

LENING LIU – HELENA HAN
(Columbia University)

Preliminary Exploration of Micro-changes in Chinese Verb-Object Compounds

Abstract

This paper examines two recent micro-changes in verb-object (V-O) compounds in Modern Chinese: the emergence of the “V个 (gè)N” construction and the increasing attachment of direct object to traditional V-O compounds. By analyzing these linguistic shifts within the framework of Construction Grammar and language change, this study reveals how these micro-changes reflect broader linguistic evolution and adaption, influenced by socio-cultural shifts and language contact phenomena. Additionally, the paper discusses the implications of these micro-changes for teaching Chinese as a second language, highlighting the challenges and pedagogical strategies needed to address evolving linguistic forms. This investigation not only contributes to our understanding of specific linguistic phenomena but also enriches the broader discourse on language as an adaptive system, responding to communicative needs and cultural interactions.

Keywords: Verb-object compounds, language change, Construction Grammar, “V个 (gè)N” construction, teaching Chinese as a foreign language

刘乐宁 韩慧颖

东亚语言文化系教授

摘要

本文探讨了现代汉语动宾合成词近年发生的两种微变化：“V个N”构式的兴起与动宾合成词外挂直接宾语现象的出现与扩展。基于构式语法与语言变化理论的分析，本研究揭示了这些微变化如何在社会文化变

迁及语言接触的影响下体现更广泛的语言适应与演进的过程。此外，本文还讨论了这些微变化对国际中文教育的启示，重点关注了应对新兴语言形式所面临的挑战及相应的教学策略。此项研究不仅丰富了对具体语言现象的理解，亦为理解语言作为一种因应交际需求和文化互动而不断演化的适应性系统提供了更全面的视角。

Introduction

The study of language change is a fascinating area that provides insights into the dynamic and adaptive nature of human communication systems. While large-scale linguistic changes often capture significant attention, the subtler shifts that occur at the micro-level can be equally revealing. These micro-changes, though incremental, reflect the intricate interplay between language structure, cognitive processes, and shifting socio-cultural contexts.

One domain where such micro-changes are particularly evident is the realm of Chinese verb-object compounds. These unique linguistic constructions, characterized by their dual nature as cohesive units that can separate into distinct components, have undergone notable transformations in recent years. Specifically, two key phenomena have emerged: the emergence of “V个(gè)N” construction and the increasing attachment of direct objects to traditional V-O compounds. These micro-changes in V-O compounds are not merely isolated linguistic quirks but rather manifestations of broader processes of language change. They provide a window into the complex interplay between structural constraints, cognitive processes, and communicative demands that shape the evolution of linguistic systems.

Through a comprehensive examination of these micro-changes in Chinese verb-object compounds, this paper aims to make several significant contributions. First, it seeks to elucidate the underlying mechanisms driving these shifts, drawing upon theoretical frameworks such as Construction Grammar and language contact phenomena. By analyzing the interplay between high-frequency exemplars, analogical processes, and socio-cultural factors, we can gain a deeper understanding of the forces that catalyze language change.

Second, this study aims to shed light on the implications of these micro-changes for language pedagogy, particularly in the domain of teaching Chinese as a second language. As these subtle shifts permeate into mainstream

usage, educators face the challenge of navigating the delicate balance between preserving linguistic norms and acknowledging the dynamic nature of language.

Ultimately, by exploring these micro-changes in Chinese V-O compounds, this paper seeks to contribute to our broader understanding of language as a living, adaptive system that evolves in response to the ever-changing needs and contexts of its speakers.

Research Background

Challenges in Teaching Separable Compound Words in Chinese as a Second Language

One of the major challenges for non-native learners in studying Chinese lies in the mastery of separable compound words, known as *lǐhé cí* (离合词). These challenges stem largely from the dual functionality of these compounds, which can exist both in their combined form (*hé 合*) and in their separated form (*lí 离*).

Learners exhibit a clear bias in dealing with these words. On one hand, they tend to use these compounds in their combined form, showing reluctance to separate the components even when contextually appropriate. Wang’s investigation using the Global Chinese Interlanguage Corpus at Beijing Language and Culture University highlighted the difficulties Chinese learners face with these constructions. An analysis of 442 sentences containing 16 high-frequency separable compounds revealed a 27.4% error rate in their use, with 80.2% of errors due to failure to appropriately separate the compounds. On the other hand, when learners do attempt to separate these compounds, they often incorrectly insert aspect marker excessively while underutilizing measure words, including the use of “个 (*gè*)” (Wang 2002; Huang et al. 2015). Common errors include constructions like:

- (a) *我今天请客你。
(Wǒ jīntiān qǐngkè nǐ.)
'I will treat you today.'
- (b) *我每天上课三小时。
(Wǒ měitiān shàngkè sān xiǎoshí.)
'I have three hours of class every day.'

- (c) *她们又唱歌起来了。
(Tāmen yòu chànggē qǐláile.)
'They started singing again.'
- (d) *她写字很好。
(Tā xiězì hěn hǎo.)
'She writes very well.'
- (e) *他一到宿舍就帮忙我。
(Tā yí dào sùshè jiù bāngmáng wǒ.)
'As soon as he got to the dorm, he helped me out.'
- (f) *我当面他说：“我不喜欢你。”
(Wǒ dāngmiàn tā shuō: “Wǒ bù xǐhuān nǐ.”)
'I said to his face, “I don't like you.”'

These examples illustrate typical errors that arise from the improper separation and combination of components within separable words. In (c), the directional complement 起来 (qǐláile) is incorrectly positioned after the VO compound 唱歌 (chànggē), which disrupts the fluency of the sentence. 她们又唱起歌来了 (Tāmen yòu chàng qǐ gē láile) should be the correct sentence. Moreover, the underlined 帮忙我 (bāngmáng wǒ) in (e) illustrates a common error where the learner has directly attached the object 我 (wǒ) to the separable compound word 帮忙 (bāngmáng), without the necessary preposition to correctly format the sentence. Since the argument structure of the verb is satisfied within the compound by taking an object, almost all separable compounds cannot take a direct object. Therefore, the correct form should use a preposition to introduce the object: 他一到宿舍就给我帮忙 (Tā yí dào sùshè jiù gěi wǒ bāngmáng).

Recent Micro-changes in Verb-Object Compounds

In recent years, several micro-changes have been observed in the usage of v-o compounds in Modern Chinese, reflecting broader trends in linguistic evolution and adaptation. Two interesting phenomena include the subjectification of the “V个 (gè)N” construction and the emergence of constructions that allow for external direct objects in traditional verb-object compounds.

The “V个(gè)N” construction, traditionally used to express a quantifiable action in a non-subjective manner, has undergone a shift towards greater subjectivity. This change is characterized by the construction being used to convey actions in a more casual context, often integrated with “不就是...” (bú jiùshi) construction, which downplays the significance of the action or event. Concurrently, there has been an expansion in the structural flexibility of verb-object compounds, allowing for the attachment of external direct objects. Traditionally, compounds like 见面 (jiànmiàn) or 洗澡 (xǐzǎo) do not accommodate external direct object due to the self-contained nature of their structure, where the verb and its object are lexically bound. This new phenomenon challenges the traditional internal object structure and reflects an evolving need for greater syntactic flexibility in response to communicative demands.

These micro changes in V-O compounds will be explored in greater detail in subsequent sections, focusing on their implications for our understanding of language change and acquisition in a socio-linguistic context.

Issues in Verb-Object Compounds Research

The separability frequency of separable compounds varies greatly, with some having a relatively high frequency of separation, while others have a low or even extremely low frequency. Wang’s (2011) comprehensive examination through a large linguistic corpus, specifically focusing on the separable words listed in the *HSK Graded Character List* 汉语水平词汇等级大纲 (*Hànyǔ shuǐpíng cíhuì děngjí dàgāng*) reveals significant disparities in separability frequencies. The average separability frequency among the 207 words studied was merely 0.056. Only four words exhibited a separability frequency over 0.5, and a substantial 87.9% had frequencies below 0.2, underscoring that for 98.1% of the cases, the combined form (hé 合) is more common than the separated form (lí 离). This phenomenon raises the question of why some separable compound words are more prone to separation while others are not, and what factors determine this variability.

Scholars have proposed various theories to explain what influences the degree of separability in separable verbs. Huang et.al (2015) suggest that the separability is influenced by the nature of the object (O) in the V-O compounds. Their posits that if the object represents a free morpheme, the compound is more likely to exhibit higher separability, as seen in examples like

唱歌 (chànggē) and 写字 (xiězì). Conversely, when the object is not a free morpheme, as in 见面 (jiànmiàn) or 理发 (lǐfà), the separability is notably lower. This viewpoint draws on Claudia Ross's discussion on cognate objects, where she argues that certain verbs in Mandarin are obligatorily transitive due to their thematic structure and the presence of cognate objects, which are often semantically weak or empty (Ross, 1998). Her examination of the thematic roles and the aspectual properties of verbs underscores the complexity of verb-object interactions, suggesting that the obligatory transitivity imposed by cognate objects can influence the separability of the verb-object pair.

However, the conclusions drawn from Ross's discussion are contentious. Several examples used to support this theory in this paper do not align with standard Chinese syntax, which challenges the reliability of these theories, such as:

- (a) *我买了一本书，买了半天没买到。
(Wǒ mǎile yì běn shū, mǎile bàntiān méi mǎi dào.)
'I bought a book, bought it for half a day, but didn't succeed in buying it.'
- (b) *我给你教书。
(Wǒ gěi nǐ jiāoshū.)
'I teach you.'
- (c) *我跟他买了车。
(Wǒ gēn tā mǎile chē.)
'I bought a car from him.'
- (d) *我走/跑路。
(Wǒ zǒu/pǎo lù.)
'I walk/run.'

Furthermore, focusing solely on the object in V-O compounds appears insufficient in explaining variations in separability. This approach fails to account for differences observed in "V个 (gè)N" construction, where the separability does not seem to depend merely on the nature of the object. For example:

- (a) 唱个歌
(chàng gè gē)
'sing a song'

- (b) 写个字
(xiě gè zì)
'write a character'
- (c) 理个发
(lǐ gè fā)
'get a haircut'
- (d) 见个面
(jiàn gè miàn)
'meet up'

These instances show that the “V个 (gè)N” construction can apply equally to verbs with both free and bound objects, suggesting that other factors may influence the degree of separability.

Theoretical Framework: Construction Grammar and Language Micro-change

Construction Grammar conceptualizes language as comprising constructions, which are fundamental units of language change. These constructions are form-meaning pairings that vary in complexity and size, representing a network of interconnected linguistic elements.

Constructions are made up of many properties (features in some models). Minimally, these properties are: semantics, pragmatics, discourse function on the meaning side and syntax, morphology, phonology on the form side (Croft 2001). The richness and multidimensionality of these properties imply that any change in one aspect could significantly influence the overall dynamics of the construction within the linguistic network. Constructions can range from simple, “atomic” elements that are indivisible, such as the plural noun inflection in English, to complex structures like phrases, clauses, or even entire sentences. For instance, complex quantifiers like “a lot of X” and pseudo-cleft constructions such as “What I did was drive to Santa Cruz” exemplify the varied sizes and complexities constructions can assume (Goldberg, 2006).

Over the past two decades, the conception of language as a system of form-meaning pairs, or ‘signs’, has been emphasized in usage-based models of language. These models argue that language is fundamentally a collection of such pairings, which are used and adapted by speakers in real-time com-

munication. The implication is that language change involves shifts in how these constructions are used and understood within the speech community (Goldberg, 1995, 2006; Croft, 2001). Goldberg (1995, 2006) and Croft (2001) have extensively developed this idea, proposing usage-based models where language is understood as a dynamic system of these form-meaning pairs.

In addition, High-frequency exemplars play a crucial role in language change. This concept, central to the usage-based models of Construction Grammar, highlights how linguistic categories are not static but evolve through the dynamic interplay of various exemplars within a linguistic community. According to Nosofsky (1988) and Strack & Mussweiler (1997), linguistic categories emerge from the associated space shared by different exemplars, with high-frequency exemplars serving as cognitive anchors around which less frequently occurring exemplars are organized.

Goldberg (2005) further elaborates on this by noting that when the linguistic input is skewed—meaning that the frequencies of certain exemplars are significantly higher—these high-frequency exemplars become salient standards of comparison. This salience allows them to influence how other, less frequent, constructions are understood and used, essentially guiding the analogical processes that underpin much of language change. As a result, these high-frequency exemplars become entrenched in the minds of language users, not merely as isolated instances but as central components of a form-meaning pairing that define the norms of usage within the language. Moreover, Goldberg's earlier work (1995, 2006) introduces the idea that the entrenchment of these constructions, driven by their idiosyncratic or frequent usage, solidifies their status within the linguistic system. These constructions, characterized by specific semantic, syntactic, or phonological features, become deeply embedded in the cognitive framework of the language user. This deep embedding facilitates the process by which linguistic change occurs, not through abrupt or systemic shifts as traditional models might suggest, but through gradual and often subtle shifts in usage patterns led by these exemplars.

Thus, the evolution of linguistic constructions is a complex interplay of cognitive processes and usage patterns where high-frequency exemplars play a pivotal role. By acting as anchors, they not only influence individual instances of language use but also guide the broader trajectories of linguistic change, making them fundamental to understanding how languages evolve and adapt over time.

In the theoretical framework of Construction Grammar, language change is often conceptualized as a series of subtle, incremental adjustments within the network of constructions that constitute a language. This perspective highlights that changes in language constructions—be they lexical, syntactic, or morphological—are not monolithic shifts but consist of numerous micro-steps.

Constructionalization, as posited by Traugott and Trousdale (2013), refers to the process through which new constructions emerge, encompassing new forms, new meanings, or both, and becoming integrated into the linguistic network of a community of speakers. It's often accompanied by alterations in the extent of abstraction, productivity, and the degree to which a construction's meaning can be predicted from its parts.

Such changes are not abrupt but occur through a series of incremental adjustments, known as micro-steps, which cumulatively contribute to the evolution of the language's constructional landscape. While some micro-constructions emerge gradually, others appear suddenly. Gradual developments often involve procedural changes, while instantaneous ones tend to carry specific content. While each step in this process happens instantly within an individual's mind, the overall progression towards constructing something new takes place gradually through a sequence of these micro-steps. However, even these sudden changes are preceded by a background of smaller, less noticeable shifts that set the stage for the new construction to be accepted and integrated into the linguistic community.

External factors, such as cultural shifts and language contact, also significantly influence constructional change. Language contact, in particular, has been shown to induce syntactic changes as languages borrow and adapt features from each other. Éva Ágnes Kiss delves into this intersection in her examination of syntactic changes within the Hungarian language. Through a meticulous analysis of the Hungarian verbal complex, she elucidates how contact with other linguistic systems has historically shaped syntactic constructions. Specifically, Kiss demonstrates how Turkic influence catalyzed a process of intricate tense system development, followed by a subsequent simplification spurred by Slavic influence. This historical trajectory underscores the intricate interplay between language contact and syntactic evolution, raising poignant inquiries into the structural conditions conducive to the borrowing and adaptation of linguistic systems. Similarly, broader societal changes are also pivotal in shaping linguistic structures. Cultural transitions reflect shifts in the values, norms, and communicative needs of a speech

community, which in turn influence linguistic expressions and constructions. For instance, the evolution of negation patterns in Middle English provides a clear example of how linguistic structures adapt in response to changing linguistic preferences within a community. As negation strategies shifted, they not only reflected but also facilitated changes in the communicative practices and cognitive orientations of English speakers.

Verb-Object Compounds in Modern Chinese

In the study of Chinese linguistics, verb-object compounds hold a significant position due to their complexity and frequency of use. Notably, most V-O compounds are considered separable compounds (Li and Thompson, 1981; Sun, 2016). The term 离合词 (*líhé cí*) was first introduced by Lu Zhiwei in his seminal work, *Chinese Morphology* 汉语的构词法 (*Hànyǔ de gòucífǎ*, 1957). In this book, Lu Zhiwei was the first to coin the term 离合词 (*líhé cí*) to describe these unique constructions in Chinese morphology. Following Lu, Cao Baoping and Feng Guihua (2003) further develop the concept in their work, *The Formation and Separability Rules of Separable Words* 离合词的构成及离合规律 (*Líhécí de gòuchéng jǐ líhé guīlǜ*). They categorized separable words into three distinct structures, verb-object, verb-complement, and adjunct structures.

Another significant contribution to the field was made by Zhang Shoukang in *On Chinese Word-Formation* 略论汉语构词法 (*Luè lùn hànyǔ gòucífǎ*, 1957), where he first discussed the concept of separable words. He argued that units like 革命 (*gémìng*), 跳舞 (*tiàowǔ*), 洗澡 (*xǐzǎo*), and 鞠躬 (*jūgōng*), which were initially identified by Zhao Yuanren, are neither purely syntactic phrases nor complete words but rather something in-between. Zhang described these units as separable words because they typically function as a single component in syntax. For example, in the sentence 我洗澡了 (*wǒ xǐzǎo le*), the unit 洗澡 (*xǐzǎo*) acts as the predicate rather than 洗 (*xǐ*) as the predicate and 澡 (*zǎo*) as the object. However, when analyzed through the grammatical features of words, they also qualify as phrases due to their internal structure. Therefore, these dominantly structured “separable verbs” act as a single “word” when combined but function as a “phrase” when used separately.

Nature of Separable Words

The nature of separable words in Chinese—whether they belong to the category of words, phrases, or a liminal state between the two—remains a focal point of contention within the field of Chinese linguistics. This debate is characterized by diverse perspectives and ongoing disputes, as scholars continue to present varied interpretations based on their analyses.

From the perspective of those advocating for the lexical classification, separable compounds are considered closer to words or fully lexicalized entities due to their semantic specificity and the binding nature of their morphemic compounds. Lin Handa was among the first, in 1953, to treat separable compounds as a distinct type of word, which he termed “结合动词 (jiéhé dòngcí)”. He argued that these are verbs composed with an adjunct that can incorporate certain syllables in between; the adjunct completes the action denoted by the verb but does not serve as the object of that action. Zhao Shuhua and Zhang Baolin (1996) provided a comprehensive discussion on separable compounds. They discussed these compounds in terms of their common and special cases, and their original and variant forms, arguing that such words exhibit two distinct morphological states which can change temporarily. The trend towards syllabification in Chinese supports common combined form, while the flexibility within the language allows for the occasional separated form, making these compounds a unique class of words distinct from typical words. Rao Qin (2001) approached separable compounds from a valency perspective, analyzing verb-object structures and concluding that separable compounds belong to the category of intransitive verbs. Supporting this perspective, lexicalist theories, as discussed by Jerome Packard in 2000, treat separable verbs as words that are subject to grammatical operations to meet the needs of specific contexts within sentences.

Conversely, advocates for the phrasal interpretation, such as Lü Shuxiang (1979), argue that general separable words should be classified as phrases from a grammatical standpoint. Lü highlighted the contradictions between syntax and morphology, noting that while compounds like 睡觉 (shuìjiào) and 打仗 (dǎzhàng) could be considered words from a morphological perspective, their syntactic behavior compels their classification as phrases due to their separability and positional variability. Zhu Dexi (1982) adopted the approach of “separated as a phrase, combined as a word.” He used the method of extension as a boundary, arguing that verb-object compound verbs before extension are compound words, but once extended, they belong to a combi-

natory verb-object structure. Structurally, Zhu pointed out that 吃饭 (chīfàn) is an agglutinative verb-object phrase where both the verb “吃 (chī)” and the object “饭 (fàn)” are independent words. Conversely, in 吃亏 (chīkuī), the “亏 (kuī)” functions as a bound morpheme and not as an independent word, making 吃亏 (chīkuī) a compound verb-object word rather than a verb-object structure. Unlike other types of compound words, verb-object compound words can often be extended, transitioning from compound words to combinatorial structures upon expansion. Liu Yuehua (1983), in her work on Practical Grammar of Modern Chinese, referred to separable compounds as “tightly bound verb-object phrases.” Similarly, Wang Li (1946) described separable compounds as “竹语 (lèyǔ)” indicating that expressions like 说话 (shuōhuà), 睡觉 (shuìjiào), 走路 (zǒulù), and 害病 (hàibìng) that could extend into 说大话 (shuō dàhuà), 睡了一觉 (shuì le yī jué), 走小路 (zǒu xiǎolù), 害了大病 (hài le dàbìng) should be considered as phrases.

The third theory posits that these constructions occupy a transitional category between words and phrases, possessing characteristics of both. Fan Xiao (1996) noted that while there are clear distinctions between words and phrases, there are also ambiguous cases that exhibit features of both, thus residing in a transitional state. This view supports the notion that linguistic units can transform from phrases to words and vice versa, representing a quantitative change that does not fully transition into a new qualitative state until a fundamental transformation occurs. Shi Youwei (1999) and Li Linding (1990) also support this intermediate classification, suggesting that while separable compounds are closer to words, they embody characteristics of both categories.

The debate extends to those like Lu Zhiwei (1957), who firmly established the term “separable word” while simultaneously clarifying its dual nature. Lu proposed that these compounds behave as a single word when combined but function as two separate words—or a phrase—when the components are split. Lu’s theory was grounded in the distinction between words and phrases, using an extension method to delineate them. This duality is foundational to understanding the flexible and dynamic nature of word formation in Chinese, as proposed by scholars like Zhao Yuanren (1968), Hu Yushu (1995) and Li & Thompson (1989), who described these compounds as inherently cohesive yet structurally separable, emphasizing their unique lexical and syntactic properties.

Grammatical Features of Verb-Object Compounds in Modern Chinese

(1) Typically Do Not Take a Direct Object

Since the argument structure of the verb is satisfied within the compound by taking an object, almost all V-P compounds cannot take a direct object. However, there are indeed some V-O compounds that do take a direct object. For instance:

- (a) 领导很关心你的健康。
(Lǐngdǎo hěn guānxīn nǐ de jiànkāng.)
‘The boss is very concerned about your health.’
- (b) 我们打算出版阎教授的专著。
(Wǒmen dǎsuàn chūbǎn yán jiàoshòu de zhuānzhù.)
‘We plan to publish Professor Yan’s monograph.’

(2) Insertion of Aspect Markers

An aspect marker can be inserted to separate the verb from its object in a V-O compound, illustrating a distinct break in the compound:

- (a) 王小姐毕了业了。
(Wáng xiǎojiě bìle yèle.)
‘Miss Wang has graduated.’
- (b) 他都三十了，还没理过发。
(Tā dōu sānshíle, hái méi lǐguò fā.)
‘He’s already thirty and hasn’t ever had a haircut.’

(3) Insertion of Measure Phrases

Measure phrases indicating frequency or duration can be inserted between the verb and the object:

- (a) 他只念了三年书。
(Tā zhǐ niànle sān nián shū.)
‘He only studied for three years.’
- (b) 小孙子给爷爷磕了三个头。
(Xiǎo sūnzǐ gěi yéyē kēle sān gè tóu.)
‘The grandson kowtowed three times to his grandfather.’

(4) Insertion of Pronouns

Personal and interrogative pronouns can be inserted into verb-object compounds. Generally, personal pronouns are followed by “的 (de)”:

- (a) 我帮他的忙。
(Wǒ bāng tā de máng.)
'I helped him out.'
- (b) 你当什么心。
(Nǐ dāng shénme xīn.)
'You watch out for what?'

(5) Insertion of Complex Linguistic Components

Verb-object compounds in Modern Chinese allow for the insertion of complex linguistic component such as modifiers including nouns, numerals, adjectives, pronouns, verbs, or phrases before the object component of the v-o compound:

- (a) 帮朋友的忙。
(Bāng péngyǒu de máng.)
'help my friend out.'

(6) Insertion of 起 (qǐ), 上 (shàng) and 下 (xià):

- (a) 大家跳起舞来。
(Dàjiā tiàodǎo wǔ lái.)
'everyone started dancing.'

(7) Features Reduplication Forms

Unlike general verbs, the reduplication in separable verbs occurs only with the initial verb-like element in order to indicate a delimitative aspect. While structures like V—Vo or VV-看(kàn)-O are not permissible, the pattern VVO-看(kàn) is possible. For example:

- (a) 睡觉
(shuìjiào)
'sleep'
- (b) 睡睡觉
(shuì shuì jiào)
'sleep a little'
- (c) *睡—睡觉
(shuì yí shuì jiào)
- (d) *睡睡看觉
(shuì shuì kàn jué)

- (e) 睡睡觉看
(shuì shuì jiào kàn)
'sleep a little'

(8) Repetition with Complements

When separable verbs are used with temporal or modal complements, the verb-like element preceding the complement must be repeated. This structure emphasizes the duration or manner of the action. For example:

- (a) 我们照相照了半个小时。
(Wǒmen zhàoxiàng zhàole bàn gè xiǎoshí.)
'we took photos for half an hour.'
- (b) 他跑步跑得满头是汗。
(Tā pǎobù pǎo dé mǎn tóu shì hàn.)
'He ran until he was sweating profusely.'

Recent Micro-changes in Chinese Verb-Object Compounds

“V个 (gè)N” Construction

The “V个 (gè)N” construction in Modern Chinese is a grammatical structure where a verb is directly combined with “个 (gè)” followed by a noun, without an intervening numeral. The characteristics of verb-object compounds in Modern Chinese that we mentioned earlier, notably its lack of a direct object and the ability to incorporate aspect markers, form the foundational underpinnings of the “V个 (gè)N” construction.

In modern Chinese, “个 (gè)” is a measure word used frequently to indicate the concrete quantity of an item. It is applicable to most items that do not have a specific unit of measurement, and it can even be paired with some items that have their own appropriate measure words. Its common usage involves forming a quantity phrase with numerals to modify the following noun or noun phrase, such as in 我今天吃了一个苹果 (Wǒ jīntiān chīle yīgè píngguǒ; I ate an apple today) or 我上午看了一本书 (Wǒ shàngwǔ kànle yī běn shū; I read a book this morning). Instead, “个 (gè)” in “V个 (gè)N” construction is directly combined with a verb followed by a noun component which simplifies the expression by omitting the numeral, as seen in examples like 我去和朋友们吃个饭 (Wǒ qù hé péngyǒumen chī gè fàn; I'll go have a

meal with friends) or 我想去街上溜个弯儿 (Wǒ xiǎng qù jiē shàng liū gè wān'r; I want to take a walk on the street).

Before the constructionalization, the insertion of temporal and quantifying phrases coexisted with aspect markers, which necessitates consistency with the subsequent noun in the construction. Examples such as 写了一个字 (xiěle yí gè zì), 见了一次面 (jiànle yí cì miàn), 教了一年书 (jiàole yì nián shū), and 红了一次脸 (hóngle yí cì liǎn) illustrate this stage of constructional usage. These instances demonstrate that the original constructions allowed for a quantifier that marked the number of instances or the duration of an action. As the construction evolved, the specific phrase 一个 (yí gè) underwent a transformation into (一)个 ([yí] gè), which marks a significant shift towards subjectification and casualness. The deletion of 一 (yí), originally denoting minimal amounts as in 一个 (yí gè), began to embody a more subjective tone—indicating something trivial, casual, or of minor importance. Consequently, the presence of aspect markers became redundant and other quantifiers began to be replaced by 个 (gè), which reflects a larger trend toward a more casual and less formally bound usage in spoken Chinese:

- (a) 小两口红个脸没啥要紧，过一夜就好了。
 (Xiǎo liǎngkǒu hóng gè liǎn méi shá yào jǐn, guò yí yè jiù hǎole.)
 *小两口红过次脸没啥要紧，过一夜就好了。
 (Xiǎo liǎngkǒu hóngguò cì liǎn méi shá yào jǐn, guò yí yè jiù hǎole.)
 ‘It’s not a big deal for the young couple to have a little argument, it’ll be fine after a night.’
- (b) 到了北京给我打电话啊，咱们见个面。
 (Dào le Běijīng gěi wǒ dǎ diànhuà a, zánmen jiàn gè miàn.)
 *到了北京给我打电话啊，咱们见了次面。
 (Dào le Běijīng gěi wǒ dǎ diànhuà a, zánmen jiànle cì miàn.)
 ‘Call me when you get to Beijing, let’s meet up.’
- (c) 知青除了劳动，有的也教个书啥的。
 (Zhīqīng chú le láodòng, yǒu de yě jiào gè shū shá de.)
 *知青除了劳动，有的也教了年书啥的。
 (Zhīqīng chú le láodòng, yǒu de yě jiàole nián shū shá de.)
 ‘Besides laboring, some of the sent-down youth also taught or something.’

教个书 (jiào gè shū) in the 1st sentence of (c) features the use of 个 (gè) as a casual quantifier that minimizes the formality and specifies no particular

quantity or duration. The use of 个 (gè) in this context is subjective which denotes an activity done in a non-specific and casual manner, suggesting that the act of teaching is not the primary duty but rather an occasional or supplementary activity. In contrast, the 2nd sentence of (c) attempts to use 了年 (le nián) which is grammatically incorrect. The phrase 教了年书 (jiao le niánshū) incorrectly combines the aspect marker 了 (le, which indicates completion) with a measure word 年 (shū), implying a specific duration that contradicts the casual tone set by the rest of the sentence.

The “V个 (gè)N” construction is a grammatical construction that has evolved from quantifying expressions to a structure that expresses subjective diminishing. Notably, this construction emerges from the category of “V量可数 (liàng kě shǔ) N” and has been restructured through structuralization, thereby inheriting the semantic features associated with small-scale actions (Lei, 2017).

Subjectivity in language is the presence of personal expression within discourse, where the speaker infuses their stance, attitude, and emotions into the conversation. This subjective tint is often expressed through specific grammatical structures or evolves through linguistic changes to accommodate such expressions (Shen, 2001). In the case of the “V个 (gè)N” construction, this subjectification is particularly pronounced, serving as a mechanism to convey minimal quantities in a subjective context (Wang, 1999; Li, 1988, 1999; Wang, 2005; Wang, 2013; Ren, 2013; Li, 1992; Zhou, 2011). This construction is marked by two primary features: quantitative minimality and temporal brevity. The numeral “个 (gè)” typically modifies nouns that denote a small quantity of tangible objects, while the verbs indicate actions of short duration. Together, these elements express the semantic characteristic of the construction, encapsulating brief actions that impact minimal quantities of objects, thereby emphasizing a subjective interpretation of events.

While the aforementioned studies have significantly contributed to understanding the semantics and pragmatic functions of 个 (gè), they often discuss it in isolation. This narrow focus has somewhat limited our understanding of the grammaticalization processes at play, neglecting how 个 (gè) contributes to the larger syntactic and semantic changes within the construction. To fully appreciate the complexity and dynamics of the “V个 (gè)N” construction, it is essential to consider it within the broader context of construction grammar and language change. The shift towards viewing 个 (gè) as a marker of triviality not only alters the construction’s meaning but also its

function in discourse. Such changes are emblematic of the adaptive nature of language, where constructions evolve in response to shifts in speaker intentions and communicative needs.

Analogy of the “V个 (gè)N” Construction

The “V个 (gè)N” construction, traditionally reserved for verb-object compound, has expanded to encompass non-VO compounds through a process of grammaticalization and analogical extension. In cases where the typical “V个 (gè)N” format does not apply, an interstitial ‘个 (gè)’ can be introduced between two morphemes, expanding the structure. This expansion refers to the broadening of newly formed structures by relaxing certain grammatical constraints, making them applicable to larger linguistic contexts where originally the insertion of ‘个 (gè)’ would not be permissible. Structures such as predicative adjuncts and serial verb constructions have thus evolved under the strong analogical influence of the “V个 (gè)N” pattern, forming new structural types. Although these analogically derived structures may differ from the typical “V个 (gè)N” format in superficial grammatical significance, they share a deep semantic purpose: by incorporating ‘个 (gè)’, they transform an unbounded, abstract activity into a bounded, concrete event. For example:

- (a) 没事了就旅个游啊，瑜个伽呀什么的。
(Méishìle jiù lǚ gè yóu a, yú gè jiā ya shénme de.)
‘If there’s nothing else, go on a trip or do some yoga or something.’
- (b) 今天得面个试。
(Jīntiān děi miàn gè shì.)
‘I have a job interview today.’

The underlined 面个试 (miàn gè shì) in (b) illustrate the innovative application of the “V个 (gè)N” construction beyond traditional verb-object settings through analogy. However, the insertion of 个 (gè) is not universally applicable as demonstrated by the ungrammaticality of 笔个试 (bǐ gè shì) and 口个试 (kǒu gè shì). These examples highlight the semantic constraints—‘个 (gè)’ favors contexts where the action can be conceptually segmented or quantified, a condition not met by the inherently indivisible nature of 笔试 (bǐshì) and 口试 (kǒushì).

Instances of this extended use are not uncommon in spoken language. In the data from BLCU Corpus Center as of October 10, 2021, we observed 1 in-

stance of 践个行 (jiàn gè xíng), 2 instances of 祈个祷 (qí gè dǎo), and 333 instances of 旅个游 (lǚ gè yóu). These examples highlight the adaptability of the “V个 (gè)N” construction in accommodating non-conventional verb-object compounds through the insertion of 个.

The “V个 (gè)N” construction enhances the expression of actions as trivial or casual. This effect is further amplified when combined with the “不就是 (bú jiùshì)...” construction, a rhetorical device that trivializes even significant or positive events. The corpus evidence indicates that the “V个 (gè)N” construction has been widely utilized since as early as 1947, with at least 122 recorded instances across seven different types of usage. This widespread historical usage underscores its established role in the language. However, its integration with the “不就是 (bú jiùshì)...” construction marks a more recent linguistic development, which underscores the dynamic nature of language as it adapts to cultural and social changes. This process of amalgamation involves blending the “V个 (gè)N” construction, which already imparts a casual and manageable perception of events, with the “不就是 (bú jiùshì)...” construction that typically downplays the significance of the described actions or situations. The “不就是 (bú jiùshì)...” construction, explored by Yin Shulin (2007), is noted for its rhetorical use in Mandarin, often employed to convey a rhetorical question or to question the inevitability or significance of an outcome. The combined effect of these constructions not only allows speakers to trivialize and casually mention minor or negative occurrences but also extends to traditionally significant and positive events, thus subjectivizing and diminishing their perceived importance. This linguistic strategy is exemplified in sentences such as:

- (a) 不就是结个婚嘛，谁怕谁啊！
(Bù jiùshì jié gè hūn ma, shéi pà shéi a!)
‘It's just getting married, who's afraid?’
- (b) 不就是当个官嘛，还能把我难住？
(Bù jiùshì dāng gè guān ma, hái néng bǎ wǒ nán zhù?)
‘It's just being an official, how could that stump me?’

(a) exemplifies how the combination of “不就是 (bú jiùshì)...” and “V个 (gè)N” constructions diminishes the perceived significance of marriage (“结婚 jiéhūn”), traditionally seen as a significant event. By employing these constructions, the phrase trivializes marriage, presenting it as an ordinary, insignificant event.

Another interesting phenomenon of the “V个 (gè)N” construction is the fixation of certain nouns within the construction, which conveys specific meanings or implications. A notable example of this phenomenon is observed in the colloquial expression “V(你 nǐ)个头 (gètóu)”, where the noun 头 (tóu) is fixed and used to emphatically reject the preceding verb action (V). Compared to a simple refusal, it enriches the emotional depth of the interaction, allowing speakers to express emotions such as anger or joking more vividly. For instance, in a dialogue where one suggests going to karaoke after dinner:

- (a) 吃完饭大家去K个歌吧！
(Chī wán fàn dàjiā qù K gè gē ba!)
‘Let’s go karaoke after dinner!’
- (b) K(你)个头啊！活儿干完了没有？
(K(nǐ) gè tóu a! Huó’r gàn wánle méiyǒu?)
‘What are you talking about? Have you finished the work?’

The underlined phrase in the response uses the construction to express humorously feign anger, thereby rejecting the proposal.

The evolution and amalgamation of the “V个 (gè)N” construction align with Elizabeth Traugott’s theory of linguistic change as a “succession of micro-steps” (2010). These steps reflect gradual and continuous changes in language structures that combine and merge, contributing to the overall dynamics of linguistic evolution. The “V个 (gè)N” construction’s adaptability in incorporating fixed nouns to convey specific meanings exemplifies the dynamic interplay between language structure and communicative needs. It represents a microcosm of broader linguistic evolution, where small changes accumulate over time, driven by shifts in social interaction and cultural norms.

Direct Object Attachment in Verb-Object Compounds

As we mentioned earlier, in the typical structure of Chinese verb-object compounds, the direct object is generally internal to the construction, meaning that the compound itself is self-contained and typically does not take an additional direct object. Jerome Packard (2000) succinctly explains that the verb’s thematic object role is already satisfied within the compound, precluding further object attachment under normal circumstances.

The structural integrity of V-O compounds often poses a challenge to native English speakers learning Chinese. Errors commonly arise when learners at-

tempt to add a direct object to these inherently complete structures. Please see some typical errors made by American students with this regard:

- (a) *我今天下午要见面老师。
(Wǒ jīntiān xiàwǔ yào jiànmiàn lǎoshī.)
'I want to meet the teacher this afternoon.'
- (b) *张先生希望结婚李小姐。
(Zhāng xiānshēng xīwàng jiéhūn Lǐ xiǎojiě.)
'Mr. Zhang hopes to marry Miss Li.'

An incorrect construction like (a) arises from the direct translation of English sentence structures (I want to meet the teacher this afternoon) into Chinese. The correct structure necessitates the introduction of another element, typically a preposition, to properly link the object, thus the correct sentence should be 我今天下午要和老师见面 (Wǒ jīntiān xiàwǔ yào hé lǎoshī jiànmiàn).

Despite this general rule, there are some verb-object compounds with transitive meanings do take a direct object, highlighting a degree of flexibility in V-O compound usage – for example, 关心 (guānxīn), 出版 (chūbǎn), 得罪 (dézuì), and 注意 (zhùyì), as in:

- (a) 请大家注意安全。
(Qǐng dàjiā zhùyì ānquán.)
'Please pay attention to safety.'
- (b) 父母十分担心孩子的安全。
(Fùmǔ shífēn dānxīn háiǐ de ānquán.)
'Parents are very worried about their children's safety.'

However, recent linguistic observations indicate an increase in the frequency with which direct objects are attached to verb-object compounds in Modern Chinese. This micro-change is evident in slogans and colloquial expressions such as:

- (a) 北京牵手奥运!
(Běijīng qiānshǒu àoyùn!)
'Beijing joins hands with the Olympics!'
- (b) 张艺谋搭档蔡国强。
(Zhāngyìmóu dādàng cài guóqiáng.)
'Zhang Yimou collaborates with Cai Guoqiang.'

- (c) 我昨晚做梦你了。
 (Wǒ zuówǎn zuòmèng nǐle.)
 ‘I dreamt about you last night.’

The origins of such usage can be traced back to as early as 1947, with phrases like 约会小姑娘 (yuēhuì xiǎo gūniáng), suggesting that the capacity for V-O compounds to take a direct object has been a latent feature of Chinese. Over the decades, the adoption and spread of such usage have gained momentum influenced significantly by two primary factors. Firstly, the rise in direct object attachment within verb-object compounds can be attributed to language contact phenomena. According to the imperfect learning hypothesis, second language learners, especially within immigrant communities, often acquire and utilize the target language imperfectly. This imperfect learning, characterized by deviations from native norms, can seep into the broader linguistic community, influencing and altering mainstream usage patterns (Lefebvre, 1998; Siegel, 2003; Migge and Smith, 2007). Another driving force behind this linguistic change is the pragmatic need to restructure information within sentences. The direct attachment of objects allows speakers to emphasize or highlight certain elements over others, thus facilitating a different focus or interpretation in communication. This need for flexibility in information presentation has led to the creative adaptation of traditional V-O compounds, accommodating more dynamic and expressive sentence structures.

Due to the increasing interactions between native Chinese speakers and Chinese learners, the imperfect learning errors of these learners have surprisingly “inspired” native speakers, incorporating these errors into the structures of their mother tongue. Historically, this type of language change induced by imperfect learning has occurred multiple times within the history of Chinese language (Mithun, 1988; Peng, 2017; Shen, 2014; Cao and Yu, 2017). Today, this kind of change is happening again:

- (a) 第二外语学习者需要挑战一套新的语言范畴。(石老师提要)
 (Dì èr wàiyǔ xuéxí zhě xūyào tiǎozhàn yī tào xīn de yǔyán fānchóu.
 [Shí lǎoshī tíyào])
 ‘Second language learners need to tackle a new set of linguistic categories.’

- (b) 呼兰：你造谣我也造得高明一些好不好？ — 《脱口秀大会》
 (Hū Lán: Nǐ zàoyáo wǒ yě zào dé gāomíng yīxiē hǎo bù hǎo? —
 “Tuōkǒu xiù dàhuì”)
 ‘Hulan: If you’re going to spread rumors about me, could you at
 least do it more cleverly? – Rock & Roast’
- (c) 王志文：你生气我？
 (Wáng Zhìwén: Nǐ shēngqì wǒ?)
 ‘Wang Zhiwen: Are you mad at me?’
 李小冉：生，特别生！ — 《大丈夫》
 (Lǐ Xiǎorǎn: Shēng, tèbié shēng! — “Dàzhàngfū”)
 ‘Li Xiaoran: Yes, very much so! — May December Love’

The underlying pragmatic motive for this syntactic variation appears to be Chinese native speakers’ need to reorganize information structure in discourse. Specifically, the arrangement of information in a sentence influence how information is highlighted and perceived by listeners. Traditional constructions such as 跟 (gēn) sb 结婚 (jiéhūn) limited the information structure by inherently focusing on the verb 结婚 (jiéhūn) as the new information and the focal point of the sentence. In contrast, emerging constructions like 结婚 (jiéhūn) sb shift the focus, placing emphasis on the object of the action, i.e., the person being married. This shift allows speakers to highlight different elements of the sentence depending on the conversational context. This manipulation is evident when comparing the following questions:

- (a) 你跟谁结婚？
 (Nǐ gēn shéi jiéhūn?)
 ‘Who are you marrying?’
- (b) 你结婚谁？
 (Nǐ jiéhūn shéi?)
 ‘Who are you marrying?’

The traditional form (a) positions 结婚 (jiéhūn) as the primary focus. In contrast, the newer form (b) shifts the focus to 谁 (shéi), the object, thereby altering the information structure. The existence of both constructions within Chinese suggests a functional differentiation driven by the speakers’ intent to manipulate the focus within their utterances. Since the functions of the two constructions differ, there is a necessity for both to exist. The alternative construction 结婚 (jiéhūn) sb not only breaks from the norm but also pro-

vides linguistic evidence of evolving language usage that responds to specific contextual needs. Such variations are indicative of a dynamic aspect of language change, where forms evolve and diverge to meet the expressive demands of speakers.

Implications for Teaching Chinese as a Second Language

Teaching verb-object compound is one of the significant challenges in the domain of teaching Chinese as a second language. These challenges are compounded by the micro-changes occurring in contemporary usage, which can lead to confusion among learners. This section explores pedagogical strategies for addressing the micro-changes observed in V-O compounds, which are crucial for ensuring effective language acquisition.

First of all, in teaching Chinese as a second language, it is crucial to distinguish between the cultivation of receptive and productive language skills. Students should be exposed to new expressions and constructions to develop a comprehensive understanding of modern usage. However, they should not be encouraged to imitate and use these constructions hastily in their own speech or writing. Educators should not hasten to introduce these new expressions actively in the classroom. Instead, the focus should be on clarifying these constructions when queried by students, providing authoritative responses that help them understand the constructions without overwhelming them with the complexities of evolving language usage.

Furthermore, teachers should avoid immediately dismissing emerging linguistics forms as mere errors or mislearning. Language is inherently dynamic, and what might seem like a minor variation today could lead to systematic changes over time. The micro changes observed in compound words reflect ongoing evolutions in the language, which may become standard usage over time. Therefore, recognizing and understanding these subtle shifts is crucial. By acknowledging and discussing these changes, teachers can foster a deeper understanding of language dynamics among students. This approach not only enriches the learners' linguistic insights but also prepares them to engage with a living language that evolves with its cultural and communication contexts.

In teaching Chinese as a second language, a balanced approach towards the micro changes in compound words is essential. Educators should foster an environment where students are informed about the dynamics of language

evolution but are also guided to adopt these changes judiciously in their language practice. This method not only enhances learning outcomes but also respects the natural progression of language as it adapts to new communicative needs.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted two primary micro-changes in Chinese verb-object compounds: the emergence and adaptation of the “V个 (gè)N” construction and the increasing instances of direct object attachments to traditional V-O compounds. Through a comprehensive examination of these phenomena, several key conclusions can be drawn.

Firstly, The “V个 (gè)N” construction illustrates a shift from specific quantification to expressing actions with subjective and casual nuances, highlighting the flexibility and adaptability of language to cultural and communicative changes. Also, the integration with “不就是 (bú jiùshì)...” and the fixation of certain nouns within the construction reflect gradual and continuous changes in language structures that combine and merge, contributing to the overall dynamics of linguistic evolution.

Secondly, the attachment of direct objects to V-O compounds challenges the traditional structural constraints of these compounds. This micro-change appears to be driven by language contact phenomena, particularly the influence of imperfect learning among second language learners, as well as pragmatic needs for flexible information structuring within utterances.

These findings underscore the dynamic and adaptive nature of language, which continuously evolves to meet the changing communicative needs of its speakers. The study of micro-changes in linguistic constructions provides a window into the intricate mechanisms that drive language change, highlighting the interplay between cognitive processes, structural constraints, and socio-cultural factors.

The implications of these micro-changes extend beyond theoretical significance. In the domain of teaching Chinese as a second language, acknowledging and addressing these evolving constructions is crucial for fostering comprehensive language competence among learners. By adopting a balanced approach that recognizes the dynamic nature of language while guiding

judicious usage, educators can enrich the learning experience and prepare students for effective communication in a living linguistic environment.

Future research can build upon this foundation by exploring additional micro-changes in other linguistic domains, such as morphology, syntax, and semantics. Longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of these constructions over time would provide valuable insights into the trajectories of language change. Additionally, incorporating sociolinguistic factors, such as regional variations, age, and socioeconomic status, could further elucidate the intricate interplay between language and sociocultural dynamics.

In conclusion, the exploration of micro-changes in Chinese V-O compounds serves as a microcosm of the broader quest to unravel the intricate mechanics of language change. By delving into these subtle shifts, we not only gain insights into the specific linguistic phenomena at hand but also contribute to our collective understanding of language as a living, adaptive system that mirrors the ever-evolving needs and contexts of its speakers.

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