

## On the Excessive Construction in Mandarin Chinese\*

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This paper explores the excessive construction, formally represented as “V ta ge N”, in Mandarin Chinese in terms of construction grammar. In view of its syntactic and semantic peculiarities, the excessive construction cannot be identified with any of the established constructions in the grammar. Rather, it is argued to represent a new type. Syntactically, the excessive construction demands a non-referential *ta* followed by an indefinite NP consisting of a numeral-classifier(-noun) sequence or by an adjectival complement. Semantically, the excessive construction allows only a volitional agent and denotes a telic situation. The constructional meaning of the excessive construction is postulated as ‘above an implicit norm’, instead of the generally recognized ‘to one’s satisfaction’. This connotation is assumed to derive from *ta*, whose original meaning constrains later semantic developments of the construction. The constructional analysis proposed in the paper allows language users to apply the familiar pattern to new contexts in principled ways, providing a motivated account of use with novel verbs.

Key words: V ta ge N, the excessive construction, construction grammar,  
non-referential *ta*, *ge*

### 1. Introduction

The special construction, “V ta ge N”, in the Mandarin Chinese examples in (1) bears some unique and unusual features, but only scant attention has been paid to it (Chao 1968, Lü 1983, Hsieh 2003, and Wu 2003, among others).<sup>1</sup>

- (1) a. mai ta ge yibaiben shu  
買 他 個 一百本 書  
buy TA GE one.hundred.CL book  
‘to buy one hundred books’

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<sup>1</sup> The transliteration of Mandarin used in this paper follows the Pinyin system. The abbreviations for the glosses used in the examples are: 3SG, third person singular pronoun; TA, third person singular pronoun used in the excessive construction; CL, classifier; GE, classifier *ge*; N, noun; V, verb; NEG, negation; PART, particle; SFP, sentence-final particle; DE, the particle *de*; POSS, possessive marker; C, complement; BA, disposal marker.

- b. wan ta ge guoyin  
 玩 他 個 過癮  
 play TA GE to.one's.satisfaction  
 'to play to a thorough satisfaction of it'

This construction is of interest for three reasons: first, *ta*, the third person singular pronoun, must be non-referential; secondly, *ge*, the most general classifier in Mandarin Chinese, does not serve as a general classifier; thirdly, although none of the constituents involves the meaning of 'many', the sense of 'above an implicit norm' is implied in this construction. In this paper, an in-depth study will be attempted on the syntax and semantics of the construction in terms of construction grammar. To distinguish this construction from another similar but distinct construction, namely, "V (yi) ge N", as shown in (2), comparisons between the two constructions will be made when necessary. For ease of exposition, we will call "V ta ge N" the excessive construction and "V (yi) ge N" the diminutive construction.<sup>2</sup>

- (2) a. xi ge shou  
 洗 個 手  
 wash GE hand  
 'to wash hands'
- b. he ge tongkuai (Chao 1968:320)  
 喝 個 痛快  
 drink GE thorough.satisfaction  
 'to drink so as to be thoroughly satisfied'

Among the around 1200 instances of the *ta ge* 他個/它個 sequence returned by the Google Search Engine, a total of about 250 written examples of the excessive construction are under investigation in this paper. These written texts consist of diaries from personal Blogs, on-line talks, dialogues gleaned from popular novels, etc., all of which are quite colloquial and resemble spoken discourse.<sup>3 4</sup> In addition, constructed

<sup>2</sup> Note that V ta ge N and V (yi) ge N are both cover terms, that is, there are some variants of the two constructions, as will be illustrated in the following sections. Readers who are interested in the diminutive construction are advised to refer to H. Liu (1994), Lin (2001), and Biq (2002, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Since the data used in this paper resemble the spoken discourse, we will use "sentence" and "utterance" interchangeably.

<sup>4</sup> In the Academia Sinica Corpus, mainly composed of written Chinese samples from Taiwan, there is only one instance of the excessive construction:

- (i) yiban dou shi ao ta ge san wu ye  
 一般 都 是 熬 它 個 三 五 夜  
 generally always be stay.up TA GE three five night  
 'It is usually the case that (people) stay up for three or five nights.'

examples are also used to illustrate some points.

The paper will be organized as follows. Section 2 briefly reviews the literature. The theoretical framework adopted in this paper is introduced in Section 3 and the existence of the excessive construction is argued in Section 4. Section 5 and Section 6 discuss the syntactic and semantic properties of the construction respectively. Three variants of the excessive construction are examined in Section 7. The questions of where and how the sense of excessiveness comes from and why *ta* is chosen are tackled in Section 8. Section 9 provides a summary and a conclusion.

## 2. Literature review

Analyses proposed in the existing literature on the excessive construction fall into three groups according to the element they focus on. Some discuss the function of *ta*, some consider the syntactic status of *ge*, and others differentiate the complement types following *ge*. This section will offer an overview of these studies and then indicate the problems involved in dealing with the excessive construction.

It is generally agreed among linguists that *ta* in the excessive construction is non-referential (Chao 1968, Lü 1983, Biq 1990, and Lin ms., among others). For example, Chao (1968:320) maintains that this *ta* is a mock object or a dummy indirect object, referring to nothing specific but the total situation, as exemplified by

- (3) wo yao he ta ge tongkuai<sup>5</sup>  
 我 要 喝 他 個 痛快  
 I want drink TA GE thorough.satisfaction  
 ‘I want to drink to a thorough satisfaction of it.’

Drawing on the analysis by Chao (1968), Biq (1990) further claims that the indirect object *ta* is optional because (3) is grammatical even when *ta* is omitted. The special behavior of the dummy object *ta* has attracted the attention of linguists; however, the question of what role *ta* plays in the semantic interpretation of the whole sentence is left untouched and thus requires further investigation.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that the presence or absence of *ta* will have a crucial effect on the semantic interpretation of the sentence though both kinds of sentences are grammatical and acceptable. A further discussion will be presented in Section 4.

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The scarcity of the “V *ta* *ge* N” examples in the Academia Sinica Corpus indicates again the colloquial nature of the excessive construction.

<sup>5</sup> To conform to the spelling system adopted in this paper, the original transliteration is changed into the Pinyin system.

<sup>6</sup> From the point of view of syntax, Lin (ms) argues that *ta* is a non-specific determiner clitic. Again, the semantic content of *ta* is left untouched in his paper.

Wu (2003), on the other hand, attempts to probe into the essence of the non-canonical *ta* in terms of discourse function. She maintains that the non-referential *ta* is being used metalinguistically for expressive considerations. Such a use of *ta* has the connotation that the speaker is away from his/her normal state of self by claiming another role of a third person, which in turn explains why the complement (being an noun or an adverb) following *ta* typically depicts an extreme situation—either excessive or very little in quantity. Nonetheless, the detachment account, that is, being away from the normal state of self, cannot fully explain why utterances with the non-referential *ta* typically depict extreme situations and, especially, why this type of utterance always expresses excessive quantities. As a matter of fact, except for one instance obviously influenced by Taiwan Southern Min (henceforth TSM),<sup>7</sup> examples denoting a small quantity are not provided in Wu’s thesis or attested in the data I collected.

We now consider the syntactic status and the function of *ge*. Canonically, *ge* is the most general classifier in Mandarin Chinese and is usually used to individuate a noun following it for purposes of counting, as can be illustrated by *san ge pingguo* (three GE apple) ‘three apples’. However, *ge* in the excessive construction does not serve as a classifier, which is especially evident when *ge* is followed by an adjectival complement such as the one in (1b) or in (3). Wu (2002) proposes a syntactic account. She suggests that *ge* is a weak unselective determiner with a non-specific specification and that *ge* is in fact a nominalizer, whose function is to get the

<sup>7</sup> The instance, gleaned from the Internet, is shown below.

- (i) faxian women shetuan de nanren a, zhen youdian gei ta ge shao  
 發現 我們 社團 的 男人 啊 真 有點 給他 個 少  
 find we club DE man PART really have.little give TA GE few  
 ‘(I) find that the number of men in our club is rather small.’  
 (Source: <http://netclub.kmu.edu.tw/~andykuos/wwwboard/messages/857.html>)

When discussing the *gei ta* construction in Mandarin Chinese, Wu (2003:94-97) suggests that *gei ta* is borrowed from the TSM *ka i* ‘make it’ but is used differently. In TSM, the *i* ‘third person singular pronoun’ in *ka i* can anaphorically refer to an antecedent and has the disposal meaning, but *gei ta* in Mandarin Chinese does not bear such a characteristic. We find that a major difference between *gei ta ge* and V *ta ge* N is that *gei ta ge* in (i) can be omitted without changing the grammaticality of the sentence, but the deletion of *ta ge* in the V *ta ge* N construction will result in ungrammaticality, as shown in (ii).

- (ii) a. he ta ge tongkuai  
 喝 他 個 痛快  
 drink TA GE to.one’s.satisfaction  
 ‘drink to a thorough satisfaction of it’  
 b. \*he tongkuai  
 喝 痛快  
 drink to.one’s.satisfaction  
 ‘(Intended) to drink to a thorough satisfaction of it’

In this paper, we will temporarily leave cases involving *gei ta ge* untouched.

following non-nominal element nominalized. Likewise, Chao (1968) also indirectly indicates the nominalizer status of *ge* by claiming that the adjectival complements in the excessive construction should be treated as nominal expressions by being modified by *ge* or *yige*. Overall, the fact that *ge* serves as a nominalizer can hardly be disputed.

Let us now turn to the complement types following *ge*. Following Lin (2001), Hsieh (2003) holds that only resultative predicates, not descriptive predicates, are allowed in this structure. Cases in point are illustrated below.

- (4) a. *sha ta ge pianjiabuliu* (resultative predicate)  
 殺 他 個 片甲不留  
 kill TA GE piece.armor.no.left  
 ‘to kill the enemy until there is no piece of armor left’
- b. \**xiang ta ge buting* (descriptive predicate)  
 響 他 個 不停  
 ring TA GE non.stop  
 ‘(Intended) to ring (something) until (it) is non-stopping’

(4a) is acceptable because *pianjiabuliu* refers to the resultative state denoted by the verb *sha* ‘kill’. By contrast, (4b) is ungrammatical in that *buting* is a descriptive predicate. Hsieh holds that the difference between them can be accounted for by the fact that the non-referential *ta* is irrealis (See also Lü 1998). We, nonetheless, do not endorse this view. Rather, we argue that the semantic condition whereby *ta* is considered to be irrealis is irrelevant to the choice of the complement. As a matter of fact, a resultative complement does not inevitably imply an irrealis event (4a); it can also be found in a sentence that denotes a past event (5).

- (5) *yuanyue yiri lingchen ... yinwei haizi ranfang baozhu*  
 元月 一日 凌晨 因爲 孩子 燃放 爆竹  
 January first daybreak because child set.off firecracker
- bu xiaoxin yinfa huozai, ba zheng pai fangwu shao*  
 不 小心 引發 火災 把 整 排 房屋 燒  
 NEG careful cause fire BA whole CL house burn
- de pianjiabuliu*  
 得 片甲不留  
 C piece.armor.no.left
- ‘In the early morning hours of January first, a fire was caused by the children’s carelessness as they set off firecrackers. This entire row of houses burned

down.’

(Source:<http://express.tzuchi.net/express.nsf/95d706eceb2858c48256cef%20010db0a/ba6b53be0d50767f482570ec000eafde?OpenDocument>)

To put it briefly, we maintain that the choice of the complement in the excessive construction has nothing to do with the irrealis nature of *ta* but is subject to another semantic constraint, namely that the complement must express a telic (intrinsically bounded) situation, as will be argued in more detail in Section 6.

To sum up so far, many linguists have noticed the existence and the peculiarity of the excessive construction but no researcher has been able to provide a motivated account of where or how the sense of excessiveness originates. This paper will thus re-examine the construction and suggest another analysis to bridge the gap.

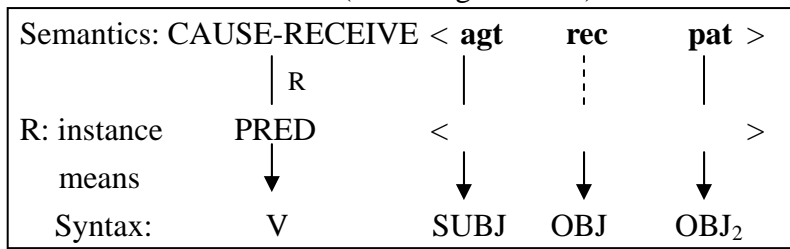
### 3. The theoretical framework

A brief introduction of the theoretical framework adopted in the paper, namely, construction grammar, is necessary here. In construction grammar (e.g. Fillmore et al. 1988, Goldberg 1995, and Jackendoff 1997), constructions are considered to be “form-meaning correspondences that exist independently of particular verbs” (Goldberg 1995:1). It is a mono-stratal theory, that is, it is surface-oriented and there is no underlying structure. A construction is posited if and only if something about its form, meaning, or use is not strictly predictable from other aspects of the grammar.

Two types of roles, viz. participant roles and argument roles, are distinguished by Goldberg (1995:43). Participant roles refer to the frame-specific roles associated with verbs, such as thief, target, and goods; argument roles refer to the more general roles associated with the construction, such as agent, patient, and goal. The Correspondence Principle (Goldberg 1995:50-51) maintains that each participant role that is lexically profiled and expressed must be fused with a profiled argument role of the construction. The construction specifies which argument roles are obligatorily fused with the participant roles (indicated by a solid line). Argument roles that are not obligatorily fused with participant roles are contributed by the construction (indicated by a dashed line).

A prime example is the ditransitive construction (also know as the double object construction), as shown in (6).

(6) a. Ditransitive Construction (Goldberg 1995:50)



- b. I gave him a gift.
- c. I baked him a cake.

The ditransitive construction is represented in (6a) and its central sense is argued to be ‘X causes Y to receive Z’. Typically, it is predicted that only a three-place predicate is compatible with the ditransitive construction, such as *give* in (6b). It is, nevertheless, not difficult to find an example like (6c), where a two-place predicate like *bake* is used ditransitively. As pointed out by Goldberg (1995:141), (6c) can only mean that I baked a cake with the intention of giving it to him. It cannot mean that I baked the cake as a demonstration of cake-baking or that I baked the cake so that he would not have to bake it. It would be ad hoc to posit such a sense of *bake* as ‘X intends to cause Y to receive Z by baking’. The “intended transfer” aspect of meaning is better viewed as being derived from the whole construction, instead of from the verb itself. It can thus be demonstrated that the constructional meaning emerges as long as the verb (even a two-place predicate) can fit into the construction.

**4. The existence of the excessive construction**

In this section, it will be shown that “V ta ge N” should be treated as a distinct construction and cannot be subsumed under any other previously established constructions. For a distinct construction to be posited, it is necessary to show that its semantics cannot be compositionally derived from other constructions existing in the grammar and that the particular combination of the lexical items does not inevitably lead to a particular interpretation (Goldberg 1995). Consider examples such as the following.

- (7) a. kan      ge      liangbu      dianying
- 看      個      兩部      電影
- watch GE      two.CL      movie
- ‘to do a watching of two movies’

- b. kan ta ge liangbu dianying  
 看 他 個 兩部 電影  
 watch TA GE two.CL movie  
 ‘to watch two movies to one’s satisfaction’
- c. kan liangbu dianying  
 看 兩部 電影  
 watch two.CL movie  
 ‘to watch two movies’

As mentioned above, (7a) is the diminutive construction, implying that the event denoted by the predicate is trivial or of no importance (Lin 2001 and Biq 2004). On the contrary, (7b), the excessive construction, indicates that the quantities/degrees denoted by the NP following *ge* are more than what are usually expected. The most natural way to describe the event of watching two movies is presented in (7c), revealing that the numeral-classifier-N sequence in isolation does not inherently encode diminutiveness or excessiveness, and rendering *ge* in (7a) and *ta ge* in (7b) necessary.

It may not always be easy to tease apart the diminutiveness in (7a) and the excessiveness in (7b) when out of context. However, when embedded in a larger context, the two meanings can be clearly distinguished. Consider examples in (8).

- (8) a. (bu bi mang,) wo he ge cha jiu/?cai hao le  
 不 必 忙 我 喝 個 茶 就/才 好 了  
 NEG necessary busy, I drink GE tea then/only okay SFP  
 ‘(Don’t bother.) I’ll just drink tea. (It’s) fine (with me).’
- b. zhe shu yao mai ta ge yibaiben ?jiu/cai gou  
 這 書 要 買 他 個 一 百 本 就/才 夠  
 this book want buy TA GE one.hundred.CL then/only enough  
 ‘(We) have to buy one hundred copies of this book. (Only by doing so, it’ll) then be enough.’

Both *cai* ‘only’ and *jiu* ‘then’ can function as linking elements in antecedent-consequent structures. *Cai* ‘only’ is associated with a “more-demanding” interpretation and *jiu* ‘then’ a “less-demanding” interpretation (Tsao 1976, M. Liu 1994, and Li 1997, among many others). The contrast between the choices of the linking elements in the pairs shown in (8) is a clear indication that two different senses should be posited. In (8a), a diminutive construction, *jiu* ‘then’ is more appropriate than *cai* ‘only’ in that a less-demanding situation is described in the



antecedent clause. Conversely, *cai* ‘only’ is preferred in the excessive construction exemplified by (8b), in which a more-demanding situation is described in the antecedent clause.

So far, we have demonstrated that the diminutive and excessive constructions are syntactically and semantically distinct, eliminating the possibility of reducing one construction to a special case of the other. Moreover, as indicated in (7c), the particular combination of the numeral-classifier-N sequence does not inherently entail the diminutive or excessive interpretations. Only when the whole constructions are taken into consideration can the two readings be differentiated. All the evidence points to the necessity of establishing two different constructions. Since the existence of the excessive construction has been justified, we will now explore the syntactic and semantic properties of this construction.

## 5. Syntactic properties

Syntactically, the excessive construction, formally represented as “V *ta* *ge* N”, possesses two features: first, the V and N slots are syntactically free, i.e. verbs and nouns can be freely inserted in the V and N slots as long as they do not violate any semantic constraint imposed on the construction; secondly, *ta* and *ge* are syntactically fixed elements and cannot be replaced by other constituents. In this section, we will explore the syntactic properties of the V, *ta*, *ge*, and N in turn.

Let us begin with the verb. As can be seen in the examples throughout the paper, a wide range of verbs is possible in the construction. For instance, both transitive and intransitive verbs are permitted, as illustrated by (9a) and (9b) respectively.

- (9) a. *mai ta ge yibaiben (shu)* (transitive verb)  
 買 他 個 一百本 (書)  
 buy TA GE one.hundred.CL (book)  
 ‘to buy one hundred books’
- b. *shui ta ge san tian san ye* (intransitive verb)  
 睡 他 個 三 天 三 夜  
 sleep TA GE three day three night  
 ‘to sleep for three days and three nights’

Now, we would like to address the following question: What licenses the occurrence of *ta*? It has long been recognized that an intransitive verb like *shui* ‘sleep’ in (9b) does not subcategorize an object. And although a transitive verb like *mai* ‘buy’ in (9a) can subcategorize an object, the object that *mai* ‘buy’ licenses is *yibaiben (shu)*

(one hundred CL book) ‘one hundred copies (of books)’, not *ta*. To solve the problem, we propose that *ta* is not licensed by the verb but by the construction. Evidence for this claim is that *ta* is a syntactically fixed element indispensable to the excessive construction and it exists independently of any other constituent in this construction.

Another notable feature of *ta* is that *ta* has to be non-referential. *Ta* in this construction does not refer to a specific person and thus must not be confused with the third person pronoun *ta*, which is recoverable from the context, either anaphorically or deictically. Please see the following example.

- (10) *rantinglun<sub>i</sub>* eyide            xiaoxiao ...rang    ren        xiang    shang    *ta<sub>i</sub>*  
 冉廷倫      惡意的      笑笑      讓      人      想      賞      他  
 name        maliciously    laugh      cause    person    want    reward    TA  
*ge*    *tongkuai*<sup>8</sup>  
 個    痛快  
 GE    thorough.satisfaction  
 ‘(Lit.) Rantinglun laughed maliciously ... made one want to reward him to one’s heart’s content.’  
 ‘Rantinglun laughed maliciously ... made people want to kill him immediately.’  
 (Source: <http://www.ettv.com.tw/2005/01/01/11083-1734952.htm>)

Here, *ta* refers back to the subject *rantinglun* in the preceding clause, as indicated by the subscripts, and contributes substantially to the interpretation of the sentence. Such an instance does not allow an excessive reading and is beyond the scope of our discussion.

It is also worth noting that the two elements immediately following the verb are fixed: no pronoun other than *ta* and no classifier other than *ge* are allowed in this construction.

- (11) a. \**kan*    *wo*    *ge*    *liangbu*    *dianying*  
           看    我    個    兩部    電影  
           watch I    GE    two.CL    movie  
           ‘(Intended) to watch two movies (to one’s satisfaction)’

<sup>8</sup> As pointed out by one of the reviewers, *ta* here seems to be both referential and non-referential, that is, *ta* has dual meanings. This is indeed the case. We propose that *ta* is characterized as referential when it can be anaphorically or deictically recoverable from the context, and as non-referential when it is not identifiable with a third person in the context. In fact, such a case further supports the claim that the excessive meaning comes from the third person pronoun *ta*, as will be discussed in Section 8.

- b. \*kan ta pian liangbu dianying  
 看 他 片 兩部 電影  
 watch TA CL two.CL movie  
 ‘(Intended) to watch two movies (to one’s satisfaction)’

The excessive meaning cannot be derived when the construction cannot be sustained. Therefore, the substitution of *wo* ‘I’ for *ta* in (11a) and that of *pian* for *ge* in (11b) not only make the excessive meaning undesirable but also render the two cases ungrammatical.

Next, we will take a look at the N slot. To begin with, only indefinite NPs, not definite NPs, are allowed in this construction (Lin ms). Consider the following example.

- (12) wo yao he ta ge (\*zhe/\*na) sanbei (pijiu)  
 我 要 喝 他 個 (這/那) 三杯 啤酒  
 I want drink TA GE this/that three.CL beer  
 ‘I want to drink three glasses (of beer).’

The presence of the demonstrative *zhe* ‘this’ or *na* ‘that’ renders the NP definite, which in turn gives rise to the unacceptability of the sentence.

Secondly, the nominal element that immediately follows *ge* must contain a numeral and a classifier though the object of the verb can be omitted, as shown in (12).

Moreover, as exemplified in the introduction, both nominal expressions and resultative complements can appear in the N slot. When the N slot is occupied by a noun phrase consisting of a numeral-classifier(-noun) sequence, *ge* is optional (13a); nevertheless, when the N slot is occupied by a resultative complement, *ge* is obligatory (13b, 13c).<sup>9</sup>

- (13) a. he ta sanbei  
 喝 他 三杯  
 drink TA three.CL  
 ‘to drink three cups to one’s heart’s content’  
 b. \*chi ta tongkuai (Wu 2002:174, footnote 6)  
 吃 他 痛快  
 eat TA thorough.satisfaction  
 ‘(Intended) to eat to a thorough satisfaction’

<sup>9</sup> The obligatoriness of *ge* will be further discussed in Section 7.3.

- c. chi ta ge tongkuai  
 吃 他 個 痛快  
 eat TA GE thorough.satisfaction  
 ‘to eat to a thorough satisfaction’

Finally, the complement cannot be in predicational form but rather must be bare (14) and cannot be syntactically negated unless the negation is part of a fixed negative adjective (15a-b) (Wu 2002).

- (14) \*chi ta ge tai bao  
 吃 他 個 太 飽  
 eat TA GE too full  
 ‘(Intended) to eat until one is too full’

- (15) a. \*chi ta ge bu bao  
 吃 他 個 不 飽  
 eat TA GE not full  
 ‘(Intended) to eat until one is not full’

- b. women yao he ta ge buzui bugui  
 我們 要 喝 他 個 不醉不歸  
 we want he TA GE not.drunk.not.return  
 ‘We’ll drink until we’re completely drunk.’

## 6. Semantic properties

An important semantic feature that has been widely recognized in the literature is that the subject is understood as doing something to his/her own satisfaction (Lin ms., Wu 2002, and Wu 2003, among others). This can be illustrated by the fact that the excessive construction is compatible with *cai* ‘only’ but not with *jiu* ‘then’, as discussed in Section 4. In addition, the satisfaction reading can also be sensed in an example like (16), in which the construction is modified by an intensifier such as *haohao* ‘good’ or *henhen* ‘to the utmost extent’.

- (16) women chen zhe ci de jihui haohao zhuan ta ge yibi  
 我們 趁 這 次 的 機 會 好 好 賺 他 個 一 筆  
 we make.use this CL DE chance good earn TA GE one.CL  
 ‘Taking advantage of this chance, we (should) make a big fortune to our heart’s content.’

(Source: <http://192.192.35.34/gemmore/Story&F1113329&10>)

A closer examination, however, reveals that the satisfaction interpretation is not implied in cases exemplified in (17).

- (17) a. fantaisui                      de ni haodai zai ren ta  
 犯太歲                              的 你 好歹 再 忍 他  
 have.bad.luck.this.year DE you anyhow again endure TA  
 ge ban nian ba  
 個 半 年 吧  
 GE half year SFP  
 ‘You, who are supposed to have bad luck this year, (should,) anyhow, at least, continue to endure (it) for half a year.’  
 (Source: [http://home.etwarm.com.tw/etwarm\\_law/detail.php?mainlawoid=2&lawoid=280](http://home.etwarm.com.tw/etwarm_law/detail.php?mainlawoid=2&lawoid=280))

- b. zai shou na sange xiaoshi de jianao zhiqian, wo hai  
 在 受 那 三個 小時 的 煎熬 之前 我 還  
 at bear that three.CL hour DE suffering before I still  
 dei dingzhedataiyang, zou ta ge yigeban xiaoshi de lu  
 得 頂著大太陽 走 他 個 一個半 小時 的 路  
 have.to under.the.blazing.sun walk TA GE one.CL.half hour DE road  
 ‘Before the three hours’ suffering, I still have to walk one hour and a half under the blazing sun.’  
 (Source: <http://knight.fcu.edu.tw/~d9368133/ru18yearsago.htm>)

From the contexts, it is apparently unreasonable to state that the subjects in (17) enjoy the events designated by the excessive constructions and will do the things to their own satisfaction. In view of examples such as those in (17), it would be more appropriate to claim that the subjects in this construction will do something to an extent that is more than what is usually expected. This explains why we call “V ta ge N” the excessive construction, instead of the satisfaction construction. Satisfaction is entailed when things are done to the utmost extent and when no negative effect is implied.

The excessive construction seems to bear another semantic characteristic: it only appears in irrealis contexts. When exploring the distribution of the non-referential *ta*, Lin (ms.), nevertheless, proposes that “neither a distinction between futurity and past nor one between realis and irrealis may account for when and why the non-referential *ta* appears where it occurs”. Rather, the non-referential *ta* must occur with a non-specific indefinite NP. The same principle also holds in the excessive construction. For instance, a past event (18a) and a habitual event (18b) are compatible with this

construction.

- (18) a. *yiqian nianqingshi hai keyi aoao ye, wan ta ge yiliang tian*  
 以前 年輕時 還 可以 熬熬夜 玩 他 個 一兩 天  
 before young still can stay.up.late play TA GE one.two day  
 ‘When (I) was still young, (I) could stay up late and have fun for one or two days.’

(Source: <http://health.healthonline.com.tw/article/p230.html>)

- b. *ta zhidao feihan changchang jiu zai wangshang*  
 他 知道 斐涵 常常 就 在 網上  
 3SG know name often then at on.the.Web  
*gua ta ge yi zheng wan*  
 掛 他 個 一 整 晚  
*hang TA GE one whole night*

‘He knows that Feihan often surfs the Web all night long.’

(Source: <http://www.525.idv.tw/bbs/cgi-bin/topic.cgi?forum=26&topic=3156>)

Examples in (18) are counterexamples to the generalization that the excessive construction only appears in irrealis contexts: the temporal adverb *yiqian* ‘in the past’ in (18a) is a clear indication that the event is a realized one; likewise, a habitual sentence like (18b) describes a number of similar events which have occurred in the past. Therefore, the distinction between realis and irrealis does not play a role in determining the acceptability of the excessive construction. Instead, instances in (18) as well as the remaining examples in this paper support Lin’s conclusion that the associates of the non-referential *ta* are all interpreted as non-specific indefinite NPs.

In addition to the semantic features discussed above, there is a constraint that the excessive construction necessarily designates a telic, that is, intrinsically bounded, situation. Compare the examples in (19).

- (19) a. \**chang ta ge ge* (atelic)

唱 他 個 歌

sing TA GE song

‘(Intended) to sing songs’

- b. *chang ta ge liangshou ge* (telic)

唱 他 個 兩首 歌

sing TA GE two.CL song

‘to sing two songs’

However, this constraint does not hold for the diminutive construction. For example, consider (20).

- (20) a. xi      ge    shou                                 (atelic)  
       洗    個    手  
       wash GE hand  
       ‘to wash hands’
- b. kan      ge    liangbu    dianying                (telic)  
       看    個    兩部    電影  
       watch GE two.CL movie  
       ‘to watch two movies’

The constraint on telicity of the excessive construction explains why the NP immediately following *ge* must contain a numeral and a classifier, which together have the function of delimiting the event designated by the verb. It also explains why only a resultative complement, not a descriptive complement, is permitted, as mentioned in (4). One semantic feature distinguishing a resultative complement from a descriptive complement is that the former inherently codes a bounded situation. Consider (4a), repeated here as (21), and (22).

- (21) sha ta ge pianjiabuliu  
       殺 他 個 片甲不留  
       kill TA GE piece.armor.no.left  
       ‘to kill the enemy until there is no piece of armor left’
- (22) bu cha ta ge shuiluoshichu, jue bu baxiu  
       不 查 他 個 水落石出 絕 不 罷休  
       NEG investigate TA GE truth.come.into.light definitely NEG stop  
       ‘(I) will never stop investigating (the case) until all the facts are revealed.’  
       (Source: <http://blog.webs-tv.net/sapphire>)

These expressions imply that the agent will kill the enemy to the point where there is no piece of armor left, or will continue to investigate the case to the point where the truth comes to light eventually. Such an insinuation is not coded in a descriptive complement like *buting* ‘non-stop’ in (4b).

It is worth noting that the argument role of the element in the N slot is contributed by the construction since no corresponding participant role of the verb exists. That is, there is no corresponding role existing as part of the inherent verbal meaning. Take, *sha* ‘kill’, for example. The verb *sha* ‘kill’ encodes two participant roles: killer and

victim, and only the killer role is profiled in the excessive construction. Also, no information about the resultant state the action of killing may reach or the length of time the action of killing may last is coded as the inherent lexical meaning of *sha* ‘kill’.

A further constraint on the excessive construction is that the subject must be acting volitionally. Examples in (23) are ruled out in that the subjects *zhe ge deng* (this CL light) ‘this light’ and *zhe ke shu* (this CL tree) ‘this tree’ are not volitionally involved in the two events.

- (23) a. \**zhe ge deng shan ta ge wupaixia*  
       這 個 燈 閃 他 個 五百下  
       This GE light flash TA GE five.hundred.CL  
       ‘(Intended) The light flashed five hundred times.’
- b. \**zhe ke shu yao ta ge shixia*  
       這 顆 樹 搖 他 個 十下  
       this CL tree sway TA GE ten.CL  
       ‘(Intended) The tree swayed ten times.’

## 7. Three variants of the excessive construction

In this section, we will examine three variants of the excessive construction, namely, “V ta ge N”, “V ta N”, and “V ta ge C”. Comparisons between the excessive construction and the diminutive construction will also be made when relevant.

### 7.1 V ta ge N

The N slot is typically filled by a phrase expressing temporal duration or quantities of things, as shown by (24a) and (24b) respectively.

- (24) a. Temporal duration  
       women manman he, he ta ge *santian*  
       我們 慢慢 喝 喝 他 個 三天  
       we slowly drink drink TA GE three.day  
       ‘We drink (it) slowly. (We) drink (it) for three days.’  
       (Source: <http://www.21red.net/novel/novel.asp?aid=1094>)



## b. Quantities of things

shuobuding na tian xingdayun ying ta ge jibaiwan  
 說不定 哪 天 行大運 贏 他 個 幾百萬  
 maybe which day very.lucky win TA GE several.million

‘Someday (I) may be lucky enough to win several million.’

(Source: <http://xinsheng.net/xs/articles/big5/2003/3/6/20107.htm>)

A major contrast between the excessive construction and the diminutive construction is that an implicit norm is involved in the former but not in the latter. As discussed in Section 6, the excessive construction implies that the action denoted by the verb is done to an extent that is more than what is usually expected. The diminutive construction, however, does not carry such a connotation, as observed by Biq (2002). For example, (25a) implies that the notes were copied quite a number of times, more than what is usually expected. In contrast, (25b) denotes that spending 20 or 30 minutes reading every day is less than the general expectation. This connotation can be more easily sensed when *ruguo* ‘if’ is replaced by *zhiyao* ‘only’.

## (25) a. More than what is usually expected (Biq 2002:525, (5))

tamen de biji chengwei qiangshou de “miji”,  
 他們 的 筆記 成爲 搶手 的 秘笈  
 they POSS notes become hot DE secret.book  
 zong dei zhuan yin ge haojici  
 總 得 轉印 個 好幾次  
 always have.to xerox GE several.times

‘Their (class) notes naturally became some hot “sacred books”, and would be copied quite a number of times.’

## b. Less than what is usually expected (Biq 2002:525, (6))

ruguo meitian neng rang haizi nian ge ersanshi fenzhong,  
 如果 每天 能 讓 孩子 唸 個 二三十 分鐘  
 if every.day can let child read GE twenty.thirty minute  
 jiu hen neng shou dao xiaoguo  
 就 很 能 收 到 效果  
 then INT can receive to effect

‘If you can have the child read (it) for about 20 or 30 minutes every day, it will be effective.’

As discussed in Section 4, an NP alone does not convey the sense of excessiveness. An NP, such as *santian* ‘three days’, is a neutral temporal phrase, which denotes

neither excessiveness nor diminutiveness. However, the meaning of excessiveness emerges when it occurs in the excessive construction and that of diminutiveness emerges when it appears in the diminutive construction. Here, we would like to re-emphasize the crucial role that constructions play in the semantic interpretations.

## 7.2 V ta N

It is held that “V ta N” is formally reduced from “V ta ge N”. See the following examples.

- (26) a. yao wan ta wutian cai gouben  
 要 玩 他 五天 才 夠本  
 have.to play TA five.day only enough  
 ‘(It won’t be) enough (unless we) play for five days.’
- b. shui ta santiansanye  
 睡 他 三天三夜  
 sleep TA three.day.three.night  
 ‘to sleep for three days and three nights’

Both examples in (26) denote the sense of excessiveness despite the absence of *ge*. That is, the semantic interpretations of the two variants, “V ta ge N” and “V ta N”, are the same irrespective of the presence or absence of *ge*. The reasons are two-fold: firstly, this semantically vacuous *ge* does not have a true classifying function and acts more like a dummy word, and secondly, the occurrence of *ta* is a clear indication of the excessive construction. Conversely, *ge* is obligatory in the diminutive construction because it is the only element that can mark this construction. If *ge* is omitted, the remaining V-N sequence will become indistinguishable from the normal verb-noun sequences. Again, it is clear that the recognition of constructions plays a determining role in languages.

## 7.3 V ta ge C

When examining the diminutive construction, Biq (2002:523-525) points out that the C position can be taken by three different types of complements. One is an adjectival expression, indicating the result state the subject or object is in by doing V, as manifested by *zhuang ge zhenzheng toupo xieliu* (hit GE really head-break blood-flow) ‘(My head) got injured badly’. Another is a negative adverbial expression, expressing the continuous state of the taking place of an action. Take, as an example,

*dageda xiang ge buting* (cellphone ring GE incessant) ‘The cellphone kept ringing’. The other is typically a phrase expressing quantity, such as temporal duration or percentage. For instance, *rang haizi nian ge ersanshi fenzhong* (let child read GE twenty-thirty minute) ‘to have the child read (it) for about 20 or 30 minutes’. Nonetheless, not all of the three types of complements can take the C position in the excessive construction. As has been pointed out in Section 6, the second type is generally not allowed in this construction. The third type actually corresponds to the “V ta ge N” variant discussed in Section 7.1. Therefore, our discussion in this section will focus on the adjectival complement.

Semantically, the C in the “V ta ge C” variant can be either subject-host or object-host, as illustrated by the following examples.

(27) a. Subject-host

nayangdehua, *wo*<sub>i</sub> jiu yao fuchu, wan ta ge *siquhuolai*<sub>i</sub>  
 那樣的話 我 就 要 復出 玩 他 個 死去活來  
 in.that.case I then want involve.again play TA GE die.go.live.come  
 ‘If so, I want to get involved again and have fun to my own satisfaction.’  
 (Source: <http://www.epochtimes.com/gb/1/10/7/n139214.htm>)

b. Object-host

jiu zheyang da ta ge *yilake*<sub>i</sub> *luohualiushui*<sub>i</sub> ba  
 就 這樣 打 他 個 伊拉克 落花流水 吧  
 then such attack TA GE Iraq turn.everything.topsy.turvy SFP  
 ‘(We will) attack Iraq in this way until everything is turned topsy-turvy.’  
 (Source: <http://www.zilona.com.tw/Enlightment.htm>)

In (27a), *siquhuolai* is predicated of the subject *wo* ‘I’ and refers to the resultant state the subject will be in. On the other hand, in (27b), *luohualiushui* is predicated of the object *yilake* ‘Iraq’ and refers to the resultant state the object will be in. These two complements describe the maximum point that doing V can reach, indicating that they are above the implicit norms.

When discussing the “V ge C” variant of the diminutive construction, Biq (2002, 2004) proposes that the C is reanalyzed as a nominal element on the grounds that the ge-N collocation is the most prototypical combination and is frequently found. The stereotypical expectation about the element immediately following *ge* explains why the C can be reanalyzed as a nominal element.<sup>10</sup> The I-heuristic proposed by Levinson (1995) works here.<sup>11</sup> Biq’s account of “V ge C” can also be applied in the “V ta ge C”

<sup>10</sup> From the syntactic standpoint, Wu (2002) also suggests that *ge* is in fact a nominalizer.

<sup>11</sup> The I (for informativeness) heuristic indicates that “what is simply described is stereotypically and specifically exemplified” (Levinson 1995:97). For instance, when one says *He opened the door*, one

variant, that is, the I-Heuristic accounts for the nominal status of the C.

As claimed in Section 7.2, the omission of *ge* in the “V ta N” variant does not have influence on the semantic interpretation or grammaticality judgment. Note, however, that the deletion of *ge* in the “V ta ge C” variant renders the sentence unacceptable. See (28).

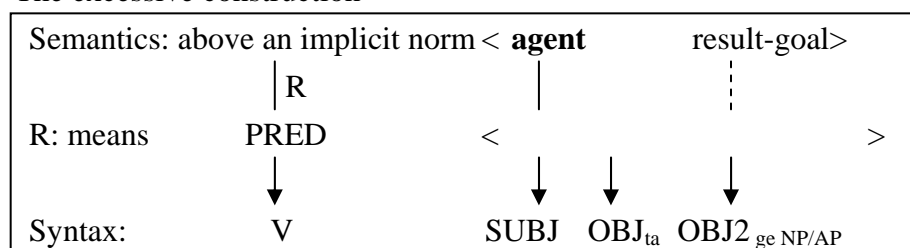
- (28) \*chi ta tongkuai (Wu 2002:174, footnote 6)  
 吃 他 痛快  
 eat TA thorough.satisfaction  
 ‘(Intended) to eat to a thorough satisfaction’

Such an instance suggests that the element occupying the C slot must be classifiable as a type of noun and that only *ge*, not *ta*, can get the C reanalyzed as a nominal element (e.g. Biq 2002, 2004 and Wu 2002).

#### 7.4 The excessive construction

To summarize our discussion, the excessive construction can be represented as follows.

- (29) The excessive construction



(29) shows a pairing between a semantic level and a syntactic level of grammatical functions. Semantically, this construction indicates that the quantities/degrees denoted by the N/C is above an implicit norm. It has two argument roles: agent and result-goal. The result-goal argument is contributed by the construction, as indicated by the dashed line. On the other hand, *ta* is not represented in the semantics of the construction, but is instead encoded as a syntactic stipulation about the form of the direct object complement. Syntactically, the excessive construction requires a subject and two objects, with the first object being lexically filled by *ta* and the second partially lexically filled by *ge* followed by an NP/AP.

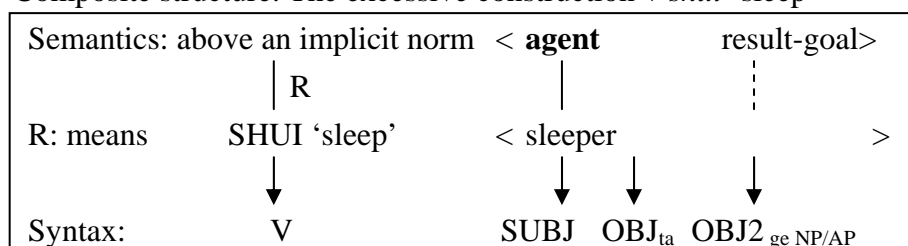
To see how the two levels are integrated, let us take a concrete example to serve as

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implies that he entered in the normal way. This is a stereotypical expectation.

an illustration: *shui ta ge san tian san ye* (sleep TA GE three day three night) ‘to sleep for three days and three nights’. *Shui* ‘sleep’ has only one profiled participant role: sleeper. It integrates with the excessive construction as follows.

(30) Composite structure: The excessive construction + *shui* ‘sleep’



The agent argument fuses with the participant role, sleeper. The result-goal argument is contributed by the construction since no participant role fuses with the result-goal argument.

One of the benefits of the constructional analysis is that speakers are allowed to extend the familiar pattern for use with novel verbs.

(31) *shujia yao lai luo, qu malawan wan*  
 暑假 要 來 囉 去 馬拉灣 灣  
 summer.vacation will come SPF go Yamay.Resort bay  
 ta ge tianhundian  
 他 個 天昏地暗  
 TA GE shrouded.by.gloom

‘The summer vacation is around the corner. Go to Yamay Resort to have fun to your heart’s content.’

(Source: <http://guest.taipeilink.net/kathiecami?pg=14>)

Typically, *wan* ‘bay’ is not used as a verb in Mandarin; nevertheless, it can occupy the V slot and serve as a verb in the excessive construction. Listeners/readers do not have any problem figuring out what the speaker/writer wants to express, namely, the speaker/writer would like to have fun to his/her heart’s content at Yamay Resort. Here, it is manifested again that constructions play a crucial role in languages.

### 8. Why is *ta* chosen for this construction?

It is generally assumed that constructions are formed through repeated use, and the particular meaning associated with a construction emerges from the association and interaction of the meaning of the individual linguistic elements in that construction. In

this section, we will focus on the question of where the constructional meaning of the excessive construction comes from.

To begin with, we will deal with the question of why *ta* is chosen for this construction. Here, we tentatively suggest that excessiveness is derived from *ta*. Compared with *wo* ‘I’ or *ni* ‘you’, *ta* is the participant that is more distantly related to the present discourse. Excessiveness can be regarded as a semantic extension of “distant relation”. Evidence in favor of this comes from the fact that *ta* in some cases of the “V *ta* ge C” variant has dual meanings, as was pointed out by one reviewer. Consider (32).

- (32) sha ta ge tungkuai  
 殺 他 個 痛快  
 kill 3SG GE to.one’s.satisfaction  
 ‘to kill him to one’s heart’s content’  
 ‘to do the killing to one’s satisfaction’

Example (32) has two possible interpretations as indicated in the English translations. In one reading, *ta* serves as a third person pronoun, deictically or anaphorically referring to an identifiable person in the context. In the other reading, *ta* functions as a dummy word, referring to nothing specific. An ambiguous example like (32) can provide a piece of evidence for the transition from the referential *ta* to the non-referential *ta*. If our hypothesis is tenable, one question that comes into mind at the present moment is: in addition to *ta*, are there any other candidates? The answer is yes, but these choices are ruled out due to other factors. For example, it may be reasonable to use the biggest number to express this notion. Nonetheless, it is impossible to find the biggest number since there is, logically, always a number that is bigger than another. Another possible candidate is *na* ‘that’. It is also a morpheme that refers to the person or thing that is not close to the speaker. However, *na* ‘that’ is blocked because it may create ambiguity in the “V *ta* ge N” variant. Consider the following example.

- (33) kan na liangbu dianying  
 看 那 兩部 電影  
 watch NA two.CL movie  
 a. ‘to watch those two movies’  
 b. ‘\*to watch two movies (to one’s satisfaction)’

If *na* ‘that’ were selected, an utterance like (33) can express either ‘watch those two movies’ or ‘watch two movies to one’s satisfaction’. That is, *na* ‘that’ acts as a deictic

demonstrative in the first reading and behaves as an excessive marker in the second reading. This obviously violates the principle of avoiding ambiguity.

Another question that needs to be tackled is: Why is it that the excessive construction can only denote excessiveness? We propose that such a phenomenon can be characterized as persistence, that is, “later constraints on the structure or meaning can only be understood in the light of earlier meaning” (Hopper and Traugott 1993:90). Since the excessiveness is argued to be closely related to *ta*, the semantic constraint on this construction can only be understood from the point of view of its original meaning. Considering this, it is not surprising that *ta*, a more distantly related participant, can only be linked to a situation that is above the norm, instead of the one that is below the norm.

A final point that will be addressed is that the excessive interpretation of this construction is derived by conventionalization of implicatures. It is speculated that this construction has to occur in a highly contextualized environment in the beginning and then gradually becomes more semantically fixed when a stronger association develops between the environment and the construction. When the environment comes to be understood as an integral part of the meaning of the construction, conversational implicatures are said to be conventionalized and need to be learned and memorized.

## 9. Concluding remarks

In this paper, the syntactic and semantic features the excessive construction bears are examined. Syntactically, *ta* must be non-referential and the NP following *ge* must be indefinite. Semantically, this construction allows only a volitional agent and denotes a telic situation. Because of these characteristics, it is argued that “V *ta ge* N” should be posited as a distinct construction, instead of being subsumed under, say, the diminutive construction. Also, it is emphasized that the constructional meanings cannot be overlooked and should be taken into consideration if one would like to derive the correct semantic interpretation of an expression. The benefit of the constructional analysis is that it allows language users to apply a familiar pattern to new contexts in principled ways. Finally, it is suggested that the excessive interpretation is derived from *ta*, whose original meaning constrains later semantic developments of the construction.

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## 論漢語中的過量結構

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本文以構式語法的架構來探討漢語中的過量結構「V 他個 N」。鑒於其句法和語意的特殊性，本文主張過量結構不歸屬於漢語中其它的任何結構，而應該被視為是一個獨立的結構。就句法上而言，過量結構必須由一個非指稱性的「他」後接一個不定名詞組(包含數詞—類別詞—(名詞))或一個形容詞補語；就語意上而言，過量結構只允許有意志性的施事者，並描述一個有界的情況。本結構的結構意義是「超過一個隱性的標準」，而非一般所認為的「使(人)滿足」，我們認為這層意義來自於「他」，而這個結構的發展也受限於「他」原本的詞彙意義。構式語法的優點在於可以讓語言使用者以有系統的方式將原本熟悉的結構應用在新的語境中，並合理的解釋某些新「動詞」的用法。

關鍵字：V 他個 N，過量結構，構式語法，非指稱性的「他」，個