The syntax of possessive arguments in Mandarin Chinese

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The alienability between a possessum and its possessor (regarding whether a nominal entity holds an intrinsic relation with its possessor) has received much attention in the linguistic literature (e.g. Antrim, 1996; Coene & D’hulst, 2003). An inalienable relationship is defined as relational (e.g. kinship terms such as mom and son) or part-whole (e.g. body parts such as face and palm).

Inalienable relations on nouns are analogous to the thematic relations of verbs and their arguments (Lin, 2007). In this paper, we examine the argument requirements and syntactic realizations associated with inalienable nouns. We demonstrate that the lexical representation of an inalienable noun is responsible for syntactic alternations regarding three constructions in Mandarin: the secondary predication of BA structures, de omission, and the double nominative construction.

We treat inalienable nouns (e.g. (1)) as subcategorizing for a possessor argument within a small-clause XP (Alexiadou, 2003, in line with Marantz, 1993; cf. Castiillo, 2001; Español-Echevarria, 1997). Alienable nouns (2), on the other hand, do not subcategorize for an internal argument. The possessive relation between a possessor and an alienable noun is constructed by means of an upper functional head (above NP at the level of DP). Processing evidence supported this analysis as Lin (2007) showed that in sentence comprehension, it is easier to integrate an inalienable noun with its possessor than an alienable noun.

(1) Structure of inalienable nouns

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XP(SC) [-alienable]
  [possessor] X'
    X IN (inalienable noun)
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In this paper, we provide evidence from Mandarin Chinese that demonstrates the various syntactic realizations of (in)alienability.

**Mandarin BA construction**

In Mandarin, inalienable nouns are not overtly distinguishable from alienable nouns at the morphological level. Nevertheless, like the Korean multiple object constructions, the grammaticality of the secondary predicates embedded within the Mandarin BA construction is contingent on the alienability of the embedded noun phrase. Only when the DPs inside the secondary predicate hold an inalienable relationship can they appear within one predicate (e.g. 3a vs. 3b-c).

(3) a. wo ba ta daduan shuang tui
   I BA he break two leg
   ‘I broke his two legs. (lit. I broke him two legs.)’

   b. *wo ba ta daduan gu bang
      I BA he break drum stick
      ‘I broke his drum sticks.’

   c. *wo ba ta daduan yanjiang
      I BA he break lecture
      ‘I broke (interfered) his lecture.’

**De omission in Mandarin**

Mandarin possessive phrases are headed by the functional head *de* (see (2)). Possessive phrases containing alienable nouns require the presence of this functional head as a linker between the possessor and the possessum (e.g. *I de pencil; *I pencil). With inalienable nouns, however, *de* can be omitted (e.g. *I (de) brother ‘my brother*). Our analysis predicts...
that inalienable noun phrases involving small-clauses allow the possessor to appear without a functional linker. Alienable nouns, however, do not have a null argument position to license de omission.

Double nominative construction in Mandarin

Lastly, we examine the double nominative construction in Mandarin (Teng, 1974, see (4)). We reconsider Teng's data in light of the different syntactic representations associated with (in)alienable nouns and provide a unified analysis based on nominal argument structures and the properties of stage and individual level predicates (as suggested by Ogawa, 2001).

(4) ni nyuer gou xingyun de, wo shuo
you daughter enough lucky DE, I say
'I say your daughter is lucky enough.'

Selected References


