

The Locus of Mandarin Sentence-final Particles and the Final-over-final Constraint

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Mandarin Chinese clausal syntax can be described as strictly head-initial, with the exception of certain “particles” which are linearized at the end of the clause. Previous work on these sentence-final particles (SFPs) has assumed that all SFPs are very high, in the CP periphery. In the absence of information from linear order, I consider the semantic scope of these SFPs to determine their structural height. Using evidence from scopal interaction with negation, modals, quantificational subjects, and alternative question disjunction, I show that a subset of SFPs—specifically, sentence-final *le* and *éryǐ* ‘only,’ both in the lowest class of SFPs (Paul, 2014, 2015)—are in a lower, clause-medial position. I identify the position of these low SFPs as coinciding with the edge of the lower phase, traditionally identified as vP.

As SFPs are head-final heads with head-initial complements, they have been discussed as an important apparent exception to the Final-over-Final Constraint (FOFC; Holmberg 2000; Biberauer, Holmberg, and Roberts 2014), a proposed universal on structure-building and linearization. I argue that the very limited distribution of apparent FOFC violations should be taken to support a modification to FOFC, rather than its outright rejection (contra Paul 2015). In particular, the existence of apparent exceptions to FOFC in a clause-medial position in addition to the CP edge motivates the view that FOFC holds only within individual Spell-Out domains. I hypothesize that languages that previously have been shown to obey FOFC across these domains are also languages with richer verbal morphology, which can be taken to extend or suspend Spell-Out of the lower phase. Apparent exceptions to FOFC are thus predicted to be possible (a) at phase boundaries (b) in analytic languages. This helps to explain previous observations that certain sets of languages, especially with little to no verbal inflection, are more prone to heads that seem to run counter to FOFC.