

Continuum of Coverbs and Distinctions between Coverb Constructions and Serial Verb Constructions

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Abstract

This study investigates coverb constructions (CoVCs) and explores distinctions between CoVCs and serial verb constructions (SVCs). This paper aims to account for Mandarin coverbs from a cognitive perspective to capture varying degrees of their grammaticalization. Traditional analyses treating coverbs as prepositions rather than verbs have been based on problematic syntactic and semantic criteria. This paper shows that coverbs are not a homogenous category but displays a continuum between verbs and prepositions. The author argues that SVCs and CoVCs differ mainly in their event structure, more specifically, in their profiling. This study supports a semantic network model by demonstrating that different meanings or senses of Mandarin coverbs are related to their basic or core meanings. The findings indicate that grammatical or functional extensions are far from random but motivated.

Key words: coverb, serial verb, grammaticalization, extension, Mandarin

1. Introduction

This paper will explore coverb constructions (hence CoVCs) and the differences between CoVCs and serial verb constructions (hence SVCs). In Modern Mandarin, coverbs are terms created to cover a set of words which are semantically like prepositions in English (Li & Thompson 1974) and this deverbalized category has undergone or is undergoing the process of grammaticalization. Coverbs are said to be historically derived from verbs and some of them are derived from serial verb constructions. Many of the items can be used either as lexical verbs or coverbs, that is, many of them are homophonous with lexical verbs.

Table 1 lists some representative items with glosses of both their verbal meanings and their prepositional meanings.

Table 1 Some representative coverbs

Coverb	(Older) Verbal Meaning	Prepositional Meaning
<i>bei</i>	to cover, to receive	by – passive marker
<i>ba</i>	to take, grasp	preverbal object marker
<i>gei</i>	to give	benefactive ‘for’, dative ‘to’ etc.
<i>gen</i>	to follow	comitative ‘with’
<i>bi</i>	to compare	than
<i>wei</i>	to do	benefactive ‘for’
<i>dao</i>	to arrive	to (location)
<i>dui</i>	to face	to, toward
<i>xiang</i>	to face	to, toward
<i>shun</i>	to follow, obey	along
<i>yan</i>	to go along	along
<i>ti</i>	to replace	on behalf on
<i>na</i>	to use	with

Traditional analyses treating coverbs as prepositions instead of verbs are based on problematic syntactic and semantic criteria. The present study will provide an account of Mandarin coverbs from a cognitive perspective which assumes that many linguistic units are of a graded phenomenon. This paper will show that coverbs are not a homogenous category but display a continuum between verbs and prepositions. I will argue that SVCs and CoVCs differ mainly in their event structure, more specifically, in their profiling.

2. Traditional Criteria

Traditional analyses that coverbs are not true verbs but prepositions are based on both syntactic and semantic criteria (Poteet 1988). The following are three main syntactic criteria to distinguish coverbs from true verbs:

- i) Verbs occur in the V-not-V structure while coverbs usually do not. In Mandarin Chinese, the V(erb)-not-V(erb) structure is one way to form a yes-no question.
- ii) Verbs can take ‘aspect’ particles such as *le* ‘perfective’, *zhe* ‘progressive’ while coverbs do not.
- iii) Transitive verbs may occur without overt object NPs immediately following them in answer to a yes-no question while coverbs may not.

The semantic criteria are that sentences with two true verbs denote two distinct actions or events while sentences with coverbs only express one action or event (Li & Thompson 1981).

2.1 Problematic Criteria

Criteria to distinguish coverbs from true verbs are problematic because there are quite a few exceptions for these criteria. First, let us look at the problematic syntactic criteria.

- i) Almost all coverbs may occur in V-not-V constructions to form questions, though some sound more natural than others.

- (1) a. *Ni na bu na kuaizi chi fan?*
 You take not take chopstick eat meal
 ‘Do you take (use) chopsticks to eat the meal?’
- b. *Ni gei bu gei ta mai pingguo?*
 You give not give 3SG¹ buy apple
 ‘Do you buy apple for him?’
- c. *Ni gen bu gen ta qu Beijing?*
 You follow not follow 3SG go Beijing
 ‘Do you go to Beijing with him?’
- d. *Ni ba bu ba shu gei wo?*
 you OBJ not OBJ book give me
 ‘Do you give me the book?’ (sometimes pose a threat)
- e. *?Ta bei bu bei mifeng yao le?*
 He PASV not PASV bee bite PERF
 ? ‘Was he stung by bees?’ (indicate willingness to be bit such as for medical treatments)

As (1) illustrates, the typical coverbs like instrumental *na*, benefactive *gei*, comitative *gen*, object marker *ba*, passive *bei* can enter into V-not-V constructions to form questions.

- ii) It has also been noticed that a number of coverbs can allow (e. g. *dui* ‘toward’, *xiang* ‘to’) or even requires (e. g. *shun* ‘along’, *yan* ‘along’) the particle *zhe*. *Wei* ‘for’ allows both *zhe* and *le*. (Li & Thompson 1974; Poteet 1988)

- (2) a. *Ta dui zhe diren kai qiang.*
 He toward PROG enemy fire gun
 ‘He fired his gun (toward) at enemies.’

¹ The abbreviations used in the paper are the following: 3SG=third person singular, OBJ=object marker, PASV=passive marker, PERF=perfective, PROG=progressive, CL=classifier.

- b. *Ta yan zhe he an zou.*
 He along PROG river bank walk
 'He is going along a river bank.'
- c. *Wei le/zhe renmin de liyi, ta xianchu le shengming.*
 For PERF/PROG people of interest 3SG give up PERF life
 'He sacrificed his life for people's cause.'

The traditional semantic criteria to distinguish coverbs from lexical verbs are problematic as well. Problems with the semantic criteria are the lack of precision in explaining the term 'action' (Poteet 1988).

i) First, stative and adjectival verbs in Mandarin do not express actions but they are included in the verb category.

- (3) *Wo pengyou hen congming.*
 My friend very clever
 'My friend (is) very clever.'

In (3), the adjectival verb *congming* does not signal any action; however, it functions as a verb to be a predicate in this sentence.

ii) Second, it is not clear if verbs like *kaishi* 'begin', *tingzhi* 'stop' should be considered as denoting separate actions from their complements (Poteet 1988).

- (4) *Ta tingzhi le chouyan.*
 He stop PERF smoke
 'He has stopped smoking.'

No one has ever proposed that *tingzhi* 'stop' should be considered as a coverb, but in what sense is the stopping of an action a separate action from the action that one is stopping?

iii) Thirdly, serial verb constructions do not usually denote two distinct actions. Often the information status of the constituents of SVCs is reduced, and the separate verbs do not denote individuated actions (Frawley 1992).

- (5) *Ta yong kuaizi chi fan.*
 He use chopstick eat meal
 'He uses chopsticks to eat his meal.'

According to traditional analyses, *yong* 'use' is usually regarded as a verb, and thus, the construction in (5) is viewed as an SVC. However, the two verb phrases: *yong kuaizi* 'use chopsticks' and *chi fan* 'eat meals' do not constitute two individuated actions.

Yin (2001) claims that SVCs reflect degrees of event conflation. SVCs are generally construable as two causally connected phases of a single event as the following example indicates.

- (6) *Ta tui dao le yi zhang zuozi.*
 He push fall PERF a CL table.
 'He has pushed down a table.'

In (6), the two serial verbs *tui* 'push' and *dao* 'fall' do not denote two distinct actions, but signal a single event with two connected phases.

2.2 Verbhood Tests

It has been noticed that in Mandarin there are coverbs which display characteristics of verbs. Also it can be found that certain verbs cannot stand some of the verbhood tests.

For instance, there are verbs which do not allow some or all of the aspect particles (e. g. *xiang* ‘resemble’ as in (7) does not take *le*, *zhe*; *si* ‘die’ does not allow *zhe*; *gei* ‘give’ as in (8), *song* ‘send’ and *ji* ‘post’ usually do not take *zhe*) (Poteet 1988).

- (7) a. *Ta xiang ta baba.*
He resemble his dad.
‘He resembles his dad.’
- b. **Ta xiang le/zhe ta baba.*
He resemble PERF/PROG his dad.
- (8) a. *Ta gei le wo yi ben shu.*
He give PERF me one CL book
‘He has given me a book.’
- b. **Ta gei zhe wo yi ben shu.*
He give PROG me one CL book

The evidence that some verbs do not pass some of the verbhood tests suggests that these verbs may have characteristics shared by some of the coverbs.

3 Present Analysis

To accommodate Mandarin coverb phenomena, I will adopt a cognitive approach to argue that structurally similar and underspecified constructions in Mandarin display a continuum of interpretation and syntactic behavior. This paper will show that the class of coverbs is neither a discrete nor homogenous class.

3.1 Coverbs — a continuum

In modern Mandarin, coverbs generally cannot be used alone as lexical verbs since they serve mainly to predicate relations between two nouns or between a verb and an oblique object as do prepositions in English. However, most coverbs still have some properties of lexical verbs. In fact, coverbs lie on a continuum between verbs and prepositions. Coverbs can be viewed as relational predications occupying different points in different constructions along a continuum between verbs and prepositions. Their position is partly determined by morphosyntactic tests for verbhood.

Na (‘take’— instrumental), *gen* (‘follow’— comitative) can pass more tests of this kind: aspectual tests such as *le*, *zhe*, and the V-not-V test, which suggests that coverbs of this kind are relatively closer to the verbal end while *ba* (object marker) and *bei* (passive marker) pass fewer verbhood tests, which indicates that these coverbs are relatively closer to the prepositional end (Yin 2003).

- (9) a. *Ta na le/zhe kuaizi chi fan.*
He take PERF/PROG chopstick eat meal
‘He ate/is eating his meal with chopsticks.’

- b. *Ta na bu na kuaizi chi fan?*
 He take not take chopstick eat meal
 ‘Does he eat his meal with chopsticks?’
- (10) a. **Ta ba le/zhe fan chi diao le.*
 He OBJ PERF/PROG meal eat finish PERF
- b. ?*Ta ba bu ba fan chi diao le?*
 He OBJ not OBJ meal eat finish PERF
- (11) a. **Fan bei le/zhe ta chi diao le.*
 meal BEI PERF/PROG he eat finish PERF
- b. ?*Fan bei bu bei ta chi diao le?*
 meal BEI not BEI he eat finish PERF
 ‘Was the meal eaten by him?’

However, the positions for coverbs to be in the continuum are not fixed and they are quite flexible. They could enter into various constructions to express different meanings.

- (12) *Ta na zhe tiaogen chi fan.*
 He take PROG spoon eat meal
 ‘He is taking the spoon to eat his meal.’

With the aspectual marker *zhe*, the verb flavor is enhanced as in (12) and *na* in this construction will be pulled much closer to the verbal end.

In fact, grammatical elements are meaningful. The problems with previous analyses mainly come from questionable assumptions about meaning and grammatical categories, which claim that grammatical particles are semantically empty morphemes used exclusively to indicate different syntactic structures and that the ability of a word to enter into a given construction is independent of its meaning (Poteet 1988).

Langacker (1987, 1991) maintains that linguistic categorizations and conceptual categorizations are not independent and constructions and grammatical markers are meaningful. With the help of grammatical markers it could induce different interpretations, and thus, the language user could make a particular coverb more like a verb or more like a preposition through different means such as with or without an aspectual marker.

3.2 Entities Undergoing Process

Coverbs are said to be developed from true verbs. Changes from verbs to coverbs to indicate grammatical functions do not stop at present and some members in this class are still in the ongoing process of grammaticalization. So coverbs should be viewed as entities undergoing process rather than as static objects.

For example, some so-called case markers like *ba* ‘object marker’, *bei* ‘passive marker’, *na* ‘instrumental marker’, *gei* ‘dative marker’ are still going on grammaticalization.

- (13) *Wo ba hua ping dapo le.*
 I OBJ flower bottle break PERF
 'I have **broken** the flower bottle (vase)'

Ba constructions indicate total affectedness of patients and they are originally used with verbs of high transitivity like *dapo* 'break'. Now it is possible for a non-high transitive verb to enter into *ba* constructions in modern Mandarin as the following example illustrates.

- (14) *Wo ba shu du le liang bian.*
 I OBJ book read PERF two times
 'I have read the book twice.'

4. Metaphorical and Functional Extensions

The distribution of a word or a morpheme is associated with its meaning and a particular word or construction may have a range of interrelated meanings. In contrary to traditional analyses to analyze different senses of a linguistic item independently, this study will show interrelatedness of its verb use and its coverb use of a lexical item and explore motivations behind its metaphorical and functional extensions. I will take *na* 'take, instrumental /topic marker' as an examples for illustrating interrelatedness of different meanings of a given lexical item.

In using something, usually we should take it and then manipulate it or perform actions with it. So *na* focuses on an initial portion of the action chain of 'take-and-then-do'. So it is a good candidate to serve as an instrumental marker since the case of using something often involves the situation to take the instrument first. The semantic value of using the instrument is compatible with the meaning of *na* which focuses on an initial portion in an action chain: 'take-do' (take-and-then-do).

In modern Chinese, *na* can still be used as a full lexical verb:

- (15) *Wo cong bingxiang li na pingguo.*
 I from fridge inside take apple
 'I took apples from the fridge.'
- (16) *Na zhe ge fangfa jiejue wenti.*
 Take (with) this CL method solve problem.
 'Solve the problem with this method.'

These two examples illustrate two extreme cases of the uses of *na* along a continuum, with typical serial verb use as in (15) at one end and prototypical instrumental marker use as in (16) at the other end.

In addition to be used as a real transfer verb or as an instrumental marker, *na* can act as a topic marker. Taking something implies the concept of contact with it. When the transfer verb is used metaphorically to indicate mental contact, the energy transferred is in the abstract domain, i.e., from human mind to the thing to be contacted. The topic marker comes into being when *na* 'take' indicates mental contact as in (17) and the thing to be taken and picked up serves as a reference point.

- (17) *Na* *shuiguo* *er yan,* *wo zui* *xihuan pingguo.*
 Topic marker fruit par talk I most like apple
 ‘Talking about fruits, I like apples best.’

As illustrated, some linguistic items like *na* can be used either as lexical verbs or coverbs. Their lexical use and coverb use and various senses within coverbs are interrelated. All the senses of a particular item are far from random and that all the variants, non-central, peripheral meanings and semantic/functional extensions are related to its basic meaning (Lakoff 1987).

5. Differences between SVCs and CoVCs

Most coverb constructions have quite different characteristics from those of prototypical SVCs but boundaries between these two constructions are not clear cut.

Serial verb constructions and coverb constructions are mainly different in event structures, more specifically in its profiling. Langacker (1988) proposes that a semantic structure derives its value through the imposition of a profile on a base. As the basis for its meaning, an expression evokes a certain body of conceptual content, called its base. Within its overall conception, it directs attention to some particular substructure — the profile. The profile comprises those portions of the base which the entity designates or refers to. “Some facet of the base is invariably raised to a distinctive level of prominence, and serves as its focal point; this substructure is the predication’s profile” (Langacker, 1988: 59).

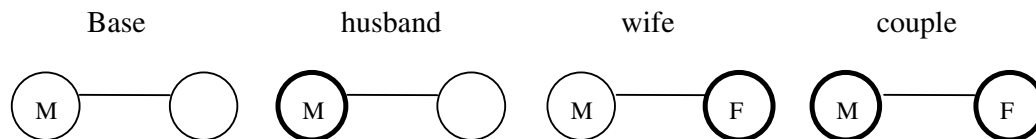


Figure 1 Base and profile of husband, wife and couple

The meanings for *husband*, *wife* and *couple* have the same base: a male (M) and a female (F) who have a certain kind of relationship indicated by a line connected them. Although these three expressions share the same base (content), they differ in meaning by imposing different profiles indicated by boldface in Figure 1.

Similar to *couple*, in which both M and F are profiled, SVCs have two events which are both profiled and they are connected by some purposive or causative relationship (Yin, 2010). In CoVCs, the event denoted by the main verb is profiled while the event denoted by the coverb is not profiled and is non-salient.

However, to a large extent, the bases for SVCs and CoVCs are the same. The verb which is not profiled in CoVCs thus becomes a coverb as the following two examples indicate.

- (18) *Wo* *wei* *ta* ***mai*** *le* *yi* *ben* *shu.* (purposive)
 I do (for) him buy PERF one CL book.
 ‘I bought a book for him.’

- (19) *Ta* *yan* *zhe* *he* *an* ***zuo***.
 He follow (along) PROG river bank walk
 ‘He walked along a river bank.’ (path for the profiled verb *zuo* ‘walk’)

In (18), *wei* is not profiled as a verb and it indicates the purpose for the profiled verb *mai* while in (19) the coverb *yan* is not profiled as a verb as well and it serves as path for the profiled motion verb *zuo*.

Although the boundaries between SVCs and CoVCs are not clear cut, most CoVCs have quite different characteristics from those of canonical SVCs. SVCs and CoVCs differ mainly in their event structure, more specifically, in their profiling. SVCs have two (sub)events which are both profiled and they are connected by some purposive or causative relationship. In CoVCs, the event denoted by the main verb is profiled while the event denoted by the coverb is largely not profiled and is non-salient. This is because meanings of coverbs in CoVCs are not fully compositional in the sense that the whole does not equal to the sum of its parts. Maybe due to their high frequency, coverbs (as compared to serial verbs) have become more schematic in meaning or they profile participants rather than actions. So in many cases, the profile of the composite structure does not include anything but a highly schematic portion of the profile of the coverb. In fact, the continuum of verbness reflected in coverb constructions could be a continuum of the degree to which the profile of the coverb is “preserved”. Since in composite structures coverbs are largely not profiled, coverb phrases tend to serve as modifiers for main verbs or indicate grammatical functions like case marking in Modern Mandarin.

6. Conclusions

In Mandarin Chinese, coverbs are not a discrete category but display a continuum. Some of Mandarin coverbs function more like prepositions than verbs and they are more grammaticalized than others. However, the process of grammaticalization of coverbs does not stop at present and this process is still going on in modern Mandarin.

In general, typical CoVCs and typical SVCs have distinct properties; however, their boundaries are not clear-cut. The main differences between these two constructions lie in event structures. In SVCs both events denoted by two serial verbs are profiled while in CoVCs only one event denoted by the main verb is profiled.

This paper supports a semantic network model by demonstrating that different meanings or senses of a lexical item are interrelated. Grammatical or functional extensions are far from random but motivated. It is often the case that such extensions are related to basic or core meaning of a lexical item though the interrelatedness displays varying degrees.

Linguistic and conceptual categorizations are not independent and constructions are not semantically empty categories but meaningful. Meanings are non-compositional but conceptual and speakers can employ various means to indicate relative conceptual distance between two events. Language users can manage the constructions such as adding aspectual markers or change the position of a particular verb to induce different interpretations such as SVCs or CoVCs.

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