Mandarin Pseudo-Ditransitive Verbs

Charles Chien-Jer Lin®* Wen-chen Wei* Chu-Ren Huang+
Graduate Program in Linguistics, National Chengchi University, Taipei®
CKIP, Institute of Information Science, Academia Sinica, Taipei®
Institute of Linguistics, Academia Sinica, Taipei+

Abstract

This paper examines a special type of verbs called “pseudo-ditransitive verbs”, such as tushang ‘spread onto’, zhuangman ‘load with’, fangjin ‘put into’, shiwei ‘see as’, etc. These verbs are similar to “ditransitive verbs” in that they both take three arguments. However, pseudo-ditransitive verbs, with a more restricted syntactic variety, are quite different from ditransitive verbs. Two possible syntactic structures of pseudo-ditransitive verbs are discussed. Then based on the assumption underlying lexical semantics that the meaning of a verb determines its syntactic behavior, we explore the lexical semantics of pseudo-ditransitive verbs. We conclude that pseudo-ditransitive verbs semantically cause “movement” or “change of state” upon the object. With the successful establishment of pseudo-ditransitive verbs as a verb class, we have a bettered classification of Mandarin verbs: verbs are categorized as “intransitive — pseudo-transitive — transitive — pseudo-ditransitive — ditransitive” based on transitivity.

1. Introduction

As the center of a sentence, verbs are among the first to be studied for a better analysis and understanding of a sentence. Previous studies have been greatly devoted to the classification of verbs. Linguists base themselves on different criteria thus arriving at different verb categories. As a pioneer in Chinese linguistics, Chao (1968) divides verbs into nine classes, based first on “transitivity”, then on “action and status”. Li (1971) divides verbs first into action and status, then transitive and intransitive, thus arriving at fourteen categories. Teng (1975) categorizes verbs on the basis of semantic transitivity. Still much previous literature, such as Tang (1989), CKIP (1989), Her (1990), Chang (1991) and Tsao (1996), has focused on the classification of Chinese verbs. Different as the criteria that linguists adopt may seem, transitivity is undoubtedly one of the most important criteria in classifying verbs. And based on transitivity, verbs are traditionally classified as transitive, ditransitive and intransitive.

In this paper, a special type of verbs in Mandarin, termed “pseudo-ditransitive verbs”, are going to be investigated. These verbs are similar to “ditransitive verbs” in
that they both take three arguments. However, pseudo-ditransitive verbs, with a more restricted variety of syntactic structure, are quite different from ditransitive verbs. *Bangshang* ‘to tie onto’ as in (1a, b) is an example of pseudo-ditransitive verb.

(1a)* ta bangshang xiangzi yi tiao shengzi
   he tie onto box one CL rope
(1b) ta ba xiangzi bangshang yi tiao shengzi
    he BA box tie onto one CL rope
‘He ties the box with a rope.’

This paper aims to explore the special behaviors of this type of verbs, to prove that they constitute an independent category and to look into them from a lexical semantic point of view. We will first review what Chang et al (1988) defined as “pseudo-transitive verbs” in section 2. We then present the syntactic properties of pseudo-ditransitive verbs with examples in section 3. As pseudo-ditransitive verbs are expected to constitute a verb category, we will be comparing them with transitive verbs and ditransitive verbs in section 4. Section 5 will be devoted to the lexical semantics of pseudo-ditransitive verbs. A Conclusion is given in section 6.

2. The Existence of “Pseudo-Transitive Verbs”

The current study of pseudo-ditransitive verbs (PDVs, henceforth) is very much inspired by Chang et al (1988), who validated the existence of “pseudo-transitive verbs”. Pseudo-transitive verbs take two arguments, while syntactically usually require a preposition to assign the oblique case to the internal argument. Chang et al (1988) have described five syntactic properties of pseudo-transitive verbs, which are summarized here with examples:

A. The internal argument of the pseudo-transitive verb is introduced by a preposition and appears after the verb, as in sentence (2a, b).

(2a)* ta toupiao wo
   he vote me
(2b) ta toupiao gei wo
    he vote to me
‘He voted for me.’

B. The internal argument of the verb is introduced by a preposition and appears before the verb, as in sentences (3a, b).
(3a)* Zhangsan qiouhuen li xiaojie
Zhangsan propose Li miss

(3b) Zhangsan xiang li xiaojie qiouhuen
Zhangsan to Li miss propose
‘Zhangsan proposed to Miss Li.’

C. Pseudo-transitive verbs appear in BA/BEI sentences as in examples (4a, b, c).

(4a)* laoban mianzhi le Laowang
don boss fire ASP Laowang

(4b) laoban ba Laowang mianzhi le
don boss BA Laowang fire ASP
‘The boss fired Laowang.’

(4c) Laowang bei laoban mianzhi le
Laowang BEI boss fire ASP
‘Laowang was fired by the boss.’

D. The internal argument intervenes into the pseudo-transitive compound verb as in examples (5a, b).

(5a)* ta zhaomafan wo
he find fault with me

(5b) ta zhaow wo mafan
he find me trouble
‘He finds fault with me.’

E. The second argument is topicalized as in (6a, b).

(6a)* fumu zuozhu huenyin de shi
parents decide marriage DE matter

(6b) huenyin de shi, fumu zuozhu
marriage DE matter parents decide
‘Matters concerning marriage, the parents will decide.’

They concluded that pseudo-transitive verbs mark a class between the two already-existing major classes—transitive and intransitive verbs, and thus classified verbs as “intransitive—pseudo-transitive—transitive—ditransitive”.

The existence of pseudo-transitive verbs between intransitive and transitive verbs
plus the data that we investigated have led us to suspect whether there exists another
group of “pseudo-“ verbs between transitive and ditransitive verbs, namely the
pseudo-ditransitive verbs, the focus of this paper.

3. The Syntactic Properties of Pseudo-Ditransitive Verbs

We have briefly stated in section 1 that PDVs are similar to ditransitive verbs in the
number of arguments they take (which is three), while different from ditransitive verbs as
for their restricted syntactic behavior. We hereby list the syntactic properties of PDVs
and provide examples to show what PDVs are.

A. Pseudo-ditransitive verbs appear in BA/BEI sentences as in examples (7a, b, c).

(7a)* wo  tushang   mianbao  naiyou
 I spread onto bread butter

(7b) wo  ba  mianbao   tushang   naiyou
 I BA bread spread onto butter
 ‘I spread butter over the bread.’

(7c) mianbao  bei  (wo)    tushang    naiyou
bread BEI (me) spread onto butter
 ‘The bread was spread with butter (by me).’

All the PDVs bear this syntactic property. That is, (7a) is ungrammatical unless the
preposition *ba* precedes one of the internal arguments. In sentence (7b), for instance, *ba*
is required to assign case to one of the two arguments receiving the action. Another
alternative is the passivization with *bei* in the sentences. Other examples of PDVs
include *tieshang* ‘stick onto’, *daoman* ‘fill with’, *shoujin* ‘put into’, *ganchu* ‘drive out’,
yicheng ‘translate as’, *kanzuo* ‘see as’, *shiwei* ‘see as’, etc. (8a) through (9b) are some
more examples.

(8a) wo  ba  ta  ganchu    jiaoshi
 I BA him drive out classroom
 ‘I drive/get him out of the classroom.’

(8b) ta   bei  (wo)   ganchu   jiaoshi
 he BEI (me) drive out classroom
 ‘He was driven out of the classroom (by me).’

(9a) wo  ba  ta  shiwei  hao  pengyou
 I BA him see as good friend
 ‘I see him as a good friend.’
B. The object of the preposition *ba* in PDV sentences can be topicalized, as in (10)-(12):

(10) mianbao, wo tushang le naiyou
    ‘On the bread, I have spread butter.’

(11) ta, wo ganchu le jiaoshi
    ‘Him, I have driven out of the classroom.’

(12) ta, wo shiwei hao pengyou
    ‘Him, I see as a good friend.’

It is acceptable for one of a PDV’s objects (the one preceded by BA) to be topicalized. It will be accounted in section 5 as to which one of the objects should be preceded by *ba* and have the opportunity to be topicalized.

Basicly, in this section we have summarized two most important syntactic properties of PDVs. Compared with the five syntactic possibilities of pseudo-transitive verbs in the last section, PDV sentence structures are obviously less diversified. In the next section, we will distinguish PDVs from transitive and ditransitive verbs to prove their particular existence, still based on the syntactic structures.

4. Pseudo-Ditransitive Verbs, Transitive Verbs and Ditransitive Verbs

The syntactic properties as described in the previous section show how strict and restricted PDV sentences are. We now compare PDVs with transitive and ditransitive verbs to see how different they are.

4.1 PDVs and Transitive Verbs

The difference between PDVs and transitive verbs is distinct. Transitive verbs take two arguments, while PDVs take three. Syntactically, transitive verbs could generally appear with the word order of S-V-O. *Chi* ‘eat’ and *baifang* ‘visit’ in sentences (13) and (14) are typical examples of transitive verbs.

(13) ta chi le san ge hanbao
    ‘He ate three hamburgers.’
PDVs, however, do not behave like a transitive verb. Sentences (15a) and (15b) are both ungrammatical, indicating that the common constituent structure of transitive verbs does not apply to PDVs.

(15a)* jingcha guanjin fanren
policeman lock into criminal
(15b)* jingcha guanjin jianlao
policeman lock into jail
(15c) jingcha ba fanren guanjin jianlao
policeman BA criminal lock into jail
‘The policeman puts the criminal in jail.’

4.2 PDVs and Ditransitive Verbs

We have mentioned in the beginning of this paper that PDVs and ditransitive verbs are similar in that they both take three arguments. We hereby examine the syntactic behaviors of ditransitive verbs to see how they are different from those of PDVs’.

Ditransitive verbs show a greater variety in syntactic alternations. In the sentences (16a) through (16c), we see that song ‘give’, as a typical ditransitive verb, appear basically in three different structures. Sentence (16a) is the basic “S-V-IO-DO” structure. Sentence (16b) is an alternation with the indirect object preceded by the preposition gei ‘to’, directly following the verb. In the BA alternation (16c), the direct object is preceded by ba, and the whole phrase precedes the verb.

(16a) wo song ta yi fen liwu
I give him one CL gift
‘I give him a gift.’
(16b) Wo song yi fen liwu gei ta
I give one CL gift to him
‘I give a gift to him.’
(16c) Wo ba yi fen liwu song (gei) ta
I BA one CL gift send to him
‘I send a gift to him.’

We have seen the syntactic properties of PDVs in section 3 that the syntactic alternations of PDVs are very restricted. Sentences (7a, b) are repeated here for comparison:
(7a)* wo tushang mianbao naiyou
    I spread onto bread butter

(7b) wo ba mianbao tushang naiyou
    I BA bread spread onto butter
    ‘I spread butter onto the bread.’

PDVs do not comply with the constituent structures of ditransitive verbs; the constituent structure for PDVs is (17) instead, which is comparable only to (6c) of ditransitive verbs.

(17) Subject – BA – Object 1 – PDV – Object 2

In this section, we have seen how syntactically PDVs behave differently from transitive and ditransitive verbs. The syntactic differences validate the existence of pseudo-ditransitive verbs as a distinct verb class. Another question that comes into our mind is: what are the verbs that constitute this PDV category? Is there any semantic similarities shared by these verbs? Are PDVs predictable from their lexical semantics? These are the questions we attempt to answer in the next section.

5. The Lexical Semantics of Pseudo-Ditransitive Verbs

The assumption underlying the study of lexical semantics is that “the behavior of a verb, particularly with respect to the expression and interpretation of its arguments, is to a large extent determined by its meaning.” (Levin, 1993: 2) In other words, it is the meaning of a verb that influences its syntactic behaviors. Under this assumption, we investigate the lexical semantics of PDVs since we see such a uniformity in the syntactic structures of PDV sentences.

An investigation of the morphology of PDVs will help us analyze their meanings. The PDVs given so far, as verb-complement (V-R) compounds, fall into three major categories:

(18) put-verb + shang ‘onto’ / man ‘full’
    ex. tushang ‘spread onto’, tianshang ‘fill in’, bangshang ‘tie onto’,
    tieshang ‘stick onto’, zhuangman ‘load with’, daoman ‘fill with’, etc.

(19) verb + direction-verb (chu ‘exit/out’, ru ‘enter/into’, jin ‘enter/into’…)
    ex. shoujin ‘put into’, guanjin ‘lock into’, paichu ‘eject’, xieru ‘write into’, fangru ‘place into’, etc.
The PDVs listed above share a common semantic property: the movement of an object to a goal or resulting in a change of state (which could be seen as a “movement” from one state to another). The first group of PDVs, those in (18), are composed of what Levin (1993) called spray/load verbs or fill verbs (both belonging to the group, put-verbs) plus a resultative complement. Spray/load verbs themselves relate to “covering surfaces and putting things into containers (Levin, 1993: 118)”. Therefore the thing that is moved and the goal where the thing is moved into are naturally important information required by the sentence. All the verbs in (18) require BA to carry out the goal. The second part of the verb—the resultative complement—indicates the state that is achieved after the action is performed. For verbs with shang ‘onto’, the object is moved onto the surface of the goal. For verbs with man ‘full’, the object is moved into the goal and fully occupies the goal. (7a) is repeated below as an illustration of this type of verbs.

(7b) wo ba mianbao tushang naiyou
    I BA bread spread onto butter
    ‘I spread butter onto the bread.’

The second group of PDVs, those in (19), are composed of a transitive verb plus a direction verb. The transitive verb is semantically involved with the movement of an object from one place to another. For instance, gan ‘drive’, shou ‘put away’, guan ‘lock’, fang ‘place’ are all related to the movement of the object from one spot to another, which is the goal. The direction verb, as the complement, specifies the exact direction of the movement. Different from the PDVs in (18), the goal is preceded by the verb directly; it is the moved object that is preceded by BA. (8a) is repeated below as an illustration.

(8a) wo ba ta ganchu jiaoshi
    I BA him drive out classroom
    ‘I drive/get him out of the classroom.’

The third group of PDVs, those in (20), are composed of a transitive verb plus a become verb. The become verb in the compound verb is the major part that contributes to the change of state. In (20), there are three become verbs—cheng ‘become’, wei ‘be’, zuo ‘be’. The verbs with cheng ‘become’ are typical become verbs since as the name suggests, become verbs usually involve a change of state; at least something has to
“become” different. In such sentences it is necessary that there be an agent who causes the change, a theme that changes, and a goal that the theme is turned into. (The goal is actually the achieved state after the change.) In these sentences, the theme is preceded by BA, and the verb is followed by the target state. In (21), for example, sanwen ‘prose’ (theme) is preceded by BA and yingwen ‘English’ as the goal is preceded by the verb.

(21) laoshi ba zhe pian sanwen yicheng yingwen
    teacher BA this CL prose translate into English
    ‘The teacher translates the prose into English.’

Wei ‘be’ and zuo ‘be’ are less typical become verbs because they seem to be stative rather than dynamic. However, there is actually movement involved in these verbs. Metaphorically, if we consider the verb shiwei ‘see as’ to be the process of assigning a property to someone, or mapping someone to a set of people with a certain quality, then the process of assigning or mapping could also be regarded as a “movement” of property or identity. Take the repeated example (9a) for instance. The object ta ‘him’ is mapped to the “goal”—a set of people who bear the quality of hao pengyou ‘good friend’ through the verb shiwei ‘see as’. Therefore there is still movement involved (though metaphorically), the movement from the object to those with a certain property.

(9a) wo ba ta shiwei hao pengyou
    I BA him see as good friend
    ‘I see him as a good friend.’

We see from the above that all the PDVs presented so far bear the common semantic property: movement. Based on such an observation, we examine other verbs that are related to movement such as fang ‘place’, chidao ‘eat into’ and bai ‘place’ in (22a-c) and we find that syntactically they also behave similarly to PDVs. In other words, we could further predict that the verbs which are semantically closely related to “movement” will syntactically behave similarly as PDVs and are possible candidates to be included in the scope of PDVs.

(22a) ta ba zidian fang zhuoshang
    he BA dictionary place on the desk
    ‘He placed the dictionary on the desk.’

(22b) laowang ba zheng tiao yu chidao duzili
    Laowang BA whole CL fish eat into stomach
    ‘Laowang devoured the whole fish.’
6. Conclusion

In this paper we have defined what we call “pseudo-ditransitive verbs” in terms of their syntactic structure and lexical semantics. We examined their syntactic properties as distinct from other verb classes and found their common semantic property, namely the quality of causing movement or change of state.

The success in establishing pseudo-ditransitive verbs as an independent category has enabled us to classify the verbs of Mandarin Chinese into the five categories as shown in (23), which is better than the existing “intransitive—pseudo-transitive—transitive—ditransitive” verb classification.

References


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