



The Motivation of Surface Unaccusativity in Chinese

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Abstract

Surface unaccusativity phenomenon refers to the phenomenon that the pivot noun can be in either the subject position or the object position in English or Chinese existential sentences. Both English and Chinese generally use the unaccusativity hypothesis to explain the surface unaccusativity phenomenon. Based on the theoretical framework of cognitive grammar, this paper points out that the reason for the emergence of the surface unaccusativity phenomenon in Chinese is that in Chinese, the meaning of the basic construction of existence is possession. This results in the differentiation of the existence expression, the differentiation between the *you* construction and the *zai* construction. After the expansion of the concept of existence, the corresponding constructions are also expanded. The extended concept and the extended construction maintain the source concept, and the basic characteristics of the source constructions are still differentiated. The extended *you* construction expresses the existence of virtual entities. Due to the interaction between the constructional meaning and the conceptual meaning, the surface unaccusativity phenomenon occurs.

Keywords

Unaccusativity, existential, cognitive grammar

1. Semantic analysis of two sentence patterns

The unaccusative hypothesis is often mentioned in the discussion of existential sentences (Perlmutter, 1978). Based on Langacker's cognitive grammar (Langacker, 2009), this paper proposes that the characteristics of the surface unaccusativity in Chinese can be summarized as follows: (1) In the two sentence patterns involved in the surface unaccusativity, there are different restrictions on the pivot noun. When the pivot noun is in the subject position, it must be actual; when the pivot noun is in the object position, it must be virtual; (2) The meaning expressed by the two sentence patterns are different. When the pivot noun is in the subject position, it indicates a action or behavior of autonomy; when the pivot noun is in the object position, it does not indicate a action or behavior of autonomy; (3) The two sentences have different requirements for the preposition *zai*. When the pivot noun is in the subject position, the locative must be preceded by the preposition *zai*. When the pivot noun is in the object position, the locative can be without the preposition *zai*.

Therefore, this paper holds that the two sentence patterns are completely different sentence patterns. In order to clearly describe the semantic features of these two sentence patterns, it is necessary to analyze these two sentences on the concept-construction interface. For convenience, this paper refers to the sentence pattern with the pivot noun in the subject position as sentence pattern A, and the sentence pattern with the pivot noun in the object position as sentence pattern B. These two sentence forms can be expressed simply as follows:

(1) Pattern A: pivot noun+V+zai+locative or pivot noun+zai+locative+V

(2) Pattern B: locative+V+pivot noun

This paper holds that the meaning of sentence pattern A is the state of being or the change of the state of being of something, while the meaning of sentence pattern B is the spatial state/change of the spatial state of a certain location. For example, pattern A *Zhangsan zai yizishang zuozhe* indicates the existence state of *zhangsan*, which is sitting. *Zhangsan jinle fangjian* means the change of *Zhang san's* state of existence, that is, from the state of being outside the room to the state of being inside the room. Pattern B, *yizishangzuozhezhangsan* indicates the spatial state of the chair, that is, there is a person sitting on it. *Wuzili feijinlai yizhi mifeng* indicates the change of the spatial state of the room, that is, from the spatial state of no bee in it to the spatial state of a bee in it.

In this paper, it is argued that pattern A and pattern B in Chinese are the extended forms of existing sentences expressed by the *you* construction and existing sentences expressed by the *zai* construction respectively.

2. Differentiation of existential sentences

The basic construction to express existence in Chinese is the *you* construction. Since the constructional meaning of *you* construction is possession, while the conceptual meaning is existence, the two have different requirements on the virtuality of the pivot noun. Constructional meaning requires that the pivot noun must be virtual, but conceptual meaning does not. In the process of the fusion of the two to form the Chinese existential sentence, they interact and influence each other, so that the final existential sentence also reflects the definiteness effect, that is, the pivot noun must be virtual. As a result, this construction cannot express "the locative existence of an actual entity", so another construction is needed. Then the *zai* construction comes into being, and the phenomenon of differentiation of existence sentence occurs.

3. The extension of the concept of existence and possession

3.1 The extension of the conceptual meaning of existence

Both existence and possession can be extended in the conceptual sense. The concept of existence means that there is something in a certain location. On this basis, the specificity of existence expands from simple existence to the state of existence, such as sitting state or running state. On the other hand, the physical appearance of existence expands from pure existence to the appearance and disappearance of existence, namely the change of the state of existence. Together, the two extensions can also be described as the state of existence/the change of the state of existence. After the expansion, some basic characteristics of the concept of existence are still retained, and there is still the difference between virtual and actual: the extended existence of an actual entity and the extended existence of a virtual entity. The former is the conceptual meaning of pattern A, while the latter is the conceptual meaning of pattern B.

3.2 The extension of the conceptual meaning of possession

Similarly, possession means that the possessor has the possession. On this basis, the specificity of possession expands from simple possession to the specific state of possession, such as the normal state of possession or other states of possession. For example, *Zhangsan* has a computer is the normal state of possession, *Zhangsan* had a computer broken is the broken state of possession. On the other hand, the physical appearance of the possession relationship has expanded from simple possession relationship to the emergence and disappearance of a possession relationship, namely the change of the state of possession relationship. For example, *Wangmian sile fuqin* is the disappearance of a possession relationship. Together, the two extensions can be described as a possessive state/a change of a possessive stat. After the extension, some of the basic features remain. The possessee is still virtual.

4. Extensions of related constructions

4.1 Extension of *you* construction

The original construction of *you* sentence in Chinese has been expanded into a construction composed of specific verbs. The structure of the construction remains unchanged, which can be simply expressed as:

(3) Locative+you+virtual noun → Locative+specific verb+virtual noun

Constructional features also remain the same. The nouns at the beginning of a sentence still don't need the preposition *zai*, and nouns after verbs still need to be virtual, not actual. Such as:

(4) *Waibian you yige ren.*

- (5) *Zhengwei shang zuozhe yige ren./ *Zhengwei shang zuozhe ta.*
 (6) *Nali you yizhi tuzi.*
 (7) *Yizhu juzishu shang feizoule yizhi wuya./ *Yizhu juzishu shang feizoule nazhi wuya.*
 (8) *Shudixia you jizhi ji.*
 (9) *Yuanli paizhe yiqun ji./ *Yuanli paizhe naqun ji.*

The verbs *you* in (4), (6) and (8) are changed into sit, fly and run respectively to represent specific actions, and the syntactic structure features are the same with the *you* construction. The first position phrase of the sentence does not need the preposition *zai*, and the noun after the verb must be virtual. He, that crow and that flock of chickens, which represent actual entities, cannot appear in this construction. This construction is pattern B mentioned above.

4.2 Extension of *zai* construction

The original *zai* construction in Chinese has been extended to a construction formed by a specific verb. The structure of the construction is basically unchanged, which can be simply expressed as:

- (10) Actual noun+*zai*+location → Actual noun+specific verb+*zai*+location
 Or Actual noun+*zai*(or other preposition)+location+specific verb

The first noun phrase is still generally actual, and the locative phrase in the predicate retains the preposition *zai*, or changes to other prepositions, such as *cong*, *dao*, etc. Such as:

- (11) *Zhangsan zai gongyuan li* → *Zhangsan/ *yigeren zuozai yizishang.*
 Or *Zhangsan/ *yigeren zai yizishang zuozhe.*
 (12) *Zhangsan zai jiaoshi li* → *Zhangsan/ *yigeren cong jiaoshi zouchuqu le.*
 Or *Zhangsan/ *yigeren zouchu jiaoshi le.*
 (13) *Zhangsan zai caochang shang* → *Zhangsan/ *yigeren zai caochang shang zouzhe.*
 Or *Zhangsan/ *yigeren zouzai caochang shang.*

In the above example, the predicate *zai* becomes the specific verb sit and walk respectively. The construction used is an extended form of the *zai* construction, with the same syntactic structure characteristics as the *zai* construction. The first noun of the sentence must be actual, and the Chinese phrase usually needs the prepositions of *zai* and *cong*. A person which representing a virtual entity cannot appear in this construction. This construction is pattern A mentioned above.

5. Summary

Surface unaccusativity phenomenon refers to the phenomenon that the pivot noun can be in either the subject position or the object position in English or Chinese existential sentences. Both English and Chinese generally use the unaccusativity hypothesis to explain the surface unaccusativity phenomenon. The unaccusativity assumption holds that verbs in English existential sentences are unaccusative verbs, which have only a deep object and no subject. When the deep object remains in situ, pattern B existential sentence is formed. This paper argues that the unaccusativity hypothesis only describes the surface unaccusativity phenomenon within the theory, and does not involve the cause of the emergence of the surface unaccusativity phenomenon. That is to say, the reason why the surface unaccusativity phenomenon occurs in English and Chinese existential sentences is still unknown.

Based on the theoretical framework of cognitive grammar, this paper points out that the reason for the emergence of the surface unaccusativity phenomenon in Chinese is that in Chinese, the meaning of the basic construction of existence is possession. This results in the differentiation of the existence expression, the differentiation between the *you* construction and the *zai* construction. After the expansion of the concept of existence, the corresponding constructions are also expanded, namely, the extended *you* construction and the extended *zai* construction. The extended concept and the extended construction maintain the source concept, and the basic characteristics of the source constructions are still differentiated. Among them, the extended *zai* construction expresses the existence of actual entities, which is the pattern A. The conceptual meaning and construction meaning of this kind of sentence have no interaction; The extended *you* construction expresses the existence of virtual entities, which is pattern B. Due to the interaction between the constructional meaning and the conceptual meaning, it presents some new characteristics, which are as follows: 1. The subject of the pattern B is difficult to define due to the difference of the identity of the trajector in the conceptual meaning and the constructional meaning, and the first position of the sentence assumes part of the subject function; 2. Influenced by the definiteness effect in constructional meaning, pattern B also shows definiteness effect; 3. Pattern A and pattern B both express existential semantics. Due to the in-

fluence of constructional meaning, the final meaning of pattern B is the change of spatial state in a certain location.

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