The Mandarin ba-construction
Hong-Yan Liu
University of Toronto

Introduction. This paper examines the Mandarin ba construction. Modern Mandarin is a subject-verb-object (SVO) language, as is shown in (1a), a canonical transitive sentence, but the ba-construction exhibits a surface word order of subject-ba-object-verb (SOV), as in (1b). The atypical word order and argument structure and numerous syntactic and semantic restrictions have made it the subject of extended debate.

(1) a. Xi-Xi he-le niunai. (canonical SVO sentence)
   Xi-Xi drink-ASP milk.
   ‘Xi-xi has drunk milk.’

b. Xi-xi ba niunai he-le. (ba-construction)
   Xi-xi BA milk drink-ASP
   ‘Xi-xi has drunk up the milk.’

The puzzle. Recent analyses treat ba as a functional head projected at different positions on the verbal spine of Mandarin Chinese, for example: above vP (Huang et al., 2009) and as v (Sybesma, 1999). The common underlying assumptions of these analyses are: 1) the NP after ba (the ba-NP) and the following VP form a constituent excluding ba, as in [ba [NP VP]]; 2) ba-sentences are derived from non-ba sentences, like passives and actives. Though these analyses can account for some basic properties of ba-constructions, they fail to derive the right word order when manner adverbs modify the VP (Huang et al., 2009; Sybesma, 1999) and are unable to account for all the data, such as the “retained object” type where a third NP occurs at the complement of V, after the movement of the logical object from this spot.

No analysis so far correctly captures the semantic and syntactic properties of the ba construction. Any proposed syntactic structure, to be descriptively adequate, has to derive the observed linear order of ba sentences with respect to adverb placement and also account for the semantic properties, such as the affected interpretation of the ba-NP (Wang Li, 1945; Sybesma, 1992, 1999), the aspecual restrictions on the predicate (telicity) (Young, 1993; Sybesma, 1999) and the definiteness of the ba-NP (F. Liu, 1999).

My analysis and proposal. My investigation of the word order issue that challenges previous analyses leads me to question the underlying assumption that the ba-NP and the VP form a constituent. Applying constituency tests, I propose instead that ba and the ba-NP form a constituent [[ba NP] VP]. I examine the argument structure and aspecual properties of the complex ba predicate (ten cases, which I group into five structural types). Based on the constituency and aspecual properties of the complex ba VPs and the argument structural differences between ba sentences and canonical SVO sentences, I propose that ba and the ba-NP merge at the specifier position of an FP between VoiceP and vP. This structure is base generated, rather than derived; there are [telic] and [definite] selecting features on F. Evidence for my claims is threefold.

First, my research has found that ba predicates are Accomplishments and Achievements, and therefore telic; telicity is a vP-level property. I claim that the head of FP holds a telicity feature that agrees with a telic ba VP, based on Kratzer’s (2002) analysis of Finnish case. Second, ba and the bei-passive can co-occur, and the morpheme bei (the passive) always precedes ba. As passive is well established as a Voice, ba must therefore be between Voice and v. Third, when ba appears with ditransitive verbs, it does not add an argument, but allows the theme NP of double object constructions (DOCs) to merge in a higher position. Pykkaenen (2008) argues that DOCs are low applicatives, situated in VP, whereas high applicatives are below both causatives and passives but above VP. This is consistent with the observed order of the Mandarin causative, passive and ba. My proposal accounts for the syntactic behaviour of all five VP types in ba-constructions, the semantics of ba constructions (telicity of VPs and the affectedness interpretation of ba-NPs), and the word order issue.

Implications. These facts, and the observations that ba allows an extra NP in the canonical object position (the defining property of applicatives) suggests that ba can mark a high applicative in the sense of Pykkaenen (2008). Further support for this idea comes from the availability of benefactive, malefactive, instrumental, and locative interpretations of the ba NP. The telicity of the ba VP and the definiteness of the ba NP may well be formally linked. Finally, ordering relations among ba, the bei-passive, and the causative (shi/rang) implies that the Mandarin Voice system occupies several functional heads.
The Mandarin ba-construction
Hong-Yan Liu
University of Toronto

References

Kratzer, Angelika (2002). In Boban Arsenijevic, Berit Gehrke, & Rafael Marín (eds.), The (De)composition of Event Predicates. Springer.