

The Differentiation and Analysis of Pivotal Construction and Similar Syntactic Constructions*

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Abstract—Since the appearance of “pivotal construction”, scholars have always questioned its existence and wanted to classify it into the category of other syntactic constructions. Therefore, it is necessary to make a more detailed distinction between the pivotal construction and the other similar syntactic constructions. Generally, the pivotal construction can be abbreviated as $N_1 + V_1 + N_2 + V_2$, which is the same as in other syntactic constructions or sentence patterns: subject-predicate structure as the object construction, serial predicate construction, fused serial predicate and pivotal construction. In this paper, syntax combined with semantics, these four simple sentence patterns (syntactic constructions) are taken as examples and analyzed in detail. Finally, we draw a conclusion that N_1, V_1, N_2, V_2 have complex relationship on the syntactic structure. Meanwhile, through the semantic analysis and classification of V_1 , we make a clear distinction of V_1 in the four types of simple sentence patterns and the relationship between V_1 and V_2 is clearly differentiated.

Index Terms—pivotal construction, syntax, semantic, distinction

The pivotal construction, focus of this paper, is a special syntactic structure in Chinese, and it exists in the history since ancient times. The source can be traced back to the beginning of the written language. For instance, we can find a lot of pivotal constructions in the inscriptions on oracle bones (Zheng, 1996). However, modern grammar studies began to pay attention to this linguistic phenomenon from the middle of the last century. In the researching processes, there are always a lot of disputes over two issues, namely the category division and syntactic construction classification. This paper is aiming at finding out the distinction between pivotal construction and the other similar syntactic constructions.

I. INTRODUCTION TO PIVOTAL CONSTRUCTION

A. Pivotal Construction

Nowadays, most scholars agree with the term “pivotal constituent” to represent the Chinese syntactic term Jianyu, while the pivotal construction is the sentence with the construction of “pivotal constituent”. The “the pivotal construction” is made up of a verb-object structure and a subject-predicate structure. There’s no equivalent structure in English. So, when translated, the pivotal construction of the sentence is changed. Such a construction can be represented in a simple sentence in Chinese, whereas maybe a complex or simple sentence when translated into English.

E. g.1. He asks me to come. (Ta Qing Wo Lai.)

In this sentence, “me” is the object of “ask” and it is also the logical subject of “come”, and this structure is generally derived as $N_1 + V_1 + N_2 + V_2$, which is a typical derivation of pivotal construction. N_1 is the subject of the sentence. $V_1 + N_2 + V_2$ is termed as “pivotal constituent”, in which $V_1 + N_2$ is a verb-object structure and $N_2 + V_2$ is a subject-predicate structure. These two structures are combined by N_2 , the pivotal noun, and also called “Jianyu” in Chinese, which means an element undertaking two syntactic functions without any inflectional change of the word form. So, N_2 has two functions: the object of V_1 , and subject of V_2 . And V_1 is the pivotal verb, governing N_2 and having little semantic relation with V_2 . According to Cui & Sheng (1990), two aspects are the points of focus. The first is the causative meaning of V_1 , which involves certain object and makes the object behave in a certain way. The second aspect is about the two verbs. There is a logical connection of cause and effect relationship between V_1 and V_2 . In their paper, the study of this construction is the study of V_1 and V_2 . There are also a lot of studies on pivotal construction in Chinese academic circle, and they mainly focus on the naming process, deep structure analysis, classification and acquisition by foreign learners.

B. Literature Review on Pivotal Construction

How to name this pivotal construction once was a heated topic among scholars. At the beginning of the argument, Lv (1953) referred to this sentence pattern as “predicate form”, while the “pivotal form” was proposed in the *Modern Chinese Grammar Speech* compiled by Ding etc.(1961) for the first time. After that, telescopic form, recursive sentence

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pattern, complex predicate, bi-functional constituent construction, Jianyu structure, etc. have appeared for a while. Whatever the name was, since people became aware of this linguistic phenomenon, scholars have carried on numerous researches on its attribution, category, definition and classification. However, some scholars have always questioned its existence and wish to put it into other sentence patterns. Shi (1954) is one of the earliest scholars who questioned “pivotal form”. He believes both the telescopic form and the recursive structure sentences are the subject predicate complement structures in which the second verb and its subsequent components are the supplementary clause. In the *Dispute on the Abolition of the Telescopic Form*, Yang (1984) analyzes the similarities and differences between conceptual and grammatical functions of N in further detail, dividing the relationship between V_1 and V_2 into four types where V_2 can be classified as an adverbial, object, complement of V_1 , or as the predicate of another clause. Although he does not directly deny the concept of the pivotal sentence, he holds the view that the existing definition of “pivotal sentence” is not clear enough and needs more advanced grammar framework to analyze. Ding (2006) totally discarded the proposition of “pivotal sentence”. He ranked the multi-predicate sentences, such as pivotal sentences and predicate sentences, into multi-nucleus sentences. This classification can temporarily solve the disputes over pivotal sentence, however, the definition of multi-nucleus sentence is ambiguous and goes against the systemic analysis and acquisition of the sentence structure under the circumstance of diversification and internationalization of Chinese. In Su’s research (2012), the traditional view of “Jiānyǔ Sentence Patterns” has serious theoretical flaws. And her study has presented an incisive analysis on the theoretical weaknesses of this view. She has proposed that the label of “Jiānyǔ Sentence Patterns” should be removed from mandarin grammar. By implementing the construction-chunk approach, her research introduced an alternative, demonstrating that the so-called “Jiānyǔ” sentences, some “double object sentences” and some “verb-predicate sentences with subject-predicate phase used as an object” are indeed seven different constructions: Request Construction, Causative Relation Construction, Action Permission Construction, Quality Judgment Construction, Position Explanation Construction, Action Collaboration Construction, and a subtype of Existential Construction.

Although views are widely different, now the majority of scholars agree on the existence of “pivotal form”, which is an irrefutable fact after all. Along with the wide application of TG grammar, the research of pivotal sentence has a new start. Trying to redefine and reanalyze this special construction, scholars realized the existence of empty category, represented by “e”, and the syntactic structure is $N_1 + V_1 + N_2 + e + V_2$ (Yang, 2006). Major disputes focus on the classification of the empty category. Xing (2004) claimed that, under the concept of “empty category” in Government and Binding Theory, the constituent N_2 in pivotal form is the object of V_1 and also is the patient argument, and there should be an empty subject of V_2 , i.e. PRO should be the agent argument. Yang (2006) has found out that the empty category in pivotal sentences can be divided into empty pronoun PRO and NP trace, which is different from the other scholars’ conclusion. In different pivotal sentence patterns, the distribution of empty category is different and the same is true to the syntactic features. You (2002) classified pivotal verbs into 11 types and analyzed each type according to the semantic meaning. He believes the features of pivotal verbs, all containing causative meaning, are determined by the number and position of the obligatory arguments and themes and the available arguments and themes. This is helpful to define the features of pivotal verbs and distinguish pivotal sentence pattern and other sentence patterns under the guidance of thematic theory and argument structure analysis. Wen & Yuan (2009) explored the derivation of the pivotal construction $NP_1 + VP_1 + NP_2 + VP_2$ in the light of the “movement theory of control” and the “copy theory of movement”. NP_2 , the pivotal constituent, merges at the subject position of VP_2 and takes the Agent role. Since VP_2 projects into $T_{def}P$, which fails to project into CP, a phase, NP_2 can be probed by V_1 when the $T_{def}P$ merges with V_1 . After feature checking, a copy of NP_2 merges at the object position of VP_1 , receiving the Accusative Case and the Theme θ -role.

In recent years, some scholars have also studied the acquisition of pivotal construction from the perspective of teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Aiming to improve teaching strategies, Zhang (2002) analyzed the reasons that influence the correct use of “make” in pivotal sentences. In *A Study on the Phonetic Segmentation of Chinese Language Teaching* (2004), Wang and Jiang studied the segmentation of pivotal construction from the phonological aspect to seek for the difference from the other constructions. On the basis of the large-scale corpus statistics, Zhou (2009) analyzed the correct and erroneous usage of the foreign students and native users, and reached a conclusion about the error frequency. Whereas, he didn’t explain the problems he had found, such as the difference of acquisition sequence of different types of pivotal construction, the influence of the deep structure on the acquisition sequence, and the reasons if the errors in learning process. Recently, there are some MA theses analyzing the acquisition of pivotal constructions (Li, 2010; Ma, 2011; Qu, 2013). The same as Zhou (2009), they all focus on the classification of errors, acquisition sequence, or the investigation on the degree of difficulty, paying less attention to the relationship between the deep structure and acquisition of pivotal construction.

II. THE DIFFERENTIATION BETWEEN PIVOTAL CONSTRUCTION AND SIMILAR CONSTRUCTIONS

The pivotal construction can be abbreviated as $N1 + V1 + N2 + V2$ as mentioned in the first part. However, there are also many other sentences in Chinese which can be abbreviated in this way, just as the following examples:

E.g. 2. He knows I’m coming. (Subject-predicate structure as the object construction)

E.g. 3. He goes to the restaurant to eat. (The serial predicate construction)

E.g. 4. He asks me to eat. (The fused serial predicate and pivotal construction)

The above sentences are all structures of $N_1 + V_1 + N_2 + V_2$ in Chinese, which seem to be the same structure in pivotal construction. However, they belong to different syntactic constructions. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to make a detailed comparative analysis of the differences between them and the pivotal sentence as shown in E.g. 1. in the first part.

A. *The Distinction between Pivotal Construction and Subject-predicate Structure as the Object Construction*

In a sentence with subject-predicate structure as the object construction which is served as a set of the subject-predicate structure, as E.g. 2 “He knows I’m coming” where the object is “I’m coming” rather than “I”. However, the pivotal construction in E.g. 1 “He asks me to come”, the object of “asks” is “me”, and “asks” is not directly related to “come” (“I” and “me” are the same word in Chinese). This syntactic structure is the most important difference between the two constructions. That is, in pivotal construction, V_1 governs N_2 , not V_2 ; while in the subject-predicate structure as the object construction, V_1 governs both N_2 and V_2 . The reason of the different functions of V_1 in two construction lies in the semantic connotations.

From the aspect of semantic relation, the meaning of V_1 is different in the two constructions. The pivotal verb V_1 mainly contains the causative verb, that is to cause N_2 generate the action of V_2 . However, in the subject-predicate structure as the object construction, V_1 , a verb that perceives and expresses emotions, receives the common effect generated by N_2 and V_2 together from the external or internal senses. So, it governs both N_2 and V_2 . A detailed classification of V_1 is as follows:

According to the study of You (2002), the pivotal verbs in this paper can be divided into six types according to their semantic meanings:

- (1) Causative: make, ask, let, order, want, find, cause, persuade, use, call, organize, arouse
- (2) Order: order, prohibit, arrange, distribute, introduce, appoint, assign, request, command
- (3) Advise: encourage, request, advise, exhort, notify, tell, urge, teach, prevent, spur, educate, train
- (4) Authorize: authorize, entrust, request, beg, and demand
- (5) Elective: recommend, elect, nominate, allot, call, name...after
- (6) Recommend: Recommend, select, nominate, transfer, call, name.....after

V_1 in the subject-predicate phrase as the object construction mainly includes two categories:

- (1) Perceptions: know, learn, hear, see, consider, think, perceive, feel
- (2) Emotions: like, dislike, hate, worship, grumble, complain, cold-shoulder, afraid, blame

B. *The Distinction between Pivotal Construction and Serial Predicate Construction*

The serial predicate construction refers to a simple sentence which contains two or more than two verbs as predicates (only two-verb predicates are discussed here). In E.g. 3, “He goes to the restaurant to eat.”, V_1 “goes” and V_2 “eat” are the actions of subject N_1 “He”, which is unrelated to N_2 “restaurant”. But in pivotal construction E.g. 1, N_2 is the pivotal noun, playing an important role in the occurrence of V_2 . In other words, there are a lot of predicates in serial predicate construction, and all the predicates describe the same subject, while in pivotal construction, the subject of V_1 and V_2 are clearly different.

From the aspect of semantic relationship, in “He goes to the restaurant to eat.”, “eat” is the purpose of “go”. In order to eat, he goes to the restaurant. In fact, there are many kinds of relations between two verbs in the serial predicate construction, such as sequence, causation, and complementary relations etc. Due to the diversity of the relationship between V_1 and V_2 , the classification of V_1 becomes very difficult and most verbs can be used in the serial predicate construction. So the verbs used in this construction is not classified here.

C. *The Distinction between Pivotal Construction and Fused Serial Predicate and Pivotal Construction*

The structure of $N_1 + V_1 + N_2 + V_2$ in the fused serial predicate and pivotal construction cannot be clearly divided into a certain structure. It is neither the serial predicate construction, nor the pivotal construction, and the two constructions are fused or combined by a specific semantic relationship. The verb V_1 in E.g. 4, “He asks me to eat”, although “ask” is a pivotal verb, there is a very special context here: to ask sb. to eat. In China, we have the consensus that if A asks B to eat, that means they will eat together, unless A specifically says he won’t eat together. In other words, in this example, “he” and “I” will eat together. N_1 is the subject of V_1 and V_2 , and N_2 is the logical subject of V_2 .

If this example is a pivotal construction, there is no semantic relation between N_1 “he” and V_2 “eat”: “he” will not “eat”. If it is the serial predicate construction, there is no semantic relation between N_2 “me” and V_2 “eat”: “I” will not “eat”. However, N_1 is the subject of V_1 and also the subject of V_2 , and N_2 is also the agent of V_2 . That is, there are two logic subjects of V_2 , so as to meet the requirement of the serial predicate construction, and the pivotal construction. Therefore, the structure becomes independent and is named after the two constructions as fused serial predicate and pivotal construction, where the meaning of V_1 is the key of this structure, so V_1 caused N_1 and N_2 together to produce V_2 . Therefore these words mainly exist in the word with the meaning “accompany”, and are classified as follows (Zhang, 1999):

- (1) Lead: lead, take, guide, draw, command, arouse, show, pull, call, convene
- (2) Accompany: accompany, escort, follow, show, company, follow, convoy, deliver, carry, chaperonage, coordinate

(3) Help: help, assist, aid, support, and boost

III. CONCLUSION

From the above, it is clear that the pivotal construction can be expressed as $N_1 + V_1 + N_2 + V_2$, but this structure can represent many similar constructions in Chinese. How to distinguish them mainly depends on the syntactic and semantic relations between the various components. The following tables are more intuitive displays of the four kinds of constructions respectively, of which the first row and the first vertical column are the four components N_1 , V_1 , N_2 and V_2 . The components in horizontal row go first when analyzed. For example, the relationship between N_1 and V_1 in Table 1 is subject-predicate relation, which has a sequence and N_1 goes first. This sequence can not be changed as V_1 and N_1 , or the relationship will be changed into “verb-object”. That is the same to V_1 and N_2 , verb-object relation. If “ N_2 and V_1 ” is used, that refers to a subject-predicate relation. The relation of V_1 and V_2 is mostly causative. N_2 and V_2 is subject-predicate relation.

TABLE 1.
SYNTACTIC RELATION IN PIVOTAL CONSTRUCTION

	N_1	V_1	N_2	V_2
N_1				
V_1	subject-predicate			
N_2		verb-object		
V_2		causative	Subject-predicate	

TABLE 2.
SYNTACTIC RELATION IN SUBJECT-PREDICATE STRUCTURE AS THE OBJECT CONSTRUCTION

	N_1	V_1	N_2	V_2
N_1				
V_1	subject-predicate			
N_2		} verb-object (internal or external perception)		
V_2			subject-predicate	

TABLE 3.
SYNTACTIC RELATION OF SERIAL PREDICATE CONSTRUCTION

	N_1	V_1	N_2	V_2
N_1				
V_1	subject-predicate			
N_2				
V_2	subject-predicate	precedence, purpose, consequence, complementary		

TABLE 4.
SYNTACTIC RELATION OF FUSED SERIAL PREDICATE AND PIVOTAL CONSTRUCTION

	N_1	V_1	N_2	V_2
N_1				
V_1	subject-predicate			
N_2		verb-object		
V_2	subject-predicate	lead, accompany, help	subject-predicate	

From the above tables, it can be summarized, in the pivotal construction, the relationship of N_1 and V_1 is subject-verb, V_1 and N_2 is verb-object, N_2 and V_2 is logical subject-verb, and V_1 and V_2 is in cause-effect relation, and V_1 brings on the action of V_2 . So the complex relations among the four components N_1 , V_1 , N_2 , and V_2 are crucial to the distinction of the four syntactic constructions.

In Table 2, the relation of N_1 and V_1 is subject-predicate. V_1 has a relation with N_2 and V_2 at the same time, and V_1 is not related to N_2 or V_2 respectively. So the function of N_2 and V_2 as a whole is the object of V_1 , that is the verb-object relation. The relation of N_2 and V_2 is logical subject-predicate. V_1 perceives the existence of $N_2 + V_2$ as its object through internal or external senses.

In Table 3, the serial predicate construction, the relation of N_1 and V_1 is subject-predicate. The relation of N_1 and V_2 is also subject-predicate. There is no relation between V_1 and N_2 , N_2 and V_2 . V_1 and V_2 are the actions issued by the subject, which can be in sequential order, objective relation, cause-effect relation, and complementary relation, etc.

In Table 4, the relation of N_1 and V_1 is subject-predicate. N_1 and V_2 is logical subject-predicate relation. N_2 is the object of V_1 . N_2 is the subject of V_2 . The relation between V_1 and V_2 is the interaction about leading, accompanying and helping.

By now, the four constructions are analyzed thoroughly and the boundary between them seems very clear. It is concluded that the syntactic relations of the four components N_1 , V_1 , N_2 and V_2 are complex in each construction. On the semantic level, the meaning of V_1 and the relation between V_1 and V_2 are of vital importance to differentiate these four constructions.

However, there is always exception:

E.g. 5. Xiaoming helps mom sweep.

There are two explanations for this sentence. Xiaoming can sweep the floor with his mother, or he sweeps the floor alone instead of his mother. If it is the former situation, this sentence belongs to the third type, the fused serial predicate and the pivotal construction; if it is the latter, this sentence is the serial predicate construction. To make clear the exact meaning of this sentence, the specific context must be taken into consideration.

Anyway, the conclusion of this paper is very useful when we come across the four typical constructions in Chinese. And the relation of the four components in each construction can be reduced to the relation between V_1 and V_2 . If V_1 and V_2 is in cause-effect relation, and V_1 brings on the action of V_2 , then it is the pivotal construction. If V_1 has a relation with N_2 and V_2 as a whole, it is subject-predicate structure as the object construction. If V_1 and V_2 are the actions issued by the subject, it is the serial predicate construction. If the relation between V_1 and V_2 is the interaction about leading, accompanying and helping, it is the fused serial predicate and pivotal construction.

This shows the free variation of the semantic relations among Chinese verbs and it is really difficult for a learner of Chinese language to learn it well. But if a foreigner can master the differences mentioned above, it is much helpful for him to use the verbs freely and reduce errors to a certain extent.

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