

*Comparing Preverbal *gei* (给) and *bei* (被) in Mandarin Transitive Patient-Subject Constructions*

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Abstract. This paper examines preverbal *gei* (给) in a restricted empirical domain: prototypical transitive patient-subject constructions in Mandarin. It asks how *gei* (给) compares with *bei* (被) in this domain. I argue that it patterns with *bei* (被) in the core environments examined here. In these environments, *gei* (给) combines with transitive predicates, may be followed by an overt post-marker source phrase, and supports agent-oriented modification such as *guyi* (故意) 'deliberately'. Earlier descriptions also suggest that passive *gei* (给) is distributionally narrower, stylistically more colloquial, and especially natural with transparent resultative predicates and clearly affected patients. The conclusion advanced here is therefore limited: in the transitive patient-subject domain examined in this paper, the evidence supports treating preverbal *gei* (给) as a passive marker in Mandarin, although a more restricted one than *bei* (被).

Keywords: preverbal *gei* (给), *bei* (被), passive marker, patient-subject constructions

1. Introduction

Mandarin passives are most commonly discussed through *bei* (被), but colloquial Mandarin also allows clauses with preverbal *gei* (给) that are closely comparable to ordinary passives. A simple contrast is given in (1).

(1) a. 门被(张三)打开了. Men bei (Zhangsan) da-kai-le. door BEI Zhangsan open-PFV 'The door was opened (by Zhangsan).'

b. 门给(张三)打开了.

Men gei (Zhangsan) da-kai-le.

door GEI Zhangsan open-PFV 'The door was opened (by Zhangsan).'

Examples such as (1) motivate a focused question: within prototypical transitive patient-subject constructions, how closely does *gei* (给) pattern with *bei* (被)? In both (1a) and (1b), the surface subject denotes the affected patient of a transitive event, and the optional post-marker DP denotes the source of that event.

Previous work gives reason to take this comparison seriously. *Bei* (被) is the standard point of reference in research on Mandarin passives [1-6]. On the *gei* (给) side, Huang [7] directly analyzes long *gei* (给) passives. Other studies, including Shen and Sybesma [8], discuss transitive patient-subject uses of preverbal *gei* (给) that are relevant to the passive comparison, although they do not

all treat *gei* (给) in the same way. What remains under-developed is a controlled side-by-side comparison of *gei* (给) and *bei* (被) within the same transitive patient-subject domain.

The present paper therefore makes a deliberately limited claim. It focuses on the restricted domain in which *gei* (给) and *bei* (被) can be compared directly. The main evidence comes from three diagnostics: compatibility with transitive predicates, the interpretation of overt post-marker source phrases, and the licensing of agent-oriented adverbs such as *guyi* (故意) 'deliberately'. The conclusion is correspondingly limited. In prototypical transitive patient-subject constructions, the evidence supports treating *gei* (给) as a passive marker, although a more restricted and more marked one than *bei* (被).

Section 2 reviews previous studies and states the present question more precisely. Section 3 compares *gei* (给) and *bei* (被) in this restricted domain through a small set of diagnostics. Section 4 concludes.

2. Previous studies and the present question

2.1. Syntactic analyses of *bei* (被)-passives

Research on Mandarin *bei* (被)-passives has long centered on a cluster of linked questions rather than a single issue. At least three questions recur across the literature. First, what kind of head is *bei* (被): a verb, a preposition-like marker, or a dedicated passive functional head? Second, how are long and short passives related: are they derived from one structure, or from distinct structures? Third, how much syntactic and semantic uniformity should be attributed to the passive family as a whole? These questions matter because Mandarin passives differ from canonical English passives in several respects, including the availability of overt post-*bei* (被) phrases, the distribution of short passives, and the interaction between passive marking and lexical predicate type.

One influential line of work argues that Mandarin *bei* (被)-passives cannot be derived in a single uniform way. Huang [1] proposes that Chinese passives require both complementation and movement. Ting [2], by contrast, divides the *bei* (被)-construction into multiple types, including A-movement structures, null-operator structures, and lexical passive compounds. Tang [3] likewise defends a complementation approach, but ties the analysis more explicitly to the categorial status of *bei* (被) and to the interpretation of the implicit external argument. Although these authors differ on implementation, they agree that any serious analysis of Mandarin passives must say something explicit about the structural status of *bei* (被) and about the syntax of the participant suppressed from subject position.

Later work reopens the question of whether long and short passives should in fact be kept structurally distinct. Her [4] argues for a more unified analysis of *bei* (被), whereas Liu [5] revisits the derivation of long and short passives in more fine-grained terms. The disagreement is important because it bears directly on how much structure is present when the post-*bei* (被) phrase is absent. For present purposes, however, the point of these controversies is narrower. The present paper does not adjudicate whether *bei* (被) is verbal, prepositional, or functional, nor whether short passives are uniformly reduced long passives. What matters here is that all of these approaches treat patient-subject clauses with transitive predicates and optional post-*bei* (被) phrases as core passive territory. That is precisely the domain in which passive *gei* (给) is compared with *bei* (被) below.

From the perspective of the present paper, these controversies are useful not because they must be resolved here, but because they define what counts as canonical passive territory in Mandarin. Across otherwise different analyses, the constructions that stand least in doubt are transitive patient-subject clauses built on eventive predicates and optionally accompanied by an overt post-*bei* (被)

phrase. That convergence is methodologically important. It means that a comparison with preverbal *gei* (给) can be carried out against a relatively stable empirical baseline even if deeper theoretical questions remain open. In other words, the paper relies on the shared descriptive core of the *bei* (被) literature rather than on any single syntactic model of Mandarin passives. This choice is deliberate: if the comparison were based on more marginal or more controversial patterns, it would be difficult to know whether a mismatch reflected the status of *gei* (给) itself or merely a prior disagreement about the passive family.

Despite these disagreements, the literature converges on a stable descriptive core: transitive patient-subject clauses with eventive predicates and optional post-*bei* (被) phrases are the least controversial passive cases in Mandarin. The present paper builds on this convergence rather than on any single syntactic analysis. This is why the comparison with preverbal *gei* (给) can remain empirically focused even when deeper architectural questions are left unresolved.

2.2. Semantic properties of *bei* (被)-passives

A second major line of research concerns the semantics of Mandarin *bei* (被)-passives. A long-standing observation is that Mandarin passives are not semantically neutral in the way English passives are often assumed to be. Many studies connect *bei* (被)-passives with adversity, affectedness, or some kind of non-neutral impact on the patient, but there is disagreement over how strong this connection is. For some descriptions, adversity is close to a hallmark of the construction; for others, it is better treated as a robust tendency rather than an absolute requirement, since neutral uses are also possible [1,6].

A related debate concerns what exactly is affected in a Mandarin passive. Huang [1] links Mandarin passive syntax to an affectee or experiencer interpretation of the subject. More recent work develops the same intuition in more explicit event-semantic terms. Law and Hirschberg [6], for example, argue that the acceptability of Mandarin passives is shaped by affectedness, transitivity, and the degree of change undergone by the theme. On this view, the passive subject is not merely a promoted internal argument in structural terms; it is also a participant whose state is saliently impacted by the event.

This semantic literature matters for the present paper because it shows that Mandarin passives cannot be characterized in purely configurational terms. The lexical semantics of the lower predicate, the transparency of the result state, and the degree of impact on the patient all affect how natural a passive clause sounds. The present paper does not attempt to resolve whether affectedness is encoded structurally, lexically, or pragmatically. It only assumes the narrower point on which the literature converges: semantically prototypical passives are especially useful testing ground for comparing *gei* (给) and *bei* (被).

A further implication follows for data selection. If affectedness and resultative change matter to Mandarin passives, then predicates such as *da-kai* (打开) are not accidental choices but useful probes. They instantiate the sort of event in which the patient's change of state is transparent, bounded, and easy to interpret. This makes them especially suitable for comparing markers rather than predicates. If *gei* (给) patterns with *bei* (被) even when the lower predicate is held constant in these semantically prototypical cases, then the comparison has a clearer force. Conversely, if differences remain, those differences are less likely to be artifacts of predicate choice alone and more likely to reflect the distribution of the markers themselves. The discussion in Section 3 adopts exactly this methodological logic.

In this respect, the choice of resultative predicates in Section 3 is not merely expository. It is meant to hold constant a set of semantically prototypical passive environments in which the

affectedness of the patient and the result state are both transparent. This makes it easier to attribute any contrast to the markers themselves rather than to differences in predicate semantics.

2.3. Passive *gei* (给) in relation to *bei* (被)

Against this background, preverbal *gei* (给) in transitive patient-subject clauses should not be evaluated in isolation. The relevant question is how closely passive *gei* (给) matches the core properties already associated with canonical *bei* (被)-passives in the restricted domain examined here. The present comparison therefore focuses on three diagnostics that bear directly on passive behavior: patient-subject syntax, the interpretation of overt post-marker source phrases when they are expressed, and agent-oriented modification.

A separate line of work has long noted a preverbal use of *gei* (给) in colloquial patient-subject clauses that are closely comparable to *bei* (被)-passives. Huang [7] directly analyzes long *gei* (给) passives. Other studies, including Shen and Sybesma [8], discuss transitive patient-subject uses of preverbal *gei* (给) that are highly relevant to the present comparison, although they do not all characterize *gei* (给) in the same way. What these studies establish is narrower but crucial: at least one use of preverbal *gei* (给) behaves closely enough like a passive marker to require direct comparison with *bei* (被).

Once the question is formulated in this way, the gap in the literature becomes clearer. What remains under-developed is a side-by-side comparison of *gei* (给) and *bei* (被) within the same transitive patient-subject domain. The evidence presented here supports treating preverbal *gei* (给) as a passive marker in this restricted domain, although a more limited one than *bei* (被).

This also explains why the present paper repeatedly compares *gei* (给) and *bei* (被) across the same small set of resultative predicates instead of multiplying loosely matched examples. A controlled comparison is particularly important in the Mandarin passive domain, where subtle changes in predicate class, resultativity, and affectedness can alter acceptability. By keeping these factors as constant as possible, the paper isolates the contribution of the markers themselves. The resulting argument is correspondingly modest: it does not claim to settle every question about passive structure in Mandarin, only to show that in the preverbal *gei* (给) patterns with canonical passive in transitive patient-subject environments.

3. Comparing preverbal *gei* (给) and *bei* (被) in transitive patient-subject constructions

3.1. Basic structural similarity

The comparison space is clearest if we hold constant the patient-subject configuration and compare *gei* (给) and *bei* (被) across the same transitive predicates. Example (2) does so with a familiar resultative predicate, *da-kai* (打开) 'open'.

(2) a. 门被打开了. *Men bei da-kai-le.* door BEI open-PFV 'The door was opened.'

b. 门给打开了.

Men gei da-kai-le.

door GEI open-PFV 'The door was opened.'

Both clauses instantiate the same basic descriptive profile: the surface subject is the affected patient, the lower predicate is transitive, and the event culminates in a result state affecting that subject. In this core environment, replacing *bei* (被) with *gei* (给) does not change the patient-subject profile of the clause.

This is the empirical domain in which a passive analysis of *gei* (给) can be defended most securely. The point is not that *gei* (给) and *bei* (被) are identical, but that passive *gei* (给) occurs in the same core clause type that defines the Mandarin passive domain more generally.

3.2. Overt source phrase after *bei* (被) and *gei* (给)

The comparison becomes tighter once the source of the event is made overt. Example (3) repeats the same predicate as in (2), but now with an expressed post-marker DP.

(3) a. 门被张三打开了. Men bei Zhangsan da-kai-le. door BEI Zhangsan open-PFV 'The door was opened by Zhangsan.'

b. 门给张三打开了.

Men gei Zhangsan da-kai-le.

door GEI Zhangsan open-PFV 'The door was opened by Zhangsan.'

In the above clauses, the post-marker DP Zhangsan (张三) is understood as the source of the event, while the surface subject remains the affected patient. The *gei* (给) examples thus pattern with their *bei* (被) counterparts not only in patient-subject syntax but also in the interpretation of the post-marker phrase.

This is important because an overt post-*bei* (被) phrase is a familiar property of canonical long passives. When such a phrase is expressed, transitive passive *gei* (给) patterns with *bei* (被) in the interpretation of the post-marker source phrase. Here and throughout, I use causer as a broad descriptive label for the source of the event, without assuming a narrowly agentive interpretation.

The same-predicate design matters here as well. If different predicates were used in the *bei* (被) and *gei* (给) examples, one could always attribute any contrast to lexical differences rather than to the status of the markers themselves. By repeating *da-kai* (打开) across the short-passive and long-passive examples, the comparison isolates the contribution of the post-marker phrase more cleanly and makes the parallel between the two markers easier to evaluate.

3.3. Agent-oriented adverbs

A third comparison tests whether the two markers pattern alike under agent-oriented modification. To keep the comparison controlled, (4) again uses the same predicate as in (2)-(3).

(4) a. 门被张三故意打开了. Men bei Zhangsan guyi da-kai-le. door BEI Zhangsan deliberately open-PFV 'The door was deliberately opened by Zhangsan.'

b. 门给张三故意打开了.

Men gei Zhangsan guyi da-kai-le.

door GEI Zhangsan deliberately open-PFV 'The door was deliberately opened by Zhangsan.'

Adverbs such as *guyi* (故意) 'deliberately' are relevant because they target the source of the event rather than the patient subject. In work on implicit arguments and passives, agent-oriented adverbs are commonly used as evidence that the clause still provides access to an external initiator [9].

The pattern in (4) therefore adds a third parallel. In the transitive patient-subject domain, both *bei* (被) and *gei* (给) support agent-oriented modification with the same predicate already used in (2)-(3). This is positive evidence that passive *gei* (给) belongs in the Mandarin passive system, even if the two markers later prove not to be fully interchangeable.

3.4. Differences between passive *gei* (给) and *bei* (被)

The parallels discussed in Sections 3.1-3.3 do not imply that passive *gei* (给) and *bei* (被) are freely interchangeable. Earlier descriptions repeatedly treat *gei* (给) as more restricted and stylistically more colloquial than *bei* (被) [1,7,8]. They also suggest that the clearest passive uses of *gei* (给) tend to involve a transparent result and a clearly affected patient, precisely the sort of predicates and interpretations illustrated in (2)-(4). This paper does not attempt to define the full distribution of *gei* (给) relative to *bei* (被). The point is narrower: the evidence presented here supports treating *gei* (给) as a passive option in this restricted domain, but not as a fully general passive marker. This asymmetry is precisely why a controlled comparison with *bei* (被) remains methodologically useful.

At the same time, the semantic literature on affectedness offers one reason why *gei* (给) may be felt to be more marked than *bei* (被). If Mandarin passives are generally more natural when the patient is strongly affected, passive *gei* (给) may cluster toward the more semantically prototypical end of the passive domain. On that view, *bei* (被) remains the default and more general passive marker, whereas *gei* (给) occupies a narrower position within the same system [1,6,7].

It is therefore useful to distinguish two kinds of claim. One is a membership claim: in the environments examined here, *gei* (给) belongs inside the passive domain. The other is an extent claim: *gei* (给) does not occupy the full range of contexts available to *bei* (被). The present paper argues for the first claim directly and treats the second as a more cautious generalization supported by earlier descriptions. Keeping these two claims apart avoids a false choice between full synonymy and total non-passive status. The evidence instead points to a structured passive system in which one marker is broader and less marked, while the other is narrower but still genuinely passive in the empirical core examined here.

The argument of this paper is intentionally restricted to prototypical transitive patient-subject constructions. This is the empirical domain in which a direct comparison between preverbal *gei* (给) and *bei* (被) is most secure: the lower predicate is transitive, the surface subject is the affected patient, and any post-marker DP is interpretable as the source of the event.

Uses of preverbal *gei* (给) that fall outside these conditions are not part of the present comparison and are left for future work.

4. Conclusion

This paper has examined a restricted question: how does *gei* (给) compare with *bei* (被) in prototypical transitive patient-subject constructions? The evidence presented here supports a concrete answer. In the constructions examined in this paper, *gei* (给) and *bei* (被) pattern alike in three respects: both occur with patient subjects and transitive predicates, both may appear with overt post-marker source phrases across the same predicate, and both support agent-oriented modification with the same predicates. These convergent diagnostics support treating passive *gei* (给) as a passive marker in the restricted domain examined here.

At the same time, the argument of the paper remains deliberately limited. The evidence presented here does not show that *gei* (给) is freely interchangeable with *bei* (被) across the passive domain as a whole. Earlier descriptions instead suggest that passive *gei* (给) is more restricted in distribution, more colloquial in register, and especially natural in affected-patient contexts. The relation between the two markers is therefore better described as asymmetric overlap: *bei* (被) is the canonical passive marker, whereas *gei* (给) is a narrower passive option.

The main methodological point is therefore simple. Passive *gei* (给) is best examined first within the core passive domain in which the comparison with *bei* (被) is most secure. Once that restricted

comparison is kept in view, the result is clear enough for present purposes: in prototypical transitive patient-subject constructions, preverbal *gei* (给) should be treated as a passive marker in Mandarin, though a more limited one than *bei* (被).

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