OLD CHINESE SYNTAX: BASIC WORD ORDER

This lemma summarizes the principle characteristics of Old Chinese word order from the late Spring and Autumn period to the end of the Warring States period (approximately 6th-3rd centuries BCE). I also touch upon some changes which are in evidence in early Middle Chinese texts of the Han period.

1. Basic word order

Old Chinese had the same basic word order found in the modern varieties. Unmarked declarative clauses were SVO, with objects and other internal arguments following the verb. Modal and embedding verbs also precede their complements, as can be seen in the second clause.

(1) 夫人幼而學之，壯而欲行之。　　　　　　　　　(*Mèngzǐ* 孟子 梁惠王下)

Fú	rén	yòu	ér	xué	*zhī*	zhuàng	ér	yù	[xíng	*zhī*].
DEM	person	young	CONJ	study	3.ACC	mature	CONJ	want	carry.out	3.ACC

'When a person is young, he studies this. When he matures, he wants to put it into practice.'

Head-final order manifests itself in clause-final particles like the *yes/no* question marker *hū* 乎. Note that (2a) is a matrix question. Like modern Chinese varieties, embedded *yes/no* questions did not employ a Q particle but were formed on alternative questions, as in (2b).

(2) a. 管仲知禮乎？   (*Lúnyǔ* 論語 八佾)

        Guǎn Zhòng   zhī   lǐ   *hū*?

        Guan Zhong   know   Rites   Q

        'Did Guan Zhong know the Rites?'

    b. 桓公不知臣欺主與不欺主已明矣。   (*Hánfēizǐ* 韓非子 難二)

        Huán   gōng   bù   zhī   chén   [qī   zhǔ]

        Huan   duke   not   know   minister   deceive   lord

           yǔ   bù   [qī   zhǔ]   yǐ   míng   *yǐ*.

           or   not   deceive   lord   already   clear   ASP

        'It is already clear that Duke Huan did not know whether his minister was deceiving

        him or not.'

Noun phrases also tended to be head-final. Possessors and modifiers precede the head noun.

(3) a. 文王之囿   (*Mèngzǐ* 孟子 梁惠王下)

        [[Wén wáng] zhī   *yòu*]

        Wen   king   GEN   park

        'King Wen's park'

    b. 避世之士   (*Lúnyǔ* 論語 微子)

        [[bì   shì]   zhī   *shì*]

        avoid   world   GEN   scholar

        'scholar who avoids the world'

According to Peyraube (1991), there were no classifiers in the Late Archaic period. Numerals commonly appeared directly preceding nouns, as in (4a). (4b) shows that a demonstrative further precedes the numeral.

(4) a. 吾先君文王克息，獲三矢焉 (*Zuǒzhuàn* 左傳 宣公 4)

Wú	xiān	jūn	wén	wáng	kè	xí,	huò	*sān*	shǐ	yān.
our	former	lord	Wen	king	conquer	Xi	capture	3	arrow	there

'When our former lord King Wen conquered Xi, (he) captured three arrows.'

b. 願君去此三子者也。 (*Hánfēizǐ* 韓非子 36)

Yuàn	jūn	qù	*cǐ*	sān	zǐ	zhě	yě.
desire	lord	dismiss	this	3	gentleman	DET	NMLZ

'(I) hope your lordship will dismiss these three gentlemen.'

One word order characteristic distinguishing Old Chinese from modern Mandarin is greater freedom in the positioning of prepositional phrases. In Modern Standard Mandarin, adjunct PPs generally surface in preverbal position, while argumental PPs appear post verbally, within the VP. Argumental PPs in Old Chinese likewise surfaced in postverbal position, as exemplified by the dative argument in (5a) introduced by the preposition *yu*. Adjunct PPs were also frequently found in postverbal position, like the passive agent in (5b).

(5) a. 天子能薦人於天。　　　　　　　　　　(*Mèngzǐ* 孟子 萬章上)

　　　　Tiānzǐ　　néng　jiàn　　　　rén　　　*yú*　　*tiān*.

　　　　ruler　　can　　recommend　person　to　　heaven

　　　　'The ruler can recommend someone to heaven.'

　　b. 吾長見笑於大方之家。　　　　　　　　(*Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子 秋水)

　　　　Wú　　cháng jiàn　xiào　*yú dàfang*　　*zhī*　　*jiā*.

　　　　1　　always PASS　laugh　by enlightened　GEN　　person

　　　　'I would have always been laughed at by an enlightened person.'

As Huang (1978), Sun (1996), Hong (1998), and others show, one reason for the subsequent increase in preverbal PPs was the grammaticalization of verbs heading modifying VPs as prepositions. For example, the Modern Mandarin source preposition *cong* 'from' grammaticalized from a verb meaning 'follow' in a construction like the one exemplified by (6a), in which *cong* heads an adjunct VP modifying another VP. The result was that modifying VPs were replaced with modifying PPs (Whitman 2000).

(6)　　a. 從晉文公伐鄭。　　　　　　　　　　(*Zuǒzhuàn* 左傳 宣公 3)

　　　　[VP Cóng　　Jīn Wén　Gōng]　　fá　　Zhēng.

　　　　　follow　　Jin Wen　lord　　　attack　Zheng

　　　　'(He) accompanied Lord Wen of Jin to attack the Zheng.'[

b. 孝文帝從代來。　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(*Shǐjì* 史記 孝文本紀)

Xiàowén　Dì　　　　　[PP cóng　Dài]　lái.

Xiaowen　emperor　　　from　Dai　come

'Emperor Xiaowen arrived from Dai.'

2. Dislocations

Various other derived word orders are also found in Old Chinese. As in modern Chinese varieties, topicalization was productive in Old Chinese. Unlike modern Mandarin, however, topicalization of the object in Old Chinese required a resumptive pronoun in the VP. The accusative pronoun *zhī* resumes the topic Zǐlù in (7).

(7)　　子路，人告之以有過。　　　　　　　　　　(*Mèngzǐ* 孟子 公孫丑上)

Zǐlù,　　rén　　gào　*zhī*　yǐ　　yǒu　guò.

Zilu　　person　tell　3.ACC　APPL　have　error

'Zilu, someone told him he made a mistake.'

Old Chinese differs from modern varieties in having two other movement processes which placed an object or other VP-internal constituent in preverbal position. For example, object *wh*-phrases preceded the verb, as in (8).

(8) 吾誰欺？欺天乎？   (*Lúnyǔ* 論語 子罕)

    Wú   *shéi*   qī?   Qī   tiān   hū?

    1   who   deceive   deceive   Heaven   Q

    'Who do I deceive? Do I deceive Heaven?'

The preverbal positioning of the objects in examples like (8a, b) has been viewed by Li and Thompson (1974), Wáng (1958), La Polla (1994), Feng (1996), Xu (2006), and others as evidence of basic OV order in Old or pre-Old Chinese. On the other hand, Peyraube (1996), Shěn (1992), Djamouri & Paul (2009), and others argue that VO has been the basic order throughout the attested history of Chinese and that there is no evidence for earlier OV basic order. One difficulty for the OV proponents is the fact that the position for *wh*-words was not immediately preverbal, as we would expect if the preverbal *wh*-words occupied their base positions. In (9a), a *wh*-word has moved from an embedded clause and precedes the matrix verb. In (9b), negation intervenes between the *wh*-word and the verb. If *wh*-movement were simply the surface realization of base generated OV order, then the object should be immediately adjacent to the verb that selected it, which is not the case in (9).

(9) a. 公誰欲與？   (*Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子 徐无鬼)

    Gōng   *shéi*   yù   [yǔ __]?

    2   who   want give

    'Who do you want to give (it) to?'

b. 我何為乎？ 何不為乎？　　　　　　(*Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子 秋水)

Wǒ	hé	wéi	hū?	*Hé*	bù	wéi	hū?
1	what	do	Q	what	not	do	Q

'Then what should I do? What should I not do?'

Regarding the landing site for *wh*-movement, it must be lower than the clause-peripheral position that *wh*-movement targets in languages like English. Aldridge (2010) proposes that Old Chinese *wh*-movement targeted a position between the VP and the subject. The asymmetry in (10), which was first observed by Wèi (1999), shows that object *wh*-words follow the modal adverb *jiāng*, while subject *wh*-words precede *jiāng*. If *wh*-words moved to a position in the clause periphery, then object and subject *wh*-words should occupy the same position. Therefore, the position for object *wh*-words must be lower than that for subjects.

(10)　a. 我將何求？　　　　　　　　　　(*Zuǒzhuàn* 左傳 僖公 28)

Wǒ	*jiāng*	hé	qiú?
1	will	what	ask.for

'What will I ask for?'

b. 誰將治之？　　　　　　　　　　(*Yànzǐ Chūnqiū* 內篇諫上 13)

Shéi	*jiāng*	zhì	zhī?
who	will	govern	them

'Who will govern them?'

Wh-movement was lost in Middle Chinese. For mysterious reasons, *wh*-movement seems to have undergone an intermediate stage of cliticization in the Han period. (11) shows that long distance *wh*-movement was lost from an embedded clause. The *wh*-word rather attaches to the local verb. Recall from (10a) that Old Chinese syntactic *wh*-movement was able to cross a clause boundary.

(11)　　諸君欲誰立？　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(*Shǐjì* 史記 趙世家)

Zhū　　jūn　　　　　yù　　[*shéi*　lì　　__]?

all　　gentleman　　want　who　stand

'Gentlemen, who do you want to place (on the throne)?'

Another environment in which Old Chinese objects appeared in preverbal position is negated clauses when the object was a pronoun. The negator in this example is the quantifier *mò* 'none'. The pronominal object surfaces between the negator and the verb.

(12)　　吾先君亦莫之行也。　　　　　　　　　　　　　(*Mèngzǐ* 孟子 藤文公上)

Wú　　xiān　jūn　　yì　　mò　　*zhī*　xíng　yě.

1　　former lord　also　none　3.ACC　do　　DECL

'None of our former lords did this either.'

A variety of approaches have been taken to the analysis of pronoun fronting to negation. Some treat this as focus movement (Djamouri 1991), others as cliticization (Feng 1996). However, there is evidence that the movement has a syntactic basis and is triggered not by prosodic factors

or information structure. In (13a), the first person pronoun is attracted to the clausal negator *bù* but not in (13b).

(13)   a.   我饑而不我食。   (*Lǚ Shì Chūnqiū* 呂氏春秋 12.5 不侵)

               Wǒ   jī   ér   bù   *wǒ*   sì.

               1   starve   CONJ   not   1   feed

               'When I was starving, (they) did not feed me.'

       b.   制不在我。   (*Guóyǔ* 國語 晉 2)

               Zhì   bù   zài   *wǒ*.

               control   not   be.in   1

               'The control is not within me.'

If we replace the object of *zài* with a third person pronoun, which shows a distinction for case, we see that the locative verb takes a dative complement, as in (14a). Note in (14b) that this dative pronoun also does not front to negation. The generalization which emerges is that only accusative case-marked pronouns are attracted by negation.

(14)   a.   先君之廟在焉。   (*Lǚ Shì Chūnqiū* 呂氏春秋 15.4 報更)

               Xiān   jūn   zhī   miào   zài   *yān*.

               former   lord   GEN   shrine   be.in   3.DAT

               'The former lord's shrine is there.'

b. 天下莫強焉。 (*Mèngzǐ* 孟子 梁惠王上)

Tiānxià mò qiáng *yān*.

world none strong 3.DAT

'No one in the world is stronger than them.'

Aldridge (2015) proposes that pronoun fronting to negation in Old Chinese was a type of object shift in order to receive accusative case. She points out that in Slavic languages like Russian objects in negated clauses are marked with genitive case when indefinite but take accusative case when definite. Given that pronouns are inherently definite, it is reasonable to assume that they needed to receive accusative case.

(15) Anna *ne* kupila **knig/knigi**.

Anna.NOM NEG bought books.GEN/books.ACC

'Anna did not buy any books/the books.' (Harves 2002:97)

Exceptions to the object shift analysis are found almost exclusively in biclausal structures. But here, too, clear patterns are discernable and unlikely to be related to cliticization or focus. As an example, the possibility of pronoun fronting across a clause boundary correlated with the type of negator. (16a) shows fronting of an embedded object pronoun when 莫 *mò* 'none' was the negator in the matrix clause. When the matrix negator was 不 *bù*, the pronoun remained inside the embedded clause, as in (16b).

(16)   a. 虎負嵎，莫之敢攖。   (*Mèngzǐ* 孟子 盡心下)

       Hǔ   fù   yú,   *mò*   zhī   gǎn   [yīng ___].

       tiger   back   crevice   none   3.ACC dare   approach

       'The tiger backed into a crevice and no one dared to approach it.'

       b. 為人臣者，不敢去之。   (*Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子 山木)

       Wéi   rén   chén   zhě   *bù*   gǎn   [qù   zhī].

       be   person minister   DET   not   dare   leave 3.ACC

       'One who serves as someone's minister does not dare to leave him.'

This asymmetry may be due to different structural positions for negators. In (16a), the negator 莫 *mò* quantifies over the matrix subject. Since the matrix subject is identical to the embedded subject, *mò* clearly takes scope over both clauses. On the other hand, there is evidence that 不 *bù* is an adverb that only scopes over what it adjoins to, as Ernst (1995) and Hsieh (2001) have argued for Modern Mandarin. In the following example, 不 *bù* negates only the following PP and not the entire VP. Note further that the object pronoun does not front but remains inside the VP instead.

(17)   禍福無不自己求之者。   (*Mèngzǐ* 孟子公孫丑上)

       Huò   fú   wú   *bù* zì   jǐ   qiú   zhī   zhě.

       disaster fortune not.exist not from self   seek   3.ACC DET

       'Disaster and good fortune, there is no one who seeks these but within themselves.'

Pronoun fronting to negation steadily declined in Early Middle Chinese. The following examples offer a striking contrast. The 5th century BCE example (18a) shows the first person pronoun 我 *wǒ* undergoing fronting. In contrast to this, a quotation of this sentence in a 1st century BCE text does not employ fronting, as shown in (18b).

(18)　　a.　莫我知也夫！　　　　　　　　　　　(*Lúnyǔ* 論語 憲問)

　　　　　Mò　　*wǒ*　　zhī　　yě　　fú!

　　　　　none　1　　　know　NMLZ　EXCL

　　　　　'No one understands me!'

　　　　b.　莫知我夫！　　　　　　　　　　　　(*Shǐjì* 史記孔子世家)

　　　　　Mò　　zhī　　*wǒ*　　fú!

　　　　　none　know　1　　　EXCL

　　　　　'No one understands me!'

3. Relative clauses

Relative clauses in Old Chinese were generally prenominal, with the head NP following the modifying clause, as shown in (19a). The particle 之 *zhī* functions as the linker between this NP and the modifying clause. In a headless relative clause formed on subject position, the clause is followed by the particle 者 *zhě*, as in (19b). In order to relativize on a VP-internal position, the particle 所 *suǒ* appears between the subject and the predicate in the relative clause, regardless of whether the clause is headed or headless, as in (19c). Interestingly *suǒ* occupies essentially the same position as object *wh*-words.

(19) a. 豈若從避世之士哉。   (*Lúnyǔ* 論語 微子)

qǐ   ruò   cóng [__ [bì   shì]   *zhī*   shì]   zāi.

how   like   follow   escape   world GEN   scholar   EXCL

'How could that compare to following a scholar who escapes from the world?'

b. 欲戰者可謂眾矣。   (*Zuǒzhuàn* 左傳 成公 6)

[__   [yù   zhàn] *zhě*]   kě   wèi   zhòng   yǐ.

desire fight   DET   POT   say   majority   ASP

'(Those) who desire to fight can be said to form the majority.'

c. 人之所畏不可不畏。   (*Lǎozǐ* 老子 20)

[rén   zhī   *suǒ*   [wèi __]]   bù   kě   bù   wèi.

person GEN   REL   fear   not   POT   not   fear

'[What people fear] cannot not be feared.'

The similarity shared by *zhě* and *suǒ* in forming relative clauses had been noticed as least as early as Mǎ (1898), who classified both as pronominals. But it was Zhū (1983) who was the first (to my knowledge) to capture the striking asymmetry between them in syntactic terms by associating *zhě* with subject gaps and *suǒ* with objects. He even goes so far as to suggest a transformational connection with relativization by saying that these morphemes raise or "take out" (*tíqǔ* 提取) these grammatical positions from the clause (Zhū 1983:61).

   Aldridge (2013) proposes that the primary structural difference between *suǒ* and *zhě* relative clauses was that the object relatives built on *suǒ* were nominalized, as evidenced by the genitive case-marking on the embedded subject, as in (19c). The purpose of *suǒ* was to license the gap within the VP. The distinction between subject and object relative clauses was gradually lost in

the Middle Chinese period. Aldridge proposes that this change was due to the loss of genitive marking on embedded subjects, a change which can be observed as early as the 1st century BCE. (20a) shows a 5th century BCE sentential subject with genitive marking on the embedded subject. (20b) shows a similar sentence in a 1st century BCE chronical. The later quotation does not use genitive case for the embedded subject.

(20) a. 天下之無道也久矣。   (*Lúnyǔ* 論語 八佾)

    [Tianxia **zhi** wu   dao   ye] jiu   yi.

    world   GEN   not.have   way   NMLZ long   PERF

    'It is a long time since the world has been without the proper way.'

  b. 天下無道久矣。   (*Shǐjì* 史記孔子世家)

    [Tianxia wu   dao] jiu   yi.

    world   not.have   way   long   PERF

    'It is a long time since the world has been without the proper way.'

The loss of genitive case and the nominalization structure for object relative clauses led to the adoption of a uniform structural derivation for both subject and object relative clauses, as is the case in modern Chinese varieties. In modern Mandarin, both types of relative clause are formed on the linking element 的 *de*, which is widely taken to be a late Middle Chinese replacement for the Old Chinese subject relativizer *zhě* (Lǚ 1943, Ohta 1958, Cáo 1986, Féng 1990, Jiāng 1999, and others), but see Wáng (1958) and Méi (1988) for alternative proposals.

4. Reflexive pronouns

Old Chinese had two reflexive anaphors: *zì* (自) and *jǐ* (己). They differed both in position and in their conditions for coreference. Like the modern Mandarin anaphor *zìjǐ*, Archaic Chinese *jǐ* could refer to a clause-mate subject or could be bound long distance (Wèi 2004, Aldridge 2009). In terms of position *jǐ* occurs in argument position , typically following the verb or preposition that selects it. In (20a), *jǐ* is bound by the local subject, while in (20b), *jǐ* in the embedded clause takes the matrix subject as its antecedent.

(20)   a.   脩己以安人。   (*Lúnyǔ* 論語 憲問)

e_i xiū   *jǐ*$_i$ yǐ   ān   rén.

train   self   COMP   protect person

'Train yourself in order to protect other people.'

b   諸侯惡其害己。   (*Mèngzǐ* 孟子 萬章下)

Zhūhóu   wù   [qí   hài   *jǐ*].

feudal.lord   dislike   they   inconvenience   self

'The feudal lords dislike it that they (those others) inconvenience them.'

Zì, on the other hand, was always locally bound. In (121), it must take the embedded subject as its antecedent and cannot refer to the matrix subject. There is also a positional difference between *jǐ* and *zì*. In surface order, *zì* always appears in immediate preverbal position.

(21)   言非禮義，謂之自暴也。   (*Mèngzǐ* 孟子 離樓上)

Yán   fēi   lǐ   yì,   wèi   [zhī   zì   bào]   yě.

speech   betray Rite Righteousness   say   3.ACC self   injure   DECL

'If his speech betrays the Rites and Righteousness, then (one) says of him that he harms

himself.'

The modern Mandarin compound *zìjǐ* was formed in Middle Chinese, no later than the 4th

century CE (Wèi 2004). The replacement of the earlier monosyllabic anaphors with the

compound was undoubtedly related to the bisyllabification of the lexicon which took place in

Middle Chinese. Another necessary condition seems to have been the acquisition by *zì* of certain

key characteristics formerly displayed only by *jǐ*, e.g. the ability to be long distance bound. In

(22), *zì* takes the matrix subject as its antecedent rather than the subject of its own clause.

(22)   或疑洪知裔自嫌。   (*Sānguózhì* 三國志 蜀 11)

Huò   yí   Hóng zhī   [Yì   *zì*   xián].

some   suspect   YH   know ZY   self   dislike

'Some suspected that Yang Hong knew that Zhang Yi disliked him.'

The following example from a 4th century text shows the compound anaphor *zìjǐ* as a long

distance anaphor taking the matrix subject as its antecedent.

(23)   但令執作供給自己。   (4th C: *Mohe Seng Qilü* 3)

Dàn   líng   zhízuò   [gòngjǐ   *zìjǐ*].

| but | order | labor | supply | self |

'But (you) order (them) to labor to supply you.'

4. Concluding remarks

This lemma has introduced the basic characteristics of Old Chinese word order and syntax. In the interest of space, I have paid particular attention to those characteristics which differ noticeably from modern Chinese varieties. Unsurprisingly, these characteristics also are among the most studied in research on Old Chinese grammar. I have therefore endeavored to offer both a sketch of Old Chinese syntax, together with a sense of some questions raised in the broader realm of linguistic debate.

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Teaser: This lemma summarizes characteristics of Old Chinese word order which differ significantly from modern Chinese varieties. The lemma also touches upon the changes which took place in Middle Chinese leading to the emergence of the modern forms.