

Voice in Chinese

A systemic functional perspective

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The present paper revisits a long-standing controversial issue in Chinese grammar — the passive voice — from a systemic functional approach. This study examines how the *ba*- and *bei*-constructions control the flow of information in text and shows that they are textually motivated. It argues, by differentiating the *bei*-construction from the OSV structure, and the *ba*-construction from the SOV and SVO structures, that the two constructions are not options of THEME, but form a separate level within the grammar. It then describes the system of VOICE in the language. Furthermore, facing the increasing productivity of the *ba*- and *bei*-constructions in process types other than transitive material processes, this study examines this trend of increasing productivity.

1. Introduction

The issue of voice in Chinese has attracted much scholarly debate. In general the *bei*-construction is widely regarded as the counterpart of the English passive voice but it is the OSV structure, rather than the *bei*-construction, that is believed to be the closest translation equivalent of the English passive because the *bei*-construction is usually used in an adversative context (Tsai 1972; Yu 1972, 1981; Chu 1979; Tsao 1982; Li & Thompson 1981; Tsee 1990; Fong 1994; to name just a few). Some claim that the *bei*-construction is a 'passive' construction and its 'active' counterpart is the *ba*-construction instead of the unmarked SVO structure (Lin 1981). Others argue that the *bei*- and *ba*-constructions are simply 'mirror images' (Hsueh 1989). These different points of view reveal the controversial nature of the issue.

This study examines the *ba*-construction and the *bei*-construction and describes the system of VOICE in Chinese from a systemic functional angle. It

begins by examining previous studies on the issue and discusses the difficulties that they confront. It then shows that apart from the system of THEME (including INFORMATION), there exists a secondary system in Chinese which helps to control information flow in the text. It shows that the *ba*- and *bei*-constructions are textually motivated by examining seven short discourses. It argues that these two constructions are not options in the system of THEME. In order to achieve this, it discusses the distinction between THEME and VOICE, and the differences between the *bei*-construction and the OSV structure, and the *ba*-construction and the SOV and SVO structures. Finally, the paper describes a system of VOICE in Chinese. However, as these two constructions are currently extending their usage into process types other than the transitive material one (i.e. the process type that construes the events of doing and happening in the physical world), and as this increasing productivity constitutes a cause of the controversy in previous studies, this study also examines this trend.

2. Studies of passive voice in Chinese

Previous studies on this issue have mainly focused on the recognition criteria used to differentiate a 'passive' clause from an active one, on the conditions under which the *bei*- and *ba*-constructions can be used, and on the nature of the subject, object and verbal complements of the two constructions. Most studies are based on the premise that the passive voice exists in Chinese just as in English, yet no study has challenged this or shown that the resource of VOICE indeed exists in Chinese.

Scholarly arguments can be grouped into three general approaches: those concentrating on (1) subject, object and their order; (2) the sense of passivity; and (3) the mirror image argument. Some studies, however, explicitly and/or implicitly adopt more than one stance.

The first approach represents the most common point of view. Previous studies adopting this approach can be subdivided into two sub-groups. The first identifies the subject as the agent of the verb and the object as the recipient. Studies in this group differentiate a 'passive' clause from an active one simply by the order of subject and object. The second goes one step further, arguing that the subject (or topic) of a clause is always encoded in the first nominal group. A clause is active when the subject is an agent of the verb, but passive when the subject is a patient (Fong 1994).

All these studies consider the marker *bei* in the *bei*-construction as the ‘passive’ marker; many, but not all, regard *ba* in the *ba*-construction as the ‘active’ marker. Many studies take the stance that the *ba*-construction and the SOV and SVO structures are all active, but none of them examines the functional difference between them. Similarly, many consider that both the *bei*-construction and the OSV structure are passive, but no studies mention their functional differences. Furthermore, a few studies seek to identify the participant in the single-participant clause as agent or patient, but do not address the *bei*- and *ba*-constructions where there is no agent-recipient relationship between the two participants.

Studies adopting the second approach resort to the ‘sense of passivity’ (an instinct assumed to be possessed by native speakers of a language) to differentiate a passive clause from an active one (Tiee 1990). They argue that the subject of a passive clause must be a ‘recipient’ of the verb. However, no studies address the following issues: first, the growing productivity of the *bei*-construction as it extends from material to other clause types (see Section 6); second, the functional difference between the *bei*-construction and the OSV structure (see Section 4.2); and third, the distinction between ergative and transitive points of view.

Studies adopting the third approach claim that the *bei*-construction is not a ‘passive’ construction by arguing that not all *bei*-constructions are passive and that not every clause with a ‘passive’ interpretation is formed with *bei*. However, these studies do not argue that there is no passive voice in Chinese (Hsueh 1989). They consider that the difference between the *ba*- and *bei*-constructions is merely a shift of emphasis, from the Actor in the *ba*-construction to the Goal in the *bei*-construction. As in the second approach, no studies address the growing productivity of *bei*-construction as it extends from material to other clause types and the distinction between ergative and transitive points of view.

From a systemic functional perspective, these three approaches point to the necessity of distinguishing: (1) THEME as a primary system from VOICE as a secondary one; (2) the transitive perspective from the ergative perspective; and (3) transitive material processes from other processes. They also indicate the need to investigate the increasing productivity of the *ba*- and *bei*-constructions beyond transitive material clauses.

3. Analyses and discussion

The system of VOICE is not a universal phenomenon. According to Matthiessen (2004: 651), “languages may have a ‘mediating’ system of VOICE that specifies different ways of ‘distributing’ participant roles in the clause”, but makes it clear that there are certainly languages that do not have such a system. Thus, the first question in this study is not what constitutes the Chinese VOICE system, but whether, apart from the systems of THEME and INFORMATION, there is indeed another textual system in Chinese that distributes participants in the clause as message. Since the *bei*-construction is commonly perceived as the ‘passive’ voice and the *ba*-construction as its ‘active’ counterpart (see Ding et al 1979; Fong 1994; Li and Thompson 1981; Lin 1981; Song 1996; Tiee 1990; Wang 1998 to name just a few), this study first examines whether the two constructions are textually motivated.

According to Halliday (1997), whenever VOICE exists in a language, its major function is to control the flow of information in text. Consequently, in order to examine ‘passive’ clauses in their co-texts, the data for this study have all been drawn from one text, the Chinese translation of the English novel, *Murder on the Orient Express*. The ‘naturalness’ of the translation has been approved by two native speakers of Chinese. The percentage of the *bei*-construction is lower than the percentage of passives in the original English novel but higher than that in another Chinese detective novel written by Ní Kǎ, *Weì Lái Shēn Fèn* (“The Future Identity”), with averages of 0.57%, 3.85% and 0.16% relevant clauses respectively. The *ba*-construction has no counterpart in English but its percentage in the data is lower than in the other Chinese novel, with 0.98% and 1.53% respectively.

3.1 The *bei*- and *ba*-constructions and textual motivation

There are a total of 56 *bei*-constructions and 99 *ba*-constructions in the data. It is impossible here to analyze all the contexts in which the two types of construction are employed. Instead, the present study examines seven short discourses from the data and shows that the employment of the *bei*-construction, independent of any notion of “adversity”, is textually motivated, as is the *ba*-construction. They distribute participants in a clause as message, and regulate the flow of information.

Discourse (1) is part of a narration about the relationship between a murder victim and a kidnapping case in America. In this discourse, Mr and Mrs

Armstrong, as ‘known’ information, are the topical Theme in [1] and [2], whereas their daughter is the information focus. The topical Theme switches from the parents to their daughter as the discourse moves on because, as the kidnap victim, the daughter is naturally given thematic status in the clauses that follow. Here, apart from the notion of adversity, the *bei*-construction in [3] makes it possible to assign her the role of topical Theme in the clause in an ‘unmarked’ way, as otherwise the clause would be a ‘marked’ one, with the role of topical Theme being assigned to an unknown entity, viz. *rén* (people). We can say that the *bei*-construction is here textually motivated.

Discourse (1)

- [1] *tāmen fūfù dīngjū Měiguó,*
they husband&wife stay America
- [2] — *shēng yǒu yī míng ài nǚ.*
(they) born have one MEAS love daughter
- [3] *zhè míng zhǎng shàng míngzhū zài sān suì shí bèi rén bāngpiào,*
this MEAS palm upon pearl at three year time BEI people kidnap
- [4] *bìng lèsuǒ yī bǐ qí gāo de shújīn.*
and extort one MEAS strange high NOM ransom
(They lived in America and had a daughter that they were very fond of.
At the age of three, their beloved daughter was kidnapped by someone
who demanded a large ransom.)

In Discourse (2), Poirot explains how the kidnapper — Cassetti — escaped the law. In this monologue, *tā* (he, referring to Cassetti) remains the topical Theme of every clause throughout the whole paragraph and the *bei*-construction is employed in [11] to make this possible. If the *bei*-construction had not been used, the Actor of this material clause *dàjiā* (everybody) would have become the topical Theme of [11] and occupied the clause-initial position — in other words, the *bei*-construction is here also textually motivated.

Discourse (2)

- [5] *dànshì tā jītún le dà bǐ bù yì zhī cái,*
but he hoard ASP large MEAS NEG righteous ASSOC money
- [6] *jiāyǐ tā shǒutóu yòu zhuā-jǐn le xǔduō shèhuì xiǎnyào **
further he hand-head again hold tight ASP much society prominent
* *dì bǎobǐng,*
ASSOC unfavourable evidence
- [7] — *liyòng tāmen dì yíngxiǎnglì,*
(who) make use of their POSS influence

- [8] *tā zuìhòu jìngnéng yǐ jìshù shàng zuì zhèng bù zú **
 he finally able with technical upon sin evidence NEG enough *
 * *ér tuō shēn fǎ wài.*
 then escape body law outside
- [9] *jìnguǎn rúcǐ, ruò bù shì tā jiǎohuá duō duān,*
 even that if NEG be he tricky many way
- [10] — *méng guò le shèhuì ěr mù,*
 (he) deceive through ASP society ear eye
- [11] *tā zǎo bèi dàjiā jǐ wàn dāo guǎ le.*
 he early BEI everybody give ten thousand knife cut ASP
 (But he piled up an enormous amount of unlawful money. He also held
 a large amount of unfavourable evidence about those socially prominent
 figures and they made use of their influence, so that he was finally
 acquitted due to a technicality. Even so, if he was not tricky enough, he
 would have been lynched by the populace.)

Discourse (3) serves to introduce a new character — Mary Dagenham. The narration is about what has happened to her, so she is the topical Theme of the whole text. Furthermore, the text exhibits a typical Theme-chain structure in Chinese; the elliptical Theme/Subject serves as a reference to create a cohesive link between the clauses. Again, the *bei*-construction in [16] enables the chain to continue through the elliptical Theme/Subject because if the *bei*-construction had not been used here, the Theme of [16] would have been *chē shàng guò qiáng de nuǎnqì* (the overheated train).

Discourse (3)

- [12] *Mǎlǐ Dàiběnhàn dǎcóng tóu tiān xīngqīsì líkāi Bāgédá yǐlái,*
 Mary Debenham since first day Thursday leaves Baghdad till now
- [13] — *jiù bùcéng shuì hǎo.*
 (she) then NEG:pf sleep good
- [14] *dào Jiěrkùkè de chē shàng zài Mósūěr de bīngquǎn, **
 to Kirkuk ASSOC car upon at Mosul ASSOC guest house,
 * *yǐj zuóyè zài chē shàng — dōu shuì de hěn bù tàshí.*
 and last night at car upon (she) all sleep CC very NEG solid
- [15] — *zhēng zhe yǎnjīng,*
 (she) open ASP eye
- [16] — *bèi chē shàng guò qiáng de nuǎnqì mèn de fāhuāng.*
 (she) BEI car upon too strong NOM heating bored CC mad
- [17] *tā pá qǐ shēn lái,*
 she crawl up body come

- [18] — *wǎng wài kuikàn.*
 (she) toward outside peer
 (Mary Debenham had had little sleep since she left Baghdad on Thursday. Neither in the train to Kirkuk, nor in the guest house at Mosul, nor last night on the train had she slept properly. Now, tired of the overheated compartment, she opened her eyes, got up and peered outside.)

Discourse (4) is an interview conducted as part of Poirot's investigation. During the interview, he asks the secretary of the murdered man why he went to Persia. So the secretary naturally assigns himself the status of topical Theme in his response to the question. This is made possible in [22] by the *bei*-construction in an 'unmarked' way, as otherwise the clause would be a 'marked' one or the topical Theme would be given to an unknown entity, viz. *rén* (people). It is obvious that all the *bei*-constructions in the above discourse regulate the flow of information (though semantically carrying an adversity effect).

Discourse (4)

- [19] “*nǐ zài nǎlǐ yǒu hé guìgàn?*”
 you at there have what doing
- [20] “*wǒ běnlái shì cóng Niūyuē qù kànkàn [[kāicǎi shíyóu de]]**
 I originally EMP from New York go see-see exploit oil SUB
 * *shēngyī jīhuì de.*
 business opportunity EMP
- [21] *nǐ dàgài bù xiǎng tīng wǒ zhe fangmian de fēi huà ba.*
 you perhaps NEG want listen I this aspect ASSOC useless talk NTR:ass
- [22] *fǎnzhèng, wǒ yǔ yǒurén zài shēngyī shàng bèi rén shuǎ le.*
 in fact I and friend at business upon BEI people trick ASP
 (“What were you doing there?” “I went there from New York to see if there was any opportunity in the oil exploiting business. But I'm sure you don't want to hear all the details. In fact, my friend and I were cheated in this business.”)

On the basis of these first four discourses, we can see that apart from the adversity effect, the employment of the *bei*-construction enables a certain participant to occupy the thematically prominent position, i.e. clause-initial position, so that:

- (1) the information focus of a previous clause can become the topical Theme in subsequent clauses, and follow the change of topic in the discourse, as in Discourse (1);

- (2) a particular participant can remain the Theme of the whole discourse, as in Discourse (2);
- (3) a topical Theme/topic chain can be continued in the discourse, as in Discourse (3); and
- (4) the Subject of a question in an initiating turn can remain the Subject in the responding turn, as in Discourse (4).

The above functions are not exclusive, but they suggest that the *bei*-constructions are textually motivated.

Discourses (5) to (7) concern *ba*-constructions. In written Chinese, *jiāng* may be used as a marker instead of *ba*, as in the *jiāng*-construction in clauses [23] to [25] and [27] in Discourse 6.

Discourse (6) describes Poirot's experiment, and the text therefore focuses on the actions that he carried out. Here, apart from one 'unmarked' material clause [26], clauses [23] to [25] and [27] are *jiāng*-construction clauses. As a result, information prominence is assigned to the Process/Predicator in each clause plus the circumstance. In other words, the four *jiāng*-constructions in this discourse are employed so that the Processes form part of the focus of information. In short, their employment is textually motivated.

Discourse (5)

- [23] *Báilúo jiāng liǎng quān tiēsī zhǎn-píng,*
Poirot BA two MEAS wire extend-flat
- [24] *ránhòu — jí jǐnshèn de jiāng fénhuà de zhǐpiàn fàng*
then (he) very carefully NOM BA burnt ASSOC paper piece put
zài yī quān tiēsī shàng,
at one MEAS wire upon
- [25] — *zài jiāng líng yī quān tiēsī fù zài shàngtòu,*
(he) again BA another one MEAS wire cover at upon head
- [26] — *yòng xiǎo qiánzǐ jiā hǎo.*
(he) use small pliers clap good
- [27] *tā jiāng liǎng quān tiēsī qīngqīng fang **
he BA two MEAS wire slightly put
** zài diǎnrán de jiǔjīng dēng shàng.*
at burning NOM spirit lamp upon
(Poirot flattened two clumps of wire, put a charred piece of paper onto the first, put the second on top of the paper, and used a pair of small pliers to clamp it properly. He then put the whole thing on top of a spirit stove.)

Discourse (6) is part of the second interview in the investigation. Poirot asks the secretary of the murdered man — McQueen — whether a train door leading to

the platform was bolted; so whether or not it was bolted is the information being negotiated throughout this discourse. The *ba*-construction in [34] enables this information to remain the focus of information.

Discourse (6)

- [28] “*nǐ jìdé mén shì shūan-shàng de ma?*”
 you remember door EMP bolt-upon EMP NTR:int
- [29] *Màikūn xiáng le xiáng.*
 MacQueen think ASP think
- [30&31] “*è, shì de, wǒ jìdé hǎo xiàng shì shūan-shàng de.*
 er yes I remember good like EMP bolt-upon EMP
- [32] *zhìshǎo mén de bǎshǒu shàng yǒu gè tiě gùn shì*
 at least door ASSOC handle upon have MEAS iron rod EMP
chà-shàng de”
 insert-upon EMP
- [33&34] “*nǐmen shàng chē zhǐhòu, — yǒu-méi-yǒu bǎ chē mén*
 you arise car afterward (you) have NEG:pf BA car
shuān-hǎo?”
 doorbolt-good
 (“Do you remember if the door was bolted?” MacQueen thought about it. “Er, yes, I remember that it seemed to be bolted. At least, there was an iron bar that fitted across the handle.” “After you got back to the train, did you bolt the door?”)

Discourse (7) is part of a dialogue in which Poirot asks the valet of the murdered man — Edward Henry Masterman — about his duties as valet. The valet’s service is thus the focus of the information. Here the *jiāng*-construction in [36] and the *ba*-construction in [37] are employed to enable the particular information — duties performed — to remain the focus of information in clause-final position.

Discourse (7)

- [35] “*nǐ de zhíwù dōu shì shénme?*”
 you POSS duty all be Q-what
- [36] “— *jiāng tā de yīzhuāng zhěnglǐ guà-hǎo.*
 (my duty is) BA he POSS clothes tidy hang-good
- [37] *xiānshēng, — bǎ tā de jiǎ yá pào-hǎo.*
 mr. (my duty is) BA he POSS false teeth steep-good
- [38] — *zài kànkàn dāngwǎn tā hái yǒu shénme biéde*
 (my duty is) again see that night he still have Q-what other
fēnfù.”
 instruction

(“What are your duties?” “Sir, I’m responsible for cleaning his clothes, hanging them in the wardrobe and putting his dentures in water. I also see if he has any other instructions.”)

The last three discourses show how the employment of the *ba*-construction and its variant, the *jiāng*-construction, enables the Process/Predicator to become the focus of information, i.e. to be assigned prominence of information by occupying clause-final position. The above observations are not exhaustive, but they all point to one conclusion: the *bei*- and *ba*-constructions have different effects on the flow of information in the texts; but in both cases their employment is textually motivated — they assign variable discourse status to components within the clause and, as a result, help to regulate the flow of information as the text unfolds.

4. The systems of THEME and VOICE

Halliday (1997) states that:

What is common to all VOICE systems is that they are resources for assigning variable discourse status to participants (and other elements) within the clause. In other words, they help to control the information flow.

The system of THEME also helps to control the information flow by assigning discourse statuses to participants and/or other elements in terms of thematic and informational prominence. However, the system of VOICE functions differently from the system of THEME in at least three ways.

First, VOICE is a secondary system while THEME is a primary one. The VOICE system is secondary because it has a narrower distribution across process types than the THEME system. Unlike THEME, which is a resource for all process types, VOICE is a resource applicable to transitive material processes.

Second, VOICE provides alternative options for making participants the ‘unmarked’ topical Theme (cf. Matthiessen & Halliday 1997:23). According to Halliday (p.c.), VOICE is an ‘enabling’ system, which enables the Theme and Information choices to remain ‘unmarked’, i.e. not locally contrastive. In contrast, the central systemic options of THEME are ‘marked’ and ‘unmarked’ topical Themes. For example, when the Goal of a transitive material clause occupies clause-initial position, it is textually ‘marked’. In contrast, the Goal in a *bei*-construction is textually ‘unmarked’. This is the functional difference between VOICE and THEME.

Third, VOICE can only assign themehood to a participant, whereas THEME can assign thematic status to participants, circumstances or the Process. These concepts of ‘primary’ system, ‘markedness’ and assignment of themehood distinguish the various constructions as options in the systems of VOICE or THEME.

4.1 The *ba*-construction vs. the SOV and SVO structures

This study suggests that the *ba*-construction is an option in a secondary textual system which we intend to argue for as VOICE, whereas the SOV and SVO structures represent alternative options in the systems of INFORMATION and THEME.

Although the thematic prominence of a message is assigned to the Actor, and news prominence is assigned to the Process in both the SOV structure and the *ba*-construction, the SOV structure is not an elliptical case of the *ba*-construction. The two constructions operate under at least three syntactic constraints. First, there must be a ‘grammatical element’ following the main verb (if it is not disyllabic) in the *ba*-construction, whereas this constraint does not apply to the SOV structure. Second, the negative particle *méi-yǒu* in any negative clause precedes the Process in the SOV structure, just as in the ‘unmarked’ SVO clause. But the negative particle precedes the dispositive marker *bǎ* in the *ba*-construction. Third, the question marker *yǒu-méi-yǒu* in any A-not-A interrogative clause precedes the Process in the SOV structure, just as in the ‘unmarked’ SVO clause. In contrast, the question particle precedes the dispositive marker *bǎ* in the *ba*-construction instead of the Process.

The SOV and the SVO structures are alternative options of the primary system while the *ba*-construction is an option of the secondary one. This is shown by the fact that the SOV and SVO structures are available not only in material clauses, but also in other clause types. In contrast, although the *ba*-construction may occasionally occur in other clause types, it is primarily available in transitive material clauses. For instance, the verb of perception *tīng-shuō* (hearsay) can appear in the SOV structure as in [39], but not in the *ba*-construction as in [40].

[39] *wǒ, nài jiàn shì tīngshuō guo.*
 I that MEAS matter hearsay ASP
 (I have heard about that matter.)

[40] **wǒ bǎ nài jiàn shì tīngshuō guo.*
 I BA that MEAS matter hearsay ASP

This constraint under which the *ba*-construction can be used has been widely studied under different contexts. For instance, Hopper & Thompson (1980) relate the conditions favourable to the employment of the *ba*-construction to the concept of transitivity. They suggest that the *ba*-construction is highly transitive and that the ‘subject’ has to behave actively or volitionally. Wang (1987: 72), adopting Hopper and Thompson’s ‘transitivity hypothesis’, suggests that the *ba*-construction is a highly transitive construction but rejects their constraints on the ‘subject’ and the ‘object’. He proposes the following transitivity constraint: “if two similar sentences (a) and (b) differ in that (a) is higher in transitivity according to any of the features ... then, if one sentence cannot be accepted in the *ba*-construction, it must be the one that is lower in transitivity.” (Wang 1987: 75)

4.2 The *bei*-construction vs. the OSV structure

This study also suggests that the *bei*-construction is an option in a secondary textual system argued to be that of VOICE, whereas the OSV structures represent an option in the systems of THEME.

Although the thematic prominence of a message is assigned to the Goal, whereas the news prominence is assigned to the Process in both the *bei*-construction and OSV structure, the OSV structure is not an elliptical case of the *bei*-construction. The OSV structure is not semantically equivalent to the *bei*-construction. For example, the adversity effect of the *bei*-construction as shown in Discourses 1 — 5 does not apply to the OSV structure.

As for structural constraints, the three differences between the *ba*-construction and the SOV and SVO structures also apply between the *bei*-construction and the OSV structure. First, there must be a ‘grammatical element’ following the Process of a *bei*-construction clause if the verb is not disyllabic, but this constraint does not apply to the OSV structure, as is obvious in the negative clause. Second, the negative particle *méi-yǒu* in any negative clause precedes the Process in the OSV structure, whereas it precedes the marker *bèi* in the *bei*-construction. Third, the question particle *yǒu-méi-yǒu* in any A-not-A interrogative clause precedes the Process in the OSV structure, whereas it precedes the dispositive marker *bèi* in the *bei*-construction.

The OSV structure is an option of the primary system like the SOV and SVO structures, while the *ba*-construction is an option of the secondary one. This is shown by the fact that the OSV structure has a wider distribution across process types while the *bei*-construction is basically restricted to the transitive

material process. For instance, the verb of perception *gǎn dào* (feel) in [41] can appear in an OSV structure but not in a *bei*-construction as in [42].

- [41] *zhè jiàn shì, wǒ gǎn-dào hěn kāixīn.*
 this MEAS matter I feel-reach very happy
 (I felt very pleased about this (matter).)
- [42] **zhè jiàn shì bèi wǒ gǎn-dào hěn kāixīn.*
 this MEAS matter BEI I feel-reach very happy

At this point I can conclude that, apart from THEME, there is a secondary system in which the *bei*- and *ba*-constructions are embodied. This secondary system, like THEME, helps to control the flow of information in Chinese discourse. I am content to call it the system of VOICE (as most Chinese linguists do) because like many VOICE systems in other languages, this secondary system (1) is a secondary grammatical system, basically a resource applicable to transitive material processes; (2) provides alternative options for making participants the ‘unmarked’ topical Theme; and (3) can only assign themehood to a participant.¹ However, this system of VOICE in Chinese has its own distinctive features. This discussion now leads us to the investigation of the nature and the description of the VOICE system in Chinese.

5. The system of VOICE

According to Halliday, the transitivity system of a language embodies two models (or two perspectives), namely transitive and ergative. The transitive perspective sorts our experience into a limited number of process types. Each type specifies how the participant(s) are involved in the process. In contrast, the ergative perspective generalizes the interaction between the participant(s) and the process across the process types (see Halliday 1994; Matthiessen 1995; Halliday & Matthiessen 1999; Matthiessen 2004). As Matthiessen (2004: 602) has pointed out, “these are ideational models of patterns in the transitivity system of the clause in the first instance; they are not just (lower-ranking) case marking patterns.”

Viewed from the transitive perspective, a participant (the ‘Controller’ in Matthiessen’s terms) controls the unfolding of the process. It is the sole participant in an ‘intransitive’ clause. This unfolding process, however, may impact on another participant, the Impacted. The Controller and the Impacted are the

two participants in a ‘transitive’ clause. In material processes, these two participants are manifested as the Actor and the Goal respectively. Sometimes, there may be a third participant, the Beneficiary, who is the one benefiting from the process. A clause with three participants is called a ‘ditransitive’ clause. The Beneficiary is regarded as peripheral to the Actor + Process + Goal nucleus of a ‘transitive’ clause. This peripheral nature is indicated by the fact that the Beneficiary is always preceded by a coverb *gěi* in Chinese. There are two possible sequences in a ditransitive clause: Actor ^ Beneficiary ^ Process ^ Goal and Actor ^ Process ^ Goal ^ Beneficiary as previously mentioned.

In this study, as in Matthiessen’s (1995), the ditransitive clause is treated as a special type of transitive clause. Four general types of process have been identified from this perspective, namely material, mental, verbal and relational.

According to Matthiessen (2004), the transitive perspective works particularly well in material clauses in English, in which the sense of transitivity is high (in terms of Hopper & Thompson’s (1980) transitivity hypothesis). However, the possibility of generalizing this perspective seems to be limited in other clauses. In contrast, since verbs or verb complexes in Chinese do not distinguish active and passive, most can be used in both intransitive and transitive clauses. Given a one-participant clause, it can be difficult to determine whether a participant is the Actor or the Goal of the process. As a result, it is difficult to determine whether the clause is ‘intransitive’ or an elliptical case of ‘transitive’. This creates a fuzzy area in the language.

Viewed from the ergative perspective, the process unfolds through one participant. In other words, this participant — the one through which the process is actualized — is called the ‘Medium’ (Halliday 1994; Matthiessen 1995; Halliday & Matthiessen 1999; Matthiessen 2004). The Medium and the process form the nuclear domain of the figure. This actualization process through the Medium is sometimes caused by another participant, the Agent, which can be considered ‘external’ to the Medium + Process nucleus. This perspective has obviously greater explanatory power for one-participant clauses in which the sole participant cannot be interpreted as actively controlling the unfolding of the process as in [43]. This type of clause is common in Chinese. In Halliday’s terms, the one-participant clause is a ‘middle’ clause, whereas the clause in which an Agent is identified is an ‘effective’ clause.

- [43] *chuán kāi le.*
 boat departed ASP
 (The boat has departed.)

'marked' Theme (see also Matthiessen & Halliday 1997; Halliday & McDonald 2004). In addition, Halliday & McDonald (2004) have observed that the OSV structure carries the predicted prosody of contrast. Furthermore, negation, yes/no interrogative and relative clause formation can operate freely in this structure but not in the *bei*-construction (Keenan 1985). The OSV structure is thus considered a 'purely' thematic device in the THEME system but not in the VOICE system. Similarly, the Goal can also precede the Process but follows the Actor, i.e. Actor ^ Goal ^ Process, and is commonly known as SOV structure. This is a textual device in the INFORMATION system but not in the VOICE system. For example,

[45] S O V V
 Wǒ zhè shì zuò wán le zāi shuō
 I this matter finish ASP then say
 (I will consider this matter after I have finished.)

5.2 Dispositive voice

Apart from the neutral voice, the *ba*- and *bei*-constructions² have been identified as resources in the system of VOICE. This means that we have three options. Figure 2 shows the simplest way to formulate the Chinese VOICE system, in which 'neutral' (realized by the SVO structure), 'active' (realized by the *ba*-construction) and 'passive' (realized by the *bei*-construction) are taken as the primary options.

However, as mentioned in the previous sections, the *ba*- and *bei*-constructions are similar. First, from a historical point of view both *bǎ* and *bèi* underwent the same change, i.e. from functioning as full-fledged verbs to becoming coverbs of specific voice marking (see Chao 1968; Ding et al 1979; Li & Thompson 1981; Lin 1981; Tsao 1982, 1983; Wang 1987; Hsueh 1989; Tiee 1990; Ho 1993; Wang 1998; Halliday & McDonald 2004).

Second, the data show that both constructions are similar in the following structural respects:

(1) The Processes in both constructions have similar properties. They can



Figure 2. Simplest description of VOICE in Chinese

follow or precede a similar set of possible 'grammatical elements' (Wang 1955; Chao 1968; Henne et al 1977; Li & Thompson 1981; Lin 1981; Li 1990; Tiede 1990; Halliday & McDonald 2004).

- (2) Both constructions have the same general word order of Participant 1 ^ coverb + Participant 2 ^ Process + (circumstance).
- (3) The negative particle *méi-yǒu* in any negative clause precedes the markers *bǎ* and *bèi* in both constructions instead of the Process, unlike in the case of the neutral voice.
- (4) Similarly, the question particle *yǒu-méi-yǒu* in any A-not-A interrogative clause precedes the markers *bǎ* and *bèi* in both constructions instead of the Process, unlike in the case of the neutral voice.

Third, these two constructions have semantic similarities:

- (1) The 'object' of the *ba*-construction has similar semantic properties to the 'subject' of the *bei*-construction. The following table shows the characteristics of the 'object' in the *ba*-construction noted in previous studies.
- (2) Analogously, the 'subject' of the *ba*-construction has similar semantic properties to the 'object' of the *bei*-construction (see Ding et al 1979; Hopper & Thompson 1980; Li & Thompson 1981; Hsueh 1989; Tiede 1990).
- (3) Most importantly, if we define the term 'disposal' broadly, we can say that both constructions carry a strong sense of 'disposal' (Wang 1947; Chao 1968; Li 1974; Li & Thompson 1981; Wang 1987; Tiede 1990; Song 1996).

Table 1. Nature of the 'object' in the *ba*-construction in previous studies

	definite	generic	specific	pre-existing or referential
Lu (1955)	√			
Wang (1959)			√	√
Chao (1968)	√			
Li (1971)	√			√
Teng (1973)	√			
Ding (1979)	√			
Li & Thompson (1981)	√	√		
Wang (1987)	√		√	
*he prefers to call the 'object' affectedness				
Tiede (1990)	√		√	
Ho (1993)	√			√
Fong (1994)	√			√

On the basis of the similarities between the two constructions, this study proposes that the primary opposition in the system of VOICE in Chinese is between ‘neutral’ and ‘dispositive’. The choice of ‘dispositive’ leads to two further options, namely ‘receptive’ and ‘operative’. The ‘receptive’ voice is realized by the *bei*-construction, which is comparable, but not identical, to the English ‘passive’; whereas the ‘operative’ option is realized by the *ba*-construction, which has no counterpart in English. They are called ‘operative’ and ‘receptive’ rather than ‘active’ and ‘passive’ because, unlike in English, the verb form does not distinguish ‘active’ and ‘passive’ in Chinese.

In addition, the choice of ‘receptive’ leads to another two options, namely ‘agentive’ and ‘non-agentive’. In the case of ‘agentive’, the Actor is specified in the clause and the syntactic structure is Goal ^ *bèi* + Actor ^ Process + (Complement). In the case of ‘non-agentive’, the Actor is not specified and the structure is Goal ^ *bèi* ^ Process + (circumstance). Unlike in the system of VOICE in English, the receptive marker *bèi* in Chinese remains in the clause in both ‘agentive’ and ‘non-agentive’ cases. Thus the VOICE system in Chinese can be formulated systemically as in Figure 3.

6. The *ba*- and *bei*- constructions beyond transitive material clauses

As mentioned, although the *ba*- and *bei*-constructions are transitive and the processes in both constructions are encoded by transitive verbs so that the two constructions are used in transitive material clauses, they are increasingly productive in other types of clause as well. Halliday and McDonald (2004)

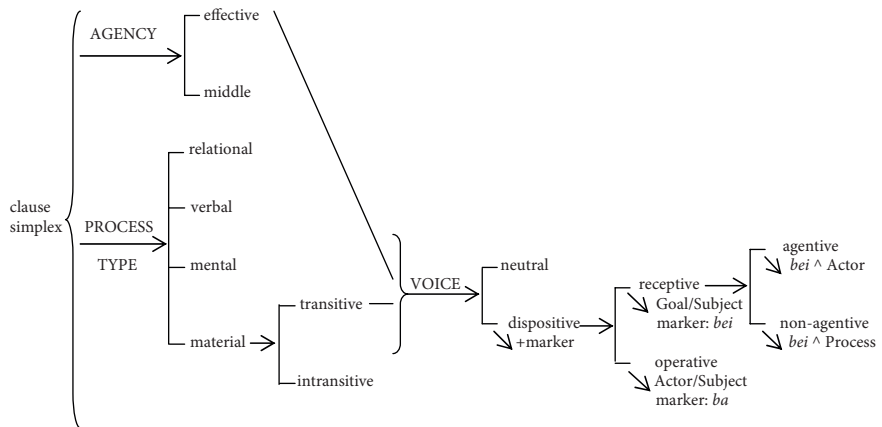


Figure 3. The system of VOICE

Table 2. Relative frequency of *ba*- and *bei*-constructions in different process types

process types	no. of <i>ba</i> -constructions		no. of <i>bei</i> -constructions	
material (transitive)	99	84.63%	56	65.88%
material (intransitive)	1	0.85%	0	0.00%
mental	2	2.55%	10	11.77%
verbal	14	11.97%	13	15.29%
relational (existential)	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
relational (attributive-circumstantial)	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
relational (attributive-possessive)	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
relational (attribute-ascriptive)	0	0.00%	2	2.35%
relational (attributive-categorizing)	0	0.00%	4	4.71%
relational (identifying)	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
TOTAL	117	100%	85	100%

note that until recently the *ba*-construction was largely restricted to material clauses, and to a few verbal and mental clauses marked for completive phase. Its extension to processes of other types, especially in written Chinese, further weakens the original concrete sense of *bǎ* as a lexical verb. In this section, the main concern is the direction and the scope of this extension.

The number of occurrences and percentages of the two constructions in different process types in the Chinese translation of the English novel *Murder on the Orient Express* are given in Table 2.

The data shows that both constructions are strongly associated with the transitive material process type. However, both have been extended into other process types. The scope of this extension in the *bei*-construction (34.12%) is greater than in the *ba*-construction (15.37%). The data also show that the *ba*-construction is used in intransitive material clauses but the *bei*-construction is not. In addition, both constructions have mainly been extended into the verbal and mental process types: in the case of the *bei*-construction, 15.29% and 11.77% respectively and in the case of the *ba*-construction, 11.97% and 2.55% respectively. Lastly, only the *bei*-construction, but not the *ba*-construction, has been extended into the relational ascriptive and categorizing process types; whereas only the *ba*-construction but not the *bei*-construction has been extended into the intransitive material one.

7. Conclusion

This study has revealed the existence of a secondary grammatical resource which, like THEME, controls the information flow in Chinese text, a resource which provides alternative options for making participants the ‘unmarked’ topical Theme. It thus complements THEME by accomplishing a unique function. In this system the primary opposition is between ‘neutral’ (similar to the English ‘active’) and ‘dispositive’. The choice of ‘dispositive’ leads to two further options: ‘receptive’ (comparable, but not identical, to the English ‘passive’) and ‘operative’ (with no counterpart in English). The ‘receptive’ voice is realized by the *bei*-construction, whereas the ‘operative’ option is realized by the *ba*-construction.

Though this Chinese system has its own distinctive features, I am content to call it the system of VOICE since, like other VOICE systems, it: (1) is a secondary one, i.e. basically a resource applicable mainly in the transitive material process; (2) provides alternative options for making participants the ‘unmarked’ topical Theme; and (3) assigns themehood only to participants.

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Notes

1. Another possible name is DISPOSAL because as we are going to show, the primary opposition in the system is between [neutral] and [dispositive]; the relationship between the Actor and the Goal in both *ba*- and *bei*- constructions shows a kind of disposal nature (see Wang 1947; Chao 1968; Li 1974; Li & Thompson 1981; Wang 1987; Tiee 1990; and Song 1996). The *bei*-construction also shows a kind of ‘patient-agent’ relationship between the Subject/the Goal and the Complement/the Actor. Its ‘active’ counterpart is the *ba*-construction. However, the verb form does not distinguish between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ in Chinese, and so the *bei*-construction realises the option [receptive] as opposed to [passive] while the *ba*-construction realises the option [operative] as opposed to [active] in the system.

2. In this study the *ba*-construction includes all its variants like *jiāng*, while the *bei*-construction includes all its variants like *gěi*. According to Halliday (p.c.), there is another *shì*-construction, which seems to regulate the information flow in a text though it is not a popular construction. This construction will be examined in a future study of mine.

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