

Ambiguity and Differentiation of "V Xia N" Pattern

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ABSTRACT

"V Xia N" is a high-frequency phrase in spoken Chinese. "Xia" here can be both directional verb and time measure word, causing ambiguity when employed in the same pattern "VN". The paper analyzes the continuity and autonomy of "VN" combined with "Xia" of different parts of speech, and clarifies the meaning with the help of the rhythm features inside the pattern, the meaning of the pattern and the context.

Keywords: Xia, VN, ambiguity, rhythm, context

I. INTRODUCTION

The pattern of V Xia N in modern Chinese, a high-frequency phrase in spoken Chinese, bears different meanings due to the different parts of speech of "Xia (下)". Here are some examples:

- (1) Cardi took Belle's face and kissed it before running down the stairs (跑下楼梯).¹ (*Cheng Zhuang* by Cen Kailun)
- (2) He Shifan said: "It's okay to borrow money, but you have to make a note first (立下字据)." (*People's Daily* 2002)
- (3) The first week of their return was soon gone (眨下眼睛). The second began. (*Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austin)
- (4) Tonight, we will clean up the room (收拾下房间) and get the computer.²

It can be seen that "Xia" in the first two examples serves as directional verb. Among them, "Xia" in the first example expresses directional meaning and limits direction of the action; while "Xia" in the second example means result and expresses that the action has been completed. "Xia" in the third and fourth examples serves as verb classifier. The "Xia" in the third example is a typical verb classifier, which objectively measures the number of times and is equivalent to "Ci" and "Hui". The "Xia" in the fourth example is a special verb classifier, also known as time measure word, which can be extended to "tidy up the room (收拾下房间)" to limit the duration of the action, with the semantic feature of [+ timing] (Liu Yuehua 1984, Xiang Yuanmao 1984, Liu Jiasheng 2003, Gan Zhilin 2008, Gao Pin 2008).

However, when combined with some "VN" patterns, the "V Xia N" pattern can be understood as either a direction or an outcome of the action, or as a short-term event.

- (5) After the visit, students write diary (写下日记), travel notes and other exercises based on the materials collected and their own feelings. (*Fujian Daily* 1982)
- (6) When the phone is fully charged, do not turn it on. Unplug the power cord (拔下电源线) first and plug it in immediately.³

In example (5) and (6), the phrases "write a diary (写下日记)" and "unplug the power cord (拔下电源线)" can be understood in two ways:

- (7) a. 写下日记 → 写下了日记 → 把日记写了下来 (directional verb)
b. 写下日记 → 写了(一)下日记 → 把日记写一下 (time measure word)
- (8) a. 拔下电源线 → 拔下来电源线 → 把电源线拔下来 (directional verb)
b. 拔下电源线 → 拔一下电源线 → 把电源线拔一下 (time measure word)

It's obvious that "Xia" can be combined with the same "VN" pattern as either directional verb or time measure word⁴, but the overall meaning varies, so do the internal syntactic and semantic characteristics and context.

¹ The examples in this paper are taken from the BCC corpus, and some unlabeled examples are life daily cases.

² <http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/zh/search/0/Clean up the room>

³ <http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/zh/search/0/Unplug the power cord first>

⁴ As a directional verb and a time measure word, "Xia" is denoted as "Xia₁" and "Xia₂" respectively.

II. DIFFERENCE OF "VN" IN "V XIA N" PATTERN

Due to the different grammatical nature and semantics of "Xia", the combined "V" has different classifications. For example, Gan Zhilin (2005) Pan Hongyan (2012) discussed the boundedness and unboundedness of verbs, and Qu Jianhua (2011) probed into terminative verbs and durative verbs. However, the overall classification of "VN" is rarely discussed, and the classification of "V" cannot replace "VN". Therefore, the author attempts to discuss the autonomy and continuity of the "VN" based on the classification criteria of verbs by Ma Qingzhu (2004).

Ma Qingzhu (2004) divided verbs into durative verbs and terminative verbs according to the situation of adding "Zhe", the time quantity ingredient, after a verb. Verbs are divided into volitional verbs and nonvolitional verbs according to whether the action can be autonomous.

A. Characteristics of "VN" in "V Xia₁ N" pattern

"V Xia₁ N" can either indicate the action in motion or emphasize the end of the action. Thus, the semantic characteristics of "VN" are not limited in terms of continuity and autonomy.

- (9) "You have a good sense of time." Haiping came out of the kitchen, took off her apron (解下围裙), and wiped her hands as she spoke. (*Gunman ·Pistol* by Gulong)
- (10) Our company has just signed a contract (签下合约) with Japan Tenggung Industrial Co., Ltd. and got an export order of 5 million yuan. (*Wen Wei Po* 2002)
- (11) Li Xiangnan looked at little star in a daze, and shed tears (流下泪) silently. (*A Letter from an Unknown Man* by Lin Ru)
- (12) It was a gold ingot that fell from the sky (掉下一个金元宝), and we were too happy to know what to do. (*Black Rosary* by Shi Liang)
- (13) "Okay, bye!" I hung up the phone (挂下电话). (*Cold Love* by Bai Di)
- (14) When the famous wife is not at home, I always answer the phone (接下电话) and ask for the message to be conveyed to her. (*My Famous Wife* by Xi Murong)
- (15) If Liu Xueyong ran away, the court's orders would not come soon enough, and Li Yi could asked Yu Mu and Li She to cut off his head if he falls out (翻下脸来). (*Purple Jade Hairpin* by Sima Ziyang)

It can be seen from the comparison that "VN" in examples (9) to (14) can be added with "zhe" or modified with "Zai/Zheng zai", which is durative action. Moreover, the movements of "took off her apron (解围裙)", "signing a contract (签合同)", "hanging up the phone (挂电话)" and "answering the phone (接电话)" were made by the speaker on his own initiative. Movements of "shedding tears (流泪)", "dropping gold ingot treasure (掉金元宝)" are involuntary actions that cannot be controlled by the speaker. The abstract action "fall out (翻脸)" in example (15) cannot be combined with "zhang zai/zheng/zhe", etc., indicating that the action is completed in an instant and is not sustained and voluntary.

It can be seen from the above analysis that the continuity and autonomy of "VN" combined with "Xia₁" are not too limited.

B. Characteristics of "VN" in "V Xia₂ N" pattern

- (16) I forgot that I have an emergency charger! Charge it (充下电) first!⁵ (Weibo)
- (17) I originally wanted to search for a software to read the novel (看下小说), and then ...⁶ (Weibo)
- (18) In fact, it is better to change the name (改下名字), how about this?⁷
- (19) I'm behind on my bill after I talk to you on the phone (讲下电话)!⁸

"VN" in examples (16) to (19) is autonomous action. According to the retrieval of the BCC corpus, "VN" combined with "Xia₂", such as "charging (充电), drinking tea (喝茶), eating (吃饭), singing (唱歌), getting up (起床), slacking off (偷懒), relieving the mood (缓解心情), cleaning the room (整理房间), paying attention to the image (注意形象), checking the body (检查身体), emotion bonding (培养感情), and packing up (收拾东西)", are all autonomous actions. Moreover, in "V Xia₁ N", the combined "VN" can be added with "zhe" to indicate continuous action. Thus "VN" as a whole represents continuous autonomous action.

However, there are some "VN" in the retrieved corpus, which represent non-continuous autonomous actions. Such as "going out (出门), trying luck (碰运气), being lazy (偷懒), breaking news (爆料)", etc. The verb "V" in these verb-object structure is durative verb when used alone, and can be followed by such tense auxiliary as "chuzhe (go out)", pengzhe (bump) and touzhe (steal)". However, as for "VN" as a whole, the action can be accomplished instantly, the duration of which is too short to be neglected. Generally, "going out, trying

⁵ <http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/zh/search/0/charge>

⁶ [http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/zh/search/0/Read the novel](http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/zh/search/0/Read%20the%20novel)

⁷ [http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/zh/search/0/change the name](http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/zh/search/0/change%20the%20name)

⁸ [http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/zh/search/0/Speak the phone](http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/zh/search/0/Speak%20the%20phone)

luck, and being lazy" are not employed to express the meaning of continuity, which explains the classification of "V" and "VN" combined with "Xia" is not consistent.

It can be seen that "VN" of the "V Xia₂ N" pattern is generally an autonomous action, but there is no limit to the continuity. The semantic feature differences of "VN" are summarized. (See "Table I")

TABLE I. THE SEMANTIC FEATURE DIFFERENCES OF "VN"

| | Future | Continuity | Autonomy |
|-------------------|--------|------------|----------|
| VN | | | |
| +Xia ₁ | | ± | ± |
| +Xia ₂ | | ± | + |

C. The difference in rhythm of the "V Xia N" pattern

Feng Shengli (1996) takes that disyllabic steps are the smallest and most standard step in Chinese, trisyllabic steps are "super step", and if the trisyllabic combination is [1 + 2], it is a phrase. Any combination greater than three syllables, such as a four-syllable form, must be a combination of two steps (two standard prosodic words).

By searching the BCC corpus, it is found that "V" in the pattern of "V Xia₁ N" is generally a monosyllabic verb. The "V Xia₁ N" pattern (such as "stepping on the accelerator (踩下油门)" and "signing the note (签下字据)") is not combined with "one". Thus, "V Xia₁ N" constitutes a [2 + 2] step. In the pattern of "V Xia₂ N", "V" can be both monosyllabic and disyllabic verb.

- (20) I'm going first. Let's get hair done (做下头发) today. (*Bureaucratic Fashion* by Hong Mengshu)
- (21) For example, when a person is bored, the 3G portal can bring him a lot of fun, such as playing games (玩下游戏), listening to music or reading books. (*Entrepreneur Talk*)
- (22) It is more casual to talk between the two. However, in formal occasions, you should pay attention to the image (注意一下形象). (*Official Upstart* by Bai Yecao)
- (23) My son is on holiday these days, so we should improve our food properly (改善一下伙食). (*People's Daily* 2003)

Through examples (20) to (23), it is found that if "V" is a monosyllabic verb, whether "one" is omitted or not, it conforms to the prosodic requirements. If "V" is a disyllabic verb, "one" generally cannot be omitted, and "V + one Xia₂" constitutes a four-syllable

combination of two steps, which conforms to the general requirements of prosody.

In addition, "Xia₁" in "V Xia₁ N" is generally used as the logical stress, and it is consciously spoken louder to highlight the semantics and emphasize the direction or outcome of the action, such as "walking down the stairs (走下楼梯)", "investing heavily (投下巨资)" and so on. In the structure of "V Xia₂ N", if the verb "V" is a monosyllabic verb, the structure can be said to be the ellipsis form of "V Xia₂ N", "Xia₂" is pronounced lighter and shorter, while the "VN" is pronounced louder. If "V" is in a disyllabic verb, the ellipsis of "one" is not common, and the phonetic focus of the phrase is still "VN". In other words, the "Xia" in "V Xia₂ N" is generally lightly pronounced, with a short sound length, and generally does not constitute a logical stress in the structure, such as "read book (看下书)", "improve meal (改善下伙食)", and its semantic focus is on "看书" and "改善伙食", the corresponding logical stress is on "VN".

III. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PATTERNS OF "V XIA₁ N" AND "V XIA₂ N"

Guo Rui (1997) pointed out that "internal temporality refers to the fact that the condition expressed by a declarative component has a possible internal process that can be expanded over time, which includes three elements, namely the starting point, the ending point and the continuation, whose presence, absence and difference in strength incur difference in the predicate verb structure." The meaning difference between patterns of "V Xia₁ N" and "V Xia₂ N" can be seen.

A. The procedural meaning of the "V Xia₁ N" pattern

- (24) An Arab man dragged a heavy black suitcase off the plane (走下飞机). (*People's Daily* 1994)
- (25) The next morning, after Henry left, Alyssa tried to set a rule (立下规矩) for Daphne, only to be rebuked by Daphne. (*Wen Wei Po* 2003)

In example (24), "Xia₁" boasts directional meaning, and "V Xia₁ N", as the predicate component, mainly indicates the direction of verb, and is the procedural meaning of "has a starting point, strong continuation, and no ending point". In example (25), "Xia₁" means result meaning, "V Xia₁ N" means the result of the action, and expresses the process meaning "continuation and ending point without starting point". That is to say, when "Xia" is a directional verb, "Xia₁" is followed by verb as a complement. "V Xia₁ N" means a process that unfolds over time. The tense auxiliary word "Le" can only be added to "Xia", indicating the completion of action, as that in (26) (27).

- (26) From a distance, I saw my father bend over (弯下了身子), open his arms and say in a loud voice to my son, "Grandson, grandpa is here!" (*People's Daily* 1994)
- (27) He unplugged (拔下插销) and carefully opened the door. (*Midnight Flute* by Cai Jun)

B. Event meaning of "V Xia₂ N" pattern

The time measure word "Xia" makes the activity "VN" a non-discrete event, such as "change the name", "speak the phone", etc. "Xia₂" allows starting and ending point to action "VN" by limiting its time, make the pattern an event with "starting point, continuation, and ending point", and "Le" is placed after "V".

- (28) Yasugi Kyoko suddenly bent down (弯下了身子) and let out an uncontrollable giggle from his mouth. (*Proof of Humanity* by Samura Mori)
- (29) After unplugging the network cable (拔下了网线) and plugging it again, Google is available but with no content, which is no surprise.⁹

IV. THE DIFFERENCE IN CONTEXT BETWEEN "V XIA₁ N" AND "V XIA₂ N"

A. Differences between narrative context and persuasive context

The word "Xia₁" generally appears in narrative discourse, and can be combined with a verb that is preceded by an adverb to indicate the state in which the speaker acted. The "Xia₂" mostly appears in the context of persuasive discourse or the expression of subjective intention and emotion, indicating the short-term meaning of the event.

- (30) Da Xiang drank the tea (喝下茶水) happily and said, "Toast also for my success." (*Fog Township* by Cen Kailun)
- (31) "See you in the office thirty minutes later." Alex answered the phone (接下电话) after hanging up. (*Gentle Bad Guy* by Xiao Xinhua)
- (32) I asked the driver to drive slowly, to arrive at seven, and then pick me up, then go to my house to drink tea (喝下茶), I went to Hongguifang after shower and meal.¹⁰
- (33) Sister ... Please answer the phone (接下电话) ... I don't feel relieved to give it to Xiao Yang in your department!¹¹

⁹ [http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/zh/search/0/Unplugged the network cable](http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/zh/search/0/Unplugged%20the%20network%20cable)

¹⁰ [http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/zh/search/0/drink tea](http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/zh/search/0/drink%20tea)

¹¹ [http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/zh/search/0/answer the call](http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/zh/search/0/answer%20the%20call)

As can be seen from examples (30) to (33), "Xia" in example (30) and (31) is directional verb, and "V Xia₁ N" is the objective description of the action. Although adverb appears before verb in example (30), the adverbs of degree with comparative significance are subjective, such as "geng (more)/bijiao (by comparison)". The adverb "happily" in example (30) is just a description of the state of action. In example (31), "answer the phone" is a statement of objective facts, indicating the completion of the action of "answer the phone". In example (32) and (33), "Xia" and "V Xia₂ N" both express the speaker's attitude and willingness to persuade the other party to do something.

B. Difference between continuous action and discontinuous action

Due to the influence of time measure word "Xia₂", the structure "V Xia₂ N" represents a bounded and independent event, so there is generally no continuous action after that, while "V Xia₁ N" represents discrete activity, followed by continuous action.

- (34) It is actually a very small thing, but so few people are willing to bend down (愿意弯下腰).¹²
- (35) According to the habit, I know she wants me to bend down (要我弯下腰). She whispered into my ear: "Don't tell mom ..." (*Zeng Zhuo's Prose Collection* by Zeng Zhuo)
- (36) Suddenly he smiled and beckoned to Qing Yan to bend over (要她弯下腰). (*I Really Want to See You* by Mo Chan)
- (37) He pushed the door open gently and had to bend down. (不得不弯下腰) (*All Dead* by Cai Jun)
- (38) His costume was so complete and rigid that he seemed (看上去) almost unable to bend over (弯下腰). (*David Copperfield* by Dickens)
- (39) Whatever else, everyone bent down (弯下腰) to "operate" happily. (*Fujian Daily* 1994)
- (40) Does anyone kneel, bend (弯下腰), and cringe (缩) when their heart hurts? (*Love is Slow* by Dong Ni)
- (41) Roger could not hear what she said, so he bent down (弯下腰) and said softly, "I'm sorry, Radisson, could you please say it again?" (*Aloeswood Incense: the Second Furnace Shannon* by Eileen Chang)
- (42) Watson, I must look inside. If you bend down (弯下腰) and hold the wall (扶着墙), I think I can see it. (*Sherlock Holmes-The Return* by Arthur Conan Doyle)

¹² [http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/zh/search/0/bent down](http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/zh/search/0/bent%20down)

- (43) In the choking nose that is still flowing, I coughed exaggeratedly, but couldn't help bending down (弯下腰). (*Human Humiliation* by Chu Chen)

From the above examples, it can be seen that the phrase of "bending down" is ambiguous in some contexts and unambiguous in others.

By comparison, it can be found that the "弯下腰 (bend down)" in examples (34) to (38) has no subsequent effect or accompanying action in the sentence, and "下 (Xia)" here can be both directional verb and time measure word. When used as a directional verb, "弯下(去)腰 (already bent down)" means a result; while applied as a time measure word, "弯(一)下腰 (bend down)" means the short-term meaning of the action and the randomness of the event. In examples (39) to (43), "Xia" serves as directional verb. In the sentence, there will be continuous action and "V Xia N". For example, the "bend down" in example (39) emphasizes the mode of operation; In example (40) to (42), the action is unfinished and there is a follow-up action. In example (43), the structure is followed by directional verb "lai", which is accompanied by other actions, such as "cough".

The comparison of examples (34) to (38) and examples (39) to (43) reveals that the ambiguous sentences, examples (34) to (38), all contain the words "yuanyi (willing), yao (will), budebu (have to), kanshangqu (seems)" to express the speaker's attitude towards the other side's "bending", not just an objective narrative.

C. Difference between realis and irrealis

Realis (reality) and irrealis (non-reality) belong to the category of modal meaning. Comrie (1985) holds that the category of realis refers to scenarios that have already occurred or are happening, and the category of irrealis indicates all scenarios outside reality. It has been discussed in previous part that ambiguity occurs in the context of the speaker's subjective attitude. This view can also be argued from the perspective of non-realistic sentences.

As for the generalization and division of non-realistic sentences, this paper agrees with the specific classification of the semantic system of non-realistic sentences made by Zhang Xueping (2009). (See "Fig. 1")

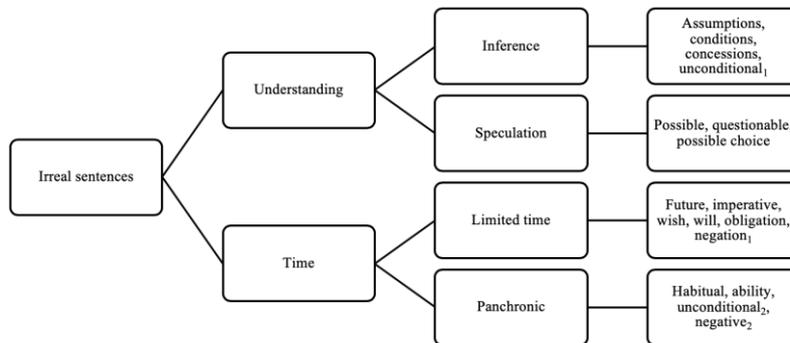


Fig. 1. The specific classification of the semantic system of non-realistic sentences made by Zhang Xueping.

This can be used as a standard to list the examples of "V Xia₂ N" in irreal sentences:

- (44) As for the homework in the liberal arts, as long as you read the book (看下书) a little before the exam, it is not easy to fail.¹³ (Assumption / Sufficient conditions)
- (45) I will make mistakes even if I wash the dishes (洗下碗). (Assumption and concession)
- (46) Whether it is useful or not, I have to go to the bank (去下银行). (Unconditional₁)

- (47) You either read the book (看下书) or read the newspaper (读下报). (Possible choice)
- (48) Should I try my luck (试下运气) too? (Questionable)
- (49) Tomorrow is a holiday. I plan to have my hair done (做下头发). (future)
- (50) Could you please vote (投下票) for my friend? Thanks! (Wish)
- (51) She shook his hand away, shivering coldly, and just wanted to rush back to the basement to change clothes (换下衣服). (Love Fanatic by Tang Xuan) (Will)

¹³ <http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/zh/search/0/Read book>

- (52) We should improve the next meal (改善下伙食). (Obligation)
- (53) I do not know what to do at work, I just go online every day, play games (玩下游戏) at noon, and do some chores for others. I'm almost dying. (Habitual)
- (54) 80-year-old mother can still cook (做下饭). (Ability)
- (55) No matter how busy, I exercise (锻炼下身体) every day. (Unconditional₂)
- (56) Even if I was scolded by my mother, I haven't read a book (看下书) until now in holiday. (Negative₁)
- (57) I always feel empty when I don't read (看下书) in bathroom. (Negative₂)

It can be found that the "V Xia₂ N" pattern can be employed in irreal sentences to indicate what may happen, exist, or assume.

According to such classification standard, the five mostly-used phrases of "V Xia₂ N" in Beijing Language and Culture University corpus were counted, and the following conclusions were drawn: (See "Table II")

TABLE II. THE FIVE MOSTLY-USED PHRASES OF "V XIA₂ N" IN BEIJING LANGUAGE AND CULTURE UNIVERSITY CORPUS

| | Vote | Relax | Read book | Listen to song | Bring up the spirit |
|------------------|------|-------|-----------------|------------------|---------------------|
| Total | 168 | 129 | 129 | 107 | 73 |
| Real sentences | 0 | 4 | 2 ¹⁴ | 8 | 2 |
| Irreal sentences | 168 | 125 | 127 | 97 ¹⁵ | 69 ¹⁶ |

From the above analysis, it can be seen that the "V Xia₂ N" pattern discussed in this paper tends to appear in irreal sentences to express the modality, that is, speakers attach markers to subjective information categories such as emotions or attitudes in language in view of their innate knowledge (Lu Chuan, 2003).

The above analysis shows that the differences in both the composition and context of "V Xia N" are affected by different parts of speech. When "Xia" is used as a directional verb, the pattern tends to express

¹⁴ Used in real sentences, "Xia" serves as a directional verb, and "read book" is followed by a directional verb. Such as "At this time, Xu Qingfan can no longer read the book quietly."

¹⁵ Most of the examples involved are microblog terms, which are characterized by fragmentation. Three examples of "listen to the song" are not complete sentences and appear in isolation, so they are excluded.

¹⁶ Two examples of the structure of "bring up the spirit" are not complete sentences and appear in isolation, so they are excluded from the statistics.

the action and state objectively, and when employed as a time measure word, the pattern tends to express the subjective modality of the event.

At this point, it can be seen that example (5) indicates action about to take place in unrealistic context, and there is no other action associated with it, so "Xia" is a time measure word. The interval between starting and ending point of "V Xia N" is very short, even negligible, which means that the speaker subjectively believes that the event can be completed in a short time, and is equivalent to "写了(一)下日记(writing diary)." In example (6), "拔下电源(unplug)" is followed by other actions, which reveals that "V Xia N" is a process. "Xia" here serves as a directional verb, corresponding to the "Shang" at the end of the sentence.

V. CONCLUSION

In the pattern of "V Xia N", "Xia" acts as a complement after the verb, which can be used as a directional verb or a time measure word. Due to the different grammatical meanings of "Xia", the semantic characteristic of the pattern varies.

"Xia", when used as a directional verb, means direction or result. The combined "VN" is a continuous action or an instantaneous action. "V Xia N" expresses the process or result of the activity, which is generally in the context of objectivity and reality, and then there are other actions that occur continuously with it, which tend to express the spatial concept of the activities. When "Xia" is taken as a time measure word, "VN" combined with it is an autonomous action. This structure expresses the meaning of the event as a whole, mostly in the context of unreality, and represents the shortness of the event, which is the expression of subjective intention.

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