THE STATUS OF EXISTENTIAL-YOU IN MANDARIN CHINESE

In Mandarin Chinese, the word *you*, literally meaning “have”, can form a type of existential construction. The example is shown (1). Recently, the existential-*you* has been considered as a functional head, either as an Infl (Huang 1988), or a modal (Tsai 2001a, 2001b), merged above the highest VP, with the construction “*you* NP VP”. The post-*you* NP is located at the highest Spec-VP, the VP-internal subject position, and the post-NP VP is the main predicate. The hypotheses explain why *you* always appear in the sentence initial position, and the “object constraint” (Tsai 2001a, 2001b), that *you* cannot appear before objects. Tsai’s hypothesis also explain the “Definiteness Effect” brought up by Huang (1987), *you* serves as an existential closure that licenses only indefinite NPs at the post-*you* position.

Contrary to previous researches, I would like to show that existential-*you* are better treated as a verb, in line with other *you* that are considered as verbs, such as possessive-*you* (aka. (2)a) and locative existential-*you*¹ (aka. (2)b). They both have the structure [SUBJECT *you* OBJECT (CP)]², with existential *you* being the verb, the post-*you* NP the object, and the post-NP element an adjunct CP. The subject position will be an empty category.

My hypothesis is based on several observations. First, there is no clear-cut distinction between existential-*you*, locative-existential *you*, and possessive-*you* constructions. Although existential-*you* construction lacks an overt subject, subjects are sometimes omitted in possessive-*you* and locative possessive-*you* constructions as well. Second, the post-*you* NP sometimes can be definite, as “Laowang” in (3), which is against Tsai’s existential closure treatment of *you*.

Third, the post-NP VP³ can be omitted when the sentence is an “ontological existential” in Milsark’s sense (Milsark 1974). Those that are ungrammatical for lacking a post-NP VP is actually due to the pragmatic uninformative nature of these sentences.

Fourth, elements within this post-NP VP cannot be extracted. For example, a wh-adverbial cannot appear within this post-NP VP. Another test is the passive *bei* construction. According to previous researches (Huang 1999, among others), passives in Mandarin Chinese involve operator movement and predication, (aka.(4)). The existential-*you* constructions cannot be passivized, as shown in (5), showing that no movement is allowed. This *bei* test is especially significant because *you*-NP in (5) is not in an object position, and cannot be explained by the object constraint.

Finally, *you*-NP in an existential-*you* construction can appear in the topic position, shown in (6). If *you* is considered as a modal or Infl, we have to assume that there is an “IP/ ModalP-internal topic-comment construction”, which is very unlikely.

My hypothesis can also explain the word order and the object constraint problem very easily. The latter is due to the simple reason that no “extra” *you* can appear between the verb *you* and the object. (7) shows the simplified version of my analysis of the existential-*you* construction.

¹ Seeing possessive-*you* and locative-existential *you* as verbs follows Tsai’s hypothesis (Tsai 2003).
² Locatives in Mandarin Chinese are considered as NPs (Li 1990), and they often occupy argument positions. The (CP) here means that this CP is an optional adjunct.
³ Here I will continue using “post-NP VP” of the previous hypotheses for convenience.
EXAMPLES

(1) you yi ge ren zai shuijiao
    
    *you one Cl. person Prog sleep
    
    There is a person sleeping.

(2a) wo you yi zhi gou zhengzai shuijiao
    I *you one Cl. dog Prog sleep
    I have a dog which is sleeping.

   b. wuzi-li you yi zhi gou zhengzai shui jiao
    *house-in *you one Cl. dog Prog sleep
    There is a dog sleeping inside the house.

(3) ruguo you Laowang zai zheli, wo jiu bu yong danxin
    if *you Laowang at here I than not need worry
    If Laowang is here, I do not need to worry.

(4) [IPDPi [VP bei [IP OPi [IP SUBJECT V ti ] ] ] ]
    [Huang 1999]

    he bei you person hit
    he was hit by someone.

(6) [you ren]TOPIC, [wo hen xihuan]COMMENT
    you person I very like
    I like someone very much.

(7) [TP proSUBJECT [VP DPk OBJECT [CP OPk[TP....]]]]

REFERENCE


Milisark, Gary (1974) Existential Sentences in English, PhD Dissertation, MIT.


Tsai, Wei-Tien Dylan (2003)“Three Types of Existential Quantification in Chinese,” in Li, Audrey and Andrew Simpson (eds.)Functional Structure(s), Form and Interpretation: Perspectives from Asian Languages, Routledge Curzon, London.

4 In (5), Tsai’s modal analysis is used. The analysis cannot explain the ungrammaticality of (5).