

On the constructionalization of [NP₁+Vi+le (了)+NP₂] in Mandarin Chinese

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In Mandarin Chinese, there exists a type of non-canonical constructions in the configuration of [NP₁+ Vi + NP₂], where the verbs are usually used intransitively, such as 来(lái ‘come’), 跑(pǎo ‘run’), 走(zǒu ‘walk’), 死(sǐ ‘die’), etc. Consider the examples below:

- (1) 刚 吃了 一半, 舅父 来了 客人。
Gāng chī-le yībàn jiùfù lái-le kèrén
Just eat-ASP one half uncle come-ASP guest
‘Just in the middle of dinner, my uncle has a guest/guests coming.’
- (2) 有的人 走了 一身 汗。
Yǒuxiē rén zǒu-le yī shēn hàn
some people walk-ASP one body sweat
‘Some people sweated all over their bodies because of walking.’
- (3) 他 从小 死了 父亲。
Tā cóngxiǎo sǐ-le fùqīn
He since small die-ASP father
‘His father died when he was young.’
- (4) 监狱 跑了 几个 死刑犯。
Jiānyù pǎo-le jǐgè sǐxíngfàn
prison run-ASP several prisoners under sentence of death
‘Several prisoners under sentence of death escaped from the prison.’

Take (1) and (3) for example. Interpretively, (1) could be construed as “my uncle’s guest is coming” and (3) means “his father died”. In these cases, 客人(kèrén ‘guest’) and 父亲(fùqīn ‘father’), the agents of the actions expressed by the respective verb, are realized as the syntactic argument of the whole construction, namely the object of the construction, but not the verb. Additionally, this kind of configuration express a distinctively inferred meaning. For instance, (1)-(2) have the sense of ‘obtain/acquire something’, whereas (3)-(4) have the sense of ‘lose someone or something’. That is to say, the [NP₁+ Vi + NP₂] construction manifests a high degree of hidden complexity in the sense that its formation is possibly driven by the principle of economy (Zipf 1949) and its interpretation would involve pragmatic inferences (Bisang 2009, 2014, 2015).

In this paper, we will diachronically investigate the token frequency and type frequency of these constructions at issue from the perspective of construction grammar and constructionalization, with a particular focus on three crucial factors, namely schematicity, productivity and compositionality (cf. Goldberg 1995, 2006; Traugott & Trousdale 2013). Based on our statistics, the construction illustrated above has been found to be highly productive in Mandarin Chinese, and there are various synchronic semantic changes of preverbal and postverbal NPs in the usages as well (cf. Zuo 2007).

Based on our study, it has thus been proposed that (1) from the constructional perspective, the [NP₁+Vi+ NP₂] expressions are characterized by high productivity, high schematicity and low compositionality; (2) From an interpretive perspective, the [NP₁+Vi+ NP₂] construction manifests a high

degree of hidden complexity; (3) from a diachronic evolutionary perspective, the non-canonical structure have gone through the process of grammatical constructionalization.

Keywords: intransitive verbs; inheritance; productivity; constructionalization; hidden complexity

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