

# Development of Multiple Interface Conditions in Adult L2 Acquisition of Chinese *shì...de* Cleft Construction

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## 1. Introduction

In recent research, the term *interface* has been used loosely but widely to refer to the point where a linguistic component joins another linguistic component or a non-linguistic one, as well as the linking or correspondence rules between them (Rothman and Slabakova 2011, White 2011: 578, Sorace 2011: 6). It is assumed that the interfaces are representational levels universal to human languages and thus do not need to be acquired. The correspondence rules, however, are language-specific and thus need to be learned (White 2011: 578, 9). Sorace and Filiaci (2006) propose that ‘narrow syntactic properties are completely acquirable in a second language, even though they may exhibit significant developmental delays, whereas interface properties involving syntax and another cognitive domain may not be fully acquirable’. This is termed the original/strong/broad version of the *Interface Hypothesis* (IH) in the literature. Later, in the updated version of the IH, Sorace (2011) argues that the IH does not predict the impossibility of resetting parameters or acquiring discourse properties. Instead of rigid dichotomies, it may be more appropriate to differentiate structures on a *gradient* according to the type of conditions they need to satisfy. She also suggests that in the case of multiple-interface structures, different kinds of interface conditions may pose different kinds of learnability challenges to bilingual speakers; research on these structures should aim to find out which of these conditions poses problems in bilingual development, and for what reason. The present study adopts the view of the updated version of the IH and investigates the development of multiple interface conditions of the Chinese *shì...de* cleft construction in adult second language (L2) acquisition by English native speakers.

## 2. The Chinese *shì...de* Cleft Construction

In Chinese linguistics, the grammar of the *shì...de* cleft construction has attracted much attention in the past decade (see also Simpson and Wu 2002, Yuan 2003, Xiong 2007, Cheng 2008, Paul and Whitman 2008, Hole 2011). Sentences (1) and (2) illustrate a canonical sentence and a corresponding *shì...de* cleft sentence in Mandarin Chinese respectively. Sentence (1) contains a canonical perfective marker *le* (i.e., verbal-final *le*, glossed as PERF), which is substituted by *shì...de* in (2). In *shì...de*, *shì* is the copula (glossed as COP), which is roughly equivalent to *be* in English, and *de* functions as an aspect marker marking the perfective aspect in this construction (glossed as DE to avoid confusion between *de* and *le*). In *shì...de* cleft sentences, *shì* always precedes the focus element and *de* follows the verb phrase. In terms of meaning, *shì...de* cleft sentences can convey *identificational focus* meanings (in the sense of É. Kiss 1998), very similar to those conveyed by English *it*-cleft sentences, hence the name ‘*shì...de* cleft construction’.

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## (1) canonical sentence

Mǎlì zuótiān qù le Měiguó.

Mary yesterday go PERF U.S.

Mary went to the U.S. yesterday.

(2) *shì...de* focus cleft

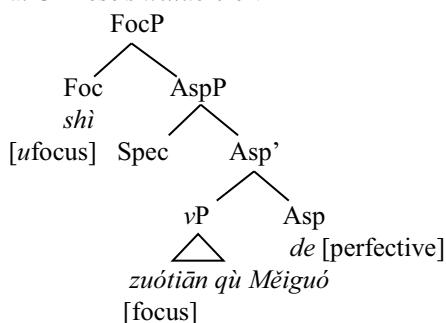
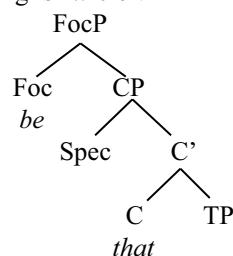
Mǎlì shì zuótiān qù Měiguó de.

Mary COP yesterday go U.S. DE

It was yesterday that Mary went to the U.S., (rather than any other day).

In spite of the fact that the Chinese *shì...de* cleft construction and the English *it*-cleft construction are translational counterparts and are often linked in L2 Chinese teaching materials, they differ from each other on many levels. On the syntactic level (Figure 1), *shì* heads a Focus Phrase (Lee 2005, Xiong 2007) and *de* heads an Aspect Phrase (following Simpson and Wu 2002, Shi 1994, Paul and Whitman 2008, Mai 2011, 2012). *Shì* does not trigger any focus movement in this structure. Rather, it checks its weak [*ufocus*] feature with the intended focus element carrying a matching interpretable [*focus*] feature by Agree (e.g. the temporal adjunct *zuótiān* (yesterday) can carry the [*focus*] feature). The Aspect Phrase headed by *de* is head-final, which yields the VP-*de* sequence in the surface structure<sup>1</sup>. In English, the copula heads FocP, but the complementiser *that* heads CP, rather than AspP.

Figure 1: syntactic structures of the Chinese and English cleft constructions

a. Chinese *shì...de* cleftb. English *it*-cleft

(Simpson and Wu 2002, Lee 2005, Xiong 2007, (É. Kiss 1998: 258, irrelevant details omitted) Paul and Whitman 2008, Mai 2011, 2012)

On the aspectual semantics level, the *shì...de* cleft construction is subject to a telic condition (Cheng 2008, Paul and Whitman 2008, Mai 2011, 2012). In common with other aspect markers in Mandarin Chinese, *de* is selective about the situation type of its complement. Atelic (especially stative) situations are unacceptable. Sentences (3) and (4) use a minimal pair to present the contrast. In (3), *de* selects *hěn shēngqì* (very angry), a stative VP, whereas in (4), *de* selects *dào* (to arrive), an achievement VP. The former is unacceptable because it violates the telic condition, whereas the latter is grammatical because the telic condition is respected. Note that the corresponding English *it*-cleft sentences are grammatical.

In addition to the telic condition, the *shì...de* cleft construction is subject to a complex interface condition involving knowledge from at least three different domains: syntax, semantics and general cognition (world knowledge). The condition is that the intended focus must not be the Affectee in the

<sup>1</sup> There is an alternative view that Chinese functional projections headed by *de*, regardless of their categorial identities, are consistently head-initial. According to Simpson and Wu (2002), because *de* bears a light tone and must attach to a phonologically strong constituent, it can trigger the movement of its complement to its specifier position to provide necessary phonological support, yielding the VP-*de* surface order. Nevertheless, whether the phrases headed by *de* is head-initial or head-final does not seem to matter in the current study, as this study does not investigate the acquisition of the head-direction of the *De* Phrase *per se*. Rather, we take the successful acquisition of the head-direction as a pre-requisite. See the experimental design for details.

event denoted by the  $\nu P$ ; in other words, the Affectee of the  $\nu P$  event constitutes part of the presupposition and thus must not bear the interpretable [focus] feature (Mai 2011, 2012). In this paper, the Affectee role is defined as the participant that undergoes change in the result of the  $\nu P$  event. Sentences (5) and (6), for instance, constitute a minimal pair. Both sentences focus on Xiao Li, the subject NP. They are different in that (6) contains an adverbial *zui xiān* (first), whereas (5) does not. This additional adverbial in (6) does not change the syntactic structure, but changes the event structure of the sentence. (5) denotes a simple event in which Xiao Li is the only participant and the Affectee. Focusing on Xiao Li violates the non-Affectee focus condition. In contrast, (6) denotes a complex event in which Xiao Li's appearing is merely the first sub-event among a number of sub-events. It is unclear whether Xiao Li's appearing is the cause of the subsequent sub-events, but our general cognitive knowledge tells us that what happens first cannot be the result. Therefore, Xiao Li in (6) is not in the resultative component of the  $\nu P$  event, and thus not the Affectee. The non-Affectee focus condition is therefore not violated. In order to recognise the difference in acceptability between these two sentences, one has to check what event role the focus element plays in the  $\nu P$  event. In other words, an active link between the *information structure* and the *event structure* has to be established. Again, this condition is irrelevant to the English *it*-clefts, in which the Affectee of the  $\nu P$  event is perfectly focalisable. The information structure in English *it*-clefts is directly mapped onto the syntactic structure: Spec FocP is the focus position, and the complement of FocP holds the presupposition (Rizzi 1997, É. Kiss 1998, 1999).

(3) \*[-telic] *shì...de*: (stative VPs)

\*Xiǎo Wáng shì zuótiān hěn shēngqì de.  
Xiao Wang COP yesterday very angry DE  
Intended: It was yesterday that Xiao Wang was very angry.

(4) [telic] *shì...de*: (achievement VPs)

Xiǎo Wáng shì zuótiān dào de.  
Xiao Wang COP yesterday arrive DE  
It was yesterday that Xiao Wang was arrived.

(5) \*Focusing on the Affectee NP

\*Shì Xiǎo Lǐ dào de.  
COP Xiao Li arrive DE  
Intended: It was Xiao Li who arrived.  
Event structure: [BECOME [*Xiao Li* <APPEARED>]]  
(simple event in which Xiao Li is the Affectee)

(6) Focusing on the non-Affectee NP

Shì Xiǎo Lǐ zuì xiān dào de.  
COP Xiao Li first arrive DE  
It was Xiao Li who arrived first.  
Event structure: [[BECOME [*Xiao Li* <APPEARED>]] [BECOME [*x* <APPEARED>]] ... [BECOME [*y* <APPEARED>]]]  
(complex event made up of multiple sub-events in which *y*, rather than Xiao Li, is the Affectee)

On the discourse level, the felicity of *shì...de* cleft sentences is subject to a discourse condition. That is, the event denoted by the VP in these sentences is necessarily known to the listener (i.e., semantic presupposition). In contrast, in canonical sentences marked with the canonical perfective marker *le* (another perfective aspect marker in the language), the event denoted by the VP is typically new information. In this paper, I use [+/- old event] to notate the contrast between these two perfective aspect markers: *de* bears a discourse [+old event] feature and *le* bears a complementary [-old event] feature. Sentence (7) represents a context in which the speaker first spells out the result of an event (i.e., Part A) and then continues to talk about the process of the same event (i.e., Part B). In this context, *shì...de* cleft sentences are more felicitous than *le*-sentences because by the time when Part B is

articulated, the VP event has already become old information, since it is spelt out in Part A. Sentence (8) represents a context in which the speaker talks about two sequential events (Part A and B), both of which are new to the listener. Therefore, the canonical *le*-sentence is very natural in Part B. The *shì...de* cleft sentence, on the other hand, is very odd, as the VP event (*nòng-huài nà tái diànnǎo* (break the computer), object elided) is neither spelt out in Part A, nor constitutes shared common knowledge. In English, the canonical past-tense sentence is no less felicitous than the *it*-cleft in context (7); it is even more natural than the *it*-cleft in context (8)<sup>2</sup>.

(7) Same-event context

- A. Xiǎo Zhāng bǎ nà tái diànnǎo nòng-huài le.  
Xiao Zhang BA that CL computer break PERF  
Xiao Zhang broke the computer.
- B. Tā shì zuótiān nòng-huài de./ #Tā zuótiān nòng-huài le.  
3SG SHI yesterday break DE. 3SG yesterday break PERF  
#It was yesterday that she broke it. She broke it yesterday.

(8) Different-event context

- A. Wǒ shàng gè xīngqī sòng le Xiǎo Zhāng yì tái diànnǎo.  
1SG last CL week give PERF Xiao Zhang one CL computer  
I gave Xiao Zhang a computer last week.
- B. #Tā shì zuótiān nòng-huài de./ Tā zuótiān nòng-huài le.  
3SG SHI yesterday break DE. 3SG yesterday break PERF  
#It was yesterday that she broke it. She broke it yesterday.

### 3. Empirical study

Cross-linguistic comparison has found that the Chinese *shì...de* cleft construction is subject to at least three interface conditions that are absent in the grammar of English *it*-cleft construction (the telic condition, the non-Affectee focus condition and the old-event condition). Given the cross-linguistic differences, the present study asks whether these interface conditions can be acquired by adult English-speaking learners of Mandarin Chinese, and whether they are acquired with similar ease or difficulty. The evidence was collected through a web-based linguistic experiment.

Table 1: Participants' background information

Groups	<i>n</i>	Mean age at time of testing (range)	Mean age of first exposure to Chinese (range)	Length of stay in China/Taiwan in months (range)	Mean score in the proficiency test (range)
Native	15	25.20 (23-30)	n/a	n/a	38.88 (36-40)
Advanced	19	23.26 (19-40)	18.53 (13-22)	11.26 (1-36)	31.79 (30-37)
Upper-intermediate	30	22.57 (19-37)	17.83 (11-24)	14.77 (0-84)	25.70 (20-29)
Lower-intermediate	27	21.96 (18-33)	18.74 (12-31)	7.33 (0-24)	14.63 (10-19)
Total	91				

The participants were 91 Chinese native speakers and adult English learners of Chinese. The control group consisted of fifteen Chinese speakers who were raised and educated in northern China. They were postgraduate students affiliated to a university in Beijing, China at the time of testing. The experimental groups had 76 adult L2 Chinese learners who were students or graduates of Chinese studies or Mandarin language courses in the U.K., U.S. and China. They did not have substantial

<sup>2</sup> Ten native speakers of British and American English were consulted about the felicity of the English sentences. They all suggested that the past tense canonical sentences were much more natural than the *it*-cleft sentences in both contexts.

exposure to any varieties of Chinese until the age of 11 or above. All of them took a short proficiency test (a 40-blank cloze test compatible with those used in Yuan 2010, Yuan and Zhao 2011), which placed them into four groups: natives, advanced, upper-intermediate and lower-intermediate. Table 1 presents the participants' background information.

The participants also took a semi-production sentence completion task which serves as the syntax screening procedure of this study (*à la* Rothman 2009, Slabakova *et al.* 2012). In this task, the participants had to build six *shì...de* cleft sentences in contexts using words or phrases given to them. The purpose was to screen out participants who had not mastered the basic structure of the *shì...de* cleft construction by the time of testing. Only those who demonstrated accuracy rates higher than 83% (5 out of 6 tokens) in the sentence completion task were included in the data analysis of the experimental tasks. As a result, 15 native speakers (100%), 18 advanced learners (95%), 23 upper-intermediate learners (77%) and 17 lower-intermediate learners (63%) passed the syntax screening.

Three experimental tasks were created to test three interface conditions. Two of them were Acceptability Judgement (AJ) tasks testing the telic condition and the non-Affectee focus condition. In the AJ tasks, the participants provided their judgements by choosing from one of the four options: completely unacceptable, probably unacceptable, probably acceptable, and completely acceptable. A separate *I don't know* option was also available. Each AJ task encompasses three types of sentences: one experimental type and two control types. The control sentences were included to ensure that the experimental sentences were correctly rejected due to violations to the target conditions, rather than any other grammatical or lexical reasons that are not being investigated in the present study. Each type of sentence had four parallel tokens. Table 2 summarises the sentence types in the AJ tasks, and sample tokens are illustrated in (3), (4), (5), (6), (9) and (10) respectively.

Table 2: Sentence types in the AJ tasks

	Experimental	Control A	Control B
The telic test	Type 1 (4 tokens): *[-telic] <i>shì...de</i> cleft, e.g. (3)	Type 2 (4 tokens): [telic] <i>shì...de</i> cleft, e.g. (4)	Type 3 (4 tokens): [-telic] canonical, e.g. (9)
The Affectee test	Type 4 (4 tokens): *Focusing on Affectee NP, e.g. (5)	Type 5 (4 tokens): Focusing on non-Affectee NP, e.g. (6)	Type 6 (4 tokens): Focusing on Time, e.g. (10)

(9) [-telic] canonical

Xiǎo Wáng zuótiān hěn shēngqì.

Xiao Wang yesterday very angry

Xiao Wang was very angry yesterday.

(10) Focusing on Time

Xiǎo Lǐ shì zuótiān dào de.

Xiao Li COP yesterday arrive DE

It was yesterday that Xiao Li arrived.

The third task was a Sentence Ranking (SR) task in which the participants ranked the felicity of paired-up *shì...de* cleft sentences and canonical *le*-sentences in two types of context, as presented earlier in (7) and (8). If the *shì...de* cleft construction is governed by the [+old event] condition in the L2 grammars, the adult L2 learners should be able to consistently rank *shì...de* cleft sentences higher than *le*-sentences in the same-event contexts (i.e., (7)) and show the reverse pattern in the different-event contexts (i.e., (8)). Each type of context had six tokens.

The AJ tasks and the SR task had 32 items in total<sup>3</sup>. These tasks were part of a dissertational project which contained another 108 items. To release the participants from the burden of repeating the

<sup>3</sup> Note that Type 2 and Type 6 sentences (illustrated in (4) and (10)) are identical. In other words, these four sentences served two purposes in the experiment, which explains why the total number of item is 32, rather than 36.

same cognitive task for an extended period of time, and to minimise the impact of participants' fatigue on the test results, the test items were divided into ten task blocks, all of which were counterbalanced for sentence types and the ratio of critical items (testing the grammar of *shì...de* clefts) to distractors (testing grammatical structures irrelevant to *shì...de* clefts). Critical items and distractors were mixed and randomised in each task block. The experiment was posted on a password-protected website and the participants were invited to log on the website and complete the tasks online. In order to prevent the participants from cross-checking test items or changing their answers, only one item was displayed on a webpage each time. The participants could press the *next* button to turn the page and see the next item. Once they had pressed the *next* button, they could not go back and change their answers. During the test, they were encouraged to take short breaks whenever necessary and resume the test when they felt refreshed. The participants were given unlimited time to complete the tasks. The actual task duration of the native group was about 20 minutes, and that of the experimental groups ranged from 40 minutes to 90 minutes including the breaks.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. The telic condition (Acceptability Judgement)

Table 3 shows the results of the Acceptability Judgement (AJ) task which tested the telic condition. The responses were converted to 1, 2, 3 and 4 respectively, and the *I don't know* responses were deleted and treated as system missing values. Before conducting further analysis, the participants were screened for acceptance of the control sentences. That is, participants who did not accept either type of the control sentence were not included in the data analysis. The *n* column shows the sample sizes after the screening. The numbers in the cells are the group means, and the percentages are the accuracy rates calculated based on the individual data<sup>4</sup>. T-tests were performed on the means of the experimental items (i.e., \*[-telic] *shì...de* items) and Control A items (i.e., [telic] *shì...de* items), as they are both *shì...de* cleft sentences and contain minimal differences (i.e., the VP). While the means of the L2 groups all fall within the indeterminate area of the acceptability scale (i.e., between 2 and 3), and the L2 groups' ratings for the ungrammatical \*[-telic] *shì...de* items are statistically higher than the monolinguals ( $p < 0.01$ ), all L2 groups treated the \*[-telic] *shì...de* sentences and the [telic] *shì...de* sentences statistically differently ( $p < \text{or} = 0.01$ , Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Tests), which suggests that all L2 groups were sensitive to the telic condition. Otherwise, these statistical differences should not have occurred. At the individual level, 71% advanced learners, 43% upper-intermediate learners and 10% lower-intermediate learners performed accurately. Overall, the data suggest that the adult L2 learners can become sensitive to the telic condition from the intermediate level, and this sensitivity increases with their L2 proficiency. This finding concurs with previous studies on the L2 acquisition of eventuality selection of aspect markers by English speakers (e.g. Jin 2004, 2009).

Table 3: The telic condition (AJ task)

Groups	<i>n</i>	Experimental *[-telic] <i>shì...de</i>	Control A [telic] <i>shì...de</i>	Control B [-telic] canonical	Accuracy rates
Native	15	1.68	3.92	3.97	93%
		└─── $p < 0.01$ ───┘			
Advanced	17	2.52 <sup>++</sup>	3.78	3.76	71%
		└─── $p < 0.01$ ───┘			
U-Intermediate	21	2.73 <sup>++</sup>	3.73	3.79	43%
		└─── $p < 0.01$ ───┘			
L-Intermediate	10	2.95 <sup>++</sup>	3.40	3.70	10%
		└─── $p = 0.01$ ───┘			
Total	63				

Notes: ‘<sup>+++</sup>’ indicates statistical differences from the monolinguals at 0.01 level.

<sup>4</sup> Participants who were able to rate the ungrammatical experimental type at least one point lower than the grammatical Control A type were considered performing accurately in this task.

#### 4.2. The non-Affectee focus condition (Acceptability Judgement)

The other AJ task testing the non-Affectee focus condition, however, yielded radically different results. Table 4 presents the data. The L2 learners incorrectly accepted the ungrammatical *shì...de* cleft sentences, and failed to make a distinction between the ungrammatical *shì...de* clefts and the grammatical ones. Crucially, the accuracy rates (given in parentheses in the table) are 0% across proficiency groups. In contrast, the native speakers' accuracy rate was 93%. Clearly this condition is consistently respected in the native grammar, but is completely absent among the L2 grammars throughout the intermediate and advanced level, which reveals a potential locus of representational deficit in the L2 grammar (representational account, Sorace 2011).

Table 4: The non-Affectee focus condition (AJ task)

Groups	<i>n</i>	Experimental *Affectee focus <i>shì...de</i>	Control A non-Affectee focus <i>shì...de</i>	Control B Time focus <i>shì...de</i>	Accuracy rates
Native	15	1.63	3.78	3.92	93%
		└─── <i>p</i> <0.00───┘			
Advanced	8	3.44 <sup>++</sup>	3.34	3.84	0%
		└─── <i>p</i> =0.33───┘			
U-Intermediate	10	3.63 <sup>++</sup>	3.48	3.75	0%
		└─── <i>p</i> =0.32───┘			
L-Intermediate	5	2.85 <sup>++</sup>	3.10	3.20	0%
		└─── <i>p</i> =0.18───┘			
Total	38				

Notes: ‘<sup>++</sup>’ indicates statistical differences from the monolinguals at 0.01 level.

#### 4.3. The [+/- old event] conditions (Sentence Ranking)

Table 5 reports the results of the Sentence Ranking task. Data analysis was performed first on the individuals and then on the groups. That is, we calculated how many times each individual ranked the *shì...de* cleft sentence higher than the *le*-sentence, and vice versa. Then we averaged the individual counts and obtained the group means. The same-event context items and the different-event context items were calculated separately.

Table 5: The [+/- old event] conditions (Sentence Ranking task)

Groups	<i>n</i>	Same-event contexts		Different-event contexts		Accuracy rates
		<i>shì...de</i>	<i>le</i>	<i>shì...de</i>	<i>le</i>	
Native	15	5.87	0.13	0.07	5.87	93%
		└─── <i>p</i> <0.01───┘		└─── <i>p</i> <0.01───┘		
Advanced	18	3.44 <sup>++</sup>	2.11 <sup>+</sup>	0.94	4.78	28%
		└─── <i>p</i> <0.01───┘		└─── <i>p</i> <0.01───┘		
U-Intermediate	23	2.30 <sup>++</sup>	2.87 <sup>++</sup>	2.09 <sup>++</sup>	3.22 <sup>++</sup>	4%
		└─── <i>p</i> =0.43───┘		└─── <i>p</i> =0.23───┘		
L-Intermediate	17	2.59 <sup>++</sup>	3.06 <sup>++</sup>	2.47 <sup>++</sup>	3.41 <sup>++</sup>	0%
		└─── <i>p</i> =0.85───┘		└─── <i>p</i> =0.30───┘		
Total	73					

Notes: ‘<sup>+</sup>’ indicates statistical differences from the monolinguals at 0.05 level. ‘<sup>++</sup>’ indicates statistical differences from the monolinguals at 0.01 level.

The results show that the advanced group exhibited sensitivity to the discourse conditions, as they ranked *shì...de* cleft sentences and *le* sentences in different contexts statistically differently ( $p < 0.01$ , Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Tests). This finding is consistent with the updated version of the IH in that it shows discourse features are indeed acquirable. The intermediate groups did not display a clear preference for either type of sentence in either type of context. Their preferences for *shì...de* cleft sentences in both contexts were around chance level (or *in a state of free variation*, Rothman's (2009) terms), which manifests *underspecification of discourse features* (Tsimplici *et al.* 2004). Individual analysis confirms that target-like accuracy is indeed achievable<sup>5</sup>, as there are 28% advanced learners and 4% upper-intermediate learners performing in the target-like manner in this task.

## 5. Discussion

Table 6 summarises the findings of the present study. In the L2 acquisition of the Chinese *shì...de* cleft construction, the telic condition is acquired at the intermediate level, the discourse condition at the advanced level. However, there is little evidence that the non-Affectee condition can be acquired. The findings indicate that although these interface conditions simultaneously govern every single grammatical and felicitous *shì...de* cleft sentence, they do present different challenges to L2 learners. Also, it is indeed more suitable to capture the differences between these conditions in terms of a gradient or a hierarchy, rather than a rigid dichotomy. This is against the original/broad/strong version of the IH (Sorace and Filiaci 2006), but provides support for its updated version (Sorace 2011).

Table 6: Main findings of the present study

	AJ task	SR task	AJ task
	telic condition	old-event condition	non-Affectee focus condition
syntax-	semantics	discourse	semantics-cognition
Native	+ (93%)	+ (93%)	+ (93%)
Advanced	+ (71%)	+ (28%)	-- (0%)
U-intermediate	+ (43%)	-- (4%)	-- (0%)
L-intermediate	+ (10%)	-- (0%)	-- (0%)

Notes: '+' means this group is sensitive to the condition; '--' means this group is insensitive to the condition; '(%)' indicates individual accuracy rates.

The boxplots in Figure 2 and Figure 3 present the data distribution of the experimental items (i.e., the ungrammatical *shì...de* clefts) in the AJ tasks testing the telic condition and the non-Affectee focus condition. Clearly there are large individual differences among the L2 learners in the \*[-telic] *shì...de* items (i.e., Figure 2), which is in fact not surprising in adult L2 acquisition. The lack of such differences in the '\*Focusing on the Affectee NP' items (i.e., Figure 3) is noteworthy. The kind of uniform insensitivity observed in the latter suggests that there might be qualitative differences in L2 acquisition between these two conditions.

Why does the non-Affectee focus condition present the most difficulty, to the extent that almost no evidence of successful acquisition is found in the present study? The usual causes of considerable L2 difficulty previously identified in the literature are ruled out in the present case. For instance, is it because the non-Affectee condition is absent from the formal L2 instruction such that it is not acquired by the L2 learners? The answer is no, because the telic condition and the discourse condition are also absent from formal L2 instruction, and yet they are successfully acquired. Then is it because the non-Affectee condition is missing from the L1 counterpart (i.e., the *it*-cleft construction)? This cannot be true either, as both the telic condition and the discourse condition are missing from the L1 counterpart, and yet the L2 grammars are sensitive to them. A common trait shared by these three conditions is that they all lack direct positive evidence in the Chinese input. In addition, the discourse condition and the

<sup>5</sup> If a participant ranked the *shì...de* clefts higher than the *le*-sentences in five or six tokens in the same-event contexts, and at the same time ranked the *le*-sentence higher than the *shì...de* clefts in five or six tokens in the different-event contexts, this individual is considered to have performed accurately in this task.

non-Affectee condition both involve factors external to syntax. Therefore, neither the lack of direct positive evidence nor the syntax-external factors alone can account for the failure observed in the acquisition of the non-Affectee focus condition. One may suspect that differences in task demand or data treatment may contribute to the L2 learners' poor performance in the non-Affectee test. This should not be the case, as the telic condition and the non-Affectee focus condition were tested and analysed using identical paradigms; and the monolinguals' provided similarly clear judgements across three tasks with minimal individual differences.

Given that the usual causes of L2 difficulty have been ruled out, we turn to another direction in search of the answer. Following Lardiere (2009), I propose that we should break down the conditions into features and re-interpret the results from the feature-reassembly perspective. Acquiring the conditions necessarily requires the L2 learners associate the [telic] feature and the [old] feature with the VP, and the [-affected] feature to the constituent that carries the [focus] feature. Assuming that interpretable features such as [focus], [telic], [old] and [affected] are universal primitives attested across languages or general cognitive concepts, and that the L2 learners bring to the L2 learning task fully assembled L1 lexical items, the acquisition task for the English speakers in the present study is really to 'recruit' these features from their L1 English and attach them to L2-appropriate lexical items. The syntax screening task has ensured that the participants included in the data analysis had known which element in the sentence carries the interpretable [focus] feature; the telic test in the AJ task shows that the intermediate L2 learners are aware that the VP in the *shì...de* cleft construction bears the [telic] feature; and the discourse test in the SR task indicates that the advanced learners possess the knowledge that this VP has to denote [old] information. The problem is that none of these L2 learners was able to attach an additional [-affected] feature to the constituent carrying the [focus] feature, or in other words, tie up the [focus] feature and the [-affected] feature. I hypothesize that the reason why L2 learners were not able to make this association is that these two features are not typically linked in their L1 English, or in Lardiere's (2009) terms, not bundled together in the L1. The [telic] feature and the [old] feature are much easier for the L2 learners to detect, because English uses various devices to encode the telicity of verb phrases (e.g. quantified objects, prepositional phrase, etc.) and the old/new information contrast (e.g. phonological stress), but does not use two distinct structures (syntactic or phonological) to mark Affectee focus and non-Affectee focus.

Figure 2: \*[-telic] *shì...de* items

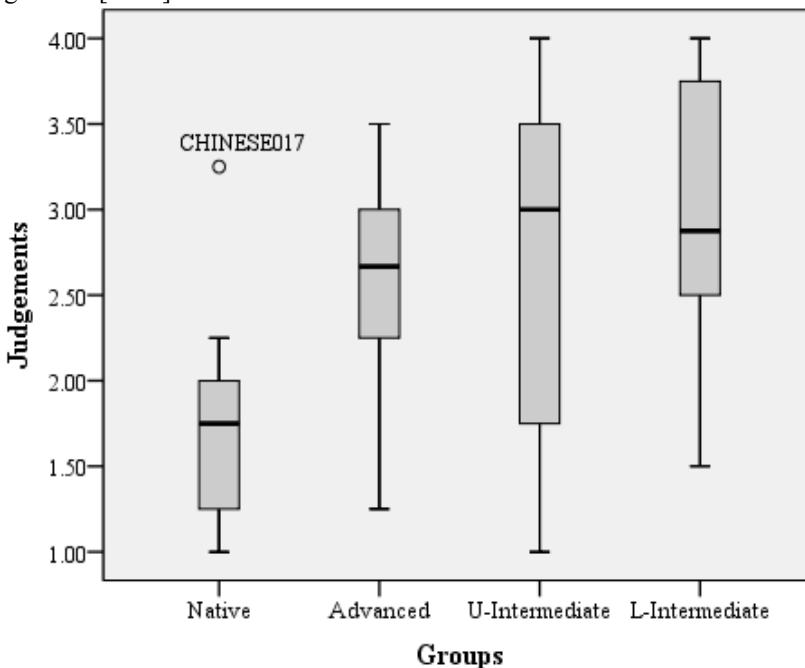
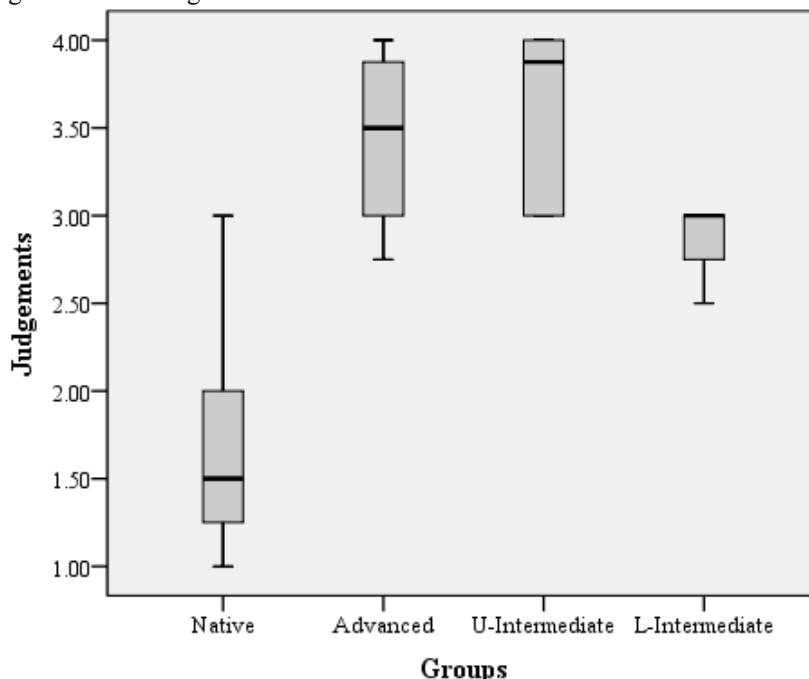


Figure 3: \*Focusing on Affectee NP items



## 6. Conclusion

To summarise, this study has shown that whether a linguistic condition belongs to a particular interface does not predict the (im)possibility of target-like representations in adult L2 acquisition, but may impact on the order of initial sensitivity to the condition (semantics before discourse), which is an extension of the IH to L2 developmental grammars and compatible with the findings in Slabakova *et al.* (2012). This study also suggests that if multiple interface conditions simultaneously govern a structure, these conditions are more likely to be acquired separately and incrementally, rather than collectively and instantly. The parameter-resetting metaphor created for the acquisition of core syntax is less powerful in explaining the cases of interface properties, whereas the (re)assembly metaphor seems to be more suitable (Lardiere 2009). This study also identifies a possible source of considerable, if not insurmountable, difficulty in acquiring interface conditions. That is, other factors held constant, creating links between features that are linked in the L2 but are not typically linked in the L1 can be extremely difficult in adult L2 acquisition. The explanatory power of this new hypothesis is subject to future empirical studies.

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