

# Finiteness in Mandarin Chinese and the basic syntax of *kěnéng*

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In a recent article, Lin Tzong-Hong (2011) argues in favor of the [ $\pm$ finiteness] distinction in Mandarin Chinese by using the contrast between the modal auxiliary verb *néng* ‘can, may’ and the adverb *kěnéng* ‘probably’. Although Chinese certainly makes the [ $\pm$ finiteness] distinction, the crucial problem is that Lin (2011) misanalyses the adverb *kěnéng* ‘probably’ as a modal auxiliary with optional subject raising, in contrast to the modal auxiliary *néng* ‘can, may’ for which he claims obligatory subject raising.

Our aim in this squib is simply to show that *kěnéng* is an adverb, not a modal auxiliary, and we leave aside the problems with Lin’s raising analysis for modal auxiliaries proper such as *néng* (cf. the short bibliography on modal auxiliaries below).

In fact, Chinese only has an adjective *kěnéng* ‘probable, possible’ (cf. 1) and an adverb *kěnéng* ‘probably’ (cf. 2-3), but no modal auxiliary *kěnéng*, an information easily retrievable from any good grammar manual (cf. among others Lü et al. 2000). Note that adjectives in Chinese do not require the copula *shì* ‘be’:

- (1) Zhè wánquán kěnéng / bù dà kěnéng.  
this completely probable/ NEG too probable  
‘This is entirely plausible/ is not too probable.’

*Kěnéng* as a sentential adverb can either precede or follow the subject (cf. 2). This well-known phenomenon is misinterpreted by Lin as “optional subject raising” of *ta* ‘s/he’.

- (2) {Kěnéng} tā {kěnéng} yě zhīdao zhè jiàn shì.  
probably 3SG probably also know this Cl matter  
‘{Probably}, he {probably} also knows about this matter.’
- (3) Tāmen hěn kěnéng hái zài kāi -zhe huì ne!  
3Pl very probably still PROG have-DUR meeting SFP  
‘They are very probably still in the meeting.’

Like many other adverbs, *kěnéng* can be modified by degree adverbs, e.g. *hěn* ‘very’ (cf. (3)).

High VP-level adverbs (e.g. *yě* ‘also’ and *hái* ‘still’ in (2-3) above) are excluded from the complement of modal auxiliaries such as *néng* ‘can’:

- (4) Tā jīntiān yě {huì / yào / kěyǐ/ néng} (\*yě) qù Běijīng.  
3SG today also will/ be.going.to/ may/ can also go Beijing  
‘She will/can/may also // is also going to go to Beijing today.’

The auxiliaries *huì* ‘will’, *yào* ‘be going to’, *néng* ‘can’ and *kěyǐ* ‘may’ cannot be combined with each other (cf. (5)). By contrast, the adverb *kěnéng* ‘probably’ can naturally precede any of these auxiliaries (cf. (6)).

- (5) \*Tā huì {kěyǐ/ néng/ yào} lái.  
3SG will may/ can/ be.going.to come

(6a) Tā kěnéng yě {kěyǐ/ néng/ yào} lai.  
 3SG probably also may/ can / be.going.to come  
 ‘She can/may probably also come. / She is probably also going to come.’

(6b) [<sub>TopP</sub> Kěnéng [<sub>TP</sub> tā yě {kěyǐ/ néng/ yào} lai]].  
 probably 3SG also may/ can / be.going.to come  
 ‘Probably, she can/may also come. / Probably, she is also going to come.’

Recall that *kěnéng* ‘probably’ as a sentential adverb can also precede the subject (cf. (6b)); this confirms that (6a) is not a case of auxiliary “stacking”.

Furthermore, the adverb *kěnéng* ‘probably’ precedes the verbal projection, negation included (cf. (8)). Auxiliaries, however, must follow negation:

(7) Tā bù {kěyǐ/ néng/ yào} (\*bù) qù Běijīng.  
 3SG NEG may/ can / be.going.to NEG go Beijing  
 ‘She is not going to/ may not/cannot go to Beijing.’

(8) Tā kěnéng [bù {kěyǐ/ néng/ yào} (\*bù) qù Běijīng].  
 3SG probably NEG may/ can / be.going.to NEG go Beijing  
 ‘She is probably not going to/ may not/cannot go to Beijing.’

Note that *bù* in *bùkěnéng* ‘improbably, impossibly’ is part of the adverb (cf. Lü et al. 2000: 337), not a syntactic negation to be construed with the following verbal projection, as evidenced by the acceptability of *bùkěnéng* in the pre-subject position:

(9) Zhè ge jiǎndān de tí mù , {bùkěnéng} tā {bùkěnéng} bù zhī dào zěn me zuò  
 this CL easy SUB exercise impossibly SG impossibly NEG know how do  
 ‘This simple exercise, he impossibly does not know how to do it.’

*Bùkěnéng* is thus on a par with the adverbs *bùxìng* ‘unfortunately’, *bùqǐào* ‘regrettably’ etc.

Aspect markers are excluded in the complement of modal auxiliaries. The verbal projection preceded and modified by the adverb *kěnéng*, however, can naturally contain aspect markers, such as progressive *zài* and perfective *-le*.

(10) \*Zhāngsān {kěyǐ/ néng/ huì} zài chī Běijīng kǎoyā.  
 Zhangsan may/ can / will PROG eat Peking duck

(11a) Zhāngsān kěnéng / dàgài / yěxǔ / yíding zài chī Běijīng kǎoyā.  
 Zhangsan probably/ probably/ maybe/ certainly PROG eat Peking duck  
 ‘Zhangsan is probably/probably/perhaps/certainly eating Peking duck.’

(11b) Zhāngsān kěnéng / dàgài / yěxǔ / yíding yǐjīng dào -le Běijīng.  
 Zhangsan probably/ probably/ maybe/ certainly already arrive-PERF Beijing  
 ‘Zhangsan has probably/probably/perhaps/certainly already arrived at Beijing.’

*Kěnéng* in (11) clearly behaves on a par with other sentence level adverbs, among them its quasi-synonym *dàgài* ‘probably, approximately’.

To conclude, *kěnéng* ‘probably’ is not an auxiliary and hence cannot “trigger” optional subject raising, either. Instead, *kěnéng* is a sentential adverb which can either precede or follow the subject. The “pair” it forms with the modal auxiliary *néng* ‘can’ is reminiscent of similar pairs found in English and French: *may* - *maybe*, *peut* - *peut-être*.

## References

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