OLD CHINESE SYNTAX: BASIC WORD ORDER

This lemma summarizes the principle characteristics of Old Chinese word order from the late Spring and Autumn period to the end of the Warring States period (approximately 6th-3rd centuries BCE). I also touch upon some changes which are in evidence in early Middle Chinese texts of the Han period.

1. Basic word order

Old Chinese had the same basic word order found in the modern varieties. Unmarked declarative clauses were SVO, with objects and other internal arguments following the verb. Modal and embedding verbs also precede their complements, as can be seen in the second clause.

(1) 夫人幼而學之，壯而欲行之。 (Mèngzǐ 孟子 梁惠王下)

Fú rén yòu ér xuè zhī zhuàng ér yù [xíng zhī].

DEM person young CONJ study 3.ACC mature CONJ want carry.out 3.ACC

‘When a person is young, he studies this. When he matures, he wants to put it into practice.’

Head-final order manifests itself in clause-final particles like the yes/no question marker hū 乎.

Note that (2a) is a matrix question. Like modern Chinese varieties, embedded yes/no questions did not employ a Q particle but were formed on alternative questions, as in (2b).
(2) a. 管仲知禮乎?  (Lúnyǔ 論語 八佾)

Guān Zhōng zhī lǐ hū?

‘Did Guan Zhong know the Rites?’

b. 桓公不知臣欺主與不欺主已明矣。  (Hánfēizǐ 韓非子 難二)

Huán gōng bù zhī chēn [qī zhǔ]

Huan duke not know minister deceive lord

yǔ bù [qī zhǔ] yǐ míng yǐ.

or not deceive lord already clear ASP

‘It is already clear that Duke Huan did not know whether his minister was deceiving him or not.’

Noun phrases also tended to be head-final. Possessors and modifiers precede the head noun.

(3) a. 文王之囿  (Mèngzǐ 孟子 梁惠王下)

[[Wén wáng] zhī yòu]

Wen king GEN park

‘King Wen’s park’

b. 避世之士  (Lúnyǔ 論語 微子)

[[bì shì] zhī shì]

avoid world GEN scholar

‘scholar who avoids the world’
According to Peyraube (1991), there were no classifiers in the Late Archaic period. Numerals commonly appeared directly preceding nouns, as in (4a). (4b) shows that a demonstrative further precedes the numeral.

(4) a. 吾先君文王克息，獲三矢焉  
(Wú xiān jūn wén wáng kè xí, huò sān shǐ yān.)
‘When our former lord King Wen conquered Xi, (he) captured three arrows.’

b. 願君去此三子者也。  
(Yuàn jūn qù cǐ sān zǐ zhě yě.)
‘(I) hope your lordship will dismiss these three gentlemen.’

One word order characteristic distinguishing Old Chinese from modern Mandarin is greater freedom in the positioning of prepositional phrases. In Modern Standard Mandarin, adjunct PPs generally surface in preverbal position, while argumental PPs appear post verbally, within the VP. Argumental PPs in Old Chinese likewise surfaced in postverbal position, as exemplified by the dative argument in (5a) introduced by the preposition yu. Adjunct PPs were also frequently found in postverbal position, like the passive agent in (5b).
(5) a. 天子能薦人於天。  
(Mèngzǐ 孟子·萬章上)

天子能薦人於天。

ruler can recommend person to heaven

‘The ruler can recommend someone to heaven.’

b. 吾長見笑於大方之家。
(Zhuāngzǐ 莊子·秋水)

吾長見笑於大方之家。

I would have always been laughed at by an enlightened person.

As Huang (1978), Sun (1996), Hong (1998), and others show, one reason for the subsequent increase in preverbal PPs was the grammaticalization of verbs heading modifying VPs as prepositions. For example, the Modern Mandarin source preposition cong ‘from’ grammaticalized from a verb meaning ‘follow’ in a construction like the one exemplified by (6a), in which cong heads an adjunct VP modifying another VP. The result was that modifying VPs were replaced with modifying PPs (Whitman 2000).

(6) a. 從晉文公伐鄭。
(Zuǒzhūàn 左傳·宣公 3)

從晉文公伐鄭。

(He) accompanied Lord Wen of Jin to attack the Zheng.[


follow Jin Wen lord attack Zheng

‘(He) accompanied Lord Wen of Jin to attack the Zheng.’[}
b. 孝文帝從代來。

Xiàowén Dì [PP cóng Dài] lái.

Xiaowen emperor from Dai come

‘Emperor Xiaowen arrived from Dai.’

2. Dislocations

Various other derived word orders are also found in Old Chinese. As in modern Chinese varieties, topicalization was productive in Old Chinese. Unlike modern Mandarin, however, topicalization of the object in Old Chinese required a resumptive pronoun in the VP. The accusative pronoun zhī resumes the topic Zìlù in (7).

(7) 子路，人告之以有過。

Zìlù, rén gào zhī yǐ yǒu guò.

Zilu person tell 3.ACC APPL have error

‘Zilu, someone told him he made a mistake.’

Old Chinese differs from modern varieties in having two other movement processes which placed an object or other VP-internal constituent in preverbal position. For example, object wh-phrases preceded the verb, as in (8).
The preverbal positioning of the objects in examples like (8a, b) has been viewed by Li and Thompson (1974), Wáng (1958), La Polla (1994), Feng (1996), Xu (2006), and others as evidence of basic OV order in Old or pre-Old Chinese. On the other hand, Peyraube (1996), Shěn (1992), Djamouri & Paul (2009), and others argue that VO has been the basic order throughout the attested history of Chinese and that there is no evidence for earlier OV basic order. One difficulty for the OV proponents is the fact that the position for *wh*-words was not immediately preverbal, as we would expect if the preverbal *wh*-words occupied their base positions. In (9a), a *wh*-word has moved from an embedded clause and precedes the matrix verb. In (9b), negation intervenes between the *wh*-word and the verb. If *wh*-movement were simply the surface realization of base generated OV order, then the object should be immediately adjacent to the verb that selected it, which is not the case in (9).

(9) a. 公誰欲與？

Gōng shéi yù [yù _]?  
2 who want give

‘Who do you want to give (it) to?’
b. 我何為乎？何不為乎？

(Wǒ hé wéi hū? Hè bù wéi hū?)

‘Then what should I do? What should I not do?’

Regarding the landing site for wh-movement, it must be lower than the clause-peripheral position that wh-movement targets in languages like English. Aldridge (2010) proposes that Old Chinese wh-movement targeted a position between the VP and the subject. The asymmetry in (10), which was first observed by Wèi (1999), shows that object wh-words follow the modal adverb jiāng, while subject wh-words precede jiāng. If wh-words moved to a position in the clause periphery, then object and subject wh-words should occupy the same position. Therefore, the position for object wh-words must be lower than that for subjects.

(10) a. 我將何求？

(Wǒ jiāng hé qiú?)

‘What will I ask for?’

b. 誰將治之？

(Shéi jiāng zhì zhī?)

‘Who will govern them?’
Wh-movement was lost in Middle Chinese. For mysterious reasons, wh-movement seems to have undergone an intermediate stage of cliticization in the Han period. (11) shows that long distance wh-movement was lost from an embedded clause. The wh-word rather attaches to the local verb. Recall from (10a) that Old Chinese syntactic wh-movement was able to cross a clause boundary.

(11) 諸君欲誰立？
(Shíjì 史記 趙世家)
Zhū jūn yù [shéi lì __]?
all gentleman want who stand
‘Gentlemen, who do you want to place (on the throne)?’

Another environment in which Old Chinese objects appeared in preverbal position is negated clauses when the object was a pronoun. The negator in this example is the quantifier mò ‘none’. The pronominal object surfaces between the negator and the verb.

(12) 吾先君亦莫之行也。
(Mèngzǐ 孟子 藤文公上)
Wú xiān jūn yì mò zhī xíng yě.
1 former lord also none 3.ACC do DECL
‘None of our former lords did this either.’

A variety of approaches have been taken to the analysis of pronoun fronting to negation. Some treat this as focus movement (Djamouri 1991), others as cliticization (Feng 1996). However, there is evidence that the movement has a syntactic basis and is triggered not by prosodic factors
or information structure. In (13a), the first person pronoun is attracted to the clausal negator \( bù \) but not in (13b).

(13)  a. 我饑而不我食。 
\[ Wǒ jī ér bù wǒ sì. \] 
I starve CONJ not I feed

‘When I was starving, (they) did not feed me.’

b. 制不在我。 
\[ Zhì bù zài wǒ. \] 
control not be.in 1

‘The control is not within me.’

If we replace the object of \( zài \) with a third person pronoun, which shows a distinction for case, we see that the locative verb takes a dative complement, as in (14a). Note in (14b) that this dative pronoun also does not front to negation. The generalization which emerges is that only accusative case-marked pronouns are attracted by negation.

(14)  a. 先君之廟在焉。 
\[ Xiān jūn zhī miào zài yān. \] 
former lord GEN shrine be.in 3.DAT

‘The former lord’s shrine is there.’
b. 天下莫強焉。 

(Mèngzǐ 孟子·梁惠王上)

Tiānxìà mò qiáng yān.

world none strong 3.DAT

‘No one in the world is stronger than them.’

Aldridge (2015) proposes that pronoun fronting to negation in Old Chinese was a type of object shift in order to receive accusative case. She points out that in Slavic languages like Russian objects in negated clauses are marked with genitive case when indefinite but take accusative case when definite. Given that pronouns are inherently definite, it is reasonable to assume that they needed to receive accusative case.

(15) Anna ne kupila knig/knigi.

Anna.NOM NEG bought books.GEN/books.ACC

‘Anna did not buy any books/the books.’ (Harves 2002:97)

Exceptions to the object shift analysis are found almost exclusively in biclausal structures. But here, too, clear patterns are discernable and unlikely to be related to cliticization or focus. As an example, the possibility of pronoun fronting across a clause boundary correlated with the type of negator. (16a) shows fronting of an embedded object pronoun when 莫 mò ‘none’ was the negator in the matrix clause. When the matrix negator was 不 bù, the pronoun remained inside the embedded clause, as in (16b).
(16) a. 虎負嵎，莫之敢摉。
(Mèngzǐ 孟子 尽心下)

Hu fù yú, mò zhī gǎn [yīng ___].
tiger back crevice none 3.ACC dare approach

‘The tiger backed into a crevice and no one dared to approach it.’

b. 為人臣者，不敢去之。
(Zhuāngzǐ 莊子 山木)

Wéi rén chén zhè bù gǎn [qù zhě].
be person minister DET not dare leave 3.ACC

‘One who serves as someone’s minister does not dare to leave him.’

This asymmetry may be due to different structural positions for negators. In (16a), the negator 莫
mò quantifies over the matrix subject. Since the matrix subject is identical to the embedded
subject, mò clearly takes scope over both clauses. On the other hand, there is evidence that 不
bù is an adverb that only scopes over what it adjoins to, as Ernst (1995) and Hsieh (2001) have
argued for Modern Mandarin. In the following example, 不 bù negates only the following PP and
not the entire VP. Note further that the object pronoun does not front but remains inside the VP
instead.

(17) 禍福無不自己求之者。
(Mèngzǐ 孟子公孫丑上)

Huò fú wú bù zi jǐ qíu zhě zhě.
disaster fortune not.exist not from self seek 3.ACC DET

‘Disaster and good fortune, there is no one who seeks these but within themselves.’
Pronoun fronting to negation steadily declined in Early Middle Chinese. The following examples offer a striking contrast. The 5th century BCE example (18a) shows the first person pronoun 我 wǒ undergoing fronting. In contrast to this, a quotation of this sentence in a 1st century BCE text does not employ fronting, as shown in (18b).

(18) a. 莫我知也夫！
    (Lúnyǔ 諫語 憲問)
    Mò wǒ zhī yě fú!
    none 1 know NMLZ EXCL
    ‘No one understands me!’

b. 莫知我夫！
    (Shǐjì 史記孔子世家)
    Mò zhī wǒ fú!
    none know 1 EXCL
    ‘No one understands me!’

3. Relative clauses

Relative clauses in Old Chinese were generally prenominal, with the head NP following the modifying clause, as shown in (19a). The particle 之 zhī functions as the linker between this NP and the modifying clause. In a headless relative clause formed on subject position, the clause is followed by the particle 者 zhě, as in (19b). In order to relativize on a VP-internal position, the particle 所 suǒ appears between the subject and the predicate in the relative clause, regardless of whether the clause is headed or headless, as in (19c). Interestingly suǒ occupies essentially the same position as object wh-words.
a. 堪若從避世之士哉。

(Lûnyû 论语 微子)


how like follow escape world GEN scholar EXCL

‘How could that compare to following a scholar who escapes from the world?’

b. 欲戰者可謂眾矣。

(Zuǒzhuàn 左傳 成公 6)


desire fight DET POT say majority ASP

‘(Those) who desire to fight can be said to form the majority.’

c. 人之所畏不可不畏。

(Lǎozǐ 老子 20)

[rén zhī suǒ [wèi __]] bù kě bù wèi.

person GEN REL fear not POT not fear

‘[What people fear] cannot not be feared.’

The similarity shared by zhě and suǒ in forming relative clauses had been noticed as least as early as Má (1898), who classified both as pronominals. But it was Zhū (1983) who was the first (to my knowledge) to capture the striking asymmetry between them in syntactic terms by associating zhě with subject gaps and suǒ with objects. He even goes so far as to suggest a transformational connection with relativization by saying that these morphemes raise or “take out” (tíqŭ 提取) these grammatical positions from the clause (Zhū 1983:61).

Aldridge (2013) proposes that the primary structural difference between suǒ and zhě relative clauses was that the object relatives built on suǒ were nominalized, as evidenced by the genitive case-marking on the embedded subject, as in (19c). The purpose of suǒ was to license the gap within the VP. The distinction between subject and object relative clauses was gradually lost in
the Middle Chinese period. Aldridge proposes that this change was due to the loss of genitive marking on embedded subjects, a change which can be observed as early as the 1st century BCE. (20a) shows a 5th century BCE sentential subject with genitive marking on the embedded subject. (20b) shows a similar sentence in a 1st century BCE chronical. The later quotation does not use genitive case for the embedded subject.

(20) a. 天下之無道也久矣。  
(Lûnyû 論語 八佾)

[Tianxia zhí wú dao ye] jiū yì.

world GEN not.have way NMLZ long PERF

‘It is a long time since the world has been without the proper way.’

b. 天下無道久矣。  
(Shíjì 史記孔子世家)

[Tianxia wú dao] jiū yì.

world not.have way long PERF

‘It is a long time since the world has been without the proper way.’

The loss of genitive case and the nominalization structure for object relative clauses led to the adoption of a uniform structural derivation for both subject and object relative clauses, as is the case in modern Chinese varieties. In modern Mandarin, both types of relative clause are formed on the linking element 的 de, which is widely taken to be a late Middle Chinese replacement for the Old Chinese subject relativizer zhě (Lǚ 1943, Ohta 1958, Cáo 1986, Féng 1990, Jiāng 1999, and others), but see Wáng (1958) and Méi (1988) for alternative proposals.
4. Reflexive pronouns

Old Chinese had two reflexive anaphors: zi (自) and jǐ (己). They differed both in position and in their conditions for coreference. Like the modern Mandarin anaphor zǐjǐ, Archaic Chinese jǐ could refer to a clause-mate subject or could be bound long distance (Wei 2004, Aldridge 2009). In terms of position jǐ occurs in argument position, typically following the verb or preposition that selects it. In (20a), jǐ is bound by the local subject, while in (20b), jǐ in the embedded clause takes the matrix subject as its antecedent.

(20) a. 修己以安人。 (Lúnyǔ 论语 檘问)

*e i xiū jǐ yǐ ān rén.*

train self COMP protect person

‘Train yourself in order to protect other people.’

b. 諸侯惡其害己。 (Mèngzǐ 孟子 萬章下)

Zhūhóu wù [qí hài jǐ].

feudal.lord dislike they inconvenience self

‘The feudal lords dislike it that they (those others) inconvenience them.’

Zì, on the other hand, was always locally bound. In (121), it must take the embedded subject as its antecedent and cannot refer to the matrix subject. There is also a positional difference between jǐ and zì. In surface order, zì always appears in immediate preverbal position.
If his speech betrays the Rites and Righteousness, then (one) says of him that he harms himself.

The modern Mandarin compound zìjǐ was formed in Middle Chinese, no later than the 4th century CE (Wèi 2004). The replacement of the earlier monosyllabic anaphors with the compound was undoubtedly related to the bisyllabification of the lexicon which took place in Middle Chinese. Another necessary condition seems to have been the acquisition by zì of certain key characteristics formerly displayed only by jǐ, e.g. the ability to be long distance bound. In (22), zì takes the matrix subject as its antecedent rather than the subject of its own clause.

Some suspect that Yang Hong knew that Zhang Yi disliked him.

The following example from a 4th century text shows the compound anaphor zìjǐ as a long distance anaphor taking the matrix subject as its antecedent.
‘But (you) order (them) to labor to supply you.’

4. Concluding remarks

This lemma has introduced the basic characteristics of Old Chinese word order and syntax. In the interest of space, I have paid particular attention to those characteristics which differ noticeably from modern Chinese varieties. Unsurprisingly, these characteristics also are among the most studied in research on Old Chinese grammar. I have therefore endeavored to offer both a sketch of Old Chinese syntax, together with a sense of some questions raised in the broader realm of linguistic debate.

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**Teaser:** This lemma summarizes characteristics of Old Chinese word order which differ significantly from modern Chinese varieties. The lemma also touches upon the changes which took place in Middle Chinese leading to the emergence of the modern forms.