

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 verbs¹, 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/HAI²

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.³ Furthermore, according to Teng,⁴ 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) Wǒ gei (or ti) tā zuò fàn.
I ben₁ he make food
I cook food for (i.e., instead of) him.
- 2) Wǒ gei (or wei) tā zuò fàn.
I ben₂ 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) Wǒ gei nǐ jiè-shao yí-ge péng-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-shao gei nǐ yí-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-shao yí-ge péng-you gei nǐ.
 In introduce one-class. friend goal you
 I introduce a friend to you.

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

- 6) Nǐ sòng (gei) tā yì-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 sòng yì-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 sòng nǎngsǎi hai khǎw.
 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) Khǎw khiǎn còdǎai hai.

He write letter hai¹
 He writes a letter for OR to (someone unspecified).

- BUT 10) *Tā xié yi-fēng xīn gei.
 He write one-class. letter gei

II. VERBAL GEI/HAI¹

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My native informants rejected this sentence on the grounds that it would be difficult to interpret. According to my informants, however, example 14 is not as bad as example 12. This may be because 14 superficially resembles the structure of acceptable gei sentences, whereas 12 contains a redundant, superfluous gei and is not analogous to other Mandarin structures.⁵ Interestingly, the sentences which my informants produced as corrections of 14 substituted the prepositions wei and ti which, as noted earlier (cf. examples 1, 2), are synonymous with benefactive gei. This could be explained as a measure to reduce semantic redundancy and ambiguity if Teng is correct in asserting that verbal

gei and its benefactive homonym are semantically equivalent.

The following, then, are corrections of sentence 14.

- 15) Tā wei wǒ gei nǐ shū.
He wei I give you book
He gives you the book for me (for my sake, at my request).
- 16) Tā tì wǒ gei nǐ shū.
He tì 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 yì-běn shū.
He gei I gei 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 nungsiī (kāb) khun.
He give book (kāb) you
He gives the book to you.

Sentence 19, like Mandarin example 14, is ungrammatical.

- 19) *Khāw hai nungsiī 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.⁶ 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 nungsiī kāb khun phī chān.
He give book kāb you phī I
He gives the book to you for me.
- 20) Tā tì/wei wǒ gei nǐ shū.
He tì/wei I give you book
He gives the book to you for (2 meanings) me.

In addition to having the dative usages discussed

so far, gei and hai can be used as causatives with human objects (translatable as "allow" or "have someone do something"), although this is more common in Thai than in Mandarin.

- 21) M^{ai}-khrua hai-dèg tàd nyá pen-chín.⁷
Cook hai-child cut meat into-slice
The cook has the child cut the meat into slices.
- 22) Xián-sheng gei wǒ-men chī fàn.
Teacher gei 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 gei/hai in sentences containing 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 polysemous gei, whereas Thai resorts mainly to preposition substitution, with haplology limited to the type seen in example 18.

Teng (1975) proposes a haplology rule which specifies that when gei 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 gei. Teng does not discuss the obligatory substitution of other pronouns for benefactive gei, but a rule could be introduced which would prevent co-occurrence of two semantically equivalent gei's within a sentence. It seems likely that Thai sentence 19 is unacceptable for the same reasons that Mandarin sentence 14 is unacceptable.

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

- 23) Nà-ge dōng-xi bei wǒ sòng le.
That-class. thing pass. I send asp.
That thing was sent by me.
- BUT 24) *Nà-ge dōng-xi bei wǒ gei le.
That-class. thing pass. I give asp.

Similarly in Thai:

- 25) *Nāngsǎi thuuk hai.
Book pass. give

Teng (1975) proposes that dative/benefactive gei 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 gei. 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 gei 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 wei or ti for benefactive gei here.

Gei 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 gei relativizes as follows, with a deletable subject noun phrase.

- 28) (Wǒ) gei tā de fàn
 I give he rel. food
 The food that (I) give him

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

- 29) Gei tā chī 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 hai which I consider verbal relativizes in the same way as Mandarin verbal gei, with an optional subject noun phrase. (In both Thai and Mandarin it is common to omit the subjects of sentences in ordinary discourse.)

- 30) Khaâw thîi (Panit) hai khâw
 Rice rel. (Panit) give he
 The rice that (Panit) gave him

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

- 31) Khaâw thîi hai khâw kin
 Rice rel. hai he eat
 The rice that is for him to eat

3. Teng (1975), p. 41.

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) *Wǒ zài zài Pèi-Jīng.
 I be-at at Peking

INSTEAD

- 33) Wǒ zài Pěi-Jīng.
 I be-at Peking
 I am at Peking.

6. However, substitution of kàb is obligatory when two pronouns in sequence would result from the deletion of prepositional hai.
 7. This example is from Noss (1964).

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