Topic and subject in Chinese and in the languages of Europe: comparative remarks and implications for Chinese as a Second/Foreign Language teaching*

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Abstract

Grammatical notions like that of 'subject' are widely used in second language teaching. However, while the grammatical subject is generally regarded as easily identifiable in the Indo-European languages of Europe, as e.g. English, French or Italian, and as a key element in determining word order, the application of this notion to Chinese has given rise to endless controversies (e.g. Li & Thompson 1976, Tsao 1990, Li 1990, LaPolla 1993, Bisang 2006). On the other hand, pragmatic-discourse considerations such as topichood, world knowledge, and context, and semantic notions such as agency, causation, and the roles of participants in the described event, appear to be more significant in Chinese as factors determining word order and interpretation of utterances (e.g. Chafe 1976, Li & Thompson 1981, Xu & Langendoen 1985, Chu 1999, Huang 1994, LaPolla & Poa 2006). In this paper, we first provide an overview of the main differences concerning subjecthood, topichood and word order in English, Italian and Chinese, highlighting their impact on learner varieties of Chinese. We then summarise the state-of-the-art of research on subject and topic, with a focus on Chinese. Lastly, we discuss the implications of these theoretical issues for Chinese as a Second/Foreign Language teaching: to this end, we propose a critical overview of how the issue of topichood and subjecthood are treated in a sample of recent English-language, Italian-language and Chinese-language coursebooks and reference materials, and propose some recommendations for instructors.

Keywords: subject, topic, word order, zero anaphora, information structure

像"主语"这样的句法概念在第二语言教学中广泛使用。句法主语在英语、法语、意大利语等印欧语言中是一种容易识别且影响词序的关键要素，而这一概念在汉语句法中的应用引起了无休止的争论（Li＆Thompson 1976，Tsao 1990，Li 1990，LaPolla 1993，Bisang 2006）。另一方面，汉语语法中，语篇因素——如话题、世界知识、语境和语义概念（如施事和使動,以及谓词所描述的事件或状态中参与者的角色）是决定词序与解釋句意的主要因素（Chafe 1976，Li＆Thompson 1981，Xu＆Langendoen 1985，Chu 1999，Huang 1994，LaPolla＆Poa 2006）。本文首先概述英语、意大利语和中文在主语、话题和词序方面的主要差异，并突出其对汉语学习者语言变体的影响。其次，我们总结专注于中文有关主语的最新研究。最后，我们讨论这些理论问题对汉语作为第二语言/外语教学的内涵：为此，我们论述我们在最近的英语、意大利语和中文教材以及参考资料中如何处理话题、主语进行的分析，并向教师提出一些建议。

关键词： 主语, 话题, 语序, 零回指, 信息结构

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1. Introduction

Grammatical notions like that of subject are widely used in second language teaching. This is partly due the fact that the grammatical subject is generally easily identifiable and plays a crucial role in the grammar of languages such as English, French or Italian. On the other hand, the notion of topic is often regarded as comparatively less relevant or at least less known, both to students and to instructors. This general tendency can also be observed in Chinese as a second/foreign language (CSL/CFL) teaching: many textbooks and reference works take subject and object as fundamental constituents in the description of word order, while the role of the topic is often downplayed, and its definition is far from consistent. However, linguistic research has shown that topic indeed plays an important role in sentential organisation (Chao 1968, Li & Thompson 1976, 1981 and subsequent literature), while the identification/definition of subject has been, and still is, highly problematic (Bisang 2006, LaPolla 1990, 1993, 2017a; Morbiato 2018a-b). Furthermore, world knowledge and context, semantic notions such as agency and causation, and the role of event participants, are key factors both in determining word order and in allowing correct interpretation.

This paper examines the implications for CSL/CFL teaching of cross-linguistic differences in sentential organisation between Chinese and two Indo-European languages of Europe, i.e. Italian and English, with the aim to inform language pedagogy timely and with an appropriate rate. Section 2 provides an overview of the main differences concerning word order and the role of subject and topic in shaping sentence structure in English, Italian and Chinese; we then discuss the impact such differences have on learner varieties of Chinese. Section 3 is devoted to a summary of the state-of-the-art of the research on subject and topic, with a focus on Chinese. Section 4 presents a critical overview of how these notions are presented in a sample of recent English-language, Italian-language and Chinese-language textbooks, grammars and other reference materials for CSL/CFL teaching. Section 5 discusses the merits and limits of different approaches to these fundamental issues in CSL/CFL teaching and propose some recommendations.

This paper aims at advancing research on CSL/CFL teaching in the following respects. First, it provides an up-to-date overview of the research on subject and topic in Chinese that targets teachers and language instructors, who may be not familiar with the complex body of literature on this matter. Second, it highlights important issues in current teaching materials with respect to Chinese sentential organisation, which is a crucial aspect in CSL/CFL teaching, given the essential role word order plays in the grammar. Third, it is a step forward towards bridging the significant gap between linguistic research and CSL/CFL practice, which is one of the main issues CSL/CFL teaching is currently facing. Finally, it offers a contribution towards the investigation of CSL/CFL for Italian-speaking learners, which very few studies have addressed so far.

2. Subject, topic, and word order: the learner's perspective

When exposed to grammatical descriptions of Chinese, learners are often taught that the basic sentence structure is subject-verb-object, or subject-predicate, just like English/Italian (§4).

However, corpus data reveal that such a description does not apply to a statistically significant number of sentences (Tao 1996, Li 2005, Lin 2009). This cannot be ignored in CSL/CFL: when encountering sentences like (1) students may feel puzzled or simply misunderstand its structure or pragmatic meaning—i.e., that (i) no 'subject' is present (zero anaphora), as it is contextually inferable, and (ii) that the 'object' *chē* 'car' is preverbal and must be understood as definite/informationally given:

(1) 车卖了。
chē *mài le*
car sell COS/PFV
'The car, I sold it.'

Some grammars also include a definition of the sentence in terms of topic-comment, but most fail to clearly explain how these two definitions (SVO and topic-comment) integrate/overlap in sentential organisation. This may lead to confusion and affect both linguistic comprehension and production. While a description in terms of topic-comment is more correct, an SVO characterisation is both more frequent and closer to students' grammatical explicit competence. Furthermore, word order is one of the acquisitional aspects that suffers the most from the influence of L1 (James 1998), which was found to be especially true for Chinese (Jiang 2009). Crucially, most cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have been conducted on English/L1 learners of Chinese (e.g., Jiang 2009), while there is a general lack of research on Italian/L1 learners. Hence, an analysis of L1-L2 differences in word order patterns in Chinese, Italian, and English is undoubtedly worthwhile. To this end, the following subsections offer a cursory overview of differences in word order and sentential organisation in the three languages, which may involve positive/negative L1 transfer (§2.1), and of the state-of-the-art of studies on related word order errors in learner varieties of Chinese (§2.2).

2.1 English and Italian vs. *Chinese: subjecthood, topichood, and word order*

A major difference between Chinese and English/Italian concerns the formal identifiability of the subject NP: in English/Italian, but not in Chinese, subjects are (also) detectable thanks to verb agreement (in number and person) and case (note, however, that Italian is a pro-drop language and pronominal subjects are very often omitted):

(2)	E.	*I*	*love*	*him.*	*He*	*love-s*	*me.*
		1SG.NOM	love-PRS.1SG	3SG.M.ACC	3SG.M.NOM	love-PRS.3SG	1SG.ACC
	I.	(*Io)*	*am-o*	*lui.*	*(Egli)*	*am-a*	*me.*
		1SG.NOM	love-PRS.1SG	3SG. M.ACC	3SG. M.NOM	love-PRS.3SG	1SG.ACC

A second difference regards so-called hanging topics (§3.2): while Chinese allows such topics to occur as sentence-initial bare NPs (underlined), English and Italian either require a prepositional element, e.g., 'regarding, as for,' (3.E) or rely on different constructions (3.I):

(3) C. 这一棵树，花，颜色很好。 (Her 1991: 6)

zhè yí	*kē*	*shù*	*huā*	*yánsè*	*hěn hǎo*
this one	CLF	tree	flower	colour	very nice

E. *As for this tree, the colour of its flowers is beautiful / The colour of the flowers of this tree is beautiful.*

I. *I*	*fior-i*	*di quest'alber-o*	*hanno*	*un color-e*	*bellissim-o.*
the.M.PL	flower-PL	of this tree-SG	have.PRS.3PL	one colour-SG	beautiful-M.SG

Third, Chinese shows a clear preference for end-focus structures: in the message encoded in (4), the focal element (UPPERCASE) is 'good', which appears as the last sentence element in Chinese. This is not necessarily the case for Italian and English:

(4) C.我男朋友脾气很好。

wǒ nánpéngyou	*píqì*	*HĚN HǍO*
1SG boyfriend	temperament	very good

I. *Il mio ragazzo ha un BEL carattere.*

E. *My boyfriend has a GOOD temperament.*

These languages also differ with respect to the relative weight that semantics, syntax, and information structure play in the grammar. In English, a so-called 'configurational language' (Erteschik-Shir 2007: 80-81), word order encodes grammatical functions: the preverbal position hosts the subject, even when it is informationally-new (6E). Moreover, in sentences with no agentive or topical participant, e.g., with existential constructions (7) and meteorological predicates (8), this position is filled by a semantically empty but phonologically overt expletive or 'dummy' subject ('it', 'there'). In other languages, commonly referred to as 'non-configurational' (Erteschik-Shir 2007: 81), word order is mostly determined by information-structure, and the sentence-initial position generally encodes definiteness and identifiability. This happens also (to some extent and with some restrictions) in Italian and in Chinese: informationally-old objects may occur sentence-initially (5), while newly-introduced subjects may, in certain circumstances, occur after the verb—e.g. 'pilot projects'(It.: *progetti pilota*, Ch. *shìdiǎn*) in (6). Furthermore, neither Italian nor Chinese require expletive subjects with meteorological predicates (8); however, with existential sentences of the type of (7), Italian requires the expletive *ci* 'there', while Chinese does not. Finally, both Chinese and Italian often omit contextually inferable elements (1) (although with substantial differences, see Morbiato 2015, 2018b).

(5) E. *He told me this long ago.*

I. *Quest-a cosa*	*me*	*l'*	*ha*	*dett-a*	*da tempo.*
this- SG.F thing	1SG.DAT	ACC.3SG	have.PRS.3SG	say.PST.PTCP-SG.F	since time

C. 这件事啊，她早就告诉我了。

zhè jiàn shì a	*tā*	*zǎo jiù*	*gàosu*	*wǒ*	*le*
this CLF thing TOP	3SG.F	soon already	tell	1SG	COS

(6) E. *Next year, pilot projects will be carried out in part of the schools of the province.*
I. *Il prossimo ann-o saranno avviat-i progett-i pilot-a in alcun-e*
the.SG.M next year-SG be.FUT.3PL carried.out-PL.M project-PL pilot-SG in some-PL.F
scuol-e dell-a region-e
school-PL of.the-F.SG province-SG
C. 省里明年在部分学校进行试点
shěng-lǐ míngnián zài bùfen xuéxiào jìnxíng shìdiǎn
province-in next.year at part school carry.out pilot.project

(7) E. *There is a fly in my soup.*
I. C' è un-a mosc-a nella mi-a zupp-a.
there be.PRS.3SG a- SG.F fly-SG in.the.SG.F my- SG.F soup-SG
C. 我的汤里有一只蚊子。
wǒ de tāng-lǐ yǒu yì zhī wénzi
1SG SP soup-in there.be one CLF fly
'there is a fly in my soup'

(8) E. *It is raining.*
I. *Piov-e.*
rain-PRS.3SG
C.下雨了。
xià-yǔ le
fall-rain COS

There are also constructions where Chinese and English, but not Italian, pattern alike, such as locative inversions with spatial-configuration verbs (Levin 1993:92):

(9) E. *One car sits four people.*
C. 一辆车坐四个人。
yí liàng chē zuò sì ge rén
one CLF car sit four CLF person
I. * *Un-a macchin-a sied-e quattro person-e*
a-F.SG car.SG sit-PRS.3SG four person-PL

These are but a few differences in word order patterns and sentential configurations displayed by English, Italian, and Chinese. For further examples and discussion, see Li (2005), Sparvoli (2016), and Morbiato (2017, 2019).

2.2 Implications for learner varieties of Chinese

The differences in the role of subject and topic in sentence structure between languages like English, Italian, and Chinese, as well as the different factors conditioning word order, anaphora, etc., may be expected to have a role in shaping learner varieties of Chinese. This expectation is borne out by the facts, as revealed by our (cursory) examination of the relevant

literature. Below is a representative list of the features of L2 Chinese mostly, though not exclusively, of learners whose L1 is English, which are often mentioned in CSL/CFL research:

a. Preference for SVO order (Jiang 2009; Zhao 2011)
b. Overuse of subject-predicate structures (Jiang 2009)
c. Problems with double nominative constructions/base-generated topics (Yuan 1995; Xiao 2004; Zhao 2011; Liu 2015; Lu & Ke 2018)
d. Overuse of subject pronouns, less zero anaphora (Xie 1995; Polio 1995; Li *et al*. 2012; Li 2014; Lu & Ke 2018)
e. Rare occurrence of OV and VO sentences without a subject (Jiang 2009)
f. Problems with the relation between argument placement and information structure (Jiang 2009)
g. Problems with 'subject' argument placement for unaccusative verbs; underuse of VP-N order for unaccusatives (Yuan 1999; Ju 2000; Shan 2006; Zhao 2011)

The preference for SVO (i.e., mostly, Agent-Verb-Patient) order in CFL/CSL, together with the overuse of subject-predicate (instead of topic-comment) sentences, has been highlighted e.g. in Jiang's (2009) cross-sectional study of 116 university-level learners of Chinese, all native speakers of English, divided into three levels of proficiency. Thus, for instance, a typical topic-comment, end-focus sentence as (4) may be realized in learners' productions as an SVO sentence, i.e. a 'subject' plus a transitive predicate (10); Jiang (2009: 159):

(10) * 我男朋友有好的脾气。
wǒ nánpéngyou yǒu hǎo de píqi
1SG boyfriend have good SP temperament

Note that this preference for SVO(/AVP) order in L2 Chinese has been highlighted not only for speakers of English (or any other language in which subjects are primary determinants of sentence structure and word order), but also for learners whose L1 is Japanese, i.e. a language which has been classified as both topic- and subject-prominent (and in which there is overt marking both of topics and of 'subjects'; see Masuoka 2017). In point of fact, there appears to be a tendency for CSL/CFL learners to analyse Chinese sentences as SVO, rather than topic-comment, regardless of their L1 (see Zhao 2011 and the references cited therein).
Generally speaking, what emerges from the literature is that speakers of a subject-prominent, SVO language like English tend to transfer features of their L1 into their initial learner varieties of Chinese: for instance, based on a study of 46 English native speakers learning Chinese as L2, Jin (1994: 115-116) argues that early stage L2 Chinese interlanguage is structured as subject-prominent English, as evidenced e.g. by the lack of null elements, the overuse of subjects, and the low frequency (compared to native controls) of double nominative constructions. Jin posits four stages of development for this aspect of Chinese syntax (i.e. topic-prominence), and claims that even at the most advanced stage, learners "are still somewhat influenced by their native language" (Jin 1994: 117; see also Zhao 2011: 564,

and the references cited therein). Particularly, non-coreferentiality of topic and 'subject' (here, the first NP in the comment; see below, §4.1) poses a higher challenge for learners: in fact, sentences with non-coreferential topics and subjects appear to be less frequent than coreferential ones in learner varieties (Jin 1994: 114).[1] Yuan's (1995) cross-sectional study of 102 L2 Chinese learners whose L1 is English (with 24 native speakers of Chinese as controls), based on acceptability judgments, revealed that learners perform rather poorly in judging the grammaticality of sentences with base-generated topics, despite their relatively high frequency in spoken Chinese (and, hence, abundant exposure): learners tend to reject perfectly acceptable sentences with base-generated topics, at least until they reach a relatively advanced stage (on learners' difficulties with base-generated topics, see also Xiao 2004; Liu 2015; Lu & Ke 2018).[2]

As hinted at above, one of the features of L2 Chinese varieties which have been reported in the literature is the overuse of subject pronouns, and thus the comparatively low frequency of zero anaphora, if compared to native speech (Xie 1995; Polio 1995; Li *et al.* 2012). It has also been suggested that there may be a significant L1 transfer: learners of Chinese with English and Russian as L1 use more overt arguments than those whose L1 is Korean and Japanese (which also allow zero anaphora; Li 2014; Lu & Ke 2018). Jiang (2009: 158) highlighted that learners rarely produce sentences in which there is no overt subject/agent, as e.g. *zhè dìfāng kěyǐ tiàowǔ* 'one can dance here' (lit. 'this place, can dance'). Unfortunately, to the best of our knowledge, no such studies have been carried out on learners whose L1 is Italian.

Another challenging aspect of Chinese syntax for L2 learners seems to be the relation between word order and information status. For instance, according to Jiang (2009: 158-159), learners apparently fail to grasp the difference between a pair of sentences such as (11a) and (11b), i.e. the difference in the information status of the object *yīfu* 'clothes' (new *vs.* given; see above, §2.1):

(11) a. 我洗衣服了
wǒ xǐ yīfu le
1SG wash clothes COS
'I have done the laundry.'

b. 衣服我洗了
yīfu wǒ xǐ le
clothes 1SG wash PFV/COS
'I have washed the clothes.'

[1] Note that, in Jin's (1994) experiment, double nominative constructions with non-coreferential topic and subject were less frequent also in the productions of native controls. Nevertheless, the gap between the two construction types was way more evident in learner varieties (and non-coreferential constructions were conspicuously absent from the productions of learners at the first two proficiency levels).

[2] Liu (2015) actually presents a more nuanced view of the acquisition of base-generated topics in L2 Chinese. Based on his own experiment, Liu argues that not all types of base-generated topics are problematic for the language learner. He suggests that the difficulties with some types of topic structures are best explained by syntactic constraints (specifically, island constraints) and semantic constraints (specifically, the lack of transparency of the relation between the topic and the associated constituent).

Lastly, argument placement is reportedly problematic also for unaccusative verbs, as e.g. 沉 *chén* 'sink': the underuse of VP-N order has been highlighted in the literature (Yuan 1999; Ju 2000; Shan 2006; Zhao 2011). For instance, Yuan (1999) tested 48 English-speaking university-level learners of Chinese (with 14 native Chinese controls), divided into four proficiency levels, with an oral picture-description task and a sentence-acceptability judgment task: his results show that the production of postverbal arguments is negligible for low-proficiency learners, but the number rises sharply with increased proficiency; however, overgeneralization (i.e. ungrammatical postverbal placement of the agent argument of unergative verbs) also becomes prominent. A similar pattern emerges from the acceptability judgment task: learners at the lowest proficiency level tend to reject all postverbal arguments, even for unaccusative verbs; the acceptability of postverbal arguments increased with increasing proficiency.

To conclude this overview, let us mention the only study specifically aimed at testing word order in L2 Chinese of Italian-speaking learners we could find, i.e. Morbiato (2017). Morbiato proposed a translation task to 24 MA level Italian-speaking learners of Chinese; since, differently from English, Chinese and Italian share both (a) the tendency to place indefinite subjects after the verb, and (b) the tendency towards 'given-V-new' word order (§2.1), she expected to find a positive L1 transfer effect as to these two contexts. Indeed, test subjects performed relatively well (error rate 33.3% and 20.9%, respectively, with respect to word order in contexts (a) and (b)—as compared to the much higher error rates observed by Jiang (2009) for English L1 learners. This shows that L1 transfer may be present in translation tasks (from Chinese to Italian and from Italian to Chinese) also for what concerns the relation between information structure and word order.

To sum up, research on L2 Chinese has shown that many basic aspects of Chinese syntax related to topichood, subjecthood, information status and argument placement (and omission) are indeed challenging for learners. Although the focus of research up to know appears to have been learners whose L1 is English, a number of aspects highlighted here apply also to learners with other backgrounds. Still, some specific aspects of Chinese syntax in this respect may be less problematic when positive L1 transfer is possible, as shown by Morbiato's research with Italian-speaking students of Chinese. In our discussion of CSL/CFL teaching materials, we seek to answer the following questions:

(a) How are the notions of subject and topic defined (i.e. how are students to identify them)?
(b) Are these notions adequately defined and discussed to allow students to distinguish between them in terms of form, properties, and function?
(c) How can the current state of Chinese teaching materials be improved?

However, before moving to the analysis of our sample of textbooks and reference works, we need to further clarify the theoretical and functional differences among the notions of 'agent', 'subject', and 'topic'. This will be the topic of the next section.

3. Subject and topic: the state of the art

While subject and topic display several common features and functions, they indeed identify and capture three distinct concepts and are generally agreed to belong to different levels of linguistic organisation, namely semantics, syntax, and information structure, respectively (Evans & Levinson 2009: 440).[3] This well-known example by Halliday (1994: 30) illustrates both common traits and differences displayed by subject, topic, and agent:

(12) a. *The duke* *gave* *my aunt* *this teapot.*
SUBJECT ≡ AGENT ≡ TOPIC

b. *This teapot,* *my aunt* *was given* *by the duke.*
TOPIC(PATIENT) ≠ SUBJECT(BENEFICIARY) ≠ AGENT(OBLIQUE)

Example (12) shows how agent, topic, and subject typically conflate onto the same NP (*the duke*): some scholars consider the prototypical subject as the intersection of agent and topic (Comrie 1988, Shibatani 1991) or as grammaticalized topics (see Shibatani 1991 for a thorough discussion). (12), on the other hand, crucially shows how subject, agent, and topic are distinct as they identify different properties of verbal arguments (syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic, respectively). Strictly speaking, 'agent' denotes the volitional, agentive participant performing the action denoted by a transitive verb; however, it is often used (e.g., in Comrie and Shibatani) to identify a generalised semantic role, (Dowty's (1991) 'proto-agent', and Foley & Van Valin (1984) 'actor'). These terms identify the most agent-like argument of a verb, including sole arguments of intransitive verbs and non-fully-fledged agents like (non-volitional) experiencers. What is crucial is that 'agent', 'actor', and 'proto-agent' are *semantic roles*. 'Subject' is, on the other hand, universally regarded as a *syntactic notion* (or *grammatical relation*). This captures the fact that not only first verbal arguments (agents/actors) can have the grammatical role of subject in a sentence (see also Bickel 2011 on this point). In (12), the subject bears the semantic role of beneficiary (*my aunt*), by virtue of a voice-changing process (passivisation) controlled, in English, by grammatical subjects (§2.1).

'Topic' —or 'theme', although the two notions differ (Halliday 1994, Li 2005)—is generally agreed to identify 'what the sentence is about', and to be related to the sentence-initial position (but see Lambrecht 1994: 129). Different theoretical approaches treat topics differently, but there is a consensus that 'topic' is an information-structural notion (see Erteschik-Shir 2007 and Güldemann *et al*. 2015 for an overview). Information structure captures how speakers structurally encode propositional content with respect to their communicative purposes and their assumptions about the addressee's state of knowledge: topics 'anchor' the utterance in the co(n)text/conversation, thus they are contextually (or co-

[3] Different theoretical approaches regard these notions in different ways. The cartographic approach sees both subject and topic as elements appearing in the Spec position of the relevant head: topics, in general, are regarded as elements belonging to the left-periphery (see Badan & Del Gobbo 2011 for Chinese). Conversely, models of grammar adopting a multi-level architecture (e.g. Prague School's functionalism, LFG, RRG) conceive the clause as a domain in which notions belonging to different components of grammar—syntax, prosody, semantics, information structure—display different functions and interact/compete with each other (Siewierska 1988; Lambrecht 1994). All these approaches nevertheless recognise that agent, subject, and topic are distinct notions.

textually) given, cognitively activated/accessible in the mind of the hearer, or at least identifiable/locatable (Morbiato 2018b). 'Comment' ('rheme') is generally defined as the rest of the predication, hosting focal/new/salient information. Different patterns, alternations, and inversions (Levin & Rappaport Hovav, 2005) are thus alternative ways to encode the same propositional content (Lambrecht 1994), depending on what carries given/background information and what conveys the focus. Sentences in (12) are then understood against the possible contexts motivating the choice of one pattern over the other, e.g. an ongoing conversation about 'the duke' or 'the teapot'.

3.1 'Subject'

As mentioned earlier, subject is a very widely used notion, regarded as universal up until the 1970s, when research on typologically diverse languages showed it displays different morphological, syntactic, and control properties (Keenan 1976, Bickel 2011). Chinese is one of those languages that ignited the debate on subjects (see Abbiati 1990, LaPolla 2017a). To date, despite the rich literature on 'subject' in Chinese, its nature, definition, and identification criteria remain unclear and much uncertainty still exists as to its relationship with the semantic notion of agent/actor.

Current linguistic frameworks deal with this issue in two major ways. Some see subject and grammatical relations (GRs) as theory-internal, either as theoretical primitives (e.g. in Lexical Functional Grammar they belong to the F-structure) or as structurally defined nodes in the formal representation of the sentence (e.g. SpecIP in Government and Binding and subsequent frameworks). In this view, GRs are universal and do not need a definition. From an acquisitional perspective, however, such an approach does not help students identify and use the notion correctly in the context of L2 grammar. On the other hand, in typological and functionalist approaches, a category exists if specific tests prove its existence: subject is identified/defined in terms of the properties/constructions that manifest it. Some are overt (e.g., verb agreement and case in Italian/English), some other are covert (control or behavioural) properties observable in GRs-sensitive constructions (see Bickel 2011). Passivisation is, both in English and Italian, a subject-controlled construction: grammatical subjects—and neither agents nor topics—control verb agreement (12). Other GRs-sensitive constructions include: relativisation, reflexives, equi-NP deletion, topic extraction out of relative clauses, raising, control, and floating. Tests conducted on these constructions help typologists reveal whether a language displays a grammatical structural subject (Bickel 2011; Van Valin & LaPolla 1997).

Going back to Chinese, subjecthood has been a troublesome issue mainly because neither overt/morphosyntactic markers—compare (2)—nor positional/semantic criteria can be applied. Moreover, a systematic examination of GRs-sensitive constructions by Morbiato (2018a-b) has shown that none are controlled by (and hence identify) a grammatical subject; few are controlled by topics (equi-NP deletion, coreference, and quantifier float), while most are role-related—i.e., controlled by the most agent-like event participant. As this paper focusses on CSL/CFL teaching, we cannot discuss this lengthy matter (see LaPolla 2017a for an overview, and Morbiato 2018a-b for a systematic examination of GR-sensitive constructions in Chinese). Rather, we summarise the major issues connected to

solutions/criteria proposed in the literature to identify subjects, with a specific focus on CSL/CFL teaching.

The positional criterion (Chao 1968; Zhang 1952; Zhu 1982) identifies the subject with the NP in the sentence-initial/preverbal slot. The reasons why this fails to define 'subjects' have already been discussed in the literature (LaPolla 2017a; Morbiato 2018a-b). In short: first, the sentence-initial position can be filled not only by verbal arguments, but also by several elements that cannot qualify as subjects (time/location phrases, subordinate clauses, frames); second, the sentence-initial position has an inherent frame-setting function (see §3.2):

(13) 自己的心情，自己做主。 (PKU corpus)

zìjǐ	*de xīnqíng*	*zìjǐ*	*zuòzhǔ*
oneself	SP state.of.mind	oneself	decide

'One's state of mind is one's decision.'

As Her (1991) points out, in (13) *zìjǐ de xīnqíng* 'one's state of mind' cannot qualify as the subject, since the sole argument of the predicate 做主 *zuòzhǔ* (lit. 'be the master'), is the second *zìjǐ*: in sentences like (13), as well as with hanging topics (3) and double-nominatives (4), the only plausible analysis for the sentence-initial element is that of (frame-setting) topic (§3.2). Similarly, in (7) the preverbal NP *wǒ de tāng-lǐ* 'in my soup' is a spatial frame. Furthermore, subjects cannot be identified with arguments occurring in the pre-verbal position: in (6), the sole argument (and possible subject) of the intransitive verb of motion *jìnxíng* 'carry out' (*shìdiǎn* 'pilot projects') is post-verbal. This pattern is by no means rare, and is typical of so-called unaccusative verbs, also including verbs of internally/externally caused change of state— 长 *zhǎng* 'grow', 沉 *chén* 'sink', and verbs of existence/(dis)appearance—存在 *cúnzài* 'exist', 死 *sǐ* 'die' (see Basciano 2010 for an overview). Identifying the subject with the first preverbal argument makes wrong predictions with transitive verbs in a statistically relevant way (Tao 1996; Lin 2009; He 2019; ex. from He 2005):

(14) 这次探访，该见的人没见着。

zhè cì	*tànfǎng*	*gāi*	*jiàn de rén*	*méi jiàn-zhao*
this CLF	visit	should	see SP person	NEG see-succeed

'As for this visit, (I/we/…) did not meet the person (I/we/…) was/were supposed to meet.'

In (14), the only overt argument *gāi jiàn de rén* 'the person who had to be met' is semantically compatible with both arguments of the predicate *méi jiàn-zháo* 'did not meet'. However, native speakers surveyed by He (2005) interpret it as the latter, which would qualify as an object. Also, the sentence-initial *zhè cì tànfǎng* 'this visit' clearly fails to qualify as a possible subject: rather, it is a topic specifying the temporal/contextual frame of the predication (for further examples, see He 2005).

The semantic criterion (Li & Thompson 1976, 1981, among others) identifies the subject with the NP having a 'doing/being relationship' with the predicate and is, either explicitly or implicitly, often employed in teaching materials. However, such a definition identifies the

notion of ‘proto-agent’ or ‘actor’, as discussed in §3, and not that of grammatical subject. This fails to account for the fact that different arguments, including non-agents/actors, may occur as subjects (12). Such a definition implies that, in *bèi* sentences like (15), the subject is the post-*bèi* agent (*jǐngchá* ‘police’) and that the agentless sentence (*tā bèi dàibǔ le*) is subjectless. However, this is counterintuitive for English/Italian-L1 learners, who are used to identifying the subject with sentence-initial patient ‘he’ (ex. from Li 1990):

(15) 他被（警察）逮捕了。

tā	*bèi*	(*jǐngchá*)	*dàibǔ le*
3SG.M	BEI	police	arrest PFV/COS

‘He has been arrested by the policemen.’

Thus, to sum up, neither a semantic nor a positional definition can adequately identify subjects in Chinese (for further discussion, see Morbiato 2018a-b).

3.2. *‘Topic'*

‘Topic’ may seem a rather intuitive notion (what the sentence is about), but it indeed presents significant cross-linguistic variation and is defined differently in different theoretical frameworks/approaches (Sornicola 2006; Erteschik-Shir 2007; Zimmermann & Féry 2010; Güldemann et al. 2015). The importance of topic in Chinese has been often remarked (Chao 1968; Li & Thompson 1976, 1981); almost all theoretical persuasions[4] identify topic as the sentence-initial element, although a sentence may display multiple topics. Some frameworks (e.g. the cartographic approach, Cinque & Rizzi 2008) see topics as left-peripheral elements of different types—e.g., left-dislocated, aboutness, hanging topics (Badan and Del Gobbo 2011); others regard topic as a syntactic notion bearing the role of frame (Her 1991); others, so-called ‘functionalist’ frameworks, see it as a discourse/pragmatic notion (Tsao 1990, Chu 1999, Li 2005). Nonetheless, it is agreed that each Chinese sentence has an underlying topic-comment structure, where the topic ‘sets a frame of validity for what comes afterwards’ (Chafe 1976, Her 1991, Paul 2015, Morbiato 2018a) and is what the sentence is about (but see Paul 2015 and Morbiato 2018a for counterexamples). Crucially, unlike subjects, topics need not be verbal arguments. In what follows, we list the major functions/characteristics of Chinese topics, focussing on differences with Italian and English that are relevant for CSL/CFL teaching.

(i) Topic referents are most times co-textually or contextually ‘given’ and activated in the hearer’s mind (5-7C). This is why *chē* ‘car’ in (1) is interpreted as definite. Informationally-new referents are generally first introduced in postverbal position—e.g., in (16), the first occurrence of *cōnghuā* ‘scallion’ is after the verb *shì* ‘be’—and then may occur as sentence-initial topics, anchoring the message in the preceding discourse—e.g., *zhège cōnghuā* ‘this scallion’.

[4] An overview of the historical development of this notion for Chinese is beyond the scope of the present article; the reader is referred to Li (2005), Shyu (2016), and LaPolla (2017b), a.o.

(16) (Context: oral narrative—recipe, from Ho's 1993 corpus)
…要放两样东西，一个呢，是葱花。
yào fàng liǎng yàng dōngxi yī ge ne shì cōnghuā
must put two CLF thing one CLF TOP be scallion
这个葱花呢，可以切得稍微大一点。
Zhè ge cōnghuā ne kěyǐ qiē de shāowēi dà yìdiǎn
this CLF scallion TOP can cut SP slightly big a.bit
'When [the chicken] is ready, we need to add two things: one is scallion. This scallion, [you] can chop it into larger pieces, it's ok.'

However, indefinite topics can be found in actual language data (Paul 2015) and different levels of cognitive statuses need to be postulated to account for topics, including *specificity*—the topic is known to the speaker but not the hearer, and *locatability*—the topic is identifiable within a given set (see Morbiato 2018b).

(ii) Chinese topics contribute to textual cohesion and discourse progression by controlling co-referential NP deletion (Li 2005). Zero-anaphors are interpreted in light of previous topics in the sentence/paragraph—in (17) *wǒ de shǒujī* 'my cell phone' and *píngmù* 'screen' control disambiguation of the following zeroes:

(17) 我的手机$_j$呢，就是屏幕$_k$碎了，被我摔碎了，
wǒ de shǒujī$_j$ ne jiù-shì píngmù$_k$ suì le Ø$_{j/k}$ bèi wǒ shuāi-suì le
1SG SP cell.phone TOP just-be screen shatter COS BEI 1SG fall-shatter COS

所以我今天想过来问一下老板怎么给我修。
suǒyǐ wǒ jīntiān xiǎng guòlai wèn yíxià lǎobǎn zěnme gěi wǒ xiū Ø$_{j/k}$
so 1SG today think come ask one.bit boss how give 1SG repair
'My phone, the screen is broken, I dropped it and it shattered, so today I thought I could come ask the shopkeeper how he can repair it for me.'
(Videoclip—www.youtube.com/watch?v=x73MWj1PrUk, last accessed: 06/11/2019)

Placement of overt pronouns/anaphoric means (such as 'it' in the English translation) would be perceived as a marked form, i.e., a means to introduce a different referent (see Morbiato 2015).

(iii) Topic-comment structures, as apparent in (3), are recursive (Hockett 1958:202). A partitive (possessor-possessed, container-contained, body-part) relation often holds between the NPs (Morbiato, to appear): this holds in (16) between 'two things' and 'scallion', and in (3) between 'tree', 'leaves', and 'colour'.

(v) A key property of Chinese topics is that they set the frame of validity for the following predication. The frame may be temporal, spatial, individual, concessive, conditional, etc. This

is why Chinese features sentence-initial NPs that are neither licensed by the verb nor can be analysed as adjuncts, without the need of any preposition, like in (3), (6), (13), and (14). While this is generally known, what is crucial for students to realise is that, with few exceptions, elements representing a frame occur before the verb—which is why any locative or temporal phrases must occur preverbally, unlike in English and Italian (see Morbiato 2019; forthcoming).

(vii) When no topics are present, the sentence coincides with the focus (thetic or all-focus sentence): this is the case in sentences like *lái le rén le* 'someone has arrived' (Li & Thompson 1981:21).

4. 'Subject' and 'topic' in reference materials: what textbooks and grammars tell us

This section assesses how topichood and subjecthood are presented in a sample of recent Chinese coursebooks and reference materials. The two English-language grammars in our sample, namely Ross & Ma (2006) and Yip & Rimmington (2006), were chosen because they are primarily reference grammars for language learners/teachers (as stated in both works' preface); more 'linguist-oriented' grammars, such as Chao (1968) or Li & Thompson (1981) were excluded, as they might not be the first choice for a learner/instructor with limited or no background in linguistics. Similar considerations hold for the two Italian-language grammars we considered, i.e. Abbiati (1998) and Romagnoli & Wang (2016).
We chose to separate the discussion of English- and Italian-language materials, on the one hand, and Chinese-language materials, on the other, since we expect that materials targeting Italian/English L1 learners would make more reference to the notion of 'subject', and Chinese-language materials would rely more on notions which are better suited for the description of Chinese (like topic). One problem with this distinction is that most of the works classified as 'Chinese-language materials' are partly or entirely bilingual texts, with translations or annotations in English (e.g. Liu 2004); in one case (i.e. Wu 2003a-b), the textbook is explicitly marketed as "designed for students whose native language is English" (2003a: 1). Moreover, with the exception of the above-mentioned Wu (2003a-b), we feel it is safe to assume that even though English translations are present, the intended audience is not limited to native speakers of English, but rather includes learners from different backgrounds.
Table 1 lists the works we considered for the present study, specifying the title (with an English translation, whenever necessary), its language(s), and the (sub)type (textbook, grammar, etc.). The choice of materials was motivated both by their diffusion (within Italy) and by convenience.

INSERT TABLE 1. HERE

4.1 *English- and Italian-language materials*

As expected, English- and Italian- language teaching materials rely heavily on the notion of subject: there is a strong tendency towards presenting Chinese grammar as based on the

notions of ‘subject’, ‘verb’, and ‘object’, which play a crucial role in determining basic word order—often described as rigid SVO. When both ‘subject’ and ‘topic’ are mentioned, they are often not clearly defined and distinguished.

This approach is most evident in Masini *et al.* (2010a-b, 2016a-b). Masini (2010a: 62) mentions the notion of ‘verbal predicate’ (It. *predicato verbale*) as what is always placed after the ‘subject’ (*soggetto*), but before the ‘object’ (*complemento oggetto*). Other than this, word order is said to follow modifier-modified order, with adverbs occurring between the subject and the predicate. On the contrary, the *bèi* morpheme is described with respect to semantic roles, as occurring before the agent and after the patient (which becomes the subject) (2010b: 169). The authors also list other examples of non-agentive subjects, e.g., existential sentences (*frasi d’esistenza*) where the subject is a place (2010b: 53)—e.g., (6C) and (7C). Whenever reference is made to word order, e.g. with *bǎ* constructions, the first element in the sentence is analysed as the subject. This holds also for Masini *et al.* (2016a-b), i.e., secondary school-level coursebooks, which mention the ‘subject-predicate-(object)’ word order (2016a: 5). In Romagnoli & Wang (2016), an elementary-intermediate level (CEFR: A1-B1) practical grammar, the canonical word order is presented as SVO too, and no reference is made to the notion of topic.

Similarly, Li (2005a: 24) argues for SVO as the basic order “a sentence in Modern Chinese is normally composed of three basic elements: subject, predicate and object”. What is interesting is that Li (2005a-b) provides bilingual grammatical explanations, thus allowing us to compare the terms used in Italian and Chinese: ‘subject’ (*soggetto*) is consistently referred to in Chinese as *zhǔyǔ*; sentences with a ‘subject-predicate’ predicate (*zhǔ-wèi wèiyǔjù*) are described as having a predicate made of a subject and a predicate, with the relation between predicate and main subject being ‘topic-comment’ (*tema-commento*). She further adds that the two constituents of this sentence type (i.e. the subject and the ‘subject-predicate’ predicate) may be referred to as ‘topic’ (It. *tema*) and ‘comment’ (*commento*). However, in the Chinese version of the text, she uses different terms: the ‘topic-comment’ relation is described as “*chénshù yǔ bèi chénshù de guānxi*”, lit. ‘descriptor and described’, while the individual terms ‘topic’ and ‘comment’ are, respectively, “*zhǔtí*” and “*shùyǔ*” (Li 2005b: 18; see below, §4.2). Thus, the notion of topic overlaps with that of subject, and the former appears to be limited to instances of the ‘double-subject’ construction. Just as in Masini (2010b), when the passive *bèi* construction is presented, the patient is referred to as ‘subject’, thus stressing again the independence of the notion of ‘subject’ from that of topic and agent. A similar treatment of these issues may be found in Bulfoni (2006): we shall not enter into the details here due to space constraints.

All in all, what emerges from the above is that the presentation of Chinese syntax considers the subject as central: basic, simple sentences are described as consisting of a subject and a predicate. However, there is no attempt towards a syntactic definition of ‘subject’ for Chinese. The notion of ‘topic’, on the other hand, is not given much importance, as reference is mostly made to that of subject (e.g. when discussing passive voice, pivotal constructions, etc.).

A somewhat more elaborate picture is provided in Abbiati & Zhang (2010, 2011). At the beginning of Volume 1 of their coursebook (Unit 2; Abbiati & Zhang 2010: 32), the basic Chinese sentence pattern is described as subject-predicate, and the canonical word order is described as SVO (Abbiati & Zhang 2010: 49). Thus, subject and object seem to be defined

on a positional basis. Later on, the notion of 'topic' (*tema*) is introduced as covering both the topic in double-subject sentences (thus, maintaining the topic *vs.* subject distinction) and in constructions in which there is only a topic, but no 'subject', as e.g. *qù huǒchēzhàn zěnme zǒu*? 'how do you get to the station?' (but lit. 'get to the station, how to go?'; Abbiati & Zhang 2010: 157). Thus, a topic is presented as distinct from the subject, since they can co-occur in the same sentence: differently from all the textbooks presented so far, the topic is defined independently from the subject, as "an element which frames the topic the rest of the utterance is about" (Abbiati & Zhang 2010: 157; our translation). They also mention the fact that the 'logical object' of transitive verbs may be topicalized by placing it at the beginning of the sentence (2010: 247): the first element in an existential sentence, e.g., *wǒ de tāng-lǐ* 'in my soup' in (7), is then analysed as a 'locative topic' (*tema locativo*). Abbiati & Zhang (2011: 16), describe the noun phrase following the verb as the 'existential object', regardless of whether it is actually the 'logical' subject or object of the verb. Lastly, in presenting passive *bèi* construction, reference is made both to the notions of 'agent' and 'patient', as expected, and to the notions of 'logical subject' and 'logical object': the agent is defined as the logical subject of the verb, while the patient is said to be often, though *not* always, the logical object of the verb. Hence, the semantic notion of patient in the passive voice is kept separate both from that of subject(/object) and from that of topic.

In short, while Abbiati & Zhang (2010, 2011) insist on the existence of a separate notion of 'subject', they fail to provide clear criteria to distinguish it from the topic. The presentation of Chinese syntax is however different in Abbiati's own reference grammar of Chinese (1998). Here, she explicitly states that topic and comment, rather than subject and object, are the two fundamental constituents of a Chinese sentence: the topic is defined as the nominal phrase at the beginning of the sentence, and as what the comment is about, or as the frame within which the predication holds; also, the topic must be definite (or rather given, and not new information). The comment, on the other hand, may contain a subject, which is defined as the nominal phrase appearing at the beginning of the comment: thus, the subject is identified as a separate entity from the topic, and is defined (also) on the basis of its position in sentence structure. Abbiati also suggests that if either the subject or the object are co-referential with the topic, they can be omitted, or replaced with pronouns (Abbiati 1998: 29-30). Thus, a sentence like (18) is analysed as follows:

(18) 那位先生不是老师，是大夫。

nà wèi xiānsheng	*bù shì lǎoshī,*	*shì dàifu*
that CLF gentleman	not be teacher	be physician
'that gentleman'	'is not a teacher, but a physician'	
TOPIC	COMMENT	

If there is an NP at the beginning of the comment, it is said to be the subject, as 我 *wǒ* 'I' in (19) (Abbiati 1998: 30):

(19) 王先生, 我认识他。

Wáng xiānsheng wǒ rènshi tā

Wang Mr	1SG know 3SG.M
'Mr Wang'	'I know him'
TOPIC	COMMENT

The predicate, on the other hand, is defined as the part of the comment which follows the subject (Abbiati 1998: 37).

Thus, here we find a different conception of the Chinese sentence and of the 'subject'. While the canonical order makes reference to the notions of topic and comment, the subject is seen as a separate notion, and, again, a positional criterion is used for its definition (see above, §3.1). A rather detailed presentations of different types of topic-comment structures is also provided (Abbiati 1998: 115-123), and the topic is defined here both in positional terms (the first NP in a sentence) and in semantic-pragmatic terms (the domain within which what is stated in the comment is relevant and should be understood; Abbiati 1998: 115), as mentioned above. However, while the definition of 'topic' is rather clear and consistent, the definition of "subject" is far from straightforward. Actually, Abbiati's view of the subject as the first NP in the comment looks very much like a 'secondary topic' (see Nikolaeva 2001), rather than as a subject in the logical or grammatical sense. And what about a basic transitive predicate with an overt preverbal subject as *wǒ mǎi-le yì běn shū* 'I bought a book': should we treat *wǒ* 'I' as a topic or a subject, given that it is the noun phrase which appears at the beginning of the sentence, but also the only element appearing before the predicate? Is it a topic, a subject, or an overlap of both levels (i.e. a topic, which is also a subject)?

The two English-language grammars we considered in the present study, i.e. Ross & Ma (2006) and Yip & Rimmington (2006), both treat 'subject' and 'topic' as distinct notions. In Ross & Ma (2006: xxi), the basic Chinese sentence pattern is defined in a way which is reminiscent of Abbiati (1998): in their view, a (full) sentence is made of a subject and a predicate, and may begin with a topic: thus, example (4) is analysed as *wǒ nánpéngyou* = TOPIC; *píqì* = SUBJECT; *hěn hǎo* = PREDICATE (Ross & Ma 2006: xxii). However, differently from Abbiati (1998): (i) an (overt) topic is not taken to be necessarily present; (ii) the subject is treated as a fundamental constituent, but may be omitted, if recoverable from the context; (iii) the subject is defined as "the noun or noun phrase about which information is provided in the predicate" (2006: xxii); (iv) topic is defined as "the noun or noun phrase that the sentence, paragraph, or narrative is about", and which "occurs at the beginning of a sentence". Once again, the distinction between subject and topic is not clear: their (semantic-pragmatic) definitions are not much different, and could overlap, although Ross & Ma (2006: xxii) state that the topic "is often distinct from the subject".

A somewhat different view is found in Yip & Rimmington (2006), who distinguish between two basic Chinese sentence patterns: 'subject-predicate' and 'topic-comment'. The former "usually relates an event and is therefore used for narrative purposes" (2006: 146), as e.g. *tāmen shōudào-le bùshǎo lǐwù* 'they received quite a lot of presents.' A topic-comment sentence, on the other hand, "while usually following a structure with a noun phrase followed by a verb phrase similar to that of subject and predicate, provides a description or offers an opinion, rather than narrating an action or event", as e.g. *zìdiǎn hěn yǒuyòng* 'dictionaries are useful' (2006: 149). They provide a list of distinctive features of subject-predicate and topic-comment sentences, summarized in Table 2:

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Yip & Rimmington thus define the subject through semantic criteria, i.e. as the agent/initiator or recipient, but they admit that it can be a patient only in *bèi* constructions: a sentence-initial patient is analysed as a topic, which is quite confusing. Furthermore, they define the 'subject' with respect to its information status, saying that it must have definite reference—although quantitative corpus studies reveal this is not necessarily true. Topics, on the other hand, may also be indefinite, while subject-predicate sentences are based on action verbs; comments contain adjectival predicates, the copula, or the existential verb *yǒu*, which contrasts with what has been claimed in the literature (§3.2).

4.2. *Chinese-language materials*

Interestingly, Chinese materials (both textbooks and reference grammars) also treat the subject (*zhǔyǔ*) as a fundamental constituent of the sentence, placed before the predicate (*wèiyǔ*). Also, quite surprisingly, elements which arguably nobody would analyse as 'subjects' are analysed as *zhǔyǔ*. Ding (2010: 82), for example, states that any kind of elements, including locatives or temporal nouns, can be subjects:

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Thus, *zhǔyǔ* seems to overlap with the topic (*huàtí*). Accordingly, sentences like (4) are called *zhǔ-wèi wèiyǔ jù* 'subject-predicate predicate sentences', i.e., having two subjects, namely *dà zhǔyǔ* and *xiǎo zhǔyǔ* 'main' and 'secondary' subject (e.g. in Yang 2006a-b). Interestingly, Yang (2006b) also includes in this category sentences like (20) (see also Lü 2014: 168): "[w]hen a subject-predicate phrase is used to describe or illustrate something (which is the subject of the main sentence), it forms a sentence with a 'subject-predicate predicate'. The sentence structure is Noun1+Noun2+Verb" (Yang 2006b: 172).

(20) 我的护照你找到了没有?

wǒ de hùzhào	*nǐ*	*zhǎodào-le*	*méiyǒu*
1SG SP passport	2SG	find-PFV	NEG
N_1	N_2		

'Did you find my passport?'

In fact, it is further added that N_1 (the 'first subject') is often an *object* of the verb, like *wǒ de hùzhào* 'my passport' in (20), which is contradictory: the 'main subject' is claimed to often be an object. Most of the examined Chinese texts do not even mention the 'topic', while in those that mention it subject (*zhǔyǔ*) and topic (*huàtí*) seem to overlap. For instance, Ding (2010: 84; our emphasis), states that:

> "The **subject** is the core of the subject part, or the **topic** in which [sic!] the person, the matter, the time, the location, the quantity, the action, the nature or the state judged, illustrated, explained, narrated or asked in the sentence; the predicate is the core of the

predicate part which plays a role as the judgement, the illustration, the explanation, the narration or the question of the sentence concerning the subject"

Other authors provide contradictory definitions. Wu (2003a), for example, first asserts that, just like in English, the basic Chinese order is SVO (2003a: 48-49), then states that Chinese is a topic-prominent language (2003b: 47), whereby the first part of a sentence hosts a specific element functioning as the topic, while the following part is "the declaration, or the comment on it". He provides no further definition of topic, and refers the reader to the following examples (topics underlined):

(21) a. 我肚子疼。

wǒ	*dùzi*	*téng*
1SG	stomach	ache

'I have stomach-ache.'

b. 她瘦瘦的，高高的，头发长长的。

tā	*shòu~shòu*	*de,*	*gāo~gāo*	*de,*	*tóufa*	*cháng~cháng*	*de*
3SG.F	thin~thin	SP	tall~tall	SP	hair	long~long	SP

'She is very thin and tall, with long hair.'

c. 你昨天买的那张新地图，能不能借我用一下？

nǐ	*zuótiān*	*mǎi*	*de*	*nà*	*zhāng*	*xīn*	*dìtú,*
2SG	yesterday	buy	SP	that	CLF	new	map
néng bù néng		*jiè*	*wǒ*	*yòng*	*yī-xià*		
can NEG can		lend	1SG	use	a-bit		

'Can you lend me the new map you bought yesterday?'

Wu (2003b: 47; our emphasis) then observes:

"Sometimes the **receiver** of an action appears at the beginning of the sentence as the topic, while the **doer** does not appear. Thus, the voice seems to be passive. But in this kind of sentence, there is usually no indication of **subject / doer** of the action […] this kind of sentence also indicates the relation of the topic to its comment."

Differently from what claimed earlier, Wu equates the subject with the agent 'doer', and not with the sentence-initial NP. Accordingly, in (22) he analyses the underlined element as a topic, but not as a subject, since it is not the agent.

(22) 早饭吃了吗？

zǎofàn	*chī-le*	*ma?*
breakfast	eat-PFV	Q

'Have you eaten breakfast?'

A reference grammar for instructors which clearly sets apart subject-prominent and topic-promient languages is Lü (2014). The text first states that the relation between subject and predicate in Chinese is very loose (Lü 2014: 5) if compared to Indo-European languages, where the notion of subject is crucial and the subject-predicate relation is strictly regulated. Lü further adds that Chinese, as a topic-prominent language, always places the topic of the discourse first (2014: 6, 103). Later on, however, she seems to mix up topic and subject, failing to provide a clear definition and a criterion to distinguish the two. Specifically, she states that the subject-predicate relationship, while quite straightforward in Indo-European languages, is rather complex in Chinese: in addition to agent and patient, the subject can also be an expression of time and place, an instrument, a means, or a cause, as in the examples below (Lü 2014: 6):[5]

(23) a. 明天考试。(time-action)
míngtiān *kǎoshì*
tomorrow exam
'The exam is tomorrow.'

b. 花瓶里插着一支玫瑰。(place-action)
huāpíng-lǐ *chā-zhe* *yī* *zhī* *méigui*
vase-in insert-DUR one CLF rose
'There is a rose in the vase.'

c. 玻璃杯喝咖啡。(instrument-action)
bōlí bēi *hē* *kāfēi*
glass cup drink coffee
'The glass cup is for drinking coffee.'

d. 针灸治腰腿疼。(means-action)
zhēnjiǔ *zhì* *yāo-tuǐ* *téng*
acupuntcture.moxibustion treat hips-legs pain
'Acupunture and moxibustion treat hips and legs pain.'

e. 暴雨淹了稻田。(cause-action)
bàoyǔ *yān-le* *dào-tián* .
rainstorm flood-PFV paddy-field
'The rainstorm flooded the paddy field.'

The two notions are confused again later on in the discussion of sentence structure and word order (2014: 103). First, it is stated that Chinese sentences are made up by at least a subject,

[5] Note, however, that subjects like those in (23d) and (23e) are possible in languages like English or Italian as well (see the translations provided).

i.e., the first sentential element (positional definition), and a predicate. The text also suggests to introduce first the relative order of subject and predicate, and then the relations between them. Then, it stresses that the basic sentence structure in Chinese is topic-comment (rather than subject-predicate). Citing Ma (1991), Lü points out that Chinese nouns/pronouns are often subjects, because the topic of a discussion is a person or a thing, and that subjects can also consist of time expressions, place words, and even verbs and adjectives, as even an action or a property can act as the "topic" (Lü 2014: 103). Once again, the two notions overlap. Finally, Lü focusses on topic-comment structures (*huàtíjù*), stating that the term indicates structures where the first element is a topic, i.e. an agent, instrument or any other known information, while the remaining part is what is said about the topic. She then illustrates different kinds of topic-comment sentences and observes that in most cases the first element is in fact the object (see e.g. ex. 22).

4.3. *Interim summary*

To sum up, the term 主语 *zhǔyǔ* in Chinese seems to be often understood as 'topic' rather than as '(grammatical) subject'. Most of the Chinese texts examined do not distinguish clearly between subject and topic, as the former is defined as any element at the beginning of the sentence (Chao 1968). Italian-language materials, too, often follow the 'Chinese model': 'subject' is defined either positionally (sentence-initial element) or semantically (the entity performing the action), although neither identifies the grammatical subject (see 3.1).
Works which introduce both notions fail to provide a rigorous definition and criteria to distinguish them. Even in Abbiati (1999), where 'subject', 'topic', 'predicate' and 'comment' are explicitly set apart and analysed, a clear definition of 'subject' and criteria for identifying it in the sentence are lacking, and even contradictory, to some extent. Similarly, Ross & Ma's (2006) grammar provides definitions of 'subject' and 'topic' which mostly overlap; Yip & Rimmington (2006), on the other hand, seem to rely on semantic roles (subject ≈ agent or recipient) and on information status (definiteness), and also introduce a distinction between verbal and adjectival predication which has no parallel in the literature examined (or elsewhere, to the best of our knowledge). Thus, if criteria are spelled out, they are mostly inconsistent, or have limited potential for application in teaching practices, thus being possibly confusing for the language learner.

5. Implications for CSL/CFL teaching

Learners whose L1 is a European language, like Italian or English, are accustomed to analysing sentences in terms of grammatical subject, verb and object, and are not very familiar with the notions of topic and comment, as proven by recurrent deviant features in their L2 Chinese (§2.2). However, as discussed throughout this paper, it is not possible in Chinese to identify subjects using overt markers, such as agreement, case, etc., which are the criteria Italian- and English-L1 learners are used to. Positional criteria seem to pose several problems, as information status, rather than syntactic structure, plays a significant role in argument placement. Besides, we have shown that the notion of subject is controversial in Chinese, and that what is identified as 'subject' often coincides with what would perhaps be

termed ‘topic’ or ‘agent’/‘actor’. However, neither of those criteria actually covers all Chinese sentence types, thus leading to the inconsistencies highlighted in §3: in the examined teaching materials, such inconsistencies are often resolved by resorting to divergent definitions for the same notion, depending on the sentence/context. Generally, the impression one gets from the analysis of learning materials is that attempts to ‘impose’ the notion of subject on the description of Chinese lead to inconsistencies in the treatment and presentation of sentence structure.

In actual language learning, though, students need to receive instructions as clear as possible; since the notion of grammatical subject cannot be easily applied to Chinese syntax, and since many (if not most) students are not familiar with the notion of topic, an effective compromise could be to define the notion of subject as the ‘logical’ subject (i.e. the entity who/which performs the action, or about whom/which the sentence is about, in short, the ‘actor’), specifying that, in many cases, it may (but need not) overlap with the definition of topic. Such a notion would need to be carefully contextualised in locative inversions and argument alternations in general, including the *bǎ* and *bèi* constructions. It should also be made clear how this definition of subject differs to the one students are used to (i.e., the grammatical subject). Furthermore, it is in our opinion crucial, especially at early acquisitional stages, to clearly define and explain the notion of topic and its function in the organisation of the sentence, stressing the topic-comment nature of the language (Lü 2014). Contrastive examples with students L1 (§2.1) should be used to highlight differences in sentential organisation between students’ L1 and L2, as well as cross-linguistic variation in the sensitivity word order displays towards information-structural and syntactic constraints. In addition, learners, especially those speaking a language with obligatory overt subjects (as English), should be explicitly told how and why arguments are often omitted in the Chinese sentence (i.e. that Chinese makes wide use of zero anaphora): this involves raising students’ awareness of the different means their L1 and L2 use to encode referentiality (i.e., a comparison between zero anaphora and weak anaphoric forms, e.g. pronouns).

Besides, other factors influencing word order, as e.g. the preference for given-new order, should be made explicit, and disentangled from the issue of subjecthood. In particular, a clear explanation needs to be provided with regard to the existence of different word order patterns and constructions to express the same propositional meaning (argument alternations, inversions, differential subject/object marking and so on). This will not only help students become familiar with those structures, but also allow them to use the correct pattern within specific contexts and communicational environments (e.g. by deviating from the unmarked word order to encode topicality, givenness or information status). Moreover, in the case e.g. of Italian-speaking learners, contrastive examples may help students recognise parallels between their own language and Chinese, such as the above-mentioned preference for given-new order, to facilitate positive L1 transfer (see Morbiato’s 2017 study mentioned earlier, §2.2). In fact, each of the problematic features of learner varieties of Chinese pointed out in the present paper, including e.g. the overuse of subject-predicate structures, base-generated topics, or ‘subjectless’ sentences, could (and, perhaps, should) become a focus for instructors, with specific teaching activities aimed at raising students’ awareness. It must be kept in mind, though, that there needs to be a graduality in CSL/CFL instruction: in this respect, specific cross-sectional/longitudinal studies need to be carried out, in order to evaluate at which stage

it is more appropriate and fruitful to draw the learners' attention to these points. As shown by the studies discussed so far, the 'errors' or deviant features of CSL/CFL learners connected to subjecthood, topichood and word order may (and typically do) vary at different levels of proficiency: in other words, the challenging aspects, say, for elementary-level students may not be the same as those for advanced students (as e.g. avoidance *vs.* overgeneralisation of a structure).

6. Conclusions

In this paper, we have first proposed an overview of the main issues related to the definition of 'subject' and 'topic' in Chinese, showing that topichood, together with information structure and semantic considerations, appear to be the main factors determining word order in the language. This is, however, fundamentally different from the situation in most languages of Europe: based on the existing literature, we have shown that English-speaking learners of Chinese apparently find these aspects of sentential organisation very challenging, and many deviant features in their learner varieties may be attributed to negative L1 transfer.
Our analysis of a sample of grammars and learning materials has revealed that, in this respect, students and instructors find limited support for CSL/CFL development in textbooks and grammars: the definitions of 'subject' and 'topic' analysed in the present survey are mostly unclear, and often even inconsistent and contradictory. Generally speaking, it seems that the attempted 'reconciliation' of the principles of Chinese sentence structure with notions familiar to speakers of European languages, especially 'subject' and 'object', leads to the above-mentioned inconsistencies, with dubious practical utility for the language learner (or instructor, for that matter).
We thus concluded our paper with some recommendations for textbook/grammar writers and language teachers. In a nutshell, while dropping the notion of 'subject' altogether might be too disorienting for speakers of a European language (or, anyway, of a language in which 'subjects' are a ubiquitous and easily identifiable constituent of the sentence), the fundamental topic-comment nature of Chinese should somehow be introduced, perhaps by resorting to a compromise notion of 'logical' subject for the purposes of illustration. Particular attention should be devoted to the notions of topic and comment, which are comparatively less familiar to students whose L1 is English or Italian, and emphasis should be given to patterns shared by their L1 and L2. Then, when appropriate, the other principles conditioning word order in Chinese should be introduced (e.g. given-new), as well as the peculiar (from the point of view of the languages of Europe) treatment of arguments (e.g. frequent zero-anaphora), separating them from the issue of subjecthood. Studies (both cross-sectional and longitudinal) on CSL/CFL learners with a specific design aimed at testing the effect of dedicated learning activities (focussed teaching, drills) on the development of these features could provide us with indications as to when (and how) introduce them. We leave this for further research.

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