

A Corpus-based Study of Mandarin Verbs of Doing*

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Adopting a corpus-based approach, this paper aims to explore the different usages of the Mandarin verbs of doing *zuo*, *nong*, and *gao*. Though often employed to define one another in dictionaries, these three verbs are not always interchangeable. Rather, they exhibit different patterns of use and selectional preferences of the complements, and display different semantic prosodies. *Zuo* emphasizes the action of engaging in or creating and mainly collocates with the objectival type arguments; *nong* has the sense of handling and favors as its arguments existing, concrete objects; *gao* specifies the action of initiating and is usually taken as associated with objects nouns denoting unusual, unconventional, or even unfavorable movements. In this paper, it is also shown that *gao* often keeps bad company and tends to carry negative semantic prosody, while *nong* and *zuo* are basically neutral. The effects of a corpus-based approach on language teaching and learning are discussed as well.

Key words: corpus linguistics, verbs of doing, semantic prosody

1. Introduction

Zuo, *nong*, and *gao* are considered verbs of doing in Mandarin Chinese. In most dictionaries, these three verbs are found to define one another. Lu (1981) defines *gao* as *zuo*, *gan*, *ban*, and *nong* and states that *gao* can often be used to substitute for a variety of verbs in the following phrases *gao guanxi* (= *la guanxi*) 搞關係=拉關係 'establish a relationship,' *gao yi-ge fangan* (= *zhiding fangan*) 搞一個方案=制定方案 'do a project,' *gao kexue gongzuo* (= *congshi kexue gongzuo*) 搞科學工作=從事科學工作 'engage in science-related work.' *Zuo* can substitute for other verbs as well, as in *zuo gongke* (= *xie gongke*) 做功課=寫功課 'do one's homework,' *zuo yanjiu* (= *congshi yanjiu*) 做研究=從事研究 'conduct research.' Such is the case with *nong*, which is defined by Lu as *gao* or *zuo* and often acts in place of other verbs in phrases such as *nong yu* (*xi/pou yu*) 弄魚=洗/剖魚 'clean a fish,' *nong che* (= *xiuli che*) 弄車=修理車 'fix a car,' *nong fan* (= *zuo fan*) 弄飯=做飯 'make a meal.' Chao (1968) states that *gao* as well as *nong* is an ordinary verb with a very general range of meanings and that they have the meaning of 'do with' or the colloquial 'fix,' when followed by a resultative complement, as in *nong hao le* 弄好了 'do it right/fix,' *nong cuo le* 弄錯了 'get it wrong/make a mistake.'

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Given that these three verbs can be used to define one another and that they have similar functions in taking the place of other verbs, it seems that these three verbs can be termed as near synonyms. However, they are not interchangeable in quite a number of cases as in (1) and (2).

- (1) 他是搞/*做/*弄選舉的。

Ta shi gao/*zuo/*nong xuanju de

3SG is GUO/*ZUO/*NONG election DE

‘He is involved with the election.’

- (2) 他把房間弄/*搞/*做得乾乾淨淨的。

Ta ba fangjian nong/*gao/*zuo de ganganjingjing de

3SG BA room NONG/*GAO/*ZUO DE extremely clean DE

‘He really cleaned up the room.’

As is seen in (1), *xuanju* 選舉 ‘election’ can co-occur only with *gao*, but not with *zuo* and *nong*. In (2), on the other hand, the resultative complement *ganganjingjing* 乾乾淨淨 ‘extremely clean’ does not collocate with *zuo* and *gao*, but *nong* only. From the above observations, we may tentatively conclude that there are distributional differences among these three verbs, which in turn suggests that the three verbs share certain meaning components, but differ clearly in others. That is, there must exist some semantic features specific to each of the three verbs, which differentiate their different usages and account for their different collocations. Therefore, adopting a corpus-based approach, this paper aims to explore the selectional preferences of the arguments or complements each of these three verbs prefers. It will also examine their collocational patterns in the corpus, hoping to gain insight into the conceptual/denotational as well as connotational meanings of these verbs by revealing their context of use.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 deals with the methodology and the corpus used in this paper. Section 3 reviews the theoretical background that this paper is based on. Section 4 examines the occurrences of the three verbs in the corpus. Section 4.1 investigates the usage of *gao*, 4.2 that of *nong*, and 4.3 that of *zuo*. Section 5 discusses the findings and concludes the paper.

2. Methodology and data

The underlying premises of the corpus linguistics approach taken here originate from the ideas expressed in works such as Bolinger (1977) and Firth (1957). Bolinger (1977) argued that no two linguistic forms can be said to be absolutely identical in

meaning and function. Firth (1957) suggested that usage patterns of lexical forms can best be examined by looking at the company they keep in an actual linguistic context. The access to the corpus data and the advancement in computer technology make it possible to perform contrastive analysis of near synonyms at a new level. As Sinclair (1991:4) puts it:

The comprehensive nature of simple retrieval systems is an excellent feature. No instance is overlooked, and the main features of usage are generally clear. Minor patterns remain in the background. Some very common usages are often not featured in descriptions because they are so humdrum and routine; this method brings them to the fore.

In this paper, I will use a computerized database and try to determine the common semantic patterns of the three verbs, elucidating the extent to which *gao*, *nong*, and *zuo* differ.

The corpus data for the analysis of this paper mainly come from a Mandarin corpus, the Sinica Balanced Corpus, which is the largest balanced corpus of both written and spoken contemporary Mandarin. The relevant data were extracted from the corpus by a key-word search. The total number of occurrences of each verb in this corpus is: ZUO: 2000; GAO: 446; NONG: 165.

3. Theoretical background

Words, practically speaking, have their frequent, typical, central uses. They are not chosen freely, but co-selected with other words in a span of a few words to left and right. In other words, every word should have its own abstract semantic schema, presenting its prototypical semantic patterns. As Stubbs (2001) claims, “the semantic patterns are typically simple and common, although the lexical realizations may be very diverse.”

Given that no two linguistic forms can be absolutely identical in meaning and function and that every word has its prototypical use and that words are co-selected, we aim to find out the differences existing among these three verbs by examining the concordance lines and the top collocates of each verb, hoping to sort out their typical uses and to specify particular semantic features/patterns unique to each of them.

Besides having conceptual or denotational meanings, words often have a connotational meaning, which implies a favorable or unfavorable evaluation by the speaker toward what is being described. Oftentimes, a favorable or unfavorable connotation resides not simply in a single item but is expressed by that item in

association with others, that is, with its collocates. Therefore, to detect the connotation each word carries, we have to examine the way that words are used and the context in which certain words are chosen over other words. The contextual clues inherent in corpus data are of paramount importance, for they can reveal some of the subtle ways in which expressive connotation is used.

In the following sections, we are going to make distinctions between these three verbs by sorting out their collocates in the corpus data and identifying the semantic patterns of each verb along with its discourse/semantic prosody, i.e. the phenomenon that describes the spreading of connotational coloring beyond single word boundaries.

4. The occurrences of *gao*, *nong* and *zuo* in the corpus

4.1 The lexical profile for *gao*

In the corpus data, the number of occurrences of *gao* is 446. Its distributional patterns are as follows¹:

construction	<i>gao</i> +NP	<i>gao</i> + de	<i>gao</i> +complements	others
occurrence	246	50	83	67

The table reveals that *gao* often collocates with nouns and is often followed by resultative complements, with or without *de*, to the right. In the following, we aim to explore these two patterns, in hope of figuring out simple, typical semantic patterns for the word *gao* as well as its discourse/semantic prosody. The discussion will begin with the arguments *gao* takes, followed by an examination of its complements.

4.1.1 *Gao* + NP

As we examine closely the 246 occurrences of *gao*'s arguments, we find as many as 97 occurrences of nouns associated with change or revolution and they account for 39% of the nouns *gao* takes. Some of the frequent collocates can be categorized into semantic sets as follows:

¹ The category of "others" refers to cases where the argument of *gao* is either topicalized, like *zhe yundong fei gao buke* 這運動非搞不可 'It is necessary to initiate the movement,' or not overtly marked, as in *nongye kuai de hen, mingnian zai gao yi nian* 農業快得很，明年再搞一年 'Agriculture has developed so fast that we still have to work on it next year.' In this study, we mainly take the right collocates of *gao* into consideration.

Collocate	Gloss
(3) <i>zhuyi</i> 主義	principle/doctrine
(4) <i>yundong</i> 運動	Movement
(5) <i>geming/gaige</i> 革命/改革	Revolution

The semantic sets revealed point to the fact that *gao* favors abstract nouns as its collocates. These nouns mainly denote revolutions, reforms or movements that are unusual and different from tradition and from what is commonly known to or accepted by the public. These activities may be positive as in *gao si-ge xiandaihua* 搞四個現代化 ‘initiate four kinds of modernization’ or negative as in *gao ousiang chongbai* 搞偶像崇拜 ‘initiate the movement of idolization.’ But in most cases, they are exotic or different from the norm. Given the association of *gao* with collocates revolving around the subject of revolution, our first observation is that *gao* mainly occurs with nouns which are new and different from the norm, and may cause great (positive or negative) change to the society or the situation concerned.

This primary observation is well-attested in sentences where the arguments *gao* takes often relate to what is “in” as in (6) or to fields which are new and uncommon as far as the present situation is concerned, as in (7) and (8).

Collocate	Gloss
(6) <i>duomeiti</i> 多媒體	multimedia
(7) <i>tugaolu</i> 土高爐	home-made blast furnace
(8) <i>gao keji</i> 高科技	high technology

Both ‘multimedia’ and ‘home-made blast furnaces’ are new and “in fashion” to the situation where the discourse takes place. ‘High technology,’ on the other hand, is a new field whose development is under way.

Moreover, we find instances of *gao* with projects or programs and with subjects which are socio-culturally acknowledged to be affairs of paramount importance.

Collocate	Gloss
(9) <i>gongcheng/diaocha</i> 工程/調查	project/investigation
(10) <i>waijiao/zhengzhi/zhian</i> 外交/政治/治安	diplomacy/politics/public security
(11) <i>xeshu/kexue/jianshe</i> 學術/科學/建設	science/science/construction

The realization of projects often takes an extensive amount of time and effort, and the events/affairs related to diplomacy or politics are hard to deal with. It suggests that to make some changes to the state of affairs requires great devotion of time and effort. The durational phrase *ershi nian lai* 二十年來 ‘for the past twenty years’ in (12) is a good example. All these reveal that the associated nouns are of great importance and

large-scale in magnitude.²

- (12) 從六十年代初期搞資源調查，二十年來，足跡踏遍巴山蜀水。

Cong liushi niandai chuqi gao ziyuan diaocha ershi nian lai zuji ta bian ba shan shu shui

From 60 years early GAO resource investigation 20 years come footprint step across ba mountain shu water

‘From the time (he) initiated the investigation of resources in the 60’s, his footsteps could be seen everywhere in Sichuan Province.’

Another set of arguments that *gao* collocates with are items of an unpleasant nature, as in the following table.

Collocate	Gloss
(13) <i>gui</i> 鬼	evil
(14) <i>guai</i> 怪	mischief
(15) <i>huayang</i> 花樣	trick or scheme
(16) <i>mingtang</i> 名堂	designation

Such negative collocates are quite prevalent in our data and there are as many as 35 instances. This set of collocates points out the fact that *gao* likes to keep bad company and that it tends to be associated with items of an unpleasant nature.

In addition to these explicitly-stated negative expressions, *gao* also collocates with “neutral” items, which express neither positive or negative connotation when standing alone. However, their associations with *gao* makes the whole utterance becomes quite unfavorable as is illustrated in the following examples.

- (17) 在辦公室搞羅曼史是一件得不償失的事。

Zai bangongshi gao luomanshi shi yi-jian de-bu-chang-shi de shi

In office GAO romance is one-CL not-worth-the-effort DE thing

‘It’s not worth it to have an office romance.’

- (18) 內政部長許水德只知搞公關、交際，問他政務完全不知道。

Neizheng buzhang xu-shui-de zhi zhi gao gongguan jiaoji wen ta zheng-wu wanquan bu zhidao

Interior minister NAME only know GAO public-relations social-intercourse

² As one of the reviewers points out, the uses of *gao* in Mandarin in Taiwan and *Putonghua* (Mandarin in Mainland China) are not quite the same. The extracted sentences from the Sinica Balanced Corpus so far seem to come mainly from the written discourse of *Putonghua*. In other words, in *Putonghua*, speakers are likely to use *gao* to denote something of great importance, which even suggests a positive evaluation. However, as will be seen later, in Taiwan Mandarin, speakers seem to associate *gao* more with a negative evaluation of the user of the sentence. Speakers of these two dialects choose to focus on different semantic properties which the lexical profile of *gao* reveals.

ask him affair not know

‘The Minister of the Interior worked only on public relations and social intercourse, and he knew nothing when asked about the affairs of the government.’

‘Romance,’ for example, should be positive, or at least neutral, by itself. But when it takes place in workplaces where hard work and cooperation are emphasized, it is not as desirable. On the other hand, ‘public relations’ and ‘social intercourse’ are necessary for a government officer, but if they are prioritized over the business affairs that he is supposed to be concerned with, these expressions undoubtedly reveal that the speaker scoffs at the event or action in question even though such events may be of great importance in the sentential subject’s mind. In other words, the use of *gao* triggers the negative interpretation of those linguistic items, which were originally neutral.

Given these examples, we can reach another tentative conclusion that *gao* tends to keep bad company and that it is basically associated with items of an unpleasant nature and with events undesirable under specific circumstances. It has evolved into a linguistic item with power over the following collocate, transforming the whole phrase into one that is interpreted negatively. *Gao* thus conveys the unfavorable semantic prosody. And the use of the item *gao* alone is often enough to signal that some undesirable event is being described, as in (19), in which the expression *zeme gao de* 怎麼搞的 ‘What’s wrong?’ indicates the speaker’s dissatisfaction with or accusation about the behavior of the person in question.

(19) 你是怎麼搞的？這些題目老師都教過了；是粗心。

Ni shi zeme gao de zhexie timu laoshi dou jiao guo le shi cuxing

2SG be how GAO DE these question teacher all teach GUO LE be carelessness

‘What’s the matter with you? I have taught all these. It is carelessness.’

Except for ‘home-made blast furnaces,’ most of the collocates discussed so far are mainly abstract nouns. However, it is found that *gao* can even co-occur with concrete nouns and has the reading of “attain.” In most cases, the collocating nouns either are hard to obtain or denote important events, as illustrated below.

Collocate	Gloss
(20) <i>luca</i> 綠卡	document showing the right to permanent residence
(21) <i>chuban gongsi</i> 出版公司	publishing company
(22) <i>wutaiju</i> 舞台劇	stage play

Neither ‘document showing the right to permanent residence’ nor ‘publishing company’ is easy to attain. So the association of *gao* with such concrete words further reinforces the semantic preference of *gao*, that is, events of an important nature rather than something trivial. That also explains why if we collocated ‘book’ with *gao*, the sentence would appear strange, as in (23). Even if it is acceptable to some speakers, this sentence often implies that the sentential subject attains the referent in question through illegal means. That is, the unpleasant nature still persists.

- (23) ?妻子給他搞了本書。
 Qizi gei ta gao le ben xu
 Wife for him GAO LE CL book
 ‘His wife got him a book.’

To sum up, *gao* seemingly collocates with a variety of nouns of different natures. These nouns, however, are basically of two types. One type concerns nouns denoting great importance or those specifying new movements. The other is connected with items of an unpleasant nature. However, as we probe into the wider linguistic context in which it is used, we find that *gao* identifies with a simple semantic schema; that is, people intentionally initiate a move which is new/uncommon to the public or the situation, and oftentimes the move is negative or unfavorable as far as the speaker is concerned, as in (17), (18), and (19).

4.1.2 *Gao* + complement

In the corpus, [*gao* + *de* + complement] enjoys a high frequency. There are as many as 50 instances. The complements are used to signify the state of the result. Some of the complements are as follows.

Collocate	Gloss
(24) <i>quanjia wuyanzhangqi</i> 全家烏煙瘴氣	The whole family is in low spirits or in confusion.
(25) <i>manshen dou shi bing</i> 滿身都是病	(one is) afflicted by several ailments.
(26) <i>yi pian xiaotiao</i> 一片蕭條	in a state of being sluggish
(27) <i>renshinhuanghuang</i> 人心惶惶	jittery or panicky

As we can see here, most of the complements are negative or unfavorable. Forty-five out of 50 complements carry a negative connotation. Only five of them are not negative, but they are not necessarily positive, either. The following are two examples.

- (28) 螢光幕上把戰爭搞得熱熱鬧鬧，好讓大家忘記立法院的過往。
 Yingguangmu shang ba zhanzheng gao de rerenao hao rang dajia wangji lifayuan de guowang
 Screen on BA war GAO de lively so that let everybody forget the Legislative Yuan DE past
 ‘The wars were made lively on the screen so that everybody could forget the past of the Legislative Yuan.’
- (29) 任別人搞得轟轟烈烈的，我們有我們的事情。
 Ren bieren gao de honghonglielie de women you womende shiqing
 Though others GAO DE grand DE we have our thing
 ‘Though others do things in a grand fashion, we still have our things to deal with.’

Judging from the contexts, the two expressions *rerenao* 熱熱鬧鬧 ‘noisy or lively’ and *honghonglielie* 轟轟烈烈 ‘in a grand fashion’ specify the magnitude of the described event but do not convey a favorable evaluation of the speaker. In other words, all those resultative complements denoting a negative impact once again confirm the conclusion that *gao* tends to keep bad company. Besides, *wuyanzhangqi* 烏煙瘴氣 ‘in low spirits,’ *yipianxiaotiao* 一片蕭條 ‘in a state of being sluggish,’ *renxinhuanghuang* 人心惶惶 ‘jittery or panicky,’ *rerenao* 熱熱鬧鬧 ‘noisy or lively,’ and *honghonglielie* 轟轟烈烈 ‘in a grand fashion’ are all idioms or lexicalized phrases which are conventionalized or socio-culturally acknowledged expressions characterizing some extraordinary states. Therefore, the state designated by the complement as a result of the verb *gao* is not only negative and unfavorable but extraordinary and excessive. As discussed above, *gao* is basically associated with activities which are of a large scale and of great importance; it therefore follows that the impact is as great and magnificent.

Given that 95% of the resultative complements are negative and 98% of them express an extraordinary state³, our observations about *gao* are reconfirmed; that is, *gao* keeps bad company and the activities initiated are of great importance or magnitude.

There is another set of complements following *gao* without an intervening *de*. Among them, the most frequent collocates are *buning(chu)* 不(清)楚 ‘(not) clear,’ *budong* 不懂 ‘unable to understand,’ *da* 大 ‘big,’ and *mihu* 迷糊 ‘confused.’ Other expressions include *butong* 不通 ‘not clear,’ *bushang(xia)qu* 不上(下)去 ‘unable to go up/ down,’ etc.

³ *Gao-de-bucuo* 搞得不錯 ‘not bad’ is the only exception.

Item	<i>buqing(chu)</i> 不清(楚)	<i>qingchu</i> 清楚	<i>budong</i> 不懂	<i>da</i> 大	<i>mihu</i> 迷糊
Occurrence	34	16	10	3	2

(30) 這種事要搞大。

Zhe zhong shi yao gao da

This kind matter need GAO big

‘This needs to be made noticeable enough.’

(31) 經請教衛生署之後，才搞清楚對等的名詞。

Jing qingjiao weishengshu zhi hou cai gao qinchu duideng de mingci

Through consult the bureau of public health after only GAO clear equivalent DE noun

‘After consulting the Bureau of Public Health, we clarified what the counterparts were.’

Even though *gao* may collocate with ‘clear,’ a negative polarity item 才 ‘only’ is often observed accompanying it. Moreover, ‘clear’ is still the minority compared with a greater number of negative expressions, which account for most of the complements. What is more intriguing is the association between *gao* and ‘big.’ Their collocation proves the assumption that *gao* basically relates to events of a large scale. All in all, the association of *gao* with negative expressions and with events of great importance/magnitude is once again confirmed.

4.1.3 Interim summary

The analysis of the concordance lines enables us to identify the typical semantic schema of *gao*; that is, *gao* is basically associated with new/uncommon moves which are oftentimes unfavorable and may lead to results of an excessive nature, or it is connected with subjects of great importance. Semantically speaking, almost all the associated nouns are abstract and most of the complements as well as objects are negative in nature. With the simple semantic patterns, we may predict that linguistic expressions like *baxi* 把戲 ‘trick’ (negative) and *yanjiu* 研究 ‘research’ (subject of great importance or difficult to deal with) are most likely to co-select with *gao*, but seldom does one observe those concrete items such as *chezi* 車子 ‘car’ (concrete) and *gongke* 功課 ‘homework’ (daily routine).

4.2 The lexical profile for *nong*

In the corpus, the total number of the occurrences of *nong* is 165, much smaller than that of *gao* (446) or that of *zuo* (2000). Like *gao*, *nong* basically occurs in the pattern of [*nong* + complement], which accounts for 68 instances of *gao*. Fifty-seven occurrences of *nong* are followed by nouns, and in the other 40 instances, *nong* stands without an explicit object.

4.2.1 *Nong* + NP

According to the data, the nouns associated with *nong* can be sub-classified into three categories: (a) expressions of an unpleasant nature (b) concrete items (c) classifier + concrete items. Among them, [classifier + concrete items] enjoys the highest frequency.

As we examine the data more closely, we find that about 27 instances of *nong* are followed by classifiers such as *juan* 卷 ‘roll,’ *kuai* 塊 ‘piece,’ *ge* 個 ‘a default classifier,’ etc.

Collocate	Gloss
(32) <i>nong juan daizi</i> 弄卷帶子	get a tape
(33) <i>nong kuai muban</i> 弄塊木板	get a piece of wood
(34) <i>nong ge shiao canpan</i> 弄個小餐盤	get a plate
(35) <i>nong zhe da langgou lai</i> 弄隻大狼狗來	get a German shepherd

In all these phrases, *nong* has the reading of ‘obtain, get’ without specifying how the ‘goal’ is to be achieved. All the nouns after the classifiers are concrete objects rather than abstract movements. Moreover, these concrete objects seem easy to obtain as far as the sentential subject is concerned. Given this, we may tentatively reach a conclusion that people often employ the pattern [*nong* + classifier + concrete noun] when they want to obtain/get something concrete.

On the other hand, *nong*, like *gao*, is found to collocate with negative expressions, as in the following.

Collocate	Gloss
(36) <i>mimizhiying</i> 靡靡之音	lewd music or songs
(37) <i>nankan de lianse</i> 難看的臉色	awful looks
(38) <i>shiao baxi</i> 把戲	little tricks

Compared with ‘scheme’ in (15) and ‘designation’ in (16), ‘lewd music’ and ‘awful looks’ are more obvious and ‘concrete.’ They can be detected much more easily. Item

(38) is more intriguing, for it can collocate both with *gao* and *nong*. When it co-occurs with *gao*, the speaker’s negative evaluation is involved. Its association with *nong*, on the other hand, seems to suggest that the *baxi* 把戲 is a little trick rather than a complicated plot. In other words, even though *nong* may be followed by abstract events, [*nong* + NP] basically denotes tasks trivial or easy to accomplish instead of activities which are of great importance and may cause great change to the situation or society concerned. This use of *nong* corresponds to our first observation; that is, the nouns following *nong* are mainly concrete, the objects are easy to attain, and the entire event is easy to accomplish.

There are cases where *nong*, followed by nouns denoting concrete items, does not have the reading of ‘obtain,’ but seems like a pro-verb or a colloquial form replacing action verbs, such as ‘cook or prepare’ in (39), ‘do with or arrange’ in (40) and (41), and ‘use or wave’ in (42).

Collocate	Gloss
(39) <i>nong xifan</i> 弄稀飯	make rice porridge
(40) <i>shi hua nong cao</i> 蒔花弄草	do with the flowers and the grass
(41) <i>ta bang wo nong hen duo dongxi</i> 他幫我弄很多東西	He helped me with many things.
(42) <i>nong na bangzi da na qiu</i> 弄那棒子打那球	Use the bat to hit the ball.

Similar to what is mentioned above, the *nong*’s in these sentences are followed by concrete items, such as ‘porridge,’ ‘grass,’ ‘thing,’ and ‘bat.’ This confirms our initial observation. Even in some conventionalized idioms found in our data, such as *jimeinongyan* 擠眉弄眼 ‘make faces,’ *wuwennongmuo* 舞文弄墨 ‘amuse oneself with writing,’ and *banshengnonggui* 搬神弄鬼 ‘scare others with gods or ghosts,’ *nong* also accompanies concrete nouns. More importantly, the meanings of *nong* in (39)-(42) are not specific or transparent; rather, they have to be determined on the basis of the wider context. Thus, *nong* is often regarded as a word with a very general range of meanings.⁴ One thing is for sure: in all these cases, the use of *nong* implies the action of hands. Cooking, doing with, and using all require the movements of hands. Such an association with *nong* implies that the events denoted by [*nong* + NP] oftentimes can be achieved in a short period of time. So our second observation is that *nong* is employed when people use their hands to do something with a concrete object.

This observation is further proven in cases where *nong* is not followed by explicit objects. In these cases, *nong* still acts as a pro-verb and the action of hands is

⁴ Chao (1968) claims that *nong* and *gao* should be regarded as ordinary verbs with a very general range of meanings rather than pro-verbs, since they do not substitute for some other verb, as *lai* 來 ‘come’ or English ‘do’ does. However, judging from the context, it is clear that *nong* is a pro-verb often

usually implied:

(43) 那火是我們燒的耶！我們去幫她弄的！

Na huo shi women shao de ye women qu bang ta nong de

That fire be we burn DE DM we go for her NONG DE

‘We made the fire! We did it for her.’

(44) 每次寄來的包裹，都是他弄的，都是他的手綁的。

Meici ji lai de baoguo dou shi ta nong de dou shi tade shou bang de

Everytime mail come DE package all be he NONG DE all be his hand tie DE

‘He dealt with every package sent here. He tied them with his hands.’

In (43), *nong* takes the place of “making the fire.” *Nong* in (44), on the other hand, substitutes for the phrase that “he tied the packages with his hands.” These instances conform to the basic semantic schema; that is, most of the events associated with *nong* are trivial, and can be handled with hands. These examples further show that if the context is clear, *nong* even assumes the function of cohesion.

So far, a semantic schema for *nong* emerges. *Nong* is selected when people talk about the attainment of concrete items or when people engage in some trivial daily activities using the hands. *Nong* can substitute for verbs of action of this type when people have difficulty retrieving the appropriate verb for the event in question or choose to use the colloquial form. *Nong* can even function as a cohesion device when it is employed to replace the whole verb phrase in the pre-text.

4.2.2 *Nong* + complement

Of 165 concordance lines of *nong*, 68 occurrences are followed by complements. The first type of the complement, preceded by *de* or *dao*, often specifies the result state of being. It is found that those complements can be associated with unfavorable expressions as in (45) and (46), or express favorable results, as in (47), and (48).

Collocate	Gloss
(45) <i>nong dao funu fanmu</i> 弄到父女反目	cause father and daughter to fight against each other
(46) <i>nong de shi da da</i> 弄得溼答答	cause me to become soaking wet
(47) <i>nong de qingqingchuchu</i> 弄得清清楚楚	make it extremely clear
(48) <i>nong de ganganjingjing</i> 弄得乾乾淨淨	make it extremely clean

Moreover, in cases without *de/dao* in between, the complements are still of two types: one positive, the other negative. The former includes complements like *sa* 灑

substituting for verbs relating to movements of the hands.

‘spilled’ and *dao* 倒 ‘falling over’; the latter has examples such as *hao* 好 ‘good’ and *ganjing* 乾淨 ‘clean.’ These positive as well as negative complements suggest that *nong*, unlike *gao*, is not necessarily associated with bad company or an excessive state. Rather, it is mainly neutral, which helps explain the co-occurrences of *nong* with *tuodang* 妥當 ‘well done,’ *mingbai* 明白 ‘able to understand,’ *shou* 熟 ‘cooked,’ etc. and with *hunluan* 混亂 ‘disordered,’ *jiang* 僵 ‘deadlocked,’ *buhao* 不好 ‘not good,’ and so forth.⁵

Another fact about *nong* is its association with *yishia* 一下 ‘for a short while,’ a delimitative aspect marker.

(49) 這帶子我綁不好，你幫我弄一下。

Zhe daizi wo bang bu hao ni bang wo nong yi-shia

This rope 1SG tie not well 2SG help me NONG a while

‘I cannot tie the rope well. You help me with it.’

This example further supports the generalization that *nong* is basically connected with hand motion and the event associated is oftentimes of a smaller scale, which requires less effort and time, compared to the usage of *gao*.

4.2.3 Interim summary

Most of the arguments that *nong* is associated with are concrete, suggesting that the denoted events are trivial and can be achieved by action of the hands in a short period of time. That is why *nong* can be associated with *yishia* 一下 ‘a short while,’ but it is unlikely that one would hear ^{??}*gao yi-shia* 搞一下 ‘do (something) for a while.’ Moreover, unlike *gao*, *nong* does not necessarily carry a negative connotation and the result designated by the complement can be a desired or an unfavorable state. In addition, *nong* acts more like a cohesion device or a pro-verb to substitute for verbs occurring in the previous text or for whatever verbs the speaker fails to retrieve.

4.3 The lexical profile for *zuo*

Both English ‘do’ and Mandarin ‘*zuo*’ are the so-called basic verbs. No wonder

⁵ The expression *nong buhao* 弄不好 ‘fail to fix it’ in fact has two meanings. One refers to the situation where the subject is unable to do something right or well. The other conveys a conventionalized meaning of ‘not perform or deal with things in a correct/appropriate way,’ as in *lianshang zhang zhi de nuren duo de shi nong bu hao de hua lianshang lan ge ba na cai hua bulai*. 臉上長痣的女人多的是，弄不好的話，臉上爛個疤那才划不來 ‘A lot of women have moles in their faces. If they are not fixed well, it would not be worth it to have scars on the faces.’ In our data, there are 6 such instances.

that *zuo* has the most occurrences in the corpus⁶, with the number up to 2000. To analyze the usage of *zuo* more closely, we chose the first ten pages of the corpus as our data and the number of occurrences is 468 after subtracting repetitive occurrences of *zuo*. The distributional patterns of *zuo* is as below.

construction	<i>zuo</i> +NP	<i>zuo</i> + (de) + complement	others ⁷
occurrence	231	50	187

In what follows, we attempt to figure out what its typical uses are and to what extent it differs from *gao* and *nong*.

4.3.1 *Zuo* + NP

The nouns collocating with *zuo* are plentiful and have quite a different nature from those of *gao* and *nong*. Basically speaking, they fit into three sub-categories: (a) concrete objects, (b) abstract nouns, and (c) deverbal nouns.

Like *nong*, *zuo* can also co-occur with concrete arguments. In our data, there are 11 instances. But unlike *nong*, *zuo* in these cases does not refer to specific action imposed on the existing object, but has the meaning of ‘making or creating from non-existence to existence’ (Lien 2000), as in *zuo chahu* 做茶壺 ‘make pots’ and *zuo guihuajiang* 做桂花醬 ‘make jam of sweet osmanthus.’ In these two phrases, the noun that goes with the verb *zuo* denotes the result or product that yields from a specific action or a scenario of actions. ‘Pot’ and ‘jam of sweet osmanthus’ are thus the created items. If *zuo* is replaced with *nong*, a different picture will emerge. The whole phrase will be interpreted as “The person is doing something with the existing pot, such as washing, cleaning, or even fixing the pot.”

Through metaphorical extension, *zuo* can be followed by nouns denoting identity or position as in *zuo baba* 做爸爸 ‘be a father’ or *zuo laoshi* 做老師 ‘be a teacher.’ The number of such occurrences is 90. *Zuo* in cases like these also has the sense of becoming something—from not being that something (father or teacher) to being that something, which is close to the meaning of ‘making or creating from non-existence to existence.’

The occurrences of the abstract nouns that *zuo* is associated with are up to 130. Among them are *timu* 題目 ‘question,’ *gongke* 功課 ‘homework,’ *shengyi* 生意 ‘business,’ etc. The most frequent collocates are *shi(qing)* 事(情) ‘thing’ and *gong(zuo)* 工(作) ‘work,’ which account for 120 instances of *zuo*. *Shi* 事 ‘thing,’ in

⁶ According to *Zhengzitong* (正字通), a dictionary written in the Ming dynasty, *zuo* (做) is a popular form of *zuo* (作). In this paper, therefore, we chose *zuo* (做) and did the KWIC search.

⁷ This category contains mainly intransitive use of *zuo*.

particular, has 101 occurrences. *Shi(qing)* 事(情) ‘thing’ and *gong(zuo)* 工(作) ‘work’ are what we call general nouns and *zuo* is one of the basic verbs. It follows that the combination of the two will result in the most general meaning of ‘doing things’ without specifying what is done or how it is done. In other words, most of the time, the *shi* 事 ‘thing’ in the phrase *zuoshi* 做事 ‘do things’ is non-referential. In everyday life, people keep doing things, either good or bad. That’s why they are the most frequent lexical units.⁸

Another set of nouns which *zuo* often collocates with are those nominalized arguments, the deverbal nouns derived from their verbal counterparts, as in the following. The number of such occurrences of *zuo* is 72.

Collocate	Gloss
(50) <i>zuo jue ding/xuanze</i> 做決定/選擇	make a decision/a choice
(51) <i>zuo yi ci yanjiang</i> 做一次演講	make a speech
(52) <i>zuo youguan huaxue fenxi de yanshuo</i> 做有關化學分析的演說	make a speech on chemical analysis
(53) <i>zuo gen cixi de yanjiu</i> 做更仔細的研究	research in greater detail

In (50), *xuanze* 選擇 ‘choice’ acts as a noun rather than as a prototypical verb when following *zuo* 做 ‘do.’ The use of *zuo* in this phrase does not contribute a great deal to the lexical meaning of the phrase. Rather, it has assumed a much more grammatical status, a light verb, a licenser for nominalization. As is claimed by *Huang et al.* (1994), even though *zuo* is grammaticalized, it still “retains the activity skeleton as well as the entailment of the creation of a concrete or abstract theme (1994,103).” That is, its selectional preference still prevails. It takes an objectival type argument which refers to the goal of the event, and the deverbal nominals come to existence through the action of doing or performing. So whether the object is concrete or abstract, there is a result achieved or created. In other words, the feature of [creation] is inherent in the semantics of *zuo*.

Moreover, as we can see from (51), (52), and (53), we find that the deverbal nominals following *zuo* are often modified or quantified. They are often accompanied with adjectivals. The use of a light verb facilitates the quantification or even modification of the event nominal (Brugman 2001)⁹, which can explain why *zuo* is often used before deverbal nominals and why the frequency of *zuo* is so high.

The events denoted by these abstract nouns are quite different from those associated with *gao*. Compared with ‘revolution’ and ‘principle,’ ‘decision’ and

⁸ As is the same with what Lien (2000) observes in the case of *chuo*(做), the noun objects that *zuo* takes denote events and the verb *zuo* in these cases act as a kind of verbalizer to enable these “eventish” nouns to be used in the predicate position.

⁹ One can refer to Brugman (2001,556) to get a better understanding the functions of English light verbs in discourse.

‘choice’ are more of daily or personal events. The former may cause great change to the society or situation concerned, while the latter can make a difference only to the subject in question.

4.3.2 *Zuo* + (de) +complement

In our corpus, we do not find plentiful instances of “*zuo* +(de)+complement.” The total number is only 27, about 5.9% of the *zuo* occurrences. On the other hand, intransitive *zuo* accounts for a much larger proportion, 40%. It seems that *zuo* mainly functions as a verb focusing more on the action of doing than on the final result which the action may lead to.

The following table shows that the complements that co-occur with *zuo* either state the result of the action in (54) and (55), or the ability/possibility of doing/achieving in (56) and (57). Being a basic verb, *zuo* most often denotes general actions or events with a result. It emphasizes the action of doing alone or the performing of action, which brings the theme into existence. On the other hand, unlike *guo*, the events that *zuo* is associated with will not cause great change to society; therefore, the complement is most often of the ordinary type. In other words, rarely are complements signaling the excessive state or result found.

Collocate	Gloss
(54) <i>zuo de geng hao</i> 做得更好	do much better
(55) <i>zuo de bu gou hao</i> 做得不夠好	do not do well enough
(56) <i>zuo bu dao</i> 做不到	be unable to do something
(57) <i>zuo de dao</i> 做得到	be able to do something

4.3.3 Interim summary

Given *zuo*'s association with concrete items and abstract as well as deverbal nouns, we may conclude that the basic meaning of *zuo* is doing/making, which entails the creation of an abstract or concrete theme. Rather than handling existing, concrete objects, the word ‘do’ creates things from non-existence to existence. Therefore, either when *zuo* means ‘make’ or when *zuo* has the meaning ‘engage,’ a result theme is expected. The basic semantic feature of the verb *zuo* should be [creation].

Like *nong*, *zuo* also has very clear constructional meanings. *Zuo* can only be interpreted as ‘make, create’ when followed by concrete object nouns, but has the meaning of doing when the arguments are abstract themes.

5. Findings and conclusion

This paper conducts a contrastive analysis of the three verbs *zuo*, *gao*, and *nong*, and tries to make distinctions between these three verbs. Based on the corpus data and the above analysis, it is found that *zuo*, *gao*, and *nong* do exhibit selectional differences despite the fact that they are used to define one another. Their differences are summarized in the table below:

	<i>Gao</i>	<i>Nong</i>	<i>Zuo</i>
Meanings	a. initiate b. obtain	a. handle (with hands) b. obtain	a. engage in b. make/create
Arguments	ABSTRACT a. new/uncommon b. of significance c. unpleasant	CONCRETE (existing, concrete objects)	ABSTRACT CONCRETE (objectival-type)
Complements	a. excessive b. extraordinary	a. positive b. negative	a. positive b. negative
Semantic prosody	Negative	Neutral	Neutral

As far as the semantics of the verbs are concerned, *zuo* emphasizes the action of engaging in or creating, *nong* that of handling, and *gao* the action of initiating. That is why *zuo* collocates with the objectival type arguments, why *nong* favors as its arguments existing, concrete objects, and why *gao* takes as objects nouns denoting unusual, unconventional, or even unfavorable movements.

What's more important is the negative semantic prosody that *gao* often carries. This prosody is realized through the bad company it keeps, either in argument or in complement positions. Even though *gao* also associates with unconventional matters in some texts, it is mainly negative in most instances, especially in Taiwan Mandarin. *Nong* and *zuo*, on the other hand, are basically neutral.

This paper is especially useful to speakers who are not native speakers of Mandarin. Those semantic patterns provide them with guidelines to use the words appropriately and also help them judge what collocates are most likely to be compatible and acceptable with a certain verb. Further corpus data would be certain to reveal further lexical variation, but unlikely to reveal other major semantic preferences. However, as time passes, so language changes. They are guidelines only; learners still have to pay attention to how they are used and developed in real life.

The present study, however, is still far from complete and perfect. On one hand, the distribution of these verbs is skewed, with *zuo* having the most occurrences and *nong* only 165 occurrences. *Zuo* occurs 8 times as often as *nong*, and even *gao* has

more occurrences than *nong*. But in our daily conversation, if we listen more carefully, we will find that *nong* in fact enjoys a much higher frequency than *gao*. Therefore, if there are more spoken data available, we are more likely to better understand how *nong* is used in an actual language context. On the other hand, the diachronic aspects of the development of these three verbs are not taken into consideration. Such a limitation prohibits us from having a clearer picture of the usages of these verbs and the changes they have undergone. Chao (1968:660) in *A Grammar of Spoken Chinese* treats *gao* as a very recent borrowing from the dialectal pronoun of *jiao* 攪 ‘stir, churn.’ Without some knowledge about the historical developments of these three verbs, we cannot testify what kind of semantic change they have gone through: generalization, pejoration or even amelioration. If more time is devoted to sorting out the historical data, we may better understand the development of *gao* as well as that of *zuo* and *nong*, and learn more about the division of labor among these three verbs in the history of language development.

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中文「做」字類動詞的語意探討

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此篇文章採用語料庫語言學的方法，試圖找出中文「做」字類動詞：*搞*、*弄*、*做*之間的差異。儘管在大部份的字典中此三字是可互相定義的，但真實的語料中顯示出其語義是有區隔的，且其對補語的選擇是不同的。*做*強調「從事」與「創造」，常與受詞性的論元同時出現；*弄*有「處理」的語義且其後常接具體事物；*搞*強調「創新」且常與不尋常且語義較為負面的事件出現。此三字中尤其是*搞*常含有負面語義，而*做*與*弄*則較為中性。文章中並將討論語料庫研究法對語言教育與學習的影響。

關鍵詞：語料庫語言學、「做」字類動詞、語意蔓延