

Lesson 8

Embedded Sentences

The goal of the introductory chapters of this textbook is to stress how authors writing in literary Chinese create ever more complex sentences from the simple building blocks of *topic-comment*, *verb-object*, *modifier-modified* (subordinate), and *coordinate* grammatical pairings. We have seen the importance of the technique of controlling emphasis through topicalization. We also have seen the various sorts of nominalizations that allow one to create larger, nested grammatical units.

A final key feature in the creation of complex sentences in literary Chinese is the *embedded sentence*. What is an embedded sentence? A sentence is *embedded* when a sentence replaces a noun in a grammatical structure. For example:

1. "Mary has the measles."
2. "I know that."
3. "I know Mary has the measles."

In the second sentence, "that", a noun, is the object of "know." The third sentence then replaces the "that" with the *entire first sentence*, which is now the object of "know." Therefore, in the third sentence, "Mary has the measles" is an *embedded sentence* and the object of "know." If one wanted to mark the sentence explicitly as embedded, one could rewrite (3) as:

4. "I know *that* Mary has the measles."

The phrase “that Mary has the measles” is the “completed form” of the embedded sentence: this *completed form* can be used in many situations:

5. “That Mary has the measles is a shame.”

but not

- *6. ~~“Mary has the measles is a shame.”~~

The point is that there are specific rules in English for indicating and using embedded sentences. The same is true in literary Chinese, but the rules are different.

7. 劍入水。
8. 見之。
9. 見劍入水。

and, to use the completed form:

10. 見劍之入水。

The most common form of embedded sentence in literary Chinese is illustrated in sentence (10):

**topic* 之 **comment*

The asterisks serve as a reminder that in the completed form, what had been the topic of the sentence is now a *modifier* and the comment is now the *head* of the noun phrase. Note that

- a. the 之 is optional; and
- b. if the topic is well understood, then **topic* + 之 is replaced by 其.

Text: 揠苗(孟子)

敢問何謂浩然之氣。

曰難言也。其爲氣也，至大至剛。以直養而無害，則塞於天地之間。其爲氣也，配義與道。無是，餒也。是集義所生者，非義襲而取之也。行有不慊於心，則餒矣。我故曰告子未嘗知義，以其外之也。必有事焉而勿正，心勿忘，勿助長也。無若宋人然。

1. 宋人有閔其苗之不長而揠之者。
2. 芒芒然歸，謂其人曰，今日病矣。予助苗長矣。
3. 其子趨而往視之。苗則槁矣。
4. 天下之不助苗長者寡矣。
5. 以爲無益而舍之者，不耘苗者也。
6. 助之長者，揠苗者也。
7. 非徒無益，而又害之。

Vocabulary

揠	yà (v), to pull	養	yǎng (v), to nourish
苗	miáo (n), sprouts	塞	sè (v), to block, fill up
孟子	Mèng Zǐ, the Confucian philosopher Mencius	配	pèi (v), to be a match for, equal
敢	gǎn (v), to dare to	義	yì (n), righteousness
謂	wèi (v), to refer to	道	dào (n), road > the Way
浩然	hàorán (v), to be vast, expansive	餒	něi (v), to be famished
氣	qì (n), breath, pneuma	集	jí (v), to gather together
難	nán (v), to be difficult > to be difficult to . . .	襲	xí (v), to win by luck (military term)
至	zhì (v), to arrive > (adv) the most	取	qǔ (v), to take, grasp in hand
剛	gāng (v), to be hard	行	xìng (n), deportment, what one does
直	zhí (v), to be direct, straight > (n) direct straightness	慊	qiàn (v), to resent; 不慊 > to be dissatisfied
		心	xīn (n), heart/mind

告子	Gào Zǐ, a Confucian philosopher, rival to Mencius	病	bìng (v), to be sick, weary
嘗	cháng (v), to try out > (adv), once (had the experience of)	予	yú (n), I, me
未嘗	wèi cháng (adv), not yet once	助	zhù (v), to help
外	wài (n), the outside > (v), take to be outside	趨	qū (v), to rush
勿	wù, thought to be a fusion of 毋之, "Don't . . . it."	往	wǎng (v), to go to
正	zhèng (v), to stand straight > to set straight	視	shì (v), to see, look at
若	ruò (v), to resemble, be like	槁	gǎo (v), to wither, dry out
閔	mǐn (v), to pity	天下	tiān xià, all under heaven > the realm
長	cháng (v), to be long > zhǎng (v), grow long	寡	guǎ (v), to be few
芒芒然	máng máng rán (v), to be weary	以 . . . 爲	yǐ wéi (v), to take to be, make
然	rán (v), to be like this > (fw), in a . . . manner	益	yì (v), to increase > to benefit
歸	guī (v), to return	舍	shě (v), to set aside, reject 捨
謂	wèi (v), to address, to speak to	耘	yún (v), to weed
今	jīn (n), now	非徒	fēi tú, not only
日	rì (n), sun > day	非	fēi (v), not [of the class . . .]
		徒	tú (v), to be in vain > (fw), only
		又	yòu (adv), again
		害	hài (v), to harm

Notes on the Text

1. 敢問.... The initial, unnumbered text is the context in 孟子 in which this well-known story appears. This discussion of 浩然之氣 in fact is *more* famous than the story of the pulling on the sprouts.

2. 閔其苗之不長而揠之 The entire section is a long nominalized phrase (see note 8 below) that serves as the object of 有. Moreover, within this nominalized phrase is an embedded sentence of the form *topic 之 comment*:

其苗之不長 his sprouts' not growing

The original form of the sentence is:

其苗不長 His sprouts do not grow.

3. 芒芒然 This is a typical descriptive adverbial construction: X 然 + *verb*.

4. 今日病矣 Note the use of 矣 here. As we have seen before, it conveys the sense that the preceding statement is new information to which the listener ought to pay attention. It has both the sense of a change of state and a slight emphatic quality.

5. 助苗長 This is a *pivoting verb* construction. *He* helps the sprouts, but it is the *sprouts* themselves that grow. 苗 is a *pivot*, which grammatically remains an *object*. Note the phrase 助之長 in (6), where the pronoun 之 has replaced 苗.

6. 趨而往視之 There are three coordinate verbs in this phrase: 趨, 往, and 視. The question, then, is why is the 而 between 趨 and 往? How does the sentence differ from

6'. 趨往而視之

The emphasis in both sentences is on the half *after* the 而. In the first version, Mencius stresses that the sons *went to see*, whereas in (6') the emphasis is focused more narrowly on the final result, their looking at the sprouts. The *fronting* of the verb 趨 *de-emphasizes* it—indeed it becomes all but reduced to a simple modifier—and is the verbal parallel to topicalization.

7. 苗則槁矣 The particle 則 is a strong rhetorical *marker of the topic* as an *exposed* element. There is no real doubt that “sprouts” is the topic here, but the 則, by separating the topic off in an exposed position, marks it for emphasis: “As for the *sprouts* . . .” Yes, what about them? “Well, they *had already dried out*.”

8. 天下之不助苗長者寡矣 All embedded verbal sentences are necessarily *nominalized* because they replace a noun and therefore occupy a noun slot, but not all nominalized verbs are parts of embedded sentences. Although the phrase 天下之不助苗長 in this example *looks* like an embedded sentence, “All-under-heaven’s not helping the sprouts grow,” the sentence refers to a complete situation—an actor doing an action—that would be too restrictive in its reference. Instead, the nominalized verb construction allows one to refer either to any *person* who performs the action (anyone who doesn’t help) or to the *action* itself ([instances of] not helping). Moreover, it is relatively rare for complete sentences to modify the abstract noun 者.

9. 舍 In the development of Chinese characters, radicals were frequently added at some later point to distinguish different uses of the same character, which often had different pronunciations that reflected the difference in meaning. 舍 is one such character. Among frequently occurring characters, other examples are:

說 can be *shuō*, “to explain,” *shuì*, “to persuade”, or *yuè*, 悅, “to please”

知 can be *zhī*, “to know”, or *zhì*, 智, “to be wise or shrewd”

A particularly difficult problem arises in the phrase 養生 “nourish life.” It can also mean 養性 “to nourish one’s nature.” In early writings, it is not easy to tell from the text which alternative is meant.

10. 非徒 . . . 而又 This is a standard construction: when you see the first half, you should expect to find some variant of the second half soon.

Questions

1. What is the rhetorical function of the 而 in sentence (1)?
2. What is the grammatical relationship between 謂 and 曰 in (2)?
3. What is the grammatical function of 今日 in (2)?
4. What is the relationship between the two “sentences” in (2)? Are they coordinate?
5. Where is the division between topic and comment in (4)? What is the rhetorical effect?
6. What two verbs does 而 mark as coordinate in (5)?
7. Is (5) a verbal or nominal sentence? What about (6)?
8. To what does the 之 refer in (5)? in (6)? in (7)?

Exercises

1. Rewrite the following pairs of sentences as single sentences.

獸皆畏虎。虎不知之。

白獸見我。請觀之。

楚人之矛甚利。楚人譽之。

2. Find *two* embedded sentences in the previous lessons. Rewrite them as pairs of separate sentences.

a.

b.