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Thinking Through Parentheses: The Case of Latin and Chinese

Let me take an ungrammatical German poem as my point of departure, a poem which has inspired my interest in the problems of noun modification:

> *Korf erfindet eine Mittagszeitung*
> *welche, wenn man sie gelesen hat,*
> *ist man satt.*
> *Ganz ohne Zubereitung*
> *irgendeiner andern Speise.*
> *Jeder auch nur etwas Weise*
> *hält das Blatt.*

(*Galgenlieder.* Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1972, p. 151)

In the highlighted passage we have ungrammatical restrictive modification, and the noun modified in a restrictive way is the midday paper. Discussing Modern Chinese the linguist Wang Li has observed:

> *When we translate from Western languages into Chinese the sentential form of secondary clauses faces us with very great difficulties. [...] When we have a two-layered secondary sentence form, then unless we break it up into a kind of parataxis, translation is practically impossible. For example, "They murdered all they met whom they supposed to be gentlemen", if we translate it literally [...] then the result is simply an uninterpretable Chinese sentence. Again, when we come across a non-restrictive clause our literal translation cannot distinguish it from the restrictive clause. Try to compare "He had four sons, who became lawyers" with "He had four sons that became lawyers". If we use a literal translation then we have no way of translating them into two different forms.*

(*Wang Li Wenji.* Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1984, vol. 1, p. 57)

In classical Chinese, even more than in English or in modern Chinese, one tends to circumvent problematic complexity by replacing what in Latin is

one hypotactic sentence organized around one single grammatical focus with a paratactic sequence of sentences with many foci.

Non-restrictive modification of proper names

Very simple non-restrictive modification of personal names is common in pre-Han Chinese. In the *Tan Gong* section of *Li Ji* (ed. S. Couvreur, *Li Ki,* Paris: Cathasia, 1951, p. 229) we naturally reproduce the Chinese as "his son Zun Ji". Here are some further typical examples: "I, who am the single person (i.e. the ruler)" *(Zuo Zhuan* Duke Zhao 9, ed. Yang Bojun, Peking: Zhonghua, 1983, vol. 3, p. 1309 et passim), "Jiao Ru's younger brother . Fen Ru" *(Zuo Zhuan* Duke Wen 11, ed. Yang Bojun, vol. 2, p. 584), "The duke killed his father Du Yuankuan" (Zuo *Zhuan* Duke Xi 4, ed. Yang Bojun, vol. 1, p. 297).

A quasi-variable like *jia "X"* in Chinese legal texts may be used as the head with a non-restrictive modifier, as in *dai fu jia* "the dignitary X" *(Shuihudi Qinmu zhujian,* Peking: Wenwuchubanshe, 1978, p. 206) and *nüzi jia* "woman X" (ibidem p. 222).

One may continue to hunt for more complex cases of non-restrictive modification of proper names in early texts. Here is one very surprising and very extreme early case: "Jia Fu, son of Qing Fu, who has held the offices jiu zong and wu zheng in Yi" *(Zuo Zhuan* Duke Yin 5, ed. S. Couvreur, vol. 1, p. 35, Yang Bojun, vol. 1, p. 49). It is impossible to find many examples of this sort.

The typical case of non-restrictive modification in pre-Han literature is like this:

> *I have heard that* the fellow Zhou *was killed, but I have not heard that a ruler was assassinated.*
>
> *(Meng Zi 1B8)*

Here *yifu* or, as some texts have it *du fu* "common fellow" is plainly epexegetic or non-restrictive. And this non-restrictive interpretation is forced upon us by the context. We translate "Zhou, who is an ordinary person", not: "of the Zhous the one who is an ordinary person".

With place names we have, only very occasionally, constructions like TIGER WOLF'S QIN "the state of Qin which is like a tiger or a wolf" *(Zhanguoce,* ed. Zhu Zugeng, Yangzhou: Jiangsuguji, 1985, p. 1154). This is not to be interpreted as "the Qin that is like a tiger or a wolf as opposed to some other kinds of Qin".

Let us take an example which involves a long epexegetic comment at least in D.C. Lau's translation of the *Analects:*

Is that the Kong who keeps working towards a goal the realisation of which he knows to be hopeless?

(*Analects* 14.38, D.C. Lau,
Confucius, The Analects,
Hong Kong: Chinese University Press,
1984, p. 145).

One would have thought that "the Kong who keeps working towards a goal the realisation of which he knows to be hopeless" is an NP just of the kind which I am claiming does not exist in Chinese. Let us look at the Chinese:

shi zhi qi bu ke er wei zhi zhe yu
THIS KNOW ITS NOT BE-POSSIBLE BUT DO IT HE-WHO QUESTION-MARKER:
"Is this the one who knows something to be impossible but does it?"

There is no non-restrictive modification in the Chinese. It is introduced by the translator to accommodate Western stylistic taste.

The very large range of possible non-restrictive modification in languages like English or Latin comes out when we consider sentences like this one with its non-restrictive possible additions:

It is said that Theophrast thought that the horse Bucephalus had been lent to Alexander by Aristotle.

This sentence involves four proper names. In Latin, as in English, we can add to these proper names explanatory non-restrictive clauses or nominal modifiers. Let us call these non-restrictive modifiers. In principle, we can add such a non-restrictive modifier to every one of these proper names:

It is said that Theophrast, (who was) not one of the weaker logicians in ancient Greece, argued that Bucephalus, (who/which is) one of the few horses to have made it into the Random House Dictionary, *had been lent to Alexander, who according to Plutarch, (who was) the greatest biographer in the Western tradition, loved Bucephalus more than any other thing on earth, by Aristotle, (who came to be) otherwise known as "the Philosopher" in the work of Aquinas, whose work I suppose might be regarded as The Philosophy of catholicism.*

In Latin and Greek one can and will, in the heat of the communicative battle, freely and spontaneously add complex non-restrictive comments to proper names in most syntactic positions in the sentence (not, however, when a noun functions adverbially), and we add them as and when these are felt to be necessary or desirable in the process of the utterance of a sen-

tence. The non-restrictive modifiers, like the parentheses, thus create free space for unpremeditated linguistic spontaneity in the process of the utterance of a sentence.

There is an evident difference between the preferred syntactic architecture of the Chinese and the Latin sentences. The Chinese often reads rather like a plain and standard logical analysis of the complex Latin. Conversely, a Latin translation compounds simpler Chinese sentences into one longer unit if it aspires to conform to Latin stylistic preference.

Classical Chinese leaves very little room for complex non-restrictive modification of proper names. Modern Chinese allows for much more such modification.

Non-restrictive modification of non-proper nouns

Ren ren HUMANE MAN "humane person" *(Analects* 15.9) refers to a subset of humans, the humane ones. Even Mencius, if he wanted to speak of "men, who by nature are humane" would have no obvious nominal construction available to make that notion explicit. An ancient Chinese anarchist who believes that all rulers are cruel cannot make an explicit noun phrase that refers to the rulers so conceived. *Bao jun* CRUEL RULER "cruel ruler" *(Mencius* 3B9) in written classical Chinese is bound to be understood as "of the rulers the ruthless ones". In English, the intonation pattern can disambiguate between the unambiguously restrictive "the cruel rulers" versus "the cruel rulers" which one can pronounce in a way that makes the phrase unambiguously non-restrictive. Moreover we have "rulers, who are cruel" versus "rulers that are cruel". For all we know, pre-Han Chinese may well have had perfectly explicit intonational patterns distinguishing the restrictive from the non-restrictive nominal modifiers. But we know nothing about this. In the texts we have adjectives preceding and modifying non-proper nouns which are almost always restrictive. The exceptions deserve our attention.

In classical Chinese *yu min* STUPID PEOPLE there is a clear ambiguity between "consider the people as stupid" and "the common people, who are stupid". Yu *ren* STUPID MAN works quite differently as a noun phrase. It is bound to be taken restrictively as "of men those who are stupid" if it is not taken as "consider others as stupid". It is impossible to speak of "men, who [quite generally] are stupid", while it is perfectly possible to say that men are all stupid.

In order to neatly appreciate the semantic distinction between *yu min* STUPID PEOPLE and *yu ren* STUPID MAN speakers of classical Chi-

nese must have been able to operate a clear distinction between restrictive and non-restrictive noun modification, partly triggered off, in this case, by the very different semantic and logical properties of the count noun *ren* MAN versus the mass noun *min* PEOPLE.

In Latin, on the other hand, we have *hominum [qui sunt] stulti* "of [the] humans those who are stupid" versus *homines, [qui sunt] stulti* "the humans, who are stupid" which is grammatically explicit. In addition the subjunctive in Latin affects the interpretation of these kinds of constructions, but this is of no consequence for my present purpose. Classical Chinese has no problem with *hominum qui sunt stulti,* but it gets into deep trouble with phrases like *homines, qui sunt stulti* except in those cases, where the noun semantically very obviously invites the adjective ascribed in the first place.

Parentheses

Consider a bit of spontaneous German prose:

> *Da* hört *bei mir, wenn ich das mal so sagen darf – und man wird hier doch wohl seine Meinung noch sagen dürfen, ohne sich dafür gleich anfeinden lassen zu müssen!— der Spaß— oder ist dieses Wort im wissenschaftlichen Diskurs überhaupt nicht mehr erlaubt? – ganz schlicht* auf.

Such a sentence is expressive of a certain volatile intellectual style of the parenthetic thinker who is constantly tempted to interrupt himself within a single clause, to criticize what he is saying as he is saying it, to defend what he is about to say against possible objections, etc. etc. The parenthetic thinker is a thinker who is constantly thinking about what he is doing as he is articulating his thought, and who is unwilling to suppress the comments or meta-thoughts that occur to him as he is articulating what he has set out to say. In some cases a German can interrupt himself several times with complete sentences within a single word.

Non-restrictive modifiers can be viewed as parenthetic insertions into a sentence. They are connected with various forms of deliberate syntactic incoherence. Such deliberate incoherence would, in classical Chinese, run a high risk of making a complex sentence incomprehensible though a certain amount of it may be tolerated in poetry. Even in the prose of the *Zhuangzi,* for example, one may look for the use of syntactic incoherence as a deliberate stylistic tool.

However, in Latin there is quite generally more syntactic and morphological glue to keep the sentence together even when it threatens to fall apart.

My investigations on the parenthesis in classical Chinese are inspired by Eduard Schwyzer, *Die Parenthese im engeren and weitern Sinne* (Berlin, 1939). Eduard Schwyzer finds that parentheses are extremely common in the Indo-European languages he has studied, and he writes (op. cit., p. 29):

> *From the point of view of general linguistics it would be important to compare the Indo-European findings with the findings from other language branches, but unfortunately I do not have the relevant information that could help us to overcome the silence of our reference works.*
>
> (translation C.H.)[1]

Inspired by Eduard Schwyzer, whose work on classical Greek I have long admired, I would have loved to look in detail at the ancient Chinese parentheses against the background of what is known about parentheses in Indo-European languages. Unfortunately, there is a slight hitch here: There simply are no parentheses in classical Chinese to look at.

Here, on the other hand, is an example which I came across reading Cicero:

> *Sed in hoc me ipse castigo, quod ex aliorum et ex nostra fortasse mollitia, non ex ipsa virtute de virtutis robore existumo. Illa enim [I si modo est ulla virtus [2 quam dubitationem, avunculus tuus [3 Brute 3J sustulit 2J 1] , omnia, quae cadere in hominem possunt, subter se habet eaque despiciens casus contemnit humanos culpaque Omni carens praeter se ipsam nihil censet ad se pertinere.*
>
> (Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes* 5.5)
>
> "But on account of this I criticize myself, that I do not judge the strength of virtue from (the point of view of) virtue itself but from the weakness of others and possibly of ourselves. For it (i.e. virtue) [1 if indeed there is any virtue [2 which doubt your uncle [3 oh Brutus 3] has relieved us of 2] 1] has everything which may befall man under itself, and despising these and it despises human vicissitudes, and being devoid of all guilt it considers that nothing beyond itself relates to itself."

This should probably be read as containing a parenthesis within a parenthesis within a parenthesis, as I have tried to indicate through numbered bracketing.

1 The function of parentheses in poetry has been treated extensively in Michael von Albrecht's masterly study, *Die Parenthese in Ovids Metamorphosen,* Heidelberg 1964. For Vedic I want to mention Walter Wüst, *Der Schaltsatz im Rigveda,* dissertation, München 1923.

The contrast between Latin and classical Chinese is startling. On the one hand I cannot remember any Latin or Greek book of prose which did not have some parentheses in it. On the other hand I cannot remember coming across any punctuated pre-Han classical Chinese book which did have parentheses in it. The introduction of parentheses not only between clauses but also within a single clause exactly as and when one comes to think of a parenthetic remark was not practised in pre-Han Chinese. The syntactic parenthesis is simply not part of the rhetorical repertory of the writers of classical Chinese.

The contrast between the written classical Chinese and the written Latin syntactic styles comes out clearly when we consider translations. Among the many translations from Western languages, consider the case of a text notoriously poor in parentheses, the New Testament, as an illustration of the contrast between Latin and classical Chinese. I quote from the Latin Vulgata juxtaposed with the excellent Literary Chinese translation by Wu Jingxiong published in 1948:

> *Quoniam audivimus quia quidam ex nobis exeuntes turbaverunt vos verbis, evertentes animas vestras, quibus non mandavimus; placuit nobis collectis in unum eligere viros et mittere ad vos cum charissimis nostris Barnaba et Paulo, hominibus qui tradiderunt animas suas pro nomine Domini nostri Jesu Christi.*

King James's Version:

> *Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment: it seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with your beloved Barnabas and Paul, men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*
>
> (*Acts of the Apostles* 15.24f)

The classical Chinese version translates literally like this:

> "Recently (I) have heard that some persons went forth from here and disturbed you with words and confused your hearts.
> These have not received orders from us.
> Because of this we unanimously elect one person.
> We send him with our beloved Banaba and Baoluo to visit you together. These two wholeheartedly work for our lord Yesu Jidus name, and they are the sort of people who do not have regard for their own lives."

I do not proceed to draw larger conclusions from these sorts of desultory observations. Before one can move on to those with any confidence at all a great deal of observational groundwork still needs to be done. Es-

pecially on the emergence of the parenthesis in colloquial Chinese literature through the ages.

While it is perfectly true that no form of parentheses are common in classical Chinese, we do find the following not intra-clausal but rather inter-clausal parenthesis in a seventeenth century text: "Although he has never regarded me as a teacher — he knows that I refuse to be anyone's teacher — nonetheless he has frequently sent people ..." (Li Zhi, *Fenshu Xufenshu,* Peking: Zhonghuashuju, 1975, p. 183).

I owe this example to the extraordinary observance of Jacques Gernet, and I wonder how many more examples of this kind one might be able to find in the vast treasury of traditional Chinese literature.

I find occasional parenthetic exclamations as in: "In the end it was only that monk and the Taoist — Amituofo — who saved Baoyu's life." *(Hongloumeng,* ch. 81, ed. Peking: Renminwenxue, 1982, p. 1169 / ed. Shanghai: Guji, 1988, p. 1343). But a spontaneous interjection is not quite a parenthesis ...

It still needs to be investigated exactly when and how the parenthesis became a customary part of written Chinese. On the other hand there is little point in speculating about the extent to which parentheses have been common in speaking practice before we have evidence of them in writing. What we might usefully study is the range of parentheses that are common in current speech today.

Final speculations

Non-restrictive modification and parentheses thrive in an environment of a large unified sentence perspective. At the same time they reflect a specific frame of mind, that of the "parenthetic thinker" who allows himself the luxury of inserting additional remarks into his sentences as and when they appear relevant to him even within one sentence or clause, so that a single clause can contain many parenthetic sentences.

One of the great enthusiasts of the parenthetic literary and intellectual style was Laurence Sterne. *Tristram Shandy* is an orgy of parenthetic wit – an orgy which rests among many other things upon a wide range of syntactic devices available in English, among them the parenthesis and the freely associative non-restrictive relative clause. It is not by chance that the parenthetic dash is ubiquitous in his work.

Symptomatically, even parenthetic adverbs meaning something like "by the way", and "incidentally", which are so crucial for Laurence Sterne, seem as absent in pre-Han classical Chinese as epexegetic phrases such as

id est which in Modern Chinese comes over smoothly as *zhei shi shuo.* (The modern Chinese *fudai shuo yi xia* "to say something less than central", at least when inserted parenthetically into a sentence, has a distinctly westernising flavour if it is possible at all.) Parenthetic modification within a noun phrase as in *Tristram Shandy, who, incidentally! by the way— like Korf — was not a real person at all* is impossible in classical Chinese and quite awkward to reproduce in Modern Standard Chinese.

The parenthesis and its associated forms are not only a grammatical device. They are the direct expression of a spontaneous, impulsive and untrammeled form of intellectual movement which engenders an apparently unpremeditated extemporated form of free syntax, which encourages parenthetic appeals to the reader, parenthetic free associations, parenthetic reflections on what is being said by the writer/speaker himself, and even parenthetic irrelevant spontaneous associations. All this material is inserted close to the point where the parenthetic thinker comes to think of it. Through such insertions the parenthetic thinker is able to expose some of the infinite tangle of undercurrents of further reflection that accompany his main line of thought.

In the typical sequence of sentences which is used in classical Chinese to represent one complex Latin sentence there is no one clearly marked single main verbal focus. There are several foci. One might think of meandering foci. Hypotactic complexity tends to unfold into delicately contrastive and subtly varied paratactic parallelism. That is the genius of classical Chinese. It allows for and even encourages many kinds of stylistic spontaneity, notably in poetry, but also in certain kinds of prose. It has become the medium of one of the world's subtlest and richest poetic traditions.

The architectural principles of the sentences of classical Chinese do not encourage the sort of explicit internal dialogue that parentheses typically articulate. In Chinese this internal dialogue — to the extent that it occurs — finds its more implicit and pregnant expression within the confines of ordinary non-parenthetic syntax.

The case of syntax should be compared with other activities of cultural articulation. A detailed comparison should be made with the treatment of single focus perspectival complexity in painting, with single focus complexity of narrative perspective in literature, with embedded compository complexity in music and with the systemic single-focus logical foregrounding and backgrounding through the concept of "logical priority" (Aristotle: *"to proteron")* which creates conceptual perspective in theoretical sciences. Such detailed comparison is necessary if we are to take seriously the fact that the writer of classical Chinese is the very same person as the painter, the musician, the writer, the thinker. There is a general cultural dimension to grammar.

The strategies of articulation in all these areas, it seems to me, may have profound articulatory or cultural features in common. The study of grammar should not be as isolated from the study of culture as modern division of labour would have it.