

Significance as a lens: Understanding the Mandarin *ba* construction through discourse adjacent alternation



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Abstract

Given alternative grammatical options, how do native speakers make the choice in a given communicative context? Drawing data from 300 videotaped conversations (100 h; one-million words), this study is the first to use a discourse adjacent alternation method to investigate how real-life speakers in a single conversation use alternative grammatical constructions to describe the same event. This study proposes the concept of LENS as a new aspect of linguistic construal. Lens refers to speakers' subjective evaluation of reality, especially their attitudes toward an event. This study finds that SIGNIFICANCE is a lens that evaluates an event as being highly consequential, challenging, or important. The elusive *ba*-construction in Mandarin is a linguistic device for the construe of significance: The *ba*-construction prototypically marks a transitive event as a significant consequence, contribution, or action, which is highly consequential, highly challenging, or highly important. The findings raise questions as to what linguistic devices are used in other languages to construe significance and what devices are used to construe other lenses in Mandarin and in other languages. This study reveals an association of linguistic markedness with discourse-level choices among paradigmatic oppositions in social interaction and suggests that syntactic markedness and semantic complexity correlate with discourse significance. The findings shed light on the pragmatic factors in linguistic choice-making during social interaction.

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1. Introduction

This study examines speakers' subjective aspects in linguistic choice-making at the discourse level. I ask the question of how a speaker comes to choose a particular grammar construction, in this case, the Mandarin *ba*-construction, out of all the grammatical choices s/he has available. I then use a dataset of 300 videotaped natural conversations and the discourse adjacent alternation method that I develop in this paper to investigate the alternative choices speakers in a single conversation make to describe the same event. I wish to propose the concept of LENS as an aspect of linguistic construal, which refers to speakers' subjective evaluation of reality, especially their attitudes toward an event. I will show that SIGNIFICANCE is a lens that evaluates an event as being highly consequential, challenging, or important. I will discuss how the *ba*-construction in Mandarin is a linguistic device for the construe of significance of transitive events, i.e., the function of the *ba*-construction to present a transitive event as being highly consequential, challenging, or important. I will also address the theoretical implications.

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1.1. Research question

There are alternative ways to describe the same event. “Speaking thus always implies a choice” (Verhagen, 2007). A major event in human language is the transitive event, in which an agent performs some action that affects an entity. To describe the event of a boy breaking a window, for example, a Mandarin speaker has at least eight grammatical options, including the *bei*-passive construction, the unmarked passive construction, the *rang*-construction, and the *ba*-construction¹ – “arguably the most famous” yet “poorly understood” grammatical construction (Jing-Schmidt and Tao, 2009). Thus the Alternative Puzzle: Given alternative grammatical options, how do native speakers make the choice in a given communicative context? This study uses large-scale Mandarin conversational data and takes a discourse approach to address a specific question concerning the Alternative Puzzle: Why does a speaker need to use a *ba*-construction while the use of other constructions is also grammatical?

The *ba*-construction refers to clauses or sentences such as (1), where the so-called preposition *ba* is used to mark the patient (*chuang* ‘window’) in a preverbal position:

- (1) 他 把 窗 打 破 了。
 ta ba chuang da po le
 3SG BA window hit break (COMP) PFV
 ‘He hit and broke the window.’

There are no equivalents of *ba* in English. The English sentence *He hit and broke the window* can be translated to either a *ba* sentence (1) or a non-*ba* sentence (2).

- (2) 他 打 破 了 窗。
 ta da po le chuang
 3SG hit break (COMP) PFV window

In a *bei*-passive construction (3), the patient is in a preverbal position with a lexical marking of passiveness *bei*.

- (3) 窗 被 他 打 破 了。
 chuang bei ta da po le
 window BEI 3SG hit break (COMP) PFV
 ‘The window was hit and broken by him.’

In an unmarked passive construction (4), the patient is in a preverbal position without any lexical marking of passiveness.

- (4) 窗 打 破 了。
 chuang da po le
 window hit break (COMP) PFV
 ‘The window (was) hit and broken.’

In a *rang*-construction (5), the patient is in a preverbal position with a lexical marking *rang* indicating passiveness, causation, or permission.

- (5) 窗 让 他 打 破 了。
 chuang rang ta da po le
 window RANG 3SG hit break (COMP) PFV
 ‘The window was hit and broken by him.’

There is an extremely extensive literature on the *ba*-construction and the other constructions. Studies on this kind of constructions constitute the core of the research on Chinese grammar, which often manifests as special constructions. Despite many pioneering findings in the literature, previous studies, which focus on how these constructions are used individually, usually cannot answer questions such as the Alternative Puzzle.

Instead of looking at constructions individually, this study turns to real-life conversations in which speakers use alternative constructions to describe the same event.

¹ There are different subtypes of the *ba*-construction. The use of the singular form is mainly for expository purposes.

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