the analysis of the topic chains used in the novel *Fortress Besieged* written by Zhongshu Qian (1991).

Theoretical Background of the Functional Typology

Functional typology was proposed by Li & Thompson. It is different from word order typology proposed by Joseph H. Greenberg in the 1960s. Through analyzing and describing the word order about over 30 different languages, Greenberg proposed six kinds of possible language types: SVO; SOV; VSO; VOS; OSV; OVS (S stands for the subject, V for a verb, O for an object). Functional typology is also different from the study of typology proposed by Hawkins. Like Greenberg, Hawkins (1994) emphasized the analysis of syntactic structure and word order. He proposed the theory of X-Leverage for the convenience of analyzing the common tendency of the word order and of the syntactic structure. Hence, his theory is to facilitate the processing of pure syntactic structure other than dealing with

semantic relations or semantic features. Furthermore, functional typology is different from traditional language typology, the so-called morphological typology. According to the relationship between morphemes, morphological typology divided all the world languages into three groups: "isolated language", "adhesion language" and "comprehensive language". Unlike Greenberg, Hawkins and also the morphologists, functional typologists stress the semantic relations and functions among the parts of a clause. Based on syntactic status of subject and topic, especially the semantic functions of the segments of a clause, functional typologists discriminated the world languages into two groups: topic-prominent language and subject-prominent language. They pointed out that Chinese language belonged to the topic-prominent group. That is because in each simple and complex Chinese clause, there must be a topic not necessarily the subject, even though the topic can be used as the subject in many cases. In other words, each Chinese clause is developed and scrolled around a topic, see example (1). In this example, the statement is composed of two simple sentences. And in each simple sentence, there is a typical Topic + Comment structure not a typical SVO structure, in which the comment parts (e.g. "水管漏水了", "啥事没有") function as a comment for the topic "李家" and "王家" respectively, even though these two sentential predicate phrases display the typical SVO structure. Then what is a topic and how to define the topic chain?

Topic and Topic Chain

Dik (1997: p. 53) defined that topic was usually placed at the depart position of a sentence; it was the object that the comment describes. In Chinese language, if the same topic is repeated, then the topic is most often omitted. There are two omitted situations: backward anaphora and forward cataphora. See example (5) and (6) respectively.

Usually, Chinese simple sentence is composed of two parts, the topic and the comment or in Halliday's words the theme and the rheme (2004: p. 53). When one topic-comment structure connected with another topic-comment structure, we can get a complicated clause. Then the topic of one topic-comment structure and the topic of another topic-comment structure can be chained in many ways according to different needs in different situations. These chains are called topic chains which will be discussed in this paper. Givón (1983: p. 67) defined that topic chain was composed of an indispensable topic, and at least one anaphorically or cataphorically omitted topic. Fengfu Tsao (1990: p. 45) proposed that "topic string (chain) consists of a topic with one or a few comments." Like Givón, Chauncey Chu (1998) offered a similar definition about topic chain. He held that topic chain was composed of an indispensable topic and several anaphorically or cataphorically omitted topics. Wendan Li (2005:67) further amended this definition as "topic chain includes at least two sentences which are connected by an indispensable NP topic and one or more anaphorically or cataphorically omitted NP topic." The writer of this paper, however, found that the above definitions are all somewhat biased. Since Chinese is a topic-prominent language, then of course, the discourse of Chinese is connected by the topics. Hence, if we take Givón's definition, we can not explain this complex sentences combined by independent and complete topic-comment structures, for example:

lǐ jiā　　　　shuǐ guǎn lòu shuǐ le　　　　wáng jiā
(1) 李 家 (topic^1) 水 管 漏 水 了 (comment^1), 王 家
què shá shì méi yǒu
(topic^2) 却 啥 事 没 有 (comment^2).

(The water pipes of Li's house were leaking, while nothing happened to Wang's house.)

Here in this complex sentence, we have two sub-clauses. And in each sub-clause, we get one topic-comment structure. Hence, we have two different topics not just one topic. Thus Givón's definition failed to account for this complex clause.

And if we take the definition offered by Fengfu Tsao, then we can not explain this discourse phenomenon. That is the discourse is constituted by several topics but one comment. See example (2).

Wendan Li's view of topic chains is also not appropriate, because we can find topic chains not only between two sentences, but also we can find topic chain in a simple sentence and across the paragraphs.

Through above analysis, we can define the topic chain like this: topic chain consists of two topics, of which at least one is indispensable; and topic chain can be shown in simple sentences, complex sentences, and even be shown in a cross-section of discourse.

Types of Topic Chains

Based on the definition given above, topic chains can be put into two groups according to the topics are indispensable or dispensable. In the first group, all the topics of the topic chain must be shown by themselves in each topic-comment structures, while in the second group, all the topics except one may not be shown, they can be omitted anaphorically or cataphorically. In the first group, there are two subcategories. When two or more topics are connected with one or more comment, we put this topic chain of this topic-comment structure into the first sub-

category, we use letter A to stand for it. See example (2). When one topic-comment structure combined with another topic-comment structure without any topics omitted, then the topic chain can be put into the second sub-category. We use letter B to stand for it. See example (3) and (4). The second group in which the topics are dispensable can also be divided into another two subcategories. We use letter C to stand for the topic chain in which some topics are anaphorically omitted. See example (5). Then we use letter D to stand for the topic chain in which some topics are cataphorically omitted. See example (6).

In fact, the above four topic chains are the basic topic chains in Chinese, they can be intercrossed in real language use. We call this type as comprehensive topic chain. We use character E to stand for it. See example (7). Since the comprehensive topic chain can fix the sentences flexibly, it may be most used type compared with the other four types.

guān yú zhè jiàn shì qíng　　　　　tā de zuò fǎ　　　　　wǒ bù
(2) 关于 这 件 事 情 (topic^1), 他 的 做法 (topic^2), 我 不
zàn tóng
赞 同 (comment).

(About this matter and his dealing way, I don't agree.)

xǔ duō nǚ rén　　　　　huì xiào dé zhè yàng tián
(3) 许 多 女 人 (topic^1) 会 笑 得 这 样 甜 (comment^1),
dàn tā men de xiào róng　　　　　zhǐ shì miàn bù jī ròu róu ruǎn cāo
| 但 她们 的 笑 容 (topic^2) 只 是 面部 肌肉 柔 软 操
(comment^2).

(Many women can smile just as sweetly, but their smile is only facial muscle calisthenics.)

wǒ　　　　　méi yǒu jiè kǒu　　　　　wǒ　　　　　wú
(4) 我 (topic^1) 没有 借口 (comment^1), | 我 (topic^2) 无
fǎ jiě shì　　　　　wǒ　　　　　bù gǎn qiú nǐ liàng yòu
法 解 释 (comment^2)。| 我 (topic^3) 不 敢 求 你 谅 宥
wǒ　　　　　zhǐ xī wàng nǐ kuài wàng jì wǒ zhè ge ruǎn
(comment^3), | 我 (topic^4) 只 希 望 你 快 忘 记 我 这 个 软
ruò　méi yǒu tǎn bái yǒng qì de rén
弱、没 有 坦 白 勇 气 的 人 (comment^4).

(I have no excuses and no way to explain. I couldn't ask for your forgiveness. I only hope you will quickly forget this coward who lacks the courage to be frank.)

sū xiǎo jiě　　　　　yí xiàng qiáo buqǐ zhè wèi hán chěn de
(5) 苏 小 姐 (topic^1) 一 向 瞧不起 这 位 寒 碜 的
sūn tài tài　　　　　ér qiě　　　　　zuì bù xǐ huān xiǎo hái zi
孙 太 太 (comment^1), | 而且 Ø (topic^2) 最 不 喜欢 小孩子
kě shì　　　　　tīng le zhè xiē huà
(comment^2),| 可是 Ø (topic^3) 听 了 这些 话 (comment^3), |
xīn shàng gāo xìng
Ø (topic^4) 心 上 高 兴 (comment^4).

(Miss Su had always scorned the poor, simple-minded Mrs. Sun and detested children, but when she heard all that, she was quite pleased.)

zuò yáng chē lā cuò le dì fāng
(6) Ø (topic^1) 坐 洋 车 拉 错 了 地 方 (comment^1), Ø
mǎi dōng xī cuò fù le qián　　　　　liǎng rén
(topic^2) 买 东 西 错 付 了 钱 (comment^2) | 两 人 (topic^3)
dōu méi hǎo yùn qì
都 没 好 运气 (comment^3).

(The rickshaws took them to the wrong place; they paid the wrong amount of money when they went shopping; neither one had any good luck.)

huí dào wò shì   cāi yí

(7) Ø (topic[1]) <u>回 到 卧 室</u> (comment[1]), Ø (topic[2]) <u>猜 疑</u>

zhòng zhòng   hán xué yù   yí dìng zài àn suàn zì

<u>种 种</u> (comment[2]), ┃ <u>韩 学 愈</u> (topic[3]) <u>一 定 在 暗 算 自</u>

jǐ   jiù bù zhī dào tā zěn yàng àn suàn

<u>己</u> (comment[3]), ‖ Ø (topic[4]) <u>就 不 知 道 他 怎 样 暗 算</u> (com-

míng tiān fēi gōng kāi chāi pò tā de xī yáng jìng bù kě

ment[4]), Ø (topic[5]) <u>明 天 非 公 开 拆 破 他 的 西 洋 镜 不 可</u> (comment[5]).

(Feeling like a guilty thief, he crept along stealthily and returned to his room filled with suspicious. Han Xue-yu was undoubtedly plotting against him, but how he didn't know. The next day, he'd just have to publicly rip the cover from Han's little peep show.)

("Ø" stands for the omitted topic anaphorically or cataphorically; "┃" stand for the segment of simple sentences.)

The above five types are the topic chains at the Chinese sentence level. There are topic chains at the clause level and at the paragraph level. Here, only the topic chains at the sentence level and clause level are concerned.

Data Collection

How do these topic chains distribute and make functions in the organization of the text? In order to make an answer to this question, we decided to have an analysis of the topic chains used in the novel *Fortress Besieged* written by Zhongshu Qian in 1991. Then why we choose this novel? It is because the language of a novel genre can not only best embody the characteristics of everyday language, but also reflect the characteristics of written language, and this book is very popular in modern China.

How do we choose the data? Specifically, we select one paragraph of every five pages. Then we annotated the topic chains manually according to the classifications mentioned above. After that, we got 365 topic chains out of 547 clauses among which there are 26 clauses in which topic chains were not included.

Findings and Results

Based on the analysis of the five topic chains, the actual use of topic chains in the novel *Fortress Besieged* can be summed in **Table 1**.

Here, we see the comprehensive type occupies 60.5 percent of all the topic chains. Type of C occupies the second largest proportion, it accounts for 21.4 percent followed by type B and D respectively. Type B accounts for 9.9 percent and type D accounts for 7.7 percent. Type A only accounts for quite lim-

Table 1.
Types of topic chains.

Types	Number	Frequency (%)
A	2	0.5
B	36	9.9
C	78	21.4
D	28	7.7
E	221	60.5

ited proportion, it occupies 0.5 percent.

Discussions

Why do the five basic topic chains have different distribution of proportion? If we want to answer this question, we should have to dig out the different functions these topic chains can enact in the organization of the discourse. Type A has unique discourse function. In this type of topic chain, several topics can be connected within a short simple sentence. Thus, the reader can get fruitful information within a few words. This type of topic chain can make a concise text. However, the reader or hearer needs to know more details about the topics. That is the reason why we have other topic chains.

In type B, the topics can be emphasized by contrast or by repetition. See example (4) again. By repeating the same topic

wǒ

"我(I)", the author's inner feelings of guilt are expressed most vividly. Nevertheless, people do not always assume this type of topic chain to account for the events since a stressed or oppressed voice is taken. Maybe this is the reason why we can find a lower proportion in **Table 1**.

In type C, topics are anaphorically omitted or substituted. Hence, the reader or hearer just focuses on the activities and events that are concerned with the main topic which is usually put at the depart position of a clause. Like pictures, all the activities and events scroll slowly unfolded to the reader, and give readers a gorgeous taste of rich connotation. In contrast, in type D, the speaker or writer do not offer the topic, he or she just begins his or her statement by describing the activities and events, and then cleverly mention the topic at the later part of his or her speech. This type of arrangement of the topic can stimulate readers' interest, suspension and imagination by foreshadowing the development of the activities and events. Compared with type D, type C is more easily followed by the reader or hearer psychologically. In another word, the reader or hearer doesn't have to use much effort to figure out the meaning of the clauses. On the contrary, if the speaker or writer chose the topic chain of type D, the reader or hearer has to focus on his or her attention and constantly imagine what the speaker or writer really wants to express. The reader or the hearer must pay more efforts to figure out what the speaker or the writer really intends to say. That is the reason why people use type C more frequently than type D. People do not always want to be suspended or inspired psychologically.

As mentioned above, type E can be realized by intercrossing type A, type B, type C and type D. Through this way, people can get a more varied discourse by using type E. In addition, this type of topic chain structure can facilitate the speaker or writer to orderly describe the complex events. Probably this is the reason why this type of topic chain occupies the top position among all the other topic chains.

Conclusion

Some basic theoretic concepts, such as topic and topic chains, are discussed in this paper. Furthermore, based on the discussion of topic chains and the calculation of the topic chains used in the novel *Fortress Besieged*, the types and functions of Chinese topic chains have also been discussed here. Since Chinese language is a topic-prominent language, Chinese discourse analysis should be based on the analysis of topic chains, especially

on the rules and functions by which the topic chains are organized into a complete text or discourse. In this paper, only the topic chains at the sentence level are explored, the topic chains at the paragraph level and text level are not discussed. Probably the distribution of topic chains has something to do with the writing style and discourse category, but all these questions are needed to be explored further.

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