

The Chronological Development and Syntactic Functions of the Copular Verb 是 (Shì) in the Chinese Language

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Abstract. This article is devoted to the chronological development of the copular verb 是 (shì) in the Chinese language and its functional features within modern syntax. The study examines the usage of 是 as a lexical unit in ancient Chinese written monuments, its gradual transformation into a copular verb during the Middle Chinese period, and its role in contemporary Putonghua as a central grammatical element ensuring the relation between subject and predicate. Furthermore, the article highlights, through illustrative examples, the application of 是 in nominal, adjectival, and other types of sentences, analyzing step by step its semantic and syntactic transformation.

Key words: copular verb shì (是); chronological development; Chinese syntax; grammatical transformation; nominal predicate sentence; adjectival predicate sentence; semantic-functional features.

Introduction

One of the most frequently referenced theories regarding the development of *shì* (是) was advanced by Wang, who argued that the copular verb *shì* derived from the demonstrative pronoun *shì*. This view is supported by classical examples such as **富与贵是人之所欲也** (*fù yǔ guì shì rén zhī suǒ yù yě* – “Wealth and high rank are what people desire”) and **如弃德不让，是废先君之举也** (*rú qì dé bù ràng, shì fèi xiān jūn zhī jǔ yě* – “If one abandons virtue and refuses to yield, this amounts to abolishing the practices of the former ruler”), which illustrate the transitional use of *shì* from a deictic element toward its later grammaticalization as a copular verb.

Hong opposes Wang’s theory and argues that *shì* (是) initially functioned as a particle of affirmation used to confirm the interlocutor’s statement. For example¹: 曰：是鲁孔丘与？曰：是也 (*yuē: shì lǔ kǒngqiū yú? yuē: shì yě*) – “He asked: ‘Is this Kong Qiu of Lu?’ He replied: ‘Yes, it is.’” As mentioned above, the *Analects* further support Hong’s view that the copular verb *shì* developed from this affirmative usage, with its employment as a copula arising as an additional functional extension. Given that *fēi* (非, “false/incorrect”) and *shì* (是, “true/correct”) expressed opposing semantic values, the nominalized form of *fēi* came to be used in contexts of negation, while *shì*, by contrast, was increasingly employed in a complementary role to convey affirm.

According to Yen’s theory², the development of *shì* (是) can be analyzed as a parallel semantic shift: *fēi* (非, “false/incorrect”) versus *shì* (是, “true/correct”), corresponding to *fēi* (“no/negation”) versus *shì* (“yes/affirmation”), where *Y* denotes the affirmative marker. This view is

¹ 洪诚. 论南北朝以前汉语中的系词.“语言研究”第2期. 1958. – P 1-22.

² 颜祥霖. The origin of the *shi* in Chinese // Journal of Chinese Linguistics 14.2. –1986. –P.227–241.

illustrated in the following passages: **如以鬼非死人，則其信杜伯非也** (*rú yǐ guǐ fēi sǐ rén, zé qí xìn dùbó fēi yě*) – “If they believe that ghosts are not dead people, then their faith in the story of Du Bo is mistaken”; and **如以鬼是死人，則其薄葬非也** (*rú yǐ guǐ shì sǐ rén, zé qí bó zàng fēi yě*) – “If they believe that ghosts are dead people, then their defense of simple burial rites is unfounded” (*Lunheng*, ca. 100 CE). These examples demonstrate how *shì*, in contrast to *fēi*, gradually evolved into a marker of affirmation and subsequently acquired its copular function through semantic reanalysis.

These examples clearly demonstrate that *fēi* (非) and *shì* (是) are employed in the same context as semantic opposites. This opposition provides evidence of the functional relationship between *fēi* as a marker of negation and *shì* as a marker of affirmation.

According to Yen, the usage of *fēi* (非) was later replaced by *bùshì* (不是), in which *bù* (不) functions as a marker of negation while *shì* (是) serves as a marker of affirmation. The substitution of *fēi* with *bùshì* played a decisive role in the grammaticalization of *shì* as a copular verb. The earliest attested use of *bùshì* is found in the *Zuozhuan* (ca. 500 BCE), where it appears in the construction **不是過** (*bù shì guò*), negating a nominal predicate. In this case, *shì* functions as a deictic element followed by a noun: **文王所以造周不是過也** (*wén wáng suǒ yǐ zào zhōu bù shì guò yě*) – “It was not an error that King Wen used this to establish the Zhou state” (*Zuozhuan*, ca. 500 BCE)

Feng identifies problematic aspects in Wang’s theory and argues that the most critical issue lies in the following: if constructions such as **仲尼日月也** (*zhòng ní rì yuè yě* – “Zhongni is [like] the sun and the moon”) and **如弃德不让，是废先君之举也** (*rú jǔ dé bù ràng, shì fèi xiān jūn zhī jǔ yě* – “If one abandons virtue and refuses to yield, this amounts to abolishing the practices of the former ruler”) did not involve the copular element, there would be no means by which *shì* could function to establish the syntactic relation between subject and predicate. Feng further contends that it is precisely through the grammaticalization of *shì* into a copula that the original demonstrative pronoun shifted its position from topic to the predicate slot, thereby acquiring the capacity to serve as a linking verb.

Feng emphasizes that in Old Chinese there was an obligatory pause occurring between subject and predicate³. Similarly, in topic–comment structures, a mandatory pause appeared between the topic clause and the comment clause. Consequently, intervening elements could emerge either between subject and predicate or between the topicalized clause and the explanatory clause. According to Feng, this structural feature facilitated the reanalysis of *shì* (是) from a demonstrative pronoun into a copular verb: as the lexical category of *shì* shifted from noun to verb, its original emphatic function as a demonstrative weakened due to the disappearance of the need for a pause, while the confusion between *shì* as an inserted particle and the prosodic pause itself accelerated its grammaticalization. Thus, *shì* was reformed as a copula precisely at the point where the obligatory pause was lost.

However, the application of Feng’s theory also presents significant challenges. First, it is difficult to establish with certainty the existence of prosodic pauses in Old Chinese, since modern researchers lack any direct phonetic or audio evidence from that period. Second, the weakening of the emphatic function of the demonstrative pronoun due to the supposed disappearance of such pauses does not necessarily entail its transformation into a verb. Moreover, the assumption that clitics could merge with pauses to produce verbalization is problematic, as Old Chinese clitics consistently appeared before the predicate, whether the predicate was nominal or verbal, and their position had distinct syntactic significance.

³ 冯春田. 看关系是的问题. 山东: 山东教育出版社. 1992. – 页 145.

Shi and Li argue that the copular verb *shì* (是), which originated from a demonstrative pronoun, underwent a process of analogy through modeling on transitive verbs in Old Chinese⁴. They emphasize that, at a certain stage in the language, the overall structural features of the system facilitated grammaticalization through analogy, leading to the emergence of a relatively standardized word order. Within this frequently occurring morphosyntactic context, *shì* was reshaped in accordance with the pattern of transitive verbs. At the same time, it is evident that in Modern Chinese the copula *shì* differs syntactically in certain respects from ordinary verbs, underscoring the unique trajectory of its grammatical development.

Lü defines the copular verb *shì* (是) without emphasizing its verbal concord, stressing instead its primary functions of linking, affirmation, and judgment. Building on Wang's view, he argues that *shì* follows elements that form the predicate of the sentence. In contrast, Chinese linguists such as Ding and Zhu⁵ regard *shì* as a transitive verb that governs a complement, thus interpreting its syntactic behavior within the framework of verb–object constructions rather than purely copular structures.

According to Zhu, when *shì* (是) co-occurs with a complement, it may be either nominalized or linked to a verb. When *shì* takes a nominal complement, it is pronounced in a neutral tone and indicates a relation of equivalence or class membership between the subject and the complement. When the complement is verbal, *shì* typically conveys contrast; in such cases it is also neutral in tone, but when stressed phonetically, it expresses affirmation. Chao further notes that although *shì* appears in constructions where its complement is verbalized, it differs fundamentally from other verbs. For instance, in examples such as: a. **他是了学生** (*tā shìle xuéshēng*, “He is a student”); b. **他没(有)是学生** (*tā méi(yǒu) shì xuéshēng*, “He is not a student”); c. **他有没有是学生？** (*tā yǒu méiyǒu shì xuéshēng*, “Is he a student?”); d. **他是一是学生** (*tā shì yī shì xuéshēng*, “He is one student”); e. **他是三次学生** (*tā shì sāncì xuéshēng*, “He is a student three times”); f. **他是一天学生** (*tā shì yītiān xuéshēng*, “He is a student for one day”); g. **他是学生的** (*tā shì xuéshēng de*, “He belongs to the category of students”); and h. **他(是的)学生** (*tā (shì de) xuéshēng*, “He is indeed a student”), unlike ordinary verbs, *shì* does not encode aspectual distinctions. On this basis, the negative construction **他没(有)是学生** cannot be interpreted as an instance of aspectual negation (*méi(yǒu)*), but rather as a structural negation of the copular relation itself.

Moreover, the construction *yǒuméiyǒu* (有没有) cannot be employed in affirmative interrogative sentences with *shì* (是). At the same time, the copula *shì* differs from other verbs in that it cannot undergo derivational processes and does not encompass iterative or durative meanings in the way that complements sometimes do. Ultimately, *shì* neither nominalizes nor allows for comparative derivation. Nevertheless, *shì* does share certain properties with other verbs: like them, it can appear with neutral negation and can occur within interrogative complement clauses. From a morphological perspective, although Modern Chinese belongs to the category of inflectional languages, it still contains a number of non-inflecting verbs whose syntactic behavior resembles that of *shì*. For example, the existential verb *zài* (在, “to exist/be at a place”) and cognitive verbs such as *sī* (思, “to think”) display comparable properties. This can be observed in forms such as **他不是学生** (*tā bùshì xuéshēng*, “He is not a student”) and **他是不是学生** (*tā shì bùshì xuéshēng*, “Is he a student or not?”), where *shì* patterns analogously to other verbs while retaining its distinctive copular function.

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⁴ 石毓智, 李讷. 汉语语法化的历程. 北京: 北京大学出版社, 2001. – 页 105.

⁵ 朱德熙. 语法讲义. 北京: 商务印馆出版, 1982. – 页 115-117.

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