HOLD-OBTAIN-TAKE as GIVE in Gan Chinese

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This paper examines GIVE verbs and their uses in ditransitive constructions in the language of Gan, a Chinese language spoken in southeast China. It is observed by Zhang (2011) that many southern Chinese languages, including Gan Chinese, do not have genuine GIVE verbs and the GIVE meaning is expressed by HOLD-TAKE verbs (“chi-na yi dongci”) instead. In the Gan Chinese we study (the Yichun dialect of Gan), there are at least three distinctive lexical items to express the GIVE meaning, including /pa\42/ ‘hold’, /te\42/ ‘obtain’ and /la\42/ ‘take’ etc. The Yichun dialect of Gan has three different ditransitive constructions. The uses of these verbs in these constructions are illustrated from (1) to (3):

1. \no\43\ pa\42-\43/te\42-\43/\la\42/ pen\42 gy\43 nj\43.  
   Type 1: [Subject-GIVE-DO-IO]  
   1SG hold/obtain/take  CL book 2SG 'I give a book to you.' [Lit: 'I give a book you.']  

2. \no\43\ pa\42-\43/te\42-\43/\la\42/ pen\42 gy\43 pa\42/te\42/#la\42/ nj\43.  
   Type 2: [Subject-GIVE-DO-DAT-IO]  
   1SG hold/obtain/take  CL book DAT 2SG 'I give a book to you.'

3. \no\43\ pa\42/te\42/#la\42/ nj\43 pen\42 gy\43.  
   Type 3: [Subject-GIVE-IO-DO]  
   1SG hold/obtain/take  2SG CL book 'I give you a book.'

The data exemplified from (1) to (3) raises the following two sets of questions: (i) How is it syntactically and semantically possible for those non-GIVE verbs to develop into GIVE verbs? To put it differently, why is it the case that /pa\42/ and /te\42/ can introduce both DO and IO, but /la\42/ can only introduce DO but not IO (recipient), as shown in (2-3)? (ii) What is the relation of these three types of ditransitives? Is it possible that these three ditransitive constructions represent different stages of development for these quasi-GIVE verbs?

We start with the first question. One of the striking differences between TAKE and HOLD-OBTAIN is that /la\42/ is a three-place predicate and potentially ambiguous between ‘take’ and ‘give’ meanings in Yichun Gan, while /pa\42/ and /te\42/ are two-place predicates and have no such ambiguity. The crucial point is that the two meanings of /la\42/ are disambiguated by word order: V-DO-IO has a GIVE reading, as in (1) and V-IO-DO has a TAKE reading. (3) with /la\42/ only means that ‘I take a book from you’. We suggest that this labor-division of these two word-orders prevents /la\42/ from developing into the function of introducing IO (recipient). In other words, in the “/la\42/-Pronoun” sequence, the pronoun can be interpreted as SOURCE only but not RECIPIENT. /la\42/ patterns with other ditransitive verbs like /si\44/ ‘borrow’/lend’, /ts\44/ ‘rent’/lease’ in Yichun Gan.

We now attempt to answer the question how it is possible for /pa\42/ and /te\42/ to introduce RECIPIENT. Two-place predicates like /pa\42/ and /te\42/ can only introduce agent and theme as their arguments. The third argument, i.e. recipient, is introduced by some verbs (or prepositions) that express PATH (Zhang 2011). According to the Yichun Gazetteer (1990), a more conservative way of expressing ditransitive is that the indirect object is introduced by the verb /ku\44/ ‘pass’ (5a) or /pa\42/-ku\44/ ‘hold-pass’ (5b), in which ku means ‘pass, cross’ and expresses PATH of movement (or transferring of entities). The following two constructions are available (used by the old generations in the rural areas or countryside of Yichun). These two examples mean that ‘I hold a book and pass it to you’.
5. a. ŋo³⁴ pa⁴²-³⁳ pen⁴² ĝy³⁴ ku⁴⁴ ȵj³⁴. b. ŋo³⁴ pa⁴²-³³ pen⁴² ĝy³⁴ pa⁴² ku⁴⁴ ȵj³⁴.

Both: I give a book to him.

We suggest that it is due to the dropping of the morpheme ku⁴⁴ ‘pass, cross’ that the two-place predicates /pa⁴²/ and /tɛ⁴²/ can introduce indirect objects. It is plausible to posit the following grammaticalization path: ku⁴⁴ ‘pass’ > pa⁴² ku⁴⁴ ‘hold-pass’ > pa⁴² ‘give’ (see Comrie 2003 for the discussion on the development of ‘causative’ TAKE into GIVE in Huichol).

As for the second question, we claim that in Yichun Gan, ditransitives develop from serial verb constructions and that the three types of ditransitives represent three stages of development from non-GIVE into GIVE verbs (see Güldemann 2012 for an alternative account based on the idea of ‘re-lexicalization’). We suggest the following three-stage development of GIVE verbs (syntactic evidence will be provided in the actual paper):

Stage 1: Ditransitives at Type 1 is formed by dropping ku⁴⁴ in a serial verb construction like (5a), but not from the dropping of the so-called dative pa⁴² in Type 2, as claimed by Liu (2001) and Deng (2003). This is the earliest form of ditransitive construction in Yichun Gan.

Stage 2: Double pa⁴² (or double tɛ⁴²) constructions in Type 2, i.e. [[pa⁴²+DO]+ [pa⁴²+IO]] are serial verb constructions, in which the first pa⁴² still means ‘hold’ and the second pa⁴² is not a dative marker but a verb, which incorporates the meaning ‘pass’ from ku⁴⁴ and can be interpreted as ‘give’;

Stage 3: Type 3 represents the highest stage of grammaticalization, in which pa⁴² or tɛ⁴² behave like true GIVE verbs in terms of their argument-taking ability. Type 2 and 3 are different from “dative alternation”, as we always see in English.

The significance of this study is two-fold. Firstly, we showed that GIVE is not a primitive verb (Goddard & Wierzbicka 1994) and it can be expressed by other lexical sources, such as hold, obtain and take etc. in the Yichun dialect of Gan. Secondly, the different ditransitive constructions represent different stages of grammaticalization of these quasi-GIVE verbs in Yichun Gan.

References