

Lesson 4

The Modifier 所 and Nominalized Verbs

Consider an action:

John went to the store.

Where is the emphasis in this sentence? What is the most important information being conveyed? Consider the various ways to change the stress:

John (not Robert) went to the store.

John ***went*** to the store (but they didn't have what you wanted).

John went to the ***store*** (not to the movies).

All languages need ways of controlling the placement of emphasis in telling a story. Literary Chinese has several direct and powerful grammatical structures that allow very precise control of how one talks about an action. One of these is the important modifier 所, which refers to the objects of verbs. Another structure is **nominalization**, which allows one to *talk about actions*.

The Character 所

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to understanding how 所 works is our “commonsense” view of how words refer to things. What, for example, does the English word “tree” bring to mind? The shape, smell, and growing pattern of pine trees differ from those of apple trees and ma-

ples. Given the many different types of trees, how does “tree” mean anything at all? Yet we know what a tree is when we see one. “Tree” refers both to a set of attributes we associate with trees and to a set of “things” we have seen and have learned to think of as trees. Based on these two sets of information, if we encounter a plant we have never seen before, we can make a judgment—“Yes, this is a tree,” or “No, it is not.” The judgment may not be right from a biologist’s perspective, and we may be forced to revise our sense of what plants belong to the category “tree.” As this example shows, understanding even a seemingly simple word like “tree” involves complex processes of abstraction and comparison. Words are labels for what we might call “differential sets”: sets of objects and attributes marked by their difference from other sets of objects and attributes. *All* words are complex, even if most of the time the inner machinery of human language processing hides this complexity from us.

所, like all other words, is a label. It is the label that allows us to refer to *a set of objects selected simply for their role as objects of verbs*. Why would one want to refer to such a “thing.” Consider the following examples:

1. 李子往市。 Master Lǐ went to the market.
2. 李子所往，市也。 Where Master Lǐ went was the market.
3. 李子所往，何也。 Where was it that Master Lǐ went?
4. 吾不知李子所往。 I do not know where Master Lǐ went.

In the first version of the sentence, we cannot know where the emphasis should be placed. In the second sentence, however, the V-O pair has been split apart, and the **verb**, the action of going, has been *shifted into the topic*. All that remains in the comment is what **had been the object**—“market.” The character 所 makes possible this shift to talking about the object of a verb. Notice that in the third and fourth sentences one can refer to an object of a verb even when one does not know what the actual object is. Consider another sentence of the general form:

5. 我食 X。 I eat X. (X is the **object**)
6. X，我所食也。 X = “what I eat” (X is moved to the **topic position**)

Anywhere you might want to use the variable X (Object_{Eat}), you can use 所食:

7. 我所食使我肚疾。 *Something I ate* upset my stomach.
8. 我不知我所食者何物。 I don't know *what I ate*.
9. 人無所食也。 People were without *anything to eat*.

Nominalization of Verbs

Sometimes, instead of wishing to refer to an *object* of the verb, one wants to point to an *action* in its entirety:

10. 往市已晚矣 It is already late for *going to the market*.
11. 忘往市 He forgot *to go to the market*.
12. 往市者吾弟也 *The one who went to the market* was my brother.

The simplest way to nominalize a verb is to use it as the topic of a sentence (10) or the object of another verb (11). Such a change in function can be implicit, unmarked by any grammatical particle, or one can use the explicit **nominalizing function word** 者, to clearly mark the nominal usage, as in (12). Note that verb + 者 can refer to the action of the verb, the fact of that action, or to the person who performs the action.

Text: 刻舟求劍 (呂氏春秋)

1. 楚人有涉江者，
2. 其劍自舟中墜於水。
3. 遽契其舟，曰是吾劍之所從墜。
4. 舟止，從其所契者入水求之。
5. 舟已行矣，而劍不行。
6. 求劍若此，不亦惑乎。

Vocabulary

刻	kè (v), to cut	所	suǒ (adj), [points to object]
舟	zhōu (n), boat	從	cóng (cv), to follow
求	qiú (v), to seek	止	zhǐ (v), to stop
劍	jiàn (n), sword	入	rù (v), to enter
呂氏春秋	Lǚ shì Chūnqiū (n), a book written by Lǚ Bùwéi 呂不韋 in the late Warring States period.	水	shuǐ (n), water
楚	Chǔ (n), an early Chinese state	之	zhī (n), him, her, them, it
涉	shè (v), to cross	已	yǐ (v), to bring to an end > (adv), already
江	jiāng (n), river	行	xíng (v), to travel
自	zì (cv), to come from	矣	yǐ (fw), [final: change of state]
墜	zhuì (v), to fall	若	ruò (v), to resemble
於	yú (fw) [locative marker]	此	cǐ (n), this
*遽	jù (v), to be swift > swiftly	不亦 X 乎	bú yì X hū, "Is it not X!"
契	qì (v), to cut, carve	惑	huò (v), to be confused, deluded, misguided
是	shì (n), this	乎	hū (fw) [final: "!" or "?"]
吾	wú (n), I, me		

Grammatical Notes

1. 有涉江者 The character 者 nominalizes the phrase 涉江. It is perhaps best to take 者 in the way suggested by its usual translation into Japanese, that is, as *mono*, or "thing." That is, 者 is a **noun** that is **modified** by the phrase 涉江 and functions as the **object** of 有.

2. 自舟中 Here the character 自 is a **coverb**. Its object is 舟中, “[the place] in the boat.” Remember that 中 is a **noun**. The main verb here is 墜.

3. 墜於水 The character 於 explicitly marks **locative objects** (or, more generally, **locative case**) in literary Chinese. Like 而, the explicit marker of verb coordination, 於 is not *required*: in 入水 (line 4), for example, 水 “water” is the locative object of 入 “enter.” Authors use 於 (or 于 or 乎) either to avoid ambiguity or for stylistic or rhetorical reasons.

4. 所從墜 Coverbs take objects. A variation on the usual pattern for 所 + verb allows one to talk about the *object of a coverb*. That is, if we have an initial phrase:

從 X 墜。

[It] fell from X.

Then we can talk about the object X:

X 者，所從墜也。

X is the place from which [it] fell.

The traveler, then, is explaining what is so important about the place he has just marked: “This is the place from which my sword fell.” This pattern of 所 + coverb + main verb is in fact common. See the exercises below.

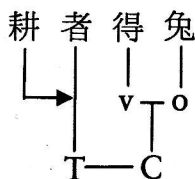
5. 求劍若此 The structure here is **topic** (求劍)—**comment** (若此). In turn, the whole four-character phrase is the topic of the comment 不亦惑乎. Note that the **verb-object** pair 求劍 becomes implicitly nominalized.

Questions

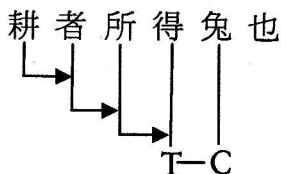
1. What is the function of 之 in (3)?
2. What is the relation of 入水 to 求之 in (4)?
3. What is the function of 而 in (5)? How would you translate it?
4. What is the larger point of this parable? One account describes the river crosser as 固執不知變通. Does this description seem appropriate? What are the political implications of this story?

Exercises

- A. Diagram the following sentences. In each case, explain the relationship between the sentences in the group. For example,



In this sentence, 兔 is the **object** of the verb 得. (耕 modifies 者, and the phrase 耕者 is the topic, about which 得兔 is the comment.)



The **object** of the verb has now become the **comment**. Instead of the verb-object pair sharing the stress, the single word 兔 is now alone in the comment position.

1. For *direct objects*

- a. 涉江者求劍。

劍者，涉江者所求也。

求者已行而所求不行。

- b. 耕者守株。

耕者之所守，株也。

c. 宋人笑守株之耕者。

守株之耕者，宋人所笑也。

d. 其子言盜必至。

鄰人之父亦言盜必至。

以其子所言爲可貴。[Note: 以 A 爲 B = "takes A to be B."]

以鄰人之父所言爲可疑。

其家疑鄰人之父。

鄰人之父，其家所疑也。

2. For locative objects

a. 兔行田中。

兔所行，富人之田也。

b. 盜至。

盜至於壞牆。

盜所至者，壞牆也。

盜所至之牆，已壞矣。

3. With *coverbs*

a. 劍從舟墜於水。

劍之所從墜於水者，舟也。

楚人刻舟。

楚人刻其劍之所從墜於水者。

- b. 宋人以耒耕田。

宋人所以耕田者，耒也。

- B. Change the following sentences so that the **object of the verb** becomes the **comment**:

Example: 其家疑鄰人之父 → 其家所疑，鄰人之父也

- a. 富人亡其財。
- b. 耕者待兔。
- c. 宋人笑其守株待兔。
- d. 盜出於窗。

- C. Change the following sentences so that the **object of the coverb** becomes the **comment**:

Example: 盜以劍殺人 → 盜所以殺人，劍也

- 1. 盜從山中至。
- 2. 王以政殺民。
- 3. 以其所言疑之。