

A Semantic Analysis of an Emerging BEI Construction in Chinese

Mandarin

LI Wanyu, National University of Singapore (e0320486@u.nus.edu)

Abstract:

This paper explores the emerging BEI construction based on the traditional BEI structure in Mandarin, typically considered a passive structure, with a focus on analyzing its two major interpretations as arising from an interaction between constructional meaning and lexical meaning.

Example (1-2) shows two typical forms of the traditional BEI structure, which allows only an originally transitive verb. In (1), the agent follows BEI. In (2), although the agent is not expressed formally, it is implied in the sentence (Huang, Li, & Li, 2009).

(1) Zhangsan BEI Lisi da le
Zhangsan PASS Lisi hit ASP
'Zhangsan was hit by Lisi.'

(2) Zhangsan BEI da le
Zhangsan PASS hit ASP
'Zhangsan was hit.'

In contrast, in the new BEI construction (3-4), the agent is disallowed and the predicate after BEI may correspond to transitive and intransitive verb, adjective or noun. In this paper, I will discuss the last three cases, which may trigger one of two interpretations. One is that the event is said to be done by the participant, as shown in example (3). Example (4) shows the other reading, i.e., that the agent is forced to carry out the action.

(3) Zhangsan BEI qushi le
Zhangsan PASS pass.away ASP
'Zhangsan was said to pass away.'

(4) Xuesheng-men BEI juan-kuan
Student-PL PASS donate-money
'Students are forced to donate money.'

Any new BEI construction sentence allows only one of these two interpretations. I argue that the interpretation depends on the interaction between properties of the traditional BEI structure and characteristics of the unusual predicates (as opposed to traditional transitive verbs) in the new BEI structure. To be specific, the traditional

BEI structure is associated with compulsion and affectedness properties and there is an implicit agent. (Huang et al., 2009; Jin, 2010). The interpretation of the new BEI construction depends on whether the post-BEI predicate shows an agentive or affectedness interpretation. Specifically, I show that agentivity is the feature of predicates that triggers the “be forced to do” meaning, while affectedness leads to the “be said to do” understanding.

The agentivity of the predicate is tested by whether it can appear as the complement of “persuade” (Kearns, 2000). When an agentive predicate is used in the BEI construction, its agentivity seems to contradict with the affectedness and compulsion meaning endowed by the BEI construction. However, according to Zhang (2004), the BEI construction can endow an interpretation of affectedness to an argument which lacks this feature outside of this context. Besides, the BEI construction also implies an agent. So the conflict can be solved by applying the interpretation that the surface agent carries out the action but is also regarded as being affected and compelled by the implicit agent to some extent. In other words, the agent is forced to do the thing.

When a predicate with a patient/affectee subject occurs in the BEI construction, there is redundancy because both BEI and the following predicate endow the sentence with affectedness property. In such cases, the thematic role of the surface subject can only be that of patient and the predicate does not specify any agentive argument. However, there is an implicit agent implied by the BEI construction. To resolve the redundancy and the unexpected agent in this case, we resort to the interpretation that the event is actually a rumor spread by the implicit agent and the it is unclear whether this event actually occurred. That is to say, the “be said to do” understanding is employed.

To sum up, in the new BEI construction, agentive predicates can be compatible with this BEI structure but the structure is associated with affectedness and compulsion, thus being interpreted as “be forced to do”; a predicate with a patient/affectee argument retains its affectedness interpretation, but an agent is implied by the construction, thus generating the “be said to do” interpretation.

Keywords: new BEI construction; lexical semantics; agentivity; affectedness

References:

- Huang, C. J., Li, Y. A., & Li, Y. (2009). *The syntax of chinese*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9781139166935
- Jin, K. (2010). An analysis on the lexical structure model of “bei+XX”. *Journal of Chang Chun University*, 7, 48-50.
- Kearns, K. (2000). *Semantics*. Basingstoke, Hants: Macmillan.
- Zhang, Y. (2004). *Xiandai hanyu shoushi binyuju yanjiu*. Academia Press.