Valence-reducing phenomena concerning GIVE and TAKE in Chinese

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Previous studies have shown the causative-to-passive development involving the ‘give’ morpheme in a number of languages, among them Manchu-Tungusic (Nedjalkov 1993; Knott 1995) and Chinese (e.g. Mandarin, Cantonese, Southern Min) (Hashimoto 1988; Cheng et al. 1999; Zhang 2000; Chin 2011; Yap & Iwasaki 2003, 2007; Chappell & Peyraube 2007). In some Chinese dialects such as Jieyang and Taiwan Southern Min, the passive use of the ‘give’ morpheme is further extended to an unaccusative use, i.e. the ‘give’ morpheme occurs in the construction ‘Patient/Theme NP + GIVE + 3SG + unaccusative predicate’ and denotes adversity (Matthews, Xu & Yip 2005; Lin 2011). This paper further identifies three possible pathways to unaccusative ‘give’ constructions in Chinese, partially based on previous works on passive and disposal constructions in Chinese such as Li & Chang (1997) and Chappell (2008, forthcoming):

(i) Lexical ‘give’ > Causative > Unintentional causative > Unaccusative
(ii) Lexical ‘give’ > Benefactive > Disposal > Unintentional causative > Unaccusative
(iii) Lexical ‘give’ > Causative > Reflexive > Passive > Adversative > Unaccusative

These developments can be construed in terms of valence reduction. For example, the extension from lexical ‘give’ to causative to unintentional causative and then to unaccusative represents a reduction in valence from 3-place to 2-place and then to 1-place predicates.

This analysis can also be extended to other morphosyntactic constructions, in particular the disposal/pre-transitive construction with the disposal or object marker being derived from a GIVE verb or TAKE verb. In Chinese languages such as some Min and Cantonese varieties, disposal constructions only allow 3-place and 2-place predicates. In other Chinese languages such as some Mandarin, Wu and Gan varieties, disposal constructions further allow 1-place predicates (e.g. Li & Chang 1997; Li 2012). In Mandarin, for example, the bă disposal construction can co-occur with an intransitive verb such as bìng ‘sick’, as in piānpiān bă láolĭ bìngle ‘Unfortunately Mr. Li got sick’ [lit. unfortunately OM PN sick PFV] (Lü 1980:49). This typological distribution in Chinese languages suggests a valence reduction from 3-place to 2-place to 1-place predicate in the development of disposal constructions, which is compatible with the development of disposal constructions in the history of Chinese (cf. Peyraube 1989; Wu 1996).

Our analysis also reveals that these valence changes are used to reflect speaker stance, with 2-place predicate GIVE/TAKE passive constructions used to defocus the agent, often by highlighting patient affectedness and sometimes also by deflecting the speaker from possible blame or responsibility for a negative outcome, and with 1-place predicate GIVE/TAKE unaccusative constructions used to highlight speaker (and not just patient) affectedness. This finding suggests that 1-place predicate GIVE/TAKE constructions have grammaticalized to convey a higher degree of speaker subjectivity, which is consistent with typological observations that 1-place predicate GIVE/TAKE constructions are rare even among Chinese languages.
References