



(Inter)subjectivity and information structure: The pragmatics of left and right peripheries in spoken Mandarin



Carmen Lepadat

Department of Foreign Languages, Literatures and Cultures, Roma Tre University, Italy

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ABSTRACT

This study provides a novel data-driven analytic model for the study of the utterance peripheries. The model operationalises the relationship between information structure and (inter)subjectivity, uncovering how speakers simultaneously manage cognitive and social aspects of communication. Using a sample of 21 spontaneous telephone conversations between Mandarin native speakers (CallFriend Mandarin Corpus), all aboutness and framing topics (Lambrecht, 1994; Frascarelli, 2017) occurring at the utterance right periphery were identified and compared with an equivalent number of topics produced at the left periphery. The study provides a multifactorial analysis including referent activation (Chafe, 1987), subjectivity (Du Bois, 2007) and intersubjectivity (Tantucci and Wang, 2018), demonstrating that multiple dimensions must be taken into account to grasp the differences between the two peripheries of the utterance. In fact, rather than differing in activation profiles or presence of (inter)subjectivity, they are characterized by distinct combinations of these dimensions. Specifically, right-peripheral topics frequently display the simultaneous presence of active referents, a subjective stance conveyed by the speaker – most frequently negative – and a peripheral marker of intersubjectivity. The complex interaction between these dimensions suggests that right peripheries serve as a key site for negotiating social relationships, aligning perspectives, and managing politeness.

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1. Introduction

Information structure (IS) and intersubjectivity have been addressed by fairly distinct lines of research in the past few decades. However, visible areas of overlap include pragmatic markers (Beeching and Detges, 2014; Detges and Waltereit, 2014) and topics, in particular right-peripheral topics (Lambrecht, 1994; Lepadat, 2021). Unlike utterance-initial topics, utterance-final topics have been argued to occur in strongly evaluative discourse putting forth the subjective stance of the speaker (Timmis, 2014) and to invite alignment and reciprocity on the part of the hearer (McCarthy and Carter, 1997). In fact, utterance-final topics have been argued to perform an interpersonal or intersubjective function (Aijmer, 1989) and to be connected with a high accessibility of the referent they denote (Lambrecht, 1994). What is more, it has been claimed that not only topics but utterance peripheries on the whole have different functions with respect to (inter)subjectivity: while the left periphery (LP) tends to host elements used for discourse coherence and the expression of the speaker's subjective viewpoint, the right periphery (RP) appears more geared toward the expression of modalising and intersubjective meanings (Beeching and Detges, 2014).

E-mail address: carmen.lepadat@uniroma3.it.

This distinction, however, has been tested mainly on the grounds of discourse markers, while the degree of (inter)subjectivity associated with LP and RP topics has hardly ever been tested based on naturalistic data or on languages other than English. This paper thus aims at assessing the connection between topics produced at the two utterance peripheries and (inter)subjectivity based on naturally occurring data from spoken Mandarin, a language where RP topics have been argued to occur with a certain frequency (Tai and Hu, 1991).

The remainder of this paper is divided into 4 different sections: Section 2 deals with the theoretical background of the study, providing a working definition of the notions of topic(s) and (inter)subjectivity. Section 3 introduces the research questions, and the methodology adopted for the data retrieval and analysis. Section 4 introduces and discusses the findings of the study, while Section 5 lays out the conclusions.

2. Information structure and topic(s)

In most accounts, IS is conceived as a dual notion consisting of topic and focus (Lambrecht, 1994; Lombardi Vallauri, 2014), alternatively termed as topic and comment (Reinhart, 1981; Frascarelli et al., 2012) or theme and rheme (Halliday, 1985; Lombardi Vallauri, 2009), among others.¹ This paper follows Lambrecht's definition of topic in terms of *aboutness*, i.e. “the matter of current interest which a statement is about and with respect to which a proposition is to be interpreted as relevant” [(Lambrecht, 1994): 119], while focus is considered both as the unpredictable or non-recoverable portion of the utterance [(Lambrecht, 1994): 206–207] and in terms of the part of the utterance carrying the illocutionary force and realising the informational purpose of the utterance [(Lombardi Vallauri, 2014): 2020].

In natural languages, the dyad topic/focus can frequently overlap with the given/new and the assertion/presupposition categories, the former referring to the (assumed) activation status of the referents in the participants' minds (Chafe, 1987) and the latter to the degree of knowledge that is implicitly attributed to the addressee on the part of the speaker (Lombardi Vallauri, 2014).

More specifically, referents which are active – already mentioned in the previous context – tend to be coded linguistically as given, as already known and shared between the interlocutors.² On the opposite end of the spectrum, referents that are not currently lit up in the interlocutors' mind – i.e. inactive – tend to be expressed linguistically as new referents. Referents in between active and inactive are accessible – either by deactivation from a previously active status, presence in the situational context or activation of a semantic frame (Chafe, 1987) – and can be coded as either one of the statuses at the opposite poles.

Lastly, pragmatically presupposed pieces of information tend to be expressed linguistically via topical information, i.e. to be presented as already known or taken for granted by the hearer, while assertions are typically – but not necessarily – focal information newly added to the hearer's knowledge as a result of hearing what has just been uttered by the speaker [(Lambrecht, 1994): 52].

2.1. Topics at the left vs. right periphery

It has been argued that different types of topics can be identified based on formal and functional features. In addition to aboutness topics representing the entity which the proposition is construed as being about, Chafe [(1987): 50] argues for the existence of the so-called *Chinese style* topics. These topics “limit the applicability of the main predication to a certain restricted domain”, meaning they set “a spatial, temporal, or individual framework within which the main predication holds”.

The distinction between these two types of topics is explored by Carella (2016) and Frascarelli (2017), who link them to distinct intonational profiles in Italian. An example from Italian is given in (1) below, wherein the aboutness topic *io* 'I' co-occurs with the framing topic *lì* 'there':

- 1 Nel primo c'era la traduzione in italiano a sinistra dello schermo – c'erano tutti i vari sistemi per avere informazioni in più e
'In the first [case] there was the Italian translation on the left side of the screen – you could find different ways to get additional information and'

[io] _{about}	[lì] _{frame}	non	l'	avevo	capito	insomma.
1SG	there	not	DO.CL	have.PST.1SG	understood	in.short

'I could not understand it [there], that's it.' [Frascarelli (2017): 486]

Additionally, Frascarelli (2017) and Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl (2007) differentiate between aboutness *shifting* topics (newly introduced or changed), given topics (familiar and discourse-given), and contrastive topics (defined by syntagmatic or

¹ Note that these terminological pairs are not necessarily equivalent. For instance, Frascarelli et al. (2012), further distinguishes between focus and presupposition within the comment.

² Other accounts also distinguish speaker-new/given referents from hearer-new/given information (Prince, 1981; Ward and Birner, 2001).

paradigmatic contrast within a closed set). This study, however, follows Lambrecht (1994)'s broader notion of *aboutness* topics without distinguishing these types, as they may simply reflect variations in the activation status of the referent, in the topical chain's continuity or in the presence of contrastiveness, an independent notion that can apply to both topics and focus. The distinction between topics representing the matter of concern of the focus and those that frame or better define the focus's field of application will be retained.

A further type are unlinked or hanging topics, which have no anaphoric link with the main utterance (Lambrecht, 1994). In Mandarin, this type of topic has been associated with the so-called *double-subject constructions* presenting two NPs in pre-verbal position (Li and Thompson, 1976), the first of which is in a part-whole or possessive relation with the second, as illustrated by *nà-ge lǎoshī* 'that teacher' and *xīn* 'heart' in example (2):

2	那个	老师	心	真	好。
	<i>Nà-ge</i>	<i>lǎoshī</i>	<i>xīn</i>	<i>zhēn</i>	<i>hǎo</i>
	That-CLF	teacher	heart	really	Good
	‘That teacher has a really good heart.’				(CallFriend/zho-m/5673)

However, double-subject constructions have been argued to represent a subtype of *Chinese-style* topics (Loar, 2011), setting a frame in the sense of Chafe's definition (Chafe, 1987). In this study, Mandarin hanging topics will be included among frames. Unlike languages with a rich inflectional morphology such as Italian, Mandarin Chinese can be described as an isolating language that lacks case and agreement marking (Li and Thompson, 1981). As a result, word order, discourse context and prosodic cues play a crucial role in determining both grammatical and pragmatic relations (Loar, 2011). Although Mandarin is classified as an SVO language in terms of word order typology, it has been long described as a topic-prominent language that favours topic–comment relations over subject–predicate ones (Li and Thompson, 1976, 1981; Loar, 2011; Xu, 2015). When compared to non-topic-prominent languages like English, Mandarin has been argued to possess a wider range of topic structures, which occur with a much higher frequency (Xu, 2015).³ Following an IS-oriented approach, this study adopts a pragmatic rather than syntactic notion of topic, encompassing both Lambrecht's *aboutness* topics (Lambrecht, 1994) and Chafe's *framing* topics (Chafe, 1987). This notion accounts for a broad range of topical constituents appearing at LP and RP, regardless of their grammatical status as verb arguments, adjuncts, or unlinked topics, whether dislocated or *in-situ*, and can also accommodate cases of multiple topics within the same utterance, as in (3) below:

3	[我] _{frame}	[在	美国] _{frame}	[同学] _{about}	挺	多	的。
	<i>Wǒ</i>	<i>zài</i>	<i>Měiguó</i>	<i>tóngxué</i>	<i>tǐng</i>	<i>duō</i>	<i>de</i>
	1SG	at	USA	classmates	rather	many	ATTR
	‘I have quite a few classmates in the United States.’						(CallFriend/zho-m/5560)

In line with the IS-oriented approach, the utterance core is taken to correspond to the focus – the part of the utterance carrying out the informational purpose – while elements preceding or following the focus are considered as left- and right-peripheral, respectively.⁴

While all the above-mentioned topics are produced at the LP of the utterance, topics can also be produced at the RP, where they are generally characterized by a flat low intonation regardless of their type or function, be they of the *aboutness* or *framing* type (Frascarelli, 2017). Example (4) contains both an *aboutness* and a *framing* topic produced first at the LP and then re-produced as a reinforcement of the utterance illocutionary force at the RP:

³ According to Liu's study on spoken Beijing Mandarin, topic structures – taken broadly – are 57 times higher than those reported in Gregory and Michaelis's study on spoken English [(Liu, 2009): 108–109].

⁴ Several studies have addressed the thorny issue of defining the utterance core and periphery from a variety of perspectives. For a detailed functionalist account, see Traugott (2015).

4 B1: 那你现在想好了就就去一个地方? ‘So you’ve made up your mind to just go to one place?’

A1: 呃-应该是. ‘Uh- should be.’

B2: 应该是. ‘Should be.’

A2: 我那个- 钱太多啦, ‘I that- too much money,

A3: [我]_{about} [现在]_{frame} 哪 有 钱 [我]_{about} [现在]_{frame}.

Wǒ xiànzài nǎ yǒu qián wǒ xiànzài.

1sg now where have money 1sg now

‘I don’t have any money right now.’

(CallFriend/zho-m/5673)

One of the first treatments of RP topics was in terms of afterthoughts, i.e. post-sentential productions with a corrective function related to referential integration or clarification (Tomlin, 1986; Geluykens, 1987). However, the most accredited analysis is in terms of dislocation. In Lambrecht’s view (Lambrecht, 1994), right dislocations are grammaticalised devices that delay the resolution of the pronominal coreferential expression in the main clause until the reference is made explicit at the end of the utterance. A necessary condition for the instantiation of such topics is, according to Lambrecht, high accessibility of the topic referent. Yet another line of research has addressed RP topics in terms of their interpersonal functions, i.e. based on the role they play in creating or maintaining a bond between the speaker and the addressee (Timmis, 2014; Carter, 2004; Aijmer, 1989).

In sections 2.2 and 2.3, first the activation status and then the (inter)subjective features that appear to uniquely characterise LP and RP topics will be addressed in detail.⁵

2.2. Topics and referent activation

Because topics usually represent “the element which serves as the point of departure of the message” [(Halliday, 1985): 38], it is generally agreed upon that they have a given rather than new status, the latter being generally associated with focus. Several studies have suggested that the way speakers choose to package information in an utterance is heavily influenced by the limits of the human cognitive and mnemonic system, therefore the tendency to postpone information that requires more processing effort or planning time while placing accessible referents earlier in the sentence [(Arnold et al., 2013): 12]. For this purpose, various attempts have been made to capture the correlations between identifiability of a referent, activation status and topicality [e.g., (Prince, 1981; Givón, 1983; Chafe, 1987; Ariel, 1991; Ward and Prince, 1991; Gundel et al., 1993; Lambrecht, 1994)].⁶ One such example is Lambrecht’s Topic Acceptability Scale (Lambrecht, 1994), drawing on Chafe’s intuition that retrieving a referent from the short-term memory is a cognitively less costly operation than its retrieval from the long-term memory (Chafe, 1987): the higher the activation status of a referent, the higher its probability to be instantiated as a topic. On this view, while fully active referents introduced in the immediately previous stretch of talk are the most acceptable type of topic elements, accessible and identifiable but unused referents have intermediate acceptability, while brand-new referents are the least acceptable in terms of topicality.

A number of studies have investigated the effect of givenness and/or topicality on linguistic/cognitive processing through different experimental studies [e.g., (Prat-Sala and Branigan, 2000; Kahn and Arnold, 2012; Arnold et al., 2013; Ganushchak et al., 2017; Thorson and Morgan, 2021)]. However, surprisingly few studies have been concerned with the analysis of naturally-occurring language in testing the correlation between topical status and degree of activation of a referent. One exception is Huang’s study (Huang, 2013), who analyses naturally-occurring oral conversations and narrative productions in Mandarin, finding that around 80 % of preverbal NPs are indeed both given, i.e. already introduced in the previous discourse and identifiable. However, no mention to the topical vs. focal status of the preverbal NPs taken into consideration is made.

If the cognitive status of LP topics tends to be taken for granted, that of RP topics is no exception. As reported in Lepadat (2024), referents of RP topics have been argued to possess a rather specific degree of activation in the interlocutors’ minds. According to Lambrecht (1994), a high degree of saliency and accessibility is necessary for the appropriate use of right dislocations. These constructions, it is argued, differ from left dislocations in that they are not used for topic shifting or establishing but rather to maintain an already established topic. The same cognitive constraint on the use of right

⁵ The topics referred to in this study only include aboutness and framing topics, while other elements that might be considered topics in the sense of Lombardi Vallauri (2009), resulting from the de-focalization of post-focal material in narrow-focus utterances, are disregarded.

⁶ Following Lambrecht [(1994): 37], a referent is taken to include entities and states of affairs designated by linguistic expressions.

dislocations is referred to as evoked in Ziv (1994) and Grosz and Ziv (1998), i.e. the referent must be accessible based on a previous mention (5), its presence in the physical context of utterance (6), or its inferability based on the activation of a semantic frame (7).

5 A: I asked you to read *this article* for today.

B: I know. I tried to very hard, but I was quite busy. [...] Besides, it is much too difficult for me, **this article**.

6 Context: Susan is holding *Chomsky's latest book*.

John: It's very difficult, **this book**. I started reading it three times and got stuck.

7 A: I saw *Modern Times* again yesterday.

B: He is amazing, **(this) Charlie Chaplin**.

Adapted from Grosz and Ziv [(1998): 7-9]

The familiar status of a referent is argued to be a distinctive factor in the use of right dislocations also with respect to Italian in Frascarelli (2017) and to Spanish in López (2016), among others. Furthermore, the same cognitive constraints tend to be taken for granted in the literature on Mandarin Chinese [e.g., (Zhou, 2008; Lee, 2013)]. An exception is Lepadat (2021), wherein an analysis of naturally-occurring telephone conversations among friends has shown that RP topics can have different degrees of activation and that the difference between aboutness topics and frames is significant: while aboutness topics have mostly active and fewer accessible referents, framing topics are much more frequently accessible than active, in particular they tend to be evoked based on their presence in the situational context of utterance.

2.3. Topics and (Inter)subjectivity

The fact that aboutness topics tend to have a fully active status in conversations among intimate or close-relationship speakers had already been noted in Aijmer [(1989): 150], who argued that although some right dislocations (tails in her terminology) may have a disambiguating function of referential clarification, their most frequent use is phatic, i.e. they are used to create an “affective bond with the hearer”. Taking this idea further, studies like Beeching and Detges [(2014): 11] suggested that the utterance RP altogether “is involved in the rise of modal elements such as negative particles [...], modal particles [...] or modalising right dislocation constructions”. Beeching and Detges's volume suggests that, while the LP of the utterance is inherently driven by discourse-oriented and subjective needs, the RP appears more oriented towards the expression of intersubjectivity.

(Inter)subjectivity, a notional category which has received varied definitions, plays a key role in this dynamic. In cognitive linguistics, Langacker (1990) sketches subjectivity as the extent to which an entity or situation is grounded in the speaker's perspective, i.e. it is construed objectively or subjectively, with elements belonging to the field of the conceptualiser or the Ground (the speech event, its participants, and its immediate circumstances) being more or less profiled in the predication. Drawing on Langacker's subjectivity, Verhagen (2005) views intersubjectivity as inherent to every utterance, as it always involve two conceptualisers, the speaker who produces the utterance and the hearer who interprets it.

Nuyts (2016), on the other hand, considers (inter)subjectivity in terms of responsibility for the utterance content, whether personal in the subjective condition or shared in the intersubjective condition. Tantucci (2021), expanding on Nuyts's notion at the crossroad between modality and evidentiality, further distinguishes between an immediate type of intersubjectivity which is limited to the here-and-now of the interaction, and an extended type which also encompasses either a specific or generic social third party with which the speaker shares responsibility over the proposition Lepadat, (2022a).

Finally, from a diachronic perspective, Traugott (2010) connects (inter)subjectivity to grammaticalisation, i.e. the gradual increase in an expression's capacity of expressing either the speaker's subjective attitude or viewpoint or the speaker's intersubjective attention to the addressee's attitudes, beliefs and self-image.

The functions that right dislocations have been argued to perform both in English and other Indo-European languages as well as in Mandarin Chinese can be said to be (inter)subjective from one or more of the above perspectives. Drawing on Aijmer (1989), studies such as Carter (2004), Timmis (2014) and Snell (2018) discuss the socio-pragmatic distribution of English right dislocations and similar constructions in naturally-occurring language. In particular, Timmis (2014), identifies a link between specific types of right dislocations and subjective evaluations, while Snell (2018) uncovers a specialised use of the pronominal right dislocation in Teesside children to either align their desires with some individuals or distance

themselves from others. Moreover, Carter (2004) also finds that tails, tags and affectionate vocatives primarily function to create intimacy and shared viewpoints between the speaker and the addressee. These constructions, therefore, are “predominantly interpersonal, relationship-creating and relationship-reinforcing” [(Carter, 2004): 107].

While Timmis (2014) emphasises the subjective attitudes or stances (Hunston and Thompson, 2000; Du Bois, 2007; Englebretson, 2007) expressed in connection with right dislocations, both Snell (2018) and Carter (2004) focus more on the social dimension, envisaging an intersubjective use of the construction in English (McCarthy and Carter, 1997; Du Bois, 2007). A similar pattern is seen in studies on Mandarin, where Bourgerie (1998) notices that (inter)subjectivity can be expressed through multiple devices in utterance-final position, including grammaticalised sentence-final particles (Liu et al., 2001; Lepadat, 2021, 2022a, 2023) and right dislocations. He thus argues that the post-sentential slot in Mandarin is being grammaticalised for the expression of modality, a complex notion broadly defined as the speaker's attitude toward the propositional content of an utterance (Pietrandrea, 2005) and therefore connected with the presence of a subjective evaluation on the part of the speaker (Lyons, 1977). On the other hand, Guo (1999) finds that in spontaneous conversations among children, the right dislocation construction has an emphatic and intensifying role, particularly in expressing negative evaluations, which is described as “fulfilling interpersonal oriented discourse functions” [(Guo, 1999): 1122], i.e. as intersubjective:

8 你没长眼睛啊，你？

Nǐ méi zhǎng yǎnjīng a, nǐ?

2sg not grow eyes SFP 2sg

‘Don't you have eyes, you?’

[Guo (1999): 1112]

As McCarthy and Carter [(1997): 413] suggest, it may be the case that right dislocations not only express an evaluation, but also an invitation towards the addressee to share it.

As far as LP topics are concerned, their (inter)subjective functions in naturally-occurring language are largely unaddressed, except in cases where they exhibit a certain degree of grammaticalisation towards pragmatic markers. An interesting case is Detges and Waltereit 's study (Detges and Waltereit, 2014), which compares the functions of strong pronouns at the LP and RP of French utterances. According to them, *moi* is used at the LP either to mark referential contrast or to anchor the illocutionary force of the speech act to the speakers' persona, thus serving an intensifying and subjective function. When *moi* is used at the RP, however, it serves to present the speech act's content as non-negotiable, anticipating a potential reaction on the part of the addressee – therefore fulfilling an intersubjective function.

3. Research questions and method

This study aims at identifying the asymmetries between topics occurring at the LP and RP of the utterance in terms of their (socio)pragmatic features based on naturally-occurring spoken Mandarin. More specifically, this study seeks to address the issues of cognitive accessibility and (inter)subjectivity that are generally taken as a fact in the literature but have seldom been tested on the grounds of naturally-occurring language.

The research questions addressed in this study are:

- i) What are the (a)symmetries in the cognitive status between left and right topics in spoken Mandarin?
- ii) What are the (a)symmetries in the connection with subjectivity between left and right topics in spoken Mandarin?
- iii) What are the (a)symmetries in the connection with intersubjectivity between left and right topics in spoken Mandarin?
- iv) How are these aspects connected?

In order to carry out the study, a sample of 21 dyadic unscripted telephone conversations among native Mandarin speakers living in the US was selected from the CallFriend Corpus (Canavan and Zipperlen, 1996). The length of each interaction is about 30 min, for a total of 10.5 h analysed, and the selected interactions are equally representative of both male and female genders: 7 conversations were among male speakers, 7 were among female speakers and 7 were women-to-man conversations. The specific relationship between the interactants may vary but can homogeneously be described as one among peers, i.e. characterised by low social distance and relative power (Brown and Yule, 1987).

The conversations were carefully listened to, and a total of 240 topics occurring at the RP were manually identified following Leech (1992)'s principle of total accountability. Given the dramatic difference in the frequency of LP vs. RP topics – the ration being about approximately 1:50 – a randomised list of all speech turns was produced and a matching number of 240 left topics was randomly selected for the purpose of comparison. The topics included in the selection were either aboutness or framing topics, as defined in § 2.1, and in the case of utterances with multiple topics, all of them were considered

for analysis. For the sake of clarity, the former type will be henceforth referred to as aboutness topic, while the latter will be labelled as frame or framing topic.

The totality of the selected topics were subsequently annotated focusing primarily on topic position (left or right), topic type (aboutness or framing), activation status of the referents, presence of subjective evaluations, presence of grammaticalised intersubjective markers (SFPs), and sentence type (ST).

In this study, the activations status connected with topics was annotated based on a combination of the theoretical models of Chafe (1987), Lambrecht (1994) and Chen (2004), which will be discussed in detail in § 3.1. The presence of the subjective and intersubjective dimensions was tackled by analysing overt linguistic markers co-occurring with topics, while the inherent (inter)subjective value of the topics themselves was disregarded on this occasion. More specifically, the subjective dimension was tackled via the presence of evaluations, following Timmis (2014) and Lepadat (2021), while intersubjectivity was detected through the presence of sentence-final particles (SFPs), following Tantucci and Wang (2018) and Lepadat (2021, 2022a). The latter two dimensions of annotation will be described in § 3.2.

The annotation scheme thus included a total of 7 dimensions, and a sample annotation row with all the covariants is

Table 1

Sample annotation row of all covariants.

ID	Top_position	Top_type	Sent_type	SFP	Evaluation	Activation
5636_A	L	About	Assert	Yes	No	Active

reported in Table 1 for the left-peripheral aboutness topic *zìxíngchē* 自行车 ‘bike’ of example (9):

9 Context: A complains to B that he doesn’t have money to maintain a bike, let alone buying a car.

A1: 我买了个自行车而已.

Wǒ mǎi-le gè zìxíngchē éryǐ.

1sg buy-ASP CLF bike just

‘I just bought a bike.’

A2: 后来自行车又送人了.

Hòulái zìxíngchē yòu sòng rén le.

After bike again gift people SFP

‘Later, I gave the bike away to someone else.’

(CallFriend/zho-m/5636)

3.1. Annotating activation status

Combining Chafe’s three activation states (Chafe, 1987) and Lambrecht’s concepts of activation and identifiability (Lambrecht, 1994), six different conditions were defined to operationalise the activations status of the topical referents under analysis: active, situationally-accessible, textually-accessible, semantically-accessible, unused, and inactive. Referents already introduced in the previous discourse no longer than 10 clauses earlier were labelled as active, as shown in (9) above.⁷ Here the referent *zìxíngchē* 自行车 ‘bike’ can be considered active since it has been introduced in A1 as part of the utterance focus and then produced at the utterance LP as a topic in A2.

Referents that are present in the situational context of the utterance are situationally-accessible, as in (10), wherein *xiànzài* 现在 ‘now’ refers to the spatial coordinates of the ongoing discourse.

⁷ The 10 clause constraint was set arbitrarily as there are not, up to date, compelling studies confirming a specific threshold for the de-activation of referents or concepts from active to accessible status (Kibrik, 2011).

10 B: 你能不能明天给我发, 发, 发, 发封那个发个 email 吧.

‘Can you send me an email tomorrow?’

A: 我们**现在那个计算机**那个系统 总那个坏.

Wǒmen xiànzài nà-ge jìsuànjī nà-ge xìtǒng zǒng nà-ge huài.

IPL now that-CLF computer that-CLF system always that-CLF Broken

‘That computer, that system of ours is always malfunctioning’. (CallFriend/zho-m/5905)

Referents that were introduced into the discourse more than 10 utterances before – thus no longer active – are labelled as textually-accessible, as illustrated in (11) by the topic NP *nà-ge dōngxi* 那个东西 ‘that thing’:

11 A1: 昨天那个最难的那门, 星期一的, ‘Yesterday the toughest class, the one on Monday,’

A1: 噢就昨天噢, 给我个 B. ‘Oh, just yesterday, I got a B.’

[... A and B talk about the professor holding the course and other peoples’ scores]

A2: 太难了我操**那个东西**.

Tài nán le wǒ cào nà-ge dōngxi.

Too difficult SFP 1sg fuck that-CLF thing

‘It’s too difficult that thing, fuck.’

(CallFriend/zho-m/5673)

Referents that are accessible based on inference from a previously activated cognitive or semantic frame (Fillmore, 1982) are semantically-accessible, as can be observed with the referent *jìsuànjī* 计算机 ‘computer’ in (10A), which became accessible because of the cognitive schemata activated by the previous mention of the term email in 10B (Fillmore, 1982; Clark, 1977).

Unused referents refer to cases in which the referent being instantiated as a topic is someone who is assumed to be identifiable both by the speaker and the hearer, but hasn’t been priorly introduced into the current conversation. This can be observed with the referent *wǒ nà-ge tángmèi* 我那个堂妹 ‘that cousin of mine’ in (12) below:

12 B: 那个谁那个, **我那个堂妹**, 在加拿大, 头一胎生了俩, 双胞胎女儿.

Nà-ge shéi nà-ge, wǒ nà-ge tángmèi zài Jiānádà

that-CLF who that-CLF 1SG that-CLF cousin be.at Canada

shēng-le liǎng, shuāngbāotāi nǚ’ér.

give.birth-ASP two twin daughters

‘That cousin of mine, who’s in Canada, her firstborn were two twin baby girls’.

(CallFriend/zho-m/5949)

Lastly, inactive referents are neither identifiable nor accessible for the hearer, but only for the speaker. An example is the framing topic *yàoshi méi yǒu dà qián dehua* 要是没有大钱的话 ‘if there is no big funding’ in (13), since no part of the prior discourse could lead to the inference of this specific condition for the event being described.

13 B1: 就算你这工作也要完啦? ‘Does that mean your job is ending too?’

A1: 哦我这工作不是要完了, 大概我估计要到明年 5 月份, 可能能拖到明年 5 月份。

‘Oh, my job isn’t ending yet. I think it’s possible to extend it until next May, probably it’s possible to extend it until next May.’

B2 奥. ‘Oh.’

A2: 要是没有大钱的话,

Yàoshi méi yǒu dà qián dehua

If not have big money if

‘It there is no big funding,’ (CallFriend/zho-m/5930)

要是能多闹个几万块钱的话, 也许能拖到明年年底. ‘If [he] can manage to get a few more tens of thousands, maybe it’s possible to extend it until the end of next year.’

3.2. Annotating (inter)subjectivity

Since a division of labour has been hypothesised in the literature concerning the performing of (inter)subjective functions (Beeching and Detges, 2014; Detges and Waltereit, 2014) at the left and right peripheries of the utterance, the presence of both subjectivity and intersubjectivity has been taken into account for the present analysis. More specifically, the subjective dimension selected for this study is based on Timmis (2014)’s account of right dislocations in connection with evaluation, while the intersubjective dimension follows Tantucci and Wang (2018)’s description of SFPs as markers of intersubjectivity.

Following Timmis (2014) and Lepadat (2021), positive or negative evaluations within the utterance was assessed based on the presence of linguistically explicit features conveying an evaluative stance (Du Bois, 2007) such as intensifiers (e.g. *zhēn/zhēnde* 真/真的 ‘really’, *tài* 太 ‘too’), superlatives (e.g. *zuì* 最 ‘the most’), strongly evaluative adjectives (e.g. *nánshòu* 难受 ‘unwell’, *shén* 神 ‘smart’), nouns (e.g. *chéngfá* 惩罚 ‘punishment’, *wèntí* 问题 ‘problem’), verbs (e.g. *hèn* 恨 ‘hate’, *xǐhuan* 喜欢 ‘like’) or adverbs (e.g. *suíbiàn* 随便 ‘as one pleases’) whose meaning may be inherently positive or negative or may acquire such connotation in the given context.⁸ In order to limit the inevitable presence of subjectivity in the annotation process of evaluation as much as possible, only overtly marked (lexical) evaluation has been taken into account. An example of negative evaluation can be found in (11), where the adjective *nán* 难 ‘difficult’, reinforced by the intensifier *tài* 太 ‘too’, is used to evaluate the utterance-final topic *nà-ge dōngxi* 那个东西 ‘that thing’, while in (14), the adjectival predicate *hǎo* 好 ‘good’ is considered to possess an inherently positive connotation applying to the aboutness topic *xīnqíng* 心情 ‘mood’:

14 反正现在比国内心情好一点吧。

Fǎnzhèng xiànzài bǐ guó-nèi xīnqíng hǎo yī-diǎn ba.

Anyway now compared country-inside mood good one-bit SFP

‘Anyway now the mood is probably a little better than back home.’

(CallFriend/zho-m/5560)

For the presence of intersubjectivity, I followed Tantucci and Wang (2018)’s analysis of SFPs as a grammaticalised class of elements encoding the speaker’s awareness of the hearer’s potential reaction to the utterance. According to them, SFPs are an

⁸ The majority of the cases involved were rather straightforward, but a few involved the use of mockery, impoliteness or even sarcasm, which had to be assessed case by case.

embodiment of what [Spencer-Oatey \[\(2008\):3\]](#) calls rapport management, i.e. “the use of language to promote, maintain or threaten harmonious social relations”.⁹ An instance of rapport management carried out through the use of an SFP is illustrated in (15), wherein *ba* 吧 is used not only to downgrade the certainty of the assertion, but more importantly to call upon the interlocutor to take part in the epistemic co-action and to seek confirmation of the addressee's acceptance of the proposition ([Tantucci, 2017](#)).

15 A: [...] 你 Fellow 也是四门课吧, 一周。

Nǐ	Fellow	yě	shì	sì-mén	kè	ba ,	yī	zhōu.
2SG	fellow	also	be	four-CLF	class	SFP	one	week

‘If you’re a Fellow you have four classes too, per week.’

B: 我这学期拿了三门课。

‘I got three classes this semester.’

(CallFriend/zho-m/5784)

4. Analysis and discussion

After the annotation process, a sample of 50 instances of LP and 50 RP topics, including both aboutness and framing, was rated independently by two raters, with inter-rater reliability values of Krippendorff's alpha ranging between $\alpha \geq 0.802$ and $\alpha \geq 0.873$, safely above the chance rate ([Krippendorff, 2004](#)).

Successively, the data were analysed statistically using RStudio ([Posit Team, 2020](#)). Both conditional inference trees [CTs, ([Tagliamonte, 2006](#))] and generalized linear mixed-model trees [GLMMTs, ([Fokkema et al., 2018](#))] were applied, which are particularly suited for categorical variables and complex relationships among these ([Levshina, 2015](#)).¹⁰

In the following sections, the results of the analyses will be shown and discussed. § 4.1. to 4.3 address the correlation of the two peripheries with single variables independently from one another, while 4.4 discusses the features of left and right topics from a more holistic point of view, applying a multifactorial analysis.

4.1. Referent activation

The first variable being analysed is the cognitive or accessibility status of the referents subsumed by LP and RP topics. To this end, I fitted a CT ([Tagliamonte, 2006](#)) using the “ctree” function of the “partykit” package in RStudio ([Posit Team, 2020](#)) with the position of the topic as the binomial output variable (L or R) and topic type (topic or frame) and activation status (active, sit-acc, text-acc, sem-acc, unused inactive) as the partitioning or explanatory variables.

The CT in [Fig. 1](#) shows the distribution of the topic position according to their type and activation status. First, the split at the top of the tree indicates that there is a significant difference ($p < 0.001$) between the two types of topic (aboutness and frames, as discussed in § 2.1) in terms of position and activation: on the one hand, the left-hand branch of the tree referring to aboutness topics (Node 2 = 286) shows no significant correlation between referent activation and left or right position, but only a lower quantity of aboutness topics at the RP (bottom black part of the Node 2 box) with respect to the LP (top light grey part of the box); on the other hand, Nodes 4 and 5 of the CT subsumed by framing topics show a significant difference ($p < 0.01$) between two groups of activation statuses and topic position: active, situationally accessible, and textually accessible framing topics occur for the most part at the right periphery (80 %, as shown by the black bottom part of the Node 4 box), while semantically accessible, unused, and inactive framing topics occur in a comparable proportion at the two peripheries (Node 5 = 76).

⁹ The criterion of syntactic dispensability was used to assess between structural/illocutionary and intersubjective uses of SFPs ([Pan and Paul, 2018](#)), based on [Lepadat \(2021\)](#)'s method following [Tantucci \[\(2021\): 33\]](#)'s definition of intersubjectivity as a “surplus of meaning” ([Lepadat, 2022b](#)).

¹⁰ The R code of the analyses can be provided upon request.

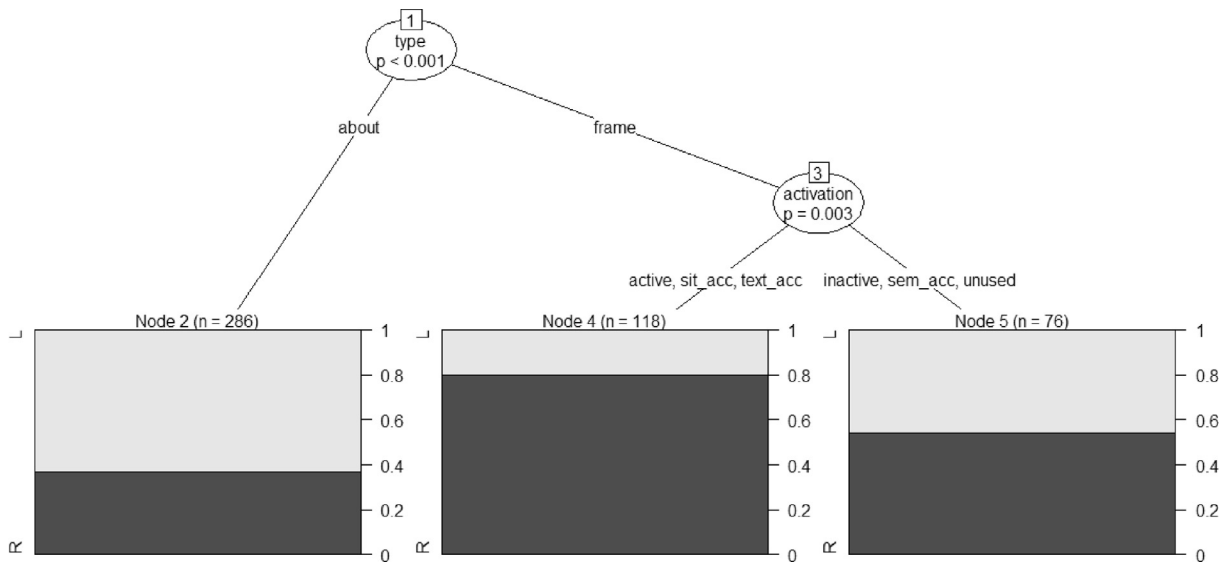
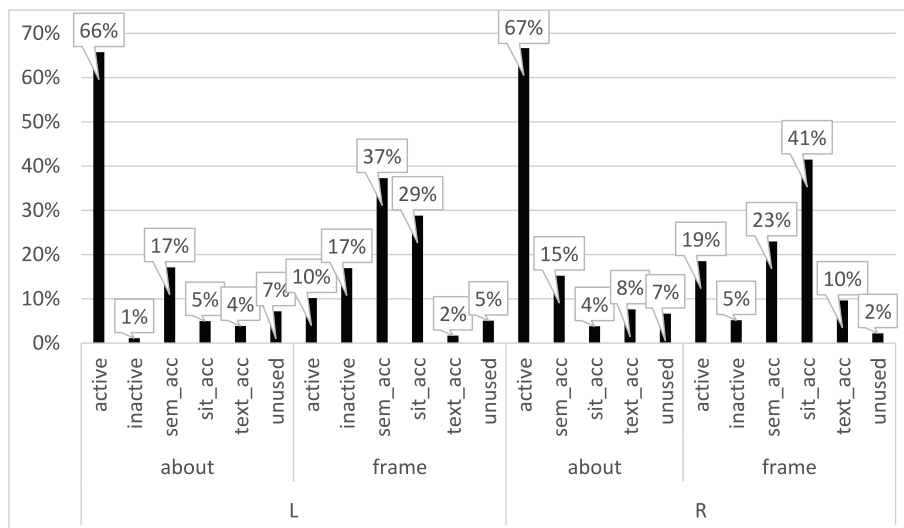


Fig. 1. Accessibility of topics at the LP and RP.

By further investigating the activation status of aboutness and framing topics at the two peripheries in Graph 1, it is possible to observe that aboutness topics have a similar profile at the two peripheries, i.e. aboutness topics occurring in both positions have for the most part active referents: 66 % in the case of the LP and 67 % in the case of the RP.



Graph 1. Activation profile of topics at the LP and RP.

However, things are different for framing topics, with the RP hosting more frames with active, situationally-accessible, or textually-accessible referents, and the LP presenting more frequently inactive, semantically-accessible, or unused referents. The latter are arguably less accessible than the former: inactive and unused referents are not in the participants' short-term memory and thus require higher processing costs for the retrieval of the referents from their long-term memory; however, semantically accessible referents also involve costly operations of retrieval, in so far as association with another referent or situation in the general knowledge of the participants has been argued to take more processing time than direct anaphoric reference (Clark and Haviland, 1977; Chen, 2004). Compare the semantically accessible frame in (16) and the situationally-accessible one in (17): in (16), *shàng cì* 上次 'last time' is inferred based on the previous mention of the fact that A will take the TOEFL exam again and could be therefore considered as an indirect reference by association [(Clark, 1977): 415].

16 A1: 我想今- 十月份考 GRE 嘛, 然后十一月, 十二月份再考一次托福嘛.

‘I want this- to take the GRE in October, and then take in November, December take the TOEFL again.’ [...]

A2: 因为它托福要五百七十五, 我上次只考了五百五十七 &=h.

Yīnwèi tā Tuōfú yào wǔbǎi qīshíwǔ, wǒ shàng cì
 Because 3SG.N TOEFL need five.hundred seventy.five 1SG last time
 zhǐ kǎo le wǔbǎi wǔshíqī.
 only score ASP five.hundred fifty.seven
 Because the requirement for TOEFL is 575, but I only scored 557 last time.

(CallFriend/zho-m/4227)

In (17), however, the framing *xiànzài* 现在 ‘now’ is much more accessible since it refers to the time coordinates in which the conversation is taking place.

17 A: 嗯, 你们那怎么样啊, 现在?

Ēng, nǐmen nà zěnmeyàng a, xiànzài?
 Mhm 2PL there how SFP now

‘How are things over there now?’ (CallFriend/zho-m/5560)

The implications of the above results are manifold: first, the activation profiles of aboutness topics and frames are different, pointing to a distinct nature or function of the two types of topics; the activation status of left and right frames is also different, with the LP favouring less accessible and the RP more accessible referents; however, the activation profile of left and right aboutness topics is similar, unlike what is generally claimed in the literature on right dislocations (cfr. Lambrecht, 1994; Frascarelli, 2017).

4.2. Subjectivity

Turning to the second variable taken into account for this study, I fitted a new CT with evaluation (pos, neg, none) as the second independent variable. Results show that topics and frames also exhibit different behaviours in connection with evaluation.

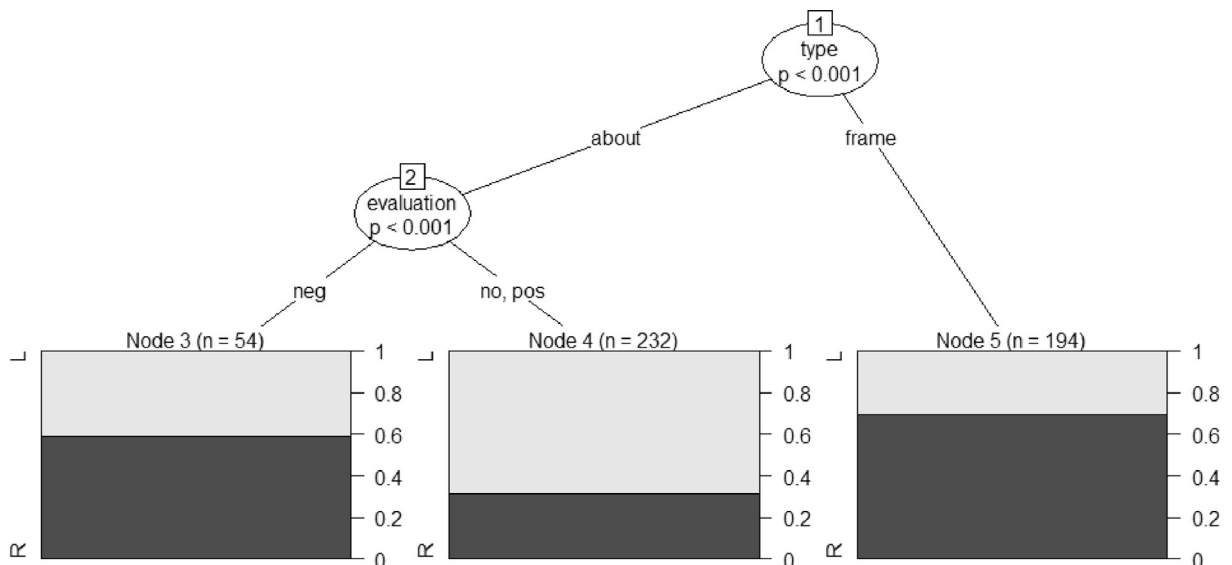


Fig. 2. Co-occurrence of topics and subjective evaluation at the LP and RP.

The CT in Fig. 2 identifies a significant split between the two ($p < 0.001$): framing topics are more frequently found at the RP of the utterance (Node 5 = 194), but no difference was found between left and right frames in connection with the presence of evaluation. On the other hand, aboutness topics present a significant split ($p < 0.001$) between those co-occurring with a piece of negative evaluation – which are for the most part right-peripheral topics (60 %, Node 3 = 54) – and those associated with positive or absence of evaluation, for the most part left-peripheral topics (69 %, Node 4 = 232). The difference can be observed below, wherein (18) contains an RP aboutness topic (*zhè-ge* 这个 ‘this’) in association with a piece of negative evaluation being expressed by the speaker, while in (19), an LP topic (*Zhōngguó rén* 中国人 ‘Chinese people’) co-occurs with a positive appraisal by the speaker:

18 A: 太过分了 这个.

<i>Tài</i>	<i>guòfèn</i>	<i>le</i>	<i>zhè-ge</i>
Too	excessive	SFP	this-CLF
‘That’s too much, this.’			(CallFriend/zho-m/5784)

19 B: 中国人真是牛逼.

<i>Zhōngguó</i>	<i>rén</i>	<i>zhēn</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>niúbì</i>
China	people	really	be	awesome
‘Chinese people are really awesome.’				(CallFriend/zho-m/5784)

Most of the left-peripheral topics, however, were found to occur in utterances where no explicit evaluation on the part of the speaker is present (75 %). This can be observed in (20) below, where no evaluative appraisal is expressed by the speaker, but only an epistemic stance in relation to the certainty of the state-of-affairs described.

20 A: 你肯定有他的电话.

<i>Nǐ</i>	<i>kěndìng</i>	<i>yǒu</i>	<i>tā</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>diànhuà.</i>
2SG	surely	have	3SG	POSS	telephone
‘You must have his phone number.’					(CallFriend/zho-m/5673)

4.3. Intersubjectivity

The last variable considered for the study is the presence of SFPs to mark intersubjectively-relevant utterances. The new CT in Fig. 3 shows that a statistical split differentiates frames and aboutness topics again ($p < 0.001$): among the frames occurring in utterances marked by SFPs (Node 7 = 92), few are left-peripheral (22 %), while the majority occur at the RP of the utterance (78 %).

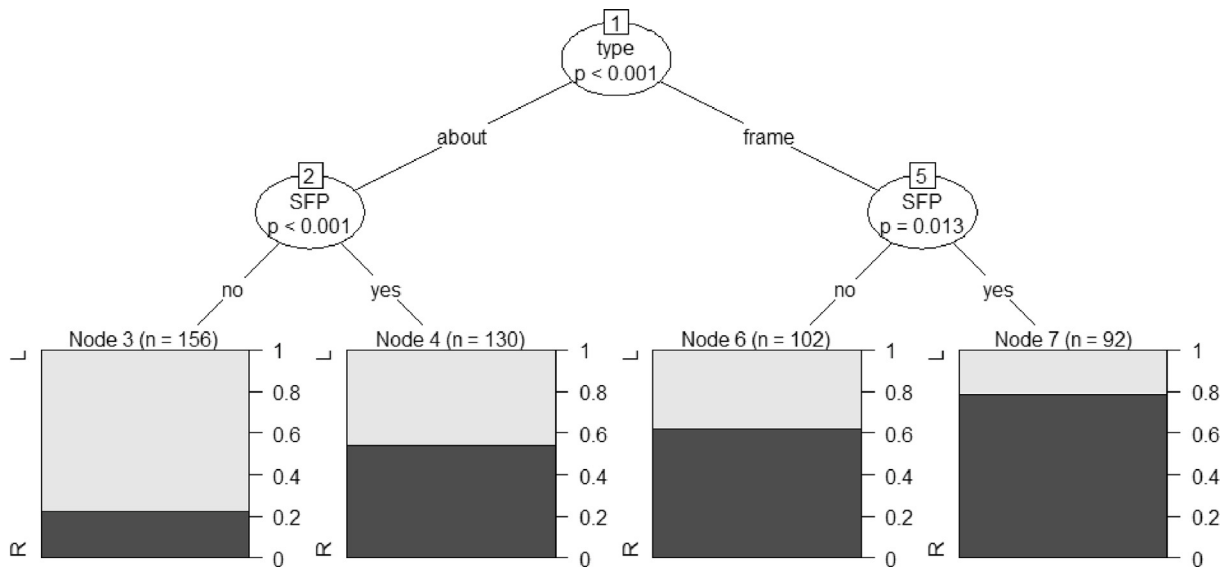


Fig. 3. Co-occurrence of topics and intersubjective SFPs at the LP and RP.

An example is given below in (21) illustrating the occurrence of a right-peripheral frame in an utterance marked for intersubjectivity through the SFP *ba* 吧. Here the speaker is inviting the hearer to jointly assess the validity of the proposition (Tantucci, 2017), whose application field is then limited post-sententially through the production of the frame *zài xuéxiào* 在学校 ‘in the school’:

21 B: 你们系系-处于挺强的吧, 在学校。

Nǐmen *xì* *xì-* *chǔyú* *tǐng* *qiáng* *de* *ba*, *zài* *xuéxiào*.
 2PL department department belong rather strong ATTR SFP at school
 ‘Your department is pretty strong, isn’t it, in the school?’ (CallFriend/zho-m/4198)

As far as aboutness topics are concerned, the gap between those at the LP and the RP is quite notable and statistically significant ($p < 0.001$): among the aboutness topics occurring in an utterance marked by SFPs, 55 % are right topics, while only 45 % are left topics (Node 4 = 130); more importantly, right-peripheral topics are quite infrequent in the utterances unmarked for intersubjectivity, with the majority being left-peripheral topics (80 %, Node 3 = 156). This means that more than 66 % of the total right-peripheral aboutness topics occur with a marker of intersubjectivity, but only 33 % of those occurring at the LP occur with SFPs. (22) below contains an utterance marked for intersubjectivity by the SFP *ba* 吧 and a pronominal right-hand aboutness topic additionally marked by the SFP *a* 啊 with the purpose of reinforcing the phatic or rapport management function of both the former SFP and the right dislocation itself.

22 B: 嗯, 算了吧, 你啊!

Ēn, *suàn-le* *ba* *nǐ* *a!*
 Hmm drop-SFP SFP 2SG SFP
 ‘Hmm, forget it, you!’ (CallFriend/zho-m/5542)

5. Holistic account

Based on the observations of the three individual variables, we can now look at their interaction in order to assess their influence on the overall functioning of the LP and RP topics. To this end, I fitted a generalized linear mixed model tree [GLMMT, (Fokkema et al., 2018)] with the position of the topic (L or R) as the binomial output variable, while topic type (aboutness or frame), evaluation (yes or no), SFP (yes or no) and activation (active, accessible, inactive) represent the

partitioning variables. Two random effects were also included in the model to account for the random variability in the data, the speakers' id (ID) and the sentence type (ST).¹¹

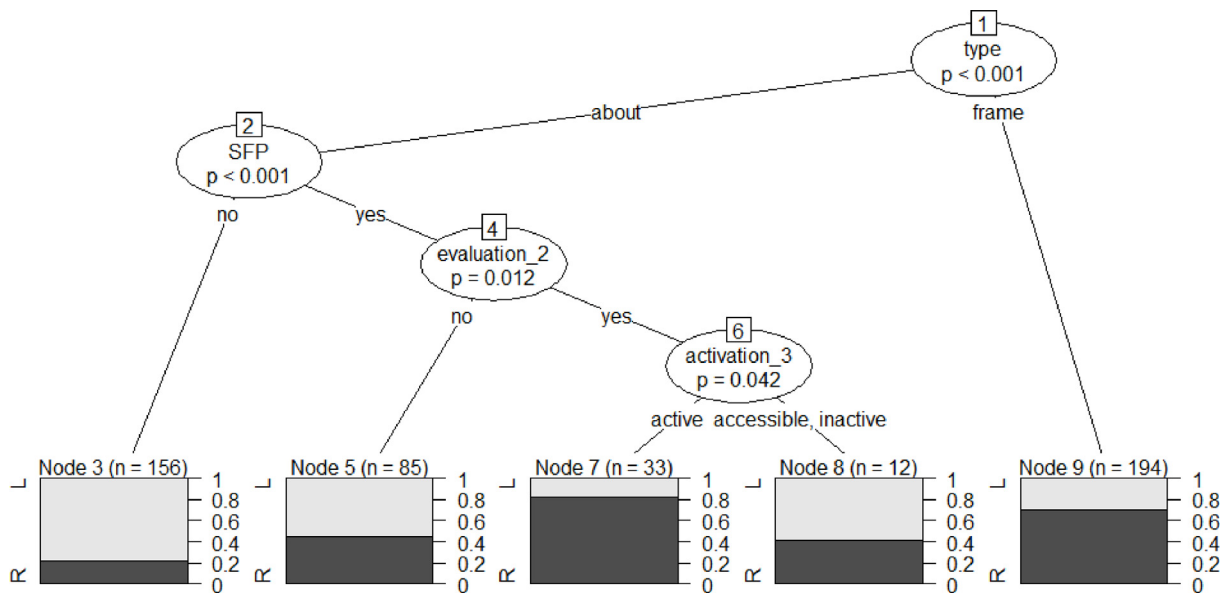


Fig. 4. Cognitive status, subjectivity and intersubjectivity in aboutness topics and frames at LP and RP.

The tree in Fig. 4 shows the distribution of the observed values of the response in each of the terminal nodes. First, a significant distinction can be observed between aboutness topics and frames ($p < 0.001$): Node 9 (=194) on the right hand side of the tree refers to frames, which show no significant partition according to the dimensions considered. On the other hand, aboutness topics on the left side of the tree show significant correlations with SFPs, evaluation and activation status. Node 3 (=156) refers to the aboutness topics occurring in utterances devoid of intersubjective markers, which show very few cases at the RP. Node 5 (=85) corresponds to aboutness topics marked for intersubjectivity but unmarked for evaluation, which show a similar situation to that of Node 3, with slightly more RP aboutness topics being involved. Nodes 7 (=33) and 8 (=12) correspond to aboutness topics marked for both intersubjectivity and subjectivity, which present a significant split with respect to referent activation ($p < 0.05$): while fully active referents under this condition occur almost exclusively at the RP (82 %), the accessible and inactive conditions present a much higher amount of LP topics (58 %).

Importantly, the distribution in Nodes 7 and 8 tells us that almost all of the topics that are cognitively active and occur in the presence of a subjective evaluation and a right-peripheral marker of intersubjectivity are right-peripheral. To word it differently, the factors correlating with the production of a fully active topic at the RP of the utterance include both the presence of a subjective evaluation on the part of the speaker and an intersubjective marker used to maintain the speaker-hearer relationship. This is clearly related to what has been referred to as a phatic (Aijmer, 1989), an interpersonal-oriented (Guo, 1999), or an intersubjective grounding use of right dislocations (Lepadat, 2021). An illustrative case in point is (23) below, wherein the second occurrence of the fully active aboutness topic *Fèichéng* 费城 'Philadelphia' at the utterance RP is clearly not motivated by referential elucidation needs but rather by the phatic intention of reaching out to the interlocutor and possibly seeking an empathic reaction to the utterance, as indeed happens in A2's response. In B2, the speaker (re)expresses her markedly negative evaluation (*hèn* 恨 'hate') with regards to the topic and marks the utterance with the intersubjective SFP *la* 啦 as a means to strengthen and emphasise her negative subjective stance, while also attempting to preserve a harmonious relation with the addressee (Shei, 2014).¹² The aboutness topic is then added at the utterance RP, where it is additionally followed by the pragmatic marker *nǐ zhīdào ba* 你知道吗 'you know', generally also employed to reach an alignment of views with the interlocutor (Östman, 1981; Tang, 2016; Lepadat, 2022b).

¹¹ After multiple attempts, the best model was found to include a binary variable for evaluation (presence as opposed to absence of evaluation) and a tripartite variable for activation (active, accessible – including textually, semantically, and situationally-accessible referents – and inactive ones, including the unused ones). For the assessment of the model's goodness of fit, I followed Bernaisch (2022) and obtained a final model with a 77 % accuracy (highly significantly better than the baseline model with a $p < 0.001$) and a 0.87 *c*-statistics, indicating a rather good discriminatory power.

¹² The SFP *la* 啦 has been argued to perform several distinct functions, including cases of *sajiao* – a form of persuasion involving speaking or behaving in a child-like fashion – in which *la* is employed to reduce the face-threatening risk in speech acts like requests or expressions of the speaker's attitude, position or emotion (Yueh, 2012).

23 B1: 我不喜欢费城, 我讨厌死了, 我恨死了, 费城.

'I don't like Philadelphia, I despise it, I hate it to death, Philadelphia.

A1 真的啊? 'Really?'

:

B2: 嗯, 我恨死啦, 费城, 你知道吧.

Nǐ, wǒ hèn sǐ la, Fèichéng, nǐ zhīdào ba.

Mhm 1SG hate die SFP Philadelphia2SG now SFP

'Yeah, I absolutely hate it, Philadelphia, you know?'

A2 呃那你, 你那你可以过来, 我们这边中国人倒蛮多的.

'Uh, well, you can come over here then. We've got quite a lot of Chinese people here.'
(CallFriend/zho-m/5906)

A further example is (24), in which the second-person pronoun *nǐ* 'you' is active because it refers to one of the interaction participants and has already been introduced into the discourse.¹³ Here, the pronoun is used at the RP with a phatic or intersubjective function, serving to downsize the negative evaluation directed towards the hearer and the forcefulness of the face threat.

24 A1: 你吃它干嘛啊? 'Why do you take it (Spiramycin)?'

[...]

A2: 抽什么疯儿啊你?

Chōu shénme fēng'r a nǐ?

Pull what craziness SFP 2SG

'What's gotten into you?' (CallFriend/zho-m/5975)

Quite differently, accessible or inactive concepts occurring with evaluations in intersubjectively-marked utterances function exactly as their counterparts in non-evaluative or non-intersubjective utterances, i.e. they either carry out referent specification at the LP (25) or referential integration at the RP (26). In (25), both the left framing topic *xiànzài* 'now' and the aboutness topic *gōngzuò* 'work' are accessible but not active. Their function is merely to contribute towards the development of the communication by introducing the entity which the utterance is construed as being about (*gongzuo*) and the time domain to which the predication applies (*xianzai*).¹⁴

25 A1: 你的那个大儿子那儿都挺好哈? 'Your eldest son, everything is ok over there, right?'

B: 挺好的. 'Pretty good.'

A2: 奥, 你现在你现在工作比较好了吧.

Ào, nǐ xiànzài nǐ xiànzài gōngzuò bǐjiào hǎo le ba.

Oh, 2SG now 2SG now work pretty good SFP SFP

'Oh, your work is going quite well now, right?' (CallFriend/zho-m/5930)

Not very different from (25) is (26), where nonetheless referent specification is carried out at post-sententially, at the utterance RP, with the effect of (de)limiting the application of the focus only to a specific time slot.

¹³ In this paper, I consider all the occurrences of the pronouns *wǒ* 'I' and *nǐ* 'you' to be active, as they refer to the participants in synchronous interaction.

¹⁴ The topic *nǐ*, on the other hand, is active.

26 B: 那你们那边是冷了没有啊? ‘Is it cold over there yet?’

A: 还行啊, 不冷啊这两天.

<i>Hái</i>	<i>xíng</i>	<i>a,</i>	<i>bù</i>	<i>lěng</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>zhè</i>	<i>liǎng</i>	<i>tiān</i>
Still	ok	SFP	not	cold	SFP	these	two	days

‘Not bad, it hasn't been cold, these (past) couple of days.’ (CallFriend/zho-m/5195)

These results indicate that right aboutness topics, unlike left topics, are linked to the speaker's subjective evaluation and the presence of an SFP marker of intersubjectivity, under conditions of full activation. These conditions favour the use of right aboutness topics instead of left topics because their function is to support the SFPs in the management of the relationship between the speaker and the hearer when the speaker's positive face and/or the hearer's negative face are threatened by the expression of the speaker's subjective stance. When overtly expressing a positive or negative evaluation, the speaker is exposing themselves to their utterance being challenged or even rejected by the addressee, a highly undesirable eventuality. As social beings, we are in constant need of approval or at least lack of disapproval from the people we are interacting with. To avoid or minimise the possibility of highly subjective evaluations being challenged or rejected by the addressees, speakers employ SFPs to call upon their interlocutors as co-sources or co-constructors of the utterance (Spencer-Oatey, 2008; Lepadat, 2021). By further adding an active aboutness topic at the end of the utterance, the speaker reinforces this call upon the addressee to accept their utterance as something they both agree upon. This can also be explained as the consequence of the sharedness effect that an already given topic – whose existence both interlocutors presumably already agree upon (Lombardi Vallauri, 2009) – produced in utterance-final position exerts back on the whole utterance (Lepadat, 2021).¹⁵ At the same time, the inclusion of an SFP and a fully active right topic in an utterance containing a strongly subjective stance can act to preserve the hearer's negative face by acknowledging their persona and their potentially different viewpoint (Tantucci, 2021; Lepadat, 2021).

5.1. Discussion

This study is the first to provide a data-driven analysis of the (a)symmetries between the left and right utterance peripheries in terms of cognitive status and (inter)subjectivity. While traditional literature has primarily offered theoretical perspectives on utterance peripheries, recent applied studies have largely overlooked the complex interplay between different socio-pragmatic dimensions being conveyed simultaneously.

After selecting and analysing an equal amount of left- and right-peripheral topics and frames from spoken Mandarin telephone conversations, this study demonstrates that classical accounts of IS postulating a different activation profile of referents at the two peripheries are insufficient, suggesting instead that a combination of activation status, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity better explains the use of right-peripheral topics. In fact, these topics are not only characterised by highly accessible referents (Lambrecht, 1994) but also by the speaker's subjective – often negative – evaluation of a person, object, or situation, with an intention to seek alignment or agreement from the addressee. This process is reinforced by intersubjectivity markers overtly addressing the hearer's persona and acknowledging the possibility that they might hold a different viewpoint from the speaker.

This study is not without limitations. First, the naturalistic conversations of this study only include telephone conversations. This type of data is well suited for this analysis, for any involvement of the paralinguistic dimension is ruled out and all meaning is necessarily encoded through linguistic verbalisation only. However, further research focusing on face-to-face interactions might bring out possible dissimilarities in the two types of interactions. Importantly, the accessibility of referents based on their presence in the situational contexts might play a more important role in face-to-face than in telephone conversations. Furthermore, the use of non-verbal elements such as gaze, gesture and facial expressions might all contribute to the negotiation of meaning in face-to-face conversation, allowing speakers to tailor the utterance content and shape on-line, bringing about possible differences in referent encoding. In addition, physical proximity might also impact the perceived psychological proximity and intimacy between the interlocutors, with possible effects on the encoding of alignment requests.

Despite these limitations, this study offers important theoretical and methodological contributions to research on the pragmatics of IS. It is the first to propose a model for operationalising and statistically analysing the combined effects of activation status, subjective evaluation, and intersubjectivity in explaining the (a)symmetries between topics at the LP and RP.

The first finding challenges prior assumptions in the literature. While most of the previous literature hypothesised distinct activation status profiles for left and right topics both in English, Italian and Mandarin (Lambrecht, 1994; Zhou, 2008; López, 2016; Frascarelli, 2017), this study finds that in Mandarin, statistical differences emerge only for framing topics, while

¹⁵ The effect of challengeability reduction is achieved also via the presupposing strength of linguistic items such as definite expressions, which have been argued to reduce the speaker's responsibility for the introduction of the topical content (Lombardi Vallauri and Masia, 2014).

aboutness topics have a very similar profile at both the LP and the RP. Although aboutness topics are more frequently found in utterance-initial position, the majority are fully active in both positions. In contrast, framing topics at the RP tend to have referents with a higher accessibility (active, situationally-accessible or textually-accessible), whereas those at the LP are more likely to have inactive, semantically-accessible, or unused referents.

Another key finding is the correlation between the presence of subjective evaluations – most often negative than positive – and RP aboutness topics, a pattern consistent with previous studies on both Mandarin (Guo, 1999) and English (Aijmer, 1989; Timmis, 2014). By contrast, aboutness topics occurring sentence-initially tend to appear without evaluation or with a positive evaluation. This contrast is significant for aboutness topics, while framing topics show no significant relationship between evaluative stance and position.

Furthermore, it has been found that RP topics are significantly more likely to co-occur with intersubjective markers in the form of SFPs, particularly in the case of aboutness topics. The vast majority of RP aboutness topics appear in utterances explicitly marked for intersubjectivity. This aligns with previous studies suggesting that right dislocations in both English (Aijmer, 1989; McCarthy and Carter, 1997; Timmis, 2014) and Mandarin (Guo, 1999) often serve an intersubjective or interpersonal function.

However, a more nuanced perspective emerges from the results of the holistic model, which suggests that differences between the two peripheries of the utterance are best understood by examining the interplay between activation status, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity. While some studies have argued that the RP appears biased towards the expression of intersubjective meanings (Beeching and Detges, 2014; Detges and Waltereit, 2014), this analysis finds that this is true only for aboutness topics in combination with some specific conditions, including a high degree of activation of the referents, the presence of a subjective stance conveyed by the speaker and a marker of intersubjectivity being employed at the utterance RP. Whenever these conditions are not met, both aboutness and framing RP topics are much more likely to perform functions merely related to IS management such as referential integration (see also Lepadat (2021)).

Finally, this study also highlights that subjectivity and intersubjectivity are not mutually exclusive dimensions. Instead, they often co-occur within a single utterance to achieve a unified communicative purpose. For example, when a speaker expresses a highly subjective evaluation, they might feel the need to pre-emptively address the interlocutor's reaction to the utterance and call upon a shared knowledge of the right peripheral referent in order to avoid having their utterances challenged or rejected (Lombardi Vallauri and Masia, 2014; Lepadat, 2021). This interplay between subjectivity and intersubjectivity thus serves not only to align perspectives but also to manage social relationships and politeness.

Whether the above findings are specific to Mandarin, determined by its topic-prominent properties, or extend cross-linguistically remains an open question for future research. In particular, cross-linguistic comparisons might help determine whether similar (a)symmetries between the RP and LP apply to other languages and how universal the interplay patterns between activation status, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity are.

6. Conclusions

This study provides a novel contribution to the study of the utterance peripheries, with findings that may have implications for both theoretical and applied research in pragmatics and cognitive linguistics. The multifactorial interaction of activation status, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity uncovered by this study provides new insights into how speakers manage both cognitive and social aspects of communication. By showing that speakers simultaneously address cognitive salience and interpersonal alignment through right-peripheral topics, this study contributes to dynamic models of conversation, such as common ground and perspective-taking theories, which emphasise the co-construction of meaning in dialogue (Clark, 1996; Tomasello, 2003).

Furthermore, the complex coordination of subjectivity and intersubjectivity observed here suggests that right peripheries serve as a key site for negotiating social relationships, aligning perspectives, and managing politeness. These findings might extend beyond the specifics of Mandarin Chinese, offering broader typological relevance in the way languages exploit utterance peripheries for cognitive and social purposes. Future cross-linguistic studies may further validate these claims, providing new insights into how diverse languages encode the interplay between cognitive activation, speaker stance, and social interaction.

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Declaration of competing interest

I have nothing to declare.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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Carmen Lepadat is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Roma Tre University, where her research is centred on the L2 acquisition of Mandarin directional complexes. She also teaches Chinese language and culture at the University of Naples “L’Orientale”. Her primary research interests include pragmatics, information structure, intersubjectivity, modality, and L2 acquisition. She earned her PhD with honours from Sapienza University of Rome, with a thesis discussing the pragmatics of the utterance right periphery in Mandarin, a topic on which she recently published the monograph *Information Structure and the Utterance Right Periphery in Mandarin: A Systematic Overview with Reference to English and Italian* (2024, Lincom).