

# On Indefinite Subject NPs in Chinese

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## Abstract

Most Chinese linguists agree that indefinite NPs cannot occur in the subject position in Chinese sentences. However, this concept is quite vague and needs further specification. In Chinese, indefinite NPs do take the subject role when they are licensed with an existential syntactic marker. On the other hand, bare nouns without the syntactic marker can appear as the subject in a sentence but are interpreted differently in different sentence types. This paper observes that the indefinite subject NPs in Chinese are actually non-definite reference NPs, which includes indefinite, specific, and generic NPs.

**Keywords:** Mandarin Chinese, indefinite NP, bare noun, specific reference, generic reference

## 1. Introduction

In all languages of the world the subject position of a sentence is normally occupied by an NP.<sup>1</sup> However, the subject NP can be displayed in various

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1 According to Ouhalla (1999), the latest syntactic theory proposes that the subject of a sentence can be a DP or an NP; that is, the subject of a sentence can be specified in terms of definiteness. Here, I will still use the term NP for the sake of convenience. Also, normally the representation of a subject is not restricted to the NP structure only and can include any other structure that

forms. Also, different languages seem to have different restrictions on the subject NPs. For instance, not all types of NP can appear in the subject position in Chinese, as illustrated in (1) below,

1. a. 黃蓉找到了打狗棒。
- b. 那個人找到了打狗棒。
- c. 有一個人找到了打狗棒。
- d. 有人找到了打狗棒。
- e.\* 一個人找到了打狗棒。
- f.\* 人找到了打狗棒。
- g. 人終究是會死。

Sentence (1a) contains a proper noun ‘黃蓉’ as its subject and the sentence is grammatical. Sentence (1b) uses a definite NP ‘那個人’ as its subject and the sentence is also acceptable. Sentence (1c) has an indefinite NP ‘一個人’ preceded by a marker ‘有’ and sentence (1d) has a bare noun ‘人’ also marked with ‘有’, and both are grammatical sentences. However, when the marker ‘有’ does not appear, as shown in sentences (1e) and (1f), the sentences are judged ungrammatical and unacceptable. Yet, in sentence (1g) a bare noun without any marker occurs as the subject and the sentence is grammatical. These empirical data show that not every type of NP can occur as a subject in a Chinese sentence and there must be certain restrictions on these syntactic manifestations.

Linguists have done some research on this phenomenon. The pragmatic interpretation they propose is that since the subject is what the speaker and the listener are talking about, it has to be definite or specific. Other linguists based their hypothesis on the linguistic data. Since the grammatical sentences in (1) all have definite NPs, as shown in (1a) and (1b), or specific NPs, as shown in

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denotes the nature of noun, such as the nominalized VP as in (i) or CP as in (ii). However, in this research for the sake of discussion, I will concentrate only on the NP structure since other structures are irrelevant to the theme of this paper.

(i) [NP [VP Seeing] ] is believing.

(ii) [NP [CP That Jack is married] ] does not seem to bother Julia.

(1c), and the ungrammatical sentences, such as (1e) and (1f), both have indefinite NPs, it is thus concluded that the restriction on Chinese subject is that the subject NP must be definite (Chao 1968, Li & Thompson 1981, among others). This observation is basically correct. Nevertheless, further exploration needs to be done to clarify the difference among the various types of indefinite NPs occurring in the subject position, the semantic property and syntactic function of the syntactic marker ‘有’, and also the occasional possibility of a bare noun as the subject NP, as shown in (1g).

This paper aims to justify the existence of indefinite subject NPs in Chinese and observe their semantic interpretation and syntactic manifestations. The paper is organized as follows: Section One illustrates the restriction on Chinese subject NPs and the purpose of this research. Section Two briefly introduces the concepts of reference and definiteness as displayed in different NPs and their co-relations. Section Three discusses the difference between the two indefinite subject NPs, the bare noun and the QP. Section Four explores the syntactic function and semantic properties of the marker ‘有’. In Section Five the manifestations and reasons of subject bare nouns in several different references are examined. Section Six concludes this paper.

## 2. Reference and (In)definiteness of NPs

NPs can be classified according to their reference and definiteness. Stockwell et al (1973) first groups NPs into two categories based on definiteness: definite and indefinite, as shown in (2). Definite NPs mean that both the speaker and the listener know the NP the speaker is referring to. In English they are usually represented as a proper noun or a noun preceded by a determiner such as the definite article, demonstratives, or the possessive noun. Some examples are illustrated in (2i). Indefinite NPs includes specific and non-specific NPs, and are either in the form of a singular countable noun preceded by an indefinite article a(n) or in the form of a plural countable noun or a singular uncountable noun. For the specific NPs, only the speaker knows what

he is referring to but not the listener; for the non-specific NPs, neither the speaker nor the listener knows what the speaker is referring to. For example, ‘a doctor’ in (2ii) is a specific NP because only the speaker, but not the listener, knows which doctor he is talking about. However ‘a doctor’ in (2iii) is a non-specific NP because here ‘a doctor’ can be any doctor with no specific referent.

2. Definite: The speaker thinks both he and the listener know the noun.

Indefinite: a. Specific: The speaker thinks only he knows the noun.

b. Non-specific: The speaker thinks neither he nor the listener knows the noun.

i. {Dr. Smith/The doctor/That doctor/My doctor} is kind.

ii. Bill plans to marry a doctor. (She is a pediatrician in the General Hospital.)

iii. Bill plans to marry a doctor. (Do you happen to know one?)

Stockwell et al (1973) also proposes another way to group NPs based on their reference. NPs can be either referential or non-referential. The referential NP has a particular referent and includes definite and specific NPs. The non-referential NP does not refer to any referent and contains indefinite and generic NPs, as shown in (3). The first three references correspond with the definite, specific, and non-specific NPs in (2), respectively. The generic reference indicates a definite ‘kind’ or ‘group’ of noun but no single referent is specified or identified.

3. Referential: a. Definite: The speaker thinks both he and the listener know the noun.

b. Specific: The speaker thinks only he knows the noun.

Non-referential: a. Indefinite: The speaker thinks neither he nor the listener knows the noun.

b. Generic: The speaker refers to a kind of noun but not to a particular referent of the noun.

Tang (1988a) further explains the relationship between NP structures and their references in English. He proposes that English has four forms of NPs: (i) the proper noun, (ii) the definite NP (the NP that is preceded by a definite article, a determiner, or the possessive NP), (iii) the singular indefinite NP (a countable N preceded by an indefinite article 'a'), and (iv) the plural indefinite NP (a plural countable N preceded by  $\emptyset$  or a singular uncountable N preceded by  $\emptyset$ ). Also, these four forms of NPs can display five references: definite reference, specific reference, generic reference, nonspecific (or indefinite) reference, and non-referring reference, as exemplified in (4) below. Definite reference can be represented by the proper noun or the definite NP, as shown in (4a-b). Specific reference can be represented by the definite noun or the singular indefinite noun, as shown in (4c). Generic reference can be represented in three forms of NPs except the proper noun, as shown in (4d), though the most common and unmarked syntactic form is the plural indefinite NP as Tang (1988b:26) proposes. The indefinite (or nonspecific) reference is represented by the singular indefinite NP, as shown in (4e); and so is the non-referring reference, as shown in (4f). The first three categories are definite references and the last two categories are indefinite references according to Tang (1988a). Most linguists agree with this categorization except on the generic ones. Some linguists group generic reference as indefinite instead of definite reference (Tsao 1993, among others).

4. a. Proper noun: Elvis Presley is the king of rock and roll.
- b. Definite: The president of our university is here.
- c. Specific: Fred spilled wine on a/the bridemaid on the wedding.
- d. Generic: Tigers are dangerous animals./A/The tiger is a dangerous animal.
- e. Nonspecific/Indefinite: Have you ever seen a panda?
- f. Non-referring: Julius is a physicist.

There is actually some correlation between the NPs' forms and their references in English. Normally, definite NPs indicate definite reference and indef-

inite NPs indicate indefinite references such as nonspecific and generic. Specific reference is vague and confusing. It is often called the indefinite NP but has definite reference. Also, it can be represented by either a definite NP or an indefinite NP. Generic reference can be represented by definite and indefinite forms of NPs but the indefinite plural NP is the most common and unconstrained representation. The non-referring feature is always represented by the singular indefinite NP. Different languages could have their own syntactic variations in demonstrating the definiteness and references of NPs in a sentence. However, the need to express the different references such as definite, specific, indefinite, generic, or non-referring must be present in every language. The sentences in (5) below show that Chinese has all these references too. In the following sections we are going to see how Chinese displays all these references and how Chinese manifests indefinite subject NPs in its syntactic representation.

5. a. Proper noun: 奧薩瑪賓拉登正被美國政府通緝中。
- b. Definite noun: 那（一）本書已經沒貨了。
- c. Specific noun: 早上有兩位先生找你。 / 小陳愛上了（一）位臺北小姐。
- d. Generic noun: 牛奶很有營養。
- e. Indefinite noun: 總是有人心懷鬼胎。
- f. Non-referring: 他長大想當（一位）物理學家。

### 3. Chinese Indefinite Subject NP

As we have observed in Section One, Chinese does not allow an indefinite NP in the subject position of a sentence, as illustrated in the ungrammatical sentences of (1e) and (1f). Yet, when the indefinite NPs are preceded by a syntactic marker ‘有’ the sentences become acceptable, as shown in (6) below. Chinese indefinite NPs can be represented in three forms: bare nouns, singular QPs, and plural QPs. (QP stands for a quantifier phrase.) A bare noun is a noun alone without any quantifier or classifier. A singular QP consists of the

numeral ‘one’ followed by a proper classifier and then the noun. The numeral ‘one’ is sometimes omitted unless the concept ‘one’ is emphasized or critical and cannot be omitted. A plural QP is composed of a numeral larger than one, a classifier, and then the noun. All these indefinite NPs must be preceded by a marker ‘有’ when they appear in the subject position in Chinese, as illustrated in (6) below.

6. a. 有人來找過你。 / \*人來找過你。  
 b. 有（一）個人來找過你。 / \*（一）個人來找過你。  
 c. 有兩個人來找過你。 / ??兩個人來找過你。  
 d. 有三幅畫失竊了。 / ??三幅畫失竊了。

Though all are indefinite in nature, there are some differences among these indefinite NPs in (6). In sentence (6a), the subject NP is a bare noun and the semantic reading of the subject is an indefinite one, meaning both the speaker and the listener do not know what the noun is referring to. The corresponding English translation of (6a) is like ‘Someone came to see you’ or ‘{There was a man/There were people} who came to see you.’ Since Chinese uses bare nouns to indicate indefinite reference, there is no classifier or numeral in bare nouns to specify the concept of number or individualized instances and hence there is no clear meaning of singular or plural reference in sentences like (6a). Other examples of a similar structure are illustrated in (7), and the bare noun subjects, all displaying indefinite references, show no indication of how many instances of the references. For example, in (7a) the meaning is ‘something happened’ but we don’t know whether one or two or many events happened. The same is in (7b). We only know cars are approaching us from the front but we don’t know the number of the cars. This is the characteristic of Chinese indefinite bare noun subjects.

7. a. 一定有事發生了。  
 b. 前面有車來了，小心一點。  
 c. 有人站在門口。<sup>2</sup>

2 Sometimes ‘有N’ could be the abbreviated form for ‘有一 CL N’ (where CL stands for a classi-

d. 有各式的飲料免費供大家飲用。

On the other hand, in sentences (6b-d), the subject is in a QP structure; that is, ‘numeral + classifier + noun’. In contrast to bare noun subjects, the semantic reading of these QP subjects is a specific reference, not an indefinite reference. That means the speaker knows which referent s/he is talking about while the listener does not know the referent.

Hence there are two major categories of indefinite subjects NP in Chinese: the bare noun and the QP noun. Both categories need a preceding syntactic marker ‘有’ so as to be grammatical, but the semantic reading of them are different. The bare noun subject marked with ‘有’ indicates an indefinite reference since the bare noun means only a vague concept of the noun and ‘有’ introduces the existence of such a noun. There is no indication of any particular instance or the number of the instance. Therefore, the bare noun subject in Chinese only specifies an indefinite reference of the noun without indication of individuality or plurality. On the other hand, the QP subject marked with ‘有’ indicates a specific reference since the classifier in QP indicates the single individual of the NP and ‘有’ introduces the existence of this instance, leading to the meaning of a specific reference which is only known by the speaker. Hitherto we may conclude that Chinese does allow indefinite NPs to occur in the subject position as long as they are marked with the syntactic marker ‘有’.<sup>3</sup>

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fier), and in this case the semantic reading will be specific instead of indefinite. Sentence (i) below can be the specific reading for sentence (7c). Hence, with a limited context, it would be hard to judge whether the subject is indefinite reading or specific reading, thus resulting in ambiguity.

(i) 有一個人站在門口, (一直向裡面張望, 賊頭賊腦的)。

- 3 Another type of indefinite subject NP in Chinese would be sentences like (i)-(iii). The indefinite subject NP, unlike the two indefinite NPs discussed above, is not marked with ‘有’ but the sentences are still judged grammatical.

(i) 一公斤有一千公克。

(ii) 一輛車可以坐五個人。

(iii) 兩間房子至少值五百萬。

Tsai (2001a) and Li (1999) observe that these sentences are a special type of sentences in Chinese. There are some characteristics about them. First, most of them are about measure-



These two major types of indefinite NPs perform different kinds of references in Chinese.

However, there are still differences between the singular QP with a ‘one’ numeral, as illustrated in (6b), and the plural QP with a ‘non-one’ numeral, as illustrated in (6c-d). Although normally the QP subject should be preceded with a marker ‘有’, the plural QP subject with a ‘non-one’ numeral does not sound as bad as the singular QP subject with a ‘one’ numeral when the marker ‘有’ does not appear. This is because ‘one’ in Chinese acts very differently from other numerals. Except for the context where ‘one’ really means the number of ‘one,’ in Chinese ‘one’ often is a polarity item with empty semantic property and needs a context and licenser to license its meaning. Tsai (2001b) in his article “One, Two, Three” observes that ‘one’ can mean ‘existential’ or ‘once’ and needs to be triggered in the contexts of ‘negative sentence,’ ‘conditional or interrogative sentence,’ or ‘modality sentences’ etc. As shown in the sentences of (8) below, ‘one’ does not mean the singular numeral of one, but rather ‘the least amount’ in (7a), ‘some (meaning existential)’ in (8b), and ‘once’ in (8c). However, these polarity meanings of ‘one’ can only emerge in the right contexts as stated.

8. a. 他一滴酒也不沾。
- b. 你要不要吃 (一) 碗麵再走？
- c. 戰爭一旦爆發，人人都會遭殃。

Unlike ‘one,’ other numerals are not so empty in their semantic properties. Non-one numerals usually indicate their numeral meaning instead of the polarity meanings, if they have one. Yet this also means that the non-one

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ments, such as length, weight, capacity, value, etc. Second, the sentences do not denote an activity or event. Instead, they usually state the maxim of natural science or the concept or belief of man-made regulations as displayed in a limited number of verb types. Third, this type of sentence usually does not carry any tense or aspect, or more precisely, is stated in the so-called generic tense, because concepts or beliefs are like truth and remain true all the time. We are not going to include this type of indefinite subject in our discussion in this paper, since they only occur in a special type of sentence with a particular semantic interpretation and limited distributions. They are highly marked in structure and occur only in certain contexts.

numerals have more concrete semantic properties than numeral ‘one’ and therefore do not rely so much on the context or licenser to trigger their proper semantic interpretations and to license their grammaticality. When the syntactic marker ‘有’ does not show up, they can still be accepted, though plural QP subjects are still indefinite NPs in nature and need a syntactic marker to license them with the existential meaning.

#### 4. Analysis of Marker ‘有’

##### 4.1 The evolution of the marker ‘有’

The syntactic marker ‘有’ is a verb in Chinese, meaning to possess or to exist. Similar to the evolution of the lexicon ‘過’, ‘有’ has also developed several different functions in history, and now in synchronic Chinese one of the functions is the ‘grammaticalized’ syntactic marker ‘有’ denoting the concept of existence before the indefinite subject NP. This historic change is not unique to Mandarin Chinese. Tsao and Cheng (1995) in their “A discussion of the five uses of ‘有’ and their relations in Southern Min” observe the five different functions of ‘有’ in Southern Min and propose that all the functions of ‘有’ were originally derived from the meaning of the verb ‘existing.’

The question to ask next is “why do we choose ‘有’ and not other verbs?” Naturally it has to do with the original ‘existing’ meaning of ‘有’. According to the pragmatic principle of languages, people tend to put the old or known information in the subject or topic position and the new or unknown information in the predicate of a sentence. Thus the new information ‘a lizard’ is placed in the predicate, as shown in (9a) and (9c) below. However, when we do need to present an indefinite NP first, we will use a presentation sentence pattern that utilizes a verb to present the existence of the indefinite NP, as illustrated below in (9b) and (9d).

9. a. In the box was a lizard.

b. There was a lizard in the box.

c. 箱內有一隻蜥蜴。

d. 有一隻蜥蜴在箱內。<sup>4</sup>

In English, the existence is normally expressed via the pattern ‘there be,’<sup>5</sup> and hence the presentation sentence pattern would be ‘there be plus the indefinite NP plus a locative, if there is any.’ Chinese has a similar process. The existence verb ‘有’ introduces the indefinite NP followed by the locative phrase. We see that both languages use existence verb or verb phrase to introduce an indefinite NP. It is because the existence verb is the most natural verb to use, for the introduction of an unknown object or concept usually starts with the existence of the introduced subject.

As the idea gets more complicated and the sentence gets more complex, more elements, especially verbs, will be added in the sentence. English allows only one finite verb in a clause and hence the second verb will subside into a participle form. The sentence will become similar to the one as in (10a). Chinese does not have a clear tense inflection on verbs, so the verb just attaches to the end of the sentence, as exemplified in (10b). In time, the sentence pattern becomes fixed and ‘有’ becomes a syntactic marker to license the indefinite subject NPs.

10. a. There was a lizard crawling back and forth in the box.

b. 有一隻蜥蜴在箱內爬上爬下。

#### 4.2 The lack of marker ‘有’ and the VP enclosure

As we have discussed above, ‘有’ is a syntactic marker to license the indefinite NP in the subject position. This is indeed the case as we can see that ‘有’ never occurs before the indefinite NPs in the predicate, as shown in the

4 Tsao and Cheng (1995) in their research “A discussion of the five uses of ‘有’ and their relations in Southern Min” name the sentence type (9c) as ‘existence pattern’ and the sentence type (9d) as ‘presentation pattern.’

5 The reason the pattern ‘there be’ is used instead of the verb ‘have’ is that the verb ‘have’ in English is interpreted more like ‘own’ or ‘possess’ instead of ‘exist.’ Consequently, the presentation sentence uses ‘here be’ instead of ‘have.’ Whereas in Chinese, all these functions are included under the verb ‘有.’

Chinese sentences below.

11. a. \*他吃了有一碗麵。
- b. \*小英常去書店買有書。
- c. \*你是不是讀過有一本小說？

The phenomenon above shows the subject-object asymmetry in indefinite NPs in Chinese. English does not have such asymmetry in indefinite NPs. Heim (1982) proposes that it is because English indefinite NP has its inherent quantificational force and thus can appear in the subject position but the meaning is either specific or quantificational instead of existential. Hence a sentence with an indefinite subject NP is grammatical in English but not in Chinese, as contrasted in the following sentences in (12). This is mainly because the numeral ‘one’ in Chinese is semantically empty and has to rely on the licenser ‘有’ to give it the existential meaning. Other numerals have more concrete inherent quantificational force and are not as empty as the numeral ‘one.’<sup>6</sup> This phenomenon can be observed in the contrast between the sentences (6b) and (6c-d), where the indefinite subject NP with numeral ‘one’ is totally bad while the indefinite subject NP with ‘non-one’ numeral is not so bad. Similarly, the sentence below in (12c) also sounds better than sentence (12b). Yet, no matter which numeral appears, the syntactic marker ‘有’ is always needed to license the existential meaning so that the sentences can be completely grammatical.

12. a. A book is on the table.
- b. \*一本書在桌上。
- c. ?今天的甄試十位同學缺席。

Why doesn’t the indefinite NP in the predicate need an existential licenser? Diesing (1990) furthers Heim’s analysis and proposes that VP enclosure is the licenser that gives the existential meaning to the indefinite NP in the

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6 Tsai (2001b) in his research article “One, Two, Three” proposes that Chinese numerals ‘one, two, and three’ are all semantically empty and need proper contexts or licensers to trigger and license their meanings.

predicate but not the indefinite subject NP since the latter is out of VP scope. However, for an indefinite subject NP to have an existential reading an overt marker such as ‘有’ in Chinese is needed. Diesing’s VP enclosure theory can successfully account for the subject-object asymmetry in indefinite NPs. It also indirectly explains why the licenser originates from a verb meaning ‘existence’ instead of from other verbs. For only with the explanation that ‘有’ was originally a verb denoting existence, can we realize that in synchronic Chinese ‘有’ is turned into like a grammaticalized VP enclosure over the indefinite subject NP to license the existential reading for the subject.

#### 4.3 Other indefinite NPs in the predicate

In addition to the indefinite NPs in the object position of a transitive verb, the indefinite NPs in the object position of a preposition in the predicate are not marked with the syntactic marker ‘有’ either. In the sentences in (13), the indefinite NPs are objects of prepositions of ‘把’, ‘對’, and ‘跟’ and when the marker ‘有’ appears, the sentence becomes ungrammatical.

13. a. 昨天老闆把 (\*有) 一位職員臭罵了一頓。  
       b. 老李對 (\*有) 一位主管很不滿。  
       c. 小華跟 (\*有) 一位同事有過一段戀曲。

Moreover, when the indefinite NPs appear in the serial verb construction or secondary predicate, they should not be marked with ‘有’ either. In (14a) although ‘一位客戶’ is the subject of the predicate ‘吃飯’, it is under the VP enclosure of ‘請’ and therefore assigned the existential meaning. Sentence (14b) is a similar situation. ‘一位學生’ is the subject of the predicate ‘很聰明’, but it is under the VP enclosure of ‘教過’ and therefore assigned the existential meaning. Hence these indefinite NPs are not marked with the syntactic marker ‘有’ and the appearance of the marker will make the sentences ungrammatical.

14. a. 昨天老闆請 (\*有) 一位客戶吃飯。  
       b. 我教過 (\*有) 一位學生很聰明。

In the same way, the indefinite NPs in the pseudo-cleft sentence as in

(15a) or the cleft sentence as in (15b) are not marked with the existential marker ‘有’ either. Since in both structures the indefinite NPs are within the emphasis VP enclosure of ‘是’, they are assigned the existential meaning and need not be marked with ‘有’.

15. a. 偷吃倉庫裡飼料的是 (\*有) 一隻老鼠。

b. 是 (\*有) 一位朋友告訴我這件消息的。

From above, we may conclude that indefinite NPs in Chinese do not have quantificational force and need a context or a licenser to give them the existential meaning. When they occur in the predicate, no matter as the object of a verb or preposition or as the object in the emphatic structure or as the subject of the secondary predicate, the VP enclosure assigns them the existential meaning and therefore no syntactic marker is needed. However, when the indefinite NPs are in the subject position and outside the scope of VP enclosure, the syntactic marker ‘有’ is obligatory to assign them the existential meaning.

#### 4.4 Other marking of ‘有’ outside VP enclosure

If we assume the indefinite NPs in the predicate is assigned the existential meaning by the VP enclosure, then all indefinite NPs outside VP enclosure would need a syntactic marker so as to be licensed the existential meaning. In Chinese, in addition to subject NP, topic NP is also outside the scope of VP. Just as our theory proposes, the indefinite topic NP also needs to be marked with the syntactic marker ‘有’, as shown in the following sentences in (16). Without the marker ‘有’ before the indefinite topic NPs, the sentences are ungrammatical.

16. a. 有一部電影，你一定看過。 / \*一部電影，你一定看過。

b. 有三件事，你一定要答應我。 / \*三件事，你一定要答應我。

Linguistic theories about Chinese gapped topic structures<sup>7</sup> are of two

7 In Chinese, topics can have or lack gaps in the following sentences. One typical example for the non-gapped topic is from Chao (1968) as shown in (i). The gapped topic structure means in the sentence following the topic there is a co-referential empty NP or trace with the topic, as illus-

types. One type claims that the topic is base-generated at the sentence initial position and has a co-referential relationship with a gap (or sometimes a corresponding pronoun) in the following sentence. The other type proposes that the topic NP is an NP preposed from the following sentence and would leave a trace at the launching site of the NP, as marked by a 't' in (17) below. Whichever type of theory is applied here, we find that the topic is always related to an NP gap. If that is the case, we can resume the word order by putting the topic NP in its original place. It is interesting to see that when the indefinite NP is put within the VP enclosure, the marker '有' is no longer needed and the appearance of '有', on the contrary, leads to the ungrammaticality of the sentence, as shown in (18).

17. a. 有一部電影<sub>i</sub> , 你一定看過<sub>t<sub>i</sub></sub>。  
       b. 有三件事<sub>i</sub> , 你一定要答應我<sub>t<sub>i</sub></sub>。  
 18. a. 你一定看過一部電影。 / \*你一定看過有一部電影。  
       b. 你一定要答應我三件事。 / \*你一定要答應我有三件事。

#### 4.5 The licensing power of '有' in other situations

In addition to indefinite NPs, the licensing function of '有' can also be observed in other lexical items that have empty or implicit semantic properties and need licensors to trigger their semantic meaning. One typical example is the wh-polarities. In Chinese, wh-phrases are like indefinite NPs and do not have inherent quantificational force. They need triggers to license their interrogative, universal, or existential meaning, as observed by Li (1992), Cheng (1995), Hsin (1999), among others. The character '有' as a licensor is also used to license the wh-phrase in the subject position so as to trigger the existential meaning of the wh-phrase. Some examples are shown in (19).

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trated in (ii). In some cases a corresponding pronoun or noun can also appear in the gap position, as exemplified in (iii). There are some differences between (ii) and (iii) topic structures as discussed in Tang (1988b: 57-63).

- i. 那場火災 , 幸虧消防隊員來的快。  
 ii. 老張<sub>i</sub> , 沒人喜歡<sub>t<sub>i</sub></sub>。  
 iii. 老張<sub>i</sub> , 沒人喜歡 { 他<sub>i</sub> / 那個渾球<sub>i</sub> }。

19. a. 這個題目，有誰不會做啊！  
       b. 他這麼聰明，有什麼（事情）難得倒他啊！  
       c. 有什時候他不在讀書的！  
       d. 有什地方他沒去過的！
20. a. 這個題目，誰不會做？  
       b. 什麼（事情）難得倒他？  
       c. 什麼時候他不在讀書？  
       d. 什麼地方他沒去過？

The wh-phrases in (19) all display existential meaning instead of the interrogative meaning. However, if we take away the syntactic licenser ‘有’ and the exclamation markers 啊、的,<sup>8</sup> the wh-phrases will change to their interrogative meaning, as shown in (20) above. Hence the role of ‘有’ as an existential licenser is further confirmed here. This section concludes that ‘有’ is a grammaticalized existential licenser in Chinese which is often used to license the existential meaning for polarity items like indefinite NPs or wh-phrases in the subject position or positions out of the bounds of VP enclosure.

## 5. The Semantic Property and Syntactic Manifestation of the Indefinite NPs

### 5.1. The indefinite reference and bare noun

The indefinite NPs in Chinese includes QPs and bare nouns. The QP subject marked with ‘有’ as discussed in the previous section is normally interpreted as having existential meaning and a specific reference. On the other hand, the bare noun marked with ‘有’ in the subject position is often consid-

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8 The exclamation markers here indicate that the context in which wh-phrases appear is an assertive sentence. Contexts play an important role for the semantic emergence of wh-phrases. In a question context, the wh-phrase will be interpreted as a question word. On the other hand, in an assertive context, the wh-phrase, with the help of the licenser, will be interpreted as an existential noun. Hence, for polarity items to have the right reading, both contexts and licensers are needed. For detailed discussion, please refer to Hsin (1999).



ered as having an indefinite reference, as contrasted in sentences (1c) and (1d), now repeated as (21a) and (21b) below.

21. a. 有一個人找到了打狗棒。  
       b. 有人找到了打狗棒。

The bare noun in Chinese is an indefinite NP and does not have quantificational force, either. It also needs to be marked with the existential marker ‘有’ when it appears in the subject position. The difference between a bare noun and a QP is that a bare noun has only the minimal semantic property of the noun. It carries only the concept of the noun and denotes no semantic property of number, type, or individual instance of the noun. That is why when the bare noun is marked with the existential meaning, it has only the indefinite reference. For example, in (21b) we only know that ‘people’ have found the dog-hitting stick, but we don’t know if one person or more persons found it, and we don’t know which particular person found it.

## 5.2 The generic reference and bare noun

We propose that the subject bare noun has to be marked with the syntactic marker ‘有’ or the sentence will be judged ungrammatical. However, the following grammatical sentences in (22) seem to present an apparent counterexample because none of the subject bare nouns in (22) is marked with the syntactic marker ‘有’.

22. a. 車子是很方便的交通工具。  
       b. 字典對學生很有幫助。  
       c. 老師一定要有敬業精神。  
       d. 每年七、八月，颱風應該會帶來充沛的雨量。

Yet, upon a close examination, we find the bare nouns without the syntactic marker ‘有’ in the sentences in (22) all have generic references instead of indefinite references as in (21b). Since the bare noun only conveys a mere concept of the noun, it is the most natural type to mean the ‘kind of the noun’ and consequently the bare noun matches well with the generic reference. Hence, in Chinese a pure bare noun in the subject position is the form that

expresses generic reference. Even so, the bare noun has to appear in certain contexts. Because generic nouns are usually used to express the general truth or belief or the speaker's judgement or estimation, the sentence patterns for the generic meaning to emerge are normally judgement sentences, as illustrated in (22a-b), deontic modality sentences, as illustrated in (22c), epistemic modality sentences, as illustrated in (22d), and the like. Without proper contexts, the bare noun in the subject position will not emerge as a generic reference.

### 5.3 The definite reference and bare noun

Instead, a different reference will come out if the proper context for generic meaning does not appear, as shown in the sentences in (23).

- 23. a. 車子來了。
- b. 字典找到了。
- c. 老師對這件事很關切。
- d. 昨天颱風帶來了充沛的雨量。

The bare nouns in (23) all express definite reference. We probably would wonder what makes the bare noun have different references in (22) and (23). As mentioned above, the generic reference of bare nouns usually occurs in the judgement or modality contexts, but the definite reference of bare nouns, as exemplified in (23), all occurs in sentences with event structure. Unlike the judgement sentences, which normally are represented in generic tense, the event type sentences have distinct tense and aspect and describe the situation of an action instead of a permanent state. Unlike the modality sentences, which display an abstract condition the speaker proposes or estimates, the event type sentences describe an actual happening. Also when other elements in the sentences gets more specific, the bare noun more closely resembles a definite reference. For example, in sentence (23d), the bare noun 'typhoon' would be generic in meaning were there no aspect marker '了' and the time expression 'yesterday.' However, with the aspect marker '了' and an expression of a specific time point, the bare noun 'typhoon' is doubtlessly definite in reference.

As illustrated in (24) below, up to now we have seen three different refer-

ences for subject bare nouns in Chinese: indefinite, generic, and definite. The first one is marked with an existential marker ‘有’, while the last two are not. In Chinese, ‘有’ plus a bare noun displays indefinite reference. The last two references, generic and definite, are not preceded by ‘有’ and they differentiate from each other in the sentence types the bare noun occurs in. The generic sentences tend to lead the subject bare noun to a generic reference, and the sentences of specific event type tend to lead the subject bare noun to a definite reference, as shown respectively in (24b) and (24c).

- 24. a. 有人來了。
- b. 人是有靈性的。
- c. 因為人沒來，所以我們很失望。

#### 5.4 The semantic difference between bare nouns and QPs

The two indefinite NPs in Chinese, bare nouns and QPs, when marked with ‘有’ in the subject position, have different references. The bare noun subject indicates an indefinite reference but the QP subject indicates a specific reference, as shown in (25) below. Since both of the indefinite NPs occur in the same event type sentences, the only reason that causes the different references is due to the nature between the bare noun and the QP.

- 25. a. 有人來了。
- b. 有{一 / 兩}個人來了。

As discussed previously, the bare noun in Chinese only denotes the mere concept of the noun and carries no semantic properties of number, kind, or gender whatsoever. Tang (1988b) proposes that the bare noun in Chinese is like the plural indefinite nouns and the abstract singular nouns in English. Yet, unlike the plural indefinite nouns, the bare noun in Chinese does not carry any inherent numeral indications. However, the QP is different. With the semantic contribution of the number and classifier in the QP, the noun is first individualized into separate instances of nouns by the classifier and then the numeral indicates what particular number of the nouns, though indefinite, are being referred to. Cheng and Sybesma (1999) discuss the differences between

English and Chinese NPs and state that English is an article language and Chinese is a classifier language. The bare noun in Chinese is like a countable mass noun and the function of the classifier is to itemize the mass noun and make it have individual identities, making it start to have the notions of singularity and plurality.

Since both the bare noun and the QP are indefinite NPs and do not have quantificational force, they need to be marked with the syntactic marker ‘有’ when they appear in the subject position of a sentence. When the bare noun is marked with ‘有’, it means a certain type of noun exists but no other information such as number, kind, etc. is available. Hence the reference can only be indefinite. On the other hand, when the QP is marked with ‘有’, it means a singular item of noun exists. Since the subject usually provides old or known information, this individual noun will be interpreted as having specific reference in Chinese.

To conclude, bare nouns are very productive in Chinese. They can be interpreted differently in different contexts. When in the context of a generic type of sentence, the bare noun is generic in meaning. However, in an event type of sentence, the bare noun can mean a definite reference when it is not marked with the existential marker ‘有’, but it can also mean an indefinite reference when marked with the existential marker ‘有’. In an inflectional language like English, there is usually subject-verb agreement which specifies the harmony of tense, number, person, gender between the subject NP and the main verb. Though Chinese does not have this agreement morpheme, there is still some kind of agreement between the type of subject NP and the sentence pattern required. For instance, the generic reference of NPs often needs to match the generic type of sentences, while the definite or specific reference of NPs needs to match the event type of sentences. Moreover, oftentimes in Chinese, a syntactic marker such as ‘有’ is required for the right reference to emerge when the indefinite NP appears in the subject position.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper re-examines the reason that indefinite NPs do not appear in the subject position of a sentence in Chinese. The traditional account is that since Chinese allows only definite NPs as the subject, the indefinite NPs are therefore excluded. Yet, a language needs to use NPs to express various references. Definite NPs in Chinese indicate only definite reference. An account like the above would lead to a wrong conclusion that Chinese only has definite reference in the subject. This is unnatural and sounds untrue. Actually Chinese uses indefinite NPs (bare nouns and QPs) to indicate other references. Tang (1988b) also observes that indefinite NPs are often utilized to express non-definite references, namely specific, indefinite, and generic references.

In this paper, I propose that theoretically all kinds of reference can appear in the subject position but with different syntactic representations. Definite NPs are the most natural and unmarked type because the subject normally expresses known (and therefore definite) information. However, indefinite NPs can also appear in the subject position but in a more constrained form. Indefinite NPs marked with an existential marker ‘有’ can appear as subjects but in two different syntactic forms. The bare noun marked with ‘有’ indicates an indefinite reference while the QP marked with ‘有’ indicates a specific reference. The difference lies in the fact that the QP contains a classifier. According to Cheng and Sybesma (1999), the function of the classifier in Chinese is to make the semantic partition of nouns syntactically visible and thus assigns the nouns the feature of countability. This paper furthers the idea by proposing that only when the noun is countable, can it be preceded by a number and will the meaning of specific reference emerge. That is why the bare noun marked with ‘有’ simply indicates an indefinite reference but the QP marked with ‘有’ can denote a specific reference.

On the other hand, bare nouns present a fascinating phenomenon in

Chinese. In addition to indefinite reference, bare nouns have generic and definite references, too. Bare nouns without any marker display the generic reference in a generic type of sentence because bare nouns in Chinese are like mass nouns or 'kind' nouns. Bare nouns without any marker can also display a definite reference in an event type of sentence with tense or aspect. Hence, with these different syntactic forms Chinese can actually demonstrate a rich reference variety in its subject NPs.

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# 漢語無定主語之分析

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## 摘 要

大部分漢語語言學家都同意，在漢語中不定名詞組不能出現在主語位置，然而這個概念十分含糊，需要再加以釐清。漢語中不定名詞組確實有出現在主語位置的情形，但它們都需帶著一個句法上的標記，但其指涉都不是定指，而是隨著不定名詞組不同的結構而分為任指或殊指。反過來，漢語中也可有不帶這句法標記的不定名詞組例如裸名詞，出現在主語位置，而且在不同類型的句子中代表不同指涉。本篇論文分析主張，漢語主詞的確可以是不定主語名詞組，而其指涉實際上就是涵蓋無定指的任指、殊指、或泛指。

關鍵詞：漢語、不定名詞組、裸名詞、殊指、泛指

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