

Object Preposing in Mandarin Chinese: Focus on *ba* Construction and *bei* Construction

Wenjing He

5509 Landmark PI, Fairfax, Virginia, 22030

whe2@gmu.edu

Keywords: Object preposing, *ba* Construction, *bei* construction.

Abstract. This article explores *ba* construction and *bei* construction in realizing object preposing in Mandarin Chinese. The change of sentence structures mirrors the movement of objects, especially for object preposing and topicalization. In this case, inserting helping words as *ba* and *bei* highlights this vibration. I propose that these two structures bear similarities in converting sentence structures, while they also reflect differences in acquiring sentence final marker as *-le*. I further investigate *ba* construction and *bei* construction within *wh*-topicalization to show that only *bei* construction is acceptable for this structure.

1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that Mandarin Chinese is a language generally with SVO structure (Mei 1980). However, the preposing of object triggers this “popular structure” into SOV or OSV structure to emphasize different topics or intentions as shown in (1).

- (1) a. Wo fan chi le (SOV)
 I meal eat PRF
 ‘I ate the rice’
 b. Yao wo he le (OSV)
 medicine I took PRF
 ‘I took the medicine’

The most intriguing and interesting part is that though the semantic meanings of the (1a) and (1b) are identical, they formed in different structures. To place a specific concentration on object preposing structures, this paper aims to focus on the *ba* construction (in SOV structure) and *bei* construction (in OSV structure). First, I present that *ba* construction and *bei* construction are indispensable in *wh*-topic sentences. Second, I propose that only *bei* construction can realize *wh*-topicalization. Third, I conclude that *ba* construction is constrained by aspectual marker *-le*, while *bei* construction is free from this constraint by implying its own passiveness. At last, I discuss the preference variation between two constructions.

This paper is organized as following. In section 2, I will give a brief introduction to general object preposing structures. In section 3, I will discuss *ba* construction and its characteristics in SOV structure and *bei* construction in OSV structure. Then, in section 4, I will compare the *bei* construction with *ba* construction in the cases as *wh*-topic sentence, *wh*-topicalized sentence and their relationship with the aspectual marker *-le*. In section 5, I will talk about their preference variation in utterance.

2. Different structures in realizing object preposing

In Mandarin Chinese, object preposing is realized in two structures that triggered by changing the word order¹. One is SOV structure that possesses a preverbal object led by subject, and the other is

¹ Word order is quite controversial in Mandarin Chinese due to the Verb Object Constructions (VOCs). Li and Thompson (1981) argue that VOCs in Mandarin Chinese are compounds. Seemingly, the verb and object within this construction is a single entity, which disallows the independent word-meaning use.

However, Linda (2013) asserts that the object in VOCs contributes to the meaning of the entire construction. As far as I’m

OSV structure that contains a clause-initial object. For years, Chinese linguistics were devoted in studying the triggering adjuncts in object preposing structures, focusing on its syntactic features, categories and positions. Thomas and Chengchi (1995) put forwards that the occurrence of some Chinese adjuncts only restricted in VP and they can apparently make movement to precede the object. This argument is explained in section 3.1, with the evidence of data (4a), (4b).

Further, Linda (2008) contends that the direct object (without any additional marker) is allowed to move between the subject and verb, which motivates the shifts of word order². Though plenty of previous studies have investigated the object preposing structures and movements thoroughly, seldom of them have made the comparison between those embedded constructions such as *ba* construction in SOV structure and *bei* construction in OSV structure. In this thesis, I will discuss the *ba* construction and *bei* construction and then make comparison between them in some cases.

3. Literature review on *ba* construction and *bei* construction

3.1 *ba* construction

Ba construction is widely studied in deciding word order in Mandarin Chinese³ and acting as Differential Object Marking (DOM)⁴. The identifiability of DOM in discourse is highlighted by *ba* construction (Giorgio 2014). With *ba*-construction in a sentence, the information/patient-object undergoes the movement and can be easily located in sentence. That is to say, the identifiability of *ba* construction triggers the object movement. Consider the following data:

- (4) a. Mingming chi yao le.
 Mingming eat medicine PRF.
 ‘Mingming took medicine.’
- b. Mingming ba yao chi le.
 Mingming BA medicine eat PRF
 ‘Mingming took medicine.’

In (4a), the sentence structure is in standard SVO structure. However, in (4b) the sentence structure transfers into SOV by adding the prepositional participle *ba*, which lead to the preposing of the object *yao* ‘medicine’. In this case, preposition *ba* marked the patient (*yao* ‘medicine’) in a preverbal position. Generally, *ba* must precede the NP in the sentence to form a grammatical structure.

3.2 *bei* construction

As the alternative pattern of *ba*, *bei* is discussed with *ba* in many cases. Compare with *ba*, *bei* is generally followed with “doer” in a passive voice sentence as in (5). *bei* sentence is a key way to express the passive in Mandarin Chinese.

- (5) Fan bei Mingming chi le.
 Meal PASSIVE Mingming eaten PRF
 ‘Meal has been eaten by Mingming’

Compared with *ba* construction, preposition participle *bei* in (5) shifts the emphasis from “doer” (Mingming) to subject(*fan* ‘meal’). Consequently, *bei*-marking as an alternative marking with *ba*-marking, is crucial in mapping the object preposing in different structures.

concerned, verbs in VOCs take a generic direct object to complete the construction. By substituting the direct object, the construction undergoes semantical transformation. I prefer the theory of the existence of separability in VOCs, which provides variant possibilities for word order analysis.

² The movement of direct object to embed between subject and verb shifts word order from SVO to SOV.

³ Li and Thompson (1981) claim that the word order in Mandarin Chinese should be SOV structure by utilizing the *ba* construction to support their claim they show the pattern as S –V-O-V =S-BA-O-V. However, Mei (1980) argues that *ba* construction undergoes transformation, thus it cannot be extended as an evidence to conclude that Mandarin Chinese bears SOV structure.

⁴ DOM is marked in Mandarin Chinese when the direct object is human/generic/animate or definite (Yang 2008). According to Yang and Bergan’s (2008) study, *ba* is one of the differential object markings in Mandarin Chinese, making DOM can be identified in sentence.

3.3 Discussion on *ba* construction and *bei* construction.

Ba construction and *bei* are closely related patterns and they have always been discussed and analyzed collectively. In *ba* construction, post-*ba* object⁵ is followed and marked by *ba*, while in *bei* construction, the original object in *ba* construction moves to the initial position of *bei* construction. See the patterns below:

S+BA+O+V (*ba* in SOV structure)

O+BEI+S+V (*bei* in OSV structure)

In other words, the object followed by *ba* is accord with the object preceded the *bei* (James, Audrey & Yafei 2009). As shown in (3).

(3) a. Zhangsan ba shu mai le.
Zhangsan BA book buy PRF

‘Zhangsan have bought the book.’

b. Shu bei Zhangsan mai le.
Book BEI Zhangsan buy PRF

‘The book is bought by Zhangsan.’

The object *shu* ‘book’ in (3a) moves to the sentence initial position in (3b), showing the occurrence of movement between *ba* construction and *bei* construction.

Also, *ba* can be omitted in SOV structure as shown in (5).

(5) Mingming yao chi le.
Mingming medicine eat PRF

‘Mingming took medicine’

In (5), *yao* “medicine” is the direct object followed by subject *Mingming* and is the receiver of the action *chi* ‘eat’. Compared with (4b), (5) shows that the sentence could still be grammatically correct with the omission of *ba*. However, does that mean *ba* construction is always optional? How about *bei* construction? I will explore this issue in the following section within *wh*-topics.

4. Comparison between *ba* construction and *bei* construction

4.1 *ba* construction and *bei* construction in *wh*-topics⁶

Mandarin Chinese is considered as *wh-in-stu* language, which *wh*-words stay in their based position and undergo no movement (Pan 2006). Thus, *wh*-words provide a landing site for *wh-topicalization* (Wu 1999)⁷. Based on this structure, which *wh*-topic is followed by the subject of the sentence. It is possible to ascribe this case into topicalization, making it an interesting case to study *ba* construction and *bei* construction. In this section, I will first investigate the possibility of embedding *wh*-topics into *ba* construction and *bei* construction. Then I will test whether the two constructions can be fitted into *wh*-topicalization. To test whether *ba* is empirical in favor of constructing *wh*-topics sentence, I set the data in (6b).

(6) a. *Mingming shenme chi le?
Mingming what eat PRF

⁵ post-*ba* object (NP) is considered as affectee, which is affected by the affector directly (James Audrey & Yafei 2009)

⁶ *wh-topic*: *wh*-items in language varieties shows that some complex *wh*-phrases behave as Topics.

⁷ Wu (1999) put a set of data to prove that *wh*-words can be topicalized in the sentence:

a. Zhangsan mai-le shenme?
Zhangsan buy-PRF what?

‘What has Zhangsan bought?’

b. #Shenme Zhangsan mai-le?
What Zhangsan buy-PRF?

‘What has Zhangsan bought?’

Pan (2007) disputes Wu’s viewpoint by indicating (b) is not acceptable by native speakers because this utterance is limited within a felicitous context designed by Wu.

In this article, I will argue Wu’s opinion by showing the evidence of *ba* construction. Though the I hold the same attitude with Pan, my data shows strong proof to tackle the problem.

- ‘What has Mingming eaten?’
 b. Mingming ba shenme chi le?
 Mingming BA what eat PRF
 ‘What has Mingming eaten?’
 c. Mingming bei shenme yao le?
 Mingming BEI what bite PRF
 ‘What bite Mingming?’

The data shows that, *ba* construction and *bei* construction is necessary to link the *wh*-topics with the subject, making the sentence to be grammatically correct without *wh*-movement.

4.2 *ba* construction and *bei* construction in *wh*-topicalization

Given that Mandarin Chinese is considered as *wh-in-situ* language (see section 3.2) in which *wh*-element has no overt movement, the issue of the existence of *wh*-topicalization in Mandarin Chinese is argued (Jianxin 1999, Pan 2006). Jianxin held the opinion that *wh*-word can be topicalized to the sentence initial position.

- (7) a. Zhangsan mai le shenme?
 Zhangsan buy PRF what?
 ‘What has Zhangsan bought?’
 b. Shenme Zhangsan mai le?
 What Zhangsan buy PRF. (Jianxin 1999)
 ‘What has Zhangsan bought?’ (data insertion).

Jianxin contends that (7b) is a fully grammatical sentence, whereas Pan (2006) argues that (7b) is unnatural. The author further proposes that *wh*-word like *shenme* ‘what’ cannot undergo topicalization.

From my perspective, I adopt Pan’s opinion that (7b) is not acceptable for native speakers for it is constrained within extremely specific context. However, I also disagree with Pan’s assertion that *wh*-word cannot be topicalized. Because *bei* construction offers landing site for the settlement of object *shenme* ‘what’, restricting it to be controlled by the subject *Zhangsan*. See the example in (7).

- (7) Shenme bei Zhangsan mai le.
 What PASSIVE Zhangsan buy PRF
 ‘What has Zhangsan bought?’

In (7), the insertion of *bei* construction adapts the original *wh*-topicalization structure, making the sentence “magically” becomes free of errors. Thus, I assume that *wh*-words can undergo topicalization if it is modified by *bei* construction.

Briefly summarizing, I assume that *bei* construction contribute significant importance in realizing a grammatical *wh*-topicalization sentence, while *ba* construction is prohibited in this structure.

4.3 Aspect marker *-le* in *ba* construction and *bei* construction

Li and Thompson (1981) suggest that the obligatory adjunct markings in object preposing structure differ in their movement. And many detailed cases of the obligatory adjuncts are studied to help explain the formation of object preposing structure. Tzong-Hong (2015) illustrates that Mandarin Chinese has clear past tense markers by concentrating its syntactic structures like object fronting, which shows the existence of tense in sentence as in (8).

- (8) Ta zou le
 He leave PRF
 ‘He left.’

According to Tzong Hong’s opinion that aspectual maker *-le* indicates the perfect aspect in sentence. However, I argue that the clear past tense marker is not indispensable in object preposing structures by comparing *ba* construction and *bei* construction.

- (9) a. Ta ba gongzuo ci le
 He BA job resign PRF
 ‘He resigned the job’

- b. *Ta ba gongzuo ci
He BA job resign
'He resigned his job'
- c. Ta bei laoban kaichu le
He BEI boss fire PRF
'He was fired by the boss'
- d. Ta bei laoban kaichu
He BEI boss fire
'He is fired by the boss.'

As shown in (9a), (9b), sentence final *-le* marker is obligatory in *ba* construction, while is optional in *bei* construction. The evidence shows that, in contrast to *ba* construction, *bei* construction is free with aspectual marker *-le*.

I assume that *bei* construction undergoes unmarked passive structure, the patient (object) is in a pre-subject position without any overt lexical marking of passiveness. As in (9c), the patient(object) *gongzuo* 'job' experienced the action *ci* 'resign' from agent *Ta* 'he'. Consequently, *-le* is not only used as past aspect marker, but also marked passiveness in *ba* construction, which denotes perfect aspectual marker *-le* contributes its function to *ba* construction.

4. Preference Variation between *ba* construction and *bei* construction

The preference variation among object preposing structures can be varied greatly, even though they bear the same semantic meaning. Based on the different word order, *ba* construction and *bei* construction emphasize the different elements in sentence. As in (4a), (4b):

- (10) a. wo ba fan chi le.
I BA rice eat PRF
'I ate rice'
- b. fan bei wo chi le
rice BEI I eat PRF
'I ate rice'

Though the semantic meaning is identical, the emphasis is quite different in two sentences. In (10a), the *ba* construction sentence emphasizes the subject *wo* 'I', while in (10b) the *bei* construction sentence emphasizes the object *fan* 'rice'. Apparently, the emphasis is put on the sentence initial position to stress the intention or information.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I discussed the preposing object structures as SOV and OSV in Mandarin Chinese, specifically pay attention to *ba* construction and *bei* construction. First, I have done a literature review to the previous studies on word order. Then I briefly introduced the *ba* construction and *bei* construction to clarify their different characteristics. My main argument is in section 4, where I compared *ba* construction and *bei* construction in different cases. I presented that both *ba* construction and *bei* construction are necessary in generating the *wh*-topic sentences. Furthermore, I argued that only *bei* construction is acceptable in *wh*-topicalization sentence. Besides, I proposed that *ba* construction is obligatory with *-le* marker while *bei* construction is free from *-le* marker. As a related issue, I also have proposed that *ba* construction and *bei* construction emphasize the different aspect in utterance.

References

- [1] Kuang, M, Is Chinese Really a SOV Language?, ms., National Taiwan University, pp. 1-3, 1980.
[2] Ernst. T. and C. Wang, Object Preposing in Mandarin Chinese. Journal of East Asian Linguistics,

vol.4, pp.235-260, 1995.

- [3] Badan. L, Preposed object and low periphery in Mandarin Chinese, City university of Hong Kong, pp. 3-5, 2008.
- [4] Charles. L and Thompson. S, Mandarin Chinese: A functional reference grammar, University of California Press, Berkeley, vol. 7, pp. 240-245, 1981.
- [5] Badan. L, Verb-Object constructios in a Mandarin: Comparison with Ewe. *Linguistic review*, vol.30, pp. 373-442, 2013.
- [6] Lemmolo. G. Differential object marking and identifiability of the referent: a study of Mandarin Chinese, *Linguistics*, vol. 52, pp. 315-334, 2014.
- [7] Ning. Y, The indefinite object in Mandarin Chinese: Its marking, interpretation and acquisition, Utrecht: LOT Publishers, pp. 56-76, 2008.
- [8] Huang.C.T. J., A. and Li, Y, The syntax of Chinese, Cambridge University Press, vol.5, pp. 154-167, 2009.
- [9] Junnan. P, Wh-topicalization and wh-in-situ in Mandarin Chinese. *20ème Journées de Linguistique d'Asie Orientale*, 2006, CRLAO, EHESS, Paris, France, pp. 14-16, 2006.
- [10]Junan.P, wh-ex-situ and the left periphery in Mandarin Chinese, *Syntax of Modern Chinese: As generative introduction*, pp. 2-6, 2007.
- [11]Wu. J, Syntax and semantics of quantification in Chinese, Doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland at College Park, pp. 25-34, 1999.
- [12]Tzong-Hong, L,. Tense in Mandarin Chinese Sentences. *Syntax: A journal of Theoretical Experimental and Interdisciplinary Research*, vol.18, pp.320-342, 2015.