

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 *ba* is controversial. This paper evaluates previous proposals for *ba* as a preposition, verb, or functional head. I claim that *ba* 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 *ba* construction, exemplified by (3b), is semantically interchangeable with an unmarked sentence such as (3a) (Li 2006). However, not all *ba* constructions have non-*ba* counterparts. In (4) a *ba*-less sentence would need a causative verb to replace *ba* (Zou 1995).

(1) NP1 *ba* NP2 V X

(2) NP1 *ba* NP2 X V

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

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

Superficially, *ba* could easily be categorized as a preposition or a verb (Li and Thompson 1974). Yet a prepositional account of *ba* 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 *ba* as a control verb largely resolves this issue. However, this approach fails to properly account for (3b), in which *ba*’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 *ba* constructions (Li 2016). Thus, an account of *ba* as a verb can explain causative *ba* constructions, but not others.

Zou (1995) bridges this gap by arguing for *ba* 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 “*ba* phrase” occupies the same position in a clausal hierarchy as AgrP (Zou 1995). This implies that the overt *ba* 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 *ba* gives nominative case to its specifier, that

