A usage-based study of the verb 看 (*see*)
in the Chinese bă-construction

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Abstract: The paper addresses the interface between lexical and constructional semantics in the Chinese bă-construction. Specifically, I focus on the distribution of the construction with the verb 看 (*see*) in its basic sense of physical vision. Under assumption of the affectedness constraint which is often stated for the bă-construction, the use of this verb would presumably lead to a semantic conflict between constructional semantics and lexical instantiation. However, corpus data demonstrate that the verb is commonly used in the construction. Its use appears to be tied to the requirement of an additional verbal dependent. Using a decompositional approach to event structure, I show how this dependent contributes an additional event structure component that makes the lexical semantics of the sentence parts compatible with that of the bă-construction.

Keywords: ba-construction, perception verbs, construction grammar, lexicalism

1 Introduction

The present paper addresses the interface between lexical and constructional semantics in the Chinese bă-construction. Given the extensive discussion around the semantics of the construction, I consider the distribution of verbs whose use in the bă-construction is marginal and comes with additional constraints. Specifically, the paper targets the use of the construction with the verb 看 (*see*) in its basic sense of physical vision. Under assumption of the affectedness constraint which is often stated for the bă-construction, the use of this verb would presumably lead to a semantic conflict between constructional semantics and lexical instantiation. However, corpus data demonstrate that the verb is commonly used in the construction. Its use appears to be tied to the requirement of an additional verbal dependent. Using a decompositional approach to event structure, I show how this dependent contributes an additional event structure component that makes the lexical semantics of the sentence parts compatible with that of the bă-construction.

The paper is structured as follows: in a first time, I outline the issue of the interface between lexical and constructional meaning that arises in constructional frameworks. Then, I present the specific problem with a short description of the bă-construction and motivate the choice of a perception verb for detailed study. In a third part, I use corpus data to show that perception verbs, namely the verb 看, are indeed used in the bă-construction; their use is combined with the requirement of an additional verbal dependent. Finally, I present an explanation of the data, focussing on the transitivity and affectedness components contributed by 看, the bă-construction and the obligatory verbal dependent.

2   Theoretical background: the interface between lexical and constructional meaning

Traditional lexicalist approaches to grammar take a monostratal approach to the projection of lexical meaning to syntax: the meaning of a lexical item determines its combinatorial potential. In turn, the combinatorial potential is realized step by step during sentence composition by cancellation of realized dependents from some subcategorization feature. Thus, the compositionality principle is taken as default mechanism for interpretation. This clear division of labor between lexicon and the combinatorial mechanism allows to avoid a number of conflicts at the syntax-semantics interface by positing new lexical entries when composition fails for some usage of the item.

By contrast, the constructional approach adopts a bidirectional approach to meaning composition. Constructions are pairs of form and meaning. The meaning component of a construction constrains its lexical instantiations.   The meaning of an instance of the construction is a combination of its constructional meaning and the meanings of the lexical parts. Thus, compared to the lexicalist approach, there is an additional interface where mismatches may arise, namely the interface between lexical and constructional meaning.

One of the issues arising under this approach are lexical instantiations of constructions that are grammatical although they are not compatible with the constraints associated with the construction. To resolve this conflict, either the meaning of the construction or that of the lexical item has to be adjusted. Both directions have been explored in the literature. Thus, according to the override principle in Michaelis (2004), stated for aspectual coercion, if a lexical item is semantically incompatible with its morphosyntactic context, its meaning is adapted so that it becomes compatible. In a similar fashion, Talmy (2000) describes conflict resolution strategies that are used when elements from open classes conflict with elements from closed classes (constructions in our case). He finds that some cases yield an adjustment not of the meaning of the open-class, but of the closed-class form (e. g. cancellation, stretching of closed-class components).

In the following, I will attempt to provide an explanation of the interactions between lexical and constructional meaning for perception verbs in the bă-construction.

3   The problem

In this section, I briefly present the bă-construction along with the associated constraints, introduce the class of perception verbs and show why they should not be licensed in the construction under the existing assumptions about the semantics of the bă-construction.

3.1 The bă-construction

In its canonical form, the bă-construction is formed from an SVO sentence by preposing the object into the preverbal position, where it is marked by ba:

(1) 他把蘋果吃了.
   he bă apple eat PRT
   'He ate the apple(s).'

The construction is not fully productive. The following constraints are frequently stated in the literature:

1. Affectedness expressed by the predicate
2. Additional verbal dependent (henceforth AVD)
3. Definiteness, specificity or genericity of the bă-NP
4. Temporal boundedness of the event

In the following discussion, I will focus on 1. and 2. and show how the semantic class of the verb determines the wellformedness requirements for the AVD.

3.2 Choice of the verb: perception / vision

Constructional approaches pay a lot of attention to marginal instantiations of constructions in the hope that their explanation will reveal additional meaning components of specific constructions (s. Goldberg 1995, p. 6). In this study, I will focus on a set of sentences in which the lexical verb does not express affectedness, trying to deduce facets of the constructional semantics from additional constraints that must be satisfied for these combinations. The considered sentences are all formed with the verb 看 (*see*). Besides being the basic verb of vision, 看 exhibits a high degree of polysemy with meaning extensions into the cognitive and social domains. The present discussion will be limited to the basic sense of physical vision; a distinction is made between the volitional and non-volitional meanings (*look* vs. *see*).

4   Data and observations

The Chinese Internet Corpus contains a large number of bă-sentences with 看 as main verb; the relevant observation is that all these sentences contain a lexical AVD. The following types of dependents are found:

• Degree adverb:

(2) 他握着她的手， 站在她前面， 想在这件黑房子里把她看個仔細。

    he hold DUR her DE hands, stand at her front, want in this CL dark DE room inside BA she
    in look GE detailed

   'Holding her hands, he stood in front in order to have a close look at her in the dark room. '

• Frequency adverb:

(3) 有个男孩跑到我面前， 從头到腳把我看一遍。

    there.is CL boy run.to me front, from head to foot BA me look one time

   'A boy came in front of me and looked at me once from tip to toe.'

• Duration adverb:

(4) 人家把裙子看了半天， 告訴我， 你放心吧， 咱這是真皮。

    PPRO BA skirt look PRT half.day, tell me, you reassured, we this is real leather

   'After looking for a while at the skirt, she told me: you can be reassured, this is real leather.'

• Idioms for short duration / punctuality:

(5) 我後來每次在紐約叫出租車是總要把司機看一眼。

    I afterwards each time in NewYork call taxi   always BA driver look one eye

   'After that, each time when I took a taxi in New York, I first had to take a look at the driver.'

• Verb reduplication, indicating short duration:

(6) . . . 仔細得把支票看了看， 就把它放進口袋里。

    . . . detailed DE bǎ ticket look PRT look, then BA it put.enter pocket inside

   'He had a detailed look at the ticket and then put it into his pocket.'

The observation has been made for the bǎ-construction by a number of authors (Lü 1995, Sybesma 1999, Liu 1997, *inter alia*). One issue with the existing descriptions is that they do not make a differentiation between grammatical aspect markers and lexical dependents as illustrated in (2)-(6). This distinction will be made here based on the categorization of lexical complements or adjuncts as open-class forms, and of aspect markers as functional closed-class forms.

The ungrammaticality of bare verbs in the bǎ-construction has been motivated by syntactic and prosodic factors. Li (1990) claims that certain juxtapositions of postverbal complements are ruled out in Chinese; thus, one of the complements is moved into the preverbal position. Under this approach, bǎ is a Case marker licensing the moved complement. Feng (2001) states that

monosyllabic verbs are ruled out on prosodic grounds, as the bǎ-construction requires a multisyllabic predicate. However, both approaches do not explain the wellformedness contrast between the following two sentences which arises by virtue of the verb choice, leaving structural aspects unchanged:

(7)
a. 他把蘋果吃了。
he BA apple eat PRT
'He ate the apple(s).'
b. * 他把蘋果看了。
 he BA apple see PRT
'He saw the apple(s).'

I claim that the contrast is motivated on semantic grounds and can be explained by a differentiation of the behavior of different semantic verb classes in the construction.

5   Interpretation and analysis

The argumentation in the following analysis goes as follows: I start with the lexical semantics of 看 and show how its use in the basic physical sense (*see / look*) can be classified with respect to transitivity, a semantic category often used for the characterization of the bǎ-construction. In a second time, I consider its use in the bǎ-construction and show that its meaning is enriched by use with bǎ on the one hand, and by an obligatory postverbal complement on the other hand. Using the decompositional characterization of transitivity by Hopper and Thompson (1980), I show that the lexical meaning is enriched in such a way that it provides for a higher degree of transitivity expressed by the sentence and, thus, makes the event structure of the lexical predicate compatible with the bǎ-construction.

5.1 The transitivity of 看

Based on the common characterization of the bǎ-construction in terms of high transitivity, an analysis at the interface between lexical and constructional meaning leads us to consider how much the transitivity is contributed by the lexical predicate on the one hand, and by the construction on the other hand. For the lexical contribution - in our case the verb 看 - I use the transitivity hierarchy by Tsunoda (1985) as a working classification of verbs:

1. Direct effect on patient:
   - Resultative: kill 殺, break 打破
   - Non-resultative: hit 打, shoot 射擊
2. Perception:
   - Attained patient: see 看到, hear 聽道
   - Non-attained patient: look 看, listen 聽
3. Pursuit: search 找, wait 等
4. Knowledge, cognition: think 想, understand 理解
5. Emotion: love 喜欢, need 需要
6. Relationship: possess 拥有, resemble 像
7. Ability: capable 会

This hierarchy was stated to explain different distributions of verbs across transitive case-marking patterns.

The hypothesis here is that the affectedness/transitivity degree expressed by the verb is a determinant of the AVD requirement: verbs with low affectedness may still be grammatical in the bǎ-construction if they are complemented by an appropriate AVD. Thus, I distinguish the following three classes of verbs with respect to wellformedness in the bǎ-construction:

1. Verbs which can appear in bare form or with an aspect marker (Tsunoda: 1st class):

(8) 張三把狗打了。
    John BA dog hit / kill PRT
    'John hit / killed the dog.'

2. Verbs which require a lexical AVD (Tsunoda: 2nd-4th classes):

(9) 張三把这件事想得很深。
     John BA this CL   affair think DE very deep
     'John thought very thoroughly about this matter.´

3. Verbs which are never licensed with bǎ (Tsunoda: 5th-7th classes):

(10) *張三把這輛車擁有了兩年。
     John BA this CL car possess PRT two year
     'John owned this car for two years.'

Another gradation of transitivity is provided by Hopper and Thompson (1980). The authors adopt a decompositional approach: they distinguish eleven components of transitivity. I posit a further three-fold distinction between components which are contributed lexically by the verbs, by joint forces of verb and construction, and by contextual factors, such as denotational properties of the NP arguments, additional sentence operators etc.:

Source	Property	High transitivity	Low transitivity
1. Verb	Kinesis Agency	*Action* *Agentive*	*Non-action* *Non-agentive*
2.Verb and/or construction	Participants Volitionality Aspect Punctuality Affectedness of O	*≥ 2 (Ag and Pt/Th)* *Volitional* *Telic* *Punctuality* *Totally affected*	*1* *Non-volitional* *Atelic* *Durative* *Non-affected*
3. Context	Affirmation Mode Individuation of O	*Affirmative* *Realis* *Totally individuated*	*Negative* *Irealis* *Non-individuated*

The combination of bǎ and 看 gives the following values for the properties of the 2nd group:

• Participants: in SVO sentences, the theme argument may be omitted if it is recoverable from context. The bǎ-construction enforces the obligatory realization of the theme argument.

• Volitionality: 看 is ambiguous between a volitional (*look*) and a non-volitional (*see*) reading. Its use with bǎ enforces the volitional interpretation.

• Aspect, punctuality: the default aspect of 看 is atelic. However, its use in the bǎ-construction contributes an aspectual shift. On the one hand, the bǎ-construction has been independently associated with perfectivity and boundedness (Liu 1997; Rhys 1996, *inter alia*). On the other hand, the required AVDs make the following aspectual contributions:

☒ Complements of result and frequency ➙ telicity

☒ Complements of short duration ➙ punctuality

☒ Complements of degree and duration ➙ boundedness

Thus, a major contribution of the bǎ-construction is the delimitation of the event, operating in the basic cognitive domain of boundedness.

• Affectedness: two tendencies:

– Prominent syntactic positions are associated with stronger degrees of affectedness. In Chinese, preverbal NP positions are more prominent. Thus, the bǎ-construction increases the prominence of the bǎ-NP and contributes to a stronger affectedness interpretation.

– Beavers (2010) aligns the affectedness scale with the scale of specification degree in the description of an event. The bǎ-construction specifies an additional dimension of the event: it imposes boundedness and, by virtue of the AVD, specifies the temporal or conceptual extent of the event.

6 Conclusion

The paper has focussed on the use of the verb 看 in the bǎ-construction. The leading assumption was that instantiations of bǎ-clauses with 看 are untypical and give rise to a conflict between constructional constraints and lexical instantiation. The use of 看 with bǎ requires extra lexical material; this material enriches the event structure of the verb to make it compatible with the semantics of the construction. Finally, I have illustrated how a decompositional characterization of transitivity and affectedness can be used to explain the distribution of affectedness / transitivity components between lexical verb, construction and additionally required lexical elements.

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