A COGNITIVE ACCOUNT OF MANDARIN COVERBS

Hui Yin

Department of Linguistics
University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, Canada

1. MANDARIN COVERBS

1.1 Definitions

In Modern Mandarin, coverbs are terms created to cover a set of words which are semantically like prepositions in English (Li & Thompson 1974) and this deverbalized category which has undergone or is undergoing the process of grammaticalization. Coverbs are said to be historically derived from verbs and some of them are derived from serial verb constructions. Many of the items can be used either as lexical verbs or coverbs (i.e., many of them are homophonous with lexical verbs.)

1.2 Representative Items

The following are some representative items with glosses of both their verbal meanings and their prepositional meanings:

	COVERB	(OLDER) VERBAL MEANING	PREPOSITIONAL MEANING
(1)	*bei*	to cover, to receive	by---passive marker
	ba	to take hold of	preverbal object marker
	dao	to arrive	to (place)
	na	to grasp	with (instrumental)
	bi	to compare	than
	gei	to give	for, to etc'
	wei	to do	benefactive for'
	gen	to follow	with (comitative)
	dui	to face	to, toward'
	xiang	to face	to, toward
	shun	to follow, obey	along
	yan	to go along	along

2. TRADITIONAL CRITERIA

Traditional analyses that coverbs are not true verbs but prepositions are based on both syntactic and semantic criteria (Poteet 1988).

2.1 Syntactic Criteria

The following are three main syntactic criteria to distinguish coverbs from true verbs:

i) Verbs occur in the V-not-V structure while coverbs usually do not. In Mandarin Chinese, the V(erb)-not-V(erb) structure is one way to form a yes-no question.

ii) Verbs can take 'aspect' particles such as *le* 'perfective', *zhe* 'progressive' while coverbs do not.

iii) Transitive verbs may occur without overt object NPs immediately following them in answer to a yes-no question while coverbs may not.

2.2   Semantic Criteria

The semantic criteria are that sentences with two true verbs denote two distinct actions while sentences with coverbs only express one action (Li & Thompson 1981).

2.3   Problematic Criteria

Criteria to distinguish coverbs from true verbs are problematic because there are quite a few exceptions for these criteria.

2.3.1   Problematic Syntactic Criteria

i)   Almost all coverbs may occur in V-not-V constructions to form questions, though some sound more natural than others.

(2)   a.   Ni   **na**   **bu**   **na**   kuaizi   chi   fan?
              You   take   not   take   chopstick   eat   meal
              'Do you take (use) chopsticks to eat the meal?

       b.   Ni   **gei**   **bu**   **gei**   ta   mai   pingguo?
              You   give   not   give   him   buy   apple
              'Do you buy apple for him?'

       c.   Ni   **gen**   **bu**   **gen**   ta   qu   Beijing?
              You   follow not   follow   him   go   Beijing
              'Do you go to Beijing with him?'

       d.   Ni   **ba**   **bu**   **ba**   shu   gei   wo?
              you   Object marker   not   Object marker   book   give   me
              'Do you give me the book?' (sometimes pose a threat)

       e.   ?Ta   **bei**   **bu**   **bei**   mifeng yao   le?
              He   Passive marker   not   Passive marker   bee   bite   Perfective
              ? 'Was he stung by bees?'
              (indicate willingness to be bit such as for medical treatments)

As (2) illustrates, the typical coverbs like instrumental *na*, benefactive *gei*, comitative *gen*, object marker *ba*, passive *bei* can enter into V-not-V constructions to form questions.

ii)   It has also been noticed that a number of coverbs can allow (e. g. *dui* 'toward', *xiang* 'to') or even requires (e. g. *shun* 'along', *yan* 'along') the particle *zhe*. *Wei* 'for' allows both *zhe* and *le*. (Li & Thompson 1974; Poteet 1988)

(3)   a.   Ta   **dui**   **zhe**   diren   kai   qiang.
              He   toward Progressive   enemy   fire   gun
              'He fired his gun (toward) at enemies.'

       b.   Ta   **yan**   **zhe**   he   an   zou.
              He   along   Progressive   river   bank   walk
              'He is going along a river bank.'

       c.   **Wei**   **le/zhe**   renmim de   liyi,   ta   xianchu le   shengming.
              For   Perf/Prog   people of   interest he   give up Perf   life
              'He sacrificed his life for people's cause.'

2.3.2   Problematic Semantic Criteria

Problems with the semantic criteria are the lack of precision in explaining the term 'action' (Poteet 1988).

i)   First, stative and adjectival verbs in Mandarin do not express actions but they are included in the verb category.

(4)   Wo   pengyou   hen   congming.
        My   friend   very   clever
        'My friend (is) very clever.'

In (4), the adjectival verb *zhongming* dose not signal any action, however, it functions as a verb to be a predicate in this sentence.

ii)   Second, it is not clear if verbs like 'kaishi' (begin), tingzhi (stop) should be considered as denoting separate actions from their complements (Poteet 1988).

(5)   Ta   tingzhi   le   chouyan.
        He   stop   Perfective   smoke
        'He has stopped smoking.'

No one has ever proposed that 'tingzhi' should be considered as a coverb, but in what sense is the stopping of an action a separate action from the action that one is stopping?

iii)   Thirdly, serial verb constructions (SVCs) do not usually denote two distinct actions. Often the information status of the constituents of SVCs is reduced, and the separate verbs do not denote individuated actions (Frawley 1992).

(6)   Ta   yong   kuaizi   chi   fan.
        He   use   chopstick   eat   meal
        'He uses chopsticks to eat his meal.'

According to traditional analyses, *yong* is usually regarded as a verb and thus the construction in (6) is viewed as an SVC. However, the two verb phrases: *yong kaizi* 'use chopsticks' and *chi fan* 'eat meals' do not constitute two individuated actions.

Yin (2001) claims that SVCs reflect degrees of event conflation. SVCs are generally construable as two causally connected phases of a single event as the following example indicates.

(7)   Ta   **tui**   **dao**   le   yi   zhang   zhuozi.
        He   push   fall   Perfective   a   Classifier   table.
        'He has pushed down a table.'

In (7), the two serial verbs *tui* 'push' and *dao* 'fall' do not denote two distinct actions, but signal a single event with two connected phases.

2.3.2   Verbhood Tests

It has been noticed that there are coverbs which display characteristics of verbs. Also it can be found that certain verbs can not stand some of the verbhood tests.

For instance, there are verbs which do not allow some or all of the aspect particles (e. g. *xiang* 'resemble' as in (8) does not take *le, zhe*; *si* 'die' does not allow *zhe*; *gei* 'give' as in (9), *song* 'send' and *ji* 'post' usually do not take *zhe*) (Poteet 1988).

(8)   a.   Ta   **xiang**   ta   baba.
                He   resemble   his   dad.
                'He resembles his dad.'

        b.   *Ta   **xiang**   **le/zhe**   ta   baba.
                He   resemble   Perfective/Progressive   his   dad.

(9)   a.   Ta   **gei**   **le**   wo   yi   ben   shu.
           He   give   Perfective   me   one   Classifier   book
           'He has given me a book.'

      b.   *Ta   **gei**   **zhe**   wo   yi   ben   shu.
           He   give   Progressive   me   one   Classifier   book

The evidence that some verbs do not pass some of the verbhood tests suggests that these verbs may have characteristics shared by some of the coverbs.

3.   PRESENT ANALYSIS

3.1   Coverbs --- a continuum

To accommodate these coverb phenomena I will demonstrate from a cognitive approach that constructions display a continuum. Coverbs are a continuous rather than a discrete phenomenon and there is a continuum between verbs and prepositions.

Coverbs could be viewed as words occupying different points in different constructions along the continuum and their position is partly determined by the morphosyntactic tests for the verbhood.

Na (take---instrumental), *gen* (follow---comitative) can pass more such kinds of test: aspectual tests such as **le, zhe**, the **V-not-V** test and these properties suggest that coverbs of this kind are relatively closer to the verbal end while *ba* (object marker) and *bei* (passive) pass less verbhood tests, which indicates that these coverbs are relatively closer to the prepositional end.

(10) a.   Ta   na   **le/zhe**   kuaizi   chi   fan.
           He   take   Perfective/Progressive   chopstick   eat   meal
           'He ate/is eating his meal with chopsticks.'

      b.   Ta   **na**   **bu**   **na**   kuaizi   chi   fan?
           He   take   not   take   chopstick   eat   meal
           'Does he eat his meal with chopsticks?'

(11) a.   *Ta   **ba**   **le/zhe**   fan   chi   diao   le.
           He   Object marker   Perfective/Progressive   meal   eat   finish   Perfective

      b.   ?Ta   **ba**   **bu**   **ba**   fan   chi   diao   le?
           He   Obj marker   not   Obj marker meal   eat   finish   Perfective

(12) a.   *Fan   **bei**   **le /zhe**   ta   chi   diao   le.
           meal   passive   Perfective/Progressive   he   eat   finish   Perfective

      b.   ?Fan   **bei**   **bu**   **bei**   ta   chi   diao   le?
           meal   passive   not   passive   he   eat   finish   Perfective
           Was the meal eaten by him?

However, the positions for coverbs to be in the continuum are not fixed and they are quite flexible. They could enter into various constructions to express different meanings.

(13) Ta   **na**   **zhe**   tiaogeng   chi   fan.
      He   take   Progressive   spoon   eat   meal
      'He is taking the spoon to eat his meal.'

With the aspectual marker *zhe*, the verb flavor is enhanced and *na* in this construction will be pulled much closer to the verbal end.

In fact, grammatical elements are meaningful. The problems with previous analyses mainly come from questionable assumptions about meaning and grammatical categories, which claim that grammatical particles are

semantically empty morphemes used exclusively to indicate different syntactic structures and that the ability of a word to enter into a given construction is independent of its meaning (Poteet 1988).

Langacker (1987, 1991) maintains that linguistic categorizations and conceptual categorizations are not independent and constructions and grammatical markers are meaningful. With the help of grammatical markers it could induce different interpretations and thus the language user could make a particular coverb more like a verb or more like a preposition through different means such as with or without an aspectual marker.

3.2 Coverbs — Entities Undergoing Process

Coverbs are said to be developed from true verbs. Changes from verbs to coverbs to indicate grammatical functions do not stop at present and some members of this class are still in the onging process of grammaticalization. So coverbs should be viewed as entities undergoing process rather than as static objects.

For example, some so-called case markers like *ba* 'object marker', *bei* 'agent (passive) marker', *na* 'instrumental marker', *gei* 'dative marker' are still going on grammaticalization.

(14) Wo **ba** huaping **dapo** le.
      I object marker flower bottle break Perfective
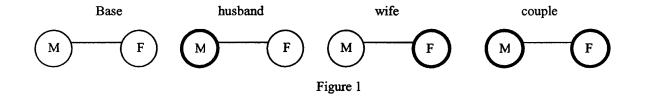   'I have **broken** the flower bottle (vase)'

Ba constructions indicate total affectedness of patients and they are originally used with verbs of high transitivity like *dabo* 'break'. Now it is possible for a non-high transitive verb to enter into *ba* constructions in modern Mandarin as the following example illustrates.

(15) Wo **ba** shu **du** le liang bian.
      I Object marker book read Perfective two times
      'I have read the book twice.'

3.3 Differences between SVCs and Coverb Constructions

Most coverb constructions have quite different characteristics from those of prototypical SVCs but boundaries between these two constructions are not clear cut.

Serial verb constructions and coverb constructions are mainly different in event structures, more specifically in its profiling. Langacker (1988) proposes that a semantic structure derives its value through the imposition of a profile on a base. As the basis for its meaning, an expression evokes a certain body of conceptual content, called its base. Within its overall conception, it directs attention to some particular substructure—the profile. The profile comprises those portions of the base which the entity designates or refers to. "Some facet of the base is invariably raised to a distinctive level of prominence, and serves as its focal point; this substructure is the predication's profile" (Langacker, 1988: 59).

Figure 1

The meanings for *husband, wife* and *couple* have the same base: a male (M) and a female (F) who have a certain kind of relationship indicated by a line connected them. Although these three expressions share the same base (content), they differ in meaning by imposing different profiles indicated by boldface in Figure 1.

Similar to *couple*, in which both M and F are profiled, SVCs have two events which are both profiled and they are connected by some purposive or causative relationship. In coverb constructions, the event denoted by the main verb is profiled while the event denoted by the coverb is not profiled and is non-salient.

However, to a large extent, the bases for SVCs and coverb constructions are the same. The verb which is not profiled in coverb constructions thus become a coverb as the following two examples indicate.

(16) Wo   **wei**   ta   **mai**   le   yi   ben   shu. (purposive)
      I   do (for)   him   buy   Perfective   one   Classifier   book.
      'I bought a book for him.'

(17) Ta   **yan**   zhe   he   an   **zou**.
      He   follow (along) Progressive   river   bank   walk
      'He walked along a river bank.' (path for the profiled verb *zuo*---walk)

In (16), *wei* is not profiled as a verb and it indicates the purpose for the profiled verb *mai* while in (17) the coverb *yan* is also not profiled as a verb and it serves as path for the profiled motion verb *zuo*.

3.4   Meanings Are Conceptual

Meanings are conceptual in the sense that they depend on how speakers represent a scene to themselves or how they expect listeners to construe it in their mind (Langacker 1987, 1991). Speakers can manipulate constructions and render them different interpretations.

(18) Wo   **mai**   le   yi   ben   shu   **gei**   ta.
      I   buy   Perfective one   Classifier   book   give   him
      'He bought a book and gave it to him (rather than for him).'

(19) Wang   qian   **zou**   **yan**   zhe   he   an.
      toward   forward   walk   follow   Progressive   river   bank
      'Walk forward, follow (go along) the river bank.'

In these two sentences, the speaker wants to profile two events denoted by the two verbs and he puts the so-called coverb after another verb so as to make the construction as an SVC rather than a coverb construction.

3.5   Related Meanings--- Metaphorical and Functional Extensions

The distribution of a word or a morpheme is associated with its meaning and a particular word or construction may have a range of interrelated meanings. In contrary to traditional analyses to analyze different senses of a linguistic item independently I would like to discuss the interrelatedness of its verb use and its coverb use and explore motivations behind its metaphorical and functional extensions.

3.5.1   *Na* 'take' --- Instrumental and Topic Marker

In using something, usually we should take it and then manipulate it or perform actions with it. So *na* focuses on an initial portion of the action chain of 'take-and-then-do'. So it is a good candidate to serve as an instrumental marker since the case of using something often involves the situation to take the instrument first. The semantic value of using the instrument is compatible with the meaning of *na* which focuses on an initial portion in an action chain: 'take-do' (take-and-then-do).

In modern Chinese, *na* can still be used as a full lexical verb:

(20) Wo   cong   bingxiang   li   **na**   pingguo.
      I   from   fridge   inside   take   apple
      'I took apples from the fridge.'

(21) **Na**   zhe   ge   fangfa   jiejue   wenti.
      Take (with)   this   Classifier   method   solve   problem.
      'Solve the problem with this method.'

These two examples illustrate two extreme cases of the uses of *na* along a continuum, with typical serial verb use as in (20) at one end and prototypical instrumental marker use as in (21) at the other end.

In addition to be used as a real transfer verb or as an instrumental marker, *na* can act as a topic marker. Taking something implies the concept of contact with it. When the transfer verb is used metaphorically to indicate mental contact, the energy transferred is in the abstract domain, i.e., from human mind to the thing to be contacted. The topic marker comes into being when *na* 'take' indicates mental contact as in (22) and the thing to be taken and picked up serves as a reference point.

(22) **Na** shuiguo er yan, wo zui xihuan pingguo.
     Topic marker fruit particle talk I most like apple
     'Talking about fruits, I like apples best.'

3.5.2 Ba --- Object Marker

Ba---the transfer verb *ba* in Old Chinese maybe is better to be interpreted as 'take hold of'. It implies certain duration of an action and the profiled portion is on the later stage---'the holding part'. The meaning of this verb includes the concept of manipulation of objects and the end stage of an action chain and thus, it indicates completion of affectedness (Sun 1996). In the use of *ba* as object marker, the semantics of *ba* is bleached but traces of the meaning of *ba* as a transfer verb are carried over. In fact, the use of *ba* as an object marker can be viewed as a semantic/functional extension of this transfer verb.

In Mandarin *ba* is now basically used as a coverb, however, the speaker can use some means such as aspectual markers to turn it into a main verb again as the following example shows.

(23) Ta **ba** zhe men bu rang wo jin.
     He take hold of Progressive door not let me enter
     'He was taking hold of the door not to let me in.'

3.5.3 *Gei* (give)--- Recipient Marker and Benefactive Use

Different meanings of *gei* 'give' though unpredictable, are indeed motivated and related. The typical case of *gei* 'give' is that somebody who has something passes it with his hands to anther person.

In addition to be used as a full verb, *gei* can function as a recipient marker. The recipient marker *gei* invokes a scene in which some transfer takes place. It is used to plot the path of an object sent by an agent to a recipient though it has the same base as its lexical verb use which includes a GIVER, a THING, and a RECIPIENT (Newman 1993, 1996).

(24) Wo **gei** ta ji le yi feng xin.
     I give (to) him send Perfective one Classifier letter
     'I sent a letter to him.

Another grammatical function of *gei* is its benefactive use, meaning for the sake of somebody, or to the benefit of somebody. There are some connections between the recipient use and the benefactive use. The benefactive sense is to the recipient advantage. The situation whereby giving something results in some kind of benefit to the recipient is a natural and frequent occurrence in human experience (Newman 1993). When *gei* is used as a benefactive marker it usually occurs before the main verb.

(25) Wo **gei** ta shenqing le tushu ka.
     I give (for) him apply for Perfective library card.
     'I applied for a library card for him.'

As illustrated, some linguistic items like *na*, *ba*, *gei* can be used either as lexical verbs or coverbs. Their lexical use and coverb use and various senses within coverbs are interrelated. All the senses of a particular item are far from random and that all the variants, non-central, peripheral meanings and semantic/functional extensions are related to its basic meaning (Lakoff 1987).

4.   CONCLUSIONS

In Mandarin Chinese, coverbs are not a discrete category but display a continuum. Some of Mandarin coverbs function more like prepositions than verbs and they are more grammaticalized than others. However, the process of grammaticalization of coverbs does not stop at present and this process is still going on in modern Mandarin.

In general, typical coverb constructions and typical SVCs have distinct properties, however, their boundaries are not clear-cut. The main differences between these two constructions lie in event structures. In SVCs both events denoted by two serial verbs are profiled while in coverb constructions only one event denoted by the main verb is profiled.

Linguistic and conceptual categorizations are not independent and constructions are not semantically empty categories but meaningful. Meanings are non-compositional but conceptual and speakers can employ various means to indicate relative conceptual distance between two events. Language users can manage the constructions such as adding aspectual markers or change the position of a particular verb to induce different interpretations such as SVC or coverb interpretations.

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