

A Functional Study of *zhi* 之 in the Chinese Nominal Group

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Abstract

Over the past decades, subjects concerned with the Chinese character “zhi 之”, i.e. grammatical structure, in ancient Chinese language, have been widely explored. This paper conducts a research from a new dimension: the Cardiff Grammar, an integral part of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) which is famous for its “problem-oriented theory”. In order to shed light on the semantics and syntactic functions of “zhi 之” in the Chinese nominal group, this study examines five distinctive nominal groups involving “zhi 之” with elaborate tree diagrams which are presented in each of the following sections. Through the contrastive study, we find that the Chinese character “zhi 之” has some various functions in different situations: as genitive element (g), as modifier trigger (mtr), as selector (v), as qualifier introducer (qint) and as deictic determiner (dd).

Keywords: systemic functional linguistics, the Cardiff Grammar, Chinese nominal group, “zhi 之”

1. Introduction

It is well known that China has a long history, especially in its literature. Some Chinese characters like “zhi 之”, “hu 呼”, “zhe 者” and “ye 也” are popular in ancient Chinese (also known as classical Chinese), no wonder that most Chinese scholars study “zhi 之” in ancient Chinese language as their research objects. As the development of society, plenty of new things emerge, and “not only do the things need new names, but also the functions of some certain words are changing, the Chinese nouns for instance” (Zhang & Li, 2017). Similarly, the usage of “zhi 之” has changed a lot- with low frequency and more functions. Among the proposals, some scholars studied “zhi 之” from the grammatical structure— i. e., *Mashi wentong* (1898) considers “zhi 之” as a preposition or a kind of modified relationship, whereas Wang (1980/2004, p. 395) takes “zhi 之” as an auxiliary word, a pronoun or a modifier; some studied “zhi 之” in advertisement (such as Sun, 2017), and some studied in the ancient classical literature (such as Tian & Xu, 2016; Che, 2005); some studied “zhi 之” from its development and change (such as Zhu, 2015). However, there are limited studies based on “zhi 之” in the Chinese nominal group from the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), particularly the Cardiff Grammar. Halliday (2005, forward) always maintains that SFL is a theoretical method to study language (see Huang, 2007), and furthermore, “Halliday’s vision is to construct an applicable theory that can be helpful to people who are engaging with language in their work” (Chang & Liao, 2010). A systemic functional study manifests that “zhi 之” has some other functions: used as genitive element (g), as modifier trigger (mtr), as selector (v), as qualifier introducer (qint) and as deictic determiner (dd). It should be noted that some examples (such as “mingci cizu zhi wojian 名词词组之我见”, “zhongguo zhi da 中国之大” in section 3.4) in this paper are generated through the way of introspection, but with a logical, reasonable and native way. Widdowson (2000, pp. 72-75) has ever pointed out that “there are, broadly speaking, three sources of linguistic data: by introspection, by elicitation and by observation”. The use of introspection makes people appeal to their “own intuitive competence as the data source” (Widdowson, 2000, p. 72).

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper relies on the theoretical framework of SFL. Halliday (1994/2000, p. F41) said that “the aim has been to construct a grammar for purposes of text analysis: one that would make it possible to say sensible and useful things about any text, spoken or written, in modern English”. SFL can be studied as a general linguistic theory (Halliday, 2005, forward), as a comprehensive linguistic theory (Matthiessen & Halliday, 2009, p. 08), as an explanatory linguistic theory (Halliday, 1994/2000, p. xv), and as a systemic and functional linguistic theory (Halliday, 1966). There are several models within SFL: the Sydney model, the Cardiff model, the Notting-ham

model and the Madrid model, and with the first two as its main models. Fawcett (2008, p. 12) mentioned that “Michael Halliday has suggested a useful metaphor for this, i.e. that our different versions of SFL are like different ‘dialects’ of the ‘language’ of Systemic Functional Linguistics, so that we should expect to find the Sydney dialect, the Cardiff dialect, the Nottingham dialect, the Madrid dialect and so on”. Now that the two models belong to the same school, they must have a great quantity in common. For example, “both assume that the concept of a vast system network of interdependent ‘choices between meanings’ should be the foundation of a SFL model of language, and both assume that realization rules convert these meanings into words, syntax, intonation, and so on” (Fawcett, 2006). The theoretical foundation of this paper is the Cardiff Grammar, an interesting but distinctive grammar with tree diagram to demonstrate difficult syntactic issues.

2.1 Realization Rule

Indeed, to understand SFL in full detail, the first important notion is REALIZATION RULE, without which any one of logical clauses cannot be generated. But what precisely is realization rule? In accordance with Li (2007, p. 12), the relation between any two adjacent strata in a higher-order semiotic system is not one of constituency but of realization; meaning is realized as wording, which, in turn, is realized as sounding/writing. Meanwhile, Halliday (1994/2000, p. xiv) argues that a language is interpreted as a system of meanings, accompanied by forms through which the meanings can be realized. The Cardiff Grammar, as an essential model of SFL, always holds that forms realize meanings (Liao, 2008; Fawcett, 2000, p. 210). For example, in the clause *I am a student*, every word is at the level of form and in turn they realize a meaning of such a situation that the identity of *me* is *a student*; the Subject (S) and the Complement (C) are separately realized by the nominal groups *I* and *a student* in each, and this is exactly the realization rule.

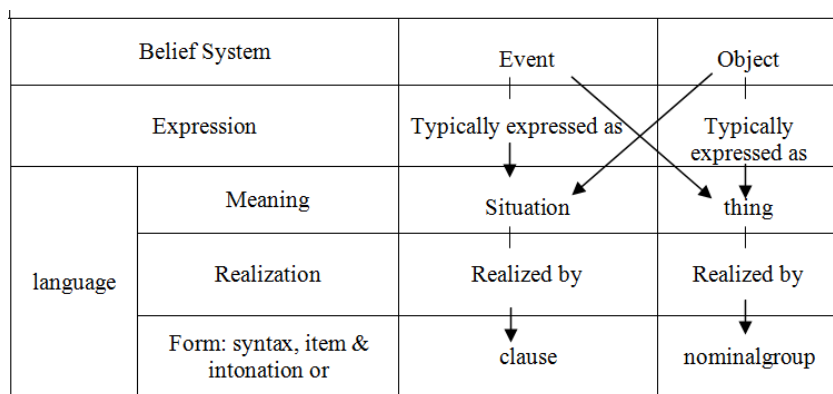


Figure 1. The relationship of logical form to semantics and syntax (Fawcett, 2000, p. 210)

According to Fawcett (2000, pp. 209-210), as is shown in Figure 1, “an event is typically expressed as a situation and an object as a thing at the level of meaning, and in turn are then realized as a clause and a nominal group at the level of form, although incongruence will happen sometimes”. For instance, the event of that *someone failed* will be expressed as *He failed*, and frequently, in turn is realized by *His failure*, which does not change the initial meaning but with a discriminative form of expression.

2.2 Categories of the Cardiff Grammar and the Relationships between Each Other

Fawcett (2000, pp. 187-231) classifies the categories of syntax in Cardiff Grammar as class of UNIT, ELEMENT of structure, PLACE and ITEM. First of all, the grammatical units include clause, nominal group (ngp), prepositional group (pgp), quality group (qlgp), quantity group (qtgp) (that those five above are major classes of unit) as well as genitive cluster and human name proper name cluster (that those two above are minor classes of unit). Secondly, with regard to elements of structure, they have been clearly explicated in the following Figure 2.

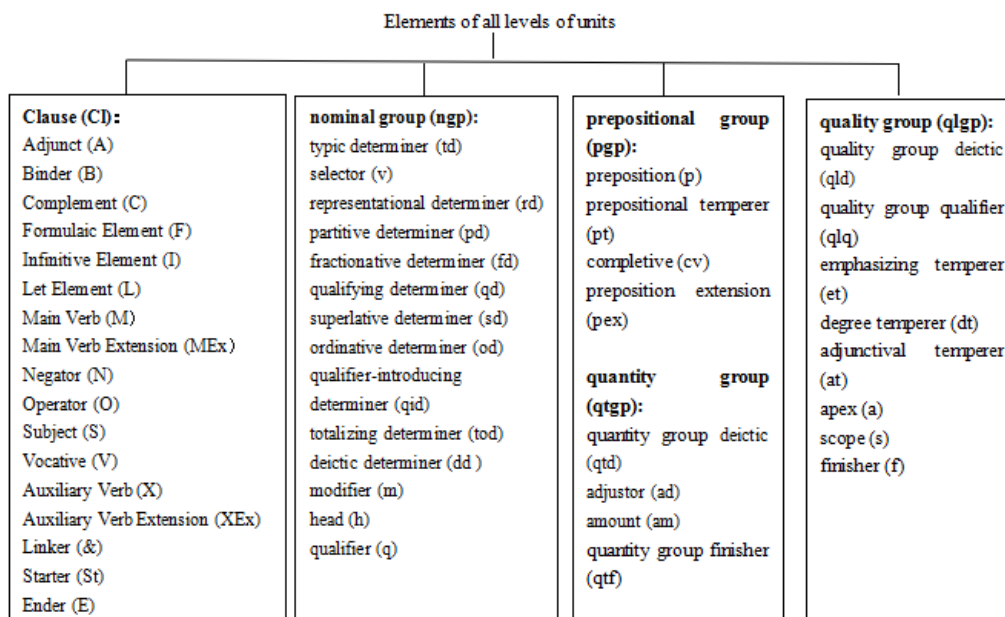


Figure 2. Elements in Cardiff Grammar

Note. Elements of ngp in the Cardiff Grammar are relatively more complicated than those of traditional grammar which only has “determinatives” in structure (Quirk et al., 1985, pp. 253-280). Here the ngp normally fills S, C and less frequently Adjunct (A) of a clause, as in (a) and (b); fills qd, fd, pd, rd, td, m and q of another ngp, as in (b) to (i); fills cv in pgp, as in (j); fills dt in qlgp, as in (k) and fills am in qtgp as in (l) and (m).

- (a) She (S) is a doctor (C);
- (b) He went there last week (A);
- (c) two glasses (qd) of water;
- (d) ninety per cent (fd) of them;
- (e) part (pd) of the field;
- (f) a plan (rd) of the house;
- (g) a new type (td) of computer;
- (h) a Birmingham (m) newsagent;
- (i) Peter Adams, a sixty year old farmer from Dorset (q);
- (j) with long hair (cv);
- (k) two foot (dt) wide;
- (l) two hundred (am);
- (m) a very little bit (ad) over (a hundred);

Fawcett (forthcoming a)

Finally, item refers to both ‘word’ (in its traditional sense) and ‘morpheme’ (Fawcett, 2000, p. 226), and item is directly presented at the level of form. See example (1) below:

- (1) He expected that he wouldn’t see the play.

(Quirk et al., 1972, p. 64)

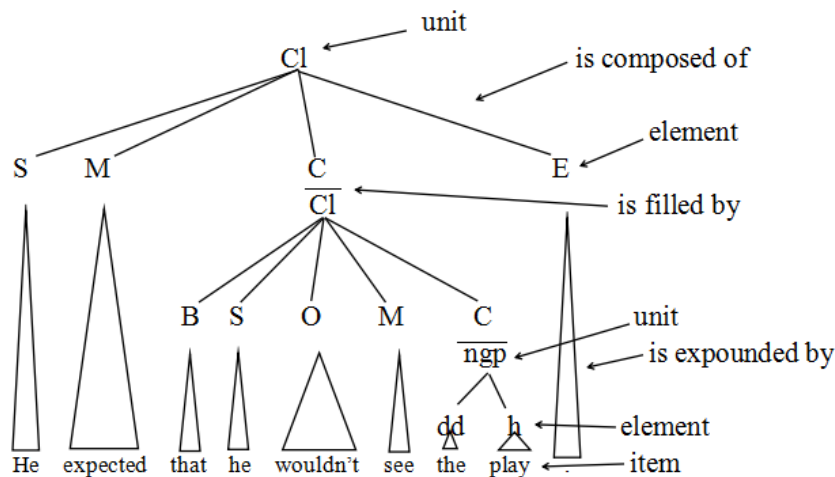


Figure 3. Syntactic analysis of example (1)

Key: “/\ \backslash ”= componence; “—”= filling; “ Δ ”= exponence; Cl= Clause;

S= Subject; O=Operator; M= Main Verb; C= Complement;

B=Binder; ngp=nominal group; h= head; dd= deictic determiner; E=Ender

Note. Negator (N) in the Cardiff Grammar is always *not*, but “*n’t* is part of O, because it would precede S in a confirmation seeker” (Fawcett, forthcoming a). That is to say, *wouldn’t* in example (1) is just O. In contrast, if *wouldn’t* is rewritten by *would not*, the word *not* is N.

This graphic representation shows:

(i) the strata of language- form and meaning. All the words of “*He expected that he wouldn’t see the play*” represent the level of form. The elements B, O, S, M, C, E, dd and h account for the roles that every item plays in clause, in other words, their functions.

(ii) grammatical categories. Cl and ngp are units; B, O, S, M, C, E, dd and h are elements (among which dd, h, m along with q are the elements of ngp); words at the level of form are items, and all above constitute the categories in Cardiff Grammar.

(iii) grammatical relationships. There are four kinds of relationships in Cardiff Grammar: componence (/\ \backslash), filling (—), exponence (Δ) and conflation (/), with the former three shown in Figure 3. The unit is composed by element(s); element is filled by unit; item directly expounds element.

As for *conflation*, Fawcett (2000, p. 250) points out that “the notion for conflation is to place the element that is being conflated immediately after the element that it is being conflated with, separated by a slash”, and usually, the conflation happens between either O and M or O and X. For example:

(2) John is in Rome this week.

(3) I am carving the legs.

(Morley, 2004/2010, p. 36)

Despite *is* in example (2) and *am* in example (3) are all *be* verbs, the responsibilities that they shoulder are different. *is* is O conflated with M (O/M), whereas *am* is O conflated with Auxiliary (O/X).

3. A Functional Study of zhi 之 within Chinese Nominal Group

3.1 zhi 之 in Chinese Grammar

The Chinese character “zhi 之” is quite frequent in Chinese literary history, especially applied in the ancient Chinese language with the characteristics of lexical diversity, flexible position and complex usage. For instance, *Mashi wentong* has systematically studied “zhi 之” from aspect of syntax.

In *Ancient Chinese Dictionary* (p. 08) and *Dictionary of Common-used Ancient Chinese Words* (p. 546), zhi 之” has those following meanings:

(i). verb: go to somewhere.

(ii). the third personal pronoun: such as *he, it, them*, and so on, which is also the “outsider type of personal

pronoun” (Fawcett, forthcoming a) in the Cardiff Grammar.

(iii). auxiliary word: like “de 的” in Chinese.

And then the following sections we come to will be new to most readers, which should be presupposed by a familiarity with the contents of Section 2.

3.2 “zhi 之” as Genitive Element (g)

(1) Darenzhe, bushi qi chizizhixin zheye 大人者，不失其赤子之心者也 (The great man never deviated from pure heart)

《Mengcius·Lilouxia 孟子·离娄下》

(2) Shengming zhi yuan 生命之源 (source of life)

In accordance with Section 3.1, we can get the message that “zhi 之” and “de 的” sometimes have the same meaning and usage. Take “chizi zhi xin 赤子之心” in example (1) and “shengming zhi yuan 生命之源” in example (2) for instance, that “chizi zhi xin 赤子之心” (the innocent heart of a child) can be written as “chizi de xin 赤子的心” (the innocent heart of a child), and “shengming zhi yuan 生命之源” (source of life) can be written as “shengming de yuanquan 生命的源泉” (source of life) without changing their original meanings. It is not difficult to find out that this is obviously an ownership between the two referents such as “xin 心” and “chizi 赤子”(in which “xin 心” belongs to “chizi 赤子”) as well as “yuanquan 源泉” and “shengming 生命”(in which “yuanquan 源泉” belongs to “shengming 生命”). He and Hong (2014) have proved that “de 的” in the nominal group like “muqin de huiyi 母亲的回忆” (mother’s memory) is a genitive element (g):

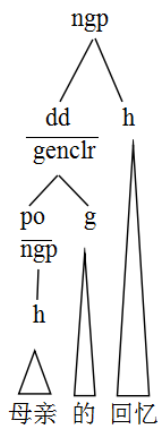


Figure 4. An example of “de 的” as genitive element (He and Hong, 2014)

Key: ngp= nominal group; dd= deictic determiner; h=head;

po=possessor; g=genitive element; genclr=genitive cluster

Likewise, “zhi 之” has the same analysis:

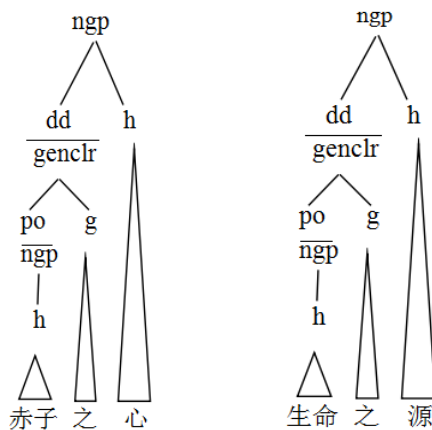


Figure 5. Examples of “zhi 之” as genitive element

Key: ngp= nominal group; dd= deictic determiner; h=head;

po=possessor; g=genitive element; genclr=genitive cluster

Besides what we have discussed above, there are some other similar syntactic structures:

(3) Huanbing zhi ji 缓兵之计 (a fabian policy)

Xinhua Dictionary (p. 198)

(4) Busu zhi ke 不速之客 (crasher)

Xinhua Dictionary (p. 468),

(5) Yimian zhi jiao 一面之交 (fast contact)

Xinhua Dictionary (p. 231)

In these nominal groups, the relationship between the two referents is not possessive but modified. He et al. (2015, pp. 108-110) have mentioned a new concept: trigger (usually “de 的”). It has this name because its presence triggers the generation of modified elements, so the trigger always appears with modifier. Similarly, “zhi 之” in those nominal groups plays the same role that it is modifier trigger (mtr):

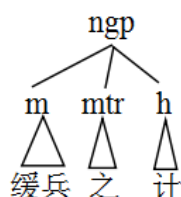


Figure 6. An example of “zhi 之” as modifier trigger

Key: ngp= nominal group; m= modifier; h=head; mtr=modifier trigger;

3.3 “zhi 之” as Selector (v)

Most Chinese grammar books consider “zhi 之” as structural auxiliary word “de 的” (such as Lv, 1979, p. 44). However, Lv (1999, pp. 672-673) also argues that “de 的” cannot replace “zhi 之” in some certain circumstances like *qizhong zhi yi* 其中之一 (one of them), *sifen zhi yi* 四分之一 (a quarter), *zhiyu* 之于 (about; to; for) etc, and it is very odd to say *qizhong de yi* 其中的一 (in English also means one of them) or *sifen de yi* 四分的一 (also means a quarter). In this section, we will talk about the function of “zhi 之” in *sifen zhi yi* 四分之一 (a quarter).

In the Cardiff Grammar, there is a new concept called SELECTION within the nominal group. “It will be recalled that it was Fawcett (1973/1981) who first introduced the concept of selection to English grammar” (Li, 2013, p. 96). Fawcett (forthcoming a) gives an example: *grey Persian cats*. In this nominal group, *Persian cats* is the sub-class of *cats*, and *grey Persian cats* is sub-class of *Persian cats*. A general principle like this kind of classifying is similarly selection, and the relationship is realized by SELECTOR (always of). For example, in *three of those students*, *three* is selected from *those students*, and precisely to say that the referent of *three of those students* is selected from the referent of *those students*. Of course, there must be two or more than two referents, or the selection may not happen.

There is a similar relationship in Chinese language —some certain Chinese groups involving the character “zhi 之”, as in *sifen zhi yi* 四分之一 (a quarter), *baifen zhi yi* 百分之一 (one percent) and *qianfen zhi yi* 千分之一 (one in a thousand). Most Chinese grammarians (such as Liu et al., 2004, pp. 117-118) -other than those who adopt SFL approach- consider such Chinese groups to be qualifying groups. In English, *sifen zhi yi* 四分之一 can be interpreted as a quarter (which is a ngp), one fourth (which is a qtgp) and one out of four (according to Fawcett (forthcoming a), it is a ngp without head).

Let’s come to our “*sifen zhi yi* 四分之一”. According to Wang (1985, p. 07), in grammar, a word is a language component that stands for meaning. For instance, “ma 马” is a word, because it stands for a large animal with four legs and furs. However, “liu 榴” or “lian 莲” is not a word in each but a Chinese character, because neither of them can express a whole meaning of *liulian* 榴莲 (durian) unless the two words are used together. In group “*si fen zhi yi* 四分之一”, “si 四” is a word, because it has a meaning of number four, and “fen 分” is also a word, because it express a meaning of “portion”. For example, if we have a circle or a cube, we divide them into four parts, and one of them is “*si fen zhi yi* 四分之一”:

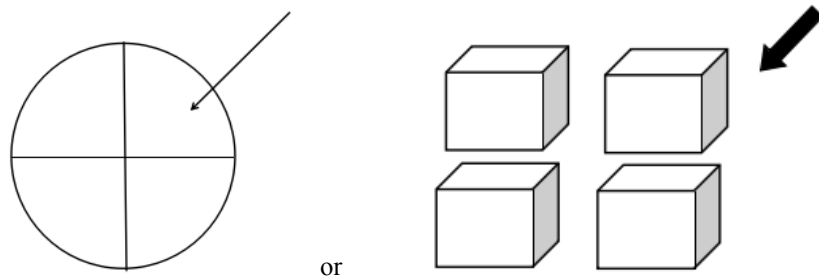


Figure 7. A graphic explanation of *si fen zhi yi* 四分之一

In other words, “si fen zhi yi 四分之一” can be re-expressed as “si fen zhi yi(fen)四份之一(份)”, which means we pick out one portion from the four portions.

Furthermore, Li (2013, p. 71) argues that selection occurs only when a ngp has more than one referents and it is obvious that selection cannot play its role when a ngp has only one referent. In “si fen zhi yi 四分之一”, “yi 一” (one) and “sifen 四分” (four portions) are the two referents of this group. By all the discussions above, we come to a conclusion that “si fen zhi yi 四分之一” is a ngp, with “yi 一” as head (h) and “sifen 四分” as selected target (st), and “zhi 之” (like “of” in English ngp) as selector (v).

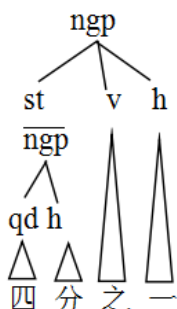


Figure 8. “zhi 之” as selector in “si fen zhi yi 四分之一”

Key: ngp= nominal group; qd= qualifying determiner; h=head; v= selector; st= selected target

Note. Selected target (st) in other works may have different names, such as *selected from (sf)* in Li (2009, 2013).

Although we put such groups like “si fen zhi yi 四分之一”, “bai fen zhi yi 百分之一” and “qian fen zhi yi 千分之一” into the camp of ngp, these ngps may function as qualifying determiner (qd) of another ngp:

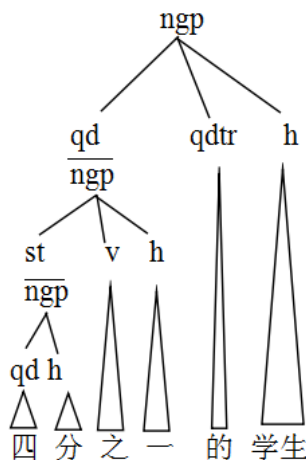


Figure 9. An example of “si fen zhi yi 四分之一” as qualifying determiner

Key: ngp= nominal group; qd= qualifying determiner;

h=head; v= selector; st= selected target; qdtr=qualifying determiner trigger

3.4 “zhi 之” as Qualifier Introducer (qint)

No matter in Chinese written text or oral text, we often see a common syntactic structure “...zhi wojian ...之我见” (my opinion on..), like “mingci cizu zhi wojian 名词词组之我见” (my opinion on ngp). In other words, “wojian 我见” (my opinion) modifies “mingci cizu 名词词组” (ngp), and because “wojian 我见” is placed after “mingci cizu 名词词组”, it is logically qualifier. And then, let’s come to the role that “zhi 之” has played in those ngps (similar structures such as “zhongguo zhi da 中国之大” (broad China)). In the Cardiff Grammar, there is an element in ngp: qualifier-introducing determiner (qid). “Its sole function is to signal that the head is about to be classified by information that will be given in a qualifier” (Fawcett, forthcoming a). For example, in *those students who got high score*, *those* is qid. Obviously, “zhi 之” plays the same role. The problem to watch for is that it is not a determiner but a QUALIFIER INTRODUCER (qint)- with the function to introduce a qualifier, while some Chinese scholars (such as He et al., 2015, pp. 108-110) consider this sort of function as QUALIFIER TRIGGER.

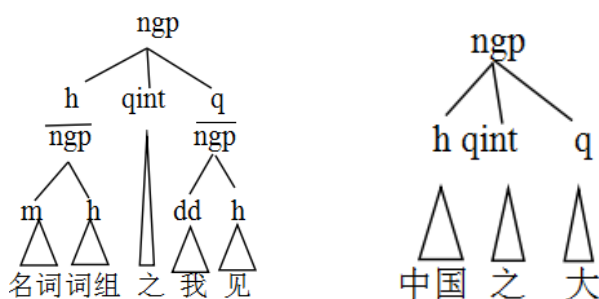


Figure 10. Examples of “zhi 之” as qualifier introducer

Key: ngp= nominal group; h=head; dd= deictic determiner; q=qualifier; qint=qualifier introducer; m=modifier.

3.5 “zhi 之” as Deictic Determiner (dd)

“zhi 之” is frequent in ancient Chinese language. For example, there is a very famous literary work called “xiaoyaoyou 逍遥游” (A Happy Excursion) in Chinese history, which is written by Zhuangzi 庄子, a great thinker. In this work, the Chinese character “zhi 之” appears thirty-one times. One example is “zhi erchong youhezhi? 之二虫又何知?”, which means how these two animals know. Here “zhi 之” equivalents to *this* or *these* in English. In the Cardiff Grammar, the items such as *the, this, that, these, those, my, your*, etc belong to the deictic determiner (dd), which is used to answer “the question of which or whose thing” (Fawcett, forthcoming a).

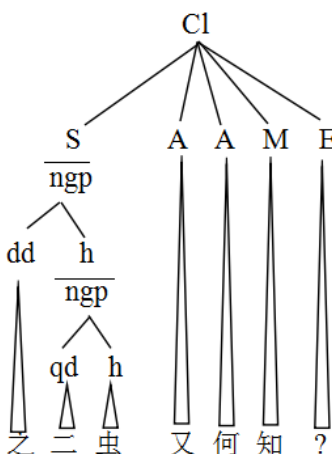


Figure 11. An example of “zhi 之” as deictic determiner

Key: Cl=Clause; S=Subject; A=Adjunct; M=main verb; E=Ender;

ngp= nominal group; h=head; dd= deictic determiner; qd= qualifying determiner;

Note. In this paper, the process is realized by M, an essential element of a clause, but in other works, such as He et al. (2015, pp. 38-44) adopt “weiti 谓体” (Predicator).

4. Conclusion

The present research empirically testifies the feasibility and efficacy of SFL that can be applied to Chinese or even other languages. Only SFL absorbs various indigenous elements can it become increasingly stronger. This paper studies the Chinese character “zhi 之” from a new angle of approach—the Cardiff Grammar, at the level of form. Different from other grammars, the Cardiff Grammar presents the syntactic relationship by the way of tree diagram, which is an excellent but distinctive method. “zhi 之” in Chinese studies has three functions in general: verb, the third personal pronoun and auxiliary word (like “de 的”). However, instead, this paper invests it new functions through syntactic analysis that “zhi 之” is:

- (1) genitive element (g) when placed between two nominal groups that the latter one belongs to the former.
- (2) modifier trigger (mtr) when placed between two nominal groups that the former one modifies the latter.
- (3) selector (v) when placed between two nominal groups that the latter one is selected from the former.
- (4) qualifier introducer (qint) when placed between two nominal groups that the latter one is introduced to be a qualifier of the former.
- (5) deictic determiner (dd) when placed before a nominal group to express the meaning of *this*, *that*, *these* and *those*.

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