The Syntactic Category of 把 (ba)
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Mandarin Chinese 把 (ba) participates in several frequently discussed grammatical constructions. However, the syntactic category of 把 is controversial. This paper evaluates previous proposals for 把 as a preposition, verb, or functional head. I claim that 把 can be a causative verb or a topic marker, depending on the construction it is a part of.

Ba constructions all follow one of the two surface forms given in (1-2), with the X representing a resultative complement or an aspect particle – for example, the perfective aspect particle le in (3b) or the complement na ge yang (‘that way’) in (4) (Li 2006). The most prevalent 把 construction, exemplified by (3b), is semantically interchangeable with an unmarked sentence such as (3a) (Li 2006). However, not all 把 constructions have non-把 counterparts. In (4) a 把-less sentence would need a causative verb to replace 把 (Zou 1995).

(1) NP1 把 NP2 V X
(2) NP1 NP2 X V

(3) a. wo wang-le yaoshi le
   I forget-PF key PF
b. wo 把 yaoshi wang-le
   I 把 key forget-PF
   ‘I forgot the key.’

(4) zhe jian shi zenme 把 ni pacheng-le na ge yang
   this CL matter how 把 you fear-PF that CL way
   ‘How did this matter make you fear like that?’

Superficially, 把 could easily be categorized as a preposition or a verb (Li and Thompson 1974). Yet a prepositional account of 把 has two major flaws. The subject of the unaccusative verb pacheng ‘fear’ is ni ‘you,’ resulting in case assignment issues. A prepositional analysis also cannot account for the fact that the X of schema (1-2) is obligatory.

A verbal analysis of 把 as a control verb largely resolves this issue. However, this approach fails to properly account for (3b), in which 把’s subject and object would be the same as those of wang-le ‘forgot,’ due to the implausibility of a dual subject- and object-control verb. Ding attempts to resolve this by positing a pro (‘little pro’) in addition to the PRO (‘big pro’) introduced by control. However any construction with pro must also allow an overt pronoun in the same position (Huang 2016), which is impermissible in 把 constructions (Li 2016). Thus, an account of 把 as a verb can explain causative 把 constructions, but not others.

Zou (1995) bridges this gap by arguing for 把 as the head of its own functional projection which selects for an aspect phrase or resultative complement phrase, illustrated in (5), a representation of (3b). The “把 phrase” occupies the same position in a clausal hierarchy as AgrP (Zou 1995). This implies that the overt 把 marker prevents movement from V to Ba (parallel with Agr) and thus causes the change in word order from SVO to SOV (ibid.). Zou (1995) assumes that Case checking happens in a Spec-head relationship, that 把 gives nominative case to its specifier, that
ASP gives accusative case to its specifier, and that a verb moves to Asp in order to check its aspectual features. These assumptions motivate the movement resulting in the surface form (3b). Unlike other analyses, Zou’s account motivates a mandatory X as per schema (1-2) because ba selects for an appropriate phrase and can be extended to all ba constructions.


Counter to Zou’s (1995) analysis, \(v\) assigns accusative case according to the standard Minimalist Program (Adger 2012). However, since the NP after ba seems to be an embedded topic, the movement of this NP can be motivated by checking an embedded topic feature on ba rather than by case, allowing \(v\) to assign accusative case as usual.

Another problem with Zou’s (1995) analysis is its interpretation of causative ba constructions. It relies upon an implausible CausP verb shell and does not attempt to disprove a verbal analysis. This suggests that ba is a verb in causative constructions. This is supported by the fact that ba can be replaced by causative verbs in these constructions. Additionally, as ba was historically a lexical verb (Bender 2000, Ding 1993, Zou 1995), it makes sense to suggest that causative ba has been retained as a less grammatical form than ba in other constructions. This is more economical in terms of historical change as well.

This paper clarifies the question of ba’s syntactic category: it is a verb in causative constructions and a topic marker elsewhere. This can in turn help contextualize studies on other work related to ba constructions, such as the sorts of resultative complements it can require.

References


