An Error Analysis of Chinese "Bei" (被) Passives from the Perspectives of Animacy and Semantic Feature Constraint

-Illustrated by the Case of "Wo (我) zai (在) dianti (电梯) kou (口) bei (被) ren (人) xiao (笑) le (了) xiao (笑)"

Aihua Wen[1]

[1] Institute for International Education, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China

Correspondence: Aihua Wen, Institute for International Education, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, No.2 North Baiyun Ave, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China. Tel: 86-155-2120-1856.

Abstract

Comparing with Ancient Chinese, passive sentences in Modern Chinese have been increasingly used, and patient subjects in them are not limited to noun phrases with a high animacy and the binding force for the sentential meaning of "suffering" and "misfortune" has largely loosened as well. As the commonest pattern in passive sentences, the same case for "Bei" (被) Passives. It is well known that "Bei" (被) Passives is a sort of difficult syntax pattern in teaching Chinese as a foreign language, and errors often occur in the use of "Bei" (被) Passives for a large number of second language learners who take Chinese as their target language. We admit that the usage of "Bei" (被) Passives has a certain connection with the linguistic animacy, while the reason for errors occur in this Chinese sentence "Wo (我) zai (在) dianti (电梯) kou (口) bei (被) ren (人) xiao (笑) le (了) xiao (笑)" is the semantic feature constraint.

Keywords: "Bei" (被) Passives, errors, animacy, semantic feature constraint

1. Introduction

After Chinese advances to Modern Chinese, passive sentences have been increasingly used, and patient subjects in them are not limited to noun phrases with a high animacy and the binding force for the sentential meaning of "suffering" and "misfortune" has largely loosened as well. These changes happen to coincide with the syntax of Indo-European Languages represented by English. Just for the reason of the descending of the animacy of patient noun phrases and the decline of "misfortune" semantic constraint in "Bei" (被) Passives in Modern Chinese, the two marks of "Bei" (被) Passives that are "patient noun phrases should be in a high animacy" and "sentences should indicate misfortunes "can not work as a premise any longer, consequently the chance to produce errors in using "Wo (我) zai (在) dianti (电梯) kou (口) bei (被) ren (人) xiao (笑) le (了) xiao (笑)" among Chinese learners has largely increased. To put linguistic animacy and the sentential meaning talked above aside, probably it is an effective approach to analyze errors occur in the usage of "Bei" (被) Passives in Modern Chinese from the perspective of semantic constraint.

2. The Animacy of Noun

Three aspects are involved in animacy, they are the animacy of nature, the animacy of human society and the animacy of language. The former two ones are the result of movement and evolution of life vitality, and the last one is the vitality of all categories of words in languages and it is also the reflection of the former two ones in languages. More importantly, the animacy of language is a grammatical and semantic principle expressed in language based on how sentient or alive the referent of a word is. Life in languages means objects that languages refer to are animate. Since the language is a reflection of human activities in nature and society, and words are the building material of languages as well as the reflection of human's concepts learning from the objective and

subjective world, it is inevitable for them to present the trail of activities in life and human consciousnesses.

The animacy of nouns is a grammatical and semantic principle expressed in language based on how sentient or alive the referent of a noun is, and it is classified from the perspective of biology. The animate concepts and inanimate concepts belong to the two basic classifications in nature. The basic animacy hierarchy provided by Bernard Cromie in 1989 was: human beings＞ animals＞inanimate objects. In linguistics, the corresponding animacy hierarchy was: person-referred nouns＞other animate nouns＞inanimate nouns. Learning from Zhang Bojiang and Fangmei (1996), Du Daoliu (1998) reached a following animacy hierarchy of nouns in Chinese: the first and second personal pronouns ＞ the third personal pronouns ＞ person-referred proper nouns ＞ object-referred proper nouns＞person-referred concrete nouns＞object-referred concrete nouns ＞inanimate concrete nouns＞abstract nouns. In other words, the higher hierarchy of life vitality referred by noun phrases is, the higher animacy hierarchy of them is.

3. The Generalization of the Westernized Grammar of "Bei"(被) Passives in Modern Chinese

He Yang(2008) demonstrated that compared with Ancient Chinese, the animacy hierarchy of the first nouns, the second nouns and verbs in "Bei"(被) Passives descended, and the constraint of that "Bei"(被) Passives should indicate negative meanings weakened. On the other hand, he claimed that after the May Fourth Movement in China, under the influence of other languages such as English, the negative semantic constraints in "Bei"(被) Passives wore off, while "Bei"(被) Passives with neutral meanings are more and more popular. Therefore, "Bei"(被) Passives with subjects served by object-referred nouns became common, since it does not matter to the positive or negative semantic meanings in "Bei"(被) Passive. Therefore, all these indicate the tendency that "Bei"(被) Passives bear the sign of foreign languages and are westernized.

Zhang Yanjun (2010) and Cui Shanjia (2013) had studied the phenomenon about westernized grammar of "Bei" (被) Passives in Modern Chinese. We believe that If there is a so-called westernized phenomenon of "Bei" (被) Passives in Modern Chinese, perhaps it is embodied in the following three aspects: the number of "Bei" (被) Passives increases, the animacy hierarchy of the first noun phrases or even the second noun phrases descends and the constraint of negative meaning weakens.

Zhang Yanjun (2010) found that the animacy of "Bei" (被) Passives had already descended systemically in Medieval Chinese, and not only the patients served as subjects, but also the agents and predicates had been in a descending animacy hierarchy. In his further study, he also discovered that since modern times, the animacy of the agents and predicates in the "Zao" (遭) -pattern sentences had descended significantly as well.

On the basis of Zhang Yanjun (2010)'s academic viewpoints and corpus, Cui Shanjia (2013) found that a process needed in advance of the animacy of subjects in "Bei" (被) Passives in Chinese. Since the ancient time, there were object-referred nouns served as subjects in "Bei" (被) Passives already, but just a lower percentage than that in Modern Chinese. Therefore, the descent of animacy hierarchy in "Bei" (被) Passives is the result of the advance of Chinese itself, which can not be called "the sign of foreign languages" or westernized grammar.

Cui Shanjia's viewpoints are relatively reasonable. However, He did not retort He Yang's(2008) viewpoint about the weakness of semantic constraint of negative meanings in "Bei" (被) Passives, but only retorted He Yang's viewpoint about the descent of animacy, and that retort still has room to be improved. Before Modern Chinese, the descent of animacy hierarchy of subjects in lots of "Bei" (被) Passives was common originally and the word "Bei" (被) was not with negative meaning originally. Nevertheless, three changes have been seen and need to be admitted in "Bei" (被) Passives in Modern Chinese. Firstly, the number of "Bei" (被) Passives has increased; Secondly, the descent of the animacy hierarchy of subjects has been broader; Thirdly, the meaning of "Bei" (被) is not negative in more and more "Bei" Passives, especially in the texts of science and technology news which are often translated from scientific English in which passive sentences are frequently used. If the situation of earlier "Bei" (被) Passives is regarded as N(number), then it becomes N^+(plus), and after its change, this "$^+$" (plus) can be regarded as a certain kind of generalization. Integrating He Yang's and Cui Shanjia's viewpoints, a conclusion is reached that those three changes in "Bei" (被) Passives in Modern Chinese are not westernized grammar, but just a generalization of westernized grammar.

4. An Analysis of "Wo (我) zai (在) dianti (电梯) kou (口) bei (被) ren (人) xiao (笑) le (了) xiao (笑)" from the Perspectives of Animacy and Semantic Feature Constraint

In Modern Chinese, "Bei" (被) Passives do not simply express negative meanings, which has been proved by lots of corpus, because of this, and the ambiguity of "Bei" (被) Passives in expressing meaning in addition, they result in errors when Chinese learners use "Bei" (被) Passives. For instance, a "Bei" (被) Passive with errors made by Japanese Chinese learners:

(1)* (Note 1) Wo (我) zai (在) dianti (电梯) kou (口) bei (被) ren (人) xiao (笑) le (了) xiao (笑) (Note 2).

It may mean "I am laughed at by others at the elevator entrance" or "*I was smiled by others at the elevator entrance".

When it comes to native Chinese speakers, the first impression would be there are errors in morphology and syntax, and it does not make sense. Surely, it is so easy for native Chinese speakers to correct it, but hard to explain the reason, because most native Chinese speakers just know how Chinese grammar is but they do not know why it is exactly.

If errors has not been corrected, native Chinese speakers tend to regard "Wo (我) zai (在) dianti (电梯) kou (口) bei (被) ren (人) xiao (笑) le (了) xiao (笑) "as "I was laughed at by others at elevator entrance" instead of "*I was smiled by others at elevator entrance", because the meaning of the word "Bei"(被) is regarded as a negative preposition subconsciously and it collocates with the phrase "laugh at" which is with a negative meaning as well. Indeed, the meaning of the word "Bei"(被) can also be non-negative, but native Chinese speakers seldom understand it that way, because if the meaning of the word "Bei"(被) is not negative and "xiao" (笑) means "smile", which is not negative either, then there is no need to use passive sentences, and it can be directly expressed as "Somebody smiled to me at the elevator entrance", which is more idiomatic. However, this error sentence finally needs to be corrected after all. And, before being corrected, it is so necessary to explore the reason which results in errors in that sentence by working backwards.

1. If the word "xiao" (笑) is supposed to mean "laugh at": "laugh at" is a transitive verb phrase which is independent, conscious and self-controllable, and on the other hand, it has a high animacy and conveys a certain value or attitude like complimentary and derogatory sense. The first noun phrase which served as a subject by the first personal pronoun "I", combines the verb phrase "laugh at" to form a structure of "NP+VP" which is very proper to express the meaning of "suffering" and "misfortune", and in order to highlight the theme, this whole sentence aims to emphasize the patient subject, i.e., what did the first noun phrase "I" suffer. Integrating Zhong Shuneng's (2007) conclusion that the majority of the first noun phrases have higher animacy in "Bei" (被) Passives with a "misfortune" sense, because only noun phrases with a high animacy like human can sense misfortune. Therefore, a passive sentence is the most suitable to state this negative meaning. This is an analysis from the perspective of animacy. Nevertheless, according to Chinese grammar, the collocation of "laugh at le laugh at(xiao 笑 le 了 xiao 笑)" is not correct, because in Chinese, the collocation of "V le (了) V", "V le (了) yi (一) V" or "V le (了) yi (一) xiar (下儿)", which means the quantity or the range of the actions is small has five semantic features in all to indicate an action which is casual, relaxing, insignificant, a try and temporary. All these five semantic features have no relations with what the word "laugh at" tries to express. As a result, constrained by semantic features , the word "laugh at" can not be embedded in the semantic feature slot and structure of "V le (了) V". However, It is noteworthy that another ambiguous situation should be distinguished:

(2) Ta (他) zhishi (只是) bei (被) nage (那个) shenmi (神秘) ren (人) qingqingde (轻轻地) mo (摸) le (了) mo (摸) , jiu (就) quan (全) shen (身) suantong (酸痛).

It means "He was sore and painful all over, after being touched slightly by that mysterious man".

It seems that the word "touch" in example (2) also delivers a negative meaning, but it can be used in the structure of "V le (了) V" instead. But as a matter of fact, this is just a false image. The whole sentence in example (2) indeed conveys a negative meaning of suffering, but it is achieved by the phrase "be sore and painful all over" instead of "touch"(mo 摸 le 了 mo 摸) which is just able to indicate the quantity or the range of actions is small.

Although it's also possible for the word "xiao" (笑) in example (1) to mean "laugh", the reason for errors occurred will be the same: "laugh" can not be embedded in the semantic slot of "V le (了) V" in Chinese, so the real reason is also because of the semantic feature constraint.

2. If the word "xiao" (笑) is supposed to mean "smile": Zhao Ruilan (2007) explored that the animacy hierarchy of the first noun phrase is lower than that of the second one in "Bei" (被) Passives. Conversely, that is to say, when the animacy hierarchy of the first noun phrase is lower than that of the second one, "Bei" (被) Passives would be usually used. The animacy of the first noun phrase "I" in example (1) is higher than that of the second one "others", and referred to Du Daoliu's opinion above that the animacy hierarchy of the first pronouns is higher than that of person-referred concrete nouns, so it is able to deduce that it's not suitable to use a "Bei" (被) Passive to express example (1) from the perspective of noun animacy. But frankly, this deduction is too arbitrary, because in language usage and corpus, there still exist many "Bei" (被) Passives used in the condition of the animacy of the first noun phrase is higher than that of the second one in sentences. Take two examples to support this:

(3) Wo (我) bei (被) ren (人) keng (坑) le (了).(It means I was cheated by others.)

(4) Wo (我) bei (被) waiguo (外国) ren (人) nong (弄) hutu (糊涂) le (了).(It means I was confused by foreigners.)

In example (3) and (4), the animacy hierarchy of the first noun phrase "Wo" (我) is higher than that of the second noun phrase "ren" (人)/ "waiguo ren" (外国人), but they are two correct "Bei" (被) Passives.

Therefore, the reason for errors occurred in example (1) is not related to the animacy of noun phrases, but to the transitivity of verb phrases. Whether "Bei" (被) Passives deliver negative meaning or not, the second noun phrase need be transited by the action from the second noun phrase. "Smile" is a intransitive verb and "smile me" is an incorrect expression in Chinese. So, there is no reason to use a passive sentence to express example (1) but an active sentence is more appropriate instead.

Therefore, no matter what kind of "xiao" (笑) it means in example (1), errors exist still. Normally, there are three main principles should be obeyed in error correcting: The first one is, corrections should conform to Chinese grammar, semantics and pragmatics, i.e. they make sense; The second one is, the fewer modifications, the better; The last one is, the meaning of modified sentences should be the same as what the authors want to express. So:

1. If the word "xiao" (笑) means "laugh at" or "laugh": according to the analyses above, it seems to use a passive sentence, but due to the semantic feature constraint, "laugh at" or "laugh" can't fit to the structure of "V le (了) V", so example (1) can be modified into:

(5) Wo (我) zai (在) dianti (电梯) kou (口) bei (被) ren (人) xiao (笑) le (了). (It means I was laughed by others at the elevator entrance.) Or

(6) Wo (我) zai (在) dianti (电梯) kou (口) bei (被) ren (人) chaoxiao (嘲笑) le (了).(It also means I was laughed at by others at the elevator entrance.)

Both sentence (5) and (6) can make sense, but (5) is better than (6), because (5) is less modified. However, which one is absolutely better depends on the author's original intent. In this case, the reason for errors occurred is that the structure of "V le (了) V" can not express the semantic feature of "suffering" or "misfortune" in Chinese.

2. If the word "xiao" means "smile": in this situation, there is no need to emphasize the meaning of "suffering", i.e. there is no need to emphasize "what I have suffered", so it's not appropriate to put the first noun "I" at the beginning of this sentence as the theme. Therefore, an active sentence is more appropriate to express "smile", and "smile" happens to be used in the structure of "V le (了) V", so example(1) can be modified into:

(7)Zai (在) dianti (电梯) kou (口), you (有) ren (人) dui (对) wo (我) xiao (笑) le (了) xiao (笑).(It means Someone smiled to me at the elevator entrance.) Or

(8)Zai (在) dianti (电梯) kou (口), you (有) ren (人) dui (对) wo (我) weixiao (微笑) le (了) yixiar (一下儿).(It also means Someone smiled to me at the elevator entrance.)

Compared with example (1), both sentence (7) and (8) have been modified a lot, but (7) is better than (8) for the same reason as which is between sentence (5) and (6). And in this case, the reason for errors occurred is that the author does not know change example(1) into an active sentence when the sentential meaning of example(1) is not related to "suffering", and "I" is not suitable to be a theme as well as "I" can not be transited by "smile".

The analyses, modifications and explanations of example(1) above are just suppositions without knowing the true intentions of the author, so readers can just guess what the word "xiao" (笑) means exactly. From the experience of native Chinese speakers, we speculate that "xiao" (笑) means "smile" instead of "laugh (at)", because logically if one "laugh (at)" someone else needs a stronger reason or intention, while "smile" needs a weaker one. Specifically speaking, it is rarely to laugh at someone else for no reason, but it happens frequently to smile to someone else in order to show the politeness.

Of course, the errors in example (1) may partly occur because of the negative transfer of the author's first language. Perhaps, the word sequence or syntax is just the same as example (1) in Japanese. Or, it is common that a sentence should be stated with the beginning of the first personal pronouns in Japanese. Therefore, to know the author's true intentions is the best way to analyze and correct errors.

5. Conclusion

This paper mainly analyses the cause for errors produced by Japanese Chinese language learners in this Chinese sentence "Wo (我) zai (在) dianti (电梯) kou (口) bei (被) ren (人) xiao (笑) le (了) xiao (笑)" from the perspectives of linguistic animacy and semantic feature constraint. In Chinese semantic feature, "Bei" (被) and "xiao" (笑) are not in accordance with the structure "V 了 V", so semantic feature constraint causes errors in that

Chinese sentence essentially instead of linguistic animacy superficially.

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Notes

Note 1. * means that sentence is a wrong one in syntax.

Note 2. In this Chinese sentence, wo(我)means "I", zai(在) means "at", dianti(电梯) means "elevator", kou(口) means "entrance", bei(被) means "by", ren(人)means "(other) people", xiao(笑)means "laugh at or "smile", and le(了) is a Chinese particle which indicates something happened already.