Perfectivity and the Chinese BA-Verb

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1. Introduction

A BA-construction differs from an ordinary Chinese sentence in that an ordinary sentence is in an S-V-O word order, whereas the BA-sentence in an S-BA-O-V word order as the BA-noun is transposed to a preverbal position. A BA-sentence is viewed, in this study, a linguistic device which allows the speaker to express a subjective perception of the responsibility on the part of the sentient subject (or the agent) for what happens to or affects the BA noun entity. In comparison, its S-V-O counterpart normally gives a neutral report or a report on "a neutral movement, done without any further purpose in mind" (Chappell 1992:521).

Before the discussion, it is necessary to introduce two useful terms, i.e. the "BA-verb" and the "BA verbal expression". The term "BA verb" is used in this study as a cover term to refer exclusively to the base form of the core verb in the BA-sentence, i.e. the verb without any form of modification. The term "BA verbal expression" is used to refer to the entire verbal expression that follows the BA-noun immediately; it is termed "the second verbal expression" by Chao (1968:345). It is also worth noting that in this study a monosyllabic verb and its related verb are treated as different verbs and may be grouped under different verb categories.

The most noticeable feature of BA verbal expressions in the contemporary use is that they cannot be monosyllabic (Chao 1968; Newnham 1971). According to Chao (1968:346), the general philosophy of the polysyllabicity of the BA verbal expression is that, since the object noun phrase is advanced to a preverbal position, there must be something more elaborate to be expressed than a monosyllable can convey; otherwise, "it would have the effect of an anticlimax".

Similar observation was also made by W. Wang (1964:196), Hashimoto (1970) and many others that the BA verb (whether monosyllabic or polysyllabic) must be modified in some way, though they do not refer to exactly the same forms of modification. This observation may help to explain why sentences such as 1a and 2a are unacceptable in the BA-form, but are perfectly acceptable as shown in 1b and 2b:

1a. *Tā bā xiǎo māo ài. (monosyllabic verb)
   3sg BA little cat love
   "S/He loves the kitten." (Li & Thompson 1981:467)

1b. Tā bā xiǎo māo ài de yào sǐ.
   3sg BA little cat love EXT want die
   "S/he loves the kitten so much that s/he wants to die." (Li & Thompson 1981:469)
we BA question discuss
"We discuss the question."

2b. Wòmen bā wèntí táolùn-táolun.
we BA question discuss-discuss
"Let's have a bit discussion on that question."

Sentences 2a and 2b suggest that to qualify the verb in a BA-sentence, the use of modification with a disyllabic verb is also necessary.

According to Chao (1968:346-50), the verbal expression in the BA construction may appear in several forms:

(a) a verb with an aspect marker or with a post-verbal complement;
(b) a verb with an adverb (i.e. a pre-verbal modifier);
(c) a polysyllabic verb;
(d) a verb with its object:
   (i) with cognate object: a cognate object may take the verb itself as the object, or take a "quantity adverbial phrase" (following Li & Thompson's term 1981:352). A quantity adverbial phrase normally specifies the frequency, extent, or time duration of the action or event.
   (ii) with indirect object; and
(e) V-O (verb-object) compounds and idioms.

It is obvious that a BA verbal expression normally includes a BA-verb and its modification, with the exception of some polysyllabic BA-verbs.

2. Characteristics of the BA-Verb

It is apparent that not all the polysyllabic verbs are BA compatible (cf. 2a above). Furthermore, it is also noted that BA-verbs may reject certain modification, due mainly to semantic or syntactic considerations:

3a. *Tà bā jiǔ hé de zúi-xūn-xūn.
    he BA wine drink EXT all drunk
    "He drank so much wine that he was all drunk."

3b. Tà bā jiǔ hé de jīngguān.
    he BA wine drink EXT all:empty
    "He drank so much wine that the wine was all gone."

The subtlety and complexity of the co-occurrence restrictions between a verb and a BA-sentence are not clear and have for a long time attracted many linguists and researchers attempting to tackle the question.

For example, Hashimoto (1971:68) has noted that a classificatory verb, an existential verb (or a "possessive" verb), a quotative verb cannot be a BA-verb, nor can a locative verb or an intransitive verb in its base form.
Li (1970), using the criterion "action" as the major determining factor for classification, examined which verb categories can occur in the BA sentence. Based on this, he provides a long list of verbs and appears to suggest that only transitive verbs may appear in a BA sentence.

A similar claim is made by Newnham (1971:93), who claims that the morpheme BA can only co-occur with transitive verbs. He gives as the reason that the verb must have a direct object to invert. Newnham also notes that the BA-construction rejects what he calls "impersonal verbs" (such as xiàng "resemble", shì "to be" and yǒu "to have"), "compound verbs of motion" (such as zhīdào "to know", and huìjiā "to return home"), and "compound verbs of conception, emotion and thought" (such as rènshì "to get to know", xǐhuān "to be fond of").

Cheung (1973), commenting on the work by W. Wang (1964), postulates that the BA-construction is closely related to the reduplicatability of verbs. The reason Cheung advances for the non-occurrence of the existential verb yǒu "have" in a BA-construction is: "Since yǒu can never be reduplicated, it does not take ba" (p. 349). The explanation is rather dubious; it has as its corollary that the BA-construction occurs exclusively with verbs which are reduplicatable. However, it is not difficult to find acceptable BA-constructions with a verb which does not take the reduplication form and vice versa. For example, resultative verb compounds are used widely in the BA-construction but they normally do not permit any reduplication form, e.g. zuòtā "sit and make collapse" in 4a. Verbs of other categories such as gàosù "tell" (cf. 4b), bāngjià "kidnap" (cf. 4c) and so forth normally do not have a reduplication form; they are perfectly grammatical in a BA-sentence:

4a. Bié bā yī zì zuò-tā le.
   don't BA chair sit-collapse le
   "Don't break the chair by sitting on it."

4b. Tāmen bā shìqíng gàosù wǒ le.
   they BA affair/matter tell I le
   "They have told me the truth."

4c. Hui shì shéi bā háizi bāngjià le?
   possible COPU who BA child kidnap LE
   "Who can be the person that kidnapped the child?"

There are also instances where the verbs are reduplicable but not BA-compatible. For example, verbs such as rènshì "to know" in 5a, pèi "to accompany" in 5b normally allow a reduplication form:

5a. Wǒ míngtiān dài tā lái rènshì-rènshì dàjiā.
   I tomorrow bring 3sg come know-know everyone
   "I'll bring him/her here tomorrow to get to know you all."
5b.  Nǐ qù pèi-pei tā.
    you go accompany-accompany 3sg
    "You go and accompany him."

Although rènshì "get to know" can be reduplicated, it cannot appear in a BA-construction (cf. 6a). Similarly, the expression as in 5b cannot be converted to a grammatical BA-construction (cf. 6b):

6a. *Wǒ bā tā rènshì wǔ nián le.
    I BA 3sg know five year le
    "I have known him/her for five years."

6b. *Nǐ qù bā tā pèi-pei.
    you go BA 3sg accompany-accompany
    "Go and accompany him/her."

It becomes obvious that reduplicatability is not a determining criterion on which to base the decision whether a verb can occur in a BA-sentence.

This study will propose that the presence of the semantic component "perfectivity" is the determining factor for the grammaticality of the BA-sentence, and the use of the modification is to perfectivise the verb so that the sentence is BA compatible. The above-mentioned problems with the BA-verb are mainly syntactic. There are also problems of semantic consideraions.

3. Semantic Problems

Semantic problems manifested in the BA verbal expressions can be classified into four major types. The problems include the following aspects:

a. the rhematic area fails to satisfy the semantic expectation. That is, the verbal expression has to either refer to a quantified event or imply a change or resulting-state arising out of the action signalled by the BA-verb;

b. the BA-noun fails to be an "affectum". That is, the BA-noun does not refer to an entity which exists "antecedently to the agent's activity" (Fillmore 1968:4);

c. the implied subject of "the lower clause" (the embedded clause) does not co-index with the patient of "the higher clause" (the matrix sentence); and

d. the "Perfectivity" component is absent from the discourse contexts.

The four types of problems are not mutually exclusive. In the majority of cases, they interlock with one another in a cause-effect relationship.