

ZHI and ZHE: A Note on the Historical Development of Chinese Relative Clauses

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Old Chinese had two relative clause-forming morphemes, which at first blush appear to be in complementary distribution. A headless subject relative clause is followed by ZHE, as in (1a). If the relative has an external head, then ZHI appears between the clause and head nominal. One possible analysis of the two types of relative clause might be to analyze ZHE and ZHI as different phonetic realizations of D taking a CP complement. We could assume a TP-fronting analysis of old Chinese relative clauses, in which the head nominal moves to [Spec, CP] in the embedded clause, followed by fronting of the remnant TP to [Spec, DP]. In the Morphological Component, when D's complement contains phonetic material, i.e. when an overt NP has moved to [Spec, CP], then D is spelled out as ZHI. Otherwise, D is spelled out as ZHE.

In this paper, however, I propose a different analysis. First, it is not possible to analyze ZHI and ZHE as occupying the same structural position, because the two can co-occur. (2a) is an externally headed relative clause in which the head nominal precedes the clause. ZHI follows the head; ZHE also appears in this constituent, following the modifying clause.

Note further that the head nominal in (2a) is definite. It refers specifically to a discourse topic. Cases like (2a) contrast significantly with examples like (2b). There is no ZHI between the head NP and the rest of the clause in (2b), and the head NP has an indefinite interpretation. The association between ZHI and definiteness is further exemplified by the existential construction in (3). Internally headed relative clauses could appear in old Chinese as the complement of existential verbs in order to introduce a discourse referent. Therefore, the referent of an internally headed relative clause is indefinite, but specific. As shown in (3), ZHI cannot intervene between the head and the clause, since this would force a definite reading for the head NP.

The contrast in (4) shows that a subject or adverb preceding ZHI occupies a higher structural position than a subject or adverb without ZHI. In (4a), the adverb *hou* 'later', appearing with ZHI, is interpreted with wide scope, outside the constituent headed by the relativizer ZHE. In (4b), the adverb without ZHI is interpreted inside the ZHE constituent, modifying only the verb. The interpretive difference clearly shows that the adverb in both examples cannot be located in the same structural position. Placing the adverb in (4a) in the specifier of DP accounts for its wide scope interpretation.

I propose the analysis in (5). Only ZHI occupies the D head position. This accords well with the intuition that the appearance of the DP layer is associated with definiteness. ZHE is the head of a lower functional projection *nP*, which is neutral with respect to definiteness. I leave aside the question here of whether *zhe* is underlyingly head-initial or head-final.

This analysis has significance for the diachronic analysis of relative clause structure in Chinese. Simpson (2001) claims that the modern Chinese relative clause former DE (see 6) derives historically from ZHI (and not ZHE). However, such a claim requires assuming that ZHI loses its associated definiteness. Throughout the classical period and beyond, relative clauses containing ZHI were either definite or generic, as is the case of the discourse topic in (7). ZHE, on the other hand, did not have such a restriction. Recall the specific indefinite ZHE relative in (3). (8) shows a ZHE relative which is generic. ZHE additionally can occur with definite or topicalized constituents. The semantic evidence, therefore, points to the origin of DE as ZHE (and not ZHI), as proposed by Lu (1955) and others. This claim is also compatible with structural evidence, for example the fact that modern Chinese relative clauses naturally appear in a position lower than demonstratives and numeral classifiers, as can be seen in (6).

- (1) a. 欲 戰 者 可 謂 眾 矣。
 [DP [TP e Yu zhan] zhe [CP t_{TP}]] ke wei zhong yi.
 desire fight ZHE Pot say majority Asp
 “(Those) who desire to fight can be said to be majority.” (Zuozhuan, Cheng 6)
- b. 豈 若 從 避 世 之 士 哉。
 qi ruo cong [DP [TP e bi shi] zhi [CP shi t_{TP}]] zai. (Analects, Weizi)
 how like follow escape world ZHI gentleman Excl
 “How could that compare to following a gentleman who escapes from the world?”
- (2) a. 馬 之 死 者 十 二 三 矣。
 [DP ma zhi [CP pro [TP si zhe]]] shi er san yi.
 horse Gen die ZHE 10 2 3 Asp
 “Of the horses, 2 or 3 out of 10 have died.”
- b. 臣 弑 其 君 者 有 之。
 [DP [CP chen shi qi jun] zhe] you zhi.
 minister assassinate 3s.Gen lord ZHE exist this
 “Ministers who assassinate their lords do exist.” (Mencius 6)
- (3) 有 人 (*之) 日 攘 其 鄰 之 雞 者。
 you [DP ren (*zhi) ri rang qi lin zhi ji zhe].
 exist person Gen daily steal 3.Gen neighbor Gen chicken ZHE
 “There is someone who steals chickens from his neighbor every day.” (Mencius 6)
- (4) a. 以 待 後 之 學 者。
 yi dai [DP hou zhi [xue zhe]]
 C anticipate later Gen study Rel
 “... in anticipation of future scholars.” (Mencius 6)
- b. 後 死 者 不 得 與 於 斯 文 也。
 [hou si zhe] bu de yu yu si wen ye.
 later die Rel not can be with thisculture Decl
 “One who will die later (humble 1st person expression) is unable to be with this culture.”
- (5) [DP [D' zhi [n_P CP zhe]]]
- (6) zhe san ben [[wo mai] de] shu
 Dem 3 Cl I buy DE book
 “These three books which I bought.”
- (7) 是 不 材 之 木 也， 無 所 可 用。
 [Shi bu cai zhi mu] ye, wu [suo ke yong].
 Dem Neg use Gen tree Top not.exist SUO Pot use
 “This useless tree cannot be used for anything.” (Zhuangzi, Renjianshi)
- (8) 仁 者 不 憂。
 [DP [CP e_i [AP ren] zhe_i]] bu you. (Analects, Zihan)
 virtue ZHE Neg worry
 “One who is virtuous does not worry.”

References

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