



香港中文大學  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

# Third Factor and Register Grammar: A Problem and its Resolution

**Prof. Shengli FENG**

Beijing Language and Culture University and CUHK

**Date:** March 24, 2025 (Monday)  
**Time:** 10:00am - 11:30am (Hong Kong Time, UTC +8)  
**Venue:** Rm 220 Fung King Hei Building,  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong



## Abstract

In English, the 'contact clause' (subject-less relative clause), such as '*Anybody does that ought to be locked up*', has traditionally been considered ungrammatical, but it does occur in many varieties of present-day English. This fact poses a challenge to formal syntactic theory: why is such an ungrammatical structure still productive in natural speech? Gelderen (2022) proposed, based on the Third Factor Hypothesis, that the that-less clause is indeed grammatical and it is formed by TP (through CP-deletion). The problem, however, becomes even more serious: how can we account for the original ungrammatical intuition of the that-less structure in standard English, and why are there two contradictory grammatical judgments? This paper attempts to resolve this problem based on the theory of Register Grammar (Feng 2010) by arguing that structures are inherently encoded with register properties and thus, structural distance reflects communicative distance in the grammatical system of human language.

## Speaker

Feng Shengli, Director of the Institute of Zhang Huang Academic Theories, School of Linguistic Science, Beijing Language and Culture University; Ph.D. in linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania in 1995. Currently Co-editor in Chief of the Journal of Chinese Languages (JCL, SSCI Index). Formerly served as Yangzi River Scholar at Beijing Language and Culture University (2005), Associate Professor at the University of Kansas and Professor and Director of the Chinese Language Department at Harvard University. Research interests include Qianjia "Logical Certainty", exegesis, prosodic grammar, register grammar, diachronic syntax and literary prosody. Published 16 Chinese academic monographs (including 4 translated into English, Korean, etc.), 2 English academic monographs, and over 200 academic papers in both Chinese and English.



香港中文大學-北京語言大學漢語語言學與應用語言學聯合研究中心  
CUHK-BLCU Joint Research Center for Chinese Linguistics and Applied Linguistics



Childhood Bilingualism Research Centre  
兒童雙語研究中心



Chinese University of Hong Kong - Peking University  
Joint Research Centre for Language and Human Complexity  
香港中文大學-北京大學語言與人類複雜系統聯合研究中心