

On the discourse marker *yeshi* and the Chinese construction of blame

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This paper identifies the Chinese construction [*NP yeshi, S*] that signals blame assignment (Construction of Blame, or CB) and focuses on the linguistic characteristics of the discourse marker *yeshi* within the CB. As an example, in (1), *yeshi* marks a second person pronoun *ni* ‘you’. It is followed by a prosodic break, indicated by a comma, and a rhetorical question. Using the CB, the speaker blames the hearer and questions the appropriateness of his previous act.

(1) 鲁豫: “你也是, 你为什么不吃一堑长一智, 还去呢?”

Lu Yu: *ni yeshi, ni weishenme bu chiyiqian zhangyizhi, hai qu ne?*

PN you *yeshi* you why not learn the lesson still go IF

Lu Yu: “You *yeshi*, why didn’t you learn the lesson? (Yet, you) still went (there)?”

(*A Date with Lu Yu: Interview with Wang Jie*)

Despite its presence as a combination of *ye* ‘also’ and *shi* ‘be’, *yeshi* in the CB does not have any concrete meaning equivalent to *also* or *too*, or function as a copular verb. It has been grammaticalized into an inseparable unit, which does not allow any intervening material. The initial NP marked by *yeshi* is always a personal pronoun. The sentence that follows *NP yeshi* is commonly a rhetorical question which indicates a contrast to the speaker’s expectation (Heine et al. 1991: 192).

Contrary to the existing studies that consider *yeshi* in the CB a topic marker (e.g., Li 2012, Liu and Li 2013), we argue that *yeshi* functions as an utterance-initial discourse marker in the CB (see Heine and Kaltenböck 2021), as it differs from a topic marker in terms of the structural position in an utterance, in addition to the source material, the grammatical category of the marked element, and the information structure of the marked construction. Take the topic construction (2) to illustrate. The particle *ma* (嘛), frequently used as a prosodic filler in Chinese, marks the verb *chao* ‘fight’ as the topic.

(2) 吵(嘛), 你肯定吵不过他。

Chao ma ni kending chao bu guo ta.

Fight TOP you definitely fight not pass him

‘As to fight (with him), you will definitely lose.’

(Liu 2020:412 with slight modification)

At first glance, it seems that the topic marker *ma* and the combination *yeshi* in the CB has a similar sentence-initial position. However, a closer look shows that *NP yeshi* in the CB takes the outermost peripheral position, whereas a marked topic must occur on the inner/right side of *NP yeshi*, as shown by (3). Contrastively, reverting the order of *ni yeshi* and the topic *chao ma*, example (4) is unacceptable.

(3) 你也是, (2)。

Ni yeshi, (2)

You *yeshi*

‘You *yeshi*, as to fight (with him), you will definitely lose.’

(4) *吵嘛，你也是，你肯定吵不过他。

**Chao ma, ni yeshi, ni kending chao bu guo ta*
Fight TOP you *yeshi* you definitely fight not pass him
Intended: ‘As to fight (with him), you *yeshi*, you will definitely lose.’

The above comparison suggests that *yeshi* in the CB and topic markers should be treated differently. In RRG’s terms, a Chinese topic takes the left-detached position. The constituent of NP *yeshi* in the CB takes its following sentence(s) into the scope and should be represented at a pre-sentential position (or at the text or discourse level), corresponding to the AttitudeP identified by Paul (2015: 276-285).

We argue that the historical development of *yeshi* is better described within the CB, whose constructionalization has undergone three historical stages:

Stage I	the clause-medial <i>yeshi</i>
<i>Pre- to Early Modern Chinese</i>	Structure: NP1 + <i>yeshi</i> NP2, S NP1 = 2nd/3rd personal pronoun NP2 = an indefinite NP; a restricted class of members; a presupposition trigger S = a rhetorical question; the subject corefers to NP1 Meaning: counter-expectation; other blame
Stage II	Intermediacy: 50% of sentences allow structural analyses of both 1) and 2).
<i>Modern Chinese</i>	Structure: 1) NP1 + <i>yeshi</i> NP2, S 2) NP1 + <i>yeshi</i> , (NP2 — VP)s Meaning: counter-expectation; other blame
Stage III	the outermost pre-sentential <i>yeshi</i>
<i>Contemporary Chinese</i>	Structure: NP1 + <i>yeshi</i> , (Cst), S NP1 = 2nd/3rd personal pronoun Cst = VP(s) or sentence(s); a presupposition trigger S = a rhetorical question Meaning: counter-expectation; other blame

Our data demonstrate that the CB has come into being at stage II, when (NP +) *yeshi* has become amenable to the analysis of a clause-external element that is followed by a rhetorical question. We consider *yeshi* a fully developed discourse marker at stage III, as its subsequent constituent (Cst) that evokes a presupposition has become more complex in structure and semantics in the CB, which in turn locates *yeshi* into an outermost position in an utterance. At stage III, the presupposition trigger (Cst) is optional and can be omitted when the presupposition is considered inferable from the context by the speaker, as shown by (1).

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