

Modal Adverb “Ke” as a Focus of Sensitivity

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Abstract: *The adverb “Ke” displays various modal functions, which has been received a great deal of attention. Some scholars give a unified explanation for the functions of the modal adverb “Ke”, regarding “Ke” as a sensitive operator marking a topical focus. However, such facts as the following are inconsistent with the nature of a topical focus, i.e., “Ke” can appear in a separate sentence, the constituents in front of “Ke” can be omitted, and the subject sometimes doesn't convey contrastive meaning; These. We consider the role of “Ke” is to highlight the constituent following “Ke” is focus and, therefore, deem that “Ke” should be a focus-sensitive operator.*

Keywords: Ke; Focus; Focus-sensitive Operator; Topical Focus-sensitive Operator

1. Introduction. The adverb “Ke” is one of the most commonly used oral words in modern Chinese and one of the issues in grammatical studies. Such dictionaries as *Eight hundreds Words in Modern Chinese*, *Modern Chinese Dictionary*, *An Interpretation of Some Functional Words in Modern Chinese* and *Dictionary of Functional Words in Modern Chinese* include the item “Ke” and list its different modalities and meanings in different sentence patterns, which has contributed our understanding of “Ke” in different contexts and laid a good foundation for further study. Yang (1993), Chen (2002), Luo & Shao (2006) provided a detailed description and analysis of the adverb “Ke”. They thought that the widely-used “Ke” could appear in various sentence patterns with an indication of different meanings, that the adverb “Ke” could be put in front of the predicative adjective or verb, that if there were some other adverbs in front of the predicate, the adverb “Ke” should be used before these adverbs, and that the adverb “Ke” usually bore an unstressed tone.

Liu & Tang (2001) pointed out that “although all the three dictionaries *Eight hundreds Words in Modern Chinese*, *Dictionary of Functional Words in Modern Chinese* and *An Interpretation of Some Functional Words in Modern Chinese* have mentioned the

modality-expressing function of “Ke” and focused on the richness in modality and functional diversity, which deserves our affirmation, the over-detailed description leads to the failure to reveal its core semantic and pragmatic functions”. We propose an analysis of “Ke” from the pragmatic perspective and deem that “Ke” is a Topical focus-sensitive Operator with the role of marking a topical focus and that this kind of function determines the external forms and meanings of “Ke”. The present article, avoiding trivial descriptions, intends to explore into the nature of “Ke”, which can enlighten further study of “Ke”. Sun (2002), Cheng (2005) and so on regarded “Ke” as a topical focus-sensitive operator. However, “Ke” can appear in a separate sentence without showing contrastive meaning, and also the constituents in front of it can be omitted. Such facts contradict with the properties of a topical focus. Contrastively, we hold the idea that in nature “Ke” should be a focus-sensitive operator marking the following constituents as a focus.

2. Focus Types and Focus Markers. The term “focus” appeared in the field of optics at first and later was borrowed in many other fields. Accordingly, this term has gained various understandings and interpretations in different fields. “Focus” in linguistic field is contrastive with “background”, i.e., it is a constituent that the speaker thinks so important as to be emphasized by linguistic means. The concept of focus is involved in such linguistic levels as pragmatics, text linguistics, syntax, phonology and many others and has become a new hot topic after introduced into Chinese linguistics since the 1980s. Many scholars, such as Xu & Li (1993), Fang (1995), Liu (1995), Liu & Xu (1998), Xu & Liu (1998, 2003), Xu (2001), Dong (2003), Yuan (2003) and so on, combined their respective theoretical background with careful observation of facts in Chinese and explored deeply into such areas about focus as its nature, classification, marking and so on, drawing some highly credible conclusions. Research on the area focus has come to a high level, although many different opinions still exist about the understanding of focus.

2.1. Focus Is a Nonlinear Grammatical Category. We hold the idea that focus can be divided into two related parts: focus selection and focus manifestation. The selection of focus involves a course of choosing a target that is reckoned relatively important by the speaker and needs to receive special emphasis. Such a concept has nothing to do with syntax and it is only associated with discourse environment and the speaker’s own preferences, which is a pure pragmatic and psychological issue. But the selected focus must get reflections in the linguistic form, and if the reflection is manifested through grammatical means, it will yields a variety of formal changes in linear structure of the sentence, which is an issue in the syntax level.

Focus can be projected onto the syntactic level to form a purely-formal nonlinear grammatical feature, which we mark as [+F]. This grammatical feature, like other nonlinear grammatical features, is not a syntactic component. Therefore, it cannot exist alone; instead, it must be attached to some other component and get manifested in the linear structure of the sentence by using some syntactic means such as marker adding, moving, overlapping and so on. Such a course is called focus highlight or focus feature instantiation. The

issue that focus feature is assigned to some grammatical component and gets manifested through various grammatical means is a purely grammatical issue irrelevant with pragmatic level. Focus is not a syntactic component, but a feature attached to some component. Just as Liu & Xu (1998) puts it, "Focus can exist in any part of the sentence and, therefore, it is not a component of syntactic structure. Certainly, some means of manifesting focus do exist in language. Focus also has connection with syntax, but the constituent as focus always possesses a structural position, for example, some focuses are syntactic objects, some focuses are syntactic adverbials, etc."

2.2. Focus Types. Type of focus is an important area of focus research. Liu & Xu (1998) divided focus property into two independent features, [prominence] / [contrast], according to the different location of the background. The focus that takes the constituents inside the sentence as the background bears the feature of [+prominence]; the focus that takes the words outside the sentence or cognitive knowledge as the background bears the feature of [+contrast]. Accordingly, they classify focus into three categories: natural focus [+prominence] [-contrast], topical focus [-prominence] [+contrast], and contrastive focus [+prominence] [-contrast].

Topical focus can only get stressed by taking some component outside the sentence or people's cognitive knowledge as the background, instead of taking some other constituents inside the sentence as the background. Topical focus is not more prominent than other parts inside the same sentences since the sentence may and should have other prominent parts. Liu & Xu (1998) and Liu (2008) argued that topical focus bears both the property of topic and the property of focus. Liu & Xu (1998) argued that "lian (even)" in the pattern "lian...dou..." in the modern Chinese plays a function of marking the topical focus and is a typical topical focus marker. Liu & Tang (2001) argued that "Ke" in modern Chinese plays a role of marking the topical focus and is a topical focus-sensitive operator.

3. "Ke" Could Not Be Regarded as a Topical Focus-sensitive Operator. Liu & Tang (2001) held the opinion that the appearance of "Ke" made the present sentence itself not independent in regard of the context value and required a background sentence and a topic in the present sentence, which formed a contrastive relationship with some relevant component in the background. Obviously, as a modal adverb, the real modality (i.e., the pragmatic function) is to highlight the topic structure in the sentence. We might as well take those adverbs that play this kind of function as topical focus-sensitive operators".

Liu and Tang had moved out from the way of describing and analyzing carefully and of focusing on the various modality types that "Ke" has manifested. Based on the summary and analysis of previous research, they described "Ke" from a new perspective, discovered the internal consistency in the hidden "divergences" and "diversities", drew a general conclusion and push the research on "Ke" to a new height. However, in our opinion, it is a misunderstanding to take a modal adverb "Ke" as a topical focus-sensitive operator since "Ke" can appear in an independent sentence of any linguistic environment; the essential function of "Ke" isn't to highlight the topic structure but to remind the listeners that the

following part is the focus, and so it should be regarded as a focus-sensitive operator in nature.

3.1. **“Ke” Could Exist in a Self-sufficient Sentence.** A topical focus is the highlighted constituent with the sentence-external constituents as the background. Since it is not more prominent than other sentence-internal constituents, the appearance of a topical focus must presuppose a sentence-external background, or the sentence itself would be able to be accepted. Liu and Tang (2001) believed that the appearance of “Ke” makes the “ke”-contained sentence cannot be self-sufficient and so requires a background sentence and a topic in the “ke”-contained sentence, which forms a contrastive relationship with the relevant constituent in the background sentence. For example:

- (1) Ni qu, wo *ke* bu qu.
You will go (to some place) while I shall not go.
- (2) Xiao-Zhang hao, Xiao-Li *ke* bu hao.
Mr. Zhang is kind while Mr. Li is not kind.

In these examples, the subjects “wo” and “Xiao-Li” in the latter clauses respectively make a contrast with the subjects “ni” and “Xiao-Zhang” in the former clauses, causing the shift from the subject of the latter clause to the topical focus.

In the context where a “ke”- contained sentence appears, there must exist a background and a pre-defined topical focus. In other words, one of the reasons why the modal adverb “Ke” is defined as a topical focus-sensitive operator is that the appearance of “Ke” leads the sentence to be not self-sufficient pragmatically and requires a contrastive relationship between this sentence and other sentences. But in the practical corpora, the “ke”-sentence can exist independently of a background sentence, and self-sufficient “ke”-sentences account a large proportion. Here are a few examples:

- (3) Ni dao chaguan jiusi qu, *ke* qianwan liudianshen. (Lao She *Chaguan*)
If you go to a teahouse or a bar, you must be cautious.
- (4) Zhege wenti *ke* bu-jiandan, dei haohao yanjiu-yixia. (quotation from *Eight hundreds Words in Modern Chinese*)
This problem is actually not easy and needs to be studied well.
- (5) Zhiyu yeli hui-bu-hui you nuanqi ma, *ke* bu-gan kending.
As for whether there will be heating at night, we dare not to be sure.
- (6) Liang-ge huangdilaouer bei ren fulu, dui shui shuolai *ke* dou bu-shi timian de shi.
The fact that the two emperors has been captured would not be a decent thing to anyone.

In these examples, the appearance of “Ke” could add various additional modalities. Without “Ke”, these sentences are still legal, only lacking original modalities, while the appearance of “Ke” does not make the original self-sufficient sentence to be not dependent and not self-sufficient. Meanwhile, “Ke” in these sentences does not play a function of

highlighting the topic structure. Instead, it reminds the listeners to pay attention to the following syntactic constituent and suggests that the following constituent is the key point of the sentence and is the focus of the sentence.

The “Ke”-sentences can be self-sufficient without linguistic backgrounds. This indicates that the constituent in front of the modal adverb “Ke” is not highlighted by being contrasted with other sentences and, therefore, not a topical focus. As a result, “Ke” is not a topical focus marker as Liu and Tang pointed, either.

3.2. The Omission of the Constituent in Front of “Ke”. If “Ke”, a non-obligatory component of a sentence, were a topical focus-sensitive operator, then its main function should be marking a topical focus. Therefore, the appearance of “Ke” should presuppose the existence of a topical focus in the sentence. If there is not any topical focus in a sentence, the topical focus-sensitive operator “Ke” will not be able to stay in the sentence. However, there exist a large amount of sentences with the omission of a subject in the data.

(7) *Ke bie ku le, zai ku jiu rang xidashan ren ba ni bei-qu le.* (Chen Yingshi *Shanli de Shijie*)

Don't cry again, or we would ask west-mountain people shoulder you away.

(8) *Zan lia dinghun de shi ni kan hao-bu-hao? Bu-yuan jiu ba, ke bie gaosu bieren.* (Jun Qing *Humen “Quan Zi”*)

Are you willing to be engaged to me? If not, then please do not tell others.

(9) *Ni shi yi-dui zhi zhang, Ke dei duo wei women qunzhong zhaoxiang a!* (quotation from *An Interpretation of Some Functional Words in Modern Chinese*)

You are leader of the team, please think more for us masses.

(10) Zhang Leren: *Lv Bin, huilai le? Hui kaide zenmeyang?*

Lv Bin: *Ke hao la!* (Lao She *Chunhua Qiushi*)

Zhang Leren: Has Lv Bin come back? How about the meeting?

Lv Bin: It couldn't have been much better.

In these examples, no subjects appear in the “Ke”-contained clauses, which indicates the non-existence of any topical focus. Accordingly, the existence of the modal adverb “Ke” in the sentence is not to mark a topical focus.

3.3. The Non-contrasting of the Constituent in Front of “Ke”. A topical focus is a focus that takes a sentence-external constituent as the background and, therefore, whether the constituent in front of “Ke” expresses the meaning of contrast is an important evidence to define a topical focus. The analysis of some data shows that the subjects of many “Ke”-contained sentences do not convey any meaning of contrasting. For example,

(11) *Ni-men de fan ke zhen xiang a!* (Wang Suo: *Biannibu de Gushi*)

Your meal is really delicious!

(12) *Zhe-wei ke shi damingdingding de Wangjuzhang.*

This is just the well-known director Wang.

- (13) Jiaoyuju *ke* bushi wo yi-ge-ren de a! (Lao She *Sishi Tongtang*)
The does not belong to me only.

“Ke” in the examples (11-13) is used in a single sentence. The sentence-initial nominal constituents “nimen de fan”, “zhe-wei” and “jiaoyuju” do not contrast with any other constituent and no one of them is the topical focus of the sentence.

When “Ke” exists in the verb-complement structure, the sentence-initial nominal constituent does not express meaning of contrasting, either. For example,

- (14) Shang le an, zhuxi shuo shui zheme liang, youde *ke* zhen shufu a! (People’s Daily Newspaper, 1993)

After going on shore, the chairman said that the water was so cool and refreshing that he had swum so comfortably.

- (15) Xianzai Zhaoyang dou name da le, shijian guode *ke* zhen kuai a! (Zhao Tianyuan *Youmo Zhangzhe Chen Yun*)

Now Zhao Yang has been such a grown-up. How time flie!

In the verb-complement structure, the emphasized part is the complement of the verb. The constituent in front of the modal adverb “Ke” is the predicate of the sentence, not the subject of the sentence, and it does not bear any contrastive meaning. This predicate is neither what the sentence stress falls on nor the topical focus of the sentence.

3.4. The Constituent in Front of “Ke” Needs to Be Marked by Stress. A topical focus-sensitive operator plays the function of marking the constituent in front of it as a topical focus. Liu & Tang (2001) argued that “Ke” is such a topical focus-sensitive operator. However, if the constituents in front of “Ke” is not a single NP but a series of NPs or grammatical constituents, these constituents will not get stressed, contrary to what Liu & Tang (2001) said, because in such a case stress can’t fall on several adjacent grammatical constituents. The sentence-initial topical constituent is not marked by “Ke”, but by the stress. For example:

- (16) a. Jianglai nimen *ke* yao haohaoxuexi, *ke* qianwan bie xiang ni baba.
b. Jianglai nimen *ke* yao haohaoxuexi, *ke* qianwan bie xiang ni baba.
a. In the future you should study hard, please don't model your dad.
b. In the future you should study hard, please don't model your dad.

In the example (16), both of the two constituents “jianglai” and “nimen” are placed in front of “Ke” and their positions can be exchanged with each other. The position of the stress is only associated with what the speaker intends to emphasize, not with the position of “Ke”.

These real linguistic data show that the modal verb “Ke” can convey various modality meanings, that it can appear in a self-sufficient sentence, that the constituent in front of it can be omitted and may not express the contrastive meaning, that what the speaker

emphasizes is marked by the stress and not relevant with the position of “Ke”. All of these facts indicate that the constituent in front of “Ke” is not a topical focus and, accordingly, “Ke” is not a topical focus-sensitive operator.

4. **“Ke” Is a Focus-sensitive Operator.** The function of the modal adverb “Ke” in a sentence is not to mark the contrastive meaning of the constituent in front of it, but to manifest that the constituent following it is what the speaker intends to emphasize and is the focus of the sentence. Liu & Tang (2001) also pointed out that “Ke” can cause the constituent following it to become a contrastive focus. According to the criteria to judge a focus marker put forward by Zhang & Fang (1996), we can conclude that the modal adverb “Ke” is not a typical focus marker, but a focus-sensitive operator with the function of marking a focus because the modal adverb “Ke” bears its own special modal meaning, although it plays the function of marking the constituent following it is the focus of the sentence, it is not an essential element of a linear sentence structure as its omission does not affect the legality of the sentence, and it is not where what the sentence stress falls on.

4.1. **“Ke” Can Mark the Focus of a Sentence.** Focus, as a pragmatic factor, can be transformed into a nonlinear grammatical feature [+F] in grammatical level. Theoretically, the focus feature [+F] can be assigned to any syntactic constituent and thus a focus yields in grammatical level. Focus can be manifested through the phonetic means, grammatical means or other linguistic means. Among these means, the addition of a focus marker is an important means to instantialise the focus feature. And a focus-sensitive operator can make a focus be highlighted to help the listener understand it. “Ke” can make the constituent following it be highlighted, easy for the listener to notice, and thus become a focus. For a sentence, the addition of “Ke” results in that the constituent following “Ke” is the focus of the sentence. Thus, the different positions of “Ke” make different focuses for the same sentence and these “Ke”-contained sentences still share the same basic meaning, only with different emphasized parts. Here is an example,

- (17) a. Women mingtian zai luyinpeng yong xinshebei gei na-pianzi lu zhutige.
b. Women *ke* yao zai mingtian zai luyinpeng yong xinshebei gei na-pianzi lu zhutige.
c. Women mingtian *ke* yao zai luyinpeng yong xinshebei gei na-pianzi lu zhutige.
d. Women mingtian zai luyinpeng *ke* yao yong xinshebei gei na-pianzi lu zhutige.
e. Women mingtian zai luyinpeng yong xinshebei *ke* yao gei na-pianzi lu zhutige.
a. We will record the theme song of that film with new equipment in the studio tomorrow.
b. It is tomorrow that we will record the theme song of that film with new equipment in the studio.
c. It is in the studio that we will record the theme song of that film with new equipment tomorrow.
d. It is with new equipment that we will record the theme song of that film in

the studio tomorrow.

e. It is the theme song of that film that we will record with new equipment in the studio tomorrow.

4.2. **“Ke” Can Be Omitted.** “Ke” can be omitted as it is not an essential element of a sentence, though it expresses various types of modalities. The sentence with the omission of “Ke” does not change in its basic meaning, only with a slight change in pragmatic level. Accordingly, many sentences without the modal adverb “Ke” can be added a “Ke” without changing the sentence meaning. Here are some examples:

- (18) Zhe-ge wenti (ke) feichang nan, women yao haohao yanjiu yixa.
This problem is (really) very difficult and we need to study it well.
- (19) Lao Wang, tian (ke) yinle, women dei ganjin ba guzi shou-qilai le.
Wang, it is (so) cloudy, and so we must hasten to put the millet away.
- (20) Ding dage, wo (ke) zoule. (Lao She *Qingnian Tujidui*)
Brother Ding, I will (really) go.

In examples (18-20), the constituents following “feichang nan”, “yin” and “zou” are what the speaker emphasizes and where the sentence stress falls on. Despite that these “Ke”s express different modalities, all of them have the function of reminding the listener to pay attention to the following parts. The omission of these “Ke”s do not affect the basic sentence meaning, but it lead the sentences to lose the reminding function and to turn into pure statements.

4.3. **“Ke” Is Adjacent to “Shi” and “Jiu”.** “Ke” is a focus-sensitive operator with the main function of reminding the listener that the following constituent is a focus. In real data, “Ke” is often adjacent to “shi”, forming the sequence of “Ke shi”, which is different from the “keshi” with adversative meaning, as in examples (21-22).

- (21) Yulai *ke shi* conglai mei shuoguo huang.
Yulai has never lied indeed.
- (22) Tamen *ke shi* buguan zhexie liyou de a.
They will never care about these reasons indeed.

In such a case, both “Ke” and “shi” can be omitted without changing the original sentence meaning, which is shown in example (23).

- (23) a. Yulai *ke shi* conglai mei shuoguo huang.
b. Yulai *shi* conglai mei shuoguo huang.
c. Yulai *ke* conglai mei shuoguo huang.
d. Yulai conglai mei shuoguo huang.
Yulai has never lied indeed.

In the same way, “Ke” is often adjacent to “jiu” and both “Ke” and “jiu” can be omitted without changing the original sentence meaning, which is shown in example (24).

- (24) a. “Gemener, jie-bu-jie,” ta you shuo, “bu jie wo *ke jiu* zou le”.
b. “Gemener, jie-bu-jie,” ta you shuo, “bu jie wo *jiu* zou le”.
c. “Gemener, jie-bu-jie,” ta you shuo, “bu jie wo *ke* zou le”.
d. “Gemener, jie-bu-jie,” ta you shuo, “bu jie wo zou le”.
“Buddy, will you borrow it to me or not?” he said again, “if not, I’ll go.”

Yulai has never lied indeed. A sentence may contain multiple focal elements, but it allows only one element that the speaker thinks most important to be particularly highlighted. This element is manifested to be a single strong focus. “Shi” is the most typical focus marker and means that the following element is a strong focus. “Ke”, as well as “jiu”, is a focus-sensitive operator and should be positioned in front of a strong focus, resulting that “Ke” is adjacent to “shi” and “jiu” in the linear sentence structure. This phenomenon is caused by the function of highlighting the focus played by “Ke” as a focus-sensitive operator.

5. Conclusion.

“Ke”, as one of the most commonly used adverbs in modern spoken Chinese, played a variety of modal functions and has been a widely concern in linguistics. Liu & Tang (2001) argued that “Ke’ is a typical topical focus-sensitive operator”. But our analysis of amounts of data, inconsistent with their conclusion, shows that “Ke” can appear in a separate sentence, that the constituent in front of “Ke” can be omitted, and that the subject sometimes doesn’t convey contrastive meaning. “Ke” plays a role of marking the constituent following “Ke” as the part that the speaker intends to highlight, which is roughly identical to a focus marker in grammatical property. To sum up, we deem that “Ke” should be a typical focus-sensitive operator.

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