On Delexicalization Features of Light Verbs in Mandarin

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Abstract:
Delexicalization is the tendency of meaning, reflecting the structural feature of light verbs. It emerges from collocation usages of semantic sharing. Based on the corpus and exemplified with “打” and “吃”, the current paper addresses the delexicalizing features of Chinese light verbs, while proposing a lexicographic approach concerning the conventionality of light verb construction and endeavoring to apply it to the learning of foreign languages.

Keywords:
Delexicalization; Light Verb; Mandarin Chinese

1. INTRODUCTION

Light verbs function both as full lexical units and as semi-lexical ones. Dictionary entries dedicated to them are always long and far from exhaustive. Light verbs (LVs), a term launched by generative grammarians and used by many followers [1–3] refers to a class of verbs which are supposed to be semantically bleached and lacking enough thematic force to function as predicates independently. For instance, English verbs “give”, “take” and Chinese verbs “打 (da)”, “吃 (chi)” are all light verbs. When used together with different collocates, their literal meanings are bleached. Light verb constructions are common cross-linguistically thus show linguistic universality.

Just as in other types of languages, light verbs are extensively used in Mandarin Chinese. Several linguists [4–10] have focused on Mandarin Chinese light verbs regarding their role and semantics. Several prominent features are attached to light verbs: in a syntactic sense, the light verbs reflect their syntactic functions with the aid of verb or verb phrase as the object as well as noun phrase as the object; in a semantic sense, light verbs exhibit vagueness of meaning or tend to be polysemous. The meaning focus is usually on objects and the meaning of the verb tends to be obscure and is usually decided by collocates followed.

The established studies on light verbs are almost defined in the generative linguistic sphere, emphasizing syntactic system, conception reconstruction and semantic bleaching. This paper attempts to put light verb study in a broader scope by exploring their meaning features with analysis of delexicalized features of some typical light verbs in Mandarin Chinese and adopt corpus-linguistic method to exhibit the delexicalization phenomenon.
2. CHARACTERISTICS OF LIGHT VERB CONSTRUCTIONS AND SOME VOICES OF DELEXICALIZATION

The meanings and functions of light verbs are both context-dependent. They are lexical items which provide simultaneously semantic contributions and discourse functions to their constructions, and are best accounted for against a theoretical background in which grammatical function is taken to be continuous with, rather than dichotomously opposed to, semantic content. A light verb construction (LVC) is headed by a verb which typically has a very wide distribution—it is polysemous and is usually associated with a wide variety of patterns of argument selection.

Jespersen and his followers hold that light verbs have no semantics of their own. The current paper aims to challenge this point and argues that light verbs display lexical polysemy and show “constructional meaning” in LVCs. We cannot always isolate a distinct meaning of the light verb apart from the construction that it heads. In other words, it is only in construction with specific arguments that the contribution of the light verb can be determined. In this sense, as a result light verbs are delexicalized.

Sinclair launched the delexicalization conception system in 1991 [4]. Delexicalization is a phenomenon that high-frequently used words lose their literal semantic content. This phenomenon reflects meaning relationship among lexical collocations and represents co-selection of different forms in the communicative process. Delexicalization is the result of multiple meaning infections in a context. It is especially common for high frequently used words, including verbs, nouns, modifiers as well as intensifiers. Most light verbs are high frequently used.

3. CASE STUDY

A. The meanings and delexicalizing features of “打” in Mandarin Chinese

According to the Contemporary Chinese Dictionary and the 800 words in Contemporary Chinese, there are 21 meanings when “打” acts as a verb. Each multi-words unit, or verb collocation has a unitary meaning:

1) Knock or hit by hand or using a tool: 打敲 (beat a drum)
2) Break, smash (container, egg, etc.): 碗打破了 (The bowl is broken) 鸡飞蛋打 (The hen has flown away and the eggs are broken)
3) Beat, fight, attack: 打架 (fight)
4) Deal with sb. or sth.: 打官司 (go to court) 打交道 (come into contact with)
5) Construct, build: 打坝 (construct a dam)
6) Make (articles of daily use or food): 打家具 (make furniture)
7) Mix, stir: 打馅儿 (stir filling)
8) Tie up: 打包裹 (pack one’s luggage)
9) Knit, weave: 打毛衣 (knit a sweater)
10) Draw, paint, make a mark on: 打蜡 (wax) 打问号 (put a question mark)
11) Open, dig: 打井 (dig a well), 打眼儿 (drill a hole)
12) Hoist, raise: 打灯笼 (carry a lantern) 打伞 (hold an umbrella)
13) Send, dispatch: 打电话 (make a phone call)
14) Buy: 打酒 (buy a drink) 打车票 (buy a ticket)
15) Catch, hunt: 打鱼 (catch a fish)
16) Reap, collect 打柴 (gather firewood)
17) Calculate, work out 打草稿 (work out a draft) 打主意 (think of a plan)
18) Do, engage in 打杂儿 (do odds and ends)
19) play 打球 (play ball)
20) Go through some physical action 打哈欠 (yawn)
21) Adopt, use 打比喻 (use a metaphor) 打官腔 (talk like a bureaucrat)

It seems that the meaning of “打” (da) as a single word has become obscure. Only when it collocates with other words can the concrete meaning be displayed. The delexicalizing features of “打” (da) are reflected more apparently through the analysis based on CCL Corpus.

500 concordances with 48926 Chinese characters are collected from CCL. “打” (da) is the node word. One concordance is selected every other 10 ones. The corpus-driven analysis shows that there are 4 types of usages with the delexicalizing features to varying degrees. The first type of usage of “打” has the basic meaning “Knock or hit by hand or using a tool”, such as “殴打”, “打鼓”, and “拳打脚踢”. There are 18 such cases among 131. There does not exist any delexicalizing feature shown in this type of usages. The second type of usages such as “打折”, “打狂”, “打疲劳战”, “打印”, “打工”, “打字”, “打包”, “打开”, “计算”, “打官司”, “打胜仗”, “打赢”, “打输”, “打乱”, “打乱盘”, “打交道”, “打扮”, “打牌”, “打太极拳”, “打电话”, “打招呼”, and “打哑谜” seems to be a unit of meaning. These collocations has been established units of meaning. As a light verb, “打” has even lost its basic meaning “to hit or beat” whose meanings are decided by the collocates. In other words, it is the “embedded meaning” in the established collocations that makes “打” display delexicalizing features. There are 61 such cases among 131. The third type of usages includes “打下”, “打好(基础)”, “打破(束缚)”, and “打出(牌子)”. There are 31 such cases among 131. They are typical resultative construction usage in which “打” is used to yield results with the aid of some prepositions. Its delexicalizing features as a verb are also displayed in this type of usage but seem to be less typical compared with the fourth type. The fourth type of usages includes “打班长起到每一个战士”, “打明天起”, and “打这儿往东走”. There are 4 cases among 131. “打” in these collocations is a colloquial use with the Northern China dialectic feature. In this case, the lexical features as a verb has almost disappeared and it has transferred into a preposition with the meaning of “since” or “from”.

B. The meanings and delexicalizing features of “吃” in Mandarin Chinese

According to the Contemporary Chinese Dictionary and the 800 words in Contemporary Chinese, there are 10 meanings when “吃” acts as a verb.

1) Put food into one’s mouth, chew and swallow, eat: 吃饭 (have dinner)
2) Eat at a place that sells food; eat by certain standard: 吃食堂 (have meals at a dining hall) 吃小灶 eat from a special pot
3) Live off, live on 吃老本 (live off past achievements)
4) Absorb liquid, soak up 这种纸不吸墨 (This paper does not absorb ink well)
5) One object entering into another 吃刀 (penetration of a cutting tool)
6) (Mostly in war or a chess game) annihilate, wipe out 吃掉敌人一个团 (wipe out an enemy regiment)
7) Understand, grasp 他的心思我还吃不透 (I’m not sure what’s in his mind)
8) Endure, withstand, take 吃得消 (can endure or handle hardship)
9) Suffer, incur, bear 吃亏 (suffer losses) 吃惊 (be startled)
10) Consume, exhaust 吃力 (laborious) 吃劲 (energy-consuming)

With the basic meaning of “to put food into one’s mouth, chew and swallow”, the first type of usage of “吃” does
not display any delexicalizing feature. There are 76 cases among 113 ones. The usages such as “吃财政饭” and “吃自助” mean “to eat by certain standard”. “财政饭” or “自助” are not the objects of the verb but a standard or a way of eating. People do not use “喝(drink)自助” just because “喝自助” is not a unit of meaning. So in the second type “吃” has certain delexicalizing features as a single verb. As for the third type, “吃惊, 吃力, 吃苦, 吃败仗” seem to be more holistic and more established as collocations which are verb units. “吃” as a single verb in these multi-word verb units has nearly lost its original meaning. So this is a typical delexicalization. The fourth type is the resultative construction usage. “吃得消” or “吃透” indicate a certain result. The meanings are established. Each word as a grammatical element is also habitually formed and cannot be altered. In other words, both the form and meaning are holistic. Thus the delexicalizing features are obvious.

C. Discussion

The previous corpus-based study of features and tendencies of delexicalized verbs in Chinese shows that the heavy-duty verbs, to varying degrees, lost their original semantic content and displayed typical semantic and structural patterns, and that such delexicalized usages have become the norm. Delexicalized verbs in Mandarin Chinese like “吃” and “打” gradually lack an independent meaning while the grammatical function tends to be stronger. It is worth noting that they have obtained a greater capability in collocation with other words.

In lexical acquisition process, which includes both English as a foreign language acquisition and Chinese as a second language acquisition in this paper, light verb acquisition is a difficult part. Being lack of idiomaticity is a common weakness of the speeches of non-native speakers. Due to the delexicalizing features, delexicalization contributes to the native-likeness of everyday use of target language. Therefore, if the light verbs are taken in, stored and processed as a holistic unit together with the other collocates that co-occur ultra-frequently, and learners do not attach particular meaning to particular verb, delexicalized verbs are believed to entail a delexicalized idiomaticity that they are preferred by the speakers in use.

4. CONCLUSION

As a unit of meaning, the light verb constructions display semantics of their own and play grammatical and textual functions simultaneously. If light verbs are treated separately as a single word, their meanings tend to be vague. But if the functional and holistic view is taken, the light verbs show both semantic and structural patterns. There is a tendency that light verbs are delexicalized and the semantic contents are embedded in the other collocates that frequently concur with them.

Holding native-likeness is the standard of foreign language acquisition. Analysis of delexicalizing features of light verbs can be applied to vocabulary acquisition and the intake of some highly-frequent used verb collocations is an ideal way of light verb comprehension, storage and extraction.

References


