A Case Study of Obligatory Object Fronting in Mandarin Chinese

In this paper, I focus on the light verb construction [LVC] discussed by Zhu (1985), arguing that the “light verb” in the LVC is not a verb, but a verbal prefix. Moreover, I argue that the obligatory moved object in the LVC checked its Case at Spec, vP. Hence a preposition-like element introducing the moved object in the IP domain is considered a different object marker. Lastly, this particular construction sheds light on differentiating the Case-checking mechanisms in the early and late Minimalist Program.

In Zhu (1985), *jiayi* (‘give’) is one of the light verbs that he has discussed. Example (2a), the light verb construction with *jiayi*, has been observed to be near-synonymous as example (1). Structurally, Zhu proposes that when the light verb is inserted into the structure, it takes the main verb position. And the original verb becomes a verbal noun, which is a noun but still maintains some of its verbal properties (i.e. taking arguments). Furthermore, since the original verb has become a noun, the original object cannot stay postverbally (i.e. 2b). Hence the object has to move to somewhere else in order to get Case in the structure (i.e. 2a).

(1) Zhangsan diaocha zhe-ge anzi. (SVO order)
Zhangsan investigate this-CL case
‘Zhangsan investigated this case.’

(2) a. Zhangsan dui zhe-ge anzi jiayi diaocha (SOV order)
Zhangsan to this-CL case give investigate
‘Zhangsan gave an investigation of this case.’

b. *Zhangsan jiayi diaocha zhe-ge anzi. (SVO order)
Zhangsan give investigate this-CL case
However, there are strong pieces of evidence indicating that *jiayi* cannot be the “verb” in example (2a). For Example, *jiayi* cannot take any other genuine nominals as in (3). Moreover, *jiayi* cannot take an Aspect Marker as in (4), nor the verbal noun can be counted as in (5). Hence I propose that *jiayi* is in fact a preverbal affix attaching to a verb. The tightness between *jiayi* and the verb is confirmed by the manner adverbial placement in (6). This predicts that the main verb *diaocha* can take the Aspect Marker, which is borne out in (7).

(3) *Zhangsan jiayi shoushu.
Zhangsan give operation
‘Intended meaning: Zhangsan gave an operation.’

(4) Zhangsan dui zhe-ge anzi jiayi(*-guo) diaocha
Zhangsan to this-CL case give(-ASP) investigate
‘Zhangsan gave an investigation of this case.’

(5) Zhangsan dui zhe-ge anzi jiayi (*san-ge) diaocha
Zhangsan to this-CL case give three-CL investigate
‘Zhangsan gave an investigation of this case.’

(6) Zhangsan dui zhe-ge anzi (hen-quai-de) jiayi (*hen-quai-de) diaocha
Zhangsan to this-CL case quickly give quickly investigate
‘Zhangsan quickly gave an investigation of this case.’

(7) Zhangsan dui zhe-ge anzi jiayi diaocha-*guo
Zhangsan to this-CL case give investigate-ASP
‘Zhangsan gave an investigation of this case.’

Next, I propose the following derivation to explain why a verbal prefix can force the object to move in the LVC. Since *jiayi* seems to “passivize” the full verb in which it is attached to, I assume that the prefix *jiayi* has defective φ-features. This assumption resembles the verbal prefix’s verbal property to a passive/unaccusative verb, whose v head is proposed to be defective (see Chomsky 2001). Although in (8), the [-interpretable] φ-features on the v head can probe the [+interpretable]
φ-features on the object as in a SVO counterpart, the defective φ-features on the prefix *jiayi* causes the intervention effect (see Chomsky 2000).

(8) \[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{[} \phi \text{ v } [vP jiayi investigate [NP this case]]} \\
\end{array}
\]

In order for the [-interpretable] Case feature to be specified/valued, the object has to move to Spec vP (following the Activation Condition by Bošković 2007). The moved object then can check the [-interpretable] φ-features on the v head via Spec-Head agreement. In this way, the [-interpretable] Case-feature of the object can also be specified/checked, as illustrated in (9).

(9) \[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{[NP this case ] v [VP jiayi investigate ]} \\
\end{array}
\]

The proposed overt Object Case-checking derivation has the following consequences: Firstly, the preposition-like element *dui* in (2) cannot be Case-relevant like a regular preposition. Paris (1979) argues that regular PPs in Chinese cannot precede modals or negation. However, it is possible to have the *dui-this case* phrase before modals or negation, as in (10). This indicates that the preposition-like element *dui* is not a real preposition and the whole *dui* phrase should be in the IP-domain.

(10) Zhangsan [dui zhe-ge anzi] yinggai/meiyou jiayi diaocha.

‘Zhangsan should/did not give an investigation of this case.’

Following Rodríguez-Mondoñedo (2007)’s proposal for Spanish *a* which is obligatory for [+person] objects but is absent for [-person] objects, I propose that *dui* is a differential object marker [DOM] in Chinese. Yang and van Bergen (2007) have proposed that BA is a DOM in Chinese, too. A BA counterpart for the LVC is shown in (11). Moreover, both DOMs are sensitive to [+person] nominals. If the nominal is [+person], the DOMs *dui* and BA cannot be omitted, as in (12) and (13). If the fronted objects are [-person], the DOMs can be omitted.

(11) Zhangsan [ba zhe-ge anzi] jiayi diaocha.

‘Zhangsan gave an investigation of this case.’


‘Zhangsan gave an investigation of Lisi/this case.’


‘Zhangsan gave an investigation of Lisi/this case.’

In addition, the must-move Object cannot be well explained by the early Minimalist Program in which Accusative Case is checked at Spec, vP. One has to postulate a strong Case feature on the Object only in the LVC, but not in a regular SVO sentence. It is also not possible for *jiayi* to have an EPP-like feature since it attaches to the verb and whatever is triggered moves to Spec, VP, not Spec, vP. Moving into Spec, VP first violates the Anti-locality Condition (Abels 2003). Compare to other overt Nominative Case-checking cases such as short passive and raising construction in Chinese which may be triggered overtly by the EPP feature on I, the overt Object Case-checking in the LVC remains a puzzle in the early Minimalist Program.

**Selected References:**


