

Surface Variations in Chinese and Their Semantic Correlates*

Chauncey C. Chu

University of Florida

1. INTRODUCTION

In several recent talks given at the University of Florida, John R. Ross, the linguist who was responsible for the fashionable term 'category squish' in the early 70's, examined certain types of syntactic variation in English to determine what underlying principles might govern such alternations. One of his findings was that the shorter version usually, though not always, possesses the property of immediacy (whether physical in terms of time and space or conceptual in terms of abstract notions). The examples that he gave to illustrate the underlying principle are in (1) and (2).

(1) a. I made the horse gallop.

b. I galloped the horse.

(2) a. Mike is arranging for our bookings.

b. Mike is arranging our bookings.

In (1. a), the cause may or may not be direct, while in (1. b) it must be direct, i. e. I must have done something directly to the horse so that it galloped. In (2. a), the arrangement may be for a future tour, but in (2. b) it has to be for a tour that is going on. Note that the difference in meaning has nothing to do with the tense or aspect of the verb: both are present progressive.

2. EXTENSION OF THE NOTION 'IMMEDIACY'

The notion of immediacy may be easily extended from its physical aspect of

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1980 Annual Meeting of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association in Atlanta, Georgia, Nov. 6-8, 1980.

time and space to an abstract aspect of conceptual immediacy. The presence or absence of the definite article, *the*, in (3) bears out this claim:

- (3) a. Linda goes to the church/the market/the school once a week.
- b. Linda goes to church/market/school once a week.

In (3. a), what Linda does seems to be just an incidental event in her life while in (3. b), it is a habit and an integral part of her life. Note again that it has little to do with the simple present tense, which usually signals a habit; since both have the same tense and both are habitual in nature, especially when there is the same adverbial phrase of frequency *once a week*. It is due to this kind of difference in the abstract sense of immediacy that the phrases *to go to church*, *to go to market* and *to go to school* have taken on their respective special meanings of *to worship*, *to buy groceries* and *to study at a school*.

Similarly, the choice between (4. a) and (5. a) can be accounted for by the same principle of conceptual immediacy.

- (4) a. Is two sugars enough?
- b. Are two sugars enough?
- (5) a. Is two packs of sugar enough?
- b. Are two packs of sugar enough?

A fast-food service person is, for instance, more likely to use (4. a) than (5. a) when the customer asks for sugar for his coffee or tea. And indeed, that is what I hear most often among all the possible forms in (4) and (5). The explanation might be that it is easier to use the shorter form. But a more compelling reason is probably that the shorter expression *two sugars* gives a sense of immediacy which in turn carries some feel of being in that line of vocation. (The choice between *is* and *are* is not our direct concern here.) The same thing may be said of recipe writers who, instead of using (6. b), prefer the shorter form (6. a) by deleting the otherwise required preposition *of*.

- (6) a. 1/2 teaspoon salt
- b. a half teaspoon of salt

3. CHINESE SURFACE SYNTACTIC VARIATIONS

Next we examine some surface syntactic variations in Mandarin Chinese in order to explore the possibility that the same principle of conceptual immediacy might apply. The variations that we consider here are 1) the 'optional' deletion of the particle *te* (的) in its various contexts, and 2) the 'optional' non-use of a localizer after certain non-place-word nouns. The word *optional* is enclosed in quotation marks because it does not actually describe the nature of the deletion of *te* (的) or that of the non-use of the localizer. In other words, the deletion or non-use is not exactly optional; it is rather for the purpose of expressing some nuances of meaning that might not be otherwise achieved.

3.1. *Te* (的) in Modifier-Modified Construction

When a noun or adjective is used to modify another noun in Mandarin Chinese, according to grammar books the particle *te* (的) is inserted between them to bring out the modification relation. Thus,

- (7) a. *hai-tzu-men te hsüeh-hsiao* (孩子們的學校)
children TE school
- b. *pa-pa te yien-ching* (爸爸的眼鏡)
daddy TE glasses
- c. *tso-t'ien te pao-chih* (昨天的報紙)
yesterday TE newspaper
- d. *nuan-ho te yi-fu* (暖和的衣服)
warm TE clothes

None of the occurrences of *te* in (7) is deletable, i. e. **hai-tzu-men hsüeh-hsiao*, **pa pa yien ching*, **tso t'ien pao chih* or **nuan ho yi fu*. On the other hand, other phrases of the same structure may have an optional *de*. For example,

- (8) a. *Chung-kuo (te) hsüeh-hsiao* (中國 (的) 學校)
China (TE) school
- b. *chin-shih (te) yien-ching* (近視 (的) 眼鏡)
near-sight (TE) glasses

- c. pen-ti (*te*) pao-chih (本地 (的) 報紙)
local (TE) newspaper
- d. hou (*te*) ta-yi (厚的大衣)
thick (TE) overcoat

The explanations for such an 'optional' deletion could be varied, such as deletion through use (i.e. through use over a long time, an expression tends to be shortened) and attribution vs. mere qualification (i.e. attributive modification tends to become shortened while mere qualification does not). In certain ways, these two theories do account for (8. b, c) and (8. a, d) respectively. But there are certain difficulties with them. One is, how long a period of time must an expression be used before it can be shortened? And the other is, how can one make a clear-cut distinction between attribution and mere qualification? For instance, (7. d) *nuan-ho te yi-fu* must have been in longer use than (8. d) *hou te ta-yi* or *hou ta-yi* because *ta-yi* is a translation from the English word *overcoat*. On the other hand, both *nuan-ho* and *hou* seem to be attributive modifications.

Further examples in (9)-(11) suggest that neither of the theories is tenable: (Cf. Chu, 1978)

- (9) a. hei *te* yien-ching (黑的眼鏡)
black TE glasses
"black-colored eye-glasses" (i.e. with either black lenses or a
black frame or both)
- b. hei yien-ching (黑眼鏡)
black eye-glasses
"sun glasses"
- (10) a. hsian-hsia *te* ren (鄉下的人)
country TE person
"people in the countryside (i.e. rural people/population)"
- b. hsian-hsia ren (鄉下人)
country person
"country folk (=red-neck)"

- (11) a. *chih te lao-hu* (紙的老虎)

paper TE tiger

"tiger made of paper"

- b. *chih lao-hu* (紙老虎)

paper tiger

"paper tiger"

The non-use of the particle *te* in the (b) forms obviously has little to do with the lengths of time the expressions have been in use or with the kinds of modification that they can possibly be assigned to. Rather, there is a distinct semantic difference between the members of each pair in (9)-(11). The fact that the (b) forms can all be translated with compound words in English indicates that there is a close semantic relationship between the components of each phrase. This may very well be accommodated in the notion of 'conceptual immediacy'. The notion seems to apply to all cases discussed so far in (7)-(11). But, of course, there will be disagreements among native speakers as to whether the non-use of *te* is appropriate since everybody organizes his concepts in some unique ways. Likewise, there are some borderline cases where it doesn't really matter whether the concepts represented by the components of an expression are treated as conceptually immediate or not. These are then the true cases of an optional deletion of the particle *te*.

3.2. *Te* as a Resultative Complement Marker

The particle *de* also occurs as a resultative complement marker in the following:

- (12) a. *ch'ih te (hen) pao* (吃的(很)飽)

eat TE (very) full

- b. *hsieh te (hen) k'uai* (寫的(很)快)

write TE (very) clean

- c. *hsi te (hen) kan-ching* (洗的(很)乾淨)

wash TE (very) clean

- d. *wuan te (hen) kao-hsing* (玩的(很)高興)

- play TE (very) happy
- e. *hsiang te* (hen) *chou-tao* (想 (的) 很週到)
consider TE (very) thorough
- f. (k'an shu) k'an *te t'ou-hun nao-chang* ((看書) 看的頭昏腦脹)
(read book) read TE head-dizzy brain-swell

Some of them may have the TE deleted, but others may result in unacceptable forms. They are thus indicated in (13).

- (13) a. *ch'ih pao* (吃飽)
"eat and feel full"
- b. **hsieh k'uai* (*寫快)
"write fast"
- c. *hsi kan-ching* (洗乾淨)
"wash clean"
- d. ? *wuan kao-hsing* (? 玩高興)
"play and feel happy"
- e. **hsiang chou-tao* (*想週到)
"think thoroughly"
- f. *(k'an shu) k'an *t'ou-hun nao-chang* (* (看書) 看頭昏腦脹)
"read (so that one becomes) dizzy"

The deletability seems to be very random in the examples. But a closer examination reveals that those which allow *te*-deletion all contain a real result in the form of a single word. (It is unfortunate that these forms are all called resultative complements, although some of them do not express a result of the action at all, such as (12. b and 12. e)). In (12. a) *pao* (飽) 'to feel full' is the result of *ch'ih* (吃) 'to eat'; in (12. c) *kan-ching* (乾淨) 'clean' is the result of *hsi* (洗) 'wash'. On the other hand, in (12. b) *k'uai* (快) 'fast' is not a result of *hsieh* (寫) 'write'; rather it is the manner (or the rate of speed, to be more exact) of the action. Similarly, in (12. e) *chou-tao* (週到) 'thorough' is not a result of *hsiang* (想) 'thinking', it is rather the manner of thinking. The problem in our claim lies with (12. f) where *t'ou-hun nao-chang* (頭昏腦脹)

'dizzy' is a result of *k'an shu* (看書) 'reading'; but it doesn't allow the deletion. The reason may be that *t'ou-hun nao-chang* (頭昏腦脹) is not a single-word adjective. Further evidence may be found in (14):

- (14) a. *Ch'ing ni pa tzu hsieh te ch'ing-ch'u yi-tien* (請你把字寫的清
楚一點)
please you BA word write (TE) clear a-little
"please write the words clearly."
b. *Hai-tzu-men tou wuan lei le* (孩子們都玩累了)
children all play tired LE
"All the children are tired from playing."
c. *T'a k'an shu k'an hun t'ou le* (他看書看昏頭了)
he read book read dizzy head LE
"He read so much that he became dizzy-headed, i. e. lost his
good sense."

Obviously, *ch'ing-ch'u* (清楚) 'clear' in (14. a), *lei* (累) 'tired' in (14. b) and *hun-t'ou* (昏頭) "dizzy-head" in (14. c) are all genuine and direct results of their respective actions. Especially noteworthy is "hun-t'ou" (昏頭) in (14. c), which is less subject to the literal interpretation "dizzy-head" than to the figuratively interpretation "without good sense." The latter tends to be taken as one meaningful unit.

Our principle of 'conceptual immediacy' here may be interpreted as "action and direct result" forming a natural sequence of expectation in the mind of the language user.

3. 3. Non-Use of the Localizer with Non-Place-Words

The use of localizers to turn nouns and pronouns into place words, in most cases, are quite straightforward. Thus,

- (15) a. *Tao wo cher lai* (到我這兒來)
to I here come
"come to me"
b. **Tao wo ϕ lai* (*到我 ϕ 來)

- (16) a. T'a yi-chih tso tsai sha-fa shang fa-tai (他一直坐在沙發上發呆)

he all-the-way sit at couch SHANG day-dream

"He has been sitting in the couch, daydreaming."

- b. *T'a yi-chih tso tsai sha-fa ϕ fa-tai. (*他一直坐在沙發 ϕ 發呆)

- (17) a. Wo-men tou chu tsai mei-kuo ϕ (我們都住在美國 ϕ)

we all live at U.S.

"We all live in the U.S."

- b. *Wo-men tou chu tsai mei-kuo-li. (*我們都住在美國裏)

But there are cases where the use or non-use is not so clear-cut. In other words, there are instances of "optional" deletion of the localizer such as in the following:

- (18) a. Wo-men p'ing-ch'ang tsai ch'u-fang (li) ch'ih-fan. (我們平常在廚房(裏)吃飯)

we ordinary at kitchen (LI) eat

"We ordinarily eat in the kitchen."

- b. Wo t'ai-t'ai tsai hsüeh-hsiao (li) chiao-shu (我太太在學校(裏)教書)

I wife at school (LI) teach

"My wife teaches in/at a school."

- c. Li hsien-shen tsai t'u-shu-kuan (li) ku η -tso. (李先生在圖書館(裏)工作)

Li Mr. at library (LI) work

"Mr. Li works in/at the library."

Note that (18. b) and (18. c) each have two translations. The use of the preposition *in* in English seems to correspond more closely to the use of the localizer *li* (裏) while that of the preposition *at* seems to correspond to the non-use of the same localizer. The parallelism between the English and Chinese variants in meaning might seem to be accidental, but it is certainly not unexplainable. According to Bennett (1975), *at* is the least specified "locative" preposition in

English. When it is used with a concrete noun, such as *school* and *library*, which requires a specific location relative to an event or state, the unspecified preposition *at* tends to lend the concrete noun a less concrete and more abstract interpretation. In other words, the location in space usually expressed by the preposition *at* is now interpreted as a location in an abstract sense. In our case, it is now a location in the conceptual structure. That is, the person in question teaches or works for an institution, rather than in a place, known as a school or library.

Obviously, a similar explanation applies to the syntactic variation in Chinese. The non-use of the localizer *li* (裏) which is the least specified in meaning, gives the nouns *hsüeh-hsiao* (學校) "school" and *t'u-shu-kuan* (圖書館) "library" a more abstract interpretation by means of changing *tsai* (在) from a location in space to a location in conceptual structure. Thus, it is possible to say (19. a) and (20. a), but their corresponding (b)-forms are much less acceptable:

- (19) a. Wo t'ai-t'ai tsai hsüeh-hsiao chiao-shu, k'e-shih t'a-te k'e, tsai chia-li shang. (我太太在學校教書，可是他的課，在家裏上)

I wife at school teach; but her class, at home hold

"My wife teaches at school; but her classes are held at home."

- b. ??Wo t'ai-t'ai tsai hsüeh-hsiao-*li* chiao-shu, k'e-shih t'a-te k'e, tsai chia-li shang. (??我太太在學校裏教書，可是他的課，在家裏上)

- (20) a. Li hsien-shen tsai t'u-shu-kuan kung tso, k'e-shih shih-ch'ing tsai tung-wu-yüan-li tso. (李先生在圖書館工作，可是事情在動物園裏做)

Li Mr. at library work; but work at zoo-inside do

"Mr. Li works at the library, but his work is done in the zoo."

- b. ??Li hsien-shen tsai t'u-shu-kuan-*li* kung-tso, k'e-shih shih-ch'ing tsai tung-wu-yüan-li tso (??李先生在圖書館裏工作，可是事情在動物園裏做)

What all this means is that while the more concrete interpretation of the

nouns as places gives the spatial location of an event or state, the more abstract interpretation gives its conceptual location—which is more a part of the whole event or state itself rather than the setting in which the event happens or the state exists. The shorter variant therefore can again be characterized by the notion of conceptual immediacy.

It is admittedly in an indirect manner that the semantic correlation of the shorter variant is justified in this section. Besides, (18. a) still constitutes an unresolved exception. However, we have at least pointed out some significant facts and a possible approach to an otherwise inexplicable case of optional deletion.

4. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The cases that we have so far examined in Mandarin Chinese do not only seem to constitute evidence for semantic correlation in syntactic variation. They may also provide some additional basis for syntactic change in diachronic terms. When speakers feel the need for collapsing separate ideas into an integral concept, they start to manipulate the forms by leaving out certain elements which have little lexical meanings and make the expressions more compact than otherwise put together. This shortening of the forms may then spread out to other similar forms by analogy. The case exemplified in (18. a) i. e. *tsai ch'u-fang-li ch'ih-fan* (在廚房裏吃飯) and *tsai ch'u-fang- ϕ ch'ih-fan* (在廚房 ϕ 吃飯)—is probably a result of the spread of compacting by analogy. The same process may be applicable to the formation of idioms.

What I have just presented, of course, is a far cry from any theory, but I hope that this paper will stir up some serious thought about the relations between semantics, surface variation and syntactic change.

REFERENCES

- Bennett, David C. (1976) *Spatial and Temporal Uses of English Prepositions*. Longman.

Chu, Chauncey C. (1978) "Conceptual Dynamism in Linguistic Description: The Chinese Evidence' in Tang, Li and Cheng, eds.

Tang, Ting-chi, Robert L. Cheng and Y. C. Li, eds. (1978) *Proceedings of Symposium on Chinese Linguistics—1977 LSA Linguistic Institute*. Taipei: Student Book Co.