The number expressions in English can be preceded by ordinal phrases in (1). In Mandarin Chinese, we use the morpheme *qian* in the sequence of \([qian]+\text{Num}+\text{CL}+\text{N}\) (henceforth *qian phrases*) to represent the same meaning, as shown in (2).

(1) the first three prime ministers

(2) *qian san-wei shouxiang.*

\begin{itemize}
\item a. ‘the first three prime ministers’ [absolute]
\item b. ‘the previous three prime ministers’ [relative]
\end{itemize}

It is worthwhile to note that the *qian* phrase, different from its counterpart in English, may assume two readings in terms of different point of views. That is, the *qian* phrase is a deictic expression, and its interpretation is context-dependent. If the “camera angle” is positioned on an internal protagonist in the context, for instance, the speaker stands on the “shoes” of England, the denotation of the *qian* phrase refers to the first three prime ministers of England: Robert Walpole, Spencer Compton and Henry Pelham (cf. Kuno (1987)). The reference of the *qian* phrase is ascertained and will not differ from speakers to speakers. We thus call it an absolute reading in (2a). Alternatively, if the speaker stands on his/her standpoint, the denotation of the *qian* phrase ties closely on the temporal/spatial dimension of the speaker. For instance, the incumbent prime minister of England is David Cameron in 2011, and the *qian* phrase refers to the previous three prime ministers: John Major, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Since the reference point is contingent on the temporal/spatial axis of the speaker, the reference of the *qian* phrase may vary from speakers to speakers. We therefore call it a relative reading in (2b).

Given the above observation, we first argue against the proposal that the morpheme *qian* stays in D because the reference of the *qian* phrase cannot be determined until the point-of-view holder or reference point has been decided (cf. Cantrall (1974)). Second, there are syntactic projections with pragmatically relevant features in Mandarin Chinese nominal expressions (cf. Speas (2004); Cinque (1999)). That is, the morpheme *qian*, with a [Perspective] feature, involves a Perspective phrase within nominal expressions in Mandarin Chinese. Moreover, the morpheme *qian* introduces a Point-of-View (henceforth POV) variable which may be bound by the speaker or an internal protagonist denoted by an argument of the nominal expressions (e.g., the possessor or the external argument) (cf. Nishigauchi (1999); Huang and Liu (2000)). If a POV variable is bound by a speaker, it results in a relative reading; if a POV variable is bound by an internal protagonist, it gives rises to an absolute reading. In this way, the structure of (2) can be represented by (3).
Simply put, the POV variable introduced by the morpheme qian in (2) can be either bound by a covert internal protagonist or a speaker, and results in absolute and relative readings, respectively. Significantly, when an internal protagonist is realized by an overt nominal expression, such as England in [Spec, DP] in (4), the POV variable involved in turn can be directly bound by that internal protagonist. The qian phrase thus yields an absolute reading.

(4) Yingguo qian san-wei shouxiang dou shi nanxing. [absolute]
    England qian three-CL prime minister all be male
    ‘The first three prime ministers of England are male.’

On the contrary, when the context of the sentence does not provide any internal protagonist or a reference point for the ‘camera angle’ to be placed on, as indicated in (5), the binder of a POV variable can only be a speaker. In this way, the relative reading of (5) is expected.

(5) Qian san-tian hen leng. [relative]
    Qian three-day very cold
    ‘The previous three days were very cold.’

Finally, we argue that the syntax-semantics mapping of the qian phrase can be captured by the spectrogram like (6).

(6) DP > PresepctiveP > NumP > CIP > NP

Our findings thus lend support to a nominal periphery in terms of a split DP-system, parallel to the clausal split CP of Rizzi (cf. Rizzi (1997), Tsai (2008)).

Selected reference