

A Comparison between Bèi Passives and Yóu Passives in Mandarin Chinese

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Abstract : This study compares the syntax and semantics of two kinds of passives in Mandarin Chinese: bèi passives and yóu passives. To express a Chinese equivalent for 'The thief was taken away by the police,' either bèi or yóu can be used, as in Xiǎotōu bèi/yóu jǐngchá dàizǒu le. It is shown in this study that bèi passives and yóu passives differ semantically and syntactically. The semantic observations are based on the theta theory, dealing with thematic roles. On the other hand, the syntactic analysis draws heavily upon the generative grammar, looking into thematic structures. The findings of this study are as follows. First, the core semantics of bèi passives is centered on the Patient NP in the subject position. This Patient NP is essentially an Affectee, undergoing the outcome or consequence brought up by the action represented by the predicate. This may explain why in the sentence Wǒde huà bèi/*yóu tā niǔqū le 'My words have been twisted by him/her,' only bèi is allowed. This is because the subject NP wǒde huà 'my words' suffers a negative consequence. Yóu passives, in contrast, place the semantic focus on the post-yóu NP, which is not an Affectee though. Instead, it plays a role which has to take certain responsibility without being affected in a way like an Affectee. For example, in the sentence Zhèbù diànyǐng yóu/*bèi tā dǎnrèn dǎoyǎn 'This film is directed by him/her,' only the use of yóu is possible because the post-yóu NP tā 's/he' refers to someone in charge, who is not an Affectee, nor is the sentence-initial NP zhèbù diànyǐng 'this film'. When it comes to the second finding, the syntactic structures of bèi passives and yóu passives differ in that the former involve a two-place predicate while the latter a three-place predicate. The passive morpheme bèi in a case like Xiǎotōu bèi jǐngchá dàizǒu le 'The thief was taken away by the police' has been argued by some Chinese syntacticians to be a two-place predicate which selects an Experiencer subject and an Event complement. Under this analysis, the initial NP xiǎotōu 'the thief' in the above example is a base-generated subject. This study, however, proposes that yóu passives fall into a three-place unergative structure. In the sentence Xiǎotōu yóu jǐngchá dàizǒu le 'The thief was taken away by the police,' the initial NP xiǎotōu 'the thief' is a topic which serves as a Patient taken by the verb dàizǒu 'take away.' The subject of the sentence is assumed to be an Agent, which is in a null form and may find its reference from the discourse or world knowledge. Regarding the post-yóu NP jǐngchá 'the police,' its status is dual. On the one hand, it is a Patient introduced by the light verb yóu; on the other, it is an Agent assigned by the verb dàizǒu 'take away.' It is concluded that the findings in this study contribute to better understanding of what makes the distinction between the two kinds of Chinese passives.

Keywords : affectee, passive, patient, unergative

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