

## **Preferred Argument Structure in Mandarin Mother-child Conversation**

Chiung-chih Huang  
*National Chengchi University*

It has been shown that referential strategies constitute a key link between grammar and discourse in adult language. In his seminal article, Du Bois (1987) formulated 'Preferred Argument Structure' (PAS), which illuminates the relationship between discourse patterns and grammatical forms. PAS concerns information flow in discourse and its interaction with the primary noun arguments associated with verb phrases: A, O and S. The central notions of PAS can be expressed in the form of four constraints: 1) the One Lexical Argument Constraint, 2) the One New Argument Constraint, 3) the Non-lexical A Constraint, and 4) the Given A Constraint. The patterns of PAS have been documented in a wide array of languages, both of the ergative-absolutive and of the nominative-accusative type (Du Bois, Kumpf, & Ashby, 2003). However, Chui (1992) and Lin (2009) showed that Mandarin does not conform to the Non-lexical A Constraint and the Given A Constraint; the results of their studies showed that both A and S are similarly constrained in Mandarin. In other words, Mandarin demonstrates an A/S alignment rather than an S/O alignment. Chui thus proposed the Lexical O Constraint and the New O Constraint to characterize the patterns observed in Mandarin.

Research on PAS has focused mainly on adult speech, and only a limited number of studies have examined child language specifically in terms of PAS. Evidence that child language also exhibits PAS has been documented for Korean (Clancy, 1993, 1995, 2003), Venezuelan Spanish (Bentivoglio, 1996), and Inuktitute (Allen & Schröder, 2003); however, little has been done to investigate Mandarin child language. The purpose of this study is to examine whether PAS is characteristic of early child Mandarin, and whether early child Mandarin exhibits the A/S alignment observed in Mandarin adult speech (Chui, 1992; Lin, 2009).

The participants of this study were two Mandarin-speaking children and their mothers. The data consisted of eight hours of natural mother-child conversation video-recorded at the children's homes when the children were at the ages of 2;2, 2;6, 2;10 and 3;1. Each clause having an overt verb in the child data was analyzed in terms of clause types (Transitive, Intransitive). The core arguments of each of these verbs were coded for grammatical roles (A, S, O), referential forms (Lexical, Non-lexical), and pragmatic features (New, Non-new).

The results showed that the preferred patterns of argument structures in early child Mandarin are consistent with those observed in Mandarin adult speech. It appears that Mandarin-speaking children are sensitive to the interaction between grammatical roles, pragmatic features and argument forms from an early age, and that they are also sensitive to the pattern of the A/S alignment presented in adult speech. One difference, however, was observed between the child data and the adult data: child Mandarin evidenced a relatively higher percentage of transitive clauses. The discrepancy appears to be related to the nature of the participant structure of caregiver-child interaction. The results are further discussed in relation to the role of input and interaction, and the link between grammar and discourse in language acquisition.