

The ironical Chinese *bei*-construction and its accessibility to English speakers

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Abstract

The paper aims to explore the accessibility of the popular Chinese ironical *bei*-construction to English speakers. It is proposed that deviation from the prototypical or unmarked Chinese *bei*-passives can help to access the ironic interpretation. Through data analysis, we find that the ironical “*bei* XX” construction derives from the underlying structure of indirect long passives: affected entity/subject + *bei* + (causer) + (implicit main predicate) + explicit secondary predicate. The differences between Chinese *bei*-passives and English passives lie in people’s “tolerance” toward the evaluative meaning of “being neutral” and degrees of “indirectness” in terms of the correlation between the causer and the affected entity. Chinese favor this *bei*-construction because it functions as a pragmatic marker of enunciation to instruct the readers about the subjectivity of the discourse participants and about the situational and socio-historical contexts in which it is used. The ironical *bei*-construction has become an accepted and recognized pattern to express disapproval and criticism in Chinese media discourse. © 2013 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Chinese *bei*-construction; Irony; Pragmatic marker of enunciation; Semantic properties; Pragmatic functions

1. Introduction

The Chinese character “*bei*” (被) has drawn great attention in China since 2009. According to the online survey “The most popular Chinese characters in 2009”, the Chinese character “*bei*” ranked first in terms of use frequency. Traditionally known as a passive marker, this character was widely used in the “*bei* XX” construction in newspapers, magazines, internet, television programs and in people’s daily communication to imply people’s disappointment or frustration at distorted facts reported by the media, fabricated statistics released by some government authorities, forced behaviors out of fear for the power and news scandals of the stars and celebrities etc. Novel constructions like *bei jiuye* ‘be allegedly employed’, *bei zhangxin* ‘be statistically counted as getting a raise’, *bei juankuan* ‘be pressured to make donations’, and *bei zisha* ‘be officially assumed to have committed suicide’ can be heard or seen in mass media almost every day. If we render these constructions into English literally, say, *bei zisha* as ‘be/get committed suicide’, English speakers would be puzzled at the illogicality of this translation, let alone interpreting the rhetorical effect of such an expression.

Why did such *bei*-constructions gain popularity in China? What are the semantic properties and pragmatic functions of such *bei*-constructions? What are the factors that lead to the prevalence of *bei*-constructions in Chinese culture? Is it possible for English speakers to understand their various implied meanings and rhetorical effects? This paper approaches these questions by data analysis from linguistic and socio-cultural perspectives.

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2. Identification of Chinese *bei*-passives as ironical utterances

The crucial factor for people's choice of Chinese *bei*-passives is the ironical effect achieved by using such constructions. How can Chinese use the same construction to express different but partially interrelated ideas, and how can they identify such constructions as ironical utterances? In the following section, we will explore how Chinese identify these *bei*-constructions as irony.

2.1. Identification of irony

As Barbe (1995:71) has documented, "Irony possesses no easily identifiable independent criteria. As much as we would like to find them, there are no signals that can be considered purely signals of irony". Identification of irony poses a big challenge to scholars all over the world. Fascinated by its intriguing communicative value and its theoretical challenge, many linguists, psychologists, philosophers and rhetoricians have proposed various theories to account for the nature of irony, focusing on widely different cognitive, linguistic, and social aspects of ironic language use. Some scholars view irony as involving a form of negation (Searle, 1979; Martin, 1992; Giora, 1995), some regard irony as an insincere speech act (Brown, 1980; Amante, 1981; Haverkate, 1990; Glucksberg, 1995), others examine the allusive nature of irony from psychological approaches by proposing such theories as the echoic mention/interpretation theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1998; Wilson and Sperber, 1992), the pretense theory (Clark and Gerrig, 1984), the echoic reminder theory (Kreuz and Glucksberg, 1989) and the allusional pretense theory (Kumon-Nakamura et al., 1995). Among them, Sperber and Wilson's echoic interpretation theory stands out as one of the most influential studies of irony identification that is widely quoted and critiqued. They defined verbal irony as a variety of echoic interpretative use, in which the speaker dissociates himself/herself from the opinion echoed with ridicule or scorn. They held that to identify irony, it is essential to find the echoic quality of the utterance and the speaker's attitude of dissociation towards the utterance, but they failed to provide a model to specify how the listener identifies the speaker's dissociative attitude when interpreting the utterance. To remedy this, Yus (2000) put forward a criterion of optimal accessibility to irony. This criterion postulates that the fast, slow, or nonexistent identification of the attitude of dissociation underlying irony depends on the number and quality of incompatibilities detected by the hearer in multiple mental activations of the available contextual sources. Based on a list of seven irony-relevant contextual sources, Yus (2000:50–51) presented seven corresponding detected incompatibilities:

- A. Factual information: Incompatibility with factual, encyclopedic, and commonsense assumptions about the world we live in.
- B. Physical setting: Incompatibility with a salient phenomenon from the speech setting surrounding the interlocutors in the course of a conversation.
- C. Nonverbal communication: Incompatibility with normal nonverbal behavior which typically accompanies verbal speech.
- D. Biographical data: Incompatibility with the speaker's opinions, character, habits and attitudes about life and the world we live in.
- E. Mutual knowledge: Incompatibility with information which is supposedly shared between the interlocutors.
- F. Previous utterances: Incompatibility between the assumptions arising from the interpretation of previous utterances and the information provided by the current utterance.
- G. Linguistic cues: Incompatibility with linguistic choices and sentential structures which are typically used for ordinary communication.

In general, most incompatibilities listed above are prone to a high degree of variation among individuals and conversational settings. As our *bei*-construction data are collected from online written documents, the incompatibilities that might help to identify irony are A, F and G. Among them, G, linguistic cues are our main focus of study because they are culture-specific and language-specific. In our study of *bei*-passives, if the construction is incompatible with the structure typically used for ordinary communication or if it defeats people's normal collocational expectations, Chinese people can easily detect this incompatibility and turn to the ironical interpretation. Then what is the typical use of *bei*-passives, which is inherent in Chinese people's mind?

2.2. Syntactic properties of prototypical Chinese passives

To find out the syntactic properties of typical Chinese *bei*-passives, we focus on the subject of the *bei*-construction and the predicate required by the passives and their relationship with "*bei*". Xiong and Wang (2002) studied the syntactic properties of prototypical Chinese passives. They found that there were two prototypical syntactic structures of Chinese

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