

# DERIVED VERBS IN CHINESE: THE UNIVERSAL AND THE UNIQUE<sup>1</sup>

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**Introduction.** There is a rich literature on Chinese compound verbs formed by a verb and one or more postpositional elements of verbal or adjectival origin, e.g. *song* 'send, give a gift': *songdao* 'send (to)': *songchu* 'send, carry away'. The literature treats (1) the merits of describing complex verbs in a transformational or lexicalist framework,<sup>2</sup> (2) the analysis of compound verbs as a phenomenon of verbal aspect,<sup>3</sup> (3) the classification of derived verbs by formal and semantic criteria,<sup>4</sup> and (4) the writing of pedagogical grammars of compound verbs.<sup>5</sup> Rare are discussions of the changing patterns of derivation through time and space.

The present paper will characterize the distinctive properties of Mandarin compound verbs against the background of verbal derivation in diverse languages; I view the discussion below as a tentative proposal for a typology of verbal derivation. Students of Chinese verb derivation have frequently drawn occasional parallels between Chinese and other languages, but I know of no systematic comparative investigations. Ideally, a comparative investigation should entail a broad sampling of languages of diverse families and structures, but here I will restrict myself primarily to Indo-European and Semitic, though I have also examined Hungarian, and the Indic and Kwa languages.

In West Indo-European languages, the devices available for deriving compound verbs from a simplex verb stem include (a) prefixation (e.g. Russian *čitat'* 'read': *pročitat'* 'read through'), (b) infixation (e.g. French *tousser* 'cough': *toussoter* 'cough slightly'), (c) suffixation (e.g. English *eat*: *eat up*), (d) multiple (usually encircling) derivation, e.g. prefixation and a reflexive/reciprocal pronoun/postfix (e.g. Russian *govet'* 'fast': *razgovet'sja* 'break the fast'). In the Semitic languages, derivation takes the form of (a) prefixation (e.g. Hebrew *raxac* 'wash': *hitraxec* 'get washed'), (b) infixation and prefixation (e.g. literary Arabic *fa'ila* 'do': *'ifta-*

'ala 'counterfeit'), (c) internal consonant/vowel gemination (e.g. Maltese *kiser* 'break': *kisser* 'break to pieces'), (d) postfixes (e.g. literary Arabic 'axaḍa 'take': 'axaḍa 'ala 'blame'). The inventory of devices could be somewhat expanded if we included other language families, e.g. Hausa uses tone patterns, sometimes with segmental changes. Chinese most resembles the devices found in Germanic languages, except that its verb particles are homophonous with verbs and adjectives, while Germanic particles are homophonous with prepositions and adverbs. In both Chinese and the West Indo-European languages, infixation is rarely used (e.g. *kan* 'look': *kanyikan* 'have a look'). Finally, there is also a close parallel between Chinese and some creoles (e.g. Afrikaans, Virgin Islands Dutch Creole) where verbal prefixes are reduced forms of verbs.<sup>6</sup>

Any comparison of such a variety of languages will first have to make sense out of a terminological *mélée*. In Western and Soviet linguistic circles, derived verbs have been called variously "causative", "potential", "verb-complement compounds", "resultative verbs, compounds", "complex resultative verbs", "quasiresultatives" and "verb-verb constructions", while the derivational morphemes have been called "converbs", "auxiliary verbs", "postpositive verbs", "verb operators", "semi-affixes", "suffixes", "verb-particles", "functional endings", "verb endings" and "complements". Terms like "resultative" or "directional" which call attention to semantic functions are not always appropriate, especially in cross-linguistic contexts; terms such as "serial verbs" or "verb-verb constructions", in calling attention to formal properties, may be historically accurate but cannot be recommended for synchronic studies, since most of the postpositional elements differ in meanings and tones from the simplex verbs from which they are derived. For example, the bound postpositional element *-shang* only occasionally has the meaning of the free verb *shang* 'go up, to', e.g. *shanglou* 'go upstairs' vs. *suoshang* 'lock up', *kaoshang* 'pass test'. Hence I prefer to use neutral terms such as "derived verbs" for the general phenomenon, and "verb patterns" or "verb particles" for the postpositional derivational elements.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the considerable structural differences, derived verbs in Indo-European, Semitic and Chinese share an impressive number of formal and semantic properties, which will be discussed below under ten headings. Lack of space precludes the citation of many non-Chinese examples.

1. **The fit between functions and resources.** In Chinese a single verb may express a variety of meanings, and a single meaning may be expressed by a number of verb particles. For example, *-qilai* expresses inchoativity (e.g. *re* 'be hot': *reqilai* 'become hot-[-ter]') and ingressivity (e.g. *shuo* 'speak': *shuoqilai* 'begin speaking'--though often there is a change in meaning, e.g. *chao* 'make noise': *chaoqilai* 'quarrel'); *-dao* expresses both successful and unexpected action (e.g. *ban* 'handle': *bandao* 'handle successfully' vs. *weng* 'dream' [noun]: *wengdao* 'dream of something unexpected').<sup>9</sup> Conversely, the opposition 'lock': 'lock up (firmly)' can be expressed by no less than three verb particles, e.g. *suo* 'lock': *suoshang* = *suoqilai* = *suozhu* 'lock up (firmly)'. Moreover, derived verbs may be nearly synonymous with simplex verb-noun object constructions, e.g. *shuoqilai* 'begin talking' ~ *kaikou* '(at last) begin talking' (literally 'open' + 'mouth').

An important goal should be to ascertain which semantic functions tend to be expressed by a common verb particle. There are striking similarities among the languages sampled. For example, in Chinese, the features of inchoativity and ingressivity may both be expressed by *-qi(lai)*; in Russian ingressivity, perfectivity and successive action are all expressible by the prefix *za-*.<sup>7</sup> In addition to shared sets of functions, unrelated languages often agree in the assignment of simplex verbs to parallel derivational patterns. For instance, English *up* with verbs of non-movement may also express the notion of performing an action within a circumscribed area or context. It is striking that not only does Chinese *-qi(lai)* match the two meanings of English *up*, but the non-directional function of *-qi(lai)* and *up* operates on a similar corpus of simplex verbs, e.g. Chinese *suanqilai* = *count up*, *guanqilai* = *close up*, *xiangqilai* = *think up*.<sup>10</sup>

Future research should determine to what extent languages agree over the assignment of semantic notions to derived verbs. Consider the notions 'chase' and 'pursue, hunt for': while English now expresses the two notions by lexical means, Old English, like many other languages, expressed the second notion by a derived form of 'chase': *purchacen* 'seek to obtain' ~ French *chasser*: *pourchasser*, Arabic *ṭarada*: *ṭarada*. Chinese *zhui*: *zhuisuo* 'pursue, investigate'.

2. **Inconsistent utilization of the resources.** Derivational resources are rarely used consistently, i.e. a derivational chain often lacks individual links.

For example, from *tang* 'lie', we can derive *tangxia-* (*lai*) 'lie down' and a potential compound *tangdexia* 'can lie down (in a certain space)'. But *diao* 'fall' > *diao-xialai*, *diaoxiaqu* 'fall down' has no intermediate *\*diaoxia*. Many compounds expressing a potential action lack the non-potential variant, e.g. *yongdezha* 'can use': *\*yongzhao*. There are also cases where derived verbs exist in the absence of the underlying complex, see *\*yu: yudao = yushang = yuzhao = yujian* 'meet'. Frequently, there is no semantic equivalence between positive and negative derived verbs formed with the potential infix, e.g. *xiangqilai* 'think up a solution, recall': *xiangdeqilai* 'can think up a solution, can recall': *xiangbuqilai* 'cannot think up a solution, cannot recall', but the negated potential use of *guandezhao* 'can take care'--*guanbuzhao*-- means both 'none of your business' as well as 'cannot manage'. Often the semantic link between a derived verb and its potential form is opaque, e.g. *shuoding* 'agree upon, settle through talking' vs. *shuobuding* 'cannot say for sure, maybe' (*\*cannot settle through talking*).

Often derived verbs assume unpredicable (usually non-verbal) functions, e.g. *henbude* 'would that' (literally 'hate' + 'cannot' + 'attain'); occasionally, derived verbs function as nouns, e.g. *banbudaor* 'roly-poly' < 'cannot push over'. Particularly common is the creation of (near) synonyms involving various verb particles and degrees of morphological complexity: (a) single = double verbal particles, e.g. *shuo* 'talk': *shuoqi = shuoqilai* 'begin to talk'; (b) simplex = complex, e.g. *ti = tiqilai* 'lift up', *tingdong* 'understand what one hears' can be contracted to *dong* 'understand' but not to *ting* 'hear'; (c) a verb may appear with a choice of verb particles, e.g. *pao* 'run': *paokai = paozou* 'run away'; (d) diverse simplexes may use a common verb particle, e.g. *ding* 'decide': *nading = dading (zhuyi)* 'make up (one's mind)'. There are widescale differences in productivity of the verb particles, e.g. *-shang* and *-xia* are very productive in a variety of functions, but *-dong* 'move' or *-de* (used with some verbs of perception) have a low distribution.<sup>11</sup> A number of observers have noted that the simplex member of an opposition does not always enjoy the highest text frequency, see e.g. Dungan.<sup>12</sup> There is evidence that the complex *-qilai* is used more often than simple *-qi*<sup>13</sup>; the potential verb seems to be rarer than the actual,<sup>14</sup> but individual positive potential verbs may be rarer than the corresponding negative potential.<sup>15</sup>

See also the opaque relationship of English *send up*