A Comparative Study of the BA-Construction in Mandarin Chinese

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Abstract

Compared with English, the BA-Construction in Mandarin Chinese has been seen as a peculiar structure. The similar structure can hardly be found in other languages either. Typically, the formation of a BA sentence is assumed in this work to be undergone a BA transformation, which moves the direct object to the sentence's pre-verb position and is preceded by the inserted morpheme BA. This paper intends to compare Yuen Ren Chao's (1968) treatment on the structure with an approach developed in this work, a theory based on the field of Government and Binding. This explanation describes the BA-Construction in terms of the module of Case Theory, and which appears to exhibit a somewhat better explanation for the BA-Construction.

Key words: BA-Construction  Case Theory  Verbal-Expressions-in-Series  morpheme  finite  non-finite

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0. Introduction

The BA-Construction (i.e. 把字句), due to its disputatious feature in Mandarin (i.e. the role of the morpheme BA plays in Chinese sentence structure), has long been a hot topic discussed by Chinese syntacticians. Typically, a BA sentence in Mandarin is described as containing a direct object, which has been preposed to pre-verb position and is preceded by the morpheme BA. Take sentences (1) and (2) below for example; sentence (2) is derived from sentence (1).

(1) 我殺了一個人。
wo sha le yigeren
I killed aspect a person
“I killed a person.”

(2) 我把一個人殺了。
wo ba yigeren sha le
I BA a person kill aspect
“I killed a person.”

The NP yigeren (a person) in sentence (1) was moved via a transformation process (i.e. BA-Transformation, as far as this work is concerned) from the unmarked direct object position (or post-verb position) to the marked pre-verb position and is preceded by the inserted morpheme BA. Chao in his 1968 work A Grammar of Spoken Chinese describes the construction as a kind of Verbal-Expressions-in-Series (V-V series). A V-V series assumption consists of a succession of two verbal expressions, which may look like (3).

(3) 把一個人殺了。
ba yigeren sha le
BA a person kill aspect “(Someone) has killed a person.”

V	O	V
1st V exp.	2nd V exp.
The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how Chao’s grammar treats the BA-Construction with a structuralist’s view in his 1968 work and, most importantly, to reanalyze the data within the current Government and Binding framework. Before discussing Chao’s approach, we will briefly review the historical background of the BA-Construction in Mandarin Chinese.

1. The Background of the Mandarin BA-Construction

Studying BA sentence in Chinese, one might be concerned with the phenomenon of why sentences such as (4) and (5) have different status, i.e. (4) is acceptable, while (5) is unacceptable.

(4) 我把人看了。
    wo ba ren kan le
    “I have seen the person.”

(5) *我把人看。
    *wo ba ren kan
    “I looked at the person.”

The explanation of the ungrammaticality of sentence (5) has in effect to do with the term “disposal.” The BA-Construction, therefore, may sometimes be called the disposal-form or disposal-construction in modern Chinese. The disposal-form’s first emergence can be traced back to the Tang dynasty (around the seventh and eighth centuries A.D.) Basically, the development of the disposal form in the Tang was based on two verbs: BA and jiang (將). In this period of time these two verbs roughly had the same meaning as “take (拿).” For example:
(6) 把鏡看。
ba jing kan
take mirror look
“He took the mirror and looked (at himself)- Not he looked in the mirror
(Bennett: (6))

(7)輕將玉板敲花片。
qing jiang yu ban qiao hua pian
lightly JIANG jade stick knock flower piece
“He lightly struck the petals with a piece of jade. (Bennett: (7))

Here we can see the difference between (2) and (6). In (6), the object of ba (or BA) is ‘jing’(mirror), but it is not the object of the second verb ‘kan’ (look). In (2), the object yigeren (a person) is the object of the second verb. This does not, however, imply that the object was always immediately after the verb BA in the Tang. It is also, in certain cases, notionally the object of the second verb. (8) is an example.

(8) 把卷看。
ba juan kan
take book look
“He took the book and read it. (Wang 1958: 412)

According to Wang (1958), sentence (8) has the same structure as (6) except the semantic difference. But since the morpheme jiang in sentence (7) behaves like a preposition, the status of BA in (8) is uncertain. (i.e. whether it is a verb or a preposition). For this reason, there were two structure patterns emerged, as in (9).

(9) Pattern <1>: S—BA—NP1—V—(NP2)

Pattern <2>: S—BA—NP—V

The difference between these two structure patterns is that in pattern <1> the NP1 and the optional NP2 are not identical (recall that in example (8) the NP juan (book) is not only the object of BA but also the object of the second verb kan (read)). To be more explicitly about this pattern, let’s take an English sentence for example, as shown in (10).
(10) Mary took a knife to cut the meat

\[ S \quad \text{ba} \quad \text{NP1} \quad \text{V} \quad \text{NP2} \]

Without further explanation, the difference between examples (8) and (10) can be clearly seen. The NP in the pattern 2 (example 9), on the other hand, is exactly the same as the NP in the example 8: an object of both BA and V. This pattern 2 in effect becomes the so-called disposal form, since BA in this structure is no more referring to a separate action, it behaves like an object marker instead. According to Bennett (1978), the development of BA (as a verb “take”) into an object marker (losing its status as a verb) may be explained in this way. Consider the example in (11).

(11) a. I took the pencil and gave (it) to Mary

\[ \text{I take the pencil and gave (it) to Mary.} \]

b. I gave the pencil to Mary.

When a language’s equivalents share the same meaning, the verb “took” may lose its grammatical function as a verb, if the action “giving” is seen to be more important than the action “taking” in semantics. Therefore, the following Chinese sentence (12a) (similar to (11a)) may become (12b) (similar to (11b)). That is, although these two sentences may pronounce alike, the morpheme BA in (12a) is considered a verb; nevertheless, it is an object marker in (12b).

(12) a. 我把鉛筆給瑪莉。

\[ \text{wo ba qianbi gei mali} \]

\[ \text{I take pencil give Mary} \]

“I took the pencil and gave (it) to Mary.”

b. 我把鉛筆給瑪莉。

\[ \text{wo ba qianbi gei mali} \]

\[ \text{I object-marker pencil give Mary} \]

“I gave the pencil to Mary.”

No matter whether Bennett’s argument is correct, one might want to ask a question: Why such a construction is called disposal-form? Wang li (1947:160) explains that the disposal-form “states how a person is handled, manipulated, or
dealt with; how something is disposed of; or how an affair is conducted” (translation by Li [1947:200-201]). More explicitly, it simply relates to what happens to the direct object. Applying this concept to the previous examples (4) and (5), it would then become obvious that the notion of disposal-form Wang has provided is just what the example in (5) is missing. For convenience, the examples (4) and (5) are reproduced as (13) and (14) below, respectively.

(13) 我把人看了。
    wo ba ren kan le
    I BA person see aspect
    “I have seen the person.”

(14) *我把人看。
    *wo ba ren kan
    I BA person see
    “I looked at the person.”

In (13) the aspect morpheme le together with the verb kan (see) describes how the direct object is dealt with: the person has been seen by me (a complete action), whereas in (14) it does not describe how the person is handled. Semantically sentence (14) is not a complete sentence since part of the expression seems to be cut out. Therefore, in theory if some appropriate words in meaning were added to it, the sentence could become grammatical, as in (15).

(15) 我把人看得很清楚。
    wo ba ren kan de hen qingchu
    I BA person see DE very clear
    “I looked at the person thoroughly.”

In the sense of disposal, thus, the added part of expression, de hen qingchu (very clear) together with the verb kan (see), exhibits some sort of effect on the direct object ren (person), i.e. it describes (or implies) how the person was seen: very clear. The action is complete now, and the sentence is therefore fine. In terms of Chinese grammar, the verb in a BA sentence must have some elements preceding
or following it to give additional information to enhance the disposal nature of the verb. This is also one of the salient features in the Mandarin BA-Construction.

2. Chao’s Approach

As noted in the above section, the object of the verb has been transformed from post-verb position to pre-verb position in a BA-Construction. Chao, however, pays no attention to this characteristic in his description of the BA-Construction: Verbal-Expressions-in-Series (V-V series). Quite possibly, Chao was a structuralist, and in the field of structural linguistics it was difficult to describe the preposed direct object that is in fact an object of the second verb.

Instead, Chao describes the Mandarin BA-Construction as a V-V series construction, which, descriptively speaking, consists of a succession of two verbal expressions, as shown in example (3) and, for convenience, repeated here as (16).

(16) 把一個人杀了。
   ba yigeren sha le
   a person kill aspect “(Someone) has killed a person.”

V O V
1st V exp. 2nd V exp.

In this V-V series the second verbal expression functions as the center to which the first verbal expression is a modifier, often translatable by a prepositional phrase in English (Chao, 1968:326). He gives the following examples to illustrate this idea.

(17) 拿筆寫字
   na bii shiee tzyh
   take pen write character

“(I) take a pen and write characters. → (I) write characters with a pen.”

In this expression the second verb is regarded as the main verb of the predicate. With respect to the first verbal expression, since the verb takes an object, it should
be seen as a transitive verb. However, Chao calls the kinds of the verb as “coverbs” or “prepositions” rather than transitive verbs. In fact, the term “coverb” is concerned with a class of words in Chinese which includes such morphemes as 到/dao (to), 從/cong (from), 跟/gen (with), 和/han (with), 在/zai (at), and so on. In a sentence they are always followed by a noun phrase.

(18) a. 他從那裡來？
    ta cong narli lai
    he from where come
    “Where is he from?”

b. 她跟我講話。
    ta gen wo jianghua
    she with me talk
    “She talked with me.”

Chao (1968:749) notes that most of transitive verbs appear in the first verbal expression only in an occasional manner; nevertheless, there is an identifiable number of verbs that can occur in the first verbal expression with the same order of frequency as in other positions. These are therefore called “coverbs” or “prepositions.” Such a word is defined as a standard preposition if it does not appear at all in other positions, that is, as a verb. So the words “cong” (from) and “gen” (with) in (18) are coverbs because they can also function as a verb, as in (19).

(19) a. 她先生從軍。
    ta xiansheng congjun
    her husband go into the army
    “Her husband went into the army.”

b. 她跟在我後面。
    ta gen zai wo houmian
    she follow at me back
    “She followed me.”
According to Chao, the morpheme BA is one of the standard prepositions because it cannot at all show up in other position. Compare (a), (b), and (c) in each set of the following examples.

(20) a. 他把他的車賣了。
   ta ba tade che mai le
   he BA his car sell aspect
   1st V exp. 2nd V exp.
   "He has sold his car."

   b. *他賣了把他的車。
   *ta mai le ba tade che
   he sell aspect BA his car
   1st V exp. 2nd V exp.

(21) a. 他把橘子剝了皮。
   ta ba iuzi bo le pi
   he BA orange peel aspect skin
   1st V exp. 2nd V exp.
   "He has peeled the orange."

   b. *他剝了皮把橘子。
   *ta bo le pi ba iuzi
   he peel aspect skin BA orange
   1st V exp. 2nd V exp.

   c. 他剝了橘子皮。
   ta bo le iuzi pi
   he peel aspect orange skin
   "He has peeled the orange."

The sentences in (a) show that BA is in the normal (i.e. unmarked) position (in Chao's view), however, when BA does not occur in the first verbal expression position, the sentence is out then, as can be seen in each (b) example above. If BA is deleted in the "abnormal"(i.e. marked) position, the sentence becomes
acceptable (as well as grammatical). The example in (c) exhibits this structural difference. One might argue that the occurrence of BA in other positions (as a main verb, for example) does not seem impossible.

(22) 別老把著門。

bie lao ba zhe men
don’t always BA DUR(ation) door

“Don’t hold the door all the time.”

Chao explains such a BA is homophonous (i.e. nearly synonymous), and it requires a separate entry in the lexicon.

The status of BA, therefore, is defined as a preposition in Chao’s V-V Series explanation. In this analysis, the second verbal expression is the head, and the first is the modifier. The first verbal expression is made up of the preposition BA and an object. BA, in this definition, has no meaning of its own and its object is in effect the object of the second verb. Chao also calls the type of structure “pretransitive” construction by virtue of being involved the use of the notorious BA. The transitive element of the main verb has been moved from its normal position to pre-verb position and is conceived by the morpheme BA. Syntactically speaking, on the one hand, the real object is related to BA; it is, on the other hand, associated with the second verb (the main verb) in semantics.

2.1 Characteristics of Chao’s V-V Series

There are several particular features in Chao’s V-V Series assumption: definite reference in the first object, meaning of the second verb, and forms of the second verb expression.

2.1.1 Definite Reference in the First Object

Chao (1968: 343) observes that “an early part in a sentence is likely to have a definite reference and a later part an indefinite reference.” More specifically, the NP following BA is generally definite (i.e. the NP is always understood as referring to something or someone that the speaker believes that the hearer knows). For example,
(23). 我把车子賣了。
   wa ba chezi mai le
   I BA car sell aspect
   “I have sold the car.”

The NP chezi (car) in (23) is definite because this sentence can be appropriately used only if the speaker believes that the listener knows which car is being talked about. Therefore the term definite may be interpreted as “something is not known to the hearer at least.” In Chao’s observation, “the object in an ordinary V-O construction has indefinite reference, unless it has specific definite modifiers such as ‘jeyg’ (這個) or “neyg” (那個) (1968:343). The following example may make this explanation clear.

(24) a. 我在看東西
   wo zai kan dongxi
   I DUR(ation) look at thing
   “I am looking at a thing.”

b. 我在看那個東西
   wo zai kan negy (following Chao) dongxi
   I DUR(ation) look at that thing
   “I am looking at that thing.”

In (24a) it can be seen that the unmarked postverbal object “dongxi” (thing) may be taken as indefinite, since it is not understood as referring to something or someone that the speaker believes the hearer knows. Yet if a specific definite modifier is added to the sentence, “neyg” in (24b) for example, it will have definite reference.

2.1.2 Meanings of the Second Verb

Chao basically rejects the idea of the so-called “disposal” sense of the second verb after a pretransitive. In his words (1968:344), the meaning of

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1 According to Chao, “jeyg” means “this,” and “neyg” is “that.”
disposal“… unless taken in a very broad sense, including disposal in an abstract sense, it will hardly be wide enough to apply to all cases.” For example, “…seeing or other such involuntary perception simply happens and is not disposing of something” (1968:705). Therefore, he says that sentences such as (25a) is fine, whereas (25b) is ungrammatical.

(25) a. 把事情看清楚了
   ba shiqing kan qingchu le
   "Look at the thing clearly."

b. *把月亮看見了
   *ba yueliang kanjian le
   "Take the moon and see it.” (Chao, 1968: 705)

2.1.3 Forms of the Second Verbal Expression

Chao notes that there is a remarkable feature in the second verbal expression, namely, the polysyllabicility. This notable feature may be from, first, “verb + suffix” or “verb + complement”, as in

(26) a. verb + suffix
   把東西捧著
   ba dongxi peng zhe
   "Hold the thing."

b. verb + complement
   把事情說清楚
   ba shiqing shuo qingchu
   "Clarify the matter.”

Second, from “adverbial modifier + verb,” as in
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(27) adverbial modifier + verb
把茶不停的喝
ba cha bu ting de he
BA tea not stop DE drink
“Drink the tea continually.”

Third, from “a verb that is itself polysyllabic,” as in

(28) a verb that is itself polysyllabic
你得先把情形调查...
ni dei xian ba qingxing diaocha...
you must first BA condition investigate
“You must first investigate the conditions....”

Fourth, from “a special V-O compound,” as in

(29) a special V-O compound
把他杀头
ba ta sha-tou
BA him behead
“Behead him.”

Hitherto, I have briefly demonstrated how Chao treats the BA-Construction with his V-V Series assumption in his 1968 work. This work will take this as a point of departure for an analysis of the same construction within the Case Theory.

3. A Case Theory Analysis

3.0 Introduction

The fundamental claim of Government-Binding theory is that the concept of Universal Grammar plays a crucial role in the syntax of natural language: “the system of principles, conditions, and rules that are elements or properties of all human languages...the essence of human language” (Chomsky, 1976:29). In
contrast, structural linguistics aims at assigning a labeled phrasemarker
description to a sentence, therefore leaving no ground for any inversion that may
have been active in the derivation of the sentence before it comes to its surface
form. This section is devoted to a discussion of how the applicability and
inapplicability of the BA-construction in Chinese can be accounted for within the
module of Chomsky’s Universal Grammar: Case Theory.

3.1 A Sketch of Case Theory

Essentially, Case Theory is about how, where, and why an NP receives
an abstract Case in a sentence, more or less having something connecting to the
concept of case in traditional grammar, more importantly, providing structural
explanations for a constituent’s transformation. In English, where an NP is
located generally decides the NP’s Case. For example:

(30) Mr. Stevenson loves Helen.

In (30) since the NP Mr. Stevenson is a subject, it owns Nominative Case; on
the other hand, the NP Helen is in an object position, so it has Accusative Case.
But the Cases these two NPs have do not automatically occur. According to the
Case Theory, Mr. Stevenson and Helen receive their Cases from some elements in
the sentence. The elements that assign the Case to the two NPs are called Case
assigners. What are the two Case assigners in (30)? The verb love is a Case
assigner as it is a transitive verb here in the sentence, and that in structure it must
be subcategorized an object. The verb love therefore assigns Accusative Case to
its object Helen.

The assignment of Nominative Case in Case Theory is limited to finite
clause only, because only finite clause has AGR element which assigns the NP in
subject position Nominative Case. Non-finite clauses, however, have no AGR
element since the to-infinitive bears [-tense] feature, which is incapable of being
a Case assigner. In terms of structure, the sister node of a non-finite clause subject
is T’ rather than an AGR’; the former’s daughter node T in theory assigns no
Nominative Case to the NP in the position of the specifier of TP. Following Cook
(1996: 224-225), the two structures are as follows.

(31) a. **Finite clause**

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AGRP
 NP   AGR'
  AGR  TP
   T   VP
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b. **Non-finite clause**

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TP
 NP  T'
  T   VP
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### 3.2 How Case Theory Interprets the BA-Construction

As noted earlier, a BA sentence is typically described as that the direct object has been preposed and is preceded by BA. The morpheme BA functioned as a verb “take” in the Tang dynasty. Chao regards it as a pure preposition, whereas some Chinese grammarians consider BA a matrix verb. So the role of BA in Chinese grammar is de facto uncertain. This paper, within the framework of Government and Binding Theory, however, suggests that there may be a BA-Transformation involved in this construction. The definition of the BA-Transformation in this paper is stated in (32).

(32) **BA-Transformation**

*An NP moves from a Case marked or non-marked position to pre-verb*
position and is preceded by the morpheme BA.

In addition to this BA-Transformation, there are two more structural restrictions applied to the rule. First, if the position of NP-trace is in the sentence final position, the morpheme BA functions as an emphatic marker (i.e. it has no ability to assign Case), as exhibited in (33).

(33) **BA-Transformation Restriction 1**

\[
S + V + X + NP \quad \downarrow \quad S + BA + NP + V + X
\]

where X is a variable and BA is an emphatic marker

Second, if the position of NP-trace is not in the sentence final position or it is in the final position but there is nothing between the verb and the trace, the morpheme BA in this structure will function as a transitive verb, and it will assign Accusative Case to its following NP, as in (34).

(34) **BA-Transformation Restriction 2**

\[
S + V + NP + (X) \quad \downarrow \quad S + BA + NP + V + (X)
\]

where X is a variable and BA is a transitive verb

The ungrammaticality of the following examples, therefore, is accounted for based on the above assumption.

(35) *他把李四問了一個問題

*ta ba Lisi wen le ti yige wenti

he BA Lisi ask ASP trace a question

“He asked Lisi a question.”
According to BA-Transformation Restriction 2, sentence (35) is out by virtue of the fact that the preposed NP “Lisi” receives two Cases: one from the main verb “wen (ask),” the other from the transitive verb “ba.” Thus, there is a Case conflict here since an NP must be assigned a Case only (Chomsky, 1986). For the same reason, sentence (36) is explained.

(36) *他把那個事情知道了
   *ta ba neige shiqing; zhidao ti le
   he BA that matter know trace ASP
   “He knew about the matter.”

The NP “neige shiqing (that matter)” in (36) also receives two Cases, so it is ruled out because of the Case conflict. Consider now the sentence (37).

(37) *他把我愛
   *ta ba wo ai ti
   he BA me love trace
   “He loves me.”

In (37) although the NP trace is in the sentence final position, there is nothing between the verb ai (love) and the trace. According to the assumption in this analysis, the morpheme BA acts as a Case assigner. The preposed NP wo (me) hence receives two Cases. The sentence’s ungrammaticality is described.

We might want to know if the assumption can be applied to the explanation of grammatical BA sentences. Consider example (38).

(38) 我把一個人殺了。
    wo ba yigeren, sha le ti
    I BA a person kill aspect
    “I killed a person.”

Since this is a structure under the BA-Transformation Restriction 1, the morpheme BA here behaves like an emphatic marker used to emphasize the following NP “yigeren,” that is, exactly one person, not two or more persons. The BA has no ability to assign Case, so the preposed NP has only one Case, and the
sentence is fine.

(39) 他把他的車賣了。
\[
\text{ta ba tade che; mai le ti} \\
\text{he BA his car sell aspect trace}
\]

“He sold his car.”

Here the NP trace is in the sentence final position and there is an aspect marker \( le \) between the verb \( mai \) (sell) and itself, thus the BA-Transformation Restriction 1 will entitle BA an emphatic marker, and there is no Case conflict here. The sentence’s grammaticality is licensed.

4. Summary

This paper attempts to show how the Mandarin BA-Construction is accounted for within two different theories: Chao’s Verbal Expressions in Series assumption and the assumption made in this paper in terms of the GB module: Case Theory. The analysis shows that this GB approach, though requires further modifications, may provide a good starting point for a better solution concerning the Mandarin BA-Construction.

References


漢語把字句的比較研究

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摘要

與英語或其他語言比較起來，漢語裡的把字句算是相當特殊的一種結構。實質上很難在其他語言裡找到相同的結構現象。在本篇論文的解釋裡，漢語把字句的形成乃透過「把」的移位法則將直接受詞移至主動詞前，然後在此直接受詞前面放置「把」這個詞素。本論文將首先探討趙元任先生在他 1968 年出版的《中國話的文法》裡對把字句的解釋。接著本文將引用管制約束理論裡的格位理論來說明把字句的結構。兩相比較之下，本篇研究的結論初步認為，應用格位理論觀點的解釋似乎比較能夠提供把字句合理的結構理論解釋。

關鍵字：把字句，格位理論，運動式，詞素，限定，非限定

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