

Sheng ‘win’ and *Bai* ‘lose’ Revisited*

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Abstract. It has been established that polarity antonyms can participate in similar syntactic patterns (e.g. Levin 1993). For example, *The amount is increasing/decreasing* and *They won/lost the game*. Interesting enough is the pair of the Chinese polarity antonyms, *sheng* ‘to win; to defeat sb.’ and *bai* ‘to lose; to be defeated by sb.’, which do not exhibit such parallel syntactic structures. In the events of winning and losing, there are at least two opposing parties in which one wins and the other loses. Let the winning party be “A” and the losing party “B”. In Mandarin Chinese, the propositions “A *sheng* B” and “A *bai* B” can refer to the exact event, rather than two opposing situations. Such apparent counterexamples to the common belief about antonyms exhibiting similar syntactic distributions have actually been noted and discussed in a pioneering work by Lü (1987). The present paper moves further to investigate the issue from the generative grammar, arguing that the transitivity alternation asymmetry can be best accounted for by adopting the notion of ‘light verb’ (Larson 1988; Lin 2001), viewing *sheng* ‘win’ and *bai* ‘lose’ undergoing different syntactic movement and incorporation of light verbs.

1. Introduction

This paper re-examines the intriguing syntactic patterns of the antonym *sheng* ‘win’ and *bai* ‘lose’ in Mandarin Chinese. The phenomenon dealt with in this paper is illustrated in the well-known joke given in (1):

- (1) An American, John, told his Chinese friend, “You Chinese are fascinated! Either you say ‘*zhonghuadui dasheng meiguodui*’ or you say ‘*zhonghuadui dabai meiguodui*’, *zhonghuadui* always wins!”

As John in this joke commented, the truth condition of the minimal pair (2) is identical.

- (2) a. *zhonghuadui dasheng meiguodui*
Chinese-team greatly-win U.S.-team
‘The China team greatly beat the U.S. team.’
b. *zhonghuadui dabai meiguodui*
Chinese-team greatly-lose U.S.-team
‘The China team greatly beat the U.S. team.’

Consider the apparent fact of the sentences in (2). The lexical items in (2a) and (2b) are exactly the same except the verbs *sheng* ‘win’ and *bai* ‘lose’. Even though the lexical meaning of *sheng* ‘win’ and *bai* ‘lose’ are contrary to each

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other, the compositional meaning of (2a) and (2b) are identical. This may easily be taken granted by Chinese native speakers, but is definitely a genuine puzzle for foreigners and Chinese learners. As a result, the case given in (1) may not be so much as a joke but a serious language teaching and learning topic.

The mysterious, puzzling examples like (2) raise theoretically interesting linguistic research questions: Why is the truth condition of the propositions identical, despite the fact that the only difference, i.e. the main predicates, in these sentences are antonym of each other? And what linguistic mechanisms are responsible for the phenomenon? What is the basic principle at work here?

Though the linguistic phenomenon has been discussed by Lü (1987) and touched upon by T. Mei (1991), they concern more of lexical semantics and historical changes than proper syntactic analyses. The study then re-considers the issue and tackles the linguistic facts from the theoretical perspective of verb classes and the notion of light verb. It is believed that a proper syntactic analysis would deepen our understanding of the nature of Chinese verbs and their syntactic properties. The central purpose of the paper, then, is to provide explicitly the structures of the minimal pair in (2) and the underlying linguistic properties of the main predicates.

The organization of the paper is as follows. Section two reviews the relevant literature. Section three provides an analysis by adopting the proposal of ‘light verbs’ in Chinese (Lin 2001). Finally, section four concludes the study.

2. Literature Review

This section summarizes one article talking about the differences between *sheng* ‘win’ and *bai* ‘lose’ in Mandarin Chinese. As early as in 1987, the intriguing linguistic phenomenon as represented in (2) was already discussed by Lü in a short article ‘Shuo sheng he bai’ (On *sheng* ‘win’ and *bai* ‘lose’). In the beginning of his paper, Lü brought in the different news headlines from two newspapers reporting one single event but using the semantically opposite verbs as the main predicates.

- | | | | | |
|-----|----|---|--------------|------------------|
| (3) | a. | zhongguonulan | dasheng | nanchaoxiandui |
| | | Chinese-girl-basketball | greatly-win | South Korea-team |
| | | ‘Chinese Girl Basketball Team greatly beat South Korea Team.’ | | |
| | b. | zhongguonulan | dabai | nanchaoxiandui |
| | | Chinese-girl-basketball | greatly-lose | South.Korea-team |
| | | ‘Chinese Girl Basketball Team greatly beat South Korea Team.’ | | |

Though both the sentences in (3) are of the pattern subject-verb-object, Lü found a difference between them and employed two schemas to illustrate the differences of the verbs in (3). In these two schemas, X refers to the winner and Y refers to the loser. As shown in the schemas, for the verb *sheng* ‘win’, if the object gets deleted, the subject noun can only be the winner, not the loser (4). Contrarily, for the verb *bai* ‘lose’, if the object gets deleted, the subject noun can only be the loser, not the winner (5).

(4) For the verb *sheng* 'win'

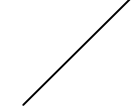
X verb Y



X verb

(5) For the verb *bai* 'lose'

X verb Y



Y verb

Moreover, Lü holds that *sheng* 'win' is a canonical transitive verb, and in the case of *sheng* 'win' occurring in an 'intransitive' pattern, the object is omitted, like a large number of transitive verbs in Mandarin Chinese, such as *chi* 'eat', *xie* 'write' and so on. Yet for *bai* 'lose', Lü, similar to T. Mei's (1991) proposal, suggests unlike *sheng* 'win', *bai* 'lose' has two usages, which correspond to distinct voicing qualities of the onset consonant. One is *zidong* (the autonomous) and the other is *shidong* (the causative). In the former usage, it means to fail oneself. In the latter usage, it means to defeat someone.

In the excursus part of his paper, Lü mentioned a proposal by some western scholar which suggests that Mandarin Chinese is, or part of it, is an ergative language. Lü suspects that it was because there exists patterns represented in (5) in Mandarin Chinese. However, he is against this view, and his crucial argument is that determination of ergative languages relies on the identical case marking of the subjects of transitive and intransitive sentences, and since Mandarin Chinese lacks morphological case marking, it is difficult to regard Mandarin Chinese as an ergative language. Moreover, if Mandarin Chinese were an ergative language, then all of the verbs, or at least most of the verbs in Mandarin Chinese should have only been allowed for the pattern (5). Nonetheless, the fact is that most of the verbs in Mandarin Chinese are allowed to occur in (4) but the verbs allowed to occur in (5) are greatly restricted. As a result, Lü opposes the view of treating Mandarin Chinese as an ergative language.

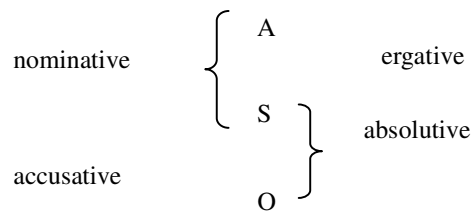
3. The issue of ergativity

As is shown in the previous section, Lü opposes the view of regarding Mandarin Chinese as an ergative language because there is no morphological case marking in this language. This is in fact related to a criticism for Dixon's (1979, 1987) analysis of ergativity (Zhou 1990). Before going into Zhou's criticism, let's first review the fundamental concepts of ergativity.

In his seminal work on ergativity, Dixon (1979: 1) defines ergativity as being "used to describe a grammatical pattern in which the subject of an intransitive clause is treated in the same way as the object of a transitive clause,

and differently from transitive subject.” Moreover, he proposes that there are three universal syntactic-semantic primitives: S, A and O. S refers to the subject of intransitive sentences; A refers to the subject of transitive sentences; O refers to the object of transitive sentences. And he uses the following diagram to illustrate the differences between nominative-accusative languages and absolutive-ergative languages:

(6)



On the one hand, if the morphological case marking of A and S are identical but distinct from that of O in a language, then the language is determined as a nominative-accusative language. On the other hand, if the morphological case marking of O and S are identical but distinct from that of A in a language, then the language is determined as an absolutive-ergative language.

Dixon’s analysis for absolutive-ergative languages has great contribution to our understanding of human languages. However, as Zhou (1990) points out, the analysis is not without its flaws. That is, Dixon’s diagnostics for ergativity rely solely in morphological case markings, but the fact is that ‘languages that are accusative canonically are also ergative in certain grammatical aspects...a la...semantic diagnostics, i.e. by the determination of semantic roles and predicate-argument relations in various syntactic structures’ (Zhou 1990: 18-19). With a similar view, in their studies of transitivity alternations in English, Hale and Keyser (1986) suggest an interaction between case theory and theta theory (viz.: 2). Along with Hale and Keyser (1986), Marantz (1984), Burzio (1986) and others view ergativity ‘as the syntactic representation(s) of the lexical-semantic or predicate-argument structure across languages’, rather than ‘a typological phenomenon relevant only to a few truly ergative languages.’ (Zhou 1990: 16)

Furthermore, Zhou notes that “the term ‘ergative’ has been used in a further, syntactic, sense to apply to coreferentiality constraints on the formation of complex sentences, through coordination and subordination” (Zhou 1990: 16)

- (7) zhonghuadui_i dasheng meiguodui_j tamen_{i/*j} huantianxidi
 Chinese-Team greatly-win U.S.A-Team they lightly
 qingzhu shengli.
 celebrate triumph
 ‘China_i greatly beats the U.S._j, and they_{i/*j} lightly celebrate their triumph.’
- (8) zhonghuadui_i dasheng meiguodui_j yinwei tamen_{i/*j}
 Chinese-Team greatly-win U.S.A-Team because they

meitian nuli lianxi.
 everyday hard practice
 ‘China; greatly beats the U.S.; because they_{i/*j} practice very hard
 everyday.’

As (7) and (8) show, coreferentiality constraints in coordination and subordination indicates an ergative property exhibited in the ergative language. Hence, it is plausible not to restrict the research of ergativity in overt morphological case marking but extend it to the general syntactic properties of human natural language.

Therefore, the current study takes such view to examine the data represented in (2), repeated here as (7) and holds that the proper analysis lies in the conception of lexical entries (Hale and Keyser 1986: 38).

4. Analysis

This section provides an analysis from the perspective of verb classes via transitivity alternations (Hale and Keyser 1986) in 4.1 and light verbs in Chinese in 4.2 (Lin 2001).

4.1 Verb classes

Hale and Keyser (1986) studied transitivity alternations in English and discussed different types of verbs in English. The most relevant types include accusative verbs and unaccusative verbs.

Accusative verbs, as the name suggests, are the verbs that are capable of assigning accusative case and are the canonical transitive verbs, taking two arguments in their argument structure, one external and one internal. Unaccusative verbs, on the other hand, are the verbs that are not able to assign accusative case, and thus have only one argument in the argument structure.

What is interesting is that Hale and Keyser observed alternations between these verbs, as illustrated below.

- (9) a. John broke the window.
 b. The window broke.

The verbs which can participant the transitivity alternation as the verb “break” in (9) are termed “unaccusative verbs.” If we compare the data in (9) with the schema (5) provided by Lü (1987), repeated here as (10), we found striking similarities.

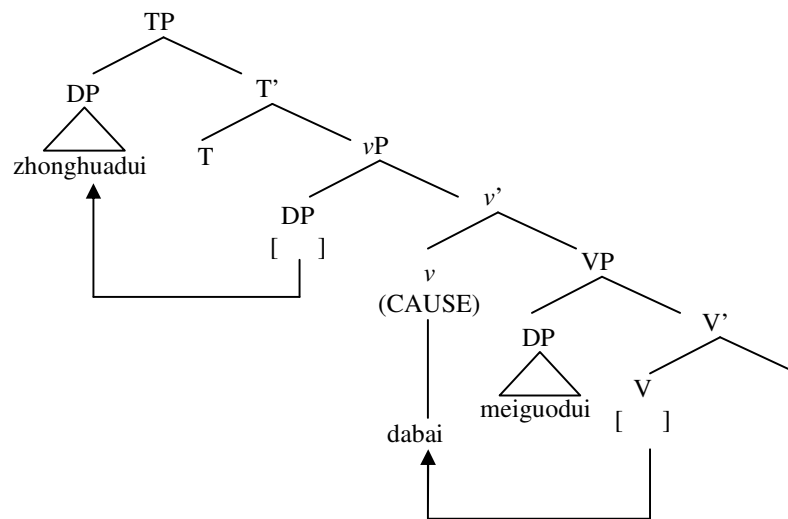
- (10) For the verb “bai” (lose)
 X verb Y
 /
 Y verb

Therefore, we may adopt Hale and Keyser's (1986) analysis and classified the Chinese verb *bai* 'lose' as an "unaccusative verb."

4.2 Chinese light verbs

Lin (2001) proposes that Chinese is a "Davidsonian" language, and suggest that "a Mandarin Chinese sentence is constructed via complementation of verbs, full or light, topped with raising functional categories." (Lin 2001: 289). Adopting such a proposal, the sentences in question can be accounted for by the following syntactic structures.

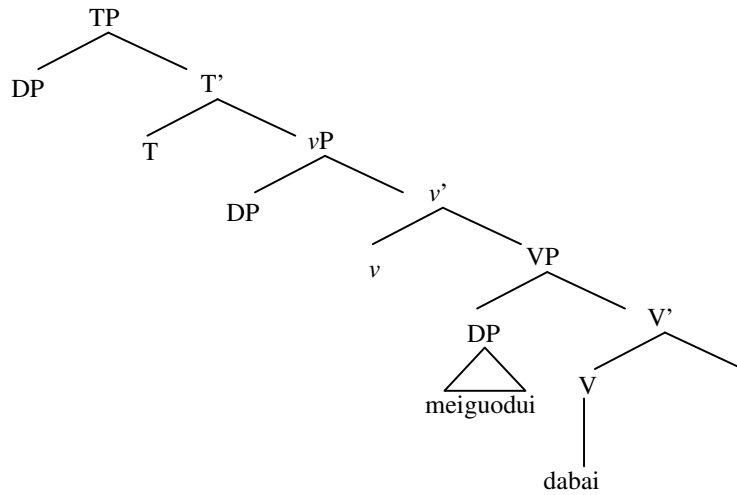
- (11) *Zhonghuadui dabai meiguodui*
'The China team greatly beat the U.S. team'



As the tree diagram shows, the verb is originated in the V, and got raised to the light v CAUSE. Moving into the light v position, the verb is incorporated with CAUSE and derived the causative meaning. This is what Lü (1987) and T. Mei (1991) call the causative usage of *bai* 'lose'.

Let's see then what happens if the verb does not move to the light v but stays in its original position.

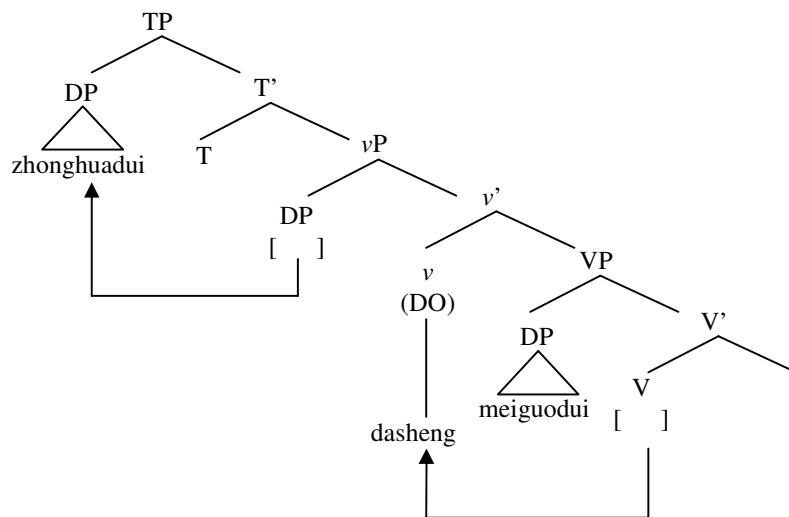
- (12) *Meiguodui dabai* 'The U.S. team lost.'



As is shown by the tree diagram above, if the verb remains in its base position, the surface form of the sentence will be *Meiguodui dabai*, whose meaning corresponds to what Lü (1987) called the “autonomous” usage, meaning *Meiguodui* ‘the U.S. team’ failed itself.

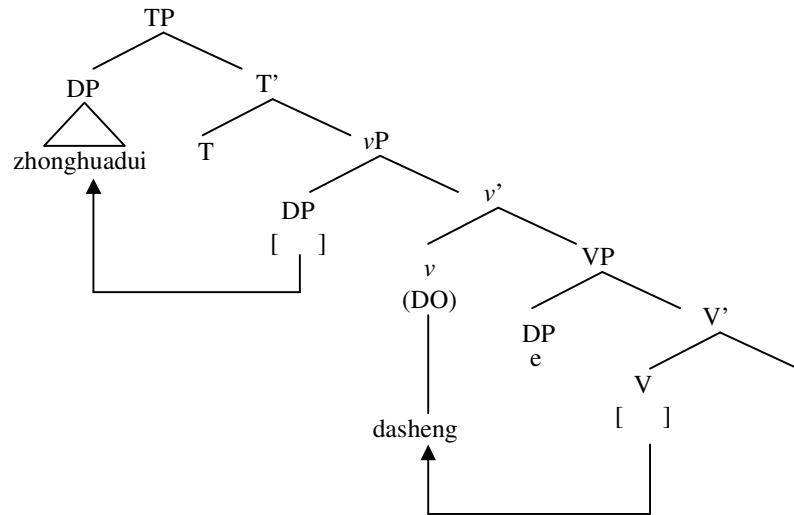
The two tree diagrams above are the analyses for the verb *bai* ‘lose’. As for the verb *sheng* ‘win’, the situation is quite different. By viewing the verb *sheng* ‘win’ as an accusative verb, the verb also moves to the light verb position, but instead of incorporated with CAUSE, it incorporates with DO.

- (13) *Zhonghuadui dasheng meiguodui* ‘The China team greatly beat the U.S. team’



Since the verb is a canonical transitive verb, it will always move to the light verb position (unlike the case of the unaccusative verb “bai”), forming the sentence *Zhonghuadui dasheng meiguodui* ‘The China team greatly beat the U.S. team’. Moreover, since Chinese is a pro-drop language, allowing free argument dropping, if the object noun is realized in a null form, the surface linear order of the sentence will still be *Zhonghuadui dasheng* ‘The China team greatly beats some team’.

- (14) *Zhonghuadui dasheng* ‘The China team greatly beats some team.’



In sum, the syntactic behavior of the verbs *sheng* ‘win’ and *bai* ‘lose’ accounted for the puzzle in (2). Though the surface forms seem to be a problem, because the underlying forms, or the distinct argument structure of the verbs, are distinct, of course the thematic role or the meaning of the syntactic subject and object are different. Thus with a proper syntactic analyses, the apparent puzzle got solved easily.

4. Conclusion

This paper revisited the issue of *sheng* ‘win’ and *bai* ‘lose’, or the transitivity alternation in Mandarin Chinese from the perspective of light verb and proposes that the differences between *sheng* ‘win’ and *bai* ‘lose’ can be accounted for by verb classes, specifically by the argument structure and the theta grid of the verbs (Hale and Keyser 1986).

To begin with, it is argued in this paper that *sheng* ‘win’ and *bai* ‘lose’ belong to two distinct verb classes, the former being accusative verb and the latter being unaccusative verb. Besides, they are distinct in argument structure. For *sheng* ‘win’, the accusative or the canonical transitive verb, there are two arguments in its argument structure, one external and one internal. When *sheng* ‘win’ appear in intransitive patterns, the internal argument is dropped due to the pro-drop character of Mandarin Chinese.

For *bai* ‘lose’, there is only one argument, the internal argument”, in its argument structure. So for the unaccusative verb *bai* ‘lose’, only the internal

argument becomes phonetically realized in the surface form.

The study also adopts the notion of light verbs in Chinese proposed in Lin (2001) and suggests that *sheng* 'win' and *bai* 'lose' are different in terms of movement into light verb and the light verb they incorporate with. For *sheng* 'win', on the one hand, since it is an accusative verb, it always moves to the light verb position and it incorporates with the light verb DO. For *bai* 'lose' on the other hand, only when it appears in the transitive pattern will it moves to the light verb position and incorporates with the light verb CAUSE. Meanwhile, an additional argument is superimposed to the verb. Hence there are two nominal phrases realized in the surface form. Yet if *bai* 'lose' appears in the intransitive pattern, it stays in its base position, and only one nominal phrase is phonetically realized.

In sum, the study adopts the notion of light verb (or VP shell) to re-examine the analysis of *sheng* 'win' and *bai* 'lose', and suggests that a proper syntactic analysis is needed to account for the apparent paradox involving in the two verbs.

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