

IDENTICAL MORPHOSYNTACTIC TREATMENT OF AGENTS AND PATIENTS  
IN SINITIC LANGUAGES

– Abstract –  
(Oral Presentation)

In this paper, I examine the intriguing problem of Sinitic languages and dialects which make use of the same exponent to mark either the agent or the object NP in what appear to be formally identical structures. Although there has been little mainstream research on this marking paradox to date, the phenomenon appears to be sufficiently well-attested for Xiang, Mandarin and Gan dialects spoken in Hunan province, China, according to the descriptions in Wu Yunji (1999, 2005: chapter 6) but also for Mandarin and Jin dialects spoken in Jiangsu, Hubei and Shanxi provinces (Huang 1996, Zhan 1991).

Preliminary findings drawn from a database of more than 650 Chinese dialects indicate that it could involve principally verbs of either giving or taking as the source of these Janus-faced exponents. Furthermore, the branches of Sinitic concerned are mainly located in the central transitional zone of China, as opposed to either the Mandarin (or Northern) group or Southern Sinitic languages such as Yue and Min.

A doublet of examples showing this alliance is provided below from Changning (Gan-Hakka; Hunan) where the passive-cum-disposal marker has its source in the verb *te*<sup>33</sup> 得 = ‘give’ or ‘gain’ (Wu Qizhu 1998: 245).

(1) PASSIVE CONSTRUCTION: NP<sub>1(agent)</sub> – [*Marker*<sub><give/take></sub> – NP<sub>2(patient)</sub>] – Verb<sub>transitive</sub>  
 猪崽啲                      得      猪婆              踩      死      了。  
*tɕy*<sup>45</sup> *tsæ*<sup>44</sup> *tɕi*<sup>44</sup>              *te*<sup>33</sup>              *tɕy*<sup>44</sup> *p*<sup>h</sup>*o*<sup>11</sup>              *ts*<sup>h</sup>*e*<sup>44</sup>      *sɿ*<sup>44</sup>      *tɔ*  
 piglet<sub>PATIENT</sub>                      PASS      sow<sub>AGENT</sub>              step:on die      ASP  
 ‘The piglet was stamped to death by the sow.’

(2) OBJECT-MARKING DISPOSAL CONSTRUCTION:  
 NP<sub>1(patient)</sub> [*Marker*<sub><give/take></sub> – NP<sub>2(agent)</sub>] – Verb<sub>transitive</sub>  
 爷爷                      得      佬佬              打      啲      一餐      饱      个。  
*ia*<sup>11</sup> *ia*<sup>11</sup>                      *te*<sup>33</sup>              *lɔ*<sup>44</sup> *lɔ*<sup>44</sup>                      *ta*<sup>44</sup>              *ta*              *i*<sup>33</sup> *ts*<sup>h</sup> *a*<sup>45</sup> *po*<sup>44</sup>              *ke*  
 father<sub>AGENT</sub>                      OM              younger:brother<sub>PATIENT</sub>                      beat      ASP      one:CL      enough      SP  
 ‘(My) father gave my younger brother a big slap.’

Hence, the following paradox arises: different, if not diametrically opposed, thematic roles are given the same morphosyntactic treatment in structures which are identical in their basic form. This paper sets out to provide a typological survey of languages and dialects exhibiting this phenomenon in the Sinitic taxon, in order to test for the existence of a grammaticalization area and to consider how this ambiguity evolved.

(Abbreviations: ASP aspect marker, CL classifier, OM direct object marker, PASS marker of the agent in the passive, SP sentence-final discourse marker)

*References:*

- Huang, Borong. 黄伯荣 1996. *Hanyu Fangyan Yufa Leibian* 漢語方言語法類編.  
[Concordance of Chinese Dialect Grammar] Qingdao: Qingdao Chubanshe.
- Wu, Qizhu. 1998. *Changning Fangyan Yanjiu* 常寧方言研究[A study of the  
Changning dialect]. Changsha: Hunan Jiaoyu Chubanshe.
- Wu, Yunji. 1999. An etymological study of disposal and passive markers in Hunan  
dialects. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* 27 (2): 90–123.
- Wu, Yunji. 2005. *A synchronic and diachronic study of the grammar of the Chinese  
Xiang dialects*. (Trends in Linguistics 162). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Zhan Bohui et al. 詹伯慧等. 1991. 《汉语方言及方言调查》 (*Chinese dialects and  
dialect research*) , 武汉：湖北教育出版社。

(N.B. two papers by author deleted, as well as details on database for reasons of anonymity)