

SOME NOTES ON THE SO-CALLED 'PSEUDO-PASSIVES' IN CHINESE

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This paper examines the 'non-syntactic' factors that affect the acceptability of the so-called 'pseudo-passives' in Chinese.

1. Introduction

- 'Pseudo-passives' in Chinese refer to the sentences with non-agentive subjects. Such sentences are also known as '受事主語句' in the literature.

- (1) 手帕哭濕了。
Shoupa ku-shi-le.
handkerchief cry-wet-Perf
'The handkerchief was wet from someone's crying.'
- (2) 氣球吹破了。
Qiqiu chui-po-le.
balloon blow-broken-Perf
'The balloon was popped (blown-broken).'

2. Subjects or topics?

- Cheng and Huang (1994) argue that 'pseudo-passives' in Chinese are derived from a transitive argument structure by suppressing the agent argument. To this structure NP-movement will apply and the patient argument surfaces as the subject.

- (3) [Agent [V Patient]] ⇒
 [e [V Patient]] ⇒
 [Patient [V t]]

- ARGUMENT 1: Only predicates that express certain results or involve affected patients may enter the 'pseudo-passives' in Chinese, on a par with middle formation in English.

- (4) *張三很喜歡。
*Zhangsan hen xihuan.
Zhangsan very like
'As for Zhangsan, someone likes him very much.'

- (5) 張三，李四很喜歡。
Zhangsan, Lisi hen xihuan.
Zhangsan Lisi very like
'As for Zhangsan, Lisi likes him very much.'
- (6) This door kicks *(open) easily.
- (7) *John likes easily.
- ARGUMENT 2: 'Pseudo-passives' in Chinese are completely natural without a pause (see also Sybesma 1992).

- (8) 手帕哭濕了。
Shoupa ku-shi-le.
handkerchief cry-wet-Perf
'The handkerchief was wet from someone's crying.'
- ARGUMENT 3: The relativized element cannot be associated with the clause by a loose 'aboutness' relation (see also Ning 1993).

- (9) 張三，車禍發生了。
Zhangsan, chehuo fasheng-le.
Zhangsan accident happen-Perf
'As for Zhangsan, an accident happened to him.'
- (10) *車禍發生的人來了。
*Chehuo fasheng de ren lai-le.
car accident happen Mod person come-Perf
'Lit.: The person such that a car accident happened came.'
- (11) *手帕哭濕的人來了。
*Shoupa ku-shi de ren lai-le.
handkerchief cry-wet Mod person come-Perf
'Lit.: The person such that the handkerchief was cried wet came.'

- Some problems for Cheng and Huang's (1994) analysis:
- PROBLEM 1: Why can't 'pseudo-passives' be derived from the structures in (12) and (13), in which DP is the patient argument and the empty category *e* is the agentive subject? (12) and (13) are supposed to be legitimate structures in Chinese.

- (12) [DP [*e* [V t_{DP}]]] (topicalization)
- (13) [*e* [DP [V t_{DP}]]] (focalization)

- PROBLEM 2: Some predicates that do not express a result or do not involve affected patients may enter the 'pseudo-passive' construction in Chinese. The 'affectedness' requirement is too strong to rule out some acceptable sentences.

- (14) 孩子不能寵。
Haizi bu neng chong.
child not can spoil
'Children can't be spoiled.'

- (15) 老大管，老二寵。
Laoda guan, lao'er chong.
eldest control younger spoil
'The eldest child is subjected to discipline. The younger child is spoiled.'
- (16) 張三喜歡過。
Zhangsan xihuan-guo.
Zhangsan like-Exp
'Zhangsan was loved (by someone).'
- (17) 張三從來沒喜歡過。
Zhangsan conglai mei xihuan-guo.
Zhangsan ever not like-Exp
'Zhangsan was never loved (by someone).'
- (18) 冰淇淋不吃了。
Bingqilin bu chi-le.
ice-cream not eat-Perf
'As for ice-cream, someone doesn't want to eat.'
- PROBLEM 3: Even though some predicates express a result, 'pseudo-passives' are still unacceptable. The 'affectedness' requirement is too weak to rule out some unacceptable sentences.
- (19) *我打傷了。
*Wo da-shang-le.
I hit-injure-Perf
'I was injured by being hit.'

- SOLUTION TO PROBLEM 1: (20), (21), and (22) are permitted by Universal Grammar and should be legitimate in Chinese. All of them can derive the same word order (i.e. 'pseudo-passives') on the surface.

- (20) subject: [DP [V t_{DP}]] (A-movement)
 (21) preverbal object: [e [DP [V t_{DP}]]]
 (22) topic: [DP [e [V t_{DP}]]] (A'-movement)

- SOLUTION TO PROBLEMS 2 AND 3: Some additional, non-syntactic factors influence the acceptability.

3. The role of non-syntactic factors in 'pseudo-passives' in Chinese

- To make 'pseudo-passives' acceptable, it is necessary to avoid ambiguity.
- Strategies to avoid ambiguity are not always syntactic. They may not have anything to do with the core computation system.

Semantic irreversibility

- Speakers should find it easier to accept sentences in which the agent and patient are *irreversible* semantically.

(23) *semantically reversible*

- a. 張三很喜歡李四。
Zhangsan hen xihuan Lisi
Zhangsan very like Lisi
'Zhangsan likes Lisi very much.'
- b. 李四很喜歡張三。
Lisi hen xihuan Zhangsan.
Lisi very like Zhangsan
'Lisi likes Zhangsan very much.'
- c. *李四很喜歡。
*Lisi hen xihuan.
Lisi very like
'Lisi is liked by someone.'

(24) *semantically irreversible*

- a. 張三哭濕了手帕。
Zhangsan ku-shi-le shoupa.
Zhangsan cry-wet-Perf handkerchief
'He cried the handkerchief wet.'
- b. *手帕哭濕了張三。
*Shoupa ku-shi-le Zhangsan.
handkerchief cry-wet-Perf Zhangsan
'*The handkerchief cried Zhangsan wet.'
- c. 手帕哭濕了。
Shoupa ku-shi-le.
handkerchief cry-wet-Perf
'The handkerchief was wet from someone's crying.'

- E.g. Some 'pragmatic' factors help.

(25) 孩子寵得太厲害。
Haizi chong-de tai lihai.
child spoil-Des too severe
'Children are spoiled too much.'

(26) 媽媽寵得太厲害。
Mama chong-de tai lihai.
mother spoil-Des too severe
(i) 'Mom spoils someone too much.'
(ii) ??'As for mom, someone spoils her too much.'

- E.g. Animacy may play a role: inanimate patients are better than animate patients in 'pseudo-passives' in Chinese.

(27) 語言學很喜歡。
Yuyanxue hen xihuan.
linguistics very like
'As for linguistics, someone likes it very much.'

- (28) 張三很喜歡。
 Zhangsan hen xihuan.
 Zhangsan very like
 (i) ‘Zhangsan likes someone very much.’
 (ii) ??‘As for Zhangsan, someone likes him very much.’

Habitual omission of the agent

- It seems that the ‘pseudo-passives’ are acceptable, in which the agent argument tends to be omitted habitually in the discourse. Compare (29) with (30).

- (29) 張三打倒了。
 Zhangsan dadao-le.
 Zhangsan overthrow-Perf
 (i) ‘Zhangsan was overthrown.’
 (ii) *‘Zhangsan overthrew someone.’
- (30) 張三批評了。
 Zhangsan piping-le.
 Zhangsan criticize-Perf
 (i) ‘Zhangsan criticized someone.’
 (ii) (?)‘Zhangsan was criticized.’

- Other predicates that tend to allow to omit the agent argument in the discourse.

- (31) a. 審查 shencha ‘investigate’
 b. 打倒 dadao ‘overthrow’
 c. 隔離 geli ‘investigate someone under isolation’
 d. 勞改 laogai ‘reform through labor’
 e. 勞教 lao jiao ‘educate through labor’

Presupposition

- ‘Presupposition’ may avoid ambiguity in ‘pseudo-passives’ in Chinese, particularly in those semantically reversible sentences.

To presuppose the event by using the experiential marker (and frequency phrases)

- (32) *張三警告了。
 *Zhangsan jinggao-le.
 Zhangsan warn-Perf
 ‘Zhangsan was warned.’
- (33) 張三警告過很多次。
 Zhangsan jinggao-guo henduo ci.
 Zhangsan warn-Exp many time
 ‘Zhangsan has been warned many times.’

To presuppose the event by using a negation

- (34) *張三喜歡。
 *Zhangsan xihuan.
 Zhangsan like
 ‘As for Zhangsan, someone likes him.’

- (35) (?)張三不喜歡。
(?)Zhangsan bu xihuan.
Zhangsan not like
'As for Zhangsan, someone does not like him.'

To presuppose the event in contrastive contexts

- (36) *張三喜歡。
*Zhangsan xihuan.
Zhangsan like
'As for Zhangsan, someone likes him.'
- (37) 張三喜歡, 李四不喜歡。
Zhangsan xihuan, Lisi bu xihuan.
Zhangsan like Lisi not like
'As for Zhangsan, someone likes him. As for Lisi, someone does not like him.'

4. Conclusion

- 'Pseudo-passives' in Chinese may be derived either by A-movement (i.e. the patient argument functioning as the subject and the preverbal object) or by A'-movement (i.e. the patient argument functioning as the topic).
- Based on the legitimate structure, non-syntactic strategies to avoid ambiguity in 'pseudo-passives' in Chinese include:
 - (i) Semantic irreversibility
 - (ii) Habitual omission of the agent
 - (iii) Presupposing the event

Selected references

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