Teaching Materials and Authentic Language: A Case Study of shi...de Sentences from Corpora

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Abstract: The paper examines 202 examples of shi...de sentences from two corpora and concludes that CFL textbooks focusing solely on the emphatic function of shi...de may be giving a slanted representation of the actual usage of the structure. It is found that the structure is often used with stative verbs and is associated with a categorization and stance-indication function. We suggest that material writers and teachers rely more on authentic data to develop teaching materials.

1. Introduction

shi...de sentences have caught attention from linguists and Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) teachers from decades ago. Previous analyses often refer to shi...de as an emphatic structure or cleft sentence. Usually, it is assumed that the element after shi is focused (Fang, 1995; Shi, 1994; Teng, 1979; Teng, 2003; Xu, 2004, p.128-129). This idea is largely borrowed into CFL textbooks. For instance, In Yao et al. (2005)'s Integrated Chinese, shi...de sentences are introduced as a structure to be used to focus on manner, location, time, etc. Some other textbooks and reference books refer to such usage as past tense usages because the emphatic usage is often associated with [+past] (Lu, 1983; Tian, 2004; Liu, 2002). Some linguists, including Yang (1997), raise doubt as to whether shi...de should be analyzed as a unique structure and whether it should be taught separately from shi-copular sentences. But despite the attention to shi...de sentences, there is not a study on the structure based on empirical data so far. The current project is carried out with the belief that authentic language from native speaker corpora should be most enlightening for analysis and for educational purposes.

2. Data Analysis

2.1 Data Categorization

Data were elicited from two corpora: the Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL) Corpus and the Sinica Corpus. 202 sentences with shi...de were sought out, with 50 from Renmin Ribao from the CCL corpus, and 152 examples from the Sinica Corpus conversation genre.

The 202 examples were then categorized into two major groups. The first group consists of shi...de sentences with stative verbs (or verbs [-dynamic], including predicate adjectives) in between. There are three subtypes within this group:

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1) a. shi+adj.+de: 管教得法才是最好的。
b. shi+stative VP+de: 童年，是属于歌声的。
c. shi+modal+de: 人生的性格以及志向，都是不能勉强的。

The second group consists of sentences with [+dynamic] verbs in between shi and de. I further divide the group into two sub-categories according to the external argument of shi:

2) a. obj.+shi+VP [+dynamic]+de: 每个人都是父母生的。
b. subj.+shi+VP [+dynamic]+de: 我一个同事也是从北京来的。

### 2.2 shi + adj. + de (109 out of 202)

More than half of the sentences (109 out of 202) take the form of shi+adj.+de:

3) 嗯，是很流行的。
4) 所以你们是正确的。

Quite self-evidently, these sentences are not “emphatic”: nothing is contrastively focused in these examples. On the other hand, the shi...de structure serves to make categorizations. For instance, (3) indicates that something belongs to the category of “being popular”. This function is briefly referred to by Zhu (1978). We also note that the categorization is accompanied by the speaker’s indication of his “stance”, or position-taking. This can be clearly witnessed from (4). Another characteristic of this subtype of shi...de sentences is that they typically take an abstract noun as an external argument.

Unfortunately, this important subtype of shi...de sentences is often ignored in literature and in textbooks. Some linguists do not even consider sentences like (3), (4) to be shi...de sentences (Lu, 1983; Liu et al., 2002, among others). But we will see that this subtype has similar functions and forms with other shi...de sentences. Particularly, given the great proportion of this subtype, I propose that we must recognize the legitimate status of shi + adj. + de sentences.

### 2.3 shi+stative VP+de (30/202); shi+modal VP+de (23/202)

Verbs such as 属于, 存在, 有, 需要, 值得 are considered as stative verbs:

5) 就是他们是属于那个角头型的。
6) 可能这个部分是占最多的。

Modal verbs in the data include 可能, 会, 可以, 要, 应该, 能, 愿.

7) 但信任也是不可缺少的。
8) 我觉得女生是会有的。

Both these two subtypes of shi...de sentences have similar categorization and position-taking functions.

### 2.4 obj.+shi+VP [+dynamic]+de (20/202)

The second major group is shi...de sentences with [+dynamic] verbs ([+activity], [+achievement], or [+accomplishment] verbs) in between. (10) and (11) are examples that have the object of the verb as the external argument of the matrix shi...de clause.
Most previous studies do not address this type of shi...de sentences at all. Presumably, this is because these sentences are also analyzed as copula shi with a headless relative clause marked by de. The relationship between the two arguments of shi is clearly equational, making it very different from emphatic shi...de sentences. However, there is evidence that we need not treat these shi...de sentences as a different type. In fact, our data so far, including shi+stative VP +de sentences, can all be analyzed as copula followed by headless relative clauses.

Essentially, all these sentences follow the same following pattern:

There is an empty category (e) within shi...de, which must be interpreted with the external argument of shi, represented by A. Such headless relative clause following shi can be "reconstructed".

(i) A shi e B de (shi+ VP [-dynamic] +de): 怎样做是 e 最好的？
   怎样做是 e 最好的?  
   怎样做最好?

(ii) A shi B e de (object +shi +VP[+dynamic]+de): 坏影响是金钱无法衡量 e 的。
    坏影响是金钱无法衡量 e 的。  
    坏影响是金钱无法衡量坏影响。

Importantly, contrary to what some traditional analysis predicts, these sentences do not necessarily have a [+focus] item following shi. Sometimes, the [+focus] falls on the first element in the sentence—as can be seen from (15a) and (16a)—because the element preceding shi can be understood as a "topic" and topic often carries [+focus].

The contrasting pairs indicate that the shi...de construction makes the reading of the predicate less dynamic: while (15b) and (16b) describe events, (15a) and (16a) describe stative characteristics of the "topic". The categorization function and sometimes the stance-indication function also entail.

2.5 subj.+shi+VP [+dynamic]+de (20/202)

There are 20 sentences that belong to this category. 15 of them are actually "emphatic sentences", or cleft sentences. As pointed out earlier, this type of shi...de sentences are most often referred to in the CFL textbooks. (17) lists some corpora examples of focus on the location, time, and purpose of an event/action.

(16) a. 我是从某版来的。 (focus on location)
   b. 这是我正式开始的？ (focus on time)
   c. 我也不是为赚钱来的。 (focus on purpose)
It is noticeable that such [+focus] function is only compatible with the subj.+shi+VP[+dynamic]+adjunct+de sentences. The data also support previous analyses that emphatic shi...de sentences are associated with past event. However, as witnessed from the small proportion of this subtype, the emphatic reading is not a primary function of the shi...de sentences at all, and CFL textbooks that place emphasis only on the focus function may be giving a slanted view of the authentic usages of the structure.

There are some sub+shi+VP[+dynamic]+de sentences without an emphatic reading. Typically, although the verb in the sentence by itself typically takes a [+dynamic] reading (e.g. 开，做), the shi...de sentence does not describe an event, but describes the status/identity of the subject/external argument.

17) 我爸爸是开工厂的。[-dynamic]
18) 因为我本身是做辅导工作的。[-dynamic]

In other words, despite the verb, the sentence does not describe an event but describes who the subject is. (20) proves that shi can be a copular and a focus marker at the same time.

19) 我自己本身是靠声音工作的。

These examples do not have a stance-indication function, but do have a categorization function. This subtype follows the general pattern observed in (14), whether there is a focus or not:

20) A shi e B de: 我爸爸是 e 开工厂的。→我爸爸开工厂。
21) A shi e C (focus) B de: 我一个同事也是 e 从北京来的。→我一个同事也从北京来。

3. Conclusion

From corpora data and analysis, we find that it is possible to give a unanimous account for all shi...de sentences, while maintaining the differences among sub-groups. The most prominent function of shi...de is its categorization function, and shi can be understood as a copula in these sentences. A stance-indication function is often associated with the categorization. This is not surprising, because a classification function is associated with both shi and de. A second function is focus. This function is only compatible with some subject+shi+(adjunct+)[+dynamic] VP+de sentences. The focus is often on the adjunct, and shi can be understood as a focus marker.

Our finding warns us that more attention should be given to shi+adj.+de sentences. The functions of shi as a copular alone and de as a relative clause marker are in fact associated with its functions in shi...de sentences. In other words, shi...de may be taught as a unique structure, but the primary functions of the sentence cannot be alienated from independent functions of shi and de. This said, we can help students learn the authentic usages of shi...de. This case study also prompts teachers and material writers to rely on authentic data to evaluate and develop teaching materials.

【Notes】

① The CCL Corpus is hosted by the Center of Chinese Linguistics at Beijing University. The corpus is available online. http://ccl.pku.edu.cn:8080/ccl_corpus/jssearch
② The Sinica Corpus is hosted by the Institute of Linguistics, Academic Sinica, available at.
Although there is disagreement as to whether all Chinese adjectives can be analyzed as stative verbs, adjectives in predicate position can usually be assumed as a type of stative verbs.

[References]