The Bei Grammatical Structure: The Bane in Learning Chinese as a Second Language

Chizirim Favour Zeph-Ojiako
Department of Chinese studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
Email: ojiakoiruoma@yahoo.com

Abstract

Every language has its own set of rules that guide it, and those rules are called the grammar of a language. Grammar serves as a guide to language learners to acquire and comprehend the target language. In other words, grammar of a language is vital in learning any language, therefore learning a language without learning the grammar of that language is like driving a car without a steering. Chinese like other languages has its own grammar(s) that guide it. Unlike other types of Chinese grammar, bei grammatical structure is the basic passive sentence construction in Chinese language which is considered very difficult, if not the most difficult form of Chinese grammar to learn based on observations. This paper therefore through qualitative research methodology, analyses the difficulties learners encounter in learning the bei passive structure, reasons for these difficulties and possible solutions for better comprehension and usage of the structure. The natural order hypothesis is adopted for the theoretical framework.
Keywords: Language, grammar, bei grammatical structure, natural order hypothesis.

Introduction

Language is purely for human interaction and communication. It is a system of communication used by a particular country or community (Oxford dictionary. n.d). It is a medium where by humans communicate their ideas, feelings, intentions, emotions etc., with their fellow humans. This is seen in Sapir's definition of language as "purely human, and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires, by means of voluntarily produced symbols" (Sapir, 1921). A world without language will lack communication and will be centered on backwardness, this is because the world will not be able to revolve without a viable means of communication. Consequently, the absence of communication in the world lacks information and information plays a vital role in human existence. As a major way of communication, we can communicate and reach the rest of the world outside our domain through the use of language. Every language is made of systems, structures as well as rules that make it whole. No language is devoid of a system. All languages have their system of arrangements which include phonological and grammatical systems, and within a system, there are several subsystems. The grammatical systems of a language include the morphological and syntactic systems, and within these two sub-systems, we have systems such as plural, mood, aspect, tense, and so on. These systems work together to create meaningful communication among individuals and also serve as a guideline to language learners in learning a second language. This is evident in the Oxford Learners Dictionary definition of language as "a structured system of communication which involves the use of particularly human languages" (Oxfordlearnersdictionarie.com, 2019).

As mentioned above, grammar is an essential constituent of a language. One cannot adequately learn, understand, and/or speak a language without knowing its grammar and because every language obeys a set of combinatory rules, we can communicate an infinite

number of concepts. This is seen in Chomsky's definition of language as "a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements" (Chomsky, 1957). While every language has a different set of rules, all languages do obey rules. These rules are known as grammar. (lumenlearning.com, n.d). In linguistics, grammar is the set of structural rules governing the composition of clauses, phrases, and words in a natural language. Two of the concepts that make language unique are grammar and lexicon. In the case of acquiring a first language, grammar is acquired unconsciously rather than learned as in the case of a second language learner. O'Grady, Dobrovotsky & Katamba (1996) state that fluent speakers of a language variety have a set of internalized rules which constitute its grammar. The vast majority of the information in the grammar is –at least in the case of one's native language-acquired not by conscious study or instruction but by hearing other speakers. Much of this work is done during early childhood; learning a language later in life usually involves more explicit instruction. Thus, grammar is the cognitive information underlying language use, it is a steppingstone at every stage of language learning. That is to say, learning a new language always implies learning its grammar.

A Brief Comparison of Chinese Grammar and English Grammar
English is grouped as an Indo-European language. Languages under this family are spoken in the western world, which includes the romance languages (such as Spanish, French, Portuguese) as well as the Slavic languages (such as Russian, Czech and Polish), and many others. All of these languages have common grammatical features which include conjugating verbs for different tenses, following specific rules about the subject-verb agreement and adding endings to words to make them plural (Chinese grammar wiki, n.d). Chinese language not being a part of the language family mentioned above on the other hand, is classified as a Sino-Tibetan language, therefore its grammar is entirely different from the grammar of the languages that belong to an Indo-European family, although there are few similarities between them.

Apart from the grammatical aspect, the most significant of all is that Chinese language does not have alphabets, instead, characters (汉子) are used to express the different sounds of the language and these characters can be represented using the Roman letters in a system called piyin. The basic sentence structure of Chinese language is the same as it is in English. Both languages use subject-verb or subject-verb-object (svo) formula for making simple sentences. For learners of Chinese whose first and second language is English should not have trouble in Chinese word order. Moreover, unlike the English language, Chinese language almost entirely lacks inflection and so words typically have only one grammatical form. This means that verb forms remain the same irrespective of when the event took place. Categories such as number (singular or plural) and verb tense are frequently not expressed by any grammatical means, but several particles serve to express verbal aspect and, to some extent, mood (Ang, 2018). For instance, the particles le（了）and guo（过）are used to indicate the time an action took place. In English language, nouns can be inflected indicating if the word is in a singular form or plural form.
Example; car-cars, table-tables

The addition of 's' in English indicates that there is more than one car, and more than one table. In Chinese language, the word remains the same. In a situation where one must emphasize the presence of more than one car, which means adding 's' in English, Chinese language uses numbers or 'many; to indicate plural.

Example;

English -There are cars everywhere

Chinese - 到处都有车 (daochu dou you che) translation; there are cars everywhere.

From the above illustration, there is no direct translation of the plural marker 's', however, daochu an adverb which means 'everywhere' and dou also an adverb meaning 'all' or 'entirely are used above to replace the plural marker 's'.

Eugenia Ang as cited in (Kinguistics.wordpress.com, 2018) used the word 'love' to explain the difference between the grammatical tense in English language and that of Chinese language. Ang wrote; 'love', this English word: like other English words it has tense. 'loved' or 'will love' or 'have loved'. All these specific tenses mean love is time-limited. Not infinite. It only exists in a particular period. No past and future. Love in Chinese means a being, a situation, a circumstance. Love is existence, holding past and future. If our love existed in Chinese tense, then it will last forever, it will be infinite. The verb to love 爱 (ai)- never changes regardless of whether it occurs in the past, present or future. Instead, the time at which the action takes place can be indicated by lexical semantics, grammatical particles, and discourse principle. Verbs can be combined with temporal adverbs or aspectual particles to establish temporal references. While Chinese may not be morphologically marked for tense, aspect is heavily encoded in the language. Some examples of how aspect works include the use of particles 了 (le) and 过 (guo) which indicate perfective aspect.

Example;

我爱了他 (wo ai le ta)

[I] [have] [loved] [him]

我爱过它 (wo ai guo ta)

[I] [have/had loved] [him]

The examples above are just how some ways in which time is encoded in Chinese without the use of tense (Kinguistics.wordpress.com, 2018).

Chinese Grammar （语法）

Just like every other language, Chinese has its own grammar which is unique. As a language under the Sino-Tibetan language family, its grammars differ from that of other European and western languages. Chinese grammar lacks inflection therefore words mostly have only one grammatical form. Chinese frequently uses serial verb which involves two or more verbs or verb phrases strung together in a single clause. Chinese grammar is embedded with word formation, sentence structure, plurals, noun phrases, relative clauses, classifiers, numerals, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, aspects, and passive. This paper focuses on the 'passive' aspect of Chinese grammar which is represented by the markers 'bei' (被), gei (给), jiao (叫), and rang (让). However, the bei (被) passive marker is the centerpiece of this writing.

The Bei Grammatical Sentence Construction (被字句)

The bei grammatical construction (被字句) is the basic way to covey the passive in Chinese language. This grammatical construction is only used in passive sentences in Chinese. The passive is a vital grammatical construction in every language, which should be properly understood and used during communication. According to (Liu, 2011), bei (被) is the major passive construction in Mandarin Chinese. It is the most commonly used passive marker in Chinese language than the other markers gei (给), jiao (叫), and rang (让). The basic form of the bei passive sentence in Chinese language is; noun/pronoun +bei +verb.

Example; 她被我打了(ta bei wo da le)

        I was beaten by her

The main feature of the bei passive sentence is that the object of an action becomes the subject of the sentence. The "doer" of the action, which would have been the subject of the normal (active voice) sentence, becomes secondary and may or may not be mentioned in the passive sentence (Chinese grammar wiki, nd). The bei passive describes an event where the patient has no control over the event, this can also be taken as the central characteristic of the construction (Liu, 2011). The basic bei sentence structure contains a subject, the passive marker bei, an agent that performed the action, a verb and a complement that could be replaced by other elements and le (了). A noteworthy fact is that, sometimes, one can choose to make a passive sentence without an agent included, this is also known as long and short passives. Liu (2011), describes these passives as the short agentless passive and the long agentive passive. Long passives take an agent while short passives do not (McEnery & Xiao, n.d). Below are some illustrations for clearer understanding.

面包被他吃完了(mian bao bei ta chi wan le)

Translation: the bread was eaten by him

Analysis: 面包=subject, 被= passive marker, 他= agent, 吃= verb, 完= complement + le

麦克被老师骂了 (Maike bei laoshi ma le)

Translation：Mike was scolded by the teacher

Analysis: 麦克= subject, 被= passive marker, 老师= agent, 骂= verb+le

Passive sentences without an agent;

麦克被打了(Maike bei da le)

Translation: Mike was beaten

Analysis: 麦克=subject, 被= passive marker, 打= verb+le

自行车被偷了(zixinche bei toule)

The bicycle was stolen

面包被吃了(mian bao bei chi le)

The bread was eaten

As mentioned above, other passive markers such gei, rang, and jiao, can serve as a substitute for bei, they all can be translated as 'by' in English, that is, if the passive sentence has an agent, as shown in the example 麦克被老师打了 (Mike was beaten by the teacher). But if the passive sentence lacks an agent, as shown in the example 麦克被打了 (Mike was beaten), the passive marker automatically changes to the verb 'to be'. Mcenery and Xiao (n.d), however, claimed that the other passive markers gei, jiao, and rang, have not been fully grammaticalized as passive markers because they are mainly used as lexical verbs meaning 'allow' and 'concede'.

Differences between the Passive Markers Bei, Gei, Jiao and Rang

An agent is optional for the passive marker bei 被 but an agent is obligatory when using the passive markers jiao and rang. For example; it is correct to say 面包被吃了(mianbao bei chi le) but incorrect to say 面包叫/让吃了 (miangbao jiao/rang chi le), an agent must be added to a passive sentence with the markers jiao or rang, thus; 面包叫/让他吃了 (mianbao jiao/rang ta chi le).

When the marker is followed by an object (an agent), all of the passive markers are interchangeable. Bei and gei can occur in both long and short passives, but is more likely they do not take an agent. In contrast, Shi, (1997) (as cited in McEnery & Xiao, n.d) presents that jiao and rang only occur with an agent in long passives. Bei occurs more

frequently in written or formal contexts than the other passive markers. In colloquial speech, jiao and rang are commonly used. Dialects also differ in the preferred passive marker. Moreover, bei connotes stronger adversity than jiao and rang (Ross, & Ma, 2006). The most significant difference between these passive markers is that bei, grammatically, is only used as a passive marker while rang, jiao and gei have other functions. Jiao is used as a verb meaning 'to call' or 'to order', rang is also used as a verb meaning 'to let' or 'to allow', while gei is also used as a verb meaning 'to give' and as a preposition meaning 'to' or 'for/on behalf of'.

The Passive and Negation

The most commonly used negating element is 不(bu). It can be placed before a verb, preposition, or adverb to negate it. However, the verb 有(you)-which can mean either possession or "there is/are" in existential clauses-is negated using mei (没) to produce 没有 (meiyou) meaning 'not have' (Yip & Remmington, 2004). Sentences quoted in passive form typically refer to situations that occurred in the past. To negate a passive sentence with bei as the passive marker, 没(mei) or 没有 (meiyou) comes directly before bei and cannot appear before the verb. When the sentence is in the present, 不(bu) is used. Examples;

面包没被他吃完 (mianbao mei bei ta chi wan)

Translation: the bread was not eaten by him/finished by him.

你的钱没有被他拿走 (ni de qian meiyou bei ta na zou)

Translation: your money was not taken away by him

不要被别人发现我的秘密 (bu yao bei bie ren faxian wode mimi)

Translation: do not allow my secret to be known by anyone/ don't let others discover my secret.

When 没 (mei) or 没有 (mei you) is used to negate the sentence, 了(le) is not added at the end of the sentence.

The passive form can also be used when expressing prohibitions and warnings (Yip & Remmington, 2004).

Example; 别被你的朋友骗了(bie bei ni de pengyou pian le). Don't be fooled by your friends.

The English Passive and the Chinese Passive

The disparities between the Chinese passive and the English passive are deep and broad which may divert the focus of this paper, therefore, only the most significant differences are discussed below;

- The Chinese passive marker bei is sometimes translated as the English preposition 'by' and other times translated as the verb 'to be'. That is; bei is directly translated as 'by' if the passive sentence has an agent, as shown in the example 麦克被老师打了 (Mike was beaten by the teacher). But if the passive sentence lacks an agent, as shown in the example 麦克被打了 (Mike was beaten), the passive marker automatically changes to the verb 'to be'.
- In Chinese, the passive marker precedes the verb, which is not always the same in English.
- The most notable feature of the bei passive construction is that it is mostly used to indicate misfortune and adversity. If the situation is bad or undesirable in some way, the bei construction can be used. Otherwise, a different sentence structure

would be more appropriate, a 吧 construction is often used (Grigg, 2011). Grigg explains that most passive sentences with the bei marker express some sort of unwanted event. Strictly speaking, this is exclusively what the bei is for. Unpleasant verbs like 杀 (kill), 偷 (steal), and 批评 (criticize) are often seen with bei. This does not imply that bei cannot be used with verbs that have more neutral meanings. In this case, Grigg presents that using the bei construction will imply that the event was undesirable in some way. Although this is a hard and fast rule, it is unlikely to see bei used with positive verbs such as 爱 (love). While **'he was loved by everyone that knew him'** is fine in English, in Chinese it would be better as an active sentence; 认识他的人都是爱他的 (renshi ta de ren dou shi ai ta de).

The Natural Order Hypothesis

The natural order hypothesis was proposed by Stephen Krashen (1980). It is defined as "the hypothesis that children acquiring their first language acquire linguistic forms, rules, and items in a similar order. For example, in English, children acquire progressive –ing, plural –s, and active sentences before they acquire third person –s on verbs, or passive sentences" Richards & Schmidt (2002) (as cited in Sepassi & Aryadoust, 2014). The natural order hypothesis argues that the acquisition of grammatical structures occur in a predictable sequence. The natural order hypothesis applies to both the first language and second language acquisition, but although similar, the order of acquisition often differs between first and second language. In other words, the order of acquisition of a first language is different from the order of acquisition of that same language as a second language (parentingpatch.com, 2018).

According to Steve Smith (2016), this order is not dependent on the ease with which a particular language feature can be taught; in English, some features such as third-person "–s" (he runs) are easy to comprehend in a classroom setting but are not typically fully acquired until the later stages of language acquisition. The hypothesis was based on morpheme studies by Heidi Dulay & Mariana Burt, which found that certain morphemes were predictably learned before others during the course of second language acquisition. McLaughlin (as cited in Sepassi & Aryadoust, 2014) states that in 1974, "Dulay and Burt published a study of what they called the order of acquisition of grammatical morphemes or 'factors' in English by five-to-eight-year-old children learning English as a second language". In their research, Dulay and Burt utilized the Bilingual Syntax Measure, presenting cartoon pictures followed by questions. The idea was based on Brown (1973), which set forth an 'invariant' or common sequence "of acquisition for at least 14 factors or function words in English that have a minor role in conveying sentence meaning". Chastain (1988), trying to put the issue more into perspective, suggests that this does not "mean that all learners acquire language in the same order at the same time, but that similarities exist among learners and that they will learn some STRUCTURES early and some late" (Sepassi & Aryadoust, 2014). This hypothesis was picked up by Krashen who incorporated it in his very well-known input model of second language learning (Smith, 2009).

The natural order hypothesis explains the reasons for the difficulty learners of Chinese encounter in acquiring the Chinese passive voice especially with the passive marker bei. It is not a new thing that the bei passive sentence construction is one the most difficult grammatical constructions to learn in Chinese language. Miss Ma, a Confucius Institute Chinese Mandarin teacher who has taught Chinese language for over ten years confirmed that in her many years of experience in teaching Chinese language, many students have

approached her tabling their inability to grasp the usage of bei sentence construction. "Some students confessed to me that they would rather make all their sentences an active one in other to avoid mistakes", she said. Miss Ma continued that the reasons behind these difficulties are not entirely based on the classroom performance of the teacher and/or students, because the bei sentence construction is often taught with more effort than other complex grammatical constructions such as 把字句 (ba zi ju), 连 (lian) etc., yet students still encounter inexplicable difficulties towards the comprehension and usage of bei construction. This is backed by Krashen's view that some grammatical structures are acquired earlier than others. People do not acquire grammar based on the teacher's explicit instruction/teaching or by explicit learning, rather all language learners of any second language appear to follow the same predictable order just like learners of English as a second language generally acquire the grammatical structure of yes-no questions before the grammatical structure of wh- questions (parentingpatch.com, 2018). In order words, people learn grammatical structures when they are mentally ready in a natural way but not in the order in which they were taught. 60 percent students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University who have studied Chinese language for over three years when interviewed agreed to the fact that other complex grammatical constructions such as 连 and 把 are easier to comprehend and use than bei even though they were all taught to them simultaneously. "把字句 (ba zi ju) is easy to grab; I started applying it to my sentences the same day it was taught" one student said. The other 40 percent of interviewed students that agreed to have mastered the bei passive construction and are able to use it fluently are classified into two categories. They both confessed that it was a long process which happened almost unconsciously, the first category are those who have traveled to China who had constant interactions with native speakers of the language for over a year, while the second category include those who always communicate in Chinese language with their peers and more knowledgeable order as suggested by Vygotskyz in his interaction theory of second language acquisition. Other students mostly in their elementary level believed that their inability to understand and make use of the bei passive construction is because it was taught in their elementary level which according to them is an early stage to acquire such complex grammatical structure. They believed grammatical structures as complex as bei passive should be taught in intermediate classes and repeated in advanced classes. Miss Anabel in her interview said "after it was taught to us, I asked my friend who is in 高级班 (advanced class) to tutor me more on how to use it as the teacher instructed that we should learn more and practice the usage, to my surprise my intelligent friend also expressed her inability to construct a simple bei sentence. She also complained it was taught to her in the elementary stage which she was unable to learn at that stage. Such complex grammatical structures which are naturally difficult to learn should be taught in higher classes when students are mentally ready, also even if it should be taught in earlier stages of learning, it should be revisited in all classes- elementary, intermediate and advanced classes.

Moreover, the research questionnaires show that 90 percent of the students also emphasized the huge differences between the English/Igbo passives and the Chinese passive as a setback in fully understanding the Chinese passive construction.
Although the natural order hypothesis has been influential in the field of second language acquisition, however, there are criticisms surrounding this hypothesis by other linguists and educators in the field.

Suggestions

It is a general knowledge that the bei passive sentence construction is one of the most difficult grammatical structures to learn in Chinese language. Therefore this paper has compiled a list of suggestions to help the teachers as well as the students to learn and master the bei passive construction.

- Krashen (as cited in Schutz 2019), states that the only instance in which teaching of grammar can result in language acquisition (and proficiency) is when the students are interested in the subject and the target language is used as a medium of instruction. In this light, this paper suggests that while teaching the bei passive construction, the teachers should find a creative way to engage students in discussions by raising topics which will interest them and as well serve as a medium to teach the grammar at hand. For instance, a teacher can teach the bei passive structure in this way; 我的自行车被小偷偷走了**(my bicycle was stolen by a thief).** Firstly, the teacher can ask a question on who among the students can ride a bicycle. Secondly, he/she should ask among the students that can ride a bike, how many of them own a bike. Thirdly, he/she should ask them how they would feel if their bike is stolen. The teacher can seize the opportunity to tell the students how to express themselves in such situation in a passive voice using the bei passive marker. For the students who do not own a bike, the teacher can use another valuable item such as phone or money as a substitute to construct the bei sentence. This method of teaching can boost students' interest in learning and as well make them comprehend the grammar easily. Krashen continues that very often when this occurs, both teachers and students are convinced that the study of formal grammar is essential for second language acquisition, and the teacher is skillful enough to present explanations in the target language so that the students understand. In other words, the teacher talk meets the requirements for comprehensible input and perhaps, with the students' participation, the classroom becomes an environment suitable for acquisition.

- As mentioned above, some students complained about the early teaching of the passive. This paper suggests that teachers should try and teach the bei passive at a more advanced stage. If there is need to teach the structure at the intermediate level, the teaching should also be repeated at the advanced level, in other to refresh their memories and to make them mentally ready as well.

- Students should always pay attention to the common errors made when using the bei passive marker. Below are some examples; from the analysis of the questionnaire, it was noticed that many students put the negation element 没有(mei you) after the passive marker bei as in: 你的车**被警察没有**拖走**.** This sentence is wrong, the correct sentence is 你的车**没有被**警察拖走. Students should note that to negate a bei sentence, one needs to insert 没 (mei) or 没有 (mei you) (for past tense) directly in front of bei, in other words, the negative element should always precede the passive marker bei. For sentences in present or future, the negation element 不 (bu) should be used. Example; 她的看法**不被**公司接受 (her view is not accepted by the company).

- When the negative marker 没/没有 is used with the bei passive marker, the element 了 should not be added at the end of the sentence. Thus it is wrong to say "你的车**没有被**警察拖走了。Other common errors as listed by Chinese Grammar wiki (n.d) include; students should always remember to add a complement or an element after the verb.

咖啡被我喝。×
咖啡被我喝了。√
他被打。×
他被打了。√

- While teaching the Chinese passive, teachers should endeavor to make a comparative analysis between the Chinese passive and the passive in the learners' native/first language. Knowing the similarities and differences between the two languages will enable them to easily master the usage in the target language.
- Vygotsky (1978) presents that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the process of cognitive development. Students are encouraged not to depend entirely on the classroom teachings of grammar. They should endeavor to interact with the native speakers or with a "more knowledgeable other" as suggested by Vygotsky. The more knowledgeable other refers to anyone who has a better understanding or a higher ability level than the learner, regarding a particular task, process or concept. The more knowledgeable other (mko) could be a teacher or older adult, but could also be peers, or a younger person. Frequent interaction in the target language will unconsciously increase the learner's competence and performance in the language.

Conclusion

It is no doubt that the passive sentence is a very important grammatical construction in Chinese language, and that it is a very difficult aspect of the Chinese grammar to learn especially with the bei passive marker. However, this paper through the adoption of the natural order hypothesis explains extensively what one needs to know about the bei passive marker with a few suggestions beneficial to both the teachers and learners of Chinese language to put into consideration that can enable one master the correct usage of the bei passive sentence construction.

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