COPING WITH COMPLEX POLYSEMY: A COMPARISON OF DATIVE/ BENEFACTIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN MANDARIN AND THAI

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In Mandarin and Thai, many prepositions have etymologically and semantically related homonyms that are members of other lexical classes. In Mandarin these homonyms can be verbs, and in Thai they may be verbs or substantives. In both languages there exists a benefactive/goal preposition (gei in Mandarin, hai in Thai) which is homonymous with a common verb that has extensive dative and causative usage. In this article I compare the syntactic and semantic characteristics of dative/benefactive constructions in the two languages, and conclude with the hypothesis that certain striking similarities that will be seen reflect a trend to avoid the possible confusion that could result from these closely parallel cases of complex polysemy.

I. PREPOSITIONAL GEI/HAI

The Mandarin preposition gei has two distinct uses: benefactive and goal-directive. The benefactive gei, according to Teng, has the same semantic content as the dative verb (i.e., "give") and always occurs preverbally. Furthermore, according to Teng, benefactive gei has two distinct meanings: "in place of" and "for the benefit of." The preposition ti ("substitute, instead of") can replace the former gei, whereas the preposition wei ("for the sake of") can replace the latter gei.

1) Wo gei (or ti) ta zuo fan.
   I bend he make food
   I cook food for (i.e., instead of) him.

2) Wo gei (or wei) ta zuo fan.
   I bend he make food
   I cook food for him (to eat).

"Goal" gei, on the other hand, may occur either preverbally or postverbally, and therefore is sometimes ambiguous with benefactive gei. Wei and ti cannot replace this gei.

3) Wo gei ni ji-shao yi-ge peng-you.
   I goal you introduce one-class. friend
   I introduce a friend to you.

Note that example 3 could also be interpreted as "I introduce a friend for your benefit" or as "I introduce a
friend for you - since you are not able to introduce him yourself." Example 4, however, with postverbal gei, does not have these additional interpretations.

4) Wǒ jiè-shào gei nǐ yī-ge péng-you.
   I introduce goal you one-class. friend
   I introduce a friend to you.

Goal gei may also occur after the direct object:

5) Wǒ jiè-shào yī-ge péng-you gei nǐ.
   In introduce one-class. friend goal you
   I introduce a friend to you.

With verbs of transmission, such as sōng ("send"), postverbal gei may be omitted when the direct object is a noun phrase specified by a number.

6) Nǐ sōng (gei) tā yī-běn shū.
   You send (goal) he one-class. book
   You send him a book.

This last example contrasts with the alternative construction 7, which has three possible meanings.

7) Nǐ gei tā sōng yī-běn shū.
   You (goal OR ben.) he send one-class. book
   You send him a book.
   OR
   You send a book for him. (2 meanings)

The Thai preposition hai always occurs postverbally; thus the variety of syntactic structures which in Mandarin helps distinguish between various interpretations of the preposition does not exist. Furthermore, there is no distinction corresponding to that illustrated by Mandarin examples 1 and 2. Sentence 8 could therefore be synonymous with either 6 or 7 above.

8) Khun sōng nangsì hai khāw.
   You send book hai he
   You send the book to him.
   OR
   You send the book for him. (for the benefit of OR instead of him)

Another difference between hai and gei is that hai, unlike prepositional gei, can be stranded in sentence final position.

9) Khāw khiĕn còdmaăi hai.
He write letter hai
He writes a letter for OR to (someone unspe-
cified).

BUT 10) *Tā xiě yi-féng xīn geǐ.
He write one-class. letter geǐ

II. VERBAL GEǐ/HAI

The basic structure of Mandarin sentences con­taining verbal geǐ is NP-geǐ-IO-DO, as exemplified by sentence 11.

11) Tā geǐ wǒ qián.
He give I money
He gives me money.

Note that although verbs of transmission (which
might be expected to include dative geǐ) may immedi­ately precede an optional goal geĩ (as in 6 above),
sentence 12 is ungrammatical.

12) *Tā geǐ geǐ wǒ yī-bēn shū.
He give goal I one-class. book

The constraint seems to be simply that goal geǐ cannot
occur next to verbal geǐ, for example 13 is grammati­cal.

13) Tā geǐ qián geǐ wǒ.
He give money goal I
He gives money to me.

Note, however, the ungrammaticality of sentence
14, which contains both benefactive geǐ and verbal geǐ.

14) *Tā geǐ wǒ geǐ nǐ shū.
He ben. I give you book

My native informants rejected this sentence on the
grounds that it would be difficult to interpret. Ac­
ording to my informants, however, example 14 is not
as bad as example 12. This may be because 14 superfi­
cially resembles the structure of acceptable geǐ sen­
tences, whereas 12 contains a redundant, superfluous
geǐ and is not analogous to other Mandarin structures.5

Interestingly, the sentences which my informants pro­
duced as corrections of 14 substituted the prepositions
wèi and tǐ which, as noted earlier, (cf. examples 1, 2),
are synonymous with benefactive geǐ. This could be ex­
plained as a measure to reduce semantic redundancy and
ambiguity if Teng is correct in asserting that verbal
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gei and its benefactive homonym are semantically equivalent.

The following, then, are corrections of sentence 14.

15) Tā wēi wǒ gei nǐ shū.
He wēi I give you book
He gives you the book for me (for my sake, at my request).

16) Tā tǐ wǒ gei nì shū.
He tǐ I give you book
He gives you the book for (instead of) me.

Example 17, like 14, was rejected by my informants on the grounds that it was virtually impossible to interpret.

17) *Tā gei wǒ gei nǐ sòng yī-ben shū.
He gei I give you send one-class book

In Thai the basic structure of sentence containing main verb hai is NP-hai-DO-(prep.)-IO, as seen in the following example.

18) Khāw hai nungsīī (kāb) khun.
He give book (kāb) you
He gives the book to you.

Sentence 19, like Mandarin example 14, is ungrammatical.

19) *Khāw hai nungsīī hai khun.
He hai book hai you

In Thai, then, prepositional hai cannot co-occur within a sentence with verbal hai, but the preposition kāb ("with") may optionally be substituted for prepositional hai. In comparing the Thai sentence 18 with Mandarin example 20, notice that Thai introduces two substitute prepositions, and that the order of the prepositional phrases is fixed.

19) Khāw hai nungsīī kāb khun phīe chān.
He give book kāb you phīe I
He gives the book to you for me.

20) Tā tǐ/wēi wǒ gei nǐ shū.
He tǐ/wēi I give you book
He gives the book to you for (2 meanings) me.

In addition to having the dative usages discussed
so far, ge ($_1$) and hai ($_1$) can be used as causatives with hu­
man objects (translatable as "allow" or "have someone do something"), although this is more common in Thai
than in Mandarin.

21) Më-khrya hai-deg tàd nyá pen-chín.7
   Cook hai-child cut meat into-slice
   The cook has the child cut the meat into
   slices.

22) Xiăn-sheng ge $_1$ w–men chI fän.
   Teacher ge $_1$ we eat food
   The teacher allows us to eat.

III. FURTHER DISCUSSION

It has been seen that Mandarin and Thai prefer
not to employ prepositional ge / hai in sentences con­
taining the homophonous and semantically related main
verb, and that Thai is somewhat stricter than Mandarin
in this respect. This would seem logical, inasmuch
as Mandarin has several syntactic devices to reduce
ambiguity among the various interpretations of poly­
semous ge, whereas Thai resorts mainly to preposition
substitution, with haplology limited to the type seen
in example 18.

Teng (1975) proposes a haplology rule which spe­
cifies that when ge is introduced by a goal feature
marker into a sentence (i.e., when the main verb is a
verb of transmission, as in example 6), it is deleted
in case the main verb of that sentence is also ge.$^

Teng does not discuss the obligatory substitution of
other pronouns for benefactive ge, but a rule could
be introduced which would prevent co-occurrence of two
semantically equivalent ge's within a sentence. It
seems likely that Thai sentence 19 is unacceptable for
the same reasons that Mandarin sentence 14 is unaccep­
table.

A clue to the semantic reasons for the phenomena
discussed so far is provided by the inability of ver­
bal ge and hai to take the passive markers bei and
thuuk of their respective languages.

23) Nà–ge dông-xi bei wọ sòng le.
   That-class. thing pass. I send asp.
   That thing was sent by me.

BUT 24) *Na–ge dông-xi bei wo gei le.
   That-class. thing pass. I give asp.

Similarly in Thai:

25) *Nongwii thuuk hai.
   Book pass. give
Teng (1975) proposes that dative/benefactive *ge* and the passive marker *bei* cannot co-occur in a Mandarin sentence because *bei* has a pejorative feature marking which is semantically anomalous with the benefactive meaning of *ge*. There is evidence that Thai *thuuk* also has "pejorative" connotations: it occurs most often with verbs of physical violence, such as "hit" and "break."

According to one of my Mandarin informants, sentences such as 26 are unacceptable because they are "confusing," i.e., difficult to interpret.

26) *Zhāng Sān *ge* Lǐ Sī *bei* dǎ le.
John ben. Lisa pass. beat asp.
John was beaten for (2 meanings) Lisa.

As usual, it is necessary to substitute *wēi* or *tī* for benefactive *ge* here.

*Ge* in colloquial usage can itself function as a passive marker, as in 27.

27) *Zhāng Sān* *gei* (or *bei*) Lǐ Sī dǎ le.
John *gei* (pass.) Lisa beat asp.
John was beaten by Lisa.

I have shown how the polysemous usage of *gei* and *hai* prevents them from behaving like other, less versatile verbs and prepositions of their languages with regard to passivization and prepositional phrase complementation. It is easy to see how multiple occurrences of *gei* or *hai* in a sentence could lead to confusion, since both words have so many semantically related functions. My hypothesis is that preposition haplology and substitution in Mandarin and Thai are devices to reduce the possibility of ambiguity that could result from this complex polysemy. It is especially interesting that such similar cases of polysemy—with similar solutions—should involve the basic dative/benefactive constructions of two languages that are related geographically but not genetically.

FOOTNOTES

1. I accept the analysis of Li and Thompson (1974).

2. There is some dispute as to whether Thai in fact has prepositions. Although Noss (1964) classifies some uses of *hai* as prepositional, other experts, such as Mary Haas, would consider these to be examples of *hai* as a complementary verb. I have found some evidence (based on a comparison of relativization in Thai and Mandarin) that there may be a syntactic distinction be-
tween verbs and prepositions in Thai similar to that seen in Mandarin. Whether or not this evidence is sufficient to support such an argument, however, in this paper I classify certain Thai structures as prepositional phrases in order to facilitate the comparison with Mandarin.

Mandarin verbal geǐ relativizes as follows, with a deletable subject noun phrase.

28) (Wo) geǐ tā de fàn
    I give he rel. food
    The food that (I) give him

Benefactive geǐ, however, cannot relativize by itself, but must be followed by a main verb. Notice also that this geǐ has no subject.

29) Geǐ tā chi de fàn
    Ben. he eat rel. food
    The food that is for him to eat

(Example 30 could also be interpreted as "the food that deleted subject gave him to eat.")

The situation in Thai is very similar. The haf which I consider verbal relativizes in the same way as Mandarin verbal geǐ, with an optional subject noun phrase. (In both Thai and Mandarin it is common to omit the subjects of sentences in ordinary discourse.)

30) Khaąw thī(Panit) haf khaw
    Rice rel. (Panit) give he
    The rice that (Panit) gave him

The haf which I have described as prepositional, on the other hand, must be followed by a main verb. Furthermore, like benefactive geǐ, this haf seems to have no underlying subject.

31) Khaąw thīhaf khaw kin
    Rice rel. haf he eat
    The rice that is for him to eat

4. Ibid., pp. 151-152.
5. That is, other verb/preposition homonymous pairs mentioned in Li and Thompson's 1974 article cannot occur in constructions analogous to 12. The following example demonstrates the case of prepositional zai ("at") and its verbal homophone meaning "to be at."

32) *Wo zai zai Peį-Jīng.
    I be-at at Peking
33) Wo zal Pei-Jing.
      I be-at Peking
      I am at Peking.

6. However, substitution of kab is obligatory when two pronouns in sequence would result from the de­letion of prepositional hai.

7. This example is from Noss (1964).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


