

Ning Yang

The Indefinite Object in Mandarin Chinese: its Marking, Interpretation and Acquisition.

This dissertation centers around the indefinite object noun phrase in Chinese. In order to investigate whether language specific properties can be accounted for by language universal constraints, three aspects of the indefinite object are studied: its marking, its interpretation and its acquisition. With respect to the marking of the indefinite object in Chinese, this dissertation shows that the pattern of differential object marking can be accounted for by considering not only cross-linguistically attested features of animacy and specificity, but word order as well. This dissertation also shows that non-specific indefinite objects in Chinese, contrary to traditional claims, in fact do occur in certain constructions. The interpretation in these constructions is influenced by lexical properties of the object, its syntactic position and the type of predicate. Finally, this dissertation describes two experiments that were carried out in order to examine the acquisition of one particular type of indefinite object in Chinese. The results show that Chinese children initially interpret indefinite objects with a non-specific, narrow-scope reading, following a universal pattern. This finding goes against the results of previous acquisition studies, claiming that Chinese children have a default non-scopal reading of indefinite objects. This dissertation therefore argues that language specific factors play a role from early stages on, but that these factors only lead to adult-like patterns of interpretation when the initial preference wanes. The examination of these three aspects of indefinite objects in Chinese leads to the conclusion that language specific properties of indefinite objects in Chinese can be captured by a language specific ranking of universal, conflicting constraints.

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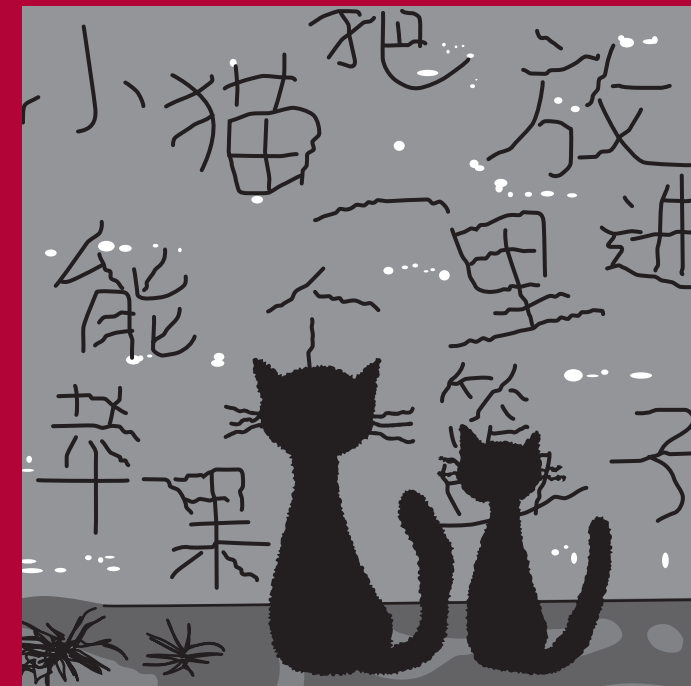
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