Parametric variations in Mandarin and English denominal verb derivation

Jie Cheng [a,*], Howard Lasnik [b]

[a] *School of Foreign Studies, South China Normal University, Shipai, Guangzhou, Guangdong 510631, PR China*
[b] *Department of Linguistics, University of Maryland, 1106 Marie Mount Hall, College Park, MD 20742, USA*

Abstract

There are three major asymmetries recognized between Mandarin and English denominal verbs (hereafter DNV): typological, aspectual and quantitative. These asymmetries receive a plausible account on the assumption that Mandarin DNVs are derived under syntactic constraints while the derivation of English DNVs is syntax-free. The different derivational mechanisms for Mandarin and English DNVs correlate with the different functions of zero morphemes in the two languages. To spell out the correlation, we posit three parameters in word derivation: the Rule Parameter (i.e., word formation is governed either morphologically or syntactically), the Morpheme Parameter (i.e., a certain kind of word derivation utilizes, in addition to a base form, either a full morpheme or a zero morpheme) and the Zero Morpheme Parameter (i.e., zero morphemes are geared to either syntactic or morphological operations in a given language). These parameters are assumably set in such a way that DNV derivation in Mandarin is assigned to syntax but that in English to morphology.
© 2016 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Denominal verbs (hereafter DNV) in Mandarin, compared with their English counterparts, exhibit intriguing characteristics. Zero morphemes in the Mandarin lexicon, compared with those in the English lexicon, function in a distinct way. As zero morphemes are essential elements involved in the derivation of Mandarin and English DNVs, we suspect that the differences between Mandarin and English DNVs and the different functions of Mandarin and English zero morphemes are somewhat related. This article presents a comparative study of the two types of empirical facts and proposes a parameter-based account of Mandarin and English DNV derivations.

The article is organized as follows. In Section 2 we introduce Mandarin DNVs and point out three asymmetries (in terms of typology, aspect and quantity) between them and their English counterparts. In Section 3 we venture a modified L-syntactic framework for DNV derivation, improving on Hale and Keyser's (1993, 1997, 1999, 2002) work, and show that the derivation of Mandarin DNVs yields to an L-syntactic account while that of English DNVs does not. Then we use the resulting hypothesis of different derivational mechanisms for Mandarin and English DNVs to account for the three

---

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +86 13682266419; fax: +86 2085211329.
E-mail address: chengjie@m.scnu.edu.cn (J. Cheng).

asymmetries aforementioned. Section 4 presents empirical evidence that zero morphemes are geared to syntactic operations in Mandarin but morphological operations in English. Section 5 contains an attempt to connect the different derivational mechanisms for Mandarin and English DNVs to the different functions of zero morphemes in the two languages via three parameters in word derivation, namely the Rule Parameter, the Morpheme Parameter and the Zero Morpheme Parameter.

2. Asymmetries between Mandarin and English DNVs

Mandarin and English DNVs exhibit three major asymmetries: a typological one (i.e., Mandarin misses some thematic types of DNVs that are found in English), an aspectual one (i.e., the aktionsart of a DNV and the semantic properties of its source noun are unrelated in Mandarin but correlated in English) and a quantitative one (i.e., Mandarin has much fewer DNVs than English).

2.1. Typological asymmetry

Chan and Tai (1995) provide a collection of Mandarin DNVs with reference to the set of criteria that Clark and Clark (1979) use to identify English DNVs, as in (1).

(1)   Criteria for DNVs   Clark and Clark (1979:768–769)
        a.   it is formed from its source noun without affixation;
        b.   the source noun denotes a palpable object or property of such an object;
        c.   it has a non-metaphorical concrete use; and
        d.   it is usable as a genuine finite verb.

We adopted Chan and Tai's (1995) data, gave it a thorough reexamination, deleted a few improper instances and came up with a renewed thematic classification of Mandarin DNVs, as illustrated in (2).[1] See a full list of Mandarin DNVs in Appendix.

(2)   a.   Tā   nì-le   nà-miàn   qiáng.   (Locatum verb)
             he   putty-perf.   that-Cl.   wall
             "He puttied the wall".

       b.   Tā   jià-le   nàxiē   shū   (Location verb)
             he   shelve-Perf.   those   book
             "He shelved those books".

       c.   Tā   chuàn-le   èrshí-kē   zhūzi.   (Goal verb)
             he   string-Perf.   twenty-Cl.   bead
             "He stringed twenty beads".

       d.   Tā   chǎn-le   nàxiē   lājī.   (Instrument verb)
             he   shovel-Perf.   those   trash
             "He shoveled the trash".

Mandarin and English DNVs are typologically asymmetrical. Within the same classificatory system of DNVs, i.e., that of Clark and Clark (1979), English has seven types whereas Mandarin has only four, as shown in (3).

---

[1] The Mandarin illustrations in this article contain shortened forms such as Perf. for perfective marker *le*, Exp. for experiential marker *guò*, Prog. for progressive marker *zhe*, DE for attributive marker *de*, BA for disposal marker *bǎ*, Cl. for a classifier, SFP for sentence-final particle, RES for result-denoting *de*, etc.