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A Corpus-Based Study of the Order of Demonstratives and Relative Clauses in Mandarin Chinese

In Mandarin Chinese there are two possibilities with regard to the relative order of relative clauses (RelC) and demonstrative expressions (DM). A relative clause may either precede a demonstrative expression (RelC+DM+NP) or follow it (DM+RelC+NP). Traditionally, it is assumed that the latter is transformationally derived from the former by virtue of the movement of DM across RelC. An investigation of two Chinese corpora, the Lancaster Corpus of Modern Chinese (McEnery et al. 2003) and the Academia Sinica Balanced Corpus (Huang et al. 1995)), however, reveals that such a claim is untenable and discoveries from these two corpora indicate that the choice of the two different word orders are constrained by syntactic and pragmatic factors. Syntactic factors play a role in deciding which construction should be used. Specifically if the subject is relativized, RelC tends to precede DM. Conversely, if the object is relativized, RelC tends to follow DM. Pragmatic factors also contribute to determine which construction should be utilized: the construction RelC+DM+NP tends to introduce a new referent into the discourse; In contrast, DM+RelC+NP is used to name or track a referent. Overall this study shows that theoretical assumptions made on the basis of introspection alone may not always be reliable. Corpus data can be tremendously useful in helping us arriving at a realistic account of the structure of human language.