1. **Introduction**

- ‘Pseudo-passives’ in Chinese refer to the sentences with non-agentive subjects. Such sentences are also known as ‘受事主語句’ in the literature.

(1) 手帕哭濕了。
    Shoupa ku-shi-le.
    handkerchief cry-wet-Perf
    ‘The handkerchief was wet from someone’s crying.’

(2) 氣球吹破了。
    Qiqiu chui-po-le.
    balloon blow-broken-Perf
    ‘The balloon was popped (blown-broken).’

2. **Subjects or topics?**

- Cheng and Huang (1994) argue that ‘pseudo-passives’ in Chinese are derived from a transitive argument structure by suppressing the agent argument. To this structure NP-movement will apply and the patient argument surfaces as the subject.

(3) \[
    \begin{align*}
    \text{[ Agent } & \text{ V Patient ]} \\
    \text{[ e } & \text{ V Patient ]} \\
    \text{[ Patient } & \text{ V t ]}
    \end{align*}
\]

- **ARGUMENT 1:** Only predicates that express certain results or involve affected patients may enter the ‘pseudo-passives’ in Chinese, on a par with middle formation in English.

(4) *張三很喜歡。
    *Zhangsan hen xihuan.
    Zhangsan very like
    ‘As for Zhangsan, someone likes him very much.’
ARGUMENT 2: ‘Pseudo-passives’ in Chinese are completely natural without a pause (see also Sybesma 1992).

ARGUMENT 3: The relativized element cannot be associated with the clause by a loose ‘aboutness’ relation (see also Ning 1993).

Some problems for Cheng and Huang’s (1994) analysis:

PROBLEM 1: Why can’t ‘pseudo-passives’ be derived from the structures in (12) and (13), in which DP is the patient argument and the empty category e is the agentive subject? (12) and (13) are supposed to be legitimate structures in Chinese.

(12)  [ DP [ e [ V tdp ]] ]
(13)  [ e [ DP [ V tdp ]] ]

PROBLEM 2: Some predicates that do not express a result or do not involve affected patients may enter the ‘pseudo-passive’ construction in Chinese. The ‘affectedness’ requirement is too strong to rule out some acceptable sentences.

(14)  孩子不能寵。
     Haizi bu neng chong.
     ‘Children can’t be spoiled.’
(15) 老大管，老二寵。
Laoda guan, lao'er chong.
‘The eldest child is subjected to discipline. The younger child is spoiled.’

(16) 張三喜歡過。
Zhangsan xihuan-guo.
‘Zhangsan was loved (by someone).’

(17) 張三從來沒喜歡過。
Zhangsan cong'ai mei xihuan-guo.
‘Zhangsan was never loved (by someone).’

(18) 冰淇淋不吃了。
Bingqilin bu chi-le.
‘As for ice-cream, someone doesn’t want to eat.’

• PROBLEM 3: Even though some predicates express a result, ‘pseudo-passives’ are still unacceptable. The ‘affecedness’ requirement is too weak to rule out some unacceptable sentences.

(19) *我打傷了。
*Wo da-shang-le.
‘I was injured by being hit.’

• SOLUTION TO PROBLEM 1: (20), (21), and (22) are permitted by Universal Grammar and should be legitimate in Chinese. All of them can derive the same word order (i.e. ‘pseudo-passives’) on the surface.

(20) subject: [ DP [ V tDP ]]  (A-movement)
(21) preverbal object: [ e [ DP [ V tDP ]]]
(22) topic: [ DP [ e [ V tDP ]]]  (A’-movement)

• SOLUTION TO PROBLEMS 2 AND 3: Some additional, non-syntactic factors influence the acceptability.

3. The role of non-syntactic factors in ‘pseudo-passives’ in Chinese

• To make ‘pseudo-passives’ acceptable, it is necessary to avoid ambiguity.
• Strategies to avoid ambiguity are not always syntactic. They may not have anything to do with the core computation system.

Semantic irreversibility
• Speakers should find it easier to accept sentences in which the agent and patient are irreversible semantically.
Some Notes on the so-called ‘Pseudo-Passives’ in Chinese

(23) **semantically reversible**

a. 張三很喜歡李四。
   Zhangsan hen xihuan Lisi
   ‘Zhangsan likes Lisi very much.’

b. 李四很喜歡張三。
   Lisi hen xihuan Zhangsan.
   ‘Lisi likes Zhangsan very much.’

c. *李四很喜歡。
   *Lisi hen xihuan.
   ‘Lisi is liked by someone.’

(24) **semantically irreversible**

a. 張三哭濕了手帕。
   Zhangsan ku-shi-le shoupa.
   ‘He cried the handkerchief wet.’

b. *手帕哭濕了張三。
   *Shoupa ku-shi-le Zhangsan.
   ‘The handkerchief cried Zhangsan wet.’

c. 手帕哭濕了。
   Shoupa ku-shi-le.
   ‘The handkerchief was wet from someone’s crying.’

- E.g. Some ‘pragmatic’ factors help.

(25) 孩子寵得太厲害。
   Haizi chong-de tai lihai.
   ‘Children are spoiled too much.’

(26) 媽媽寵得太厲害。
   Mama chong-de tai lihai.
   (i) ‘Mom spoils someone too much.’
   (ii) ‘As for mom, someone spoils her too much.’

- E.g. Animacy may play a role: inanimate patients are better than animate patients in ‘pseudo-passives’ in Chinese.

(27) 語言學很喜歡。
   Yuyanxue hen xihuan.
   ‘As for linguistics, someone likes it very much.’
(28) 張三很喜歡。
Zhangsan hen xihuan.
Zhangsan very like
(i) ‘Zhangsan likes someone very much.’
(ii) ‘As for Zhangsan, someone likes him very much.’

Habitual omission of the agent
• It seems that the ‘pseudo-passives’ are acceptable, in which the agent argument tends to be omitted habitually in the discourse. Compare (29) with (30).

(29) 張三打倒了。
Zhangsan dadao-le.
Zhangsan overthrow-Perf
(i) ‘Zhangsan was overthrown.’
(ii) ‘Zhangsan overthrew someone.’

(30) 張三批評了。
Zhangsan piping-le.
Zhangsan criticize-Perf
(i) ‘Zhangsan criticized someone.’
(ii) ‘Zhangsan was criticized.’

• Other predicates that tend to allow to omit the agent argument in the discourse.

(31) a. 審查 shencha ‘investigate’
    b. 打倒 dadao ‘overthrow’
    c. 隔離 geli ‘investigate someone under isolation’
    d. 勞改 laogai ‘reform through labor’
    e. 勞教 laojiao ‘educate through labor’

Presupposition
• ‘Presupposition’ may avoid ambiguity in ‘pseudo-passives’ in Chinese, particularly in those semantically reversible sentences.

To presuppose the event by using the experiential marker (and frequency phrases)
(32) *張三警告了。
    *Zhangsan jinggao-le.
    Zhangsan warn-Perf
    ‘Zhangsan was warned.’

(33) 張三警告過很多次。
Zhangsan jinggao-guo henduo ci.
Zhangsan warn-Exp many time
‘Zhangsan has been warned many times.’

To presuppose the event by using a negation
(34) *張三喜歡。
    *Zhangsan xihuan.
    Zhangsan like
    ‘As for Zhangsan, someone likes him.’
SOME NOTES ON THE SO-CALLED ‘PSEUDO-PASSIVES’ IN CHINESE

(35) (?)張三不喜歡。
    (?)Zhangsan bu xihuan.
    Zangsan not like
    ‘As for Zhangsan, someone does not like him.’

To presuppose the event in contrastive contexts
(36) *張三喜歡。
    *Zhangsan xihuan.
    Zangsan like
    ‘As for Zhangsan, someone likes him.’
(37) 張三喜歡，李四不喜歡。
    Zhangsan xihuan, Lisi bu xihuan.
    Zangsan like Lisi not like
    ‘As for Zhangsan, someone likes him. As for Lisi, someone does not like him.’

4. Conclusion

- ‘Pseudo-passives’ in Chinese may be derived either by A-movement (i.e. the patient argument functioning as the subject and the preverbal object) or by A’-movement (i.e. the patient argument functioning as the topic).
- Based on the legitimate structure, non-syntactic strategies to avoid ambiguity in ‘pseudo-passives’ in Chinese include:
  (i) Semantic irreversibility
  (ii) Habitual omission of the agent
  (iii) Presupposing the event

Selected references


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