An Event Integration Approach to Chinese Instrumental Constructions

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Previous literature reveals that instrumental constructions (ICs) in Chinese are broadly divided into three types: marked instrumental constructions, instrument-subject constructions and instrument-object constructions. The first refers to ones whose instrumental components are introduced by prepositions, like 用 yòng, 拿 ná and 以 yǐ, while the last two are without prepositional markers:

(1) a. Marked instrumental construction:

我 用　这 把 刀 切 肉。(Wu 1996)
wǒ yòng zhè bǎ dāo qiē ròu
I YONG this CL knife cut meat.
'I cut meat with this knife'.

b. Instrument-subject construction:

那 台　缝纫机　　做 了 三　百　　套 衣服 了。(Wang 1984)
nà tái　féngrènjī　　zuò le sān bǎi　　tào yīfú le
that CL sewing machine make LE three hundred CL clothes LE.
'That sewing machine has made three hundred suits of clothes'.

c. Instrument-object construction:

吃 大碗。(Shao 2015)
chī dà-wǎn
eat big bowl.
'Eat with a big bowl'.

(1a) demonstrates a situation where the instrument 刀 dāo 'knife' is introduced by prepositional marker 把 bǎ. (1b) and (1c) show cases where there are no markers, but the instrument 缝纫机 féngrènjī 'sewing machine' in (1b) functions as the subject, while the instrument 大碗 dàwǎn 'big bowl' in (1c) serves as the object.

The three-way classification is based on syntax without considering semantic factors and thus couldn't exactly reflect the overall picture of the family of ICs. Furthermore, despite the same conceptual concepts - all ICs basically contain "instrument-manipulation event" and "act-on event", different syntactic representations imply distinct features of event integration. Moreover, previous studies mainly focus on a certain type of ICs (Wang 1984; Wu 1996; Shao 2015), don't consider the whole family of ICs, let alone explore how different ICs are structured and how event integration is at work in forming different ICs.

This study, with data collected from BLCU Corpus Center (BCC) and from previous literature, aims to comb the family of ICs, and explores the degree of event integration of different ICs and the cognitive mechanism behind them under the framework of event integration theory (Talmy 2000) so as to contribute to the reclassification of ICs family and the exploration of the structuring of different ICs.

Put concretely, this study takes the roles instrumental elements play, namely intermediary or facilitating roles (Koenig et al. 2007), into consideration, and divides ICs into 8 types. This study is on instrumental category, whose prototypical concept is "Agent-Instrument-Patient". However, syntactically, this sequence is not always integrally shown in concrete ICs, like object-instrument constructions. Therefore, this study creatively proposes "overt events / total events" and states that the higher the ratio is, the lower the degree of event integration is. It's found that the family of ICs exhibits a continuum of the degree of event integration. This study also reveals that the cognitive mechanism behind the structuring of ICs is event integration, which is three-folded: (1) event integration falls into single-chained or double-chained; (2) apart from explicit argument integration, implicit argument integration is also the hub of event integration; (3) the mismatch between predicates and arguments is an essential aspect of event integration.

At the global level, this study is the first attempt to apply event integration theory to ICs and more concrete studies can be conducted on (non-prototypical) ICs or on the representation of the instrumental category in other languages and finally contribute to typological studies on instrumental category in the future.

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