

Book Title: East Flows the Great River: Festschrift in Honor of Prof. William S-Y. Wang's 80th Birthday.....

Chapter name: Arguments for a Construction-based Approach to the Analysis of Sino-Tibetan Languages.....

Scheduled publication date: 2013.....

Notes :
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修改者 Edited by	文字修改 完成日期 Text edited on	圖版修改 完成日期 Illustrations edited on	備註 (Remarks)
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Arguments for a Construction-based Approach to the Analysis of Sino-Tibetan Languages*

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Abstract

One of the things that has always impressed me about Professor William Wang is his amazing ability to draw from many different fields and synthesize what he learned from them into a cohesive discussion of some topic. I have always hoped to learn to do that, as my own influences are many and varied. In this paper I will discuss a few of these influences, to show how and why I have come to support a radically construction-based view of language structure, doing away completely with global categories such as form classes and grammatical relations.

* I would like to present this paper to Prof. William S-Y. Wang as an expression of my respect, gratitude, and affection for his teaching, help, and friendship over the years. An earlier version of this paper was presented first at Nanyang Technological University in April 2011, and at the Workshop on Typological Studies of Languages of China held in conjunction with the Association of Linguistic Typology meeting in July, 2011. I'd like to thank all those who gave me useful feedback after those presentations, in particular K. K. Luke.

1. My Personal Path to a Construction-Based Approach

In the early 1980s, having just returned from several years in China, I was searching for a grammatical framework that would help me understand how the Chinese language works. I studied all the major theories of that period, such as Relational Grammar (RG), Government and Binding (GB), Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG), Generalized Phrase Structure Grammar (GPSG), and Categorical Grammar (CG). One major point about these theories was that all assumed that “subject” is a global category, and is manifested in all languages (i.e., is universal), and yet analyses of natural Mandarin discourse and computational implementations of Chinese structures always seemed to point to problems with “subject” in Chinese.

Discussions of “subject” at that time saw “subject” as a single “thing” (e.g., Keenan 1976 and other papers from Li 1976). Li and Thompson’s (1976, 1981) approach to Chinese was helpful but not the whole picture.

In the late 1980s I found Role and Reference Grammar (RRG; Foley and Van Valin 1984), which did not assume “subject” as a universal, or even as a global category within a single language (see also Van Valin and LaPolla 1997, Chap. 6; Dryer 1997). It saw what we thought of as “subject” not as a single “thing” or category, but as a set of pivot constructions, that is, constructions where one NP is singled out for special prominence and treatment, and there is a restricted neutralization of semantic roles in that pivot position. It is therefore not a single category, and languages are seen to differ in terms of which constructions, if any, had grammaticalised pivots in the language.

An important point about this construction-based approach is that the meaning of the construction is not just the sum of the parts, but forces a particular interpretation (i.e., the construction itself has a meaning). For example, the “Cross-clause co-reference constraint” in English forces a particular co-reference interpretation on the overall construction, as in (1), which must mean the man burst.

- (1) The man_i dropped the melon and Ø_i burst. (Comrie 1988, 191)

In languages where this type of pivot has not grammaticalised (including languages said to have “subject”, such as Italian), common sense would lead to the interpretation that the melon burst. An example of such a language is Rawang (Tibeto-Burman, Kachin State, Myanmar), where the following structure could be understood as any of the three translations given:¹

- (2) əp^hūŋí ədɯsəŋ ədip bua nu ŋua:ʔmì
əp^hūŋ-í ədɯ-səŋ ədip bu-a nu Ø ŋu-ap-ì
Apung-AGT Adeu-LOC hit PFV-TR.PST PS cry-TMdys-INTR.PST
(i) ‘Apung hit Adeu and (Apung) cried’ or
(ii) ‘Apung hit Adeu and (Adeu) cried’, or
(iii) ‘Apung hit Adeu and (someone else) cried’

1. Abbreviations used in this paper: AGT agent marker; CL classifier; CSM change of state marker; INTR. PST intransitive past tense marker; LOC locative marker; NEG negative marker; PFV perfective marker; PS predicate sequencer; TR.PST transitive past tense marker.

At that time I also read Dwight Bolinger and others arguing that much of language use involves recall of complete forms, including sentences, from memory rather than generation of totally new forms, as these remembered forms are what become fixed syntactic patterns (constructional schemata). Bolinger (1961, 1976) argued for something like constructions, what he called ‘idioms’, and combinations of constructions, what he called ‘syntactic blends’ to form new syntactic structures, and pointed out ‘the permeation of the entire grammatical structure by threads of idiom’ (1961, 366). (See also Pawley 1985; Grace 1987; Langacker 1987; Matisoff 1979; Nunberg, Sag, and Wasow 1994; and Fillmore (e.g., 1982) on Frame Semantics.)

In 1984–85, when I took the Syntax course at UC Berkeley, it was co-taught by Charles Fillmore and Paul Kay, and they began developing Construction Grammar as the material for the course. This led to Fillmore, Kay and O’Connor’s 1988 paper on the idiom *let alone* and other work on constructions. Cognitive Grammar (e.g., Langacker 1987) was also developing at the time. There was (and is) a close relationship between Construction Grammar and Cognitive Grammar, and there was much discussion between all of these more functionally oriented approaches (Construction Grammar, RRG, Cognitive Linguistics, and what came to be the “Santa Barbara approach”, which began with Wallace Chafe at UC Berkeley in the late 1970s and early 1980’s before he moved to UC Santa Barbara).

When I looked at Chinese from the RRG construction-based perspective of syntactic relations, I found that none of the relevant constructions manifested a syntactic pivot, so I talked about Chinese as not having “subject” or “direct object” (e.g., LaPolla 1988a, 1988b, 1990, 1993; for alternative explanations for word order patterns, see LaPolla 1995, 2009a; LaPolla and Poa 2005, 2006).

Interest in grammaticalization theory took off with the publication in 1984 of Heine and Reh’s book *Grammaticalization and Reanalysis in African Languages* and Lehmann’s 1982 book and 1985 article on grammaticalization. This led to Elizabeth Traugott and Paul Hopper teaching a class on grammaticalization as part of the 1987 LSA Institute (the course notes became Hopper and Traugott, 1993). Having taken that class as well as an earlier class at UC Berkeley on diachronic syntax, I moved more into looking at that aspect of the languages I was interested in.

Working with natural language led me to begin questioning the componential view of language (and linguistic theory). The componential view assumes that there are three components: the phonological component, the syntactic component, and the semantic component. The lexicon crosses all three, but the components must be linked by “linking”, “interface”, or “realization” rules. All non-constructional grammars are basically variants of the componential model. The constructionist approach appealed to me because it avoids the unnaturalness of the componential model, as the construction includes all these aspects at the same time.

Sperber and Wilson’s *Relevance* was published in 1986, and it made a big splash, and greatly influenced my way of thinking about communication, allowing me to tie together the different strands of research I was doing: historical morphosyntax (grammaticalization), pragmatics, and morphosyntactic typology. The breakthrough came from my work on syntactic relations in Chinese. Once in 1996, after presenting my ideas about Chinese lacking “subject” in a seminar at City University of Hong Kong, I was told that while my data and analysis were correct, the idea that Chinese didn’t have a “subject” could not be accepted. I then said

“What if instead I said that Chinese doesn’t constrain the interpretation of the roles of referents in discourse the way English does?” They said, “That would be fine.” So the direction of my research since then has been talking about grammatical structures as constraining the interpretation in particular ways, e.g., LaPolla and Poa 2002, LaPolla 2003, 2005a. (LaPolla 2006a and 2006b discuss this view specifically relative to grammatical relations, and LaPolla 2005b, 2009b are applications to language learning and language contact, respectively.)

This view also entails that each language is unique, and each structure which conventionalizes in a language does so in a particular type of situation, so each construction is unique.

In the late 1990s I also became familiar with Michael Halliday’s work (esp. 1994), which is the most holistic of all approaches to linguistics, further confirming in my mind the problems of the componential and “interfaces” model. His work also reflects an understanding of constructions, where the whole is more than the sum of the parts.

In the 2000s I got involved in debates about form classes in Chinese and Tagalog (e.g., LaPolla 2008, 2010). I argued against universal form classes cross-linguistically and against global classes within a single language, and also argued (LaPolla and Poa 2006) against the use of assumed universal categories (e.g., SOV) in discussions of word order. When publishing this work, comments from reviewers of my publications often involved reference to Croft’s work, generally mentioning that we were saying similar things, so I made myself familiar with his work, in print and in person during his visit to the RCLT in 2010. Later in 2010 I also attended his ten-lecture workshop as part of the 8th China International Forum on Cognitive Linguistics in Beijing. From that I came to be convinced in his view that we can extend the same construction-based approach we had in dealing with syntactic relations to other grammatical categories and phenomena, that is, that they can be defined purely in terms of constructions, and so there are no global categories. Most recently I have tried to apply this view to the question of transitivity (LaPolla, Kratochvil and Coupe 2011).

2. The Distributional Method vs. the Constructionist Approach

The standard methodology in linguistics for identifying linguistic categories such as form classes is the distributional method. In this method, one identifies certain constructions as criterial for determining the membership of a word or structure in a particular category. So, for example, a noun is defined structurally as a word that can appear as the head of a noun phrase. The categories so defined, such as word classes, are then seen as the building blocks of larger syntactic structures.

One problem with this is that not all constructions point to the same categories. There is in fact tremendous diversity within each language and across languages. The Structuralists, who developed the distributional method for identifying linguistic categories, for example Bloomfield (1933) and Harris (1946), acknowledged that following the distributional method rigorously would lead to the creation of many small classes and membership of the same word in different classes (Bloomfield’s “class cleavage”). They argued that the way to deal with this was to

consider particular constructions as more important than others in determining class membership and choose those as the ones they thought defined the class best, while ignoring the others. Croft (2001, to appear) calls such a move “methodological opportunism”. Methodological opportunism allows one to invoke any grammatical construction (context) to justify a particular category or distinction. This allows one to assume a universal syntactic element no matter what the diversity of grammatical behavior is.

The facts of languages that lead to the need to resort to methodological opportunism show there is a conflict between the distributional method and the building block model. There is also the problem that we define the categories on the basis of the constructions, yet define the constructions based on the categories defined by the constructions. For example, a noun is defined as a word that can appear as the head of a noun phrase, but a noun phrase is defined as a construction that has a noun as its head. This is completely circular. So we need to either give up our commitment to the distributional method, or we need to give up the idea of the building block model of grammar and just take the constructions as basic (see Croft, to appear).

In construction-based approaches, grammatical knowledge is represented as constructions: pairings of form and meaning/function. The phonological, syntactic, and semantic properties are all within the construction, not different components. In constructions there are only part-whole roles.² Constructions can be complex or atomic (single words or morphemes), schematic or substantive (or anything in between), and they can be organized into taxonomic hierarchies. There are no syntactic categories that are independent of the constructions, only the whole-part roles within the individual constructions. The constructions are also language-specific; there are no universal construction types.

As argued in LaPolla and Poa 2002 and LaPolla 2003, in communication, there is no coding or decoding, just ostension by the communicator and (abductive) inference by the addressee to create a context of interpretation in which the communicator’s ostensive act can be seen to make sense (be relevant to some purpose). The role of language (as well as gestures and other ostensive acts) is to constrain the interpretation of the communicative intention of the communicator by the addressee. All language structure is the conventionalization of repeated patterns of discourse (cf. Hopper 1987, 1988), that is, repeated patterns of constraining the interpretation in a particular way. Constructions are conventionalized patterns of experience which constrain the interpretation in a particular way.

3. Constructions in Chinese grammar

Chinese grammar has traditionally been talked about and taught as constructions, such as the *bǎ* construction, the *bei* construction, and the *shì* . . . *de* construction. The *bǎ* construction was given

2. This is the view of Radical Construction Grammar (Croft 2001). Some other construction-based approaches also allow for part-part relations within constructions, but as Croft (2001) has shown, these are not necessary and in fact problematic.

by Thompson (1973) as <NP1 *bǎ* NP2 V1 (V2) (NP3)>. The example in (3) is a natural example that fits this template.

- (3) 他們計劃明年把共祭活動推廣到陵園和社區。
[Tāmen] jìhua míngnián
3pl plan next.year
NP1

bǎ [gongjì huódòng] tuīguǎng dao [língyuan hé sheqū]
BA public.obervance activity spread arrive cemetery and community
bǎ NP2 V1 V2 NP3
'Next year they plan to spread the public observance activities to the cemeteries and communities.'
(<http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2011-04-04/100722235984.shtml>)

In many works on the *bǎ* construction, *bǎ* is said to be followed by an NP and said to mark the “direct object” of V1 (e.g., Sun and Givon 1985).

Although such constructions were recognized, attempts were still made to define word classes according to the building blocks model using the distributional method. But in Chinese it is notoriously difficult to define word classes. Y. R. Chao (1968) devoted more than 300 pages of his grammar to defining word classes (1968, 498–815), aside from another whole chapter trying to define “word” itself in Chinese, yet was not able to fit words into clear neat categories. Chao, as with the other Structuralists, recognised the problem of overlapping classes:

In Chinese 怪 *guay* is an adjective in 可是這很怪 *Keesh jeh heen guay* ‘But this is odd’, an adverb in 怪難看的 *guay nankann de* ‘rather ugly’, and a transitive verb in 別怪我! *Bye guay woo!* ‘Don’t find me odd—don’t blame me!’... (1968, 498)

By saying this, Chao is in effect saying that there is no global category for 怪 *guay* (Pinyin *guai*); the word gets its function (form class, meaning) from the construction it occurs in. This view was much earlier espoused by Lí Jīnxī 黎錦熙 (1924, 24): “凡詞，依句辯品，離句無品” ‘The class of a word depends on the sentence (it appears in), outside of a sentence it has no class’ and “由職顯類” ‘through (its) function (its) class becomes manifest’ (1953, 10–11). Chao claimed to disagree with this view (1968, 498), but in effect argued for the same position in the quote above. Li Jinxi argued for a sentence-based approach to Chinese grammar (“Sentence-based grammar” “句本位的文法”), which might be seem as an early attempt at a construction-based approach, as “sentence” (句) didn’t have a clear definition at that time and could refer to different types of structures.³

3. K. K. Luke (2006) has argued that many of the problems in the analysis of Chinese have been because of the lack of clear definitions for phrase, clause and sentence. Refining Li Jinxi’s “sentence-based” approach, he argues for a “clause-based” approach to Chinese grammar.

Another major problem in Chinese grammar is the question of syntactic relations. Basically three approaches have developed to how to characterise clause structure in Chinese:

Topic-Comment (Y. R. Chao, 1968 / Lu Shuxiang, 1979 / LaPolla, 2009a)

Topic-prominent (Li and Thompson, 1976, 1981)

Subject-Predicate (most of the formalist camp)

For us to identify global form classes in Chinese and also syntactic relations using the distributional method, we would need to use key constructions as “tests” or “criteria” for membership in the category or for particular syntactic relations.

Let us start with the *bǎ* construction. As mentioned above, *bǎ* is said to be followed by an NP and said to mark the “direct object” (e.g., Sun and Givon 1985). Normally the initial NP is said to be the “subject”, understood as the agent. Let’s look at some examples (4a–d) from Ma 1987, 428–29).

(4) a. 蘿蔔把刀切鈍了。

Luobo *bǎ* dāo qiē dùn le.
radish BA knife cut dull CSM
‘The radish made the knife dull (when I/you/he cut it).’

b. 他把筆寫禿了。

Tā *bǎ* bǐ xiě tū le.
3sg BA pencil write blunt CSM
‘He made the pencil blunt from writing with it.’

c. 這包衣裳把我洗累了。

Zhe *bǎo* yīshang *bǎ* wǒ xǐ lèi le.
this package clothes BA 1sg wash tired CSM
‘Washing this pack of clothes has made me tired.’

d. 這些事把頭髮愁白了。

Zhe xiē shì *bǎ* tóufa chóu bái le.
this CL affair BA hair worry white CSM
‘Worrying about these affairs has made (my/yours/his/her) hair turn white.’

In (4a) the knife is an instrument, not the patient of ‘cut’, so it is difficult to say it is the direct object of the main predicate, ‘cut’, and the radish is certainly not the agent of ‘cut’ or ‘dull’. In (4b) ‘he’ can be seen as an agent, but the pencil is an instrument, not the patient of ‘write’. In (4c) the clothes are the patient of ‘wash’, not the agent of ‘wash’, and in fact the agent of ‘wash’ appears after *bǎ*. In (4d) ‘these affairs’ is not the agent of ‘worry’, and the hair is not any kind of semantic argument of ‘worry’.

From these examples we can see that there is no way we could say that *bǎ* is marking a particular syntactic function. Let us now look at what sorts of elements can appear after *bǎ* in the construction. Consider the examples in (5):

- (5) a. 不要把吃飯變成一場戰爭。
bu yao *bǎ* [chī fàn] bian cheng yī-chǎng zhanzhēng
NEG want BA eat rice change become one-CL war
'Don't make eating into a war.'
(<http://renyifei.172baby.com/posts/137278.html>)
- b. 為什麼有些人把吃飯睡覺當成最重要的？
weishenme yǒu xiē rén *bǎ* [chī fàn shuìjiào]
why EXIST CL people BA eat rice sleep
dāng chéng zūi zhòngyào de
take.as become most important NOM
'Why do some people take eating and sleeping as the most important (things)?'
(<http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/228560628.html>)
- c. 為什麼把吃飯各自付款稱為AA？
wèishénme *bǎ* [chī fàn gèzì fùkuān] cheng wei AA
why BA eat rice each pay call be AA
'Why is eating and each person paying for themselves called "AA"?'
(<http://iask.sina.com.cn/b/17752493.html>)

In (5a) a “verb phrase” appears in the post-*bǎ* slot, in 8.5(b) two “verb phrases” appear in the post-*bǎ* slot, and in (5c) a whole clause appears in the post-*bǎ* slot.

Trying to use the *bǎ* construction to define form classes or grammatical relations, then, will not work. What we can do is say we have a construction that marks a secondary topic that is affected in some way by an action.

Another construction that has been talked about for many years in discussions of form classes in Chinese is what has come to be known as the “這本書的出版 *zhe běn shū de chūbǎn* construction” since this phrase was first used by Zhu Dexi, Lu Jiawen and Ma Zhen in a famous 1961 article. Zhu et al. argued that even though in this construction *chūbǎn* has a referring function, and is the head of a noun phrase, *chūbǎn* is still a verb. My question is, Why is it necessary to posit global categories such as noun and verb, and assign words to particular classes based on their appearance in certain constructions, when in fact they can appear in other constructions used to define other classes? There is also the problem of circularity mentioned above. Why not just take the constructions as basic and define the functions (referential, modifying, or predicative) of particular words based on those constructions?

Consider the following natural examples. In the construction in (6a), *bōchū* has a predicative function, but in the construction in (6b), *bōchū* has a referring function:

- (6) a. CNN循環播出中國國家形像宣傳片。
 CNN xunhuan **bōchū** Zhōngguó guójiā xíngxiàng xuānchuánpiàn
 CNN circulate **broadcast** China country image propaganda.film
 ‘CNN repeatedly broadcast a propaganda film promoting China’s national image.’
 (<http://www.sina.com.cn/> 2011年01月19日07:49 新浪播客)
- b. 有沒有看到那天的播出？
 Yǒu mei yǒu kan dào nèi tiān de **bōchū**?
 exist NEG exist watch arrive that day ASSOC **broadcast**
 ‘Did (you) see the broadcast of that day?’
 (《明日之星》(電視節目) 2011.06.11)

Yet another construction to consider is the basic clause construction, which is a Topic-Comment construction. In (7a) *tóngzhuō chīfàn* appears in the comment position, and has a predicative function, but in (7b) the same phrase appears in the topic position and has a referring function:

- (7) a. 書記和我們同桌吃飯。
 Shūjì hé wǒmen tóng zhuō chī fàn
 secretary and 1pl.excl same table eat rice
 ‘(The Party) secretary ate at the same table as us.’
 (http://d.wanfangdata.com.cn/periodical_ddkg201101023.aspx accessed 2011.07.10)
- b. 同桌吃飯也就具有了表演的性質。
 Tóng zhuō chī fàn yě jùyǒu le biǎoyǎn de xìngzhì
 same table eat rice also possess PFV perform ASSOC nature
 ‘Eating at the same table also has the nature of a performance.’
 (<http://baike.baidu.com/view/13977.htm> accessed 2011.07.10)

In (8) we have an example with the word *chī* ‘eat’ used alone in topic position. In this position of this construction it can only have a referring function.

- (8) 在中國及世界的許多國家，吃是一種文化。
 Zài Zhōngguó jí shìjiè de xǔduō guójiā **chī** shī yī zhǒng wénhuà.
 eat COP one kind culture
 ‘In China and many countries of the world, eating is a kind of culture’
 (<http://baike.baidu.com/view/13977.htm> accessed 2011.07.10)

In (9) and (10) we have the expressions *shīrén* ‘poet’ and *dàxuéshēng* ‘university student’ used predicatively. They have this predicative function because they occur in the predicative slot (comment) of the construction.

(9) 這些人都很詩人。

Zhèxiē rén hěn shīrén.

this CL person very poet

‘These people are very (much like) poet(s).’

(<http://hi.baidu.com/xmfine/blog/item/8c8b804404b6cb84b2b7dcbb.html>)

(10) 都大學生了還這麼幼稚？

Dōu dàxuéshēng le hái zhème yòuzhi?

all university.student CSM still this.much naïve

‘(You) are already a university student, (but) still so naïve?’

(<http://video.baomihua.com/goodadv/12901470?P3P31>)

We can see from all these examples that these constructions cannot be used for determining form classes. The same is true of all other constructions.

4. Conclusions

There is no need for abstract global categories in individual languages or cross-linguistically. Taking the constructions as basic and avoiding methodological opportunism makes for much more empirically grounded linguistics, and allows us to be open to and appreciate the diversity of structures found in languages.

When we write grammars of individual languages using a construction-based approach, there is no need for chapters on supposed global grammatical categories. Instead we present the constructions used for propositional acts: referring expressions, predicative expressions, attributive expressions, and complex propositional constructions.

In doing language comparison from a construction-based approach, just the same we should not assume any global or universal grammatical categories. In description and comparison we should work inductively, looking to see what constructions are manifested in the languages, approaching the description from the point of view of the following questions:

- Is the interpretation of a particular functional domain constrained?
- If so, to what extent?
- If so, what form does the construction take?

In this way we will have descriptions and comparisons that are empirically based and more fully reflect the diversity of structures found in the languages of the world.

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