

REVISITING MANDARIN CHINESE VP-FRONTING: INSIGHTS FOR A UNIFIED THEORY OF PHRASAL MOVEMENT

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Introduction

- The difference between A- and A'-movement, i.e., A/A'-distinction, is a long-discussed topic in the generative linguistic literature. Most recent studies link A-movement to φ -agreement and/or Case-licensing. (van Urk, 2015; Safir, 2019; Lohninger, 2024; Hewett 2025a, a.o., cf. Keine, 2019; Massam & Travis 2021; Brodtkin 2025.)
- This study challenges this consensus by reporting non-nominal movement exhibiting A-properties in a battery of standard diagnostics.
- The empirical domain of this study is Mandarin Chinese VP-fronting (VPF): The clause-internal Low-VPF (1), and the clause-external High-VPF (2).

- (1) Zhangsan [du zhe ben shu] du=le san
Zhangsan read this CL book read=PFV three
ci / san ge xiaoshi _ .
time / three CL hour
'Zhangsan has read this book three times/for three hours.'
- (2) [du zhe ben shu], Zhangsan du=le san
read this CL book Zhangsan read=PFV three
ci / san ge xiaoshi _ .
time / three CL hour
'As for reading this book, Zhangsan has read this book three times/for three hours.'
- (3) Zhangsan du=le san ci / san ge
Zhangsan read=PFV three time / three CL
xiaoshi zhe ben shu.
hour this CL book
'Zhangsan has read this book three times/for three hours.'

- This study argues that both types of Mandarin VPF (partially) involve A-movement, suggesting the elimination of the nominal restriction on A-movement and calling for a category-neutral view of phrasal movement.

Basics on Mandarin VP-fronting

IP-architecture of Mandarin Chinese

- Hierarchy: TP > AspP > vP > Asp_{F/DP} > VP
- Frequency/Duration adverbials are located at Spec, Asp_{F/DP} (Gouguet, 2006; Lai, 2021, 2024; Qiu, Zhang & Hu, 2021)
- Mandarin Chinese exhibits V-to-Asp movement. (Pan, 2022; Lai, 2024)
- IO c-commands DO in Mandarin ditransitive construction. (Paul & Whitman, 2010; Lai, 2021)

Motivation for a movement analysis

- Mandarin VP-fronting is island-sensitive. (Lai, 2024: (54))

Complex DP island:

- (4) *Wo [qi nei pi ma] xiangxin [Lisi
I ride that CL horse believe Lisi
qi=le liang ge xiaoshi _ de shuofa] .
ride=PFV two CL hour DE claim
Intended: 'I believe the claim that Lisi has ridden that horse for two hours.'
- (5) *[qi nei pi ma], Wo xiangxin [Lisi
ride that CL horse I believe Lisi
qi=le liang ge xiaoshi _ de shuofa] .
ride=PFV two CL hour DE claim
Intended: 'As for riding this horse, I believe the claim that Lisi has ridden that horse for two hours.'

Adjunct island:

- (6) *Ni he ta [qi nei pi ma] zai [Lisi
you and she ride that CL horse at Lisi
qi=le liang ge xiaoshi _ zhihou] cai
ride=PFV two CL hour after then
fenshou.
break.up
Intended: 'She and you broke up only after Lisi had ridden that horse for two hours.'
- (7) *[qi nei pi ma], Ni he ta zai [Lisi
ride that CL horse you and she at Lisi
qi=le liang ge xiaoshi _ zhihou] cai
ride=PFV two CL hour after then
fenshou.
break.up
Intended: 'As for riding that horse, she and you broke up only after Lisi had ridden that horse for two hours.'

Diagnosing A-movement of VP

Table 1: The A vs. A'-properties of Mandarin Low/High VP-fronting

Tests targeting properties sensitive to A-mvt	Low VPF	High VPF
Shows no specific interpretive effect	✓	×
Cannot cross finite clause boundaries	✓	×
No binding reconstruction	Shows Condition C obviation	w.r.t. Subj
	Creates new antecedent-anaphor relation	w.r.t. IO
can feed further A-movement	✓	×

Applicable Diagnostics on A/A'-properties

I. Interpretive effect

- Low-VPF exhibits no special interpretive effect.
- High VPF has topic interpretation. (compare (1) & (2))

II. Clause-boundedness

- Low-VPF is clause-bounded, i.e., cannot cross finite boundaries. (Meadows & Yan, 2025)
- High-VPF is not clause-bounded.
- changshi 'try' takes (at least) vP/non-finite TP complement, renwei 'think' takes CP complement. (N. Huang, 2018; He, 2020, 2024)

- (8) Zhangsan [du zhe ben shu] changshi [TP
Zhangsan read this CL book try
_ du=le san ci _].
read=PFV three time
'Zhangsan tried to read this book three times.'
- (9) *Zhangsan [du zhe ben shu] renwei [CP
Zhangsan read this CL book think
Lisi _ du=le san ci _].
Lisi read=PFV three time
Intended: 'Zhangsan thinks that Lisi has read this book three times.'
- (10) [du zhe ben shu], Zhangsan renwei [CP _
read this CL book Zhangsan think
Lisi _ du=le san ci _].
Lisi read=PFV three time
'As for reading this book, Zhangsan thinks that Lisi has read this book three times.'

III. Condition C Obviation

- Low-VPF exhibits Condition C obviation.
- High-VPF exhibits Condition C obviation w.r.t. the indirect object, not w.r.t. the subject.

- (11) Wo [song Zhangsan_i de shu] song=le
I give Zhangsan POSS book give=PFV
ta_i san ci _ .
him three time
'I have given Zhangsan's book to him three times.'
- (12) [song Zhangsan_i de shu], ta_i _
give Zhangsan POSS book, he
song=le wo san ci _ .
give=PFV me three time
'As for giving Zhangsan's book, he has given me Zhangsan's book three times.'
- (13) [song Zhangsan_i de shu], wo _
give Zhangsan POSS book, I
song=le ta_i san ci _ .
give=PFV him three time
'As for giving Zhangsan's book, I have given him Zhangsan's book three times.'

IV. Antecedent-anaphora relation

- Low-VPF creates new antecedent-anaphora relation.
- High-VPF creates new antecedent-anaphora relation w.r.t. the indirect object, not w.r.t. the subject.

- (14) Wo [song taziji_i de shu] song=le
I give himself POSS book give=PFV
Zhangsan_i san ci _ .
Zhangsan three time
'I have given Zhangsan books of himself three times.'
- (15) [song taziji_i de shu], Zhangsan_i _
give himself POSS book Zhangsan
song=le Lisi_i san ci _ .
give=PFV Lisi three time
'As for giving books of himself, Zhangsan has given Lisi books of himself three times.'

Interim Summary

- Low VPF involves A-movement, High VPF involves A'-movement fed by A-movement (Low VPF).
- Low-VPF feeds further A-movement ((8) & (16)).

Deriving VP-fronting

Landing Site of Low VP-fronting

Against previous proposals

Not Spec, vP (contra Cheng, 2007; Bartos, 2019)

- Such a proposal is based on a specific model of Mandarin IP-architecture, where AspP is below vP. Here I adopt the well-accepted model that AspP is above vP.
- VP moves over the Asp head, therefore cannot land at Spec, vP.

Not IP-internal Spec, TopP (contra Hsu, 2008; Chen & Yip 2026)

- The complement of event-type verbs, e.g., changshi 'try', lacks of the clause-internal TopP (N. Huang, 2018; He, 2020, 2024), but can exhibit VPF (16).

- (16) Zhangsan changshi [*(du) zhe ben shu]
Zhangsan try (read) this CL book
du=le san ci _ .
read=PFV three time
'Zhangsan tried to read this book three times.'

Not Spec, AspP (contra Lai, 2024)

- Low VPF can precede the outermost specifier of AspP, i.e., adverbs adjoining to AspP (18). (Ernst 2001; Thompson 2006)

(17) Adverb at Spec, VP

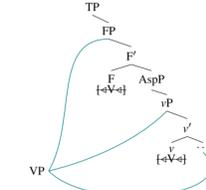
- Zhangsan [vp dasheng chang zhe shou ge]
Zhangsan loudly sing this CL song
chang=le san ge xiaoshi _ .
sing=PFV three CL hour
'Zhangsan has sung this song loudly for three hours.'

(18) Adverb at Spec, AspP

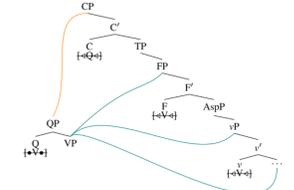
- Zhangsan [vp chang zhe shou ge] [AspP
Zhangsan sing this CL song
dasheng chang=le san ge xiaoshi _].
loudly sing=PFV three CL hour
'Zhangsan has sung this song loudly for three hours.'

Proposal

Mandarin low VPF:



Mandarin high VPF:



Insights for Views of Phrasal Movement

Insulation approach (Cable, 2010; Safir, 2019; Colley, 2024)

- A'-moved elements differ from A-moved ones (DP) in being insulated in an QP.
- A/A'-distinction=DP/non-DP-distinction
- Presence/absence of reconstruction: DPs allow Late Merge, QPs do not.
=> A-movement of any XP bigger than DP is impossible. (Undergenerate!)

- (19) ✓ DP
D Δ
- (20) * QP
Q DP Δ
- (21) * VP
V DP Δ

Featural view (van Urk, 2015; Branam & Erlewine, 2022; Lohninger, 2025)

- A-mvt triggered by intrinsic features, A'-mvt by optional features.
- If A-mvt is sensitive to φ /Case-features, => VPF with A-properties is not expected. (Undergenerate!)
- If A-mvt is sensitive to D-feature, => VPF with A-properties is not expected. (Undergenerate!)
- & A/A'-distinction=DP/[XP+A']-distinction (Unexplained inconsistency)

Categorial view (Hewett, 2025)

- Categorial feature-driven Merge
- A/A'-distinction=DP/QP-distinction => Undergenerate but with flexibility!
- It does not exclude the possibility of non-nominal A-movement.

Extension: A'-probes target QP and A-probes target any non-insulated XP (at least DP & VP), i.e., A/A'-distinction = non-QP/QP-distinction.
Next Step: Look for cross-linguistic non-nominal movements with A-properties.

Conclusion

- Mandarin VP-fronting demonstrates that A-movement can target non-nominal constituents (VP), undermining theories that restrict A-movement to nominals.
- Currently, non-nominal A-movement is best captured by an extended categorial view of A/A'-distinction.

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