

CO-VERBS IN SPOKEN CHINESE

# 國語動介詞

BY

ROLAND CHIANG-JEN CHANG

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## ABSTRACT

A group of morphemes including *bǎ*, *gěi*, *gēn*, *yòng* and *yán* are claimed to have been verbs in earlier stages of the Chinese language. Most of them still function as verbs in certain contexts. Because of this, some grammarians call them verbs. More commonly, however, they occur in the position

Subject \_\_\_\_\_ NP - V - (NP)

in a sentence. Since together with the following NP, they function as modifiers, other grammarians call them co-verbs. And since they may be translated into English as prepositions in some contexts, still others call them prepositions. This study attempts to find out what they really are and what implications they may have for Chinese syntax by applying the case grammar model.

Chapter I is a general survey, in which the treatment of each of the grammarians is discussed with a review of weaknesses. An outlook on what improvements one might expect over the previous works is given. At the same time, a means of distinguishing such morphemes from full verbs or prepositions is defined. Finally, the need for a category 'co-verb' is justified.

In Chapter II, the criteria given by various grammarians for defining prepositions and verbs are recapitulated. Some of the criteria are used in addition to the notion of 'conceptual wholeness' to distinguish co-verbs from full verbs or prepositions. By the application of all this, the ten morphemes in question are put through a definitive test. The verbal properties which each of them still retains are thus determined, and each is assigned to a certain position on the continuum: *bǎ* has progressed farthest, *ná* has not departed very far from its verbal origin, and the rest are

distributed in between.

In Chapter III, following a discussion that Chinese is essentially a topic-prominent language, there is a brief discussion about the non-applicability of the 'standard' theory to the description of Chinese. Then, the arguments for adopting the theory of case as a descriptive model for Chinese is put forward, supported by the demonstration of some problems easily accounted for by case grammar but insoluble in the 'standard' theory.

Chapter IV is devoted to the discussion of co-verbs in relation to case. The previous classifications of co-verbs by various linguists are touched upon. It is pointed out that some of these co-verbs have been inappropriately classified, several are related to more than one case, and some (other than the ten mentioned above) actually function as full verbs rather than as case markers.

Chapter V discusses one residual problem, namely, the lack of a mechanism in case grammar to account for the historical derivation of co-verbs from earlier verbs to their modern function as case markers on nouns, and summarizes the findings. The falsity of treating co-verbs as either full verbs or as prepositions is restated and the non-discrete nature of co-verbs in the grammatical system is reemphasized. The 'co-verb' continuum may accommodate those otherwise 'genuine prepositions' as well, effecting a saving in itself and reflecting the amphibious nature of such morphemes.

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## CHAPTER I

### A SURVEY OF THE PAST TREATMENTS OF CO-VERBS

This study deals with a group of morphemes such as *bǎ* (object marker) 'to take; to hold', *gěi* 'for, by; to give', *gēn* 'with; to follow', *yòng* 'with; to use' and *yán* 'along; to follow along'. They usually occur in the position

Subject \_\_\_\_\_ NP - V - (NP)

in a sentence. These morphemes were verbs in earlier stages of the Chinese language.<sup>1</sup> Most of them still function as verbs in certain contexts. Since together with the following NP, they function as modifiers, some grammarians call them co-verbs. And since they may be translated into English as prepositions in some other contexts, others call them prepositions. There is wide disagreement over whether such verb-like morphemes with prepositional meanings and functions should be regarded as verbs or prepositions. Our interest is in finding out what they really are and the implications they may have for Chinese syntax in particular and for linguistic theory in general.

#### I. 1 *Background Discussion*

As early as 1945, the term 'co-verb' was found in the *Dictionary of Spoken Chinese*, described as follows:

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<sup>1</sup>Charles N. Li and Sandra A. Thompson, for example, claim *bǎ* to be an earlier verb by quoting from *Mèzi* "Yù qīng *bǎ* tiān zhī rù-lǐng yǐ zhén yǒu Miao." 'Yu himself took the mandate of heaven to conquer Miao.' James Chao-ping Liang also claims so by quoting from *Zhàn-Qúo-Cè* "Zǔo-shǒu *bǎ* Qín-wáng zhī xiù." '(His) left hand holds Qin-wang's sleeves.'

Co-verbs serve to mark nominal referents in a sentence, either (1) connecting the following nominal referent to a preceding one, or (2) indicating the relation of the following nominal referent to all the rest of the sentence. (Hockett et al., 1945:18)

The term 'co-verb' later appeared in *Speak Chinese* compiled by M. Gardner Tewksbury in 1948 and in *Beginning Chinese* by John Defrancis in 1963. Both are textbook series published by Yale University Press and widely used in the U. S. For the teachers of spoken Chinese the term 'co-verb' helps them avoid explaining to their students whether these morphemes should be called verbs or prepositions.

In "Some remarks on the structure of the verb complex in Standard Chinese" (1958), Harry F. Simon talks about the class of co-verbs, but he does not tell how co-verbs are classified.

In *A Grammar of Spoken Chinese*, Chao Yuen Ren discusses co-verbs and prepositions as follows:

In connection with verbal expressions in series, we noted that ... a listable number of verbs occur as first verbs with the same order of frequency as in other positions and are thus called coverbs (hence "K") or prepositions. In a few cases, they do not occur at all in other positions and are thus prepositions par excellence. But the most important properties of prepositions are that they do not, as a rule, have aspects and that they do not usually function as centers of predicates. (1968: 749)

It is clear that Chao does not distinguish co-verbs from prepositions and that he defines co-verbs (prepositions) in terms of their position and function.

In "The illusory co-verb," *Journal of the Chinese Language Teachers Association*, J. Charles Thompson says

A co-verb is, of course, simply a Chinese transitive verb that happens to be translated by an English preposition .... They [co-verbs] are distinguished from other Chinese verbs only by their use in translating English prepositions. (1970:15-16)

Thompson does not, however, justify his assertion. The object marker *bǎ*, which is not a transitive verb in modern Chinese, readily demonstrates that this assertion is at least partially false.

Li Ying-che in his Ph. D. dissertation *An Investigation of Case in Chinese Grammar* (1970) discusses co-verbs, but does not take a definitive stand on their status. He refers to the discussions on this subject by various scholars such as Wang Li, Lü Shu-xiang, Wang Huan and William S-Y Wang. For Li, the terms 'co-verb' and 'post-verb' refer to two types of case-marking morphemes, distinguishable by their position relative to the verb. It is thus clear that Li considers co-verbs as distinct from verbs.

James Chao-ping Liang in his Ph. D. dissertation *Co-verbs or Verbs? A Commentary on Chinese Grammar—Past and Present* (1971), after studying six of the most commonly used co-verbs, concludes that *bǎ* is a direct object marker and that *zài*, *yòng*, *gēn*, *gěi*, and *dào* are verbs. But Liang also suggests that *gēn* can be a coordinate conjunction, *gěi* can be a passive marker when it occurs in the first verb position, and *dào* can represent an extent complement in the second verb position.

Charles N. Li and Sandra A. Thompson in their "Co-verbs in Mandarin Chinese: Verbs or Prepositions?" (1974a) and Huang Hsuan-fan in his "Between Verbs and Prepositions" (1974) all conclude that co-verbs are in fact prepositions.

It seems to us that the earlier linguists' treatments of Chinese grammar are set up from a classificatory point of view, with Professor Chao Yuen Ren's *A Grammar of Spoken Chinese* as the

highlight of classificatory grammars. The later linguists deal with various problems in spoken Chinese from a transformational point of view. In regard to co-verbs, some of the grammarians even go so far as to trace their development through various stages of the Chinese language. There is fairly general agreement that most of the present-day co-verbs have evolved from verbs and that they are still in process of changing from earlier verbs. However, these later linguists regard co-verbs as either verbs or prepositions.

To explain the transitional nature of co-verbs, we should like to put forward a continuum scale, with the verbal end at one extremity and the prepositional at the other.<sup>2</sup> The morphemes in question have been progressing along the continuum toward the prepositional end each at a rate of its own. The loss of verbal properties and the progression toward the prepositional end on the continuum have a simultaneous cause and effect relationship.

It seems that most Chinese linguists are in agreement as to what verbal properties are in Mandarin Chinese. Verbs can be interrogated in *V-bu-V* constructions and negated by either *bù* 'not' or *méi* 'have not'. Verbs can be followed by aspect markers such as *-le*, *-zhe* and *-guo*. They can serve as the predicates of sentences. Through a series of tests based on these properties, we are able to assign each of such morphemes to a certain section on the continuum. Because of the differences in the rate of progress, there can hardly be a clear-cut demarcation between verbs and prepositions in modern Chinese. The term 'co-verb' could therefore serve well as a means to prevent too arbitrary a claim that a mor-

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<sup>2</sup>We are indebted to Chauncey C. Chu for his suggestion on the continuum hypothesis. Though Li and Thompson also mention such a continuum, their references are somewhat vague.



pheme of this sort must either be a verb or a preposition. We may thus say that a co-verb is something between a verb and a preposition, usually occurring in the position \_\_\_\_\_ NP -V - (NP) in a sentence, retaining certain verbal properties but functioning somewhat like a preposition.

## I. 2 *Chao Yuen Ren's Treatment*

It is Chao Yuen Ren who first treats co-verbs at some length. As stated in I.1, Chao does not distinguish co-verbs from prepositions, but he points out the most important properties of prepositions (co-verbs): (i) they do not, as a rule, have aspect markers and (ii) they do not usually function as centers of predicates. He goes on to say

Because of the transitional nature of Chinese prepositions, both in the classificatory and in the historical sense, the characterizations given above have had to be stated in circumscribed terms and cannot serve as rigorous definitions. Consequently, we are defining prepositions by enumeration. (1968:749)

At this point we feel that we should clarify the use of the terms 'co-verb' and 'preposition'. Since Chao does not distinguish co-verbs from prepositions and since he uses the term 'preposition' all along, we follow his use of the term 'preposition' whenever we paraphrase or quote statements from his works. However, in discussing his findings, we use 'preposition' when we mean the morpheme under discussion is generally regarded as a real preposition, and we use 'co-verb' when we regard the morpheme as a co-verb.

### I. 2. 1 *Formal Features of Prepositions*

Chao divides "Formal Features of Prepositions" (1968:749)



into three parts:

(1) Lack of aspect markers: prepositions (a) do not have tentative reduplicates, (b) do not have the inchoative suffix *-qílái* 'start to', (c) do not have the indefinite past aspect with *-guo*, (d) rarely have the perfective aspect with *-le*, and (e) have the progressive aspect with *-zhe* only in a few cases. Chao continues to say that the use or non-use of aspect suffixes is a matter of degree, even prepositions which usually do not take such suffixes may in certain contexts take several of them.

What Chao says about the lack of aspects may serve as a very practical test of the preposition-like properties of co-verbs. His observation about the use or non-use of aspect suffixes is correct, and it indicates that such co-verbs have not progressed as far as the others; they still retain more verb-like properties. Therefore, they may be considered co-verbs, not prepositions.

(ii) Chao's second part of "Formal Features of Prepositions" is as follows: Prepositions do not normally serve as centers of predicates. Thus, (a) they do not often occur as the main verbs. (b) In

(1) Nǐ cóng bu cóng Tánxiangshān zǒu?

you from not from Honolulu go

'Are you going by way of Honolulu?'

*cóng* 'from' is a preposition, to be sure, but it is better to regard it as the V-bu-V form of the whole V-V series. (c) Prepositions do not form one-word sentences, even in supplementary answers to questions. (d) Prepositions except as part of a total V-V series, do not often follow an auxiliary verb.

With the exception of (b) above, Chao is quite correct. Notice that in (a), (c) and (d), Chao begins his statement by saying, "Prepositions do not often occur (form or follow) ...," whereas in (b) he simply cites the sentence (1) as a start. What he says