

# Research Overview on the Mandarin Passive Construction “Bei”

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the passive marker “bei” in Mandarin Chinese, exploring its categorial status, derivational relationships, and syntactic structures of both long and short passive forms. The analysis includes multiple linguistic viewpoints on whether “bei” functions as a preposition, verb, or has a dual status. Various scholars’ arguments and counterarguments are presented, including syntactic evidence from coordination tests, reflexive pronouns, and negation tests.

**Keywords:** Passive Marker “bei”; Mandarin Chinese; Syntactic

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## 1. Introduction

Considering the categorial status of Mandarin passive marker *bei* and the derivational relationship between long and short *bei* passives, there are mainly three competing views: *bei* is a preposition (Chen 2002; Her 1985–86; J. Huang 1982; L. Huang 1990; A. Li 1990; S. Li 1994; Li & Thompson 1981; Lü 2000[1980]; McCawley 1992; Tsao 1996; Wang 1970); *bei* is a verb or light verb (Bender 2000; Chiu 1993; Feng 1995; Her 1989, 2009; Hsueh 1989; J. Huang 1999; Huang et al. 2009; Li 2003; S. Tang 2001, 2003, 2004, 2008; Ting 1998; Wang 1992[1943]; Wu 1999; Xiong 2003); or *bei* has the double status of being both verbal and prepositional (Cao 2011; Shi 2005; Shi & Hu 2005). As for the syntactic structures of the long and short passives, while some linguists (Cao 2011; Huang 1999; Huang et al. 2009; Tang 2001, 2003, 2008; Ting 1998;) hold the view that the long and short passives are not derivationally related, others (Hashimoto 1987; Her 2009; Shi 2005; Shi & Hu 2005) argued that the long and short forms have similar underlying structures.

## 2. The “Bei” Construction

### 2.1 “Bei” as a Verb

Huang (1999) and Huang et al. (2009) argued that *bei* behaves like a verb instead of a preposition. The use of subject-oriented adverb as a modifier of the subject, such as *guyi* ‘intentionally’, shows that *bei* can assign a theta role to its subject and this cannot be explained if *bei* is a preposition. The *bei*-DP cannot move across a time phrase or prepose to a sentence-initial position, demonstrating that the *bei*-DP does not behave like a prepositional phrase. The Agent DP and the VP following it form a constituent, excluding *bei* in the coordination test. The binding test indicates that the Agent DP is not the object of *bei* but a subject of the embedded clause since the reflexive pronoun *ziji* must take a subject as its antecedent. Based on the verbal *bei* analysis, Huang (1999) and Huang et al. (2009), following Chiu (1995), Ting (1995, 1996) and Feng (1995), further assumed that the long *bei* passive is a complex predication structure that involves null operator movement, that is, the main verb *bei* selects an active IP as its complement, within which a null operator moves from the object position of the base verb to Spec, IP. The main verb *bei* and the complement IP form a complex predicate, which selects the matrix subject as its single argument. The moved null object is bound by the matrix subject under predication. The evidence that support this hypothesis include unbounded dependency, island effects, the particle *suo* (Chiu 1995) and the resumptive pronoun. Tang (2001) agreed with the verbal nature of *bei* and further assumes that *bei* in the long passive is an ECM verb taking an infinitive clause as its complement.

Huang (1999) and Huang et al. (2009) argued that the structure of the short passive is not derived from the long form via deletion of the Agent DP, but is a control structure that involves A-movement by some evidence. No matter whether *bei* is analyzed as a preposition or a verb, the Agent is not allowed to be deleted. If *bei* is a preposition, the deletion of its object would violate the general prohibition against preposition stranding. If it is a verb, it would behave like other verbs in the similar V-NP-V configuration that does not allow the deletion of the Agent DP either. In contrast to the long passive, the short passive does not exhibit unbounded dependencies, nor does it allow the particle

suo or a resumptive pronoun, and the short passive does not involve A'-movement but A-movement. Following Hoshi's (1991,1994a,b) analysis of English get-passives and Japanese ni-passives, Huang(1999) and Huang et al.(2009) assumed the short passive has a structure that *bei* is a semi-lexical or light verb, selecting an Experiencer subject and a VP complement, in which the Theme object is an empty category PRO that moves to Spec, VP and gets controlled by the matrix subject.

## 2.2 “Bei” as a Dual-Status Marker

Shi and Hu (2005) pointed out some problems of treating *bei* as a verb and advocate the double *bei* analysis. The evidence offered by Huang(1999) that *bei*-DP cannot be preposed to the sentence-initial position as common PPs can is not strong enough because some prepositional phrases cannot be preposed to the sentence-initial position either. The coordination test may also be explained by assuming that the coordinated part involves the omission of the preposition *bei* because Chinese prepositions, when appearing repeatedly, can be omitted. *Bei*-DP can undergo coordination tests, which suggests that the string of *bei* and the Agent DP is a constituent. Fourth, they argue that the reflexive *ziji* ‘self’ test cannot forcefully show that *bei* is not a preposition because the objects of some prepositions can also serve as the antecedents of *ziji*. Shi and Hu (2005) pointed out that the biggest problem in treating *bei* as a verb is revealed from the negation test: When we intend to negate a passive sentence, we have to negate *bei* but not the embedded VP. Chinese verbs must be in the same clause as the elements that negate them, which shows that the complement is a clause. Shi and Hu (2005) then assumed that there are two *bei*'s in the long passive: the passive morpheme *bei* heading the Passive Phrase and the prepositional *bei* taking the Agent DP as its complement. They are designated as *bei*1 and *bei*2. Since the two *bei*'s are adjacent and homophones, the second one undergoes haplology and gets deleted. The short passive is derived from the long passive by deleting the agentive PP.

Liu(2016) found out some problems in Shi and Hu's analysis. The coordination test suggesting that the string of *bei* and the Agent DP is a constituent is a phenomenon of right node raising(RNR), as already pointed out by Huang (1999), and more recently by Xiong (2010). According to Postal (1974), Gazdar (1981), Williams (1981) and Huang (1999) among others, the function of RNR is to identify the constituency status of the raised rightmost part instead of a coordination test.

## 2.3 Long and Short Passive Structures

Liu(2016) argued that *bei* is a verb. The Chinese reflexive *ziji* can be used as either an anaphor or an intensifier. The anaphoric *ziji* appears in argument positions, while the intensifying *ziji* occurs in non-argument positions. According to the analysis provided by Tang (1989), *ziji* can be analyzed on a par with *ta* *ziji* with *ta* being a null pronominal *pro* (i.e. *pro ziji* ). Since *ziji* can be changed into *ta*, *ziji* in this situation is an intensifier, not an anaphor. In this sentence being used by Shi and Hu, *Wo wei Xiaolii zai zijii jia-li gai-le ge chepeng*, the change of *ziji* with *ta* does not make this sentence ungrammatical, which shows that *ziji* is not an anaphor, but an intensifier. Therefore, the *ziji* test being applied by Shi and Hu(2005) is not strictly reasonable. Due to Tang (1989): while a subject *ziji* may be anteceded by a subject or non-subject, an object *ziji* is strictly subject-oriented. Liu further pointed out that in the sentence, *Na-feng xin bei Zhangsani ji-gei-le ziji*. *Ziji* is an anaphor in the object position and it is coindexed with *zhangsan*, which shows that *zhangsan* is the subject of the embedded clause and the DP following *bei* is the subject, not the object of *bei*, and *bei* therefore is a verb and not a preposition. According to recent studies by Huang (2011, 2013, 2014) and Liu (2012), the *bei*-passive allows for both a control and a raising analysis. In order to explain why *bei* exhibits both the control and raising behaviors, Huang (2013, 2014) supposed that *bei* is a semi-lexical verb, the meaning of which may include multiple points in the causative-unaccusative continuum: cause > let > witness > undergo > be affected by > become > exist > be. The chameleonic character of the *bei* passive as either a raising or control structure discussed in Huang's research can only be explained when *bei* is treated as a semi-lexical verb but not as a preposition or as having the dual status of a passive morpheme and a preposition.

As for the derivational relationship between long and short *bei* passives, there have been two main approaches to describe it: the non-uniform approach, under which the long and short passives have distinct underlying structures, and the uniform approach, under which the long and short passives behave rather similarly. Liu(2016) argued for a third approach, according to which the long passive can be further divided into the local long passive and the long-distance passive, and the local long passive may have the same underlying structure as the

short passive, while the long-distance passive does not have a short form. There are some evidence of idiom chunk, which shows that there indeed exists two kinds of long passives, since the application of idiom chunk in both of the two long passives does not demonstrate the same situation, that is one is grammatical, the other is not.

## 2.4 Negation and Aspectual Differences

Shi and Hu(2005) argued that in the formation of negative sentences, it is *bei* but not the embedded VP that can be negated. Since in Chinese negators and the predicates that they negate must be in the same clause, they argue that the complement of *bei* should not be a clause. Liu(2016) found some examples that show the grammaticality of negative passives with the negator *bu* and the predicates in the same clause, which shows that the evidence of Shi and Hu(2005) is not strong enough to prove the complement of *bei* is not a clause. Liu(2016) mentioned that the point is different negators, *bu* and *meiyou*. Li and Thompson (1981) pointed out that *meiyou* denies the completion of an event, while *bu* denies an event without denying the completion of it. Lin (2003a) distinguished *bu* from *mei* in that they select complements of different aspectualities. The negator *mei* is like the negative counterpart of the perfective marker *le*. It selects an event as its complement, indicating the non-existence or non-realization of an event. On the other hand, the negator *bu* aspectually selects as its complement a stative situation that requires no input of energy to bring it about and has no inherent end boundary. Therefore, the semantics of *bei* do not allow the negator *meiyou* to occur below it, since *bei* means 'to undergo or to suffer from some event', and *meiyou* negates the existence of an event. It is impossible for one to state that someone or something underwent or suffered an event, and then to deny the existence of that event. Differently from *meiyou*, if *bu* occurs in the complement of *bei* it does not cause any semantic conflict with *bei*. Liu (2004) stated that *mei*(you) negates perfective aspect or currently relevant state (CRS, which is marked by sentence-final *le* and indicates inchoativity) while *bu* negates the verbs without being marked with aspect or CRS. The fact that *bu* can occur below *bei* while *meiyou* cannot indicates that there is no AspP or CrsP in the complement of *bei*. Taking a clause without AspP or CrsP to be non-finite, Liu(2016) concluded that the verb *bei* selects a non-finite clausal category as its complement. Liu(2016) also explained the reason of *le* and *guo* occurring in the embedded clause by Functional Restructuring.

## 2.5 Analyticity vs. Syntheticity in Chinese Syntax

Huang(2015) introduced analyticity of Modern Chinese syntax and Old Chinese typological properties as well as the contrast between modern Chinese, Old Chinese and English. As for Modern Chinese syntax, Chinese verbs exhibit a high degree of simplicity or purity in several ways, with the following prominent properties: the light verb construction, pseudo noun incorporation, compounds or phrasal accomplishments, verbal atelicity, and absence of verbal coercion, and Chinese nouns also have some particular properties: numeral classifier for count nouns, localizer for locational nouns, discontinuous prepositions and overt positive degree marker. Modern Chinese is consistently more analytic than English, with respect to the structure of every lexical category. In contrast to Modern Chinese, Old Chinese exhibits a fully array of properties that make it a relatively synthetic language, and Old Chinese behaved more like Modern English, in the relevant typological properties. Old Chinese has the following properties concerning lexical categories: denominal verbs: no need for light verbs, true incorporation: no pseudo incorporation, simplex causatives: no compounds or phrasal accomplishments, countable nouns: no need for numeral classifiers, and nouns qua locations: no need for localizers. In explaining the analyticity and syntheticity of Modern Chinese and Modern English, Huang introduces the feature of functional categories. In Modern English, the feature of functional categories is strong and triggers movement, while in Chinese the feature of functional categories is not strong and causes agree, instead of movement. The difference can be seen in *wh-in-situ*, discontinuous *wh-the-hell* construction, absence of negative quantifiers, absence of reciprocal pronouns, absence of bi-nominal *each*, Kaynean word order *par excellence* and absence of canonical gapping.

## 3. Conclusion

When considering the syntactic structure of *bei* xx, Huang and Liu(2014) thought *bei* xx is not a special syntactic structure which passivizes intransitive verbs, but some light verb structures which imply some causative and conative meaning like other common Chinese passives. The difference between causative and conative is that between physical causation and mental causation. Huang and Liu(2014) thought

that it is not the intransitive verbs be passivized, but rather the implied light verb whose elementary semantics is equivalent to CAUSE and DO, and generally refers to several events denoting causative and executive. According to Mei( 1989,2012), there is a light verb in these xx construction. If the light verb is expressed by the lexical verb, CAUSE, the result is an analytical pattern. If the light verb is an affix or a silent zero affix, the following verb needs to be moved up to keep its structural position, so as to obtain a synthetic pattern. Huang and Liu(2014) believed that the xx pattern is the passive form of this causative structure. Considering the intransitive structure of xx and intransitive verb of Modern Chinese passives, they think the intransitive structure of xx is actually transitive, and contains a light verb. Since the [-strong] feature of the light verb, the transitive structure of xx stay in situ and causes agree and make a phrasal element which cannot give the following object case, and the result is the intransitive of this xx structure, which demonstrates the syntheticity like Old Chinese.

All in all, the light verb in both English and Old Chinese have a high degree of affixation and [+strong] feature, which makes xx merge into the light verb, that is, movement. While the light verb in Modern Chinese has a low degree of inflection and [-strong] feature, which forms agreement with xx.

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