

**From Discourse to Grammar, But Not All the Way:  
Grammaticalization and Redundancy of the Classical  
Chinese Function Word *ye* 也 in Pre-Qin Texts, with Special  
Attention to the Guodian Bamboo Manuscripts**

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**Abstract**

This paper proposes a grammaticalization path for *ye* 也 from focus particle to copula and investigates its other functions, as well as the regularity of its usage in the copular function in the Guodian corpus. Its main contribution lie in the attempt to apply the recent typological literature on focus, copulas and intransitive predication to Classical Chinese, as well as in the complete coverage and quantitative analysis of pre-Qin excavated material, following the pioneering 2004 study on Focus Markers in the Zhongshan Bronze Inscriptions by Anne Yue.

**Keywords**

Classical Chinese, Chu Bamboo Manuscripts, syntax, nominal predicates, copulas

The particle *ye* 也, with its extremely high textual frequency and its poorly understood multiple functions, plays a central role in Classical Chinese Grammar (6th to 3rd century BCE). It functions as marker of nominal predication and as a final particle, it is used in interrogative sentences and certain other constructions; it is also a particle occurring in the middle of a sentence and at the end of correlated clauses (Peyraube 2006: 277). This multiplicity of functions has not encouraged scholarly investigation: the bibliography on *ye* 也 is very slim.

The two founding fathers of Classical Chinese grammar, Gabelentz in the West and Ma Jianzhong in China, describe *ye* 也 mainly as a modal particle marking noun predication, while devoting considerable space to its other two functions as nominal focus and verbal focus markers (Gabelentz 1881: 314, 316-318, 434, 438-441; Ma 1904/2000: 538-562). While the description of the environments in which these usages occur is very detailed (especially Ma Jianzhong's) and insightful (especially Gabelentz's, who was not only a sinologist but one of the foremost general linguists of his times), there is no attempt to relate the three functions (topic marker, nominal predication marker, final particle) to some core function.

Since then, most descriptions of Classical Chinese have discussed the co-occurrence of *ye* 也 with equational sentences (see among them Zhou 1961 and Pulleyblank 1995), but have remained non-committal about its precise nature and function. Equational sentences are sentences with noun predication and typically contain a copula, but few sinologists accept the label of copula for *ye* 也.

The problem is that, whether the label of *ye* 也 has been accepted or rejected, reference has been made (mostly implicitly) to a notion of copulas that goes back to early 20<sup>th</sup> century linguistics, or even earlier. As many linguistic terms, 'copula' has a history, and retracing its history is necessary to clarify its usage and untangle the contradictions of the descriptions of *ye* 也 in sinological literature.

The classical notion of copula has been influenced by three distinct traditions (Moro 1997: 248-261).

The first tradition goes back to Aristotle, who considers the copula as the bearer of tense, or more generally of those inflectional features that are normally expressed syncretically on the verbal predicate in Indo-European languages; according to this tradition, Classical Chinese, not having inflection, cannot have a copula either.

The second tradition, starting from the Medieval logicians, most importantly Abelard (XII century) who coined the name *copula* (which means ‘link’ in Latin) and reaching its canonical expression with the XVII century Grammar of Port Royal, considers the copula as sign of affirmation, indispensable for the basic logical act of judgment (which is defined as the connection of names in a predicative relationship by means of a copula) (Moro 1997: 252). As the Grammar of Port Royal is the most important Western source of Ma Jianzhong’s *Mashi Wentong* 馬氏文通, (Peyraube 2001), Ma’s choice of the term *panduan ju* 判斷句 ‘judgmental sentences’ most probably comes from there.

The third tradition goes back to Frege and Russell and the attempt to use mathematical logic to describe natural language; for them the copula is a mark of identity. Bloomfield’s and Zhou Fagao’s terminology of equational sentences comes from here, even though Zhou makes explicit that the A=B relationship between subject and predicate is a syntactic, not a logical relationship (Zhou 1961: 6). When Peyraube and Wiebusch consider *ye* 也 as a copula “when it links a NP subject and a nominal predicate and expresses an assertion”, they cite Frege in support of their definition of assertion as the act by which one thinks or states a judgment as true, be it in its affirmative or negative form (Peyraube and Wiebusch 1994: 388 and 401 n. 12).

Recent typological accounts by Pustet and Stassen allow us to go beyond these traditions and to rely on a notion of copula that can be more useful for comparative and diachronic analyses.

Pustet (2003), the most comprehensive typological account of copulas across languages, rejects the Aristotelian notion of copula as a marker of tense, or more in general as a syntactic ‘hitching post’ to which verbal inflectional categories can be attached, as a viable typological account of copular usage (Pustet 2003: 2-4); as for the notion, going back to Abelard and Port Royal, of the copula as a necessary linker between subject and predicate, it is also not consistent with the existence of languages, such as Tagalog, where nominal predicates regularly occur without any linking item (Pustet 2003: 2). Such languages lack copulas entirely, and express nonverbal predicates directly, a situation that Stassen, the author of the other major book on copulas, refers to as “zero encoding” (Stassen 1997: 62-65), and which can be found in more than 40% of the world’s languages (Stassen 2005). As for the third notion we

mentioned, the Fregian notion based on identity and truth value, it is not empirically testable in natural languages.

Departing from these traditions the motivation for the use of copulas, according to Pustet (2003: 4), is to be seen not in its morphological nor in its semantic function, but rather in the purely syntactic function of rendering certain types of lexemes eligible for predicate position, enabling a non-verbal predicate to act as main predicate in those languages and under those circumstances in which this non-verbal predicate could not fulfill such function on its own.

Pustet's definition of copula is the following: "a copula is a linguistic element which co-occurs with certain lexemes in certain languages when they function as predicate nucleus. A copula does not add any semantic content to the predicate phrase it is contained in" (Pustet 2003: 5). This means, in our case, that we will consider *ye* 也 following nominal predicates as a supportive item devoid of semantic content, whose rate of presence in such environment we will analyze in tables 1 to 3.

Building on Pustet's definition of copula, we need criteria to decide which lexemes in a given language in general, and specifically in Classical Chinese, need copulas, or to put it in other words, which lexemes are verbal and which are nonverbal. For this we turn to the other major typological treatment of Copulas, Stassen (1997), where three criteria are proposed in order to decide whether a given predicate encoding must be rated as verbal or nonverbal.

The first, the Agreement criterion, is based on verb agreement and is clearly not applicable to language like Classical Chinese without inflectional morphology (Stassen 1997: 39).

The second, the Auxiliary criterion, states that: "if a predicate category is marked by the presence of a supportive item (an auxiliary), then its encoding must be rated as nonverbal (Stassen 2005: 693). It is important to notice that such supportive item does not need to be a verb. While in Indo-European languages copular items are verbal copulas, which have (by and large) the same morphosyntactic properties as verbs (as English *be*, Spanish *ser* and Russian *byt'*) large areas of the world show the use of nonverbal copular items. Particularly prominent is the use of a pro-copula, i.e., a demonstrative or personal pronoun which serves as the linker between subject and nominal predicate, and which is obligatory in nominal predication. In addition

to pronouns, other nonverbal items are attested in copular function. They are called particle copulas and have their origin in a variety of markers of discourse-oriented phenomena such as topicalization, backgrounding, or contrastive focus for subjects or predicates, as in Awtuw (Papua New Guinea), where the item *po* is a general focus marker. The item is generally optional in verbal sentences, but nearly obligatory with nominal predicates (Stassen 1997: 486-487), with the functional motivation that in equational sentences, especially when they are zero-marked, the explicit encoding of information structure is more important than with verbal sentences, where subject and predicate belong to different word classes. In this sense, *ye* 也 can be defined a particle copula, as in my corpus (as I will show in table 1) *ye* 也 co-occurs with nominal predicates with an extremely high regularity. Even with this expanded notion of copulas though, to languages that lack both agreement and auxiliaries like Tagalog the two aforementioned criteria are not applicable. While Stassen's description is based on Austronesian and South American languages, an examination of the relevant literature shows that the strategy of using focus particles as particle copulas is also well attested in the Tibeto-Burman family (Chin, Belhare, Karbi, Kham, Hani) to which Classical Chinese is most likely related,<sup>1</sup> and an investigation of the usage of *ye* 也 in the Guodian corpus (see below) confirms (for the first time with a complete and systematic count) that it is attested in Classical Chinese too.

The third criterion is the negation criterion, stating that “if a predicate category has a negation that differs from the negation of predicate verbs, then the encoding of that predicate category must be rated as nonverbal.” Classical Chinese has a special negator for nominal predicates, *fei* 非.<sup>2</sup> According to the auxiliary and the negation criterion, Classical Chinese encodes copulas only for nominal predicates.

The definition of copula appropriate for Classical Chinese is accordingly “a semantically empty element which may co-occur with nominal predicates and is negated by *fei* 非.” Nominal predicates are in general followed by *ye* 也.

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<sup>1</sup> I will not elaborate on the issue of whether this is an areal or an inherited feature. For Kham, a Tibeto-Burman language of the Rung branch, see Watters (2002: 185, 215); for Hani, a Tibeto-Burman language of the Loloish branch, see Zhang (2005: 56-57, 136); and Li and Wang (1986: 114-115, 125-127). For more details see Caboara (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Classical Chinese is not the only language having a special negator for nominal predicates; Turkish and Bahasa Indonesian also have one (Stassen 1997: 45-50), and some language with particle copulas also have one, such as Kham (Watters 2002: 216)

The key elements of my approach are therefore the issues of the co-occurrence of *ye* 也 with nominal predicates and the diachronic hypothesis that *ye* 也 was in the origin a marker of discourse-oriented phenomena such as topicalization, backgrounding, or contrastive focus.

The extent of the co-occurrence of *ye* 也 with nominal predicates can be tested in any given text, provided there is an objective methodology to identify nouns functioning as predicate nuclei; it is in fact remarkable how uncontroversial such an identification proves in most cases to be, once a standard prose text of the Warring States period gets tagged.<sup>3</sup>

It was the absence of any such comprehensive testing that led Wang Li, in his pioneering study of the history of copulas in Chinese, to end his piecemeal investigation of instances of *ye* 也 following nominal predicates with the conclusion that although *ye* 也 fulfills many of the functions of a copula (Wang 1936/2000: 358), it cannot properly be considered one, as there are cases where nominal predicates are not followed by *ye* 也. In a subsequent study Wang gives the two following examples from pre-Qin materials (Wang 1937/2000: 379-380):<sup>4</sup>

- (1) 前識者，道之華而愚之始（也）。(*Dao De Jing* ch.38)  
‘Foreknowledge is the flowery embellishment of the way and the beginning of folly.’ (Lau)
- (2) 有兩虎爭人而鬥者，卞莊子將刺之，管與止之曰：“虎者，戾蟲；人者，甘餌（也）。今兩虎爭人而鬥，小者必死，大者必傷。”（*戰國策* juan 4, section 2, 上海古籍出版社, 1978: 141)  
‘Once two tigers [a pair of] quarreled over the corpse of a man. Bian Zhuangzi would have slain them but Guan Yu stopped him. “Tigers are cruel beasts to whom man is a sweetmeat. Now two are fighting over a man the smaller must die and the larger be wounded.”’ (Crump)

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of such methodology and an analysis of all dubious cases in the Guodian manuscripts, please refer to my PhD dissertation, Caboara (2010).

<sup>4</sup> In the same study Wang also gives examples of *ye* 也 sometimes following and sometimes not following stative verbs as another proof that it should not be considered a copula, but this only shows that his implicit definition of copula was too tied to the European case, where adjectives as well as nouns need a copula when functioning as predicate nuclei.

Not only are Wang Li's examples piecemeal, they are also, in these cases, textually problematic, and I have put *ye* 也 within parenthesis after Wang Li's examples because the Mawangdui version of the *Laozi* and the Shanghai Guji edition of the *Zhanguo Ce* 戰國策 do have *ye* 也 there. While these limitations are completely understandable in a pioneering study and unavoidable given that stage of linguistic enquiry and the availability of materials in the 1930's, today we have not only new comparative data to generate new hypotheses, but also more reliable excavated texts to test them, employing a more rigorous tagging methodology and applying it to the totality of a given body of data.

This is what I have done in my dissertation, under the supervision of Professor Yue, on the basis of the analysis of the Guodian texts.

The Guodian manuscripts have been excavated in 1993 from Tomb 1 at present-day Guodian, Jingmen city, 9 kilometers north of Ji'nancheng, the ancient Chu capital, 5 kilometers north of Jingzhou, Hubei, not far from Baoshan (Yang 2004: 193-196 and Pian and Duan 2006: 468-470). The corpus consists of more than 800 inscribed bamboo strips for a total of 12,092 characters, and eighteen texts, that can be roughly subdivided into three groups: 1) four "Daoist" texts (three portions of textual material corresponding to parts of the *Dao De Jing* and one short cosmological piece on the role of the *Tai yi* 太一); 2) ten "Confucian" texts (one corresponding to the "Zi yi" 緇衣 chapter of the *Li Ji*) treating political and psychological issues thematically close to Mencius and Xunzi; 3) four short collections of aphorisms.<sup>5</sup> They are a philologically much more reliable source of data than the transmitted pre-Qin texts, and a much larger set of far longer texts than the epigraphic sources we described above. There are 615 occurrences of *ye* 也. As the nature and period of the archeological culture to which Guodian Tomb 1 belongs are clear, the corpus can be dated with precision as no later than 300 BCE (Li 2000: 107). I have tagged the Guodian texts and analyzed the usage of *ye* 也 into three categories<sup>6</sup> as shown in the table 1 below.

<sup>5</sup> See Allan and Williams (2000) for more details.

<sup>6</sup> The first category, topic, is a discourse function, the second, copula, syntactic, the third, 'final', is a label for different, discourse-based usages.

454 From Discourse to Grammar, But Not All the Way:  
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Table 1 Functions of *ye* 也 text by text in the Guodian Corpus

text n.	text name	chars. N	top	cop	fin	total
1	郭店一《老子》甲本	1073	11	6	27	44
2	郭店二《老子》乙本	377	0	1	2	3
3	郭店三《老子》丙本	268	4	1	6	11
4	郭店四《太一生水》	284	7	10	0	17
5	郭店五《緇衣》	1153	9	2	11	22
6	郭店六《魯穆公問子思》	149	0	1	2	3
7	郭店七《窮達以時》	287	2	1	10	13
8	郭店八《五行》	1240	11	61	17	89
9	郭店九《唐虞之道》	704	7	8	24	39
10	郭店十《忠信之道》	256	4	7	10	21
11	郭店十一《成之聞之》	966	26	3	24	53
12	郭店十二《尊德義》	914	8	13	26	47
13	郭店十三《性自命出》	1551	15	54	44	113
14	郭店十四《六德》	969	16	18	25	59
15	郭店十五《語叢一》	687	1	17	24	42
16	郭店十六《語叢二》	344	1	0	6	7
17	郭店十七《語叢三》	467	6	11	13	30
18	郭店十八《語叢四》	403	0	0	2	2
		12092	128	214	273	615

In the Guodian corpus, the absence of *ye* 也 after nominal predicates is fairly rare; there are 12 occurrences in 8 passages, versus 214 occurrences of the copular particle *ye* 也.<sup>7</sup> I have given a detailed discussion of these occurrences in my dissertation, here it suffices to say that 7 passages fall into one of the following categories: 1) asymmetric gaps, where it seems likely that the lack of *ye* 也 is due to an accidental gap (ex 1); 2) symmetrical omissions, where the strong parallelism suggests that the non-usage of *ye* 也 after the nominal predicate is not an accident:

<sup>7</sup> There are two quotations from the *Book of Odes* in which there is no copular marking. I do not discuss them as they do not reflect the language stage I am investigating:  
5.37. 《詩》云：5.38. “成王之孚，下土之式。”（緇衣 13）  
5.50. 《詩》云：5.51. “其容不改，出言有章 [順 LL]，黎民所望 [信 LL]。”（緇衣 17）(LL refers here to the graphs as read by Li Ling, as opposed to the reading of the original Guodian editors).



- (3) 簡，義之方也。匿，仁之方也。強，義之方。柔，仁之方也。(五行 40-42)

‘Resoluteness is a method of righteousness, leniency is a method of humanity. hardness is a method of righteousness, softness is a method of benevolence.’

- (4) 察諸出，所以知己，知己所以知人，知人所以知命，知命而後知道，知道而後知行。(尊德義 8-9)

‘Examining it (one’s behavior) in its manifestations, (this) is how one can know oneself; knowing oneself, (this) is how one can know others; knowing others, (this) is how one can know fate; one first knows fate and after that one knows the way, one first knows the way and after that one knows how to act.’

The high regularity in the usage of *ye* 也 after nominal predicates makes these examples exceptional, and yet we cannot discard them but should consider the case that at this stage the usage of *ye* 也 has not spread to all cases. Furthermore, as Stassen also found that particle copula is often a complementary option to zero copula, both being used in the same language, his framework allows to make sense of the presence of a certain number of unmarked nominal predicates in the Guodian texts, which can be interpreted as the residue of a change in progress whereby particle copula *ye* 也 takes over zero copula encoding (which is the mode of encoding of the previous stage, represented by the *Shu Jing* 書經 (*Book of Documents*) and the *Yi Jing* 易經 (*Book of Changes*)).

This leads to the issue of diachrony. The original objective of my dissertation was to test Yue’s hypothesis that *ye* 也 was in the origin a focus marker (Yue 2004). While this hypothesis is fully compatible with the typological approach at the basis of my analysis, the Guodian corpus represent a stage where all the functions are present and only traces of the grammaticalization process are left in the form of exceptions. As etymological and lexicographical data are inconclusive,<sup>8</sup> the only possibility to trace the development of *ye* 也 is to use other manuscript sources when they will become

<sup>8</sup> The original function of *ye* 也 cannot be recovered from its etymology, which is unknown, even though a tentative etymology is discussed in my dissertation. *Ye* 也 is one of the few function words which does not derive from any known full lexical word, and its historical development is difficult to reconstruct: it is unattested in the *Book of Documents* and completely absent from the early epigraphic sources (Oracle Bones and Bronzes); while present in the *Book of Odes*, its syntactic behavior stabilizes only in the *Analects* and later texts.

available. I present here, as a conclusion, two tables that represent a preliminary attempt to proceed in such direction, tabulating functions of *ye* 也 in other excavated texts: table 2 covers all the known occurrences of *ye* 也 in excavated texts previous to the Guodian texts, and table 3 the occurrences of *ye* 也 in the contemporary cache of texts of unknown provenance known as Shanghai Museum texts (the first six volumes). The story these tables tell points to a grammaticalization of *ye* 也 from discourse marker into a copula, but such cannot be yet told in detail, nor is this the venue to make such an attempt. But it is this larger picture, which the continuous publication of new material makes increasingly testable, that Professor Yue always kept in front of me and that has motivated our common enquiry into this topic, our conversations, our sifting of the examples, and for such stimulus and sharing I am deeply grateful.

Table 2 Functions of *ye* 也 in other excavated texts

Text information	Functions				
	Copula	Top	Focus	Other Functions	Total
大盂鼎 Tripod Caldron of the Great Yu (X century BCE)				1	1
欒書缶 Fou-barrel of Luan Shu (V century BCE)			1		1
曾侯乙墓編鐘 Sets of bells of the Tomb of Marquis Yi (V century BCE)		20			20
中山國王墓 Zhongshan bronzes <sup>9</sup> 300 BCE	1		3	3	7
包山竹簡 Baoshan manuscripts 300 BCE		2		1	3
信陽竹簡 Xinyang manuscripts 300 BCE			1	5	6
Total	1	22	5	10	38

<sup>9</sup> The Zhongshan bronzes do not contain the particle *ye* 也 but a graph, variously transcribed as *shi* 施 (\*lais) or *zhan* 旃 (\*(l)an), that stands for a word appearing in the same position and with the same function of the nominal predication marker *ye* 也 \*laiʔ/\*leʔ (see Yue 2004). The phonetic values follow Schuessler's Minimal Old Chinese reconstructions.

Table 3 Functions of *ye* 也 in other excavated texts<sup>10</sup>

Text	Text name	Char.	top	cop	fin	?	total	0 Cop
1	孔子詩論	1009	8	33	2	3	46	0
2	緇衣	1153	9	2	10	0	21	0
3	性情論	1256	15	54	44	0	114	0
4	民之父母	398	2	1	2	2	7	1
5	子羔	390	6	12	2	1	21	0
6	魯邦大旱	208	0	0	1	0	1	0
7	從政	658	1	7	4	1	14	0
8	昔者君老	172	0	0	0	0	0	0
9	容成氏	2080	4	3	11	0	19	0
10	周易	1809	0	0	0	0	0	0
11	仲弓	540	5	10	3	2	20	0
12	恒先	513	5	0	5	0	10	0
13	彭祖	295	0	0	0	1	1	0
14	采風曲目	153	0	0	0	4	4	0
15	逸詩—交交鳴鳥	120	0	0	0	0	0	0
16	逸詩—多薪	44	0	0	0	0	0	0
17	昭王毀室+昭王與龔之雕	379	0	1	1	0	2	0
18	東大王泊旱	593	0	0	0	0	0	0
19	內禮	390	0	1	0	0	2	0
20	相邦之道	110	1	0	0	0	1	0
21	曹沫之陣	1763	1	1	1	0	3	21
22	競建內之+鮑叔牙與隰朋之諫	697	5	3	5	0	13	0
23	季康子問于孔子	669	9	6	0	0	15	0
24	姑成家父	466	2	1	1	0	4	0
25	君子為禮	340	0	3	9	0	12	0
26	弟子問	520	0	7	6	0	13	0
27	三德	925	0	0	0	0	0	4
28	鬼神之明	197	0	3	2	0	5	0
29	融師有成氏	122	0	0	0	0	0	0
30	景公虐	489	1	5	0	1	7	0

<sup>10</sup> The columns provide the number of characters per text and the number of occurrences of *ye* 也 in topic position, as copula, in final position, with uncertain function, the total of occurrences and, finally, the occurrences of zero copula, namely nominal predicates not followed by *ye* 也.

458 From Discourse to Grammar, But Not All the Way:  
Grammaticalization and Redundancy of the Classical Chinese Function Word *ye* 也  
in Pre-Qin Texts, with Special Attention to the Guodian Bamboo Manuscripts

31	孔子見季桓子	554	3	5	0	2	10	0
32	莊王既成	93	0	0	0	0	0	0
33	申公臣靈王	117	0	0	0	0	0	0
34	平王問鄭壽	173	0	0	0	0	0	0
35	平王與王子木	117	0	0	0	0	0	2
36	慎子曰恭儉	128	0	0	0	0	0	1
37	用曰	776	0	0	0	0	0	0
38	天子建州	407	1	3	0	0	4	0
39	武王踐阼	496	0	0	0	0	0	3
40	鄭子家亡	232	0	0	0	0	0	0
41	君人者何必安哉	240	1	4	2	0	7	0
42	凡物流形	807	0	0	0	0	0	0
43	吳命	421	2	3	1	0	6	0
		23019	81	168	112	17	382	33

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## 從郭店楚簡看古代漢語虛詞“也”的語法化 和語言冗餘現象

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### 提要

本文討論古代漢語中“也”從焦點助詞發展到繫詞的語法化過程，並對“也”在郭店楚簡裡判斷詞以外的用法、及其作為繫詞的規律性進行了研究。

其主要貢獻是：

- 一：把類型學關於焦點，繫詞和不及物動詞的最近的看法，應用於古代漢語語法研究。
- 二：採納余靄芹（2004）先創的模式，完整調查和定量分析先秦出土文獻。

### 關鍵詞

古代漢語，郭店楚簡，語法，判斷句，繫詞