

# THE SO-CALLED CHINESE VV COMPOUNDS—A CONTINUUM BETWEEN LEXICON AND SYNTAX\*

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Whether Chinese VV compounds are lexicalized units or derived syntactically has been a long-time debate among Chinese linguists. Traditional analyses assume that Chinese VV compounds are either in the realm of lexicon or syntactic phenomena but are not both. This study proposes that Chinese VV compounds are not a discrete category. Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 1987, 1991) holds that lexicon and syntax form a continuum. In fact, Chinese VV compounds display a continuum between lexicon and syntax. Some so-called VV compounds are best analyzed as lexicalized items while others are really serial verb constructions (e.g. Paul 2004).

## 1. Lexicon and Syntax

It is common practice for linguists to maintain the distinction between syntax and lexicon. It is not uncommon as well for us to come across the recurrent issue of whether a given construction is to be handled in the domain of syntax or in that of the lexicon. The notion of lexicon as an appendix of the grammar or a list of basic irregularities is not a new one (Langacker 1987). “The lexical component was dedicated for use as a repository for recalcitrant phenomena that were originally considered syntactic but refused to obey certain preconceived ideas about that syntax should be like” (Langacker 1987: 26). Syntax was deemed to be the domain of generality and regularity containing productive rules to produce fully predictable linguistic expressions. Anything falling short of these standards was relegated to the domain of lexicon which is associated with irregularity, idiosyncrasy, and lists (Langacker 1987). However, Langacker (1987) claims that this deeply ingrained and widely accepted concept of syntax has very little empirical foundation. There is no a priori reason for us to believe that grammatical constructions can be divided neatly into groups on the basis of generality. There are no factual grounds that the regular aspects of language structure can be separated neatly in any meaningful way from the irregular ones (Langacker 1987).

Cognitive Grammar (CG) claims that there is no meaningful distinction between grammar and lexicon. Lexicon and syntax form a continuum of symbolic structures. They differ along various parameters, but it is arbitrary to divide them into separate components (Langacker 1987). Langacker (1987) believes that if the lexicon has any content, it refers to fixed expressions, and primarily those that are less than fully compositional. Many expressions that

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meet these conditions display internal grammatical organization and some of them even display obvious syntactic properties. Thus, Cognitive Grammar posits a gradation uniting lexicon and syntax. Any strict dichotomy based on novelty, generality and size of expressions is rejected (Langacker 1987). What seems categorical is really a matter of degree. In the case of Mandarin Chinese VV compounds, I propose that they actually display a continuum between lexicon and syntax.

## 2. Parallel VV Compounds

In the VV compound category, some items are simply fixed lexicalized units. These compounds are mostly parallel VV compounds. Li and Thompson (1981: 68) claim that “[t]he vast majority of parallel verb compounds have developed as the Mandarin language, which once contained a predominance of monosyllabic words, has gained an ever-increasing number of polysyllabic words.” For example, the concept ‘fortunate’ was expressed by the monosyllabic word *xing* ‘fortunate’ at an earlier stage of Mandarin Chinese; however, in Modern Mandarin, this concept is expressed by the parallel compound *xing-fu* ‘fortunate-blessed—fortunate’ (Li & Thompson 1981).

In some of parallel VV compounds two verbs either are synonymous or signal the same type of predicative notions (Li & Thompson, 1981). The constituents of these verb compounds are of the same syntactic category. For example, if the constituents are transitive verbs, the compound is also a transitive verb such as *ti-huan* ‘replace-change—replace’. The following are examples of two basic kinds of parallel verb compound (Li & Thompson 1981):

(i) V1 and V2 are synonyms or near synonyms:

- |     |                  |                             |
|-----|------------------|-----------------------------|
| (1) | <i>gou-mai</i>   | ‘purchase-buy—buy’          |
|     | <i>qing-zhu</i>  | ‘celebrate-bless—celebrate’ |
|     | <i>bang-zhu</i>  | ‘help-assist—help’          |
|     | <i>jian-cha</i>  | ‘check-examine—examine’     |
|     | <i>zhi-liao</i>  | ‘treat-cure—cure’           |
|     | <i>chong-bai</i> | ‘respect-worship—worship’   |

(ii) V1 and V2 are similar in meaning:

- |     |                 |   |
|-----|-----------------|---|
| (2) | <i>piao-liu</i> | ‘drift-flow—drift’                        |
|     | <i>fu-yang</i>  | ‘support-care for—raise’                  |
|     | <i>fang-qi</i>  | ‘loosen-abandon—give up’                  |
|     | <i>ti-huan</i>  | ‘replace-change—replace’                  |
|     | <i>fen-san</i>  | ‘separate-disperse—separate and disperse’ |

In Mandarin Chinese, there are some parallel VV compounds whose meanings are not directly or only partially related to those of their components such as *chu ru* ‘exit enter—(have) differences’, and *li kai* ‘separate-open—leave’. Such compounds abide by Lexical Integrity Principle (Huang 1984) and nothing can intervene between their two constituents. For example, the

perfective aspect marker *le* can not occur between the constituents of these compounds. For these somewhat opaque compounds, their compositional value may not remain a significant factor in their meanings and it is better to list them in the lexicon as fixed units.

### 3. Phase VV Compounds

Different from opaque VV compounds, most VV compounds in Mandarin Chinese are quite transparent semantically and each of their constituents can be used freely as a word on its own. These transparent VV compounds can be classified into three groups, which display various degrees of syntactic properties. The first type is phase compounds in which the second verb constituent indicates the phase of the first verb such as *chi wan* 'eat finish—eat up'. Li and Thompson (1981: 65) claim that in phase VV compounds “the second part denotes something more like the type of action described by the first verb or the degree to which it is carried out than its result”. The following are different types of common phase VV compounds, which are grouped together according to the second constituent expressing the phase of the action in the first verb (Li & Thompson 1981).

(i) wan 'finish', which signals the completion of an action

- (3) xie wan 'write-finish — finish writing'  
 duo wan 'read-finish — finish reading'  
 zuo wan 'do-finish — finish doing'  
 chang wan 'sing-finish — finish singing'  
 nian wan 'study-finish — finish studying'  
 nong wan 'do-finish — finish doing'

(ii) zhao 'be on target':

- (4) zhao zhao 'search-be on target — find'  
 shuo zhao 'say-be on target — say (it) right'  
 cai zhao 'guess-be on target — guess right'  
 yong zhao 'use- be on target — get to use'

(iii) zhu 'hold on'

- (5) zhan zhu 'stand-hold on — stand still'  
 ting zhu 'stop-hold on — stop firmly'  
 zhua zhu 'grab-hold on — grab onto'  
 guan zhu 'control-hold on — control'  
 liu zhu 'keep-hold on — keep or detain'

In phase VV compounds, *bu* 'not' or *de* 'achievable' can be usually inserted between these compounds to indicate that the result can be obtained or cannot be achieved as (6) and (7) show.

- (6) Ta chi de wan yu.  
3SG eat DE finish fish  
'S/he can finish eating the fish.'
- (7) Ta chi bu wan yu.  
3SG eat not finish fish  
'S/he cannot finish eating the fish.'

In phase VV compounds, except *bu* 'not' or *de* 'achievable' nothing else can intervene between the constituents. For example, the perfective aspect marker *le* cannot occur between two constituents of phase compounds as (8) illustrates.

- (8) \* Ta chi le wan yu.  
3SG eat PERF finish fish

#### 4. Resultative VV Compounds

In resultative VV compounds, the second verb indicates the result or end state of the action denoted by the first verb. The commonly used verbs indicating result are the following: *dao* 'fall', *diao* 'drop', *kai* 'open, separate', *dao* 'reach, attain, achieve'. These verbs, when serving as complements, express the end states or achievements of the first verbs. In English, the resulting state is usually indicated by an adjective or prepositional particle—in short, by an atemporal relational predication (Langacker 1987), while in Mandarin Chinese, the resulting state is often indicated by a complement verb which usually immediately follows the first verb.

- (9) Ta tui dao le wo.  
3SG push fall PERF me  
'S/he pushed me down.'
- (10) Zhangsan mo diao le zang dongxi.  
Zhangsan wipe drop PERF dirty thing  
'Zhangsan wiped the dirty things away.'

In (9) the result of pushing is that the things being pushed fall; in (10) the result of wiping the dirty things is that the dirty things drop away.

In Mandarin Chinese, the need for resultative complements is due to the fact that many Mandarin action verbs only convey the meaning of the action phase but not the result phase (e.g. Talmy 2000). Thus, such action verbs often require other verbs as complements to specify realization or fulfillment. The example in (11) is entirely acceptable in Chinese but sounds strange in English:

- (11) Wo sha le zhu (keshi mei sha si).  
I kill perf pig (but neg kill die)  
\* 'I killed the pig but it didn't die.'

- (12) Wo sha si le zhu.  
 I kill die perf pig  
 'I killed the pig.'

The semantics of the examples in (11) and (12) can be explained as follows. In (11), the first clause means that the speaker performed the action with the intention of killing the pig and the second clause in parentheses indicates that the action did not achieve the goal, i.e. success in killing the pig. In contrast, with the confirmational satellite *si* 'die' in (12), the sentence is now an undeniable assertion that the speaker succeeded in killing the pig.

Thus, the English verb *kill* used to gloss the Chinese verb *sha* does not correspond fully in meaning. Therefore, a sentence gloss like 'I killed the pig but the pig didn't die' is really contradictory in English but thus incorrectly represents the non-paradoxical Mandarin Chinese original. The original meaning is that 'I performed the action with the intent to kill, but the pig didn't die.' English verbs such as *kill*, *open*, *kick* are generally construed to refer to a simplex action of the fulfilment type and they specify the attainment of a certain final state (Talmy 1985, 2000; Yin 2008).

In Mandarin Chinese, the concept covered by a typical English verb such as *kill* is divided into two parts: the final outcome, usually conformed by a verb complement and an action performed with the intent to lead to that outcome, which is signalled by the main verb. As a result, the unitary concept of an English verb often has a counterpart in Mandarin Chinese with two-part conceptualization expressed by a verb plus another verb to indicate result.

Therefore, in Mandarin Chinese, unlike in English, some action verbs often do not specify the results by themselves. It is often verbal complements in the V2 position that specify the result-state. One of the most frequent resultative complements is *dao*. With *dao* being used together with action verbs, the results of the action verbs are signaled. For example, when *ting* 'listen' is used with *dao* 'reach, get to', the resulting construction is interpreted as 'hear something' (the result of the action of listening has been achieved).

Another good example to illustrate that Mandarin speakers often add another verbal morpheme to an action-only verb to indicate the result would be *kan* 'look' vs. *kan-jian* 'look-perceive—see'. A verb like *kan* 'direct one's gaze, look' only encodes the meaning of looking, without indicating whether the looking has led to perception or not. When Mandarin speakers want to convey the meaning that not only the action has taken place but also results have been achieved, they need to add resultative verbal complements. Thus, when Mandarin speakers want to express the meaning equivalent to English 'see' they need to use two verbal morphemes: one is *kan* 'look' and the other is *jian* 'perceive'. In the case of English, a different strategy for conveying the result meaning of verbs is used. It does not add resultative complements to action-only verbs but uses entirely new verbs, which include both the action-phase and the result-phase as in *look* vs. *see*.

Like phase VV compounds, resultative VV compounds allow the insertion of *bu* 'not' or *de* 'achievable' between their constituents as (13) and (14) indicate.

- (13) Ta kan de dao feiji.  
 3SG look DE reach, achieve plane  
 ‘S/he can see the plane.’
- (14) Ta kan bu dao feiji.  
 3SG look not reach, achieve plane  
 ‘S/he cannot see the plane.’

Moreover, in some resultative VV compounds, certain adverbs such as *quan* ‘completely’ can insert between the constituents to indicate degrees as (15) shows.

- (15) Beizi da de quan sui le  
 cup hit DE completely break PERF  
 ‘The cup was hit completely broken to pieces’.

#### 4. Directional VV Compounds

Directional verb compounds are another type of semantically transparent VV compound. Motion verbs are very frequently used as V2 to indicate direction to form directional compounds (e.g., Li & Thompson 1981; Zou 1994). This type of compound has the schematic nature [V1<sub>MOTION/ACTION</sub> V2<sub>DIRECTION</sub>], in which the second verb signifies the path or direction of the first verb, as illustrated in (16) and (17). In these two examples, the verbs in the V2 position do not specify motion in their own right, but only the direction or the path of the motion or action suggested by the first verb, the main verb.

- (16) Zhangshan da bu zou lai.  
 Zhangshan big step walk come  
 ‘Zhangshan walked over here in big steps.’
- (17) Lisi xiang tingche chu zou qu.  
 Lisi toward parking place walk go  
 ‘Lisi walked away toward the parking lot.’

In directional compounds, the second verb, typically one of the motion verbs *lai* ‘come’ or *qu* ‘go’, indicates the direction of the first verb. In Mandarin Chinese, certain verbs, typically verbs of displacement, show up as the first verb in directional compounds. As Li and Thompson (1981) have observed, the most obvious type of displacement verb is a verb of motion such as *pao* ‘run’, *zou* ‘walk’, *fei* ‘fly’, *gun* ‘roll’. Another common type of displacement verb is a dislocation verb, a verb that “inherently implies that the direct object undergoes a change of location” (Li & Thompson 1981: 58) such as *ban* ‘remove’, *reng* ‘throw’, *song* ‘send’, *ji* ‘mail’, *ju* ‘lift’, *fang* ‘put’, *duan* ‘carry’. These verbs generally conflate movement with some other activity.

Prototypically, the second verbs in directional compounds are *lai* ‘come’ and *qu* ‘go’, although there is a small set of additional verbs which function as complements of direction. I’ll discuss these in turn.

The verbs *lai* ‘come’ and *qu* ‘go’ are used extensively in Mandarin compounds as complements of direction. They occur after verbs of movement or action to indicate direction ‘towards’ or ‘away from’ a preferred deictic centre (Yip & Don 1998). Typically, these involve events of TRANSPORTATION as in (18) or TRANSACTION (TRANSLOCATION) as in (19):

- (18) a. Ta pao lai le.  
3SG run come PERF  
‘S/he run over here.’
- b. Ta pao qu le.  
3SG run go PERF  
‘S/he run over there.’
- (19) a. Ta na lai le yi ping jiu.  
3SG carry come PERF one CL wine  
‘S/he brought a bottle of wine.’
- b. Ta na qu le yi ping jiu.  
3SG carry go PERF one CL wine  
‘S/he took a bottle of wine with him.’

Besides *lai* and *qu*, there is a small group of Mandarin motion verbs (e.g. *jin* ‘enter’, *chu* ‘exit’, *qi* ‘rise’, *hui* ‘return’, *guo* ‘cross’, *kai* ‘open’) which also participate in directional compounds (Li & Thompson 1981, Lamarre 2007, Lin 2001, Xiao & McEnery 2004). These verbs are mainly used in directional complements to express directional meanings and they are seldom used as independent verbs (Li & Thompson 1981). Two examples are given below:

- (20) Ta zuo jin le shangdian.  
3SG walk enter PERF store.  
‘S/he walked into the store.’
- (21) Ta fang hui le liang ben shu.  
3SG put return PERF two CL book  
‘S/he put two books back.’

In directional VV compounds, it is also possible to insert *bu* ‘not’ or *de* ‘achievable’ between their constituents as (22) and (23) indicate.

- (22) a. Ta na de lai yi xiang shu.  
3SG carry DE come one CL book  
‘S/he can bring a box of books here.’
- b. Ta na bu lai yi xiang shu.  
3SG carry not come one CL book  
‘S/he cannot bring a box of books here.’

- (23) a. Ta ban de qu yi xiang shu.  
 3SG move DE go one CL book  
 'S/he can take a box of books away.'
- b. Ta ban bu qu yi xiang shu.  
 3SG move not go one CL book  
 'S/he cannot take a box of books away.'

In addition to allowing the insertion of *bu* 'not' or *de* 'achievable' between their constituents, this type of compound also permits the perfective aspect marker *le* to intervene between the two constituents as (24) shows.

- (24) a. Ta ba yi ben shu na le lai le.  
 3SG OBJ one CL book carry PERF come PERF  
 'S/he brought a book (here).'
- b. Ta ba yi ben shu na le qu le.  
 3SG OBJ one CL book carry PERF go PERF  
 'S/he took a book away.'

Moreover, in the so-called directional compounds, it is possible for their objects to occur between the first constituent and the directional complement as (25) illustrates.

- (25) a. Ta na le yi ben shu lai.  
 3SG carry PERF one CL book come  
 'S/he brought a book (here).'
- b. Ta na le yi ben shu qu.  
 3SG carry PERF one CL book go  
 'S/he took a book away.'

Directional VV compounds do not lose their internal grammatical structure or cease to instantiate schematic constructions. Their compositional value remains a significant factor in their meanings. Therefore, those compounds could be viewed as being formed by the assembling of their components and could be regarded as highly integrated serial verb constructions.

## 5. Conclusions

The so-called VV compounds in Mandarin Chinese are not a discrete or homogenous category, but display a graded phenomenon. Cognitive Grammar holds that lexicon and syntax form a continuum and Mandarin Chinese VV compounds actually display some properties between lexicon and syntax. Parallel VV compounds are typical lexicalized compounds while phase and resultative VV compounds display characteristics of syntactic compounds though resultative VV compounds display more syntactic properties. Directional

VV compounds show typical syntactic properties and some linguists (e.g. Yin 2001, Paul 2004) argue that they are serial verb constructions.

In terms of Mandarin Chinese VV compounds, the continuum between lexicon and syntax is the following: parallel VV compounds >> phase VV compounds >> resultative VV compounds >> directional VV compounds.

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