

# Subjectivity of Chinese and English Topic Constructions: A Grounding Analysis

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Topic constructions refer to a series of constructions composed of a topic nominal and a comment clause, which take four main types of manifestations, including subject-topic, object-topic, left-dislocation and hanging-topic constructions. As there are no consensus on the semantic features and functions of these constructions as well as their typicality in a specific language (Chen 1994; Lambrecht 1994; Liu & Lin 2010; Netz & Kuzar 2009; Shi 2000; Wang & Li 2016 etc.), this paper investigates their distribution and grounding features both monolingually and in a contrastive perspective, with a focus on the grounding strata of their comment clauses. Based on a comparative corpus of ten hours' casual conversation in Chinese and English, we get 1789 instances in Chinese and 309 in English, with different preferences in distribution, as showed in the table below.

Construction Language	Subject - topic	Object -topic	Left -dislocation	Hanging – topic	Total
Chinese	567 (31.7%)	560 (31.3%)	182 (10.2%)	480 (26.8%)	1789 (100%)
English	177 (57.5%)	16 (5.2%)	105 (34%)	11 (3.4%)	309 (100%)

In the light of Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 2002, 2008, 2017 etc.), grounding mainly refers to those expressions that establish a connection between the ground (i.e. the speech event, its participants, and the immediate circumstances), and the conceptual content evoked by a nominal or finite clause. After manual annotation of the grounding strategies of all instances in the data exhaustively, we find that there is a significant difference on the grounding options between the two languages. While the Chinese comment clauses tend to grounded with more epistemic and inferential means (应该'should'/真是'really'/够...的'quite'in (1a,b,d)), the English ones are more inclined to use temporal qualification, with limited expression of subjective assessment (*was/is/played* in (2a,c,d)).

- 1) a. [四千多的房价], [Ø]应该是 05 年左右吧。 (Subject-topic)  
 Four thousand more de apartment price, should be 05 year or so *ba*-Particle
- b. [住宿费], 真是没白出[Ø]。 (Object-topic)  
 Accommodation fee, really no in vain give
- c. [那客厅], 我儿子能在[里面]骑自行车打转。 (Left-dislocation)  
 That living room, my son can inside ride bicycle turn
- d. [这个饭]<sub>1</sub>, [成本]<sub>2</sub>够高的。 (Hanging-topic)  
 This rice, cost quite high *de*-Particle
- 2) a. [Another thing I thought was interesting], [Ø]was the, this, the emphasis on transportation. (Subject-topic)
- b. [Some iron] you can't, uh people can't absorb [Ø]. (Object-topic)
- c. You know, [this guy], I can't really believe [that guy]'s her husband. (Left-dislocation)
- d. [The first week]<sub>1</sub>, I played with them [all week long]<sub>2</sub>, which was really stupid. (Hanging-topic)

A further comparison shows that among the topic constructions in Chinese, hanging-topic is the most subjective construction, subject-topic and left-dislocation are less subjective, and object-topic construction even less. Meanwhile in English topic constructions, only left-dislocation is similarly used with the Chinese counterpart. Further investigation demonstrates that the grounding option in the comment clause is closely related with the speaker-as-conceptualizer's epistemic control over the topic referent. When the topic referent is more accessible in current discourse space, both objective description and subjective assessment can be selected in the comment clause. However, as the topic referent is not prominent in English, speakers tend to give objective description to locate the topic. Another interesting evidence is the dual function of the clause-external grounding elements in Chinese, both as qualification of the specific comment propositions and as explicit markers of the topics' scope. It is hoped that this cognitive-grounding analysis can provide a new perspective to the typological differences between Chinese and English.