Embodied semantics and pragmatics: Empathy, sympathy and two passive constructions in Chinese media discourse[☆]

Zhuo Jing-Schmidt [a,1,*], Ting Jing [b,2]

[a] Department of East Asian Languages and Literature, Friendly Hall 308, 1248 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403, USA
[b] Harbin Normal University, Center of Mental Health and Education, Li-Min Development District of Economy and Technology, 1 Shi-Da South Street, 150025 Harbin, China

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the usage patterns of two passive constructions, the emerging zao construction and the conventional bei construction, in Chinese media language where the distributional ratio of the zao construction to the bei construction is conspicuously higher than in other genres. The difference is especially dramatic in Internet news headlines. To account for the uses, we adopt a corpus-driven constructionist approach, seeking to identify the semantics of the two constructions by means of collostructional analysis. Based on the corpus data, we argue that the two constructions differ primarily in the speaker/writer's subjective experience of the event in which the patient is affected. Specifically, we invoke the psychological constructs of empathy and sympathy to account for the respective functions of the two passive constructions. The genre-specific usage patterns of the two constructions in the Internet news headlines are attributed to the pragmatic manipulation of semantics for the purpose of constructing stance and creating sensationalism. Cognitive psychological insights on human emotion, cognition and morality are discussed in support of embodied semantics and pragmatics.

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1. Introduction

The conventional passive construction in Mandarin Chinese, as schematized in (1), promotes the patient (NP_1) of an event to the subject/topic position and demotes the agent (NP_2) to an optional oblique. The morpheme bei serves as a lexical passive marker[3]:

(1) NP_1 bei (NP_2) VP

This construction is typically used to describe something unfortunate that befalls the patient (Chao, 1968:703; Li and Thompson, 1981:493). Therefore, as an "adversative passive" (Howard, 1969:40) it should be considered a form of pragmatic voice (Klaiman, 1991).[4] Consider (2) from the INH corpus as an illustration of the adversative passive[5]:

[☆] An earlier version of the paper was presented at the Columbia Invitational Seminar in May 2008 in New York City.
* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 541 346 4023; fax: +1 541 346 0260.
    E-mail address: zjingsch@uoregon.edu (Z. Jing-Schmidt).
[1] Zhuo Jing-Schmidt received funding from the Fritz-Thyssen Foundation for the research in this study.
[2] Tel.: +86 451 88060540.
[3] For a detailed discussion of the status of bei, see Shi (1997).
[4] In colloquial Mandarin, jiao and rang are interpreted as adversative passive markers. They are not discussed in the present paper for two reasons. First, jiao and rang may be more appropriately analyzed as causative markers with a "permissive" inference (Weng, 2007). Second, the present study focuses on usage in written Mandarin.
[5] Throughout this paper the following abbreviations are used: 1SG, first person singular; ASSOC, associative; BEI, passive marker bei; CLF, classifier; EXT, existential; LOC, locative; NML, nominalizer; PFV, perfective marker le; PN, proper name; RES, resultative; ZAO, passive marker zao.

(2)   婆婆被前儿媳赶出家门 (INH)

     popo bei qian erxi gan chu jia men

     mother-in-law BEI ex-daughter-in-law drive out house door

     'Mother-in-law thrown out by ex-daughter-in-law'

Although negativity continues to be characteristic of the *bei* construction, there is evidence of affective neutralization in its usage. Earlier scholars (e.g. Wang, 1958; Chao, 1968; Li and Thompson, 1981) note the non-adversative usage of the *bei*-passive and attribute it to Western influence. Recently, Xiao et al. (2006) provide quantitative corpus data to show that the proportion of negative events described by the *bei*-passive is slightly over 50% in modern written Chinese, suggesting a strong trend of affective neutralization.

With this background, we explore in this paper the usage of the emerging adversative *zao* construction, schematized in (3), below, in contrast to the conventional *bei* construction in Chinese media discourse.

(3)   NP$_1$ *zao* (NP$_2$) VP

Our investigation is prompted by the observation of an overuse of the *zao* construction in this particular genre where it appears to be a remarkable rival of the *bei* construction, especially in Internet news headlines. To account for the distributions, we take a constructionist approach and seek to determine the respective meanings and functions of the two constructions by identifying their most prominent collexemes in the lexical verb slot. Based on the collostructional data, we invoke the psychological distinction between empathy and sympathy as the experiential reality behind the semantic difference between the two constructions. Consider (4) from the INH corpus as an example:

(4)   绝症男子遭女友骗钱 (INH)

     jue zheng nanzi zao nüyou pian qian

     terminal disease man ZAO girlfriend cheat money

     'Man with terminal disease cheated of money by girlfriend'

At first glance, the *zao* construction seems synonymous and thus interchangeable with the *bei* construction. However, based on the No Synonymy Principle (Bolinger, 1977) central to the constructionist approach, we propose that the two constructions have different meanings. The psychological distinction between empathy and sympathy is introduced to inform the postulation of contrastive constructional meanings based on semantic field information on collexemes identified through collostructional analysis. We consider the emergence of the *zao* construction as a pragmatic response to the affective neutralization of the *bei* construction as exemplified by its uses in non-adversative domains. Buttressed by further corpus data, we show that both constructions are subject to genre-specific pragmatic manipulation, although their pragmatic behaviors differ. Drawing on insights from cognitive psychology, we contend that the semantics and pragmatics of the two constructions are essentially embodied.

2. Data and method

2.1. Corpora and data retrieval

While the focus of this paper is on Chinese media language, it is analytically meaningful to see this genre with reference to other types of written discourse. For the purpose of cross-genre comparison, four corpora of written Mandarin are adopted for the quantitative analysis. The XIN corpus is a ca. 400 million character collection of authentic news texts from the Xinhua News Agency of Mainland China. As a sub-corpus in the Chinese Word Sketch (CWS), a combination of the Chinese GigaWord Corpus (Huang et al., 2005) and the search tool of Word Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al., 2005), it represents Mainland China mainstream media discourse.[6] The INH corpus with 1876 headlines and 32,601 characters is a manually compiled collection of Internet news headlines in the category of apolitical news stories under the rubric of "panorama of society", retrieved from two Chinese websites.[7] The examination of Internet news headlines as a sub-genre of media language in contrast to mainstream media discourse will shed light on the extent to which genre-specific communicative goals influence grammatical choice. The UCLA Written Chinese Corpus (hence WCC) (Tao and Xiao, 2007) is an annotated balanced corpus of ca. 690,000 word tokens containing 15 different text categories. The FCT corpus (Wu, 2003) contains ca. 400,000 characters and is a collection of nine novellas by nine different authors. Because WCC represents a variety of genres, it is apt to provide

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[6] See http://wordsketch.ling.sinica.edu.tw for details on the CWS.

[7] The websites from which the news headlines were retrieved are: msn.ifeng.com (which has been re-routed to www.ifeng.com) and www.sina.com.cn. The headlines were retrieved in bulk between January 2008 and April 2008. It should be noted that the authorship of the headlines could be more heterogeneous than the name INH makes it appear, since hosting news sites is not a privilege of news agencies in the Internet, and amateur writers may be behind some headlines. But we assume that any author of news headlines is aware of the unique public effect of this genre, at least by intuition, if not by profession.