

The alternation of the Mandarin disposal constructions: quantifying the evolutionary dynamics across twelve centuries

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Abstract: The Mandarin disposal construction encompasses the ba-construction and the jiang-construction. They are SOV syntactic patterns (e.g., Light 1979; Sun & Givon 1985) in which the object marker *ba* or *jiang* precedes the object, which is in turn followed by the predicate verb. The structure can be represented as “subject/NP1 + *ba/jiang* + object/NP2 + verb (+ X)”, as in (1).

(1) a. 我们最后决定把包弟送到医院去……。

Wǒmen zuìhòu juéding **bǎ** Bāodi sòng dào yīyuàn qù...

We finally decide **BA** Baodi send arrive hospital go

‘We finally decided to send Baodi to the hospital...’

b. 她已经将一头乌亮的美发全部剃光，人也苍白瘦削了。

Tā yǐjīng **jiāng** yītóu wūliàng dì měifǎ quánbù tì

She already **JIANG** one.head black.bright GEN beautiful.hair all shave

guāng, rén yě cāngbái shòuxuē le.

unleft, people also pale thin PERF.

‘She has shaved all her black hair, and she is pale and thin.’

Despite extensive research on the ba-construction in Chinese, the diachronic change of the alternation between the *ba* and *jiang* constructions has received little attention. There are only two documented quantitative studies of the distinction between *ba* and *jiang* in the literature: Xing (1994), and Jing-Schmidt and Tao (2009). There are limitations in Xing’s study and her findings still need to be confirmed. As noted by herself, her findings are based on her data set, which only come from two or three prototypical works in each of the four historical periods she investigated and the genres of the works only cover Buddhist scriptures and fictions. Jing-Schmidt and Tao’s (2009) study is a synchronic study based on data of modern Chinese.

This study takes a multifactorial approach to examine the language-internal and language-external factors that probabilistically condition the alternation between the two constructions based on diachronic data across twelve centuries from a large corpus of multi-genres. It is found that there are both stable linguistic constraints (parallelism/syntactic priming, and NP2 length) and fluid constraints (verb type, NP2 animacy, adjunct semantics, genre, and period), and that there are fluctuations in both effect sizes and effect directions of the fluid constraints as a function of time. Moreover, the factor “parallelism” (i.e., syntactic priming) plays a significant role in the diachronic alternation of the two disposal constructions. This study is the first one to take a corpus-based long-term perspective on the variation, from the earliest period whereby the *ba* and *jiang* constructions coexisted to the present, and to gauge the effects of various factors using mixed-effects logistic regression analysis. Theoretically, the present study complements previous research by demonstrating that the processing factor—syntactic priming plays a significant role in the diachronic variation and by quantifying the evolutionary dynamics of the alternation.

Abbreviations

BA *ba* (a disposal marker in Chinese)

JIANG *jiang* (a disposal marker in Chinese)

GEN genitive

PERF perfective marker

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