An Overview of Possessor-Subject-Possessee-Object Construction In Modern Chinese

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Abstract. This article provides a literature review of the possessor-subject-possessee-object construction, a special language phenomenon in Chinese. Researchers from different schools have made meaningful attempts to describe or analyze this construction. Their studies enhance our understandings on this construction and shed light on relevant further research.

1. Introduction

In the past decades, there has been a growing body of research that has had as its focus, a special construction in Chinese---lingzhu shubin ju (the construction of possessor-subject possessee-object) named by Guo[1] in which the subject and the object are in a possessive relationship. This particular construction seems to be of obvious interest in studies of Chinese grammar. In literature sentences like WangMian si-le fuqin (Wangmian's father has died) ZhangSan diao-le liangke menya (Two front teeth of John's have dropped) have been frequently discussed. ([2, 3, 4, 5, 6], etc.) Previous studies on this construction have provided us with understandings from perspectives of syntax, semantics, pragmatics and cognitive linguistics. This article aims to provide an overview of the development of theoretical perspectives on this language phenomenon. In this article, major internal debates within each approach will be described and their merits and problems will be discussed.

2. Overview

2.1 Research in the 1950s The 1950s has witnessed a large-scale discussion on the semantic relations between the predicate and the subject /the object in this construction. Cao Bo-han[7] held that the event *si-le fuqin* was used to describe the situation that the subject *wangmian* was in, hence, it was not advisable to treat the subject *wangmian* as the Agent of the predicate structure. Fu Zi-dong[8] tended to believe that *wangmian si-le fuqin* and *wangmian de fuqin si-le* were synonymous despite their syntactic differences.

On the whole, while a number of studies related to this construction have been undertaken, the focus of this earlier work was based predominately on its grammatical and semantic relations between the subject and object, syntactic description of this construction was largely ignored and their discussion was far from comprehensive.

2.2 Research in the Early 1990s In the late 1980s and early 1990s, this construction aroused the interest of many scholars again, among whom Li[9] and Guo [1] provided exhaustive description on this special language phenomenon.

Li[9] expressed her ideas on the choice of verbs in this construction. She claimed that verbs in this construction should denote changes and that these change-of-state verbs could fall into two groups: verbs indicating emerging and verbs indicating disappearing. She further pointed out her belief that for some emerging verbs and disappearing verbs in particular, if the event these verbs denote is detrimental to SN1(i.e. the subject), SN1 would be the Theme of the event structure.

Guo[1] conducted a more exhaustive analysis to this sentential structure, treating this kind of sentence structures as *lingzhu shubin ju*---a construction with a possessor subject and a possessed object in which the subject and the object are in a relatively stable possessive relationship, of which

the predicate verb has the property of involition. He further compared this kind of sentence structure (1i) with the other two related ones (1ii & 1iii), and concluded that sentences like (1i) resembles (1ii) in meaning and shares some similarities with (1iii) in structure.

    1i) Ta si -le   yizhi gou.
         He die–asp   one dog.
         One of his dogs died.
    1ii) Ta DE yizhi gou si-le.
         His   dog   die –asp.
         One of his dogs died.
    1iii) Ta sha -le   yizhi gou.
         He   kill –asp a dog.
         He killed one dog.

What's more, he noted that the subject is not semantically related to the predicate and that the object takes the Patient role in this construction. Finally, he stated that the essential difference between (1i) and (1ii) lies in their topics, with *ta(He)* and *ta de yizhigou (his dog)* being the topics of sentence (1i) and sentence (1ii) respectively.

2.3 Research in Recent Years. The recent years has witnessed an explosion of literature concerning this sentence structure. Researchers have conducted a wide range of studies from different perspectives.

From the Semantic Perspective. Many researchers ([10][4][11],etc.) come to the agreement that *wangmian si-le fuqin* and *wangmian De fuqin si-le* are not synonymous sentences. They, however, differ greatly as to how to account for the meaning differences. Some ([10]) attribute these meaning differences to the predicate *si*, while others ([4][12]etc.) owe these differences to the construction.

Yuan [13, 14] explored the sentence structure from semantic valence of noun. He maintained that the predicate *si* (die) assigns Theme role to *fuqin* (father) and that *WangMian* is valence-bound not to the predicate verb *si (die)*, but derives genitive case from the mono-valence noun *fuqin (father)*, which accounts for why *si* can be followed by *fuqin*.

Ma [10] stated that *si* could be a polysemic word and should not simply be regarded as a one-argument predicate. She compared the three sentences below:

    2i) WangMian   si -le   fuqin.
         WangMian   die –asp   father.
         WangMian's father died.
    2ii) WangMian DE fuqin si -le.
         WangMian's father   die -asp.
         WangMian's father died.
    2iii) WangMian   si -le.
          WangMian die-asp.
          WangMian died.

To her, *si (die)* may bear different meanings in sentence (2i) and sentence (2ii), in that the latter one is a statement of death of *Wangmian*'s father while the former one conveys to us the message that his father's death could be a big loss to him.

Based on the above analysis, after exploring these series of intransitive verbs in Chinese, she drew the conclusion that these series of verbs could be treated as one-argument predicates and two-argument predicates as well. They could possibly have two meanings, though differing slightly, one being a statement of the facts of the world and the other being an emphasis of the negative effects of "the loss" on the subject. Furthermore, for these verbs to take two arguments, two conditions have to be met: the object should be the lost person or thing, and the subject should be the person who suffers from the loss.

Shen[4] and Wei[12] proposed that the meaning differences could come from the construction. As a type of cognitive construction, it conveys on the part of the subject the message of unexpected gain or loss, which cannot be attributed to the predicate or any other constituent, but could be

implicit in the construction itself.

From the Syntactic Perspective   A lot of analyses have been undertaken within the framework of Generative Grammar, and great progress has been made up until now.

In earlier studies within the framework of GB, many scholars tended to treat this construction to be derived by Possessor Raising (PR) and it was a common assumption that PR was motivated by Case satisfaction to avoid the violation of Case Filter ([2, 15]). Yet there was a problem left to be explained satisfactorily, that is, how to account for the case status of the possessed NP, which is left behind after the possessor NP has been raised to the subject position of the sentence.

To Xu[2], though an unaccusative verb cannot assign accusative case to the whole complement NP, it assigns inherent Partitive Case to the possessed NP. Xu illustrated this point with examples:

> 3i) Zhangsan   diao-le   liangke   menya.   （S-Structure）
>   Zhangsan   drop—asp   two   front teeth.
>   Two front teeth of John's have dropped.
>
> 3ii) Zhangsan DE   liangke menya   diao-le. (S-structure)
>   John's   two front teeth   drop-asp.
>   John's front teeth have dropped.
>
> 3iii) Diao -le   zhangsan DE liangke menya.   (D-Structure)

According to Unaccusative Hypothesis, the above sentence, with diao (drop) being its predicate, must be one without subject in D-structure, for the surface subject Zhangsan bears no direct semantic relationship to diao(drop). Moreover, since Burzio's Generalization forbids an accusative verb to assign case to its object, therefore in order to avoid the violation of Case Filter, either zhang san de liang ke men ya (two front teeth of John's) as a whole move forward to its subject position and obtain accusative case (as is shown in 4i)), or the possessor NP (zhangsan) moves upward to the subject position, leaving the possessed NP (liangke menya) remain in situ. The possessed NP (liangke menya) then is assigned inherent Partitive Case (as is shown in 4ii)). The motivation of PR was to separate the possessor NP from the possessed NP to emphasize the former.

4i)   Zhangsan (de)   liang ke menya   diao-le   *t*.

4ii)   Zhangsan diao-le   *t* (de) liang ke menya.

Han[14] argued against Xu and put forth a "Case Transmission" proposal. To be explicit, Moving the possessor NP into the subject position enables it to be assigned nominative case, the possessor NP then transmits the nominative case it is assigned at the subject position back to the whole logical object NP through the chain formed by the moved NP and the trace left resulting from the raising operation. For instance:

> 5)   Zhangsan diao-le *t* (de) liang ke   men ya.

The NP *zhangsan* moves to the subject position to obtain nominative case, and through the chain formed by the moved NP *zhangsan* and the trace left resulting from movement, the nominative case is transmitted back to the whole logical object NP *t(zhangsan) de liang ke menya (John's front teeth)*.

Wen & Chen[16] proposed an MP analysis of PR in Chinese. They held that this particular phenomenon can be better accounted for in terms of feature checking theory in MP rather than the GB Case Theory. They assume that Chinese DP has three features: the [D] feature (D for definiteness)，[case] feature and [Φ] feature, among which the [D] feature is the strong feature and the other two are weak since a Chinese sentence generally allows a definite rather than indefinite nominal phrase as its subject and Chinese has no morphological realization of grammatical features like case and person, number and gender; Moreover, the functional head T has the features of [D] and [Assign Accusative]. From the perspective of feature checking theory of MP, the checking of

the [D] feature of the possessor NP against the [D] feature of the functional head T is the primary motivation for possessor raising in Chinese. In other words, the functional head T attracts the possessor NP to the [spec, TP] position, and thus has its strong feature checked; at the same time, its weak features [case] and [Φ], as free riders, also get checked. The weak features of the possessed NP (i.e. [case] and [Φ]) are checked through the long-distance Agree operation.

Possessor Raising runs into serious technical difficulties, however. First, it fails to account for the whereabouts of *DE* after possessor raising.　Second, it goes against the NP movement rule (i.e. Case-marked NP cannot be moved) to move possessor NP which has already obtained genitive case before raising in the D-structure.

Zhu[11] was aware of the defects of PR and stated that the construction could be accounted for in terms of light verb syntax. To him, the possessor NP *Wangmian* is base-generated in the underlying structure. Mediating between *NP Wangmian* and VP *si-le fuqin* is the eventuality predicate *v*, a null verb with much the same interpretation as the verb　EXPERIENCE, which semantic-selects NP *Wangmian* to be its subject and VP to be its complement, and from which the external argument NP receives its theta role of Experiencer in syntax through predication; the NP *fuqin* in the complement position in the lower VP is identified with the argument that undergoes change of state and assigned the role of Theme by the unaccusative verb *si*.

Some formalists ([17, 18] etc.) proposed that that the nominal phrase in the sentence-initial position should be treated as the topic which is base-generated in Spec-CP. This dangling topic is not semantically related to the verb, nor is there any topic-related position in the comment.　It is licensed because of the semantic gap in the semantic open predicate which serves as a variable.　The subject of a possessive construction could be the empty category *e* which occupies the Spec- TP position.　The nominal phrase behind the predicate could take the Spec-VP position and be assigned the nominative case.　The underlying reason for a subject position to be null is because that Chinese is a topic-prominent language in which T has the weak EPP features that do not require the subject position to be occupied with lexical constituents.

From Pragmatic Perspective　He[19] treated *WangMian* in *WangMian si-le fuqin (WangMian's father has died)* to be topic of the sentence. Ma[20] analyzed it with respect to the principle of information. He held that the focus usually takes the back position of that sentential structure which offers the maximum amount of new information and thus plays a significant part in a sentence. For example:

　　6i)　WangMian　　si-le　　　fuqin.
　　　　WangMian　die –asp　　father.
　　　　WangMian's　father has died.
　　6ii)　WangMian DE　fuqin　si-le.
　　　　WangMian's　　father　die-asp.
　　　　WangMian's father has died.

Sentence (6i) emphasizes what has happened to WangMian. In this sentence, *WangMian* is the old information，and the verb phrase *si-le fuqin (father died)* carries the new information; Sentence (6ii) emphasizes what has happened to WangMian's father. In this sentence, the NP *WangMian's father* carries the old information. The focus of this sentence is *si-le (has died).*

From Cognitive Perspective　　A noticeable shift has occurred in the research of this construction in the 21st century.　Feverish research activities are now being conducted on this special language phenomenon within the framework of cognitive linguistics.

Some scholars ([5, 21]) explored the formation of this construction.　Shen[5] provided a blending explanation of *Wangmian si-le fuqin*, putting that *Wangmian sile fuqin* is the blending of *Wangmian de fuqin si-le* and *Wangmian diu-le mou wu*.　Blending is one important way of sentence formation in Chinese, the other being haplology. Wang[21] investigated this construction from the perspective of conceptual blending and grammatical blending. The event structure *Ta si-le fuqin* (his father died) is composed of two causative sub-events: *Ta shiqu-le fuqin* and *fuqin si-le,* with the latter being the

cause of the former and the former the result of the latter. In blending, the grammatical space (Input 1) which consists of the elements of NP1/Vt/NP2 with Vt indicating loss is partially mapped onto the conceptual space which is composed of the Experiencer *Ta* / Theme "*fuqin*" and the manner of which the Experiencer suffer from the loss-- *si*.

Some others ([5, 9, 22, 23], etc.) analyzed this construction within the theoretical framework of Construction Grammar. Zhang[22] treated *WangMian si-le fuqin* as a construction which expresses the loss of the object on the part of the subject. As its constructional meaning and the general cognitive mechanisms determine the attributes of its components, the verb undergoes categorization as coerced by the construction and the subject and the object enter into a reference-point relationship. The reference-point relationship lends itself naturally to the explanation of the topic status of the subject and the focus status of the object. Its constructional meaning also differentiates it from a seemingly similar construction *WangMian fuqin si-le*.

3. Summary

The study of possessor-subject-possessee-object construction has been a prominent research topic in Chinese grammar. Researchers from formalist linguistics and functional linguistics alike have conducted meaningful research to describe, analyze this construction or explain its formation. Their studies deepen our understanding on this construction and shed light on relevant further research.

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