

A COMPARISON OF CLEFT SENTENCES IN ENGLISH AND SHI SENTENCES IN CHINESE

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1. Introduction

Though English and Chinese belong to different language families, the former being Indo-European while the latter, Chinese-Tibetan, both have the so-called cleft-structures even though such structures are differently termed in the two languages. In English, they are called cleft-sentences and in Chinese they are named shi (be) sentences. The English clefts are surprisingly similar to the Chinese shi sentences in some aspects while they are equally surprisingly different from them in other aspects.

This article attempts to present some of the most prominent similarities and differences between them, mainly in terms of word order.

By clefts in this article, we mean such statements in English as:

- (1) It was an English Dictionary that John bought this morning.
- (2) What John bought this morning was an English dictionary.

And by shi sentences here, We mean the following kinds of sentences in Chinese.

- (3) Shi Yuehan jintian shangwu mai le
Be John today morning buy ASP(ect)
yi ben yingwen zidian.
a CLASS(ifier) English dictionary.
It was John that bought an English dictionary this morning.
- (4) Yuehan jintian shangwu mai de shi yi ben yingwen zidian.
John today morning buy RM be a CLASS English dictionary.
What John bought this morning was an English dictionary.

Cleft constructions in English are a universal linguistic phenomenon. Take the

It-cleft sentences for example, We find that there are, at least, 58 occurrences in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, 97 in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, and over 10 in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. The shi sentences in Chinese are also a large linguistic category widely used in the language. So such linguistic phenomena are worth studying. And indeed there have been more and more linguists working on them, especially on the English clefts though comparatively still few on the Chinese shi sentences from modern linguistic views.

2. Features of clefts in English

One of the most important features of clefts in English is that syntactically they are divided into two separate sections, each having its own verb. And functionally, these two sections of the clefted sentence "establish an identity between a known or presupposed entity and a focused entity which represents the new information" (Greenberg 1978:422).

Some linguists distinguish sentences like (1) above as cleft sentences from those like (2) above as pseudo-cleft sentences. Harries-Delisle (1978:422) does not think that this is a deep structure distinction. We will support this idea with evidence when discussing the shi sentences in Chinese later in this paper.

3. Features of Chinese shi sentences

Shi means *be* in Chinese. And shi sentences comprise a large category in the syntax of the language. Syntactically, the *shi* may occur in any position in a sentence: initially, medially, or finally, in accordance with the specific context where it is used. Liu et al. (1983) list 8 different uses of the shi sentences in their *Practical Modern Chinese Grammar*. Only a few points listed there correspond or are related to the English clefts. For example, shi sentences may be used to express explanations, sometimes with the "flavour of protest".

- (5) Tà xuexi hau shi youyu ta you mingquede xuexi mudi
 he study well be because he have clear study aim
 It is because he has a correct aim in mind that he studies well.
- (6) Tāmen zuihou yici jihui shi zai Beida
 they last time meet be in Beijing University
 It was in Beijing University that they met for the last time.
- (7) Tāde zuofa shi jin, bushi tui.
 his way of doing be progress; not be retrogress
 What he does is progress, not retrogress.

According to Liu et al. (1983), the following sentences are called subjectless ones:

- (8) Shi feng ba men chui kai le.
 be wind AUX door blow open ASP
 It is the wind that has blown the door open.

- (9) Shi wo mei shuo qingchu, bushi ni mei ting qingchu.
 be I not speak clearly not be you not hear clearly
 It was I who did not speak clearly, but not you who did not hear clearly.

Shi sentences in Chinese, the above *Grammar* says, may be used to stress the object of a sentence:

- (10) Wo yao shuo de jiushi zhexie.
 I want say ASP just be these
 What I wanted to say is nothing but this.
 (or: This is just what I wanted to say.)

It does not take a great deal of attention to find that all the Chinese sentences of (5) through (10) are similar to the clefts in English in terms of the information they provide, with the help of the accompanying English statements. But it will take some analysis to locate where the similarities lie between the above shi sentences and their English counterparts in structure.

4. Syntactic similarities between shi sentences and cleft sentences

As mentioned above, (8) is called a "subjectless" sentence. Actually there is a subject, which happens to be *feng* (wind). The verb is *chuikaile* (has blown open) and the object is *men* (door). *Ba* is the auxiliary which is used to shift the object before the verb governing it. Without the auxiliary *ba*, the verb phrase should be immediately restored to its normal order: *chuikaile men* (has blown the door open). In other words, both (8) and (11) are correct sentences:

- (11) Shi feng chuikaile men.
 It is the wind that has blown the door open.

Suppose we leave out the initial *shi* in both statements, what will happen? (8) and (11) will become (12) and (13) respectively:

- (12) Feng ba men chuikai le.
 wing AUX door blow open ASP
 The wind has blown the door open.
- (13) Feng chuikai le men.
 wind blow open ASP door
 The wind has blown the door open.

(12) and (13) are typically normal Chinese sentences though the former has the order S + *ba* + O + V, which is a variety from the basic order of (13): S + V + O. In both of them, the subject is *feng* (wind).

What is *shi* in the initial position of (8) and (11)? It is the imposed element which is functionally equivalent to the *be* immediately before the focus in the It-

clefts in English. It is a particle made use of to mark focus. (Evidence is from many linguistic works, e.g. Abraham & de Meij (1986:154), Greenberg 1978.) Specifically speaking, the *shi* in (8) and (11) is used to emphasize the grammatical subject of both sentences: *feng* (wind). From the functional sentence prospective, the *shi* makes the psychological subject – the topic: *feng* very prominent. The rest of the sentences will be the comment made about that topic. The Pragueans prefer the terms theme and rheme for topic and comment (Bolinger 1975). *Feng* (wind) represents the new information while the part after it represents given or old information (Li 1976).

Through the above analysis, it is obvious that the *shi* sentences in the case of (8) and (11) are very similar to the It-clefts in English. If we juxtapose the following, we will see that these two kinds of sentences seem more similar to each other than expected.

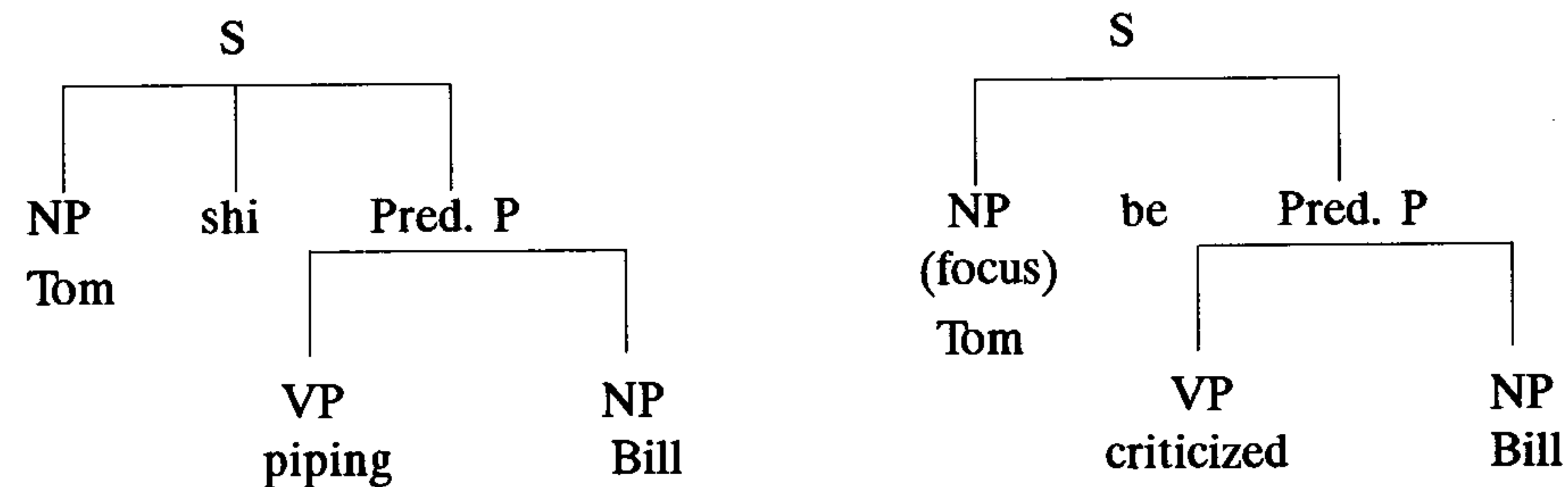
(14) Shi yuehan jiao wo lai de.
be John call me come ASP
It is John that told me to come.

(15) Zuotian shi laoshi mei lai shang ke.
yesterday be teacher not come give lesson
It was the teacher that didn't come to give lessons yesterday.

Here in (14) and (15), the Chinese and the English convey the same meaning and syntactically there is not much difference between the two sentences of each pair, apart from the "It is (was) that ..." phrase, which we will discuss later in this article.

Perhaps if we look at (16), the similarity between two kinds of structures appears greater and more intuitive.

(16) a. Shi Tom piping le Bill. b. It is Tom who/that criticized Bill
be Tom criticize ASP Bill



The diagrams in (16)a and (16)b show almost no difference between the two underlying structures (of course apart from the differences in symbols and verb aspect, etc.).

By now, one might conclude that the Chinese *shi* sentences and the English It-clefts, when both are used to mark focus, are extremely similar to each other if not exactly identical, except for the English dummy "it" and the relative pronoun "that/who". The problem is not so simple as it appears. Next, we will have to look at the differences between these two structures.

5. Differences between *shi* and cleft sentences

Before discussing the differences between the two types of sentences, we would like to compare the basic word order of the two languages.

Generally speaking, Chinese and English have the same word order in an unmarked sentence: S V O. For example:

(17) a. Wo mai le yi ben zidian.
I buy ASP a CLASS dictionary
b. I bought a dictionary.

However, differences will occur when other elements such as attributive or adverbial modifiers are added. For instance:

(18) a. Wo zuotian zai shudian mai le yi ben zidian.
I yesterday at bookstore buy ASP a CLASS dictionary
b. I bought a dictionary at the bookstore yesterday.

Obviously (18)a has the order of S + V + O + ADVp + ADVt.

In both cases, varieties do exist, but the above represent the most basic unmarked word order. If we look at the S V O as the core elements, we find that the other elements (ADVs) are peripheral in English where they are medial in Chinese. More examples are:

(19) a. Ta he Bill xingqitian wanshang
he and/with Bill Sunday evening
zai dianshi shang kan le zhege jiemu.
at TV on watch ASP this programme
b. He watched this programme with Bill on TV on Sunday evening.
or: He and Bill watched this programme on TV on Sunday evening.

(20) a. Women yong zhe ba gai zhui xiu hao le shouyinji
we with this screw repair ASP radio
b. We repaired the radio with this screw.

(19)a shows a pattern S (or S + ADVm) + ADVt + ADVp + V + Do while (19)b shows a pattern S + V + O + (ADVm) + ADVp + ADVt. Similarly, (20) a represents an order of S + ADVm + V + Do, whereas (20)b, an order of S + V + Do + ADVm. From the above analysis, we see that the adverbial elements (adverbs, prepositional phrases) in Chinese not only take medial positions, that is, after S and before V, but have a relatively fixed order something like S + ADVm + ADVt + ADVp + V, in a sentence. But in English those adverbial phrases

usually have the order ADV_m + ADV_p + ADV_t if they are placed in a series after the S V O.

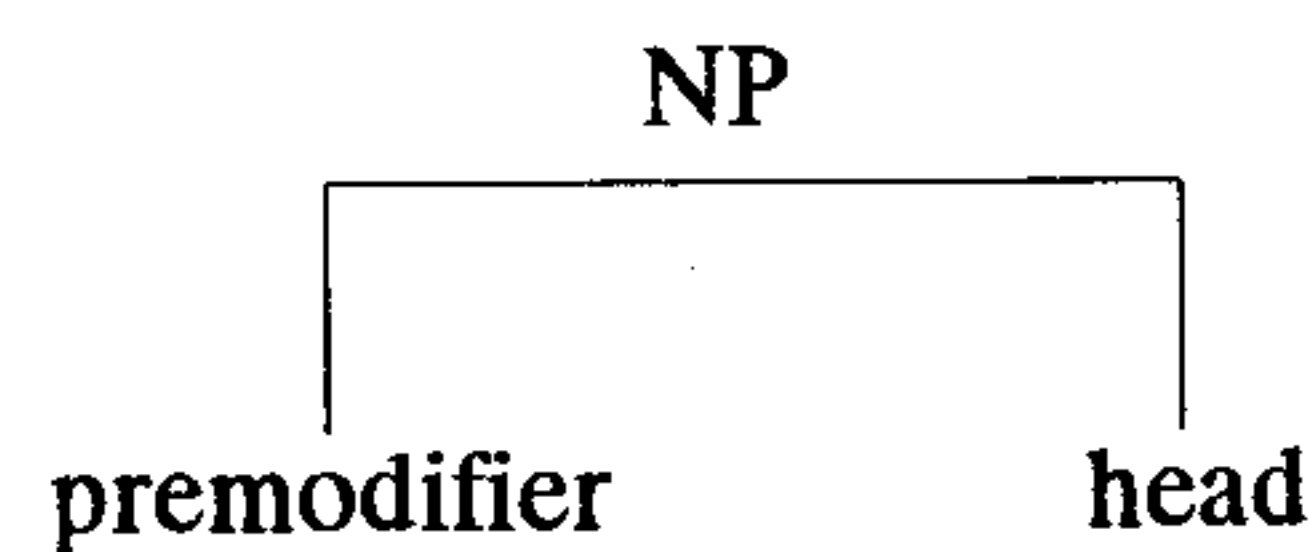
Now we have to examine the basic word order of sentences with nouns and their attributives in both languages.

In English, this is a complicated matter because it has both premodification and postmodification. And in both cases, there are subcategories. For instance, premodification may be by adjectives, participles, -s genitives, nouns, adverbial phrases, and sentences. And postmodification may be by attributive clauses, prepositional phrases, participial phrases, etc. But premodification is in general to be interpreted (and most frequently can only be interpreted) in terms of postmodification and its great explicitness. That is, *Some pretty college girls* will be interpreted as 'some girls who are pretty and who are at a college.' (Quirk et al. 1972).

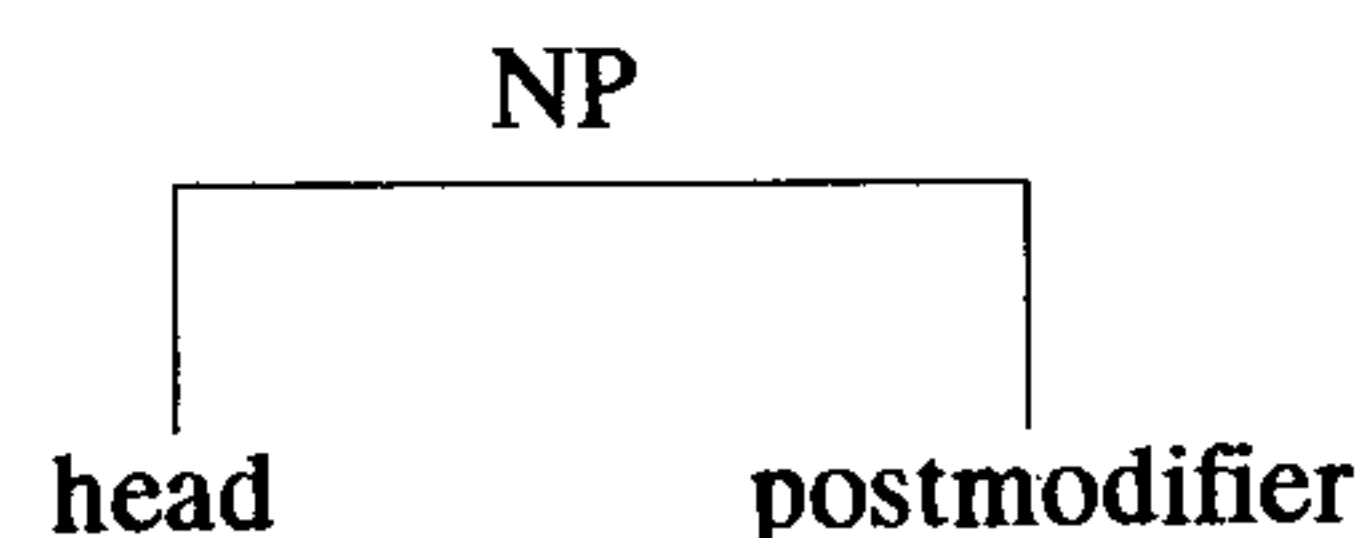
In Chinese, however, there is only premodification and no postmodification at all.

- (21) a. Zhuozi shang de gangbi shi wode.
desk on ATT_m pen be mine
b. The pen on the desk is mine.
- (22) a. Shoushang de ren bei songjin le yiyuan
wounded ATT_m people be sent into ASP hospital
b. People wounded in the earthquake were sent to hospital.
- (23) a. Ni gangci kanjian de nage ren shi wo gege.
you just now saw RM that man be my brother
b. The man (that) you saw just now is my brother.
- (24) a. Bangzhu women de nage ren shi felangke.
help us RM that man be Frank
b. The one who helped us was Frank. (Harries-Delisle 1978)

In (21) through (24), all the a sentences contain a noun head that has a pre-modifying phrase. It may be diagrammed like this:



whereas all the b sentences have a noun head postmodified by a phrase or clause. The noun phrase may be diagrammed in the following way:



However, in (25)a the part before *shi* is a subject clause and so is the part before *is* in (25)b.

- (25) a. Ta xuyao de shi gongju
he need Rel.M be tool.
b. What he needs is a tool.

Ta xuyao de may be construed as having omitted a constituent *dongxi* (thing): *Ta xuyao de dongxi shi ...*. The English equivalent is *What he needs is....*. But when it happens to be person, there is no exact equivalent in English.

- (26) a. He ni shuohua de (nage ren) shi Tom.
with you talk RM that person be Tom
b. *What talked with you was Tom.
*Who talked with you was Tom.

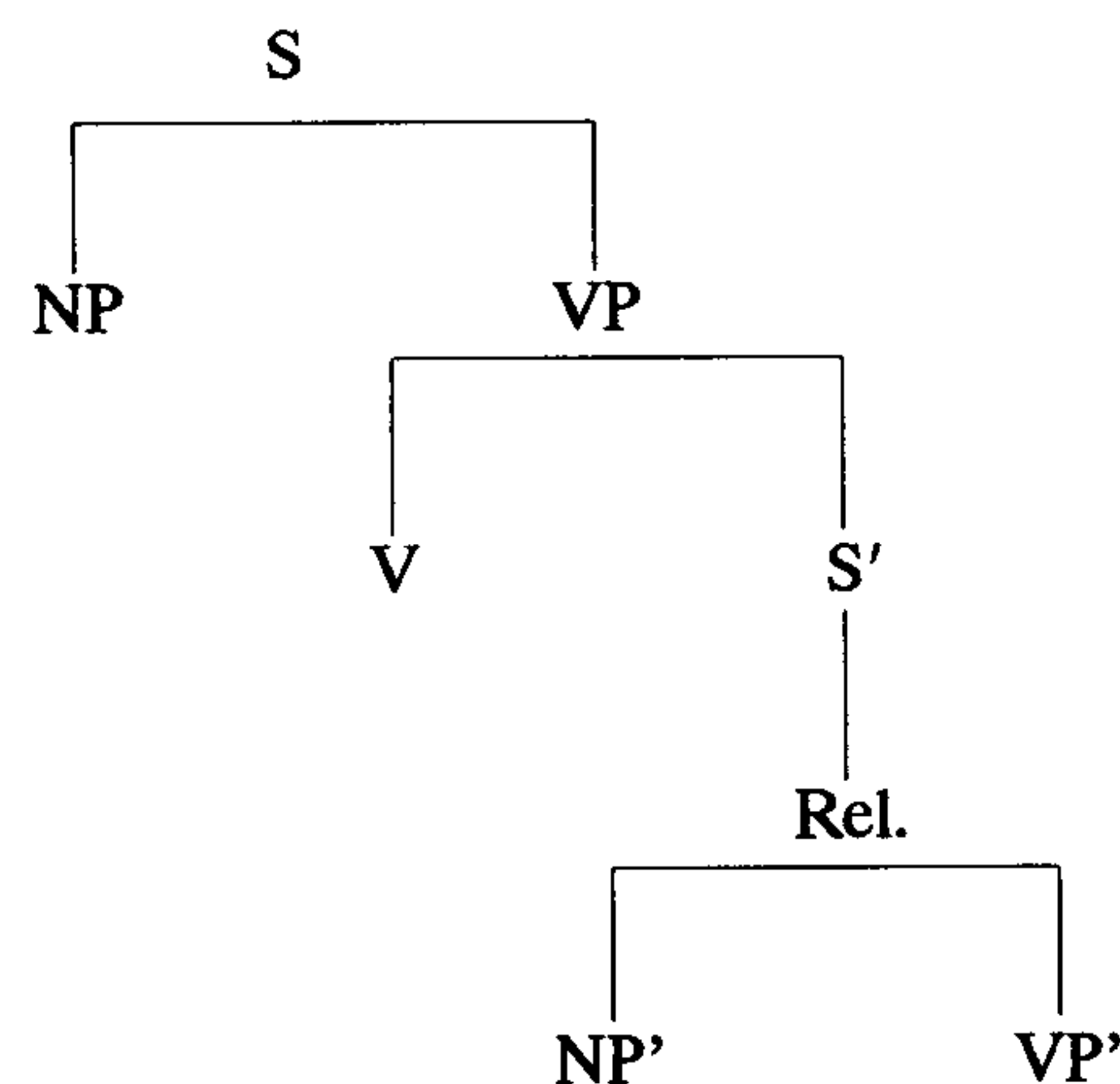
In this case, English has to rely on a noun phrase followed by an attributive clause: *The one who talked with you was Tom.*

Finally, we must look at the word order of sentences with interrogative pronouns and adverbs. Examples are:

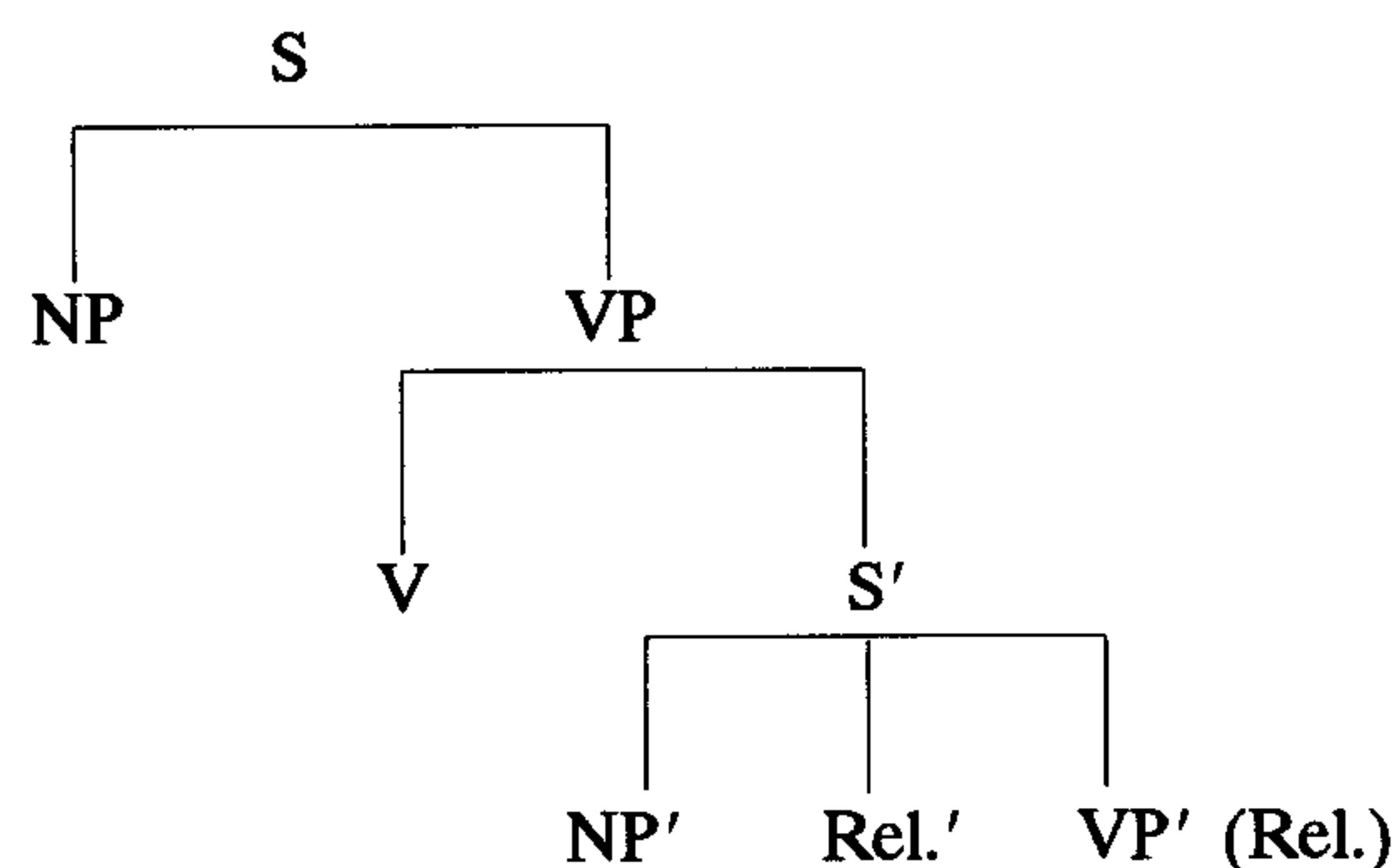
- (27) a. Wo bu zhidao nage xuesheng xuexi genghao
I not know which student study better
b. I don't know which student studies better.
- (28) a. Ta wen wo yuehan weishenme mei qu kan dianying.
he ask me John why not go see film
b. He asked me why John didn't go to see the film.
- (29) a. Women xiang zhidao ni jiandao le shei.
we want know you see ASP who
b. We want to know who(m) you saw.

From the above in (27)a, we see clearly that the interrogative *which* modifies the subject of the embedded clause. So it is placed before *student*. This is similar to (27)b. In (28)a the interrogative *weishenme* (why) is placed after the subject of the embedded clause, whereas in (28)b *why* must precede the embedded subject. But in (29)a *shei* (whom) has been put at the end of the embedded clause while (30)b *who(m)* stays at the head of the embedded clause. Now we have to conclude that in Chinese the embedded interrogative pronoun is placed at the head of the embedded clause if it is used as subject of that clause and placed at the end if it is the object or predicative of the clause. Even here the rule of word order still works: S + (ADV) + O. Cl. [S' + (ADV') + V' + O']. In English, however, the embedded interrogatives must always be placed at the beginning of the embedding.

English:



Chinese:



6. Other differences

After the above discussion of word order differences between Chinese and English we will be in a better position to investigate other differences (the most outstanding ones) between shi sentences and cleft sentences now.

As mentioned in Part 2 of this article, the English clefts are divided into two sections. The first section usually begins with the dummy "it" which is followed by "be", which is in turn followed by the focus; the second section is usually a that/who clause. For example:

- (30) It was the Normans who began to build that fine old hall,
(*The Mill on the Floss*, p.127).
- (31) It is only someone looking on from outside that can inject the dangerous thoughts. (L.G. Alexander: *Fluency in English*, p. 188).

The syntactic pattern of (30) and (31) is:

It + be + Focus + that/who-Cl

whereas the Chinese equivalent for (30) and (31) will be something like (32) and (33):

- (32) Shi nuomanren kaishi jianzao nage piaoliang de gulao da ting de
be Normans begin build that fine ATTM. old hall ASP
- (33) ϕ zhiyou wailai de pangguanzhe cai keneng zhuru zhexie weixian sixiang.
only alien ATTM on-looker particle can inject these dangerous thoughts.

The syntactic pattern of (32) and (33) is:

shi + Focus (subject here) + zero-Rel.M + Rel.Cl.

Notice the omission of the initial shi in (33). In sentences with *zhiyou ... cai neng* (only ... can), as here in (33), it is obligatory to omit *shi* as the focus marker since *zhiyou ... cai* is also used for emphasis.

Comparing the above patterns, we find the following differences between them:

One. In English, the initial dummy "it" is obligatory whereas in Chinese, we lack such dummy subjects as "it, there". (Lehmann 1976:453).

Two. In English, the relatives *who(m)*, *whose*, *which*, *that* (also as a conjunction) are abundantly used whereas in Chinese none of them exists.

Three. In English clefts, the stressed focus must be shifted to the position between "be" and the relative *that/who* while in Chinese shi sentences, no focus has to be moved anywhere. In fact, no element of the relatively fixed word order has to be shifted anywhere. If you want to mark any element of a sentence as focus and give it special emphasis, all you have to do is to insert the marker shi immediately before it. Examples are:

- (34) a. It is Bill that/who swims every afternoon.
b. Shi EMP Bill meitian xiaowu youyong.
be Bill everyday afternoon swim
(EMP = Emphasis)
- (35) a. It was last Friday that they met at a conference.
b. Tamen shi EMP shang xingqiwu zai yici huiyi shang xianghui de.
they be last Friday at a conference on meet ASP
- (36) a. It was in this room that she was murdered.
b. Ta shi EMP zai zhege fangjian bei sha de.
she be in this room be killed ASP
- (37) a. It was with a screw that he repaired the lock.
b. Ta shi EMP yong gaizhui xiuhao naba suo de.
he be with screw repair that lock ASP
- (38) a. It is a good dictionary that we need badly.
b. *Shi EMP yiben hao zidian women hen xuyao.
be a good dictionary we badly need
c. women hen xuyao de shi EMP yiben hao zidian
we badly need R.M be a good dictionary
What we need badly is a good dictionary.

(38) is a very good example that does not only clearly illustrate the difference between the way the object of a sentence is given special emphasis in English clefts and Chinese shi sentences, but more importantly, it reveals a hidden fact that there is no such distinction as shi and pseudo-shi sentences in Chinese corresponding to the English clefts and pseudo-clefts respectively. Just as (34) b through (38) b have shown, shi is used only to give special emphasis to a specific element of a sentence. It does not change the word order, nor its basic meaning (apart from the special emphasis it gives to a certain element), and therefore it does not change the basic nature of the original sentence. And still more importantly, this will be some contribution to explain why some linguists such as Harries-Delisle, Akmajian think that clefts and pseudo-clefts in English are interchangeable. Bolinger (1972:31) even states that "the distinction between them is ... 'false'".

Four. In English It-cleft general questions, the dummy "it" and "be" exchange positions and with special questions, the question word is always placed initially. In Chinese, however, the shi general questions show no difference from the corresponding statement except for the question mark if it is written and the intonation if it is spoken. The special questions place the question word immediately after shi if it is the subject of the sentence, but put it in the final position if it is the object of the sentence. Otherwise, it is placed immediately after *shi*. Examples follow:

- (39) a. Is it John who broke the cup?
b. Shi yuehan dapo de beizi?
be John broke ASP cup

- (40) a. Who is it that broke the cup?
b. Shi shei dapo de beizi?
be who broke ASP cup

- (41) a. Where was it that you met?
b. Nimen shi zaina xiangjian de?
you be where meet ASP

- (42) a. What was it that you had for lunch?
b. Ni wufan chi de shi shenme?
you lunch eat ASP be what

Five. When the cleft questions are embedded as object clauses, for example, the "it" and the "be" in the cleft structures have to exchange positions. For example:

- (43) He asked whether it was Tom that lost his job.

(Notice *whether* has to be inserted for the original general questions.)

- (44) We don't know how it was that he passed the exam.

But when the shi questions are embedded, no change occurs at all except that the embedding clause is placed before the shi structure and the question mark removed.

- (45) Ta wen wo shi bu shi ta si zai zhanchang shang.
she ask me be not be he die at battlefield on
She asked me whether it was he that died on the battlefield.

(Notice the insertion of *bushi* after *shi* for the original general question.)

- (46) Ta xiang zhidao nimen shi shenme shihou daoda de.
He want know you be what time arrive ASP
He wants to know when it was that you arrived.

Six. As discussed in the previous section, the English nouns have postmodification as well as premodification. With prepositional phrases, attributive clauses or other long modifying phrases such as participial phrases as modifiers the noun head is always placed before such phrases or clauses while in Chinese the corresponding noun head is always placed after them (In this connection, this is one of the greatest difficulties that hinder Chinese beginners of English from learning it well). For example:

- (47) a. It was the man who came to visit us last week that told us so.
b. Shi shang xingqi Lai kan women de nage ren gaosu
be last week come see us R.M. that man tell women de. (us ASP)

Seven. Incidentally, the "be" in the English clefts changes its forms with time, "is" for the present and "was" for the past, for instance. But the *shi* in Chinese never changes its form, as all the examples containing it in this article have shown.

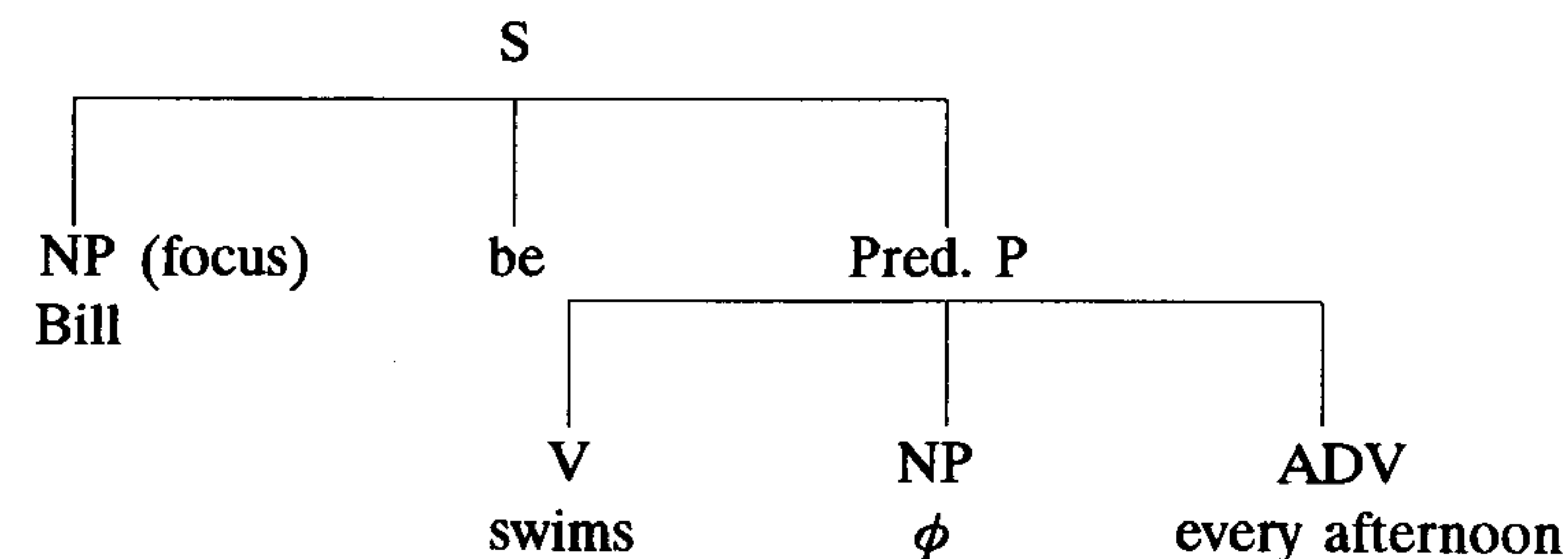
7. Underlying structures

In the previous section, we have been discussing the differences between the English clefts and the Chinese shi sentences. Examples are (34) through (47). But those are syntactic differences only.

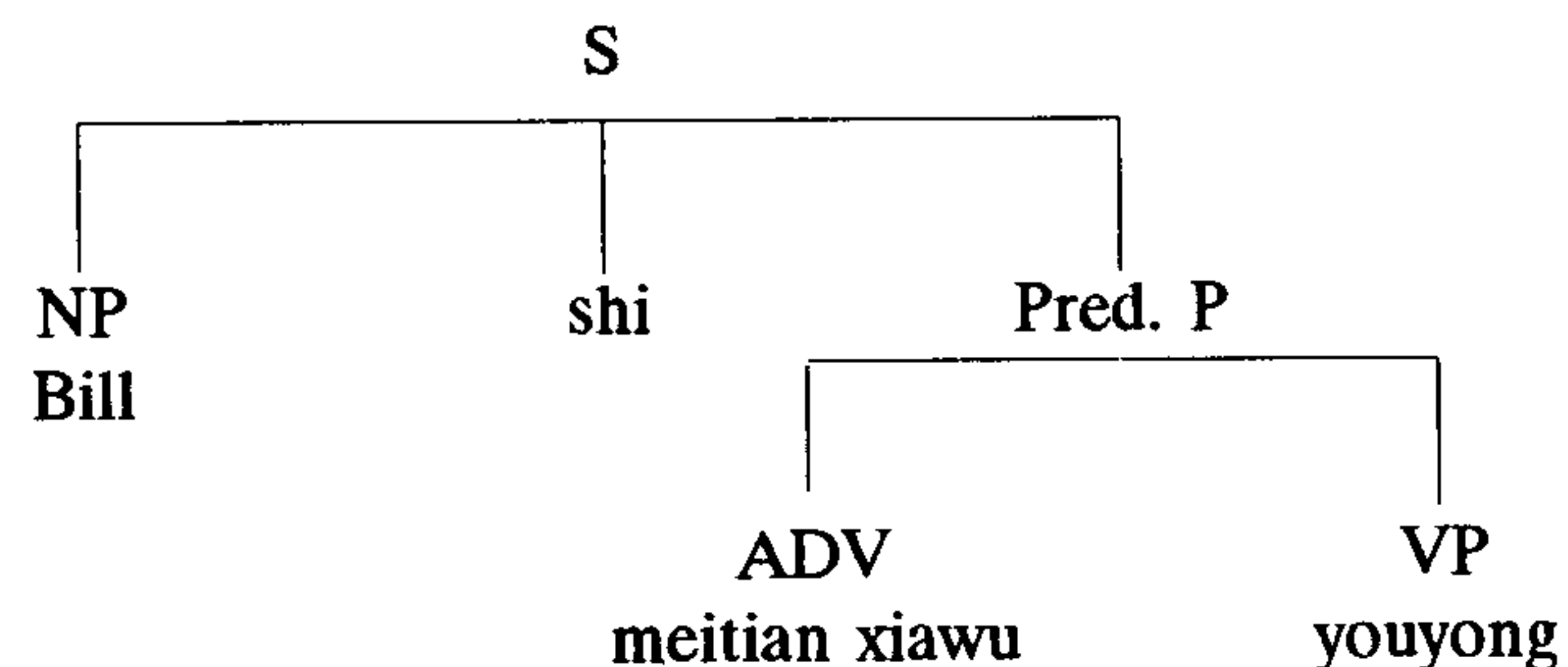
If I stopped here, it would seem as if the differences between the two types were so great that they were incompatible linguistic phenomena, in spite of the similarities discussed in section 4 of this article. So we will discuss the underlying structures of these two types, and see what we will find there.

If we examine the underlying structure of (34) through (38) we will have some idea. (34) is similar to (16) in structure, so they have the same underlying structures.

- (34) a. It is Bill that/who swims every afternoon.



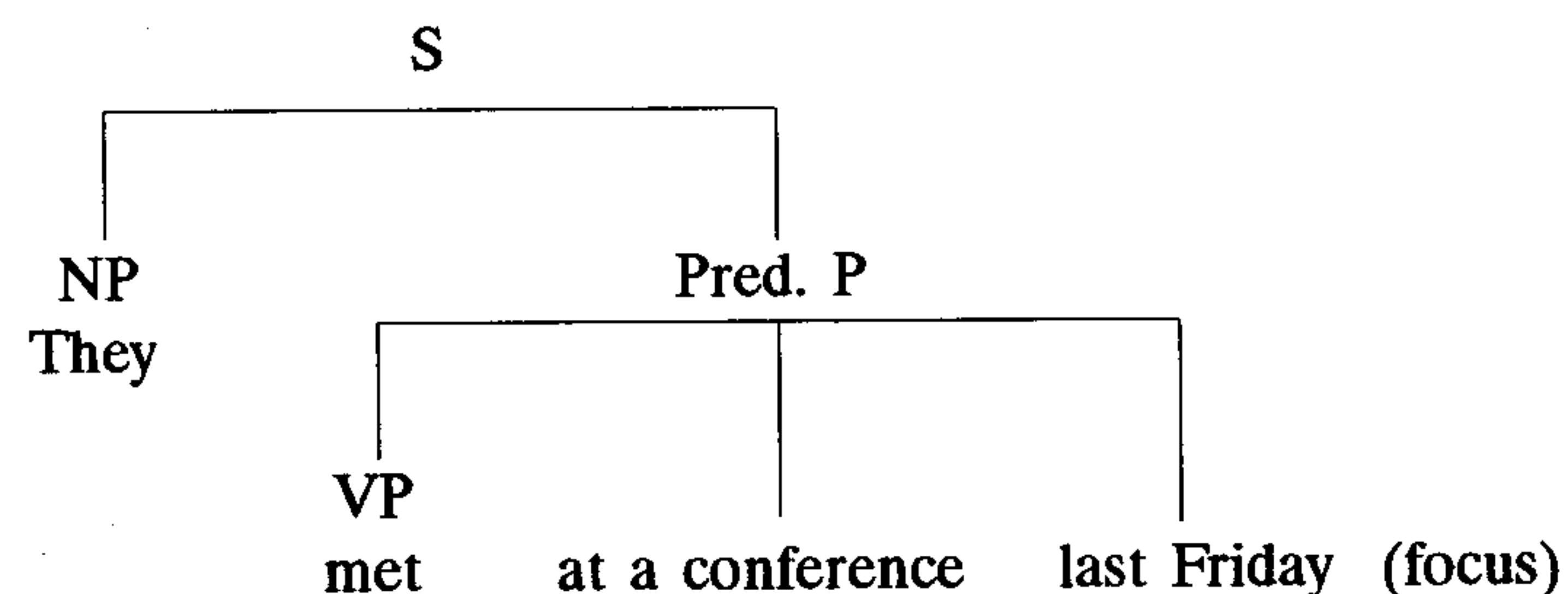
b. Shi Bill meitian xiawu youyong.



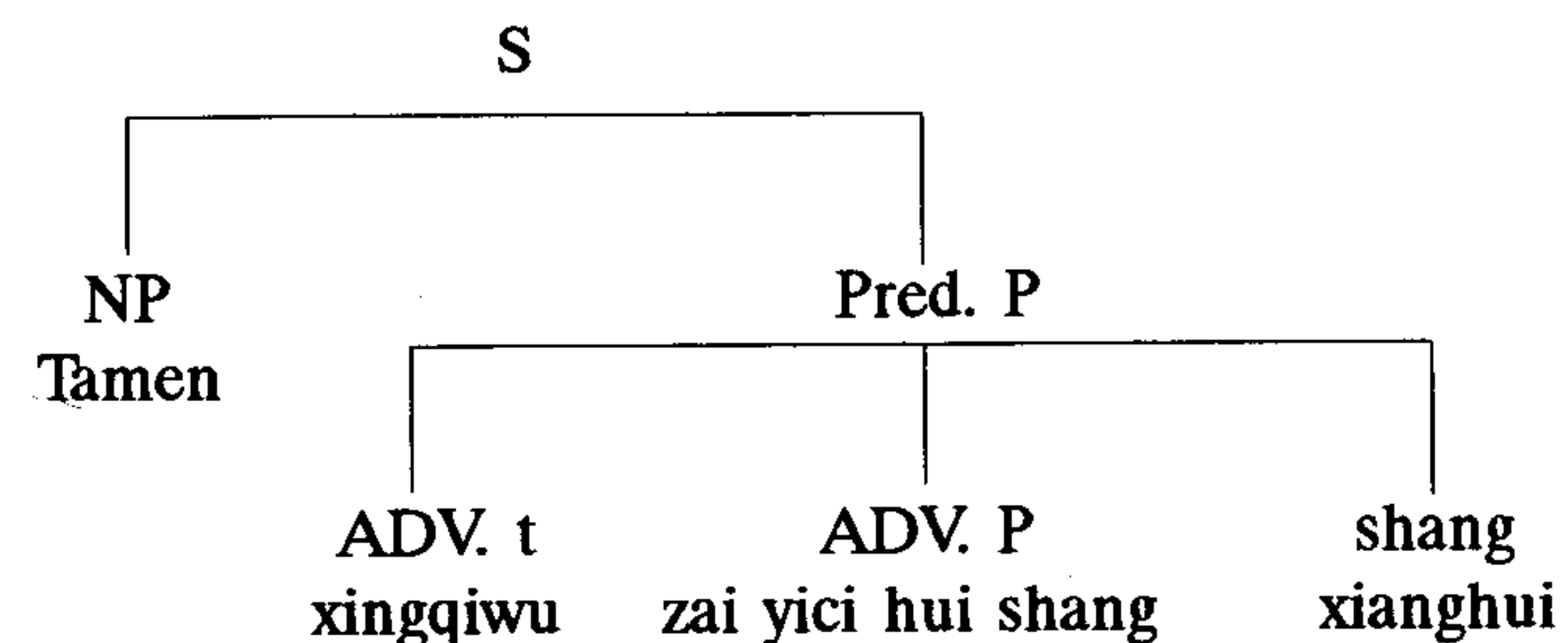
Just as when we analyzed (16) in section 4, we clearly see here in the underlying structures of (34) that the English and Chinese structures have almost no difference.

(35), (36) and (37) are similar to one another in that all of them emphasize an element of ADV, (35) stressing ADV.t, (36), ADV.p and (37), ADV.m. So, all we have to do is to have a look at underlying structures of one of the three, and we will understand those of the other two. Now we will look at (35).

a. It was last Friday that they met at a conference.



b. Tamen shi shang xingqiwu zai yici huiyi shang xianghui de.



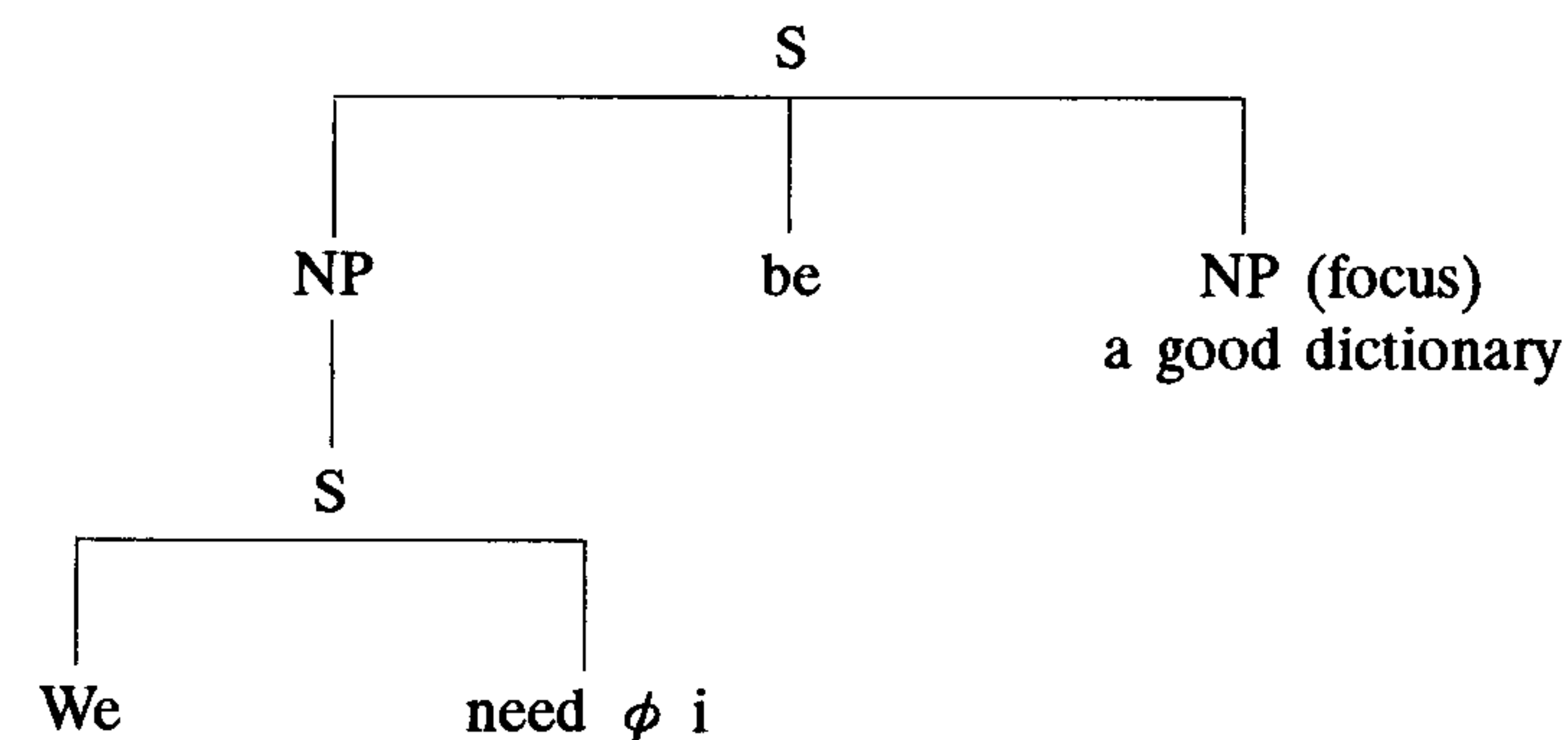
Some linguists such as Pinkham and Hankamer (1975) distinguish between deep and shallow clefts. They regard all non-NP focus sentences as shallow clefts. And such shallow clefts have the same underlying structure as their uncleaved coun-

terparts. That is to say, (35)a and (35)b have the same underlying structures as (48)a and (48)b respectively:

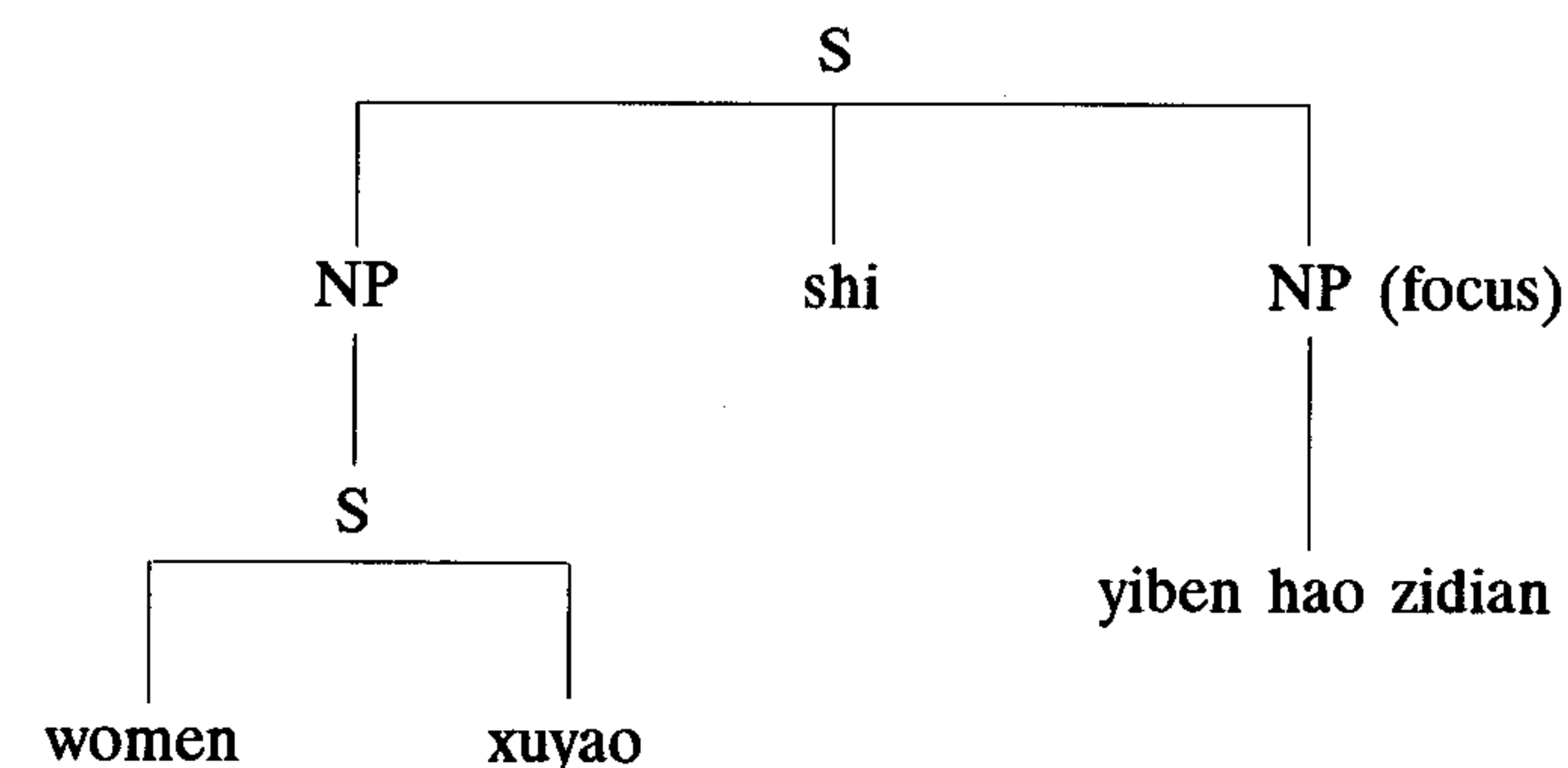
- (48) a. They met at a conference last Friday.
b. Tamen shang xingqiwu zai yici huiyi shang xianghui de.

(38)a has the following underlying structure:

It is a good dictionary that we need badly.



b. Women hen xuyao de shi yi ben hao zidian.



Through the above analysis of the underlying structures of the English clefts and the Chinese shi sentences, we find basically no difference between them, in spite of the surface differences that we have discussed in section 5. Considering the fact that many languages have similar structures for contrastive emphasis (Greenberg 1978), we wonder if this article might be considered some contribution to the study of universality in this language phenomenon.

Just as English clefts have constraints, so the Chinese shi sentences have their own. But that deserves a separate article.

8. Summary

To sum up, we have attempted in this article to discuss the similarities and differences between the clefts in English and the shi sentences in Chinese. When the contrastive emphasis or focus falls on the grammatical subject of a sentence,

the above two structures are extremely similar to each other except for the fact that English is famous for its dummy "it" and relatives *who/that*, etc, whereas Chinese has none of such linguistic items. If the focus happens to be the object of a sentence, the English object, like other elements, is moved after "be" *who/that* in the cleft. The Chinese object, however, remains where it is and the *shi* is obligatorily placed before it to give it special emphasis. Then the *shi* sentence becomes something more like the English Wh-cleft rather than the It-cleft. This shows that in Chinese there is no such distinction of "shi" and "pseudo-shi" sentences corresponding to the English cleft and pseudo-clefts, respectively. This may also be a support to those linguists who advocate that the distinction between WH-clefts and It-clefts is false. It is certainly not a deep structure distinction.

At the level of surface structure, the two types of sentences in both languages seem to be greatly different from each other in spite of their similarities. But after an analysis of their underlying structures we find that there is little difference between them. One wonders if this investigation can be considered some contribution to the study of the universals of world languages, considering the fact that many languages share this feature however different they may look at the surface structure level. (See Harries-Delisle 1978.)

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