

TOPIC MARKING AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF NARRATIVE IN SIBE

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The Sibe language is the language spoken by those members of the Sibe nationality that live in northwest China. The Sibe in northwest China are the descendants of thousands of Sibe soldiers and their families who were assigned to Xinjiang (present day Xinjiang Uygur [Uighur] Autonomous Region) from northeast China in 1764. The Sibe language belongs to the Manchu-Tungus branch of the Altaic family of languages. It has the largest number of speakers of any language belonging to that branch. Most of the data for this paper is drawn from natural discourse, relying primarily on a corpus of folk-tale narratives recorded by T. Jang.

In this paper we show that there is a prototypical grammatical construction in Sibe that functions to advance the foregrounded portion of a narrative text. This construction crucially involves the particle *da* in interesting and varied usages. The particle *da* occurs in four syntactic contexts in our corpus, but is never “obligatory” in any particular context. In other words, it is a particle that is constrained, but not determined, by syntactic structure. The central question that we address in this paper is what semantic and/or pragmatic factors influence or determine a speaker’s choice to use or omit *da* in any particular environment in which it may occur.

Our conclusion is that the usages of *da* are sensitive to a cluster of semantic and pragmatic properties extending from a prototype in which *da* marks the topic, in the sense of Li and Thompson (1976). The other usages can all be insightfully viewed as extensions of this basic use. In the process we show that Sibe is appropriately considered a topic and subject-prominent language. It is similar in this respect to Japanese and Korean. However, Sibe is more flexible in what may be the topic constituent in topic-comment sentences. Therefore Sibe is closer to the topic-prominent end of the topic- / subject-prominent continuum than either Japanese or Korean.

Finally, the usages of the discourse particle *da* are crucially involved in an indigenous notion of style. The frequency of *da* is highest in stories told by well-known and proficient storytellers. Furthermore, *da* is virtually absent in daily conversation, and its use lends a highly valued element of formality, or even archaism to narrative text. This study, therefore, provides a preliminary template for how linguistic analysis may inform a fundamental characterization of genre, style and literary esthetics.