snippets

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Change of state and change of location verbs in Chinese

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There are two classes of verbs that involve change: change of state verbs, e.g. *break*, *open*, and change of location verbs, e.g. *come*, *enter, put.* The two classes of verbs are similar in a number of aspects. Both are telic, indicating change; when used intransitively, both are unaccusative. In the event structure representation of verb meaning (e.g. Dowty 1991, Pinker 1989, Pustejovsky 1991, Rappaport Hovav & Levin 1998, Tenny 1994, Van Valin & LaPolla 1997), change of state of verbs have a complex structure, as in (1a), which can be detransitivized, as in (1b).

(1) a. [x ACT] CAUSE [y BECOME <STATE>]
b. y BECOME <STATE>

Similarly, transitive change of location verbs also have a causative, complex structure, as in (2a), which can also undergo detransitivization, as in (2b):

(2) a. [x ACT] CAUSE [y BECOME AT <PLACE>]
b. y BECOME AT <PLACE>

In the event structure approach to verb meaning, it is predicted that verbs of change of location would participate in the alternation between (2a) and (2b), in the same way change of state verbs participate in the alternation between (1a) and (1b). Is this prediction supported empirically?

I would like to suggest that support can be found in Mandarin Chinese, although (2b) occurs in inversion only. Consider (3-4):

(3) a. Xiaoming kai -le men
Xiaoming open -PERF door
'Xiaoming opened the door.'

b. Men kai -le
door open -PERF
'The door opened.'

c. Houyuan kai -le yige men
back-yard open -PERF one-CL door
'In the back yard opened a door.'

(4) a. Xiaoming fang -le yifen zuoye zai lanzili
Xiaoming put -PERF one-CL assignment at basket-in
'Xiaoming put an assignment in the basket.'

b. Zuoye fang zai lanzili
assignment put at basket-in
'The assignment was put in the basket.'

    c. Lanzili   fang -le   yifen   zuoye
       basket-in put   -PERF one-CL assignment
       'In the basket is an assignment.' (Lit: 'In the basket was put an assignment')

The (a) sentences are causative, the (b) sentences could be causative (with an unexpressed subject) or intransitive, and the (c) sentences are intransitive. Among (3b-c) and (4b-c), it can be shown that (4b) is still agentive, while the other three have undergone detransitivization. The reasoning is as follows. I take detransitivization to mean that the agent is no longer part of the event structure. One way to tell if a verb is used agentively is to determine its compatibility with adverbial modifiers that imply agentivity, e.g. *xiaoxinde* 'carefully'. If a sentence is acceptable with such adverbs, we can assume that the verb retains agentivity in its meaning. (5a) shows that (3b) is not compatible with *xiaoxinde* 'carefully', whereas (5b) shows that (4b) is:

(5) a.*Men   xiaoxinde   kai -le
        Door   carefully   open -PERF
        '*The door opened carefully.'

    b. Zuoye   xiaoxinde   fang   zai   lanzili
        assignment carefully   put   at   basket-in
        'The assignment was put in the basket carefully.'

In contrast, the (c) sentences in (3-4) do not take an agent-oriented adverb, as in (6):

(6) a. *Houyuan xiaoxinde kai   -le   yige   men
        back-yard carefully open -PERF one-CL door
        'In the backyard was opened a door carefully.'

    b. *Lanzili   xiaoxinde   fang   -le   yifen   zuoye
        basket-in carefully   put   -PERF one-CL assignment
        'In the basket was put an assignment carefully.'

This suggests that detransitivization has taken place in (3b), (3c) and (4c), and the verb no longer has agentivity as part of its meaning; however, it has not taken place in (4b).

     It thus seems that the alternation between (2a) and (2b) can only be demonstrated with locative inversion, while the alternation between (1a) and (1b) does not require inversion. Nonetheless, the above examples show that in Mandarin both change of state and change of location verbs participate in the causative-intransitive alternation.

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