

Aspects of the *Ba*-construction

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1. Introduction

The *ba*-construction is one of the most talked about constructions in Mandarin Chinese. The question of whether the object of *ba* is base-generated or not has been the center of discussion (see Cheng 1986, Cheng and Ritter 1987, Goodall 1986, Huang 1982, Li 1985, Thompson 1978, among others). Little has been said regarding other aspects of the *ba*-construction; for instance, what types of verbs can or cannot occur with *ba* and what other factors are linked to the grammaticality of the *ba*-construction? Further, does the fact that the object of the verb can appear both postverbally and preverbally correlate with some other properties in the language?

In this paper, I will first discuss the syntactic characteristics of the *ba*-construction and previous analyses of the construction. I will then show that aspectual properties of the matrix verb do play a role in determining the grammaticality of the *ba*-construction. Section 3 is devoted to a discussion of different aspect markers and their occurrence with *ba*. In section 4, I will discuss the notion of affectedness and the *ba*-construction. It will be shown that the notion of delimitedness discussed in Tenny (1987) is crucial in determining what markers and what types of verbs can occur with *ba*.¹

2. The Syntactic Aspect of the *Ba*-construction

Ba occurs in the preposition position in Mandarin Chinese, as shown in (1).

(1) Subject-*preposition*-NP-Verb-(NP)

The verb of the sentence can be either intransitive, as in (2) or transitive, as in (3). [cong] is the preposition in (2) and [ti] in (3).

¹"An event is delimited iff there is some point of time during which the event transpires, but after which the event is no longer transpiring." (Tenny 1987, p.24)

- (2) Zhāngsān cóng xuéxiào lái.
from school come
Zhangsan came from school.'
- (3) Lǐsì tǐ wǒ mǎi-lè chē-piào
for me buy-ASP car-ticket
'Lisi bought a ticket for me.'

While *ba* shares a position with prepositions such as [cong] and [ti], *ba* differs from prepositions such as [cong] 'from' and [ti] 'for' in that the NP following *ba* is always the logical object of the verb, as in (4) and (5).

- (4) a. Tā shā-lè Zhāngsān.
he kill-ASP
'He killed Zhangsan.'
- b. Tā bǎ Zhāngsān shā-lè.
he BA kill-ASP
'He killed Zhangsan.'
- (5) a. Lǐsì kànjiàn-lè Zhāngsān.
see-ASP
'Lisi saw Zhangsan.'
- b. *Lǐsì bǎ Zhāngsān kànjiàn-lè.
BA see-ASP
'Lisi saw Zhangsan.'

The NP following *ba* appears to be the internal argument that the verb subcategorizes. For the other prepositions such as [cong] 'from' and [ti] 'for', the NP following the prepositions is not the logical object of the verb. As shown in (4), sentences with *ba* are paraphrases of sentences with an object NP appearing in postverbal position. However, not all sentences can have a *ba*-paraphrase, as shown in (5b).

Huang (1982) and Goodall (1986) among others, have proposed a movement analysis for the *ba*-construction based on sentences such as (4) (optional *ba*-construction) and (6) (obligatory *ba*-construction). Under this analysis, the NP following *ba* is base-generated in the postverbal position, as in the (a) sentences and moves to a position preceding the verb, as in the (b) sentences. *Ba* is treated as a simple Case-marker which is inserted after the movement of the NP.

- (6) a. *Tā tī-lě yīgè dòng zhǐmēn.
he kick-ASP one hole paper-door
'He kicked a hole in the paper-door.'
- b. Tā bǎ zhǐmēn tī-lě yīgè dòng.
he BA paper-door kick-ASP one hole
'He kicked a hole in the paper-door.'

One major problem for the movement analysis is the optional *ba*-construction (see Cheng 1986 for details). Li (1985), on the other hand, argues for a base-generation analysis for the *ba*-construction based on an SOV hypothesis for the word order of Mandarin.² Yet, her analysis also runs into the problem of explaining why sentences such as (5b) are ungrammatical. In other words, something else needs to be said in order to account for the facts we have seen

3. Aspect Markers and *Ba*

It has been noted by Mei (1978) and Frei (1956) that the well-formedness of the *ba*-construction is also linked to the perfective aspect (i.e. the aspect marker [le]) in Mandarin. I will show that besides [le], the progressive aspect marker [zhe] can also occur in the *ba*-construction. The property that is shared by these two aspect markers is that they both can delimit the event expressed by the verb. Let us proceed by examining the aspect markers³ in Mandarin carefully.

2.1. Past marker 'le' and inchoative marker 'le'

There are two [le]'s in Mandarin, as shown in (7) and (8). One is the past marker [le], which immediately follows the verb. The other is a sentence-final [le], called 'inchoative le'.⁴ The inchoative

²Although she seems to be able to account for the optional *ba*-constructions, she has problems in explaining why some sentences cannot have a *ba*-paraphrase. Further, her SOV account of Mandarin word order runs into problems with simple sentences and also sentences with prepositional phrases (see Cheng 1987 for discussion).

³These markers in Mandarin conveys more aspectual information than tense information. Thus, I call them aspect markers here.

⁴The question which arises in sentences such as (7a) is which [le] is in the sentence? That is, is it the past marker [le] or is it the inchoative marker [le]? Chao (1968) claims that in a sentence with a sentence final verb, the past-marker [le] is merged with the inchoative marker [le]. Thus, (7a) is said to be derived from (i):

[le] indicates a change of state (i.e. a termination of the past, a beginning of something else) (Lu 1975). Examples in (7) and (8) show that both the past marker [le] and the inchoative marker [le] can occur with *ba*. It should be noted that in both (7) and (8), the events have been completed. That is, the events have been supplied with an end point which indicates that the events are terminated.⁵

(7) a. **Tā bǎ shū mài-lè.**

he BA book sell-ASP

'He sold the book.'

b. **Tā bǎ chē gěi-lè wǒ.**

he BA car give-ASP me

'He gave the car to me.'

(8) **Tā bǎ chē gěi wǒ le.**

he BA car give me ASP

'He gave the car to me.'

In (7a) and (7b), the past marker indicates that the action of selling the book and that of giving away the car are finished. Similarly, the inchoative marker [le] in (8) (since it does not immediately follow the verb) indicates that the action of 'giving the car' is finished. In other words, both markers indicate that the event described by the verb is delimited.

2.2. Progressive markers, 'zhe' and 'zai'

There are two progressive markers in Mandarin, namely [zhe] and [zai]. 'zhe' is used with stative verbs such as [bao] 'hold' and [chuan] 'wear'. It indicates a state and that the action needed to reach the state is finished. For example, in (9a), to reach the state of holding the dirty clothes, one must have completed the action of picking up the clothes. Similarly, in (9b), in order to wear the coat,

(i) **tā bǎ shū mài-lè.**

he BA book sell-asp

'He sold the book.'

⁵It should be noted that tests on delimitedness of these aspect markers will be helpful in determining the nature of these markers. However, it is not at all easily to convert the tests stated in Tenny (1987) into tests for Mandarin aspect markers. In fact, it will be an interesting area to work on. In this paper, I will simply take my own intuition and also intuitions of scholars who wrote on this topic.

Lisi needs to take the coat and put it on. After he reaches the state of wearing the coat, the action to reach that state is completed. In other words, there is again an end point of the action, namely, the state. As shown in (9), this progressive marker can occur with *ba*.

- (9) a. **Tā bǎ zāng yīfú bào-zhě.**
 he BA dirty clothes hold-ASP
 'He is holding the dirty clothes.'
 b. **Lisi bǎ dàyī chūan-zhě.**
 BA coat wear-ASP
 'Lisi is wearing the coat.'

In contrast, the progressive marker [zai] indicates no end point. Instead, it emphasizes a duration and the action is continuing. Thus, there is no indication regarding the termination of the event and it cannot occur with *ba*, as shown in (10a) and (10b):

- (10) a. ***Tā zài bǎ Zhāngsān shā.**
 he ASP BA kill
 'He is killing Zhangsan.'
 b. ***Tā zài bǎ Zhāngsān tī.**
 he ASP BA kick
 'He is killing Zhangsan.'

2.3. Indefinite past marker 'guo'

The indefinite past marker [guo] indicates that an event happened at least once before. For instance, in (11b), Zhangsan ate the cake once before. Although the eating is no longer continuing, there is no indication whether the cake is finished. In other words, [guo] does not participate in delimiting the event of 'eating the cake' and thus it cannot occur with *ba*, as shown in (11a) and (12).

- (11) a. ***Zhāngsān bǎ bǐng chī-guò.**
 BA cake eat-ASP
 'Zhangsan ate the cake once before.'
 b. **Zhāngsān chī-guò bǐng le.**
 eat-ASP cake ASP
 'Zhangsan ate the cake once before.'

- (12) *Wǒ bǎ shū mài-guò.
I BA book sell-ASP
'I sold the book once'

From different aspect markers discussed above, it is clear that only aspect markers that can delimit an event can occur with *ba*.⁶ That is, the grammaticality of the *ba*-construction is also conditioned by the type of aspect marker which occurs in the matrix sentence.

3. "Affectedness" and *Ba*

Besides aspect markers, the notion of affectedness also plays a role in determining the grammaticality of the *ba*-construction. Consider the following examples with different types of verbs:

- (13) a. Xiǎomíng dào-lè táiběi lè.
arrive-ASP Taipei ASP
'Xiaoming arrived at Taipei.'
b. *Xiǎomíng bǎ táiběi dào-lè.
BA Taipei arrive-ASP
'Xiaoming arrived at Taipei.'
- (14) a. Lǐsì kànjiàn-lè Xiǎomíng.
see-ASP
'He saw Xiaoming.'
b. *Lǐsì bǎ Xiǎomíng kànjiàn-lè.
BA help-ASP
'Lisi saw Xiaoming.'
- (15) a. Tā shā-lè Zhāngsān.
he kill-ASP
'He killed Zhangsan.'
b. Tā bǎ Zhāngsān shā-lè.
he BA kill-ASP
'He killed Zhangsan.'

Regardless of a movement analysis or a non-movement analysis of the *ba*-construction, sentences in (13)-(15) should be accounted for.

⁶Szeto (1988) also stated that the *ba*-construction is temporally bound.

That is, whatever the solution is, it has to incorporate the distinction manifested by different types of verbs.

Consider now the differences between the verbs in (13)-(15). These verbs are all transitive verbs and the difference is mainly the "affectedness" relationship between the verb and the object. In (13), [dao] 'arrive' indicates that the object of the verb [taibei] 'Taipei' is the goal of the action and the relationship between [dao] 'arrive' and 'Taipei' is not that of 'affectedness'.⁷ That is, the arrival of [Xiaoming] does not affect "Taipei".⁸ In (14), [Xiaoming] is the patient of seeing but he is not affected by being seen. In contrast, the object of 'kill' [Zhangsan] in (15) is clearly a patient of the action and further he is "affected" by the action 'kill'.⁹

Notice here that in (13)-(15), only the aspect marker [le] is used. Thus, it is clear that some factor other than aspect marker is responsible for the ungrammaticality of (13b) and (14b). From (13)-(15), it is clear that only verbs such as [sha] 'kill' can occur with *ba*. In other words, the "affectedness" of the verb plays a role in determining whether the *ba*-construction is licensed. Sentences (16)-(19) provide further evidence for the contrast between verbs of affectedness and verbs of non-affectedness with respect to the *ba*-construction.

- (16) a. *Wǒ bǎ Lǐsì tūi-lē.
I BA push-ASP
I pushed Lisi.'
- b. Wǒ bǎ Lǐsì tūi-dǎo-lē.
I BA push-fall-ASP
I pushed Lisi and he fell.'
- (17) a. *Tā bǎ Zhāngsān lā-lē.
he BA pull-ASP
He pulled Zhangsan.'

⁷It should be noted that the verb 'arrive' in Mandarin differs from the one in English in that it optionally takes a goal and it also assigns Case to it. The point that I am making with the verb 'arrive' can also be made with any other verbs that take a thematic role 'goal'.

⁸In normal situations, one's arrival at a place does not affect the place in any way.

⁹The verb [sha] 'kill' implies that the patient of the action is either dead or badly wounded, in other words, the patient of the action is in some way affected.

b. Tā bǎ Zhāngsān lā-dǎo-lē.
he BA pull-fall-ASP
'He pulled Zhangsan and Zhangsan fell.'

(18) a. *Tā bǎ diǎn-nǎo dài-lē.
he BA computer bring-ASP
'He brought the computer.'

b. Tā bǎ diǎn-nǎo dài-lái-lē.
he BA computer bring-come-ASP
'He brought the computer here.'

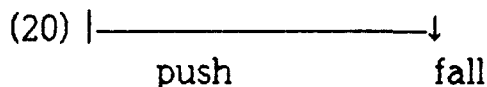
(19) a. *Tā bǎ fángjiān dǎ-sǎo-lē.
he BA room hit-sweep-ASP
'He cleaned the room.'

b. Tā bǎ fángjiān dǎ-sǎo de hěn gānjìng.
he BA room hit-sweep DE very clean
'He cleaned the room and the result is that the room is very clean.'

(16a) and (17a) show that action verbs such as [tui] 'push' and [la] 'pull' do not entail that the objects are affected. In (16a), Lisi is pushed but it is not clear that the pushing has any effect on Lisi. Similarly, in (17a), Zhangsan is pulled but there is no necessary entailment that Zhangsan is affected. However, if these verbs are compounded with a resultative verb such as [dao] 'fall', the action-result compound verb clearly indicates that there is a definite effect on the object of the verb, as shown in (16b) and (17b). In both sentences, the *ba*-construction is licensed. It is clear that both Lisi and Zhangsan are affected by being pushed and pulled respectively and the effect is indicated by their falling.

(18) and (19) provide similar examples. In (18a), the verb [dai] 'bring' does not indicate clearly whether the computer is in any way affected. Yet, when [dai] 'bring' is compounded with [lai] 'come', the direction of the action is clearly indicated. Further, it is clear that the computer is affected because it is no longer in the place it was before (i.e. it has been moved). In (19a), the verb [da-sao] 'hit-sweep' does not imply that the room is affected. However, when a complement clause is added, it is clear that the cleaning has affected the room (i.e. the room is now clean). In other words, if the effect of the action is clearly stated in the sentence, then the *ba*-construction is licensed.

Let us now consider the notion of "affectedness" more closely. The question which arises is what exactly is being indicated when the object is affected? As Tenny (1987) points out, affectedness is also related to aspect in the sense that it also provides end points to an event. Consider again the examples above. The verbs which indicate that the objects are affected all imply an end point of the action. For example, in both (16b) and (17b), a part of the compound verb, namely [dao] 'fall', indicates that the actions "pushing" and "falling" are completed. That is, the falling provides an end point to the events (i.e. the events are terminated by the falling of Lisi and Zhangsan). Similarly, in (18b) and (19b), the events are terminated by the indication that the computer has been relocated and the room has been cleaned. Again, the fact that the objects are affected shows that there is an end point to the event. Consider the following graph:



(20) shows that the action of pushing continues until the falling occurs. In other words, it is clear the end point of the event 'pushing someone' is provided by the result of pushing, in this case, 'someone falls'. Thus, the event is again delimited.

4. A note on definiteness of the *ba*-phrase

Besides the above characteristics of the *ba*-construction, there is also a constraint on the noun phrase following *ba*. It appears that the noun phrase following *ba* must be able to be interpreted as definite (see also Li and Thompson (1974), Mei (1972), Teng (1975) and Szeto (1988) among other). Consider sentences in (21) and (22).

- (21) a. Wǒ bǎ qúnzǐ xǐ-gānjìng-lè.
 I BA skirt wash-clean-ASP
 'I washed the skirt.'
 b. *Wǒ bǎ yī-tiáo qúnzǐ xǐ-gānjìng-lè.
 I BA one-cl skirt wash-clean-ASP
 'I washed a/one skirt.'
 c. Wǒ bǎ nà-tiáo qúnzǐ xǐ-gānjìng-lè.
 I BA that-cl skirt wash-clean-ASP
 'I washed that skirt.'

(22) a. Wǒ bǎ chē mài-lē.

I BA car sell-ASP
'I sold the car.'

b. *Wǒ bǎ yī-liang chē mài-lē.

I BA one-cl car sell-ASP
'I sold a/one car.'

c. Wǒ bǎ Zhāngsān de chē mài-lē.

I BA DE car sell-ASP
'I sold Zhangsan's car.'

[Qunzi] 'skirt' and [che] 'car' in (21a) and (22a) are interpreted as a particular skirt and a particular car. Thus, nouns that do not have any classifiers or modifiers are interpreted as definite when they occur with *ba*. The ungrammaticality of both (21b) and (22b) is attributed to the fact that the NPs following *ba* need to be interpretable as definite. [Yi-tiao qunzi] 'one skirt' and [yi-liang che] 'one car' in Mandarin cannot be interpreted as definite and thus are not compatible with the definiteness imposed by *ba*. In contrast, the (c) sentences in (21) and (22) have a definite NP following *ba* and thus are acceptable. The question which arises from (21) and (22) is whether this definiteness constraint is at all related to the delimitedness of an event. Investigations into the definiteness of NPs in Mandarin Chinese may shed light on this question.

5. Conclusion

The above discussion shows that aspect markers and different types of verbs do play a role in the grammaticality of the *ba*-construction. Only aspect markers and verbs that can delimit an event can occur with *ba*. In other words, the *ba*-construction is licensed by events which provide a definite temporal end point.

The paper discusses the syntactic repercussions that aspect has in Mandarin Chinese with regard to the *ba*-construction. However, it is clear that there is no explicit constraint stated above. Cheng (1986) and Cheng and Ritter (1987) attempt to formulate an affectedness constraint to account for sentences in section 3. Further work is needed to develop constraints that account for the interaction between aspect and the *ba*-construction. It should be noted that the question of the *ba*-construction does not end with constraints which may explain the grammaticality of the

construction. The fact that Mandarin has the *ba*-construction while other Chinese dialects such as Cantonese lacks this construction raises a deeper question regarding the existence of the *ba*-construction and clause structures of Mandarin. Future work looking into this area may shed light on this and other related questions.

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