

Lability of Verbs and the Change-of-State Construction in Chinese

Liulin Zhang

It has long been noticed that some Chinese verbs can be used transitively or intransitively, and that the syntactically privileged argument (subject) in these different uses has different semantic roles. Many terms have been introduced to describe this phenomenon, among which verb lability appears to be the most felicitous one for Chinese considering its transparency and straightforwardness: it does not pertain to notions absent in Chinese, and does not encode any information about the function of the transitive/intransitive construction pairs, which has been highly contentious in previous studies.

Set within the framework of cognitive linguistics and construction grammar, this dissertation assumes that language is usage-based instead of rule-generated. Accordingly, a diachronic corpus-based approach is employed. Meanwhile, in order to adapt to the special feature of Chinese, i.e., Chinese is undefinable without resorting to its ideographic writing system, the diachronic analysis of lexical semantics is based on Chinese characters in this dissertation.

Corpus data of the Pre-Qin period (Old Chinese), the Tang dynasty (Middle Chinese), and the Ming dynasty (Old Mandarin) show that the ‘theme + labile verb’ construction is extraordinarily ancient and stable in Chinese, and that historically, labile verbs are prototypically changes of state. An extensive study of verbal semantics in Modern Mandarin reveals two semantic parameters determining verb lability: change of state and spontaneity. Change of state is the prototypical function of labile verbs and the construction pairs formed by them, while the contingency between labile verbs and their transitive/intransitive use is sensitive to the likelihood of spontaneous occurrence of the

event. This finding can be incorporated into a cross-linguistic context, reflecting the general characteristics of human conceptualization. However, as an isolating language in which causative/anticausative is not marked, Chinese exhibits an overwhelmingly large group of labile verbs in comparison with other languages.

The intransitive change-of-state construction (CSC, henceforth) formed by labile verbs have traditionally been referred to as the ‘notional passive construction’, distinguished from the so called ‘Chinese passive construction’ marked by 被 *bei*. After investigating the process of grammaticalization of the character 被, it is found that 被 derived an ‘affected’ sense in construal from its lability (denoting ‘cover/receive’), thus the 被 *bei* construction (BEIC, henceforth) can roughly be represented as ‘affectee + 被 + event’. In contrast to CSC, BEIC predominantly takes animate subjects as the affectee, and the event that affects the affectee is not limited to change-of-state events.

In Chinese, the frequency of CSC is much higher than that of BEIC, but this prevalence is not introduced or reflected in Chinese textbooks. Correspondingly, previous studies show that Chinese learners tend to overuse BEIC for situations that are more authentically expressed by CSC. In order to test whether an increased frequency in input can promote students’ use of CSC (as predicted by the usage-based approach to language acquisition), two experiments of picture description tasks are conducted. Results indicate that due to the difference in terms of markedness, CSC is much more difficult to be noticed than BEIC in incidental exposure, rendering explicit instruction necessary.