



Mandarin resultative verb compounds: Simple syntax and complex thematic relations



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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a comprehensive lexical-semantic account of Mandarin resultative verb compounds (RVCs). On this account, the complex thematic relations expressed by RVCs result from different interactions of the individual thematic relation expressed by each component of the compound and the composite thematic relation expressed by the whole compound, and from the different ways of realizing the Causer and the Causee. This lexical-semantic account has theoretical implications for the relation between the Agent and the Causer and for the division of labor between syntax on the one hand and semantics (and pragmatics) on the other.

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1. Introduction

Mandarin sentences containing a resultative verb compound (RVC) like *ca-ganjing* ‘wipe-clean’ are noted for expressing complex thematic relations. For example, in addition to resultatives like (1), in which the surface subject is the Agent of V1 and the surface object is both the Patient of V2 and the Patient argument of V1, there are resultatives like (2) that involve an object unsubcategoryed by V1 and resultatives like (3), in which neither the subject nor the object is subcategoryed by V1.

- (1) Zhangsan **ca-ganjing-le** zhuozi.
 Zhangsan wipe-clean-PERF table
 ‘Zhangsan wiped the table clean.’
- (2) Zhangsan **qie-dun-le** dao.
 Zhangsan cut-blunt-PERF knife
 ‘Zhangsan cut (something) with a knife, and as a result the knife became blunt.’
- (3) Na-ge youmo gushi **xiao-wan-le** Zhangsan-de yao.
 that-CL humor story laugh-bend-PERF Zhangsan-MM waist
 ‘That humorous story caused Zhangsan’s waist to bend as a result of his laughing.’

Abbreviations: ASP, aspectual marker; CAUS, causative; CL, classifier; DO, direct object; INSTR, instrumental; MM, modifier marker; NOM, nominative; PAST, past tense; PERF, perfective aspect.

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To account for such complex thematic relations, previous (lexical-) syntactic accounts (e.g. Li, 1998; Lin, 2004; Sybesma, 1991, 1999; Zou, 1994) normally propose different underlying representations for sentences with different thematic relations. On such accounts, (1) and (3) have different underlying syntactic structures. Apart from (lexical-) syntactic accounts of Mandarin RVCs, there are also accounts that view all RVCs as being lexically formed (e.g. Chang, 2003; Chao, 1968; Cheng and Huang, 1994; Cheng et al., 1997; Gu, 1992; Her, 2007; Huang and Lin, 1992; Li, 2008; Li and Thompson, 1981; Li, 1990, 1993, 1995, 1998, 1999; Ross, 1990; Thompson, 1973). Among this group, Y. Li's and Her's accounts can be said to be two of the most representative ones.

This paper is not intended to compare the two approaches mentioned above or to review all the literature on Mandarin RVCs, two tasks that are beyond the immediate concern of this article. Instead, it is focused on lexical-semantic accounts and it is intended to first review Li's (1990, 1995) and Her's (2007) accounts and point out their problems and then to offer an alternative lexical-semantic account which improves the two previous accounts while drawing on insights and inspirations from them. The central theses of this lexical-semantic account are: (i) for a complex causative event expressed by a resultative, both the event roles licensed by each component of the resultative and the higher-level event roles of Causer and Causee need to be recognized; (ii) the complex thematic relations result from different interactions of the composite causative thematic relation expressed by the whole compound and the individual thematic relation expressed by each component of the RVC, and from the different ways of realizing the Causer and the Causee contributed by the causing component and the result component of a complex event; and (iii) complex (and causative) semantics does not entail complex syntax, and syntax should be made "simpler."

The paper is organized as follows. Sections 2 and 3 review Y. Li's account and Her's account, respectively. Section 4 offers an alternative lexical-semantic account by focusing on how the Causer and the Causee of a Mandarin resultative sentence are realized, and Section 5 summarizes the paper and discusses the theoretical implications of this study.

2. Y. Li's account

Although Y. Li's account has already been reviewed by Her (2007) and Li (2008, 2009a), it is necessary to recapitulate that account here so that an informative comparison can be made later. Y. Li discusses Mandarin RVCs in five important papers (1990, 1993, 1995, 1998, 1999). The review here will focus on his 1990 and 1995 papers, as only these two are exclusively devoted to an account of Mandarin RVCs and they together give a full picture of the account.

In accounting for Mandarin RVCs, Li (1990) makes three important assumptions, namely theta-identification, a structured theta-grid, and head feature percolation. Theta-identification is a mechanism of linking two theta-roles together and assigning them to a single argument. Moreover, Li assumes that the theta-roles assigned by a verb form a structured theta-grid on the basis of "theta-role prominency" or thematic hierarchy. In this case, the most prominent theta-role is put in the first position in the theta-grid and assigned last and the least prominent role is placed in the last position in the theta-grid and assigned first.¹ In addition, Li assumes a version of head feature percolation. According to him, V1 is the head of the RVC, and "the theta-role prominency of the head must be strictly maintained in the theta-grid of the compound" (Li, 1990, p. 181).²

With the above assumptions, Li (1990) intends to give a successful account of the complex thematic relations expressed by RVCs and of the fact that RVCs often provide more theta-roles than overt NP arguments. This attempt is largely successful as it accounts for the majority of the thematic relations expressed by RVCs. For example, with the assumptions adopted, Li successfully accounts for the first two readings in (4), and rules out the fourth reading.

- (4) Zhangsan zhui-lei-le Lisi.
 Zhangsan chase-tired-PERF Lisi.
 (a) 'Zhangsan chased Lisi and as a result Lisi got tired.'
 (b) 'Zhangsan chased Lisi and as a result Zhangsan got tired.'
 (c) 'Lisi chased Zhangsan and Zhangsan got Lisi tired.'
 (d) *'Lisi chased Zhangsan and Zhangsan got himself tired.'

In the (4a) reading, which is represented in (5) below, the chasee (i.e. the "internal" argument of V1 or V_{caus}) is identified with the single argument of V2 or V_{res}, thus giving rise to an object-oriented reading. In the (4b) reading (see the representation in (6)), it is the chaser (i.e. the "external" argument of V_{caus}) that is identified with the single argument of V_{res}. As a result, a subject-oriented reading arises.

¹ Li (1990) does not give a list of theta-roles that are ranked according to their prominency. However, he does make it clear that in the case of the verb *give*, for example, it has the theta-grid in (i), in which the Agent role is the most prominent and the Theme role is the least prominent.

(i) give (Agent, (Goal, (Theme))) (Li, 1990, p. 179)

In the same paper, Li also mentions that "the relative prominence of a verb's theta-roles is in most cases predictable from their semantic context" (p. 179).

² It should be pointed out that Li adopts the V1-as-head assumption without much argumentation. In fact, Li (1990, p. 182) simply states that the head of an RVC like *pao-lei* 'run-tired,' which is composed of a verbal V1 and an adjectival "V2," is the first constituent because, intuitively, "the whole compound is obviously 'verb-like,' not 'adjective-like.'" Although Li admits that it is difficult to independently prove the above intuition, yet he adopts the V1-as-head assumption on the grounds that doing so allows him to better account for the argument realization patterns and complex thematic relations of RVCs. For an alternative view, see Li's (2009a) argument that Mandarin RVCs are in fact headless.

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