



Preverbal Objects in Taiwan Southern Min: Topic or Focus?

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Abstract

This paper studies preverbal objects in Taiwan Southern Min (TSM), which are defined as NPs that occur after the subject, before the verb, and are subcategorized for by the verb. This paper adopts five syntactic tests taken from Rizzi (1997) to judge the status of preverbal NPs in TSM, topic or focus. First: A topic (but not a focus) may contain a resumptive pronoun in the comment clause. Second: A topic does not result in weak crossover effect, yet the focus does. Third: More than one topic is allowed in one sentence, while the number of the focus is limited to one. Fourth: Bare quantificational elements cannot be topics, yet they can be a focus. Fifth: A *wh*-operator is compatible with a topic, but not with a focus. Three more factors discussed in the literature on preverbal NPs in Mandarin Chinese are also considered. First: In a topic construction, the VP can be questioned, while in a focus construction, it cannot. Second: A focus can be indefinite but a topic cannot. Third: The bare NP in the pre-adverbial position functions as a topic and it has to be specific, while the NP in the post-adverbial, preverbal position serves as a focus and it can be nonspecific. The test results show that preverbal NPs in TSM can function as either topic or focus when appropriate contrasts are provided. Moreover, through tests, this paper further distinguishes focuses from contrastive topics, which carry intonational stress as focuses do but display features of topics.

Keywords

topic, focus, preverbal object, Taiwan Southern Min

1. Introduction

Chinese is commonly considered an SVO language (Huang 1982, Sun and Givon 1985) as demonstrated by the Mandarin Chinese example (1); however, sentences with SOV order also occur very often as shown in the Mandarin Chinese example (2). NPs that occur after the subject, before the verb, and are subcategorized for by the verb are termed preverbal NP objects, which are exemplified by *gongke* ‘homework’ in (2).¹

- (1) Wo zuo-wan gongke le. (Mandarin Chinese)
 I do-finish homework Part²
 ‘I finished doing homework.’
- (2) Wo gongke zuo-wan le. (Mandarin Chinese)
 I homework do-finish Part
 ‘I finished doing homework.’

Preverbal objects in Mandarin Chinese have been well-discussed in the literature (Badan 2007, 2008, Ernst and Wang 1995, Paul 2002, 2005, Shyu 1995, 2001, Tang 1990, Tsai 2008, Xu and Langendoen 1985). This paper would like to look into preverbal objects in another language spoken in Taiwan, that is, Taiwan Southern Min (TSM), a Chinese language spoken by more than 80% of the people in Taiwan (Cheng 1985). The preverbal NPs in Taiwan Southern Min are demonstrated in examples (3-6).

- (3) Li png ciah-ciah leh.³ (Taiwan Southern Min)
 you meal eat-eat Part
 ‘You eat the meal.’ (Pu-zi City Collection of Southern Min Stories)
- (4) I gu pang-leh, to liah i khi. (Taiwan Southern Min)
 he cow leave-Asp then catch it go
 ‘He left the cow behind, and then took him away.’ (Pu-zi City Collection of Southern Min Stories)

¹ NP objects that occur at the sentence-initial, pre-subject position as in (i) are not discussed in this paper.

(i) Gongke wo zuo-wan le. (Mandarin Chinese)
 homework I do-finish Part
 ‘I finished doing homework.’

Moreover, NP objects that are introduced by a disposal marker such as *ba* as in (ii) are not considered, either.

(ii) Wo ba gongke zuo-wan le. (Mandarin Chinese)
 I BA homework do-finish Part
 ‘I finished doing homework.’

² Abbreviations used in this paper are listed below:

Acc: accusative, Asp: aspect, Assoc: associative, Cl: classifier, Exp: experiential, Neg: negative particle, Pass: passive, Part: particle.

³ The romanization used in this paper for Taiwan Southern Min examples is according to the TLPA (Taiwan Language Phonetic Alphabet), which was promulgated by the Ministry of Education in Taiwan in 1998.

- (5) Gua ti-thau chang-khilai ciah tng-khi la. (Taiwan Southern Min)
 I hoe hide-up then return Part (Classical Jokes of Taiwanese)
 ‘I will return after I hide the hoe.’
- (6) Li he cinn to theh lai hing gua. (Taiwan Southern Min)
 you that money then take come return I (Sha-lu Township Collection of
 ‘You return that money to me.’ Southern Min Stories, Volume II)

As shown in (3’-5’), not every preverbal NP in TSM can also occur in the postverbal canonical object position.⁴

- (3’) *Li ciah-ciah png leh. (Taiwan Southern Min)
 you eat-eat meal Part
 ‘You eat the meal.’
- (4’) *I pang-leh gu, to liah i khi. (Taiwan Southern Min)
 he leave-Asp cow then catch it go
 ‘He left the cow behind, and then took him away.’
- (5’) *Gua chang-khilai ti-thau ciah tng-khi la. (Taiwan Southern Min)
 I hide-up hoe then return Part
 ‘I will return after I hide the hoe.’
- (6’) Li to theh he cinn lai hing gua. (Taiwan Southern Min)
 you then take that money come return I
 ‘You return that money to me.’

Moreover, it is more common to find objects occurring before the verb in TSM than in Mandarin Chinese. For instance, even though as shown in the Mandarin examples (1) and (2) the object *gongke* ‘homework’ can occur either before or after the verb, only the preverbal example (2) has a TSM counterpart

⁴ Aspect markers and phase markers in TSM must occur in a clause-final position as shown in (4) (Cheng 1992, Lien 1995, Lin 2001, Tang 2000). The aspect marker *leh* in (4) must occur clause-finally, and thus the object, *gu* ‘cow’ in (4), takes the preverbal position. In contrast, aspect and phase markers in Mandarin Chinese are not required to occur clause-finally. However, it should be noted that exceptions in TSM are also found. As noted in Lien (1995) and Tang (2000), the phase marker *tioh* is an exception. As shown in (i), *tioh* does not have to take the clause-final position.

(i) Gua khuann-tioh i a.
 I see-arrive he Part
 ‘I saw him.’

Aspect and phase markers in Mandarin do not have to occur clause-finally, while most (if not all) markers of these two types in TSM are required to take the clause-final position. The speculation is that the difference between these two languages may result from different historical developments they have undergone. The specific nature of the historical development is beyond the scope of this paper.

In Chinese, verbs of three or more syllables cannot take postverbal objects as shown in (5), where the three-syllable verb *chang-khilai* ‘hide-up’ cannot take a postverbal object, and thus the object takes the preverbal position.

as shown in (7). The would-be TSM counterpart of the postverbal example (1) is ungrammatical as shown in (7').⁵

(7) Gua kongkho co-liau a. (cf. (2)) (Taiwan Southern Min)
I homework do-finish Part
'I finished doing homework.'

(7') *Gua co-liau kongkho a. (cf. (1)) (Taiwan Southern Min)
I do-finish homework Part
'I finished doing homework.'

As illustrated above, in contexts where either preverbal or postverbal objects are allowed in Mandarin Chinese, only preverbal objects are tolerated in TSM for various reasons as stated in footnote 4. Preverbal objects are far more prevalent in TSM, but they have drawn much less attention in the literature. This paper thus aims to explore the status of the preverbal NP objects. Are they topic or focus? It should be noted that this paper does not intend to discuss how the preverbal NP object is derived.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 1 explains the motivation of this study and introduces the discussion topic—preverbal NP objects in TSM, and the discussion issue—the status of the preverbal NP objects. Section 2 determines the function of the preverbal NP object through various tests. In section 3 more tests introduced in the literature regarding Chinese preverbal NP objects are applied to judge the status of the preverbal NP object in TSM. Section 4 argues against another proposal regarding the status of the preverbal NP—the Contrastive Topic proposal. A conclusion is given in section 5.

2. Preverbal objects: topic or focus

Topic and focus are often understood as pragmatic functions (Dik 1980) or discourse functions (Halliday 1967).⁶ From a semantic/pragmatic point of view, a topic is considered to carry old information while a focus conveys new information (Belletti 2004, Rizzi 1997, 2004).⁷ In (8) when the context is provided, it is clear

⁵ (7') is ungrammatical also because the aspect marker *liau* must take the clause-final position, and thus the object *kongkho* can only take the preverbal position.

⁶ If closely defined, both topic and focus can be further divided into several subtypes (Féry 2007, Krifka 2007). For instance, Féry (2007) further classifies focus into several subclasses such as narrow focus, parallel focus, association with focus, and verum focus; topic is also divided into aboutness topic, frame-setting topic, and familiarity topic. Concerning focus, Krifka (2007) has also made the following distinctions: expression focus vs. denotation focus, semantic focus vs. pragmatic focus, narrow focus vs. broad focus. This paper does not intend to look into the subcategories of topic and focus.

⁷ Paul (2005) does not consider that topics always convey old information. However, the examples cited by her to prove that topics also can carry new information do not really support her claim.

that *cinn* ‘money’ denotes old information. *Cinn* is something mentioned earlier in the context or understood by both the speaker and hearer in the discourse. As to (9), in a different context, when *cinn* is in contrast with another NP *cheh* ‘book’, *cinn* carries new information and is the focus in this context. Information type, old or new, hints at the status of the preverbal NP. Rizzi (1997) argues that topic and focus occupy different positions in a sentence as shown in (10). As a result, topics and focuses behave differently and have different meanings.⁸ In the following, five syntactic tests taken from Rizzi (1997) are further applied to corroborate that preverbal NPs in Taiwan Southern Min (TSM) can be either topic or focus and they occupy different positions, Spec of TopP or Spec of FocP as specified in (10), according to their function. Appropriate contrasts are provided to help determine their function.⁹

- (8) Li cinn to theh lai hing gua (m si hing i). (cf. (6)) (Topic)
 you money then take come return I not be return he
 ‘You return the money to me (not to him).’
- (9) Li cinn to theh lai hing gua (m si cheh). (cf. (6)) (Focus)
 you money then take come return I not be book
 ‘You return the money to me (not the books).’

For instance, as explained by Paul, example (i) could be the first utterance made by a customer in a butchery. However, exactly because this is an utterance made in a butchery, *beef* or *pork*, the product sold in a butchery, carries known information that is expected in that context. Example (i) will not be a felicitous utterance made in a bakery exactly because *beef* does not carry information expected in a bakery context.

- (i) Niurou, ni gei wo liang-jin. (Mandarin Chinese) (Paul 2005: 3 (2))
 beef you give I two-pound
 ‘Give me two pounds of beef.’

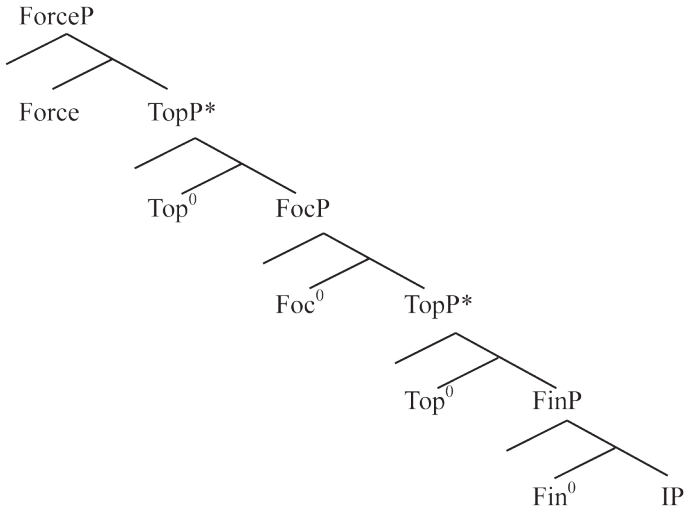
Paul considers that example (ii) is possible in a context where the speaker is addressing a visitor to elicit information to decide to whom he should introduce. However, in (ii) *women de fuzhuren* ‘our deputy director’ is intended to carry old information by the speaker. That is why the speaker asks the visitor to confirm whether his assumption that *women de fuzhuren* ‘our deputy director’ carries old information is correct.

- (ii) Women de fuzhuren, ni renshi ma? (Mandarin Chinese) (Paul 2005: 3 (3))
 we Assoc deputy.director you know Part
 ‘Our deputy director, do you know him?’

⁸ Take (8) and (9) as examples. As illustrated above, the difference in meaning between topic and focus includes, but is not restricted to, the type of information denoted in these two types of NP, old or new.

⁹ In addition to the contrasts, a pause or a topic marker such as *a* following the topic as in (8), (11), (14), (16), (18), and (20), or intonational stress on the focus as in (9), (12), (15), (17), (19), and (21), helps get the contrast in meaning in the paired sentences (8) vs. (9), (11) vs. (12), (14) vs. (15), (16) vs. (17), (18) vs. (19), and (20) vs. (21).

(10)



The first test is related to resumptive clitics. According to Rizzi (1997), a topic may contain a resumptive clitic in the comment clause, while the focalized NP is not compatible with it. There is no resumptive clitic in TSM. Instead a resumptive pronoun is introduced by the disposal marker *ka* as shown in (11b).¹⁰ As the contrast between (11b) and (12b) indicates, tolerating a resumptive pronoun, (11b) involves a topic, while (12b) contains a focus, which is not compatible with a resumptive pronoun.

- (11) a. Li cinn to theh lai hing gua (m si hing i). (Topic)
 you money then take come return I not be return he
 ‘You return the money to me (not to him).’
- b. Li cinn to ka i theh lai hing gua (m si hing i).
 you money then KA it take come return I not be return he
 ‘You return the money to me (not to him).’
- (12) a. Li cinn to theh lai hing gua (m si cheh). (Focus)
 you money then take come return I not be book
 ‘You return the money to me (not the books).’
- b. *Li cinn to ka i theh lai hing gua (m si cheh).
 you money then KA it take come return I not be book
 ‘You return the money to me (not the books).’

Second, a topic does not result in weak crossover effect, while the focus does.

¹⁰ As argued in Lin (2012), *i* in TSM may be non-referential as in (i), where the *i* introduced by *ka* is non-referential. (11b) can also be understood as involving a non-referential *i*; however, the point here is that the *i* in (11b) can also be understood to be a referential pronoun.

(i) I to khi ka (i) thau bih tiam hit cui kng la!
 he then go KA he secretly hide at that water-vat Part
 ‘He then secretly hid in the water vat.’

As demonstrated in (13), when the object *mui cit ciah gu* ‘every cow’ occupies the postverbal position, the weak crossover effect renders the sentence ungrammatical. When the object takes the preverbal position, (14) does not result in weak crossover effect, while (15) still does. Therefore, the preverbal NP in (14) is judged to be a topic, and that in (15) functions as a focus.

- (13) * I_i e cu-lang thai tiau mui cit ciah gu_i .
 it Assoc owner kill away every one Cl cow
 ‘Its_i owner killed every cow_i.’
- (14) Gua mui cit ciah gu_i long khan-khi i_i e cu-lang hia thai tiau
 I every one Cl cow all pull-go it Assoc owner there kill away
 (m si bue tiau). (Topic)
 not be sell away
 ‘I took every cow to its owner to be killed (not to be sold away).’
- (15) *Gua mui cit ciah gu_i long khan-khi i_i e cu-lang hia thai tiau
 I every one Cl cow all pull-go it Assoc owner there kill away
 (m si mui cit ciah be). (Focus)
 not be every one Cl horse
 ‘I took every cow to its owner to be killed (not every horse).’

Third, bare quantificational elements cannot be topics, while they can be focalized. As shown in (16) the bare quantificational NP *soo-u* ‘all’ occupies the preverbal position, but this sentence is ungrammatical. Thus *soo-u* in (16) is a topic. On the other hand, the same quantificational NP *soo-u* also occupies the preverbal position in (17), and this sentence is grammatical. Therefore, *soo-u* serves as a focus in (17).

- (16) *Gua soo-u long theh lai hing i (m si hing li). (Topic)
 I all all take come return he (not be return you)
 ‘I returned everything to him (not to you).’
- (17) Gua soo-u long theh lai hing i a (m si ciu cit puann). (Focus)
 I all all take come return he Part (not be only one half)
 ‘I returned everything to him (not just half).’

Fourth, more than one topic is allowed in one sentence, while the number of the focus is limited to one. In (18) both *ku-ni* ‘last year’ and *hit ciah gu* ‘that cow’ are topics, while in (19) two focuses, *ku-ni* and *hit ciah gu*, are not allowed.

- (18) Gua ku-ni hit ciah gu khan khi thai tiau (m si bue tiau). (Topic)
 I last-year that Cl cow pull go kill away not be sell away
 ‘Last year, I took that cow away to be killed (not to be sold away).’
- (19) *Gua ku-ni hit ciah gu khan khi thai tiau (m si kin-ni, m si hit ciah be).
 I last-year that Cl cow pull go kill away not be this-year not be that Cl horse
 ‘Last year, I took that cow away to be killed (not this year, not that horse).’
 (Focus)

Fifth, a *wh*-operator is compatible with a topic, while it is incompatible with a focus.¹¹ Even though in Chinese in general, *wh*-words remain in-situ and *wh*-movement takes place at LF (Huang 1982), the same constraint is observed. As shown in (20), the topic *hit ciah gu* ‘that cow’ is compatible with the *wh*-word *to-ui* ‘where’. The focus in (21), however, cannot occur with the *wh*-word.

- (20) Li hit ciah gu khan khi to-ui thai tiau (m si bue tiau)? (Topic)
 you that Cl cow pull go where kill away not be sell away
 ‘Where did you take that cow to be killed (not sold)?’
- (21) *Li hit ciah gu khan khi to-ui thai tiau (m si hit ciah be)? (Focus)
 you that Cl cow pull go where kill away not be that Cl horse
 ‘Where did you take that cow to be killed (not that horse)?’

If preverbal NPs in TSM have only one function, topic or focus, the contrast in grammaticality as demonstrated in this section cannot be explained. Therefore, the results of the five syntactic tests reveal that preverbal NPs in TSM function as either topic or focus when appropriate contrasts are provided, and they occupy different syntactic positions, Spec of TopP or Spec of FocP as specified in (10), according to their function.

3. More tests on the status of the preverbal object

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Mandarin Chinese data have been greatly discussed in the literature. Regarding object preposing in Mandarin Chinese as shown in (22), there have been long debates on the status and the derivation of the preverbal object. Xu and Langendoen (1985) and Tang (1990) have argued that the preverbal object such as *fan* ‘meal’ in (22) has the function of a topic. Ernst and Wang (1995) and Shyu (1995, 2001) propose that the preposed object functions as a focus, while Paul (2002, 2005) proposes that the preposed object serves as an internal topic and Badan (2007, 2008) analyzes the preposed object as a contrastive topic.

- (22) Wo fan chi le. (Mandarin Chinese)
 I meal eat Part
 ‘I ate the meal.’

¹¹ One reviewer doubts the validity of this test because a *wh*-operator appears to be compatible with a focus in English as shown in (i).

(i) Where did you buy THAT dog?

The following Italian example is cited by Rizzi (1997) to show that a *wh*-operator is incompatible with a focus.

(ii) *A GIANNI che cosa hai ditto (, non a Piero)” (Rizzi 1997: 291 (25a))

‘TO GIANNI what did you tell (, not to Piero)?’

Moreover, example (21) also shows that a *wh*-operator indeed cannot occur with a focus in TSM. It appears that English is different from Italian and TSM in this aspect. The cause of the difference still needs further investigation.

Both arguments for and against the focus proposal mainly come from the comparison with the focus construction—*lian...dou* construction as shown in (23).

- (23) Wo (lian) fan dou chi le. (Mandarin Chinese)
 I even meal all eat Part
 ‘I ate even the rice.’

This paper is not going to compare object preposing construction with *lian...long* construction, the TSM counterpart of *lian...dou* construction, to argue for or against the focus proposal. This paper also does not intend to discuss how a topic or focus is derived.¹² Instead, this paper looks into the nature of the preverbal object. In addition to the tests provided by Rizzi (1997) which involve contrasts when the status of the preverbal object is considered, this section discusses other factors that may affect the status of the preverbal object.

Shyu (2001) argues that in a sentence involving a stage-level predicate the pre-subject object is ambiguous with two possible readings, topic or focus. For instance, in (24) the pre-subject object *fan* ‘meal’ could be understood to be either topic or focus.

- (24) Fan Zhangsan chi-guo le. (Mandarin Chinese)
 meal Zhangsan eat-Asp Part
 ‘Zhangsan has eaten the meal.’

In a sentence expressing generic judgment which involves the use of an individual-level predicate such as *zhidao* ‘know’ in (25), however, the pre-subject object can only be perceived as substance. Hence, the pre-subject object *yidaliwen* ‘Italian’ in (25) functions as a topic.

- (25) Yidaliwen, geju yanyuan zhidao. (Mandarin Chinese)
 Italian, opera performer know (Shyu 2001: 111 (40a))
 ‘Italian, opera performers know.’

Shyu thus argues that the post-subject object can only function as a focus. However, this paper argues that as the pre-subject object can be ambiguous when a stage-level predicate is involved, the post-subject object is also ambiguous when a stage-level predicate is involved as shown in (8-9), repeated here for ease of reference. Moreover, even when an individual-level predicate is involved, the post-subject object is ambiguous as demonstrated in (26-27). Therefore, the type of predicates does not seem to determine the status of the preverbal object.

¹² Whether topic constructions in Mandarin Chinese are derived by movement or base-generation has been hotly debated (Huang 1982, 1987, Li 1990, Shi 1992, Shyu 1995, Xu 1986, Xu and Langendoen 1985). Appealing to the minimal effort notion in the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1991, 1993, 1995), Li (2000), however, argues that topic structures in Chinese can be based-generated or derived by movement. That is, only when morpho-syntactic clues suggest that movement be required, a topic construction is derived by movement; otherwise, a topic is base-generated.

- (8) Li cinn to theh lai hing gua (m si hing i). (cf. (6)) (Topic)
 you money then take come return I not be return he
 ‘You return the money to me (not to him).’
- (9) Li cinn to theh lai hing gua (m si cheh). (cf. (6)) (Focus)
 you money then take come return I not be book
 ‘You return the money to me (not the books).’
- (26) Gua ing-gi e-hiau sia, be-hiau kong. (Topic)
 I English can write not speak
 ‘I can write English, but cannot speak it.’
- (27) Gua ing-gi e-hiau, jit-gi be-hiau. (Focus)
 I English can Japanese not
 ‘I know English, but not Japanese.’

Paul (2002) argues that the preverbal object is an internal topic, not a focus. She bases her argument on the observation that “no bipartition into focus and presupposition exists for object preposing sentences” (p. 701), and thus the VP itself can be questioned as shown in (28). The VP *yong-guo* ‘used’ in (28) can be questioned, and that indicates that the VP does not constitute the presupposed part and the preverbal object is not a focus. The preverbal object is thus taken to be a topic.

- (28) Ni zhongyao yiqian yong-guo ma? (Mandarin Chinese)
 you Chinese.medicine before use-Exp Part (Paul 2002: 697 (1))
 ‘Have you ever taken Chinese medicine before?’

Let’s try this test on example (29). As shown in (30), the VP *theh lai hing gua* ‘take to pay me back’ can be questioned and that indicates that there is no presupposition assumed in the sentence; the preverbal object *cinn* ‘money’ thus cannot be the focus and should be taken as a topic.

- (29) Li cinn to theh lai hing gua.
 you money then take come return I
 ‘You return the money to me.’
- (30) Li cinn theh lai hing gua be?
 you money take come return I Neg
 ‘Have you returned the money to me?’

As discussed earlier, a preverbal object can be either a topic or focus when appropriate contrasts are provided. Therefore, as shown in (8) and (9), *cinn* ‘money’ is a topic in (8), and the same NP is a focus in (9). The question test can also apply on (8) and (9) to check whether the preverbal NP indeed has a different function in different contexts. It is predicted that the VP in (8) can be questioned, while that in (9) cannot. The prediction is borne out as shown in (31) and (32). In (31), the

preverbal NP functions as a topic and the VP does not constitute the presupposed part; the VP thus can be questioned. In (32), however, the contrast indicates that the preverbal NP is a focus. Since in a focus construction the VP denotes the presupposition, it thus cannot be questioned. The above question test proves that when no contrast is provided, the preverbal object is most likely to be a topic as shown in (30). However, with an appropriate contrast present, the preverbal object can still be construed to be a focus as the case in (9).

- (31) Li cinn theh lai hing gua be (m si hing i)?
 you money take come return I Neg not be return he
 ‘Have you returned the money to me (not to him)?’
- (32) *Li cinn theh lai hing gua be (m si cheh)?
 you money take come return I Neg not be book
 ‘Have you returned the money to me (not the books)?’

Another well-accepted distinction between topic and focus is that a focus can be indefinite but a topic cannot. As shown in (33), without a contrast provided it is not clear whether the preverbal object is a topic or focus. However, with an appropriate contrast present the preverbal object *png* ‘meal’ is construed to be a topic in (34) and that in (35) is understood to have the focus meaning. With the preverbal object in the form of an indefinite NP, however, only the focus meaning is possible as the contrast between (36) and (37) shows.

- (33) Gua png ciah be lue.
 I meal eat not down
 ‘I cannot eat the meal.’
- (34) Gua png ciah be lue (thoo to chut-lai). (Topic)
 I meal eat not down throw-up fall out
 ‘I could not eat the meal (threw up the meal).’
- (35) Gua png ciah be lue (muai to e-sai). (Focus)
 I meal eat not down porridge then can
 ‘I cannot eat the rice (porridge is all right).’
- (36) *Gua cit uann png ciah be lue (thoo to chut-lai). (Topic)
 I one Cl meal eat not down throw-up fall out
 ‘I could not eat one bowl of rice, (threw up the rice).’
- (37) Gua cit uann png ciah e lue (nng uann png to siunn ce a). (Focus)
 I one Cl meal eat can down two Cl meal then too much Part
 ‘I can eat one bowl of rice (two bowls of rice will be too much).’

Regarding the specificity of the preposed NP, Tsai (2008) argues that while the preverbal, post-adverbial bare NP is either definite or nonspecific in an irrealis context as in (38), the pre-adverbial bare NP is definite in the same context as in (39).

- (38) Women mingtian zhurou chi, niurou bu chi. (Mandarin Chinese)
 we tomorrow pork eat beef not eat (Tsai 2008: 482 (8))
 a. ‘(As for the meat in the refrigerator,) tomorrow we will eat the pork,
 but not the beef.’ (definite)
 b. ‘(As for dinner,) tomorrow we will eat pork, but not beef.’ (nonspecific)
- (39) Women zhurou mingtian chi, niurou houtian chi. (Mandarin Chinese)
 we pork tomorrow eat beef day-after-tomorrow eat (Tsai 2008: 483 (10))
 a. ‘(As for the meat in the refrigerator,) we will eat the pork for tomorrow,
 and the beef the day after tomorrow.’ (definite)
 b. #‘(As for the dinner,) we will eat pork for tomorrow, and beef the day
 after tomorrow.’ (nonspecific)

Tsai proposes that the difference in the specificity of the bare NP results from the different status of the NP. That is, the bare NP in the pre-adverbial position functions as a topic and it has to be specific, while the NP in the post-adverbial, preverbal position serves as a focus and it can be nonspecific. The same contrast is also observed in TSM. As shown in (40) the preverbal, post-adverbial bare NP has both definite and nonspecific interpretations. However, the pre-adverbial bare NP in (41) is only construed as definite. The difference in specificity of the bare NP again proves that the preverbal object has different status in different contexts and takes different positions. Moreover, what follows from Tsai’s proposal is that the topic takes a higher position than the focus. That is, in structure (10), where two topic positions are available, the topic in TSM takes the higher Spec of TopP position.

- (40) Gun binacai tibah ciah, gubah m ciah. (Taiwan Southern Min)
 we tomorrow pork eat beef not eat
 a. ‘(As for the meat in the refrigerator,) tomorrow we will eat the pork,
 but not the beef.’ (definite)
 b. ‘(As for dinner,) tomorrow we will eat pork, but not beef.’ (nonspecific)
- (41) Gun tibah binacai ciah, gubah aujit ciah. (Taiwan Southern Min)
 we pork tomorrow eat beef day-after-tomorrow eat
 a. ‘(As for the meat in the refrigerator,) we will eat the pork for tomorrow,
 and the beef the day after tomorrow.’ (definite)
 b. #‘(As for the dinner,) we will eat pork for tomorrow, and beef the day after
 tomorrow.’ (nonspecific)

To sum up, four more factors can be considered when determining the status of the preverbal NP. However, the type of predicates as proposed by Shyu (2001) does not seem to be decisive. The other three factors (question formation, definiteness of the preverbal NP, and specificity of the preverbal bare NP) are more reliable when judging the function of the preverbal NP.

4. Focus versus contrastive topic

Preverbal objects as in examples such as (9) often display some sort of contrastive

reading, which is considered a typical feature of focuses.

- (9) Li cinn to theh lai hing gua(m si cheh). (cf. (6)) (Focus)
 you money then take come return I not be book
 'You return the money to me (not the books).'

However, Badan (2007, 2008) argues against a focus proposal. Instead, she considers preverbal objects in Mandarin Chinese to be contrastive topics. These topics carry intonational stress as focuses do but still display features of topics such as allowing resumptive pronouns and showing no weak crossover effect. Indeed as presented above, some preverbal objects function as topics. However, there are still preverbal objects which serve as focuses.¹³ To illustrate, the answer to a *wh*-question introduces new information, which is taken to be information focus (Badan 2007, 2008). In (42b) the preverbal object *gu* 'cow' serves as the answer to the *wh*-question in (42a) and thus is taken to be an information focus.

- (42) a. I siann-mih pang-leh, to cau a?
 he what leave-Asp then leave Part
 'What did he leave behind and then leave?'
 b. I gu pang-leh, to cau a.
 he cow leave-Asp then leave Part
 'He left the cow behind and then left.'

Moreover, an answer that serves as a correction to a piece of information provided earlier is considered a contrastive focus. In (43b) the preverbal object *gu* 'cow' serves to correct the information provided in (43a) and thus it has the function of a contrastive focus.

- (43) a. I iunn pang-leh, to cau a, si-bo?
 he sheep leave-Asp then leave Part be-Neg
 'He left the sheep behind and then left, right?'
 b. M-si, i gu pang-leh, to cau a.
 not-be he cow leave-Asp then leave Part
 'No, he left the cow behind and then left.'

Furthermore, a contrastive focus expresses exhaustive identification, and it is also termed identificational focus (É. Kiss 1998). The exhaustive identification can be tested through the tests devised by Szabolcsi (1981) as introduced in É. Kiss (1998). To illustrate, (44a) differs from (44b) in that one of the coordinate NPs in the former is dropped in the latter; the latter sentence is not among the logical consequences of the former. (44a) is thus considered to denote exhaustive identification.

¹³ The following examples, (42), (43), and (46), are cited to prove that there are indeed preverbal objects in TSM that serve as focuses, not to claim that all preverbal objects are focuses.

- (44) a. Mari **egy kalapot és egy kabátot** nézett ki magának.¹⁴ (Hungarian)
 Mary a hat.Acc and a coat.Acc picked out herself.to
 ‘It was **a hat and a coat** that Mary picked for herself.’
 b. Mari **egy kalapot** nézett ki magának.
 ‘It was **a hat** that Mary picked for herself.’

On the other hand, a topic does not denote exhaustive identification as demonstrated in (45). The preverbal object in (45) is a topicalized constituent carrying an intonational stress and since (45b) is among the logical consequences of (45a), the preverbal object does not denote exhaustive identification.

- (45) a. A HAT AND A COAT, Mary picked for herself.¹⁵
 b. A HAT, Mary picked for herself.

The result of applying the test of exhaustive identification to sentences in (46) indicates that (46a) denotes exhaustive identification because (46b) is not among the logical consequences of (46a). This test again proves that the preverbal object in examples such as (46a) functions as a focus, not a topic.

- (46) a. I cit ciah gu kap cit ciah iunn pang-leh, to cau a.
 he one Cl cow and one Cl sheep leave-Asp then leave Part
 ‘He left one cow and one sheep behind and then left.’
 b. I cit ciah gu pang-leh, to cau a.
 he one Cl cow leave-Asp then leave Part
 ‘He left one cow behind and then left.’

To sum up, preverbal NP objects in TSM indeed display topic features and also focus characteristics. However, this does not mean that preverbal NP objects are contrastive topics because they demonstrate different features, topic or focus, when they occur with different contrasts. Therefore, this paper argues that depending on the contrasts they occur with, they function as either topic or focus.¹⁶ Furthermore, they take different syntactic positions, Spec of TopP or Spec of FocP.¹⁷

¹⁴ Example (44) is taken from É. Kiss (1998: 250 (12)).

¹⁵ Example (45) is taken from É. Kiss (1998: 251 (14)).

¹⁶ As to which subtype of topic or focus each preverbal NP belongs to, it is also determined by the context. For instance, an information focus is identified in (42b), while a contrastive focus occurs in (43b). This paper does not intend to discuss the subtypes of topic and focus. These two subtypes of focus are introduced here just to argue against Badan’s proposal that preverbal objects are not focuses.

¹⁷ In principle, a topic can co-occur with a focus as they take different positions. However, in this paper, the preverbal objects under discussion refer to those subcategorized for by the verb. Since there is often only one NP object subcategorized for by a transitive verb, there cannot be two preverbal objects. However, if we take time topics into consideration, a topic indeed can co-occur with a focus as demonstrated in (i), where the time topic *ku-ni* ‘last year’ co-occurs with the focus *hit ciah gu* ‘that cow’. Example (i) thus proves that a topic and a focus can co-occur and they take different positions.

5. Conclusion

There have long been debates on whether the preverbal objects in Mandarin Chinese function as focus or topic. This paper has discussed the status of the preverbal objects in another Chinese language, being Taiwan Southern Min, which involves far more preverbal objects. The controversy over the status of the preverbal NP results from the inconsistent features demonstrated by the preverbal NP; some display topic features while others demonstrate focus characteristics. This paper has applied various tests to show that with appropriate contrasts provided, preverbal NPs can serve as focus in one sentence and topic in another sentence.

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(i) Gua ku-ni hit ciah gu khan khi thai tiau (m si hit ciah be).
 I last-year that Cl cow pull go kill away not be that Cl horse
 'Last year, I took that cow away to be killed (not that horse).'

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台灣閩南語的動前賓語：主題或焦點？

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提要

本文探討台灣閩南語中的動前賓語，動前賓語乃指位於主語後、動詞前，並為動詞所次類劃分之名詞組。本文採納 Rizzi (1997) 所提出五項句法測試來檢驗台灣閩南語中動前名詞組的功能—主題或焦點。首先，只有主題允許複指代名詞出現於評論子句。第二、只有主題接受輕微越位。第三、一個句子允許多個主題，但只能有一個焦點。第四、光桿量化成分不能充當主題，但能當焦點。第五、*wh* 算子只和主題相容。此外，本文也考慮漢語（普通話）文獻中常討論的三個因素。第一、只有在主題句中，動詞組部分可改為問句。第二、只有焦點容許不定指名詞組。第三、位於狀語之前的光桿名詞組為主題，並且為一特定名詞組。而狀語之後、動詞之前的光桿名詞組為焦點，並且可為非特定名詞組。測試結果顯示台灣閩南語中動前賓語依據所提供的對照句可有主題或焦點功能。此外，雖然所謂對比性主題常如焦點為語調重音所在，並具有主題的特徵，台灣閩南語中的焦點仍不被視為（對比性）主題。

關鍵詞

主題、焦點、動前賓語、台灣閩南語