

The Cognitive Motivations and Combinatorial Mechanisms of Semantically Disoriented VXN Constructions

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Abstract. Semantically disoriented VXN constructions in Mandarin Chinese, such as “读死书” (read in a rigid way) and “吃闲饭” (live idly without work), exhibit a distinctive form-meaning mismatch: the modifier X formally precedes the patient object N, but semantically orients toward other components of the event, such as the agent, instrument, manner, or goal. Existing studies have yet to offer a comprehensive account of the motivation and combinatorial mechanism underlying these structures. Drawing on Cognitive (Construction) Grammar, this study systematically examines the grammatical features and orientation types of disoriented VXN constructions to uncover their cognitive motivations and combinatorial mechanisms. The findings suggest that: (1) semantically disoriented VXN constructions are licensed by separable verb-object constructions, with their formation depending on a higher-level process of conceptual reification; (2) the combination of X and VN is achieved through the mechanisms of “active zone” and “reference point,” whereby the reified event activates relevant event participants (e.g., agent, instrument), which then stand in conceptual correspondence with the semantic properties of X; and (3) some XN sequences may undergo reanalysis and conceptual blending in usage, gradually becoming entrenched as lexical units, such as “青春饭” (a youth-dependent livelihood), reflecting the dynamic evolution of language use.

Keywords: semantically disoriented VXN constructions, form-meaning mismatch, reified event, reference-point mechanism, reanalysis

1. Introduction

Mandarin Chinese allows a special type of verb-object construction, namely the semantically disoriented VXN construction, as illustrated by “读死书” (read dead book; idiomatically, read in a rigid way) and “吃闲饭” (eat idle rice; idiomatically, live idly without work). In such a structure, the modifier is not interpreted as describing the patient object but instead targets another component of the event structure. For example, in “读死书”, “死” (dead) does not modify “书” (book) but the manner of reading: it characterizes the reading activity as rigid and mechanical. The construction thus displays a mismatch between syntactic modification and semantic orientation.

Previous studies have approached this type of structure in terms of interpretation strategies [1], semantic development [2], and formation mechanisms [3, 4]. However, its cognitive motivation and combinatorial mechanism remain under-explained. One influential analysis treats X as an adverbial

element shifted into attributive position for pragmatic needs [3, 4]. Yet this account cannot cover all semantically disoriented VXN structures and sits uneasily with the generative assumption that syntactic movement should be syntactically motivated.

In Cognitive Grammar, linguistic combination is licensed by correspondences between conceptual structures [5-7]. Semantically disoriented VXN constructions are puzzling precisely because X and N show no apparent conceptual match on the surface, yet the expressions are readily understood by speakers. This paper therefore adopts a Cognitive (Construction) Grammar approach [5-9] to account for the conceptual motivation and combinatorial mechanism underlying these constructions.

2. Features of semantically disoriented VXN constructions

The semantic orientation of X falls into four types. First, X may be agent-oriented. In “喝闷酒” (drink gloomy wine; idiomatically, drink in a depressed mood) and “吃闲饭” (live idly without work), “闷” (depressed) describes the agent’s repressed psychological state, while “闲” (idle) characterizes the agent as unoccupied and inactive. Second, X may target the instrument. In “打嘴仗” (fight a mouth battle; idiomatically, engage in verbal argument) and “吃青春饭” (eat youth rice; idiomatically, make a living by youth or beauty), “嘴” (mouth) indicates the instrument of verbal fighting, while “青春” (youth) indicates the means of livelihood. Third, X may describe the manner of action. In “读死书” (read in a rigid way) and “喝交杯酒” (drink with crossed cups), “死” (dead) describes a rigid manner of reading, while “交杯” (crossed cups) specifies the manner of drinking. Fourth, X may modify the goal. In “打翻身仗” (fight a turnaround battle; idiomatically, turn the situation around) and “打退堂鼓” (beat the retreat drum; idiomatically, give up), “翻身” (turnaround) and “退堂” (retreat from the hall) function as the goals of fighting and drumming, respectively.

The VN base in these structures also has a special grammatical status. In ordinary cases, a VN sequence is compositional and functions as a verb-object phrase denoting a concrete event. In semantically disoriented VXN constructions, however, VN is often lexicalized as a whole and no longer denotes a specific event. As Lü notes, if the meaning of a combination equals the sum of its parts, it is a phrase; otherwise, it is a word [10]. For example, “吃饭” is a phrase when it literally means “eat rice,” but may be treated as a word when it generally means “have a meal.” Similarly, “读书” in “读死书” refers not to reading a particular book but to studying or reading in general, while “吃饭” in “吃青春饭” is extended to mean “make a living.”

The overall meaning of a semantically disoriented VXN construction is not simply the sum of its parts. For example, “喝闷酒” does not mean drinking a kind of “gloomy wine,” but refers to drinking alone while feeling low or depressed. This non-compositional meaning highlights the mismatch between form and meaning. Two questions therefore arise: why are such VXN constructions grammatically licensed, and how does the modifier X combine with the base VN? This paper argues that semantically disoriented VXN structures are constructions licensed by a more abstract separable verb-object construction. Their formation is motivated by a higher-level conceptual representation, through which the disoriented attributive X combines with the base VN via different cognitive mechanisms, giving rise to various types of semantically disoriented VXN constructions.

3. Cognitive motivations of semantically disoriented VNX constructions

In Cognitive (Construction) Grammar, constructions are entrenched form-meaning units organized in a network of categorization relations, while their internal components may still combine through conceptual correspondence [5, 6, 8]. Since meaning is encyclopedic and construal-based, non-canonical combinations can be licensed when the conceptualizer foregrounds different components within the same conceptual base [7]. A construction therefore requires both external and internal motivation: externally, it must be sanctioned by existing constructions in the grammatical network; internally, its components must be conceptually integrated into a coherent whole [8, 11, 12].

Cognitive Grammar defines lexical categories by profile: nouns profile things, whereas verbs profile temporal relations, namely processes [13]. A process can also be reified as a higher-level non-processual entity, as shown by the shift from “agree” to “agreement”: the noun profiles an abstract thing while still evoking the process of agreeing [13]. The same double construal is central to semantically disoriented VNX constructions: the base VN is construed as a lexicalized whole while still retaining access to its underlying event structure.

Semantically disoriented VNX structures involve form-meaning mismatch and are not fully predictable from ordinary modifier-noun relations; they can therefore be regarded as independent constructions. Their external motivation lies in their licensing by separable verb-object constructions. In such constructions, the VN base is often lexicalized as an integrated unit while remaining formally separable, allowing a modifier to be inserted between V and N. For example, “生气” (be angry) can be split as “生了两个小时的气” (was angry for two hours). Similarly, “喝酒” (drink wine) appears in separated form in the semantically disoriented VNX construction “喝闷酒” (drink in a depressed mood).

The internal motivation of the construction lies in the reification of the process profiled by the base VN structure. Through reification, the VN event is construed as a higher-level conceptual unit whose conceptual content can be enriched by X, thereby licensing the combination of X and VN. Yet X does not directly modify the reified VN to form XVN; rather, it is inserted between V and N, producing VNX. This is because the base VN must be construed both as a reified event and as a processual structure. To reconcile these two opposing construals, the modifier can only be placed before the nominal component: syntactically, X modifies N, but semantically, it orients toward the reified VN event as a whole. For example, in “游了两次泳” (swam twice), “两次” (twice) modifies the whole event “游泳” (swim); similarly, in “看闲书” (read leisure books/read idly), “闲” (idle) orients toward the event of reading rather than toward “书” (book) alone. In this way, the semantically disoriented VNX construction is internally motivated.

4. Cognitive combinatorial mechanisms of semantically disoriented VNX constructions

With the constructional motivation established, the remaining issue is how X combines with the reified VN under a disoriented interpretation. The process can be accounted for through the active-zone phenomenon and the reference-point mechanism in Cognitive Grammar. An active zone is the part or dimension through which an entity directly participates in a profiled relation [14]. For example, in “The dog bit the cat”, the noun “dog” profiles the whole animal, but the active zone involved in the biting event is its teeth. The dog therefore serves as a reference point that activates the teeth as the relevant target. An active zone need not be a physical subpart of the profiled entity; it only needs to be saliently associated with it [15].

In a profiled relation, the most prominent participant is the trajector (tr), while the less prominent participant is the landmark (lm) [7]. In semantically disoriented VNX constructions, N functions as

the landmark. Since it is explicitly encoded, N can serve as a reference point that activates the reified VN event. This reified event may then become a further reference point, activating its internal active zones such as the agent, instrument, manner, or goal [14]. Through this chain of activation, X can be conceptually correspondent to the relevant active zone, making the overall VXN combination possible.

Consider first the agent-oriented case, as in “吃闲饭” (live idly without work). Here, the noun “饭” (meal) does not function as an ordinary patient object. Instead, as the explicitly encoded N, it serves as a reference point that activates the reified VN event “吃饭”, whose meaning has been metaphorically extended from “eating” to “making a living.” Although reified, the event “吃饭” still retains access to its underlying participant roles and can therefore function as a further reference point to activate the human agent involved in the event. The modifier “闲” (idle), whose trajector is normally a human being, is then conceptually aligned with this activated agent. In this way, “闲” combines with “吃饭” to form “吃闲饭”, conveying the meaning of “living idly without work”. Figure 1 illustrates this chain of activation: N activates the reified VN event, which in turn activates the event agent as the active zone corresponding to the trajector of X.

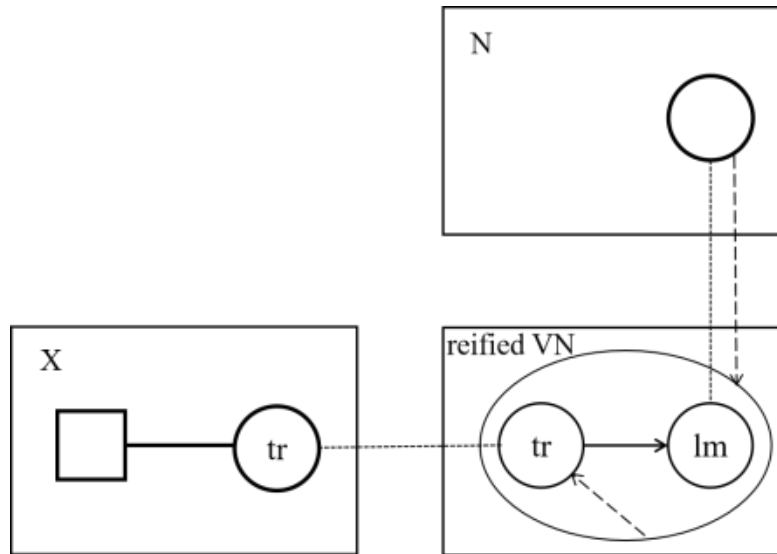


Figure 1. Combinatorial process of agent-oriented VXN constructions

When X targets an instrument, as in “打嘴仗” (engage in verbal argument), the reified event “打仗” (fight a battle) activates an abstract instrumental component. In an event action chain, an instrument functions as the transmitter of energy and may be foregrounded under a particular construal [7]. In “打嘴仗”, “嘴” (mouth) is not a physical weapon, but it is metaphorically construed as the medium of verbal confrontation. The battle frame of “打仗” is thus extended from physical combat to verbal conflict, allowing “嘴” to correspond to the activated instrument within the reified event and yielding the composite structure “打嘴仗”. Figure 2 illustrates this process: the reified VN event activates the instrument as its active zone, and the nominal X corresponds to this instrument, thereby licensing the instrument-oriented VXN construction.

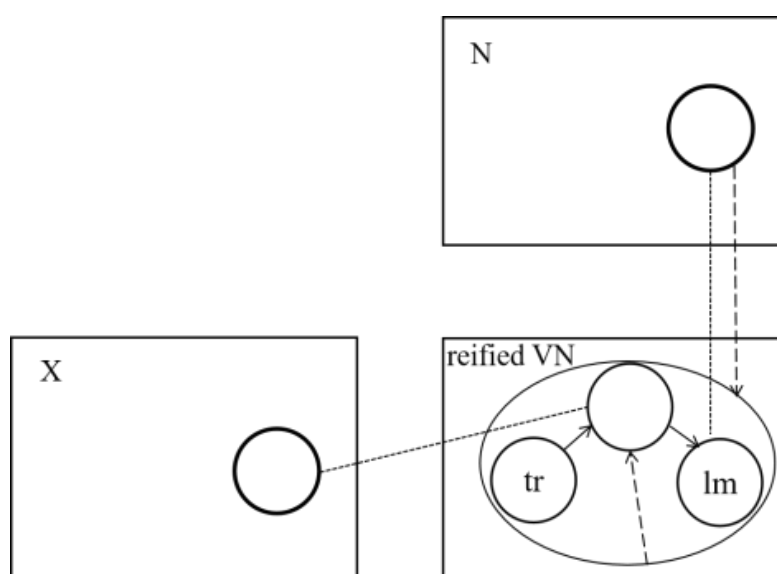


Figure 2. Combinatorial process of instrument-oriented VXN constructions

In manner-oriented cases, X targets the way in which the event is carried out, as in “读死书” (read in a rigid way). Here, “死” (dead) does not refer to biological death but is metaphorically extended to mean “rigid”, “mechanical” or “inactive”. More specifically, “死” characterizes the manner of the action and therefore profiles a non-processual relation whose trajector is an abstract processual event. In “读死书”, the reified event “读书” (read) functions as a reference point and activates the whole processual event of reading. This activated event corresponds to the abstract trajector profiled by “死”, thereby yielding the composite structure “读死书”, which describes a rigid and uncomprehending way of reading. Figure 3 schematizes the manner-oriented pattern: the reified VN event activates the whole processual event, which functions as the active zone corresponding to the trajector of X, thus licensing the composite structure.

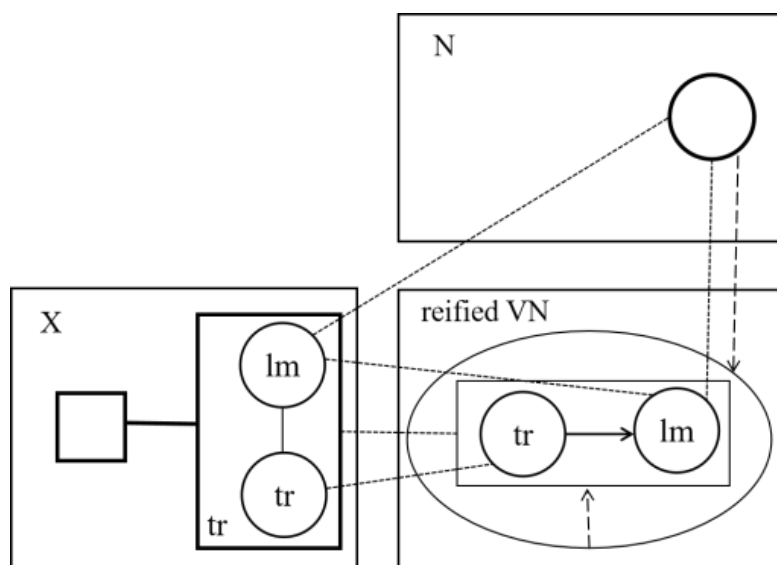


Figure 3. Combinatorial process of manner-oriented VXN constructions

X may also be goal-oriented, as in “打退堂鼓” (give up). Although goals are usually less prominent than agents or patients, they may be foregrounded under a particular construal. In “打退

堂鼓”, the reified event “打鼓” (beat a drum) serves as a reference point to activate an abstract event goal, which is elaborated by “退堂” (retreat from the hall). This means-goal relation is supported by cultural knowledge: drumbeats may signal the end of an activity and prompt participants to withdraw. In this context, “退堂” is construed not as a processual event but as a reified goal corresponding to the abstract goal activated by “打鼓”, thereby giving rise to the composite structure “打退堂鼓”. Through metaphorical extension, the expression further comes to mean “give up” or “withdraw”. The combinatorial process is shown in Figure 4. Here, the reified VN event activates the goal as an active zone corresponding to X, thereby licensing the goal-oriented VXN construction.

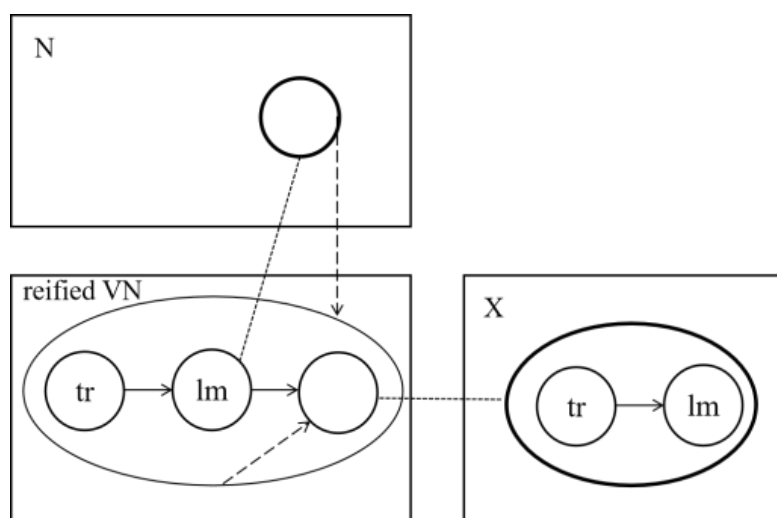


Figure 4. Combinatorial process of goal-oriented VXN constructions

Finally, some XN sequences may develop into independent lexical units through repeated use. Although X does not originally orient toward the following noun, frequent use may lead speakers to reanalyze the VXN structure. Reanalysis involves a change in the underlying representation of a linguistic form, often producing new semantic or syntactic organization [16, 17]. The English word “hamburger” provides a familiar example. It was originally analyzed as “Hamburg+-er”, but after reanalysis the root was divided as “ham+burger”, which later enabled the formation of new words such as “cheeseburger”. Similarly, in “吃青春饭” (make a living by youth or beauty), “青春” (youth) and “饭” (meal) did not originally form a fixed collocation. But with the frequent use of “吃青春饭” in workplace discourse, its syntactic structure was reanalyzed as “吃+青春饭”, thus “青春饭” gradually became entrenched as a compound noun.

In the process of reanalysis, conceptual blending plays a crucial role in making the combination of “青春” and “饭” possible. It integrates two input spaces [18]: “青春” (youth), which highlights temporariness and limited duration, and “饭” (meal), which denotes daily food and, by metaphorical extension, livelihood or occupation. Through this blending, the two concepts form a new cognitive frame in which “青春饭” refers to a job or livelihood dependent on youth. The expression thus emphasizes the time-bound nature of such work and foregrounds the fact that certain groups obtain income or work opportunities only during a limited youthful stage.

5. Conclusion

Within the framework of Cognitive (Construction) Grammar, this paper has examined the motivations and combinatorial mechanisms of semantically disoriented VXN constructions in Mandarin Chinese. Three main conclusions can be drawn. First, these constructions are sanctioned by separable verb-object constructions, and their formation involves a higher-level conceptual reification process. Second, the combination of X and VN depends on the active-zone phenomenon and the reference-point mechanism. The reified event functions as a reference point that activates relevant components of the event frame, such as the agent, instrument, manner, or goal. As a result, the semantic orientation of X is not restricted to N, but may extend to other event-level components. Third, in long-term usage, some XN sequences may undergo reanalysis and conceptual blending, eventually becoming entrenched as lexical units, as illustrated by “青春饭”. By moving beyond traditional syntactic movement analyses, this study offers a cognitive account of the motivation behind form-meaning mismatch and provides a new perspective on non-canonical constructions in Chinese.

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