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A Study on Chinese Nominal Predicate Sentences From the Perspective of Cognitive Grammar

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Mandarin Chinese permits nominal expressions to function directly as predicates, as in "*jintian xingqisan*" (today Wednesday), "*ta da yanjing*" (she big eyes), and *"man wuzi ren*" (a roomful of people). This challenges accounts that treat verbal predication as obligatory. Drawing on Langacker's notions of autonomy and dependence, profiling, grounding, and reference-point organization, this paper analyzes five types of nominal predicate clauses in CCL Corpus of Modern Chinese contexts: identity classification, temporal anchoring, scalar specification, property description, and spatial-existential predication. The analysis argues that nominal predicates remain nominal in lexical content but acquire a dependent function in construction, classifying, locating, quantifying, characterizing, or situating the subject. An overt copula is unnecessary when the relation is recoverable from constructional meaning, discourse grounding, and shared knowledge. These sentences thus illustrate the interaction of topic-comment organization, zero marking, and cognitive economy.

Keywords: Chinese nominal predicate sentence, Cognitive Grammar, grounding, constructional meaning

Introduction

In Mandarin Chinese, predicates need not be verbs or adjectives. Nominal and other substantival expressions may follow a subject or topic to form a complete judgment without overt "*shi*" (be), "*you*" (have), or "*zai*" (at), as in "*jintian xingqisan*" (today Wednesday), "*wo waidiren*" (I stranger), "*ta da yanjing*" (she big eyes), "*ta gao gezi*" (he tall build), "*jinnian shiqisui*" (this year 17 years old), and "*man wuzi ren*" (a roomful of people). Such clauses are commonly called nominal or substantival predicate sentences.

This phenomenon challenges two assumptions. First, unlike English, which requires overt relational coding in examples such as "Today is Wednesday" and "There are many people in the room," Mandarin can rely on word order, context, and constructional meaning. Second, it complicates the use of predicative function as a simple diagnostic of the noun-verb distinction: Chinese nouns can predicate directly.

This paper asks why Chinese permits direct nominal predication and how such clauses are interpreted. It argues that these are not merely elliptical forms: adding "*shi*" or "*you*" can change the construal or information structure. Instead, a nominal concept is recruited for a dependent predicative function by a construction. The analysis uses Cognitive Grammar and contextualized examples from the CCL Corpus of Modern Chinese.

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Literature Review

Nominal Predicates in Chinese Grammar

Modern Chinese grammarians have long recognized nominal predicates. Zhu (1982) includes them among Chinese predicate types, while Lü (1979) cautions against imposing Indo-European copular patterns on Chinese. Chao (1968) and Li and Thompson (1981) likewise observe that Mandarin clauses need not contain an overt equivalent of English "be." These accounts establish that predication is a clausal function, not one reserved for verbs.

Descriptions distinguish identity or affiliation predicates ("*wo waidiren*," I stranger), temporal predicates ("*jintian xingqisan*," today Wednesday), scalar predicates ("*jinnian shiqisui*," this year 17 years old), property descriptions ("*ta da yanjing*," she big eyes), and locative-existential patterns ("*yi wuzi ren*," a roomful of people). Not every noun predicates freely: "*ta yanjing*" (she eyes) is normally incomplete, unlike the informative "*ta da yanjing*."

Some accounts treat these clauses as ellipses of "*shi*," "*you*," or other verbs, but this overgeneralizes. "She big eyes" presents a compact portrait rather than the possession foregrounded by "she has big eyes"; similarly, "a roomful of people" profiles an occupied spatial scene rather than simply abbreviating a "*you*" clause. The construction itself therefore needs explanation.

Lexical Category, Construction, and Recent Accounts

Recent work questions rigidly importing Western category models into Chinese grammar. Shen (2016, 2017) argues that category, distribution, and discourse function should be considered together. Nominal predicates support this view: their conceptual content remains nominal while they function predicatively in a construction.

Tie and Qin (2019) analyze nominal predicate sentences as constructions whose NPs are linked by a conceptual relation, rather than by deletion of a hidden verb. Cao and Tong (2022) show that zero-verb existential patterns have constructional meaning organized by spatial schemas, especially the container schema, rather than reducing to "*you*" (have/exist).

Cognitive Grammar

Cognitive Grammar treats grammar as meaningful symbolic structure (Langacker, 1987, 1991, 2008). Nominals typically profile conceptually autonomous entities, whereas verbs and prepositions profile dependent relations; this distinction is a continuum, and constructions can assign a dependent function to an autonomous concept. Meaning also involves profiling against a conceptual base: "Wednesday" presupposes a calendrical cycle, and "big eyes" a body and a scale of visual salience.

Expressions are grounded in a speech situation: "today," person deixis, locations, and scalar values anchor predications in relevant domains. In nominal predicate clauses, the subject or topic often serves as a reference point, while the predicate supplies new information. When their relation is conventional and recoverable, overt linking material is unnecessary.

Data and Method

Data come primarily from the CCL Corpus of Modern Chinese; the BCC Corpus informs the method. Search strings cover identity, temporal, scalar, property, and spatial-existential patterns, including "*wo waidiren*," "*jintian xingqisan*," "*ta da yanjing*," "*jinnian shiqi sui*," and "*man wuzi ren*."

String matches are not automatically grammatical evidence: Chinese writing lacks word boundaries, so "*wo daxuesheng*" may match unrelated sequences such as "*wode daxue shenghuo*" (my college life). Each hit was checked in context; attributive structures, objects, incomplete quotations, duplicates, and accidental matches were excluded before classification. Counts indicate searchable examples, not corpus-wide frequencies.

The analysis is qualitative: examples illustrate how conceptual relations are licensed and interpreted, rather than establish a statistical model.

Corpus Analysis

Identity Classification

Identity-classification predicates use a person-denoting expression followed by a category noun for origin, occupation, role, or status. In "I am stranger, my boyfriend is foreigner" (CCL, "*wo waidiren*," BAAI_Wudao/weibo_060.txt), "*waidiren*" and "*waiguoren*" classify people against social-geographical frames. "*Waidiren*" remains a noun but predicates "*wo*" (I) as a category member.

In another example, a response to "What do you do?" is "I am a college student; after graduation this year I will go to do manual work" (CCL, "*wo daxuesheng*," BAAI_Wudao/Wechat_206.txt). The question grounds the requested status, which "*wo daxuesheng*" supplies without "*shi*." Although "*shi*" is possible, the zero-copula form is more compact and conversational.

Temporal Anchoring

Temporal predicates include "*jintian xingqisan*" (today Wednesday), found in diary-like contexts such as "Suddenly I remembered that today Wednesday, and I had to pick up my elder daughter." "*Jintian*" is grounded by the speech event; "*xingqisan*" profiles a position in the weekly cycle. Their conventional mapping makes "*shi*" recoverable but unnecessary.

These predicates also frame discourse, especially in diaries, blogs, and narrative openings, locating subsequent events within a shared temporal grid.

Scalar Specification

Scalar predicates express age, height, price, or distance, as in "*Liu Qing jinnian shiqi sui*" (Liu Qing this year 17 years old) and "*ta yi mi ba*" (he one meter eighty). The nominal or numeral-classifier phrase gives a value, while the subject identifies what is measured. Interpretation relies on shared measurement frames.

In scalar anchoring, an expression such as "*shiqi sui*" or "*yi mi ba*" becomes dependent on the subject and specifies a salient dimension. The relation is licensed by conventional measurement knowledge.

Property Description

Property-descriptive predicates often profile body parts or salient features, as in "*ta da yanjing*" (she big eyes) and "*ta gao gezi*" (he tall build). CCL examples place these expressions in character descriptions, alongside other features.

This involves metonymic profiling: "*yanjing*" (eyes) and "*gezi*" (build) relate to dimensions of a person, while "*da yanjing*" and "*gao gezi*" profile salient properties of that person. "*Ta yanjing*" is normally uninformative; "*ta da yanjing*" supplies a recognizable profile.

Spatial-Existential Predication

Spatial-existential predicates pair a location or spatial range with a nominal expression, as in *"man wuzi ren*" (a roomful of people). CCL examples include "*Man wuzi ren*, mostly script editors and journal editors" and "Aunt Liu went out, leaving us, *yi wuzi ren*, staring at one another." Rather than simply omit "*you*," these clauses construe a spatial container occupied by entities.

The container schema organizes the construction: the location is the container, the noun profiles its contents, and "*man*" (full) or "*yi*" (one/a whole) indicates occupancy. Compared with "*you*" clauses, the zero-verb form presents a more compact spatial construal.

Analysis of Nominal Predicates

Across the five types, an autonomous nominal concept acquires dependent use. Expressions such as "*waidiren*," "*xingqisan*," "*shiqisui*," "*da yanjing*," and "*man wuziren*" remain nominal or nominal-like but depend on a subject or topic to provide new information. The relation may classify, locate in time, specify a scale value, describe a property, or present spatial existence.

Paraphrasing with "*shi*" or "you" does not establish ellipsis, since it may change construal: "*shi*" tends to foreground identification or contrast, and "you" possession or existence, whereas nominal predicates compactly categorize or present a scene. This is clearest in property and existential examples.

These clauses align with topic-comment organization: a grounded first element serves as reference point, and the second provides a comment, category, value, or scene. Mandarin distributes grammatical meaning across word order, grounding, context, and construction rather than requiring the finite verbal marking characteristic of English.

Nominal predication is constrained by informativeness and recoverability. "*Ta yanjing*" or "*ta gezi*" is normally unacceptable, while "*ta da yanjing*" and "*ta gao gezi*" provide salient information. Likewise, "*jintian xingqisan*" is conventional, but "*zhuozi xingqisan*" (table Wednesday) requires a special scheduling context. This is contextually licensed construal, not category confusion.

Conclusion

Chinese nominal predicate sentences are productive, not marginal irregularities. In Cognitive Grammar terms, the nominal predicate retains nominal conceptual content but takes on a dependent predicative function: it classifies a subject, locates it in time, assigns a scalar value, profiles a property, or presents a spatial scene.

The corpus examples support three conclusions: direct nominal predication is licensed when a grounded subject receives an informative profile; the construction may supply the subject-predicate relation without an omitted verb; and Chinese distributes relational meaning across construction, context, and discourse rather than simply "lacking" a copula. Larger annotated CCL and BCC samples could test variation across genres and historical periods.

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