The Origin of OV Word Order in Old Chinese

Wuwei LI
School of Humanities, Southwest Jiaotong University

Abstract: OV word order is an important language phenomenon in old Chinese. Scholars have made a lot of researches on OV word order, including studies on the origin of OV word order in old Chinese. Given the current research results, the author has found that there are four major theories which explain the origin of OV word order, namely remnant theory, emphasis theory, shift in stress theory and focus theory.

Keywords: Old Chinese; OV word order; Origin

DOI: 10.47297/wspiedWSP2516-250014.20200410

As an important part of the linguistic typology, OV word order is an important language phenomenon in old Chinese, and its earliest study can be traced to Ma shi wen tong, a book published at the end of the 19th century. The current studies have focused on the types, evolution, origin and the evolution mechanism of OV word order. This article only looks at the origin of OV order in old Chinese. There are four different theories in regard to the origin of OV order, namely remnant theory, emphasis theory, shift in stress theory and focus theory.

1. Remnant Theory

Remnant theory was the first to be studied and the most discussed theory out of the four theories accounting for the origin of OV word order. Fruitful results have been achieved concerning the legacy theory. As early as the 1940s, Xing Gongwan (1947: 135-141) pointed out in his article On the Inversion of “中” in the Book of Songs that placing the verb behind the object was the normal word order in Tibeto-Burman languages. In the 1950s, Wang Li (1958: 357-368) discussed the three cases of OV word order in old Chinese, and he maintained that the first case, in which pronouns in affirmative sentences appeared in preverbal position, showed that the old word orders were obsolete and that only a few remnants of these orders were carried over. He also explained that the reason why these word orders were deemed as remnants was that in the Pre-Qin Period (2,100 - 221 B.C.), aside from

About the author: Wuwei LI (1977-2), Male, Han, School of Humanities, Southwest Jiaotong University, Lecture, Ph.D. Candidate, Ancient Chinese Grammar.
fixed orders, the word order subject-object pronoun-verb (SOV) was no longer used. The normal sentence structure has become subject-verb-object pronoun (SVO). Because Chinese had both SOV and SVO sentence structures and SOV was no longer used, Wang came to the conclusion that SOV was the remnant of Proto-Chinese.

Since the 1980s and 1990s, there had been many researches on the remnant theory, and the leading scholars at the time were Yu Min (1981: 78-82), Yu Zhihong (1988: 57-60), Feng Shengli (1997: 217), and Hong Bo (1999: 27-37). Yu Min (1981: 78-82) believed that the prerequisite for these phenomena in old Chinese was that the words that stop an action, were placed at the beginning for the purpose of emphasis, and the SOV word order could be seen as the remnant of proto-Chinese left over by history. Yu Min also pointed out that ever since the Han people entered the Central Plains, the evolution of the word order was reversed. According to Yu, it was hard to pinpoint the reason behind it (perhaps they were influenced by the ethnic people they conquered?). The old word order was preserved only when the words that stop an action were used for the purpose of emphasis. Pronouns were frequently used, and sentences with pronouns seemed more conservative. This conservative power not only held sway over words that mean to stop an action, but the modifiers behind them (pronouns that replace the nouns), which were also preserved! By comparing Tibeto-Burman languages and Tai languages, Xu Zhihong (1988: 57-60) concluded that on the basis of current ethnic languages around the Han people, Tibeto-Burman languages follow object-verb (OV) word order, Tai languages in the south verb-object (VO), and Altaic languages in the north OV. Given the earliest documents written in ancient Chinese, although OV and VO word orders coexisted for a time, OV had never taken a dominant position and was gradually sifted out in the course of Chinese language evolution. Only a few remnants of OV word order were carried over from the past, such as “唯...是...唯...是...唯...是”。Thus, we believe that the period of co-existence of two word orders was the result of the integration of the old languages. Feng Shengli (1997: 217) held that the root of ancient Chinese had SOV word order as the underlying construction, which was later taken place by SVO word order. That is to say that the “inverted” expressions we come across nowadays are the remnants of SOV word order in Proto-Chinese language. Meanwhile, Feng further analyzed that in a strict sense, these remnants only included a few fixed forms, such as “唯...是...唯...是...唯...是”, which were either preserved as “fossils” or eliminated since they did not conform to the grammar of the time. Besides, Feng affirmed his view on the origin of OV in old Chinese through the theory of prosody. Thus, he made a quite incisive and sound analysis. By comparing the inscriptions on oracle bones from the Yin-Shang Dynasty (17th - 11th century B. C.) with the written documents after the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046 - 771 B.C.), Hong Bo (1999: 27-37) pointed out that there were many significant differences between them, and some differences may be
The Origin of OV Word Order in Old Chinese

cased by movements in history. However, for some differences, it was hard to identify the basis and traces of the language evolution over time. For example, object pronouns appearing in preverbal position in negative sentences, interrogative pronouns functioning as nouns placed in preverbal position, and objects with case-markers (such as “之 zhi” and “是 shi”) placed in preverbal position, which were extensively used in documents written in the Zhou-Qin Dynasty (1046 - 206 B.C.), could not be explained with pragmatics. Therefore, these word orders and case-markers were the expressions typically unique in languages with SOV word order. However, Yin language written on oracle bones from the Yin-Shang Dynasty was a relatively typical language with SVO word order. The traces and basis for the evolution of those phenomena can not be found in the inscriptions on oracle bones from the Yin-Shang Dynasty. Clearly, these language phenomena are rooted in somewhere else, and the most likely origin is Zhou language. By comparing the inscriptions on oracle bones from the Yin-Shang Dynasty with the written documents after the Western Zhou Dynasty, Hong came to the conclusion that OV word order in old Chinese was originated from Zhou language, as the remnant of Western Zhou language. He made insightful observations based on his precise and appropriate analysis. In this period, Mei Zulin (1997: 81-103) compared Sino-Tibetan languages and found that prepositional interogatives and prepositional pronouns in negative sentences were both remnants of SOV word order.

In recent years, remnant theory is still researched upon by scholars. Li Rulong (2013: 63-71) compared the phenomena of prepositional objects in ancient and modern Chinese with northern and southern dialects and made general observations. From the observations of ancient and modern Chinese, the phenomena of prepositional pronouns were rarely seen in old Chinese. Such phenomena were only present owing to various constraints, meaning they were remnants carried over from the history. Li studied the prepositional objects from the perspective of dialects, which offered a great research angle. Gao Yingze and Zhang Jin (2018: 227-235) also supported remnant theory. In a word, “remnant theory” has always been a focus of the academia. On the whole, the above-mentioned scholars all adopted the comparative method and compared ancient Chinese with modern Chinese, Chinese with Tibeto-Burman languages, and Chinese with dialects, which proves to be a sensible approach. Unfortunately, they did not describe in detail the geographical distribution of OV word order in old Chinese, and thus their conclusions lacked scientific basis.

2. Emphasis Theory

The leading scholars supporting emphasis theory are Yu Min and Ding Bangxin. Yu Min (1981: 78-82) discussed the origin of OV word order in old Chinese and pointed out that the words that mean to stop an action, were placed
at the beginning for the purpose of emphasis. Yu also added that interrogative pronouns themselves were the object of emphasis, and thus they were often positioned at the beginning. Ding Bangxin (1997: 155-162) believed the various phenomena of prepositional objects in old Chinese were not the remnants of SOV word order in Proto-Chinese but the results of “emphatic tones”.

3. Shift in Stress Theory

As the only scholar who advocated the shift in stress theory, Feng Shengli (1997: 115-126) pointed out that if the position on the left side of the verb were the position where the interrogative pronoun used as object appeared, according to the general rule of language, the question focus in Chinese would be on the left side of the verb, and its interrogative stress would also be on the left of the verb. Accordingly, the reply focus should also correspond with it. However, the reply focus, in fact, is on the right side of the verb. Feng proposed that a reasonable explanation for the contradiction was that in the transition from SOV to SVO word order, the interrogative form witnessed a shift in stress, allowing the syntactic form of OV consistent with the stress form of VO. At the same time, Feng also pointed out that on the basis of the general rule of language, the stress in SVO language is usually at the end of the sentence, while the stress in SOV language is generally placed on the left side of the verb. Therefore, “shift in stress theory” can be seen as an emphasis on the prepositional objects.

4. Focus Theory

Focus theory was brought up under the influence of Western Linguistics. Xu Liejiong and Liu Danqing (1998: 260) were the first scholars who stood for focus theory in China. They pointed out that the interrogative pronouns used as objects in the interrogative sentences that use specific interrogative words were the natural focus or the contrastive focus. Feng Shengli (2000: 225-228) discussed the shifting of prepositional objects and maintained that the shift of interrogative pronouns towards left could be analyzed as the pragmatic shift of focus. Interrogative pronouns shifted upwards under FOP from the latter position of objects, achieving the focus function. In the meantime, he discussed OV word order achieved by using words like “是 shi” and “之 zhi” and stated that a sentence with such prepositional object was undoubtedly a contrastive focus construction, which meant that syntactically, the “focus format” of prepositional object existed. Xu Jie (2001: 128-156) pointed out that the prepositional object in old Chinese was connected with the focus, and discussed separately each of the OV cases in old Chinese. According to Xu, in interrogative sentences, [+Focus] features were allocated to each of the syntactic components in deep structure. In declarative
sentences, the [+F] feature could be assigned to any syntactic component without restriction. However, in interrogative sentences that use specific interrogative words, the [+F] feature seemed to have to be assigned to the interrogative pronoun (e.g., “谁 shui”, meaning “who”) and could not be assigned to other components of the sentence. Normally, the interrogative pronoun in an interrogative sentence would automatically become the strong and primary focus. In declarative sentences that have a positive meaning, the focus would be the emphatic core. In negative sentences, the focus would be the negative core. The focus of a sentence is same as the negative core, and the latter instantiates the former. In cases where words like “是 ” and “之 ” were used, pronouns like “是 ” and “之 ” combined with nouns and became compound nouns, making the nouns the focus of the sentence. “唯 ” has an obvious effect of emphasis. Placing it in front of a noun would further strengthen the focus feature of the noun. Liu Danqing (2008: 230) further studied the position of the focus. Liu stated that in languages with SOV word order or with SOV as the optional word order, the focus was placed before the verb, the position nearest the verb in particular. Wu Fuxiang (2012: 347-355) also supported focus theory, and he claimed that “唯 NP 是 V” model was the typical expression of focus in old Chinese.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the above-mentioned four theories can be summarized into two categories, including remnant theory and pragmatic focus theory (combining shift in stress theory, emphasis theory and focus theory). Even the same scholar holds two different views. For example, Yu Min (1981: 78-82) maintained both remnant theory and emphasis theory, and Feng Shengli (1997: 105-112) held both focus theory and shift in stress theory. It can be seen that the origin of OV word order in old Chinese is extremely complicated. So far no consensus on its origin has been reached, and the possible reason is that geographical distribution of OV word order in old Chinese has not been studied. Therefore, studies on geographical distribution of OV word order in old Chinese are the direction of our future efforts.

Works Cited

[1] Ding Bangxin. “Notes on the Problems in Chinese Word Order”. Languages and Linguistics in China, Taipei: Institute of History and Philology. Academia Sinica, 1997.
[2] Feng Shengli. “Interactions Between Morphology, Syntax, and Prosody in Chinese”. Beijing: Peking University Press, 1997.
[3] Feng Shengli. “Prosody and Syntax in Chinese”. Shanghai: Shanghai Educational Publishing House, 2000.
[4] Gao Yingze, Zhang Jin. “A Multidimensional Study on Transitive Verbs in Old Chinese”. Qinhuangdao: Yanshan University Press, 2018.
[5] Li Rulong. “On the Prepositional Objects”. Chinese Linguistic, 2013 (4): 63-71.
[6] Li Wuwei. “A Study on the Layering Structure of ‘NP is VP’ in Old Chinese”. Journal of Southwest University, 2020 (3): 158-66.
[7] Li Wuwei, Zhou Junxun. “The Formation Mechanism of Prepositional Objects of OV Word Order in Old Chinese”. Studies on the History of Chinese Language, 2020, 29 (12): 10-20.
[8] Liu Danqing. “A Handbook for Grammatical Investigation and Research”. Shanghai: Shanghai Educational Publishing House, 2008.
[9] Mei Zulin. “The Origin of Seven Features in Chinese Language”. Languages and Linguistics in China, Taipei: Institute of History and Philology. Academia Sinica, 1997.
[10] Wang Li. “Manuscript of Chinese History”. Beijing: Science Press, 1957.
[11] Wu Fuxiang. “Selection versus Innovation of Word Order: Some Observations and Reflections on the Word Order Change in Chinese”. Studies of the Chinese Language, 2012 (4): 347-55.
[12] Xing Gongwan. “On the Inversion of ‘中’ in the Book of Songs”. Analects of Language, Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1947.
[13] Xu Jie. “Grammatical Principles and Chinese Grammatical Phenomena”. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2001.
[14] Xu Liejiong, Liu Danqing. “Topic: Structural and Functional Analysis”. Shanghai: Shanghai Educational Publishing House, 1998.
[15] Yu Zhihong. “OV Inverted Sentences and Language Integration”. Minority Languages of China, 1988 (3): 57-60.
[16] Yu Min. “A Research on the Origin of Inverted Sentences”. Studies in Language and Linguistics, 1981 (3): 78-82.