Review Article

The Syntactic Position of the Topic Markers in Mandarin Chinese

Ma Daoshan

Department of English, School of Humanities, Tianjin Polytechnic University, 399#, Binshui West Road, Xiqing District, Tianjin, 300387, China

Abstract

The present article deals with the syntactic position of the topic markers in Mandarin Chinese. One of the characteristics of the topic structures in Mandarin Chinese is that there is a topic marker attached to the topic. The topic markers don't carry meaning in the structure but only serve as the functional markers in syntax. Therefore it may be argued that these topic markers are not heads of the topic structures but rather modality particles attached to the head of the topic.

Keywords: topic marker, topic sentence, syntactic position, Mandarin Chinese.

INTRODUCTION

In 1958, Hochett first put forward the term "topic", which refers to the "concept which exhibits some similarities with the syntactic notion of subject" [1]. In 1976, Keenan and Schieffelin defined topic as a proposition expressing a concern without any overt expression in the discourse but can be read behind the lines [2]. A syntactic definition of topic is formally done by Gundel as shown in the following [3].

(1) Formal Definition of Topic

A constituent C, is the syntactic topic of some sentence S, if C is immediately dominated by S and C is adjoined to the left or right of some sentence S' which is also immediately dominated by S.

Based on her investigation of the topic structures in 30 languages, Gundel classified topics into 2 types, the canonical topic comment structures and the sentence final topic comment structures [4], which may be illustrated in the following examples in Mandarin Chinese.

(2) zhe ben shu, wo ai kan.
This Cl. book I love read
"This book, I love to read."

(3) ai kan zhe ben shu, wo.
love read this Cl. book I
"Love to read this book, I."

As is shown in (2), the constituent NP "zhe ben shu" is located in the leftmost position of the sentence, dominated by S and adjoined to the left of S' "wo bu ai kan" which is also immediately dominated by S. The topic comment sentence shown in example (2) is called a canonical topic comment sentence. While in sentence (3), the constituent DP "wo" is located in the rightmost position of the sentence, dominated by S and adjoined to the right of S' "wo bu ai kan zhe ben shu" which is also immediately dominated by S. The topic comment sentence shown in example (3) with the topic located in the rightmost position of the sentence is called a sentence-ending topic comment sentence. Sentence final topics can be widely spread in Shandong dialect as illustrated by the example of (4) quoted in Ma [5].

(4) dou bu zheyang shuohua a, women!
All not so speak Part. we
"All of us don't speak in this way!"

Topics can carry topic markers especially in topic prominent languages such as Mandarin Chinese. Topic markers usually follow topics but sometimes are preposed before the topics or the themes. Modal particles such as "a" /"ne" /"ma" /"na" /"ba" /"la" /"ha" often serve as topic markers in the sentence as shown below.

(5) jufaxue a /ma /na/ la/ /ba/ /ha /ne, wo xihuan.
Syntax Particle I like
"Syntax, I like."

In sentence (5) the modal particles are used as topic markers and when it is uttered there is usually a pause or a rising tone after the topic markers. These topic markers may also occur before the topics or after the themes as shown in the sentence final topic comment structure of (6), which read exactly like the sentence final topic comment sentences in Shandong dialect such as it is shown in (4).

(6) dou bu xihuan jufaxue a /ma /na/ la/ /ba/ /ha /ne, women!

All not like syntax Particle we

"No one likes syntax, we!"

Sentence (6) may also be considered as a canonical topic comment structure in which the topic is the negative VP "dou bu xihuan jufaxue". If this judgment is correct, the topic markers "a" /"ne" /"ma"

/"na" /"ba" /"la" /"ha" are attached at the end of the topic negative VP. However this disparity does not affect our discussion of the syntactic position of these topic markers.

Following Ma [6], the derivation of (2) may be illustrated by the process shown in the tree diagram of (7) below.

(7)
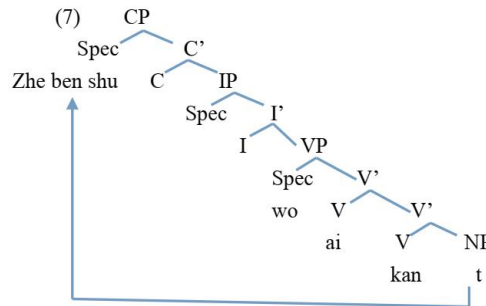
In (7) it shows that the topic "zhe ben shu" is moved from its original place in the object position to the spec CP to check the strong topic feature of C. However, in light of the copy theory, there are two copies of the NP "zhe ben shu" in the derivation. The fronted topic is the pronounced copy while the one in the object position is the silent copy which is not externalized, but both copies are interpreted in the two positions. The silent copy is indicated by a single line in the center in (8).

(8) zhe ben shu, wo ai kan zhe ben shu.

This Cl. book I love read this Cl. book

The merging operation of the topic comment structure in (2) may be demonstrated as in the following. In sentence (2), the noun phrase "zhe ben shu" (the merge operation of this noun phrase is omitted for convenience) is external merged with the verb "kan" into a V' "kan zhe ben shu", the V' "kan zhe ben shu" is then further external merged with the verb "ai" into the verbal phrase "ai kan zhe ben shu", and the VP "ai kan zhe ben shu" is then external merged with the pronoun "wo" into the IP "wo ai kan zhe ben shu". Finally the topic phrase "zhe ben shu" is internal merged with the IP "wo ai kan zhe ben shu" into the CP "zhe ben shu, wo ai kan zhe ben shu." As the first copy of the noun phrase "zhe ben shu" is the most prominent copy, it is externalized and thus pronounced, while the last copy of the noun phrase "zhe ben shu" is not prominent, it is deleted and silent in the externalization of the sentence. This process of merge is illustrated in (9-12).

(9) Merge (kan, zhe ben shu) => {kan, zhe ben shu}

(10) Merge (ai, kan zhe ben shu) => {ai, kan zhe ben shu}

(11) Merge (wo, ai kan zhe ben shu) => {wo, ai kan zhe ben shu}

(12) Merge (zhe ben shu, wo ai kan zhe ben shu) => {zhe ben shu, wo ai kan zhe ben shu}

If the above analysis following Ma [6] is on the right track, the syntactic position of the topic markers should be located in the position of C.

THE SYNTACTIC POSITION OF TOPIC MARKERS

As it has been argued in the above section, the syntactic position of the topic markers should be located in C position as illustrated in (13) below.

(13)
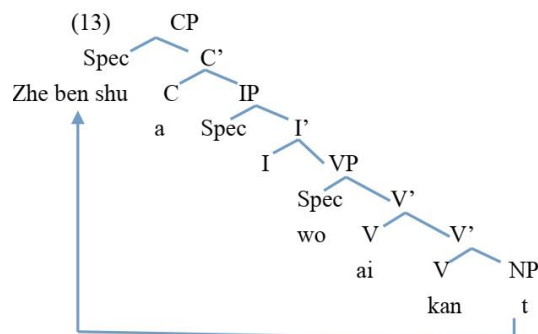
As it is illustrated in the tree diagram of (13), the topic markers of "a" /"ne" /"ma" /"na" /"ba" /"la" /"ha" (in the tree diagram only the modal particle "a" is written in (13) for convenience) should be written under the node of C.

If the analysis of (13) follows the minimalist spirit, then sentence (5) may be illustrated in the tree diagram of (14) (topic markers of the modal particles "a/ne/ma/na/ba/la/ha" are shortened as TM in the tree diagram for convenience).
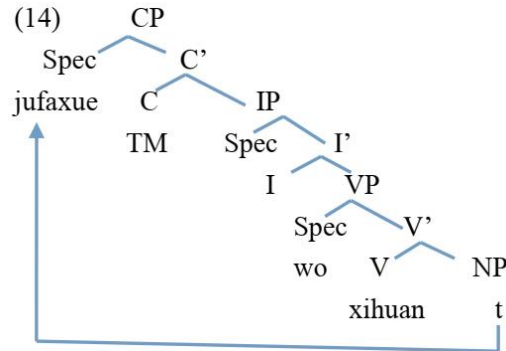
From the illustration in (13-14), it may be concluded that the topic markers in Mandarin Chinese are located in the head C position. But this is not the whole story. As it is examined and considered further, some problem arises as to the feature checking requirement of the topic.
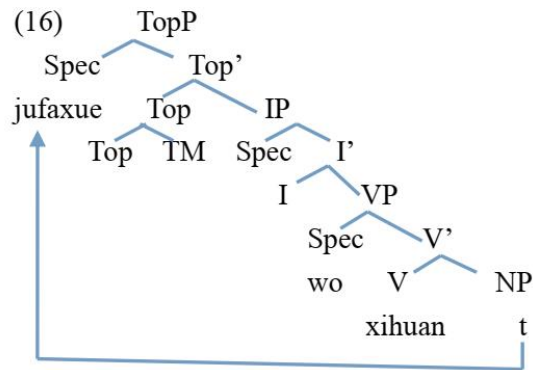
As it is shown in (14), the topic moves from the object position to the spec CP position. What is the motivation of its movement? A reasonable answer is that the head C carries strong [+topic] feature which triggers the topic movement. The strong [+topic] feature in C carries a specifier [+topic] feature which attracts the movement of the topic to the spec CP position. The head [+topic] feature of the specifier "jufaxue" checks against the specifier [+topic] feature of the head C. As the two features of the head and the specifier are compatible with each other, the derivation converges. It seems quite sound for the above explanation. But think it over and it may be found that the head C is filled with the modality particles of the topic markers "a" /"ne" /"ma" /"na" /"ba" /"la" /"ha". It is problematic that these topic markers don't carry any semantic content, nor do they introduce any complement, nor do they mark the locutionary force of the sentence, nor is their usage obligatory. This shows that the topic markers are optionally used at the phonological level instead of the syntactic level. Therefore, these modal particles are not head of the sentence. As they are not heads of the sentence, they might be attached to the head C as affixes as shown in (15) below (topic markers are shortened as TM in the tree diagram for convenience).
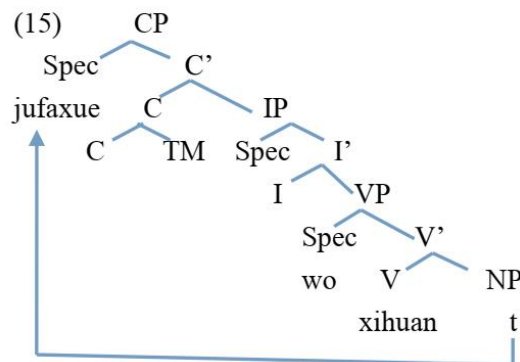
Another problem arises as to the tree diagram of the above topic comment sentences. No evidence is found that there is any constituent used as the category of complementizer in Chinese [7, 8]. In Chinese no constituent can be used in a similar way with "that /if /for" to mark the locutionary force of the sentence and to introduce a complement clause or phrase. Chinese is a language without any overt complementizers.

Therefore the topic comment sentences might not be CP in syntactic structure, instead, following Xu & Liu [9] and many others, it might be assumed that the Chinese topic comment sentences may be tree diagramed as a topic phrase shortened hereafter TopP maximally projected by the head topic shortened hereafter as Top. If this assumption is correct, the tree diagram of (15) may be rewritten as in (16).

(16) TopP
Spec   Top'
jufaxue   Top   IP
        Top   TM   Spec   I'
                    I   VP
                    Spec   V'
                    wo   V   NP
                        xihuan   t

In (16) the topic markers are affixed to the head topic which carries a strong [+topic] specifier feature, which requires the spec to be filled with a phrase with the [+topic] head feature. As the spec TopP is null, the strong [+topic] specifier feature of the head topic attracts the determiner phrase DP "jufaxue" to raise to the spec TopP position to check its own feature. When the DP "jufaxue" with [+topic] feature is moved from the object position to spec TopP, the strong [+topic] specifier feature of the head topic is thus checked and the two features are found to be compatible. The derivation converges. The sentence is acceptable.
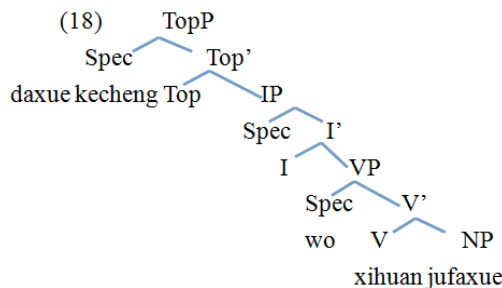
But why the DP "jufaxue" in the object position moves instead of the DP "wo" in the subject position? The head topic actually carries [+ABOUTNESS] and [+DEFINITENESS] features [5, 6], these features are strong enough to attract the DP "jufaxue" in the object position which also carries [+ABOUTNESS] and [+DEFINITENESS] features to move to spec TopP for feature checking. If the subject "wo" also carries [+ABOUTNESS] and [+DEFINITENESS] features, the subject may also be attracted to move to spec TopP. In fact, sometime it does.

The above topic comment sentences are those in which the topic is moved from somewhere in the sentence to spec TopP for feature checking. There is also other type of sentences in which the topic is not moved from anywhere in the sentences but base generated in spec TopP [6]. The example in (17) shows that the topic DP "daxue kecheng (university courses)" is base generated in spec TopP.

(17) Daxue kecheng, wo xihuan jufaxue.
University course I like syntax
"(As to) University courses, I like syntax."

As is shown in the above, there is no internal merge in the sentence of (17). The topic is not moved from anywhere in the sentence. Rather it is base generated in spec TopP as it is illustrated in (18) below.

(18) TopP
Spec   Top'
daxue kecheng   Top   IP
                Spec   I'
                I   VP
                Spec   V'
                wo   V   NP
                    xihuan jufaxue

In (17) there is no topic marker in the sentence. However, topic markers may be optional in the sentence. After the topic "daxue kecheng", topic markers "a" /"ne" /"ma" /"na" /"ba" /"la" /"ha" may be attached to it as shown in the tree diagram of (19).

(19) TopP
Spec   Top'
daxue kecheng   Top   IP
        Top   TM   Spec   I'
                    I   VP
                    Spec   V'
                    wo   V   NP
                        xihuan   jufaxue
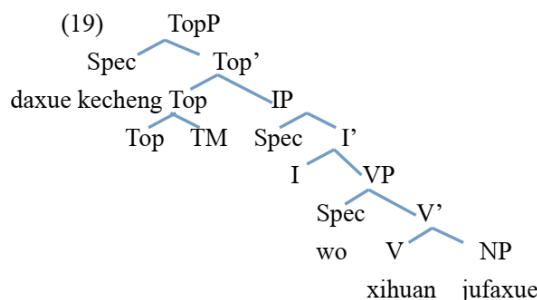
Dangling topics are also base generated in the spec TopP position without any internal merge of the topics. Similar to (17), they are not moved from anywhere in the sentence [6].
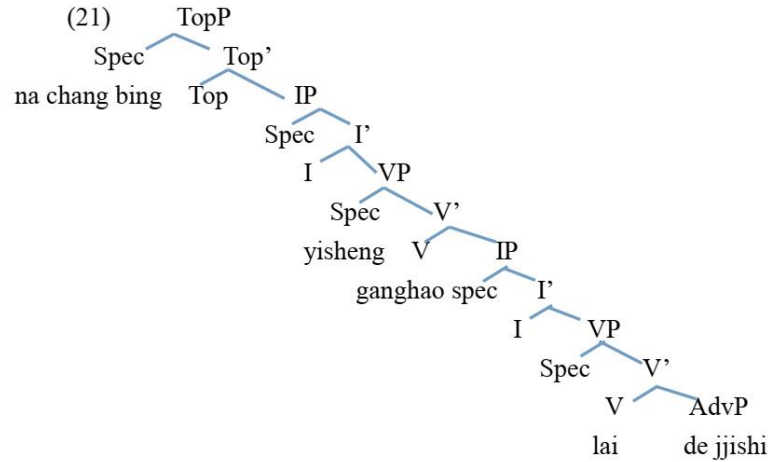
(20) na chang bing, yisheng ganghao lai de jishi.

That Cl. illness doctor happen come Part. On time

"(As to) That disease, the doctor happened to come on time."

The tree diagram of (20) may be written as in (21).

(21)

In the above tree diagram, the dangling topic is externally merged with the IP "yisheng ganghao lai de jishi". The dangling topic in (20) may also be attached to its end the topic markers "a" /"ne" /"ma" /"na" /"ba" /"la" /"ha" as shown below.

(22) na chang bing a /ma /na/ la/ /ba/ /ha /ne, yisheng ganghao lai de jishi.

The tree diagram of (22) may be illustrated in (23) below.

(23)
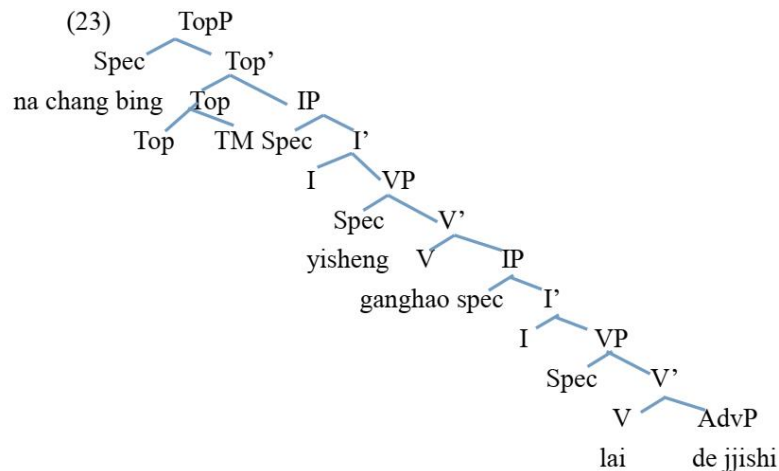
In left dislocation topic comment sentences where a pronoun or a noun phrase is located in the object position which is properly c-commanded by and co-indexed with the topic in the initial position of the sentence as shown in (24) and (25).

(24)Jufaxue, wo xihuan ta.
Syntax I like it
"Syntax, I like it."

(25)Jufaxue, wo xihuan zhe men ke.
Syntax I like this Cl. course
"Syntax, I like this course."

One of the explanations is that the topic is originally located in the object position and is raised to the spec TopP for feature checking. After it is displaced, in the original position a resumptive pronoun or a noun phrase is placed instead which is co-indexed with the moved topic. This solution fails to account for why in some sentences there is no need to substitute the trace of the topic with a resumptive pronoun or a noun phrase while in other sentences as in (24) and (25) it is necessary. In this thesis the proposal [6] that the topic is base generated in the topic position is adopted. Therefore the derivation of (24) is similar to that of (17) illustrated as in (26).

(26)

```
            TopP
         Spec      Top'
       Jufaxue  Top     IP
                     Spec    I'
                          I      VP
                              Spec    V'
                              wo    V     NP
                                  xihuan    ta
```
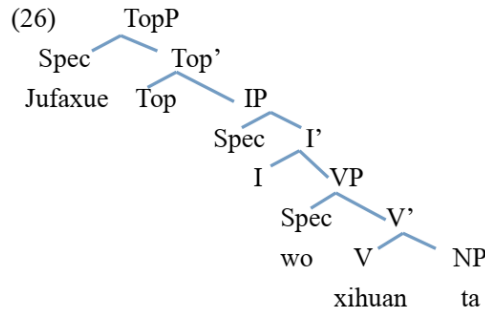
The topic markers "a" /"ne" /"ma" /"na" /"ba" /"la" /"ha" may also be optionally attached to the left dislocation topic comment structures as shown below.

(27) Jufaxue a /ma /na/ la/ /ba/ /ha /ne, wo xihuan ta.

(28) Jufaxue a /ma /na/ la/ /ba/ /ha /ne, wo xihuan zhe men ke.
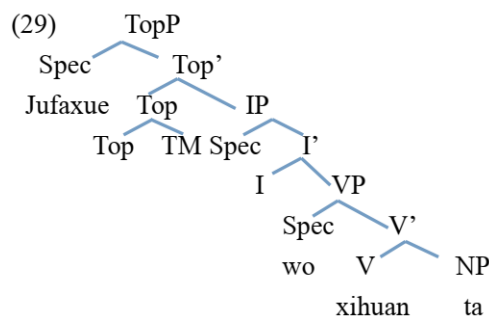
The tree diagram of (27) may be written as in (29) below.

(29)

```
            TopP
         Spec       Top'
       Jufaxue   Top        IP
                Top  TM  Spec    I'
                              I      VP
                                  Spec    V'
                                  wo    V     NP
                                      xihuan    ta
```

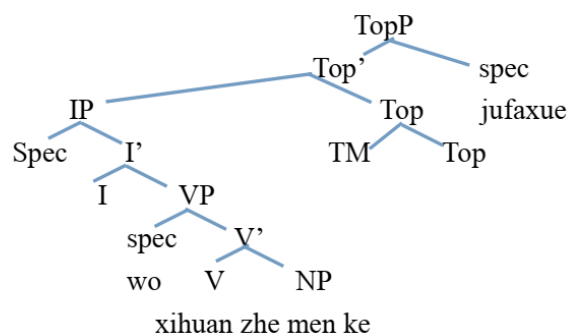Then where is the syntactic position of topic markers in the sentence final topic comment sentences as shown in (30)?

(30) Wo xihuan zhe men ke, jufaxue.

Topic markers "a" /"ne" /"ma" /"na" /"ba" /"la" /"ha" may be optionally attached to the comment in the intermediate position of the sentence as shown in (31).

(31) Wo xihuan zhe men ke a /ma /na/ la/ /ba/ /ha /ne, jufaxue.

The sentence in (31) is derived by adding the topic markers to the topic. The topic is a head final constituent in Chinese and the tree diagram of (31) may be written as in (32) below.

(32)

```
                              TopP
                        Top'          spec
              IP             Top      jufaxue
         Spec    I'        TM    Top
              I      VP
              spec     V'
              wo    V     NP
            xihuan zhe men ke
```

As it is shown in (32) the topic markers are attached to the topic which is located at the right of the sentence. The topic markers linearly follow the IP and in PF the topic markers are pronounced after the comment. Thus the derivation of the topic markers in the sentence final topic comment structures may be solved.

Sentence (31) is a left dislocation sentence. In the following dangling topic comment structures, the topic markers "a" /"ne" /"ma" /"na" /"ba" /"la" /"ha"may also be attached to the comment in the intermediate position of the sentence as shown in (33) .

(33) yisheng lai de jishi a /ma /na/ la/ /ba/ /ha /ne, na chang bing.

The derivation process of (33) is similar to that of (31). The tree diagram of (33) is (34).

(34)

```
                                    TopP
                              Top'        spec
                    IP                 Top    na chang bing
              Spec    I'             TM    Top
                    I    VP
                      spec   V'
                    yisheng  V    AdvP
                            lai   de jishi
```
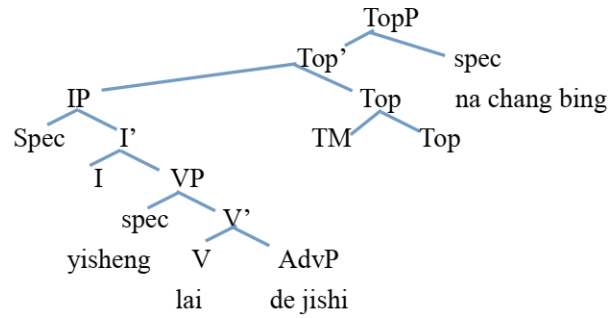
As shown in the above, sentence (5) is a typical canonical topic comment structure. The corresponding sentence final topic structure of (5) may be written as in (35) below.
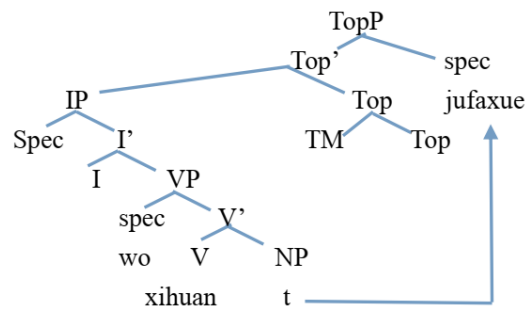
(35) wo xihuan a /ma /na/ la/ /ba/ /ha /ne, jufaxue.

Sentence (35) is derived from sentence (36). The object "jufaxue" carries [+ABOUTNESS] and [+DEFINITENESS] head features while the topic at the end of the sentence also carries strong [+ABOUTNESS] and [+DEFINITENESS] specifier features. Therefore the object "jufaxue" is attracted to move to the spec TopP position at the rightmost position of the sentence to check against the strong [+ABOUTNESS] and [+DEFINITENESS] specifier features of the head topic. As the features are compatible, the derivation converges and the sentence is grammatical. This process is illustrated in the tree diagram of (37).

(36) wo xihuan jufaxue a /ma /na/ la/ /ba/ /ha /ne.

(37)

```
                                    TopP
                              Top'         spec
                    IP                 Top    jufaxue
              Spec    I'             TM    Top
                    I    VP
                      spec   V'
                      wo   V    NP
                         xihuan   t
```

However topic markers are also optionally attached to the end of the topics in the sentence final topic comment structures as shown in (38-40).
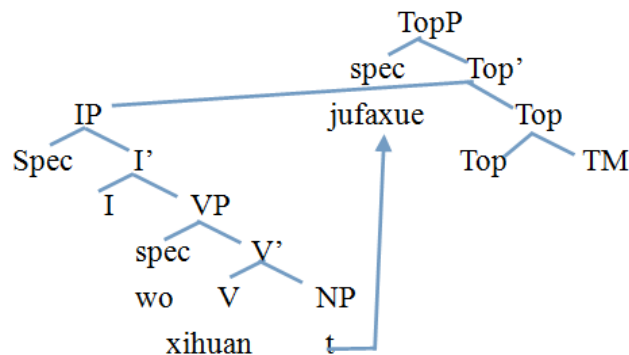
(38) wo xihuan, jufaxue a /ma /na/ la/ /ba/ /ha /ne.
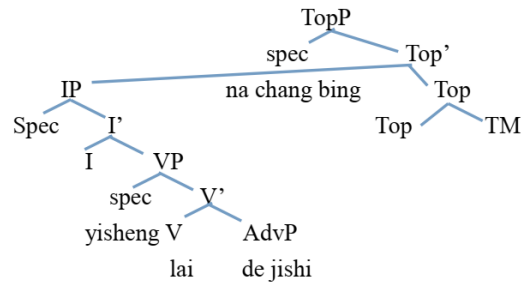(39) yisheng lai de jishi, na chang bing a /ma /na/ la/ /ba/ /ha /ne.
(40) Wo xihuan zhe men ke, jufaxue a /ma /na/ la/ /ba/ /ha /ne.

These sentences further show that Chinese may also be a topic head final language. The topic may be located at the rightmost position of the sentence and the topic markers may be attached to the head topic at the end of the sentence. The derivation of (38-40) are illustrated respectively by the tree diagram of (41-43).

(41)

```
                                    TopP
                              spec    Top'
                    IP           jufaxue   Top
              Spec    I'                Top    TM
                    I    VP
                      spec   V'
                      wo   V    NP
                         xihuan   t
```

(42)

```
                                    TopP
                            spec            Top'
            IP                  na chang bing      Top
     Spec        I'                          Top       TM
           I        VP
            spec        V'
       yisheng  V       AdvP
               lai    de jishi
```

(43)

```
                                    TopP
                            spec            Top'
            IP                  jufaxue          Top
     Spec        I'                          Top       TM
           I        VP
            spec        V'
        wo    V       NP
           xihuan zhe men ke
```

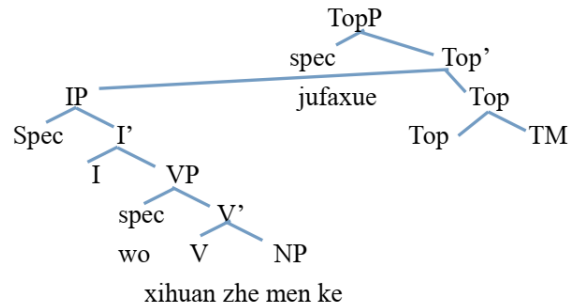## CONCLUSION

In the present article the syntactic position of topic markers in canonical topic comment sentences as well as in sentence final topic comment sentences is dealt with. Topic markers are modal particles in Chinese language which are attached to the head topic in the derivation of the sentence. Topic markers are not heads, instead they are affixes attached to the head Top.

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