Parameter Change in Early Middle Chinese

In this presentation, I propose an analysis of movement asymmetries in Late Archaic Chinese (LAC; 5th-3rd centuries BCE) and the subsequent loss of this asymmetry in Early Middle Chinese. In LAC, subjects could freely undergo movement, while object movement was subject to certain restrictions. I illustrate this with topicalization. LAC was an SVO language in which the subject typically appeared in clause-initial position, as in (1a). An object topic could also appear to the left of the subject, but topicalized objects were always resumed by pronouns, as in (1b). Subjects, were never resumed by a pronoun.

(1) a. 鄭伯亦惡之。 (Zuo\zhuan, Xi 31)
Zheng bo yi wu zhi.
‘And the Earl of Zheng also disliked him.’

b. 子路，人告之以有過。 (Mencius 3)
Zilu ren gao zhi yi you guo.
‘Zilu, someone told him he made a mistake.’

I account for this asymmetry within the framework of C-T Inheritance (Chomsky 2008 and subsequent work). I propose that some languages lack C-T inheritance altogether, because C in these languages carries only a single feature driving movement, specifically the \([u\phi]\) feature necessary for licensing the subject. Consequently, subject movement in these languages is free, a reflex of valuing nominative case.

(2) \([CP \, DP_{[\phi, \text{NOM}]} \, [C' \, C_{[\phi]} \, [v \, DP_{[\phi; \text{CASE:} \, }] \, \langle [v' \, v \, VP \, ]]\,]]\]

The object in (1b), however, is prevented from moving to [Spec, CP], because the \([u\phi]\) probe there has already been valued by the subject. Consequently, an object topic can only be base generated as an adjunct and resumed by a pronoun in argument position. I show that this asymmetry is mirrored in other movement contexts like relativization and wh-question formation.

I further show in this presentation that the extraction asymmetry began to be lost in Early Middle Chinese, beginning in the 1st century BCE. Certain morphological changes in the language forced acquirers to posit separate features on \(C\) to allow movement of an object over a nominative subject, which is the case modern Sinitic languages.