

An Extensive Exploration into the Irregular Collocations of V + NP in Chinese: Take “Chi (Eat)” for Example

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Abstract

With various collocations of the Chinese verb “chi (eat)”, the paper deals with irregular phenomena from a cognitive perspective. With the cognitive frame of a verb, a set of inter-related popular concepts have been provided for various collocations. Cognitive principles function together for the realization of these concepts on the syntactic level. These principles entitle various concepts with different degrees of prominence, which leads to various syntactic statuses. Generally speaking, when transferred to linguistic expressions, the agent becomes the subject, the patient the object, and other concepts various adverbials. Nevertheless, extra prominence may be given to some concepts, as the speaker may want to fulfill particular needs in communication. As a result, the original prominence scalar is disordered, and what follows is the rearrangement of their syntactic statuses, which finally results in an ungrammatical sentence pattern.

Keywords: V + NP in Chinese, irregular collocation, principles of prominence, syntactic status

1. Introduction

It has been traditionally considered grammatical that the transitive verb takes a noun as the object while the intransitive does not. The object would be the patient of the very action of the verb. Since the patient has been so far considered as the normal and grammatical object, the structures like “read a book” in English or “chi fan (吃饭, eat rice)” in Chinese have been taken as canonical collocations. However, it often occurs that transitive verbs take no nouns. For example, there is no noun after reading in “Leave him alone. He’s reading now.” Sometimes, intransitive verbs do take nouns, such as the English sentence “Susan swam the Channel”, or the Chinese phrase “shui dachuang (睡大床, sleep big bed)”. Oddness occurs if a noun follows an intransitive verb, as it is known to all that “intransitivity” means “carrying no objects”. Moreover, even if transitive verbs take nouns, but it is never the traditional and expected patient, they are various concepts like the place, the utensil, the time, etc. Especially in Chinese, we can notice lots of examples like “chi shitang (吃食堂, eat canteen)”. All these three situations are by no means grammatical in the eyes of traditional grammarians. In other words, when no noun or a noun other than the patient occurs after a transitive verb, or any noun appears after an intransitive verb, the structures are ungrammatical, or at least irregular, according to traditional linguists.

What leads to these ungrammatical phenomena? What are the underlying motivations? Are they really ungrammatical? Before we answer these questions, we will first look at this great mess of “ungrammatical” collocations both in English and Chinese.

To start with, we can easily find that many transitive verbs take non-patient nouns after them, for example: chi shitang (吃食堂, eat canteen), chi dawan (吃大碗, eat big bowl), chi XiaoWang (吃小王, eat XiaoWang), etc. (Note 1) In these expressions of “chi (吃, eat)”, nouns other than food, such as “shitang (食堂, canteen), dawan (大碗, big bowl)” are used after the verb. These nouns can be place, tableware or some other concepts as we can see above. Except for the variety of nouns attached behind, the verbs involving this usage are actually quite large in number. We term this set of structure as Vt + NP.

Surprisingly, quite a few other intransitive verbs also take various nouns after them and we classify them into the structure of Vi + NP. For example: fei Shanghai (飞上海, fly Shanghai), shui dachuang (睡大床, sleep big bed), shui shafa (睡沙发, sleep sofa), etc. These verbs impress us greatly with different kinds of nouns taken after them. We also find similar situations in English, where “swim” is generally taken as intransitive, and it requires

no objects to complete the sentence like “Susan swam in the Channel”. To our great surprise, Susan can also “swim the Channel” as we have just mentioned above, where a location noun is put right after it and no preposition is inserted, hence the status of object. Also, not only can we “ride on the horse”, but “ride the horse”.

This article aims to study these “ungrammatical” expressions, endeavoring to seek the fundamental motivation underneath. We hold the view that every linguistic structure is born of various factors including semantic, syntactic, pragmatic as well as cognitive ones, thus the interpretation shall be multi-leveled. We will primarily start from cognitive linguistics, hoping to find some principles that are specific enough to account for all the abnormalities, but also broad and thorough enough to be manageable as the basis for general claims about the grammar of English and Chinese.

We are going to reason from particular cases to general principles. Thus this article begins with a case study of the Chinese transitive verb “chi (吃)”, followed by more transitive verbs both in Chinese and English. Then the investigation will move on to those intransitive verbs and the author will finally arrive at some conclusions, which are comprehensive enough to account for all the irregularity.

2. Literature Review

This irregular phenomenon has caught the attention of Chinese linguists ever since the 1960s. Many of them have worked hard on it, but the research has not yet reached anything essential until the publication of Guo’s article on *Zhongguo Yuwen* in 1999. Therefore, we will set the research into two sections, the research before it and that after it.

Earlier researches center on the description of this phenomenon, while little efforts have been paid to seek the underlying motivations. The terms like “quasi-objects” “substitute objects” “free collocations”, seem to have solved the problem but the nature remains mysterious, as those terms are so general themselves.

Guo (1999) gives out a long list of intransitive verbs with heterogeneous objects to illustrate the complicated nature of the problem. He relates that a certain semantic element termed as PREDICATE, is to be inserted during the process of reasoning for the sake of good understanding. The PREDICATE symbolizes the semantic relationship between the verb and the noun in a specific context, but it is never syntactically realized. For example:

$$\begin{array}{l}
 \text{Vi} \quad + \quad \text{NP} \qquad \qquad \qquad \text{Vi} \quad + \quad (\text{PREDICATE} \quad + \quad \text{NP}) \\
 \text{走} \quad \quad \text{八卦掌} \quad \longrightarrow \quad \text{走} \quad \quad \text{练} \quad \quad \text{八卦掌} \\
 \text{walk} \quad \text{baguazhang} \quad \quad \quad \text{walk} \quad \text{practice} \quad \quad \text{baguazhang} \quad (\text{Guo, 1999, p. 338})
 \end{array}
 \tag{1}$$

In the above structures, with the help of inserted PREDICATE, “practice”, we can easily understand the “ungrammatical” structures. Guo (1999) also points out the structure of Vi + NP is never basic in Chinese owing to the following five factors: 1) one has to insert a certain semantic element PREDICATE so as to understand the structure; 2) the structure is ambiguous because of the changeability of PREDICATE, while a basic structure is not; 3) the structure is confined to certain concrete contexts in most cases, while the basic one is generally independent of a particular context; 4) the typical intransitive verb never carries an object; 5) the structure is not frequently used.

Apart from the pursuit for economy, he states that the structure has its own necessity and possibility. The necessity is that people have to speak it frequently and thus it is surely necessary and practical to adopt a shortened form. The possibility lies in two aspects. Semantically, the two parties in the communication must possess certain background knowledge so that they can automatically understand the PREDICATE. In other words, they have to know the argument structure of the intransitive verb. This may be well illustrated by the fact that the structure Vi + NP is frequently used in certain lines of business where common background knowledge guarantees the understanding. Syntactically, the structure of Vi + NP is most likely the omission of “Prep + NP + (Loc) + Vi” or “V₁ + zhe (着) + V₂ + NP” for the sake of economy.

Xu (2003) has been seeking the motivations of intransitive verbs taking an object by applying the theoretical model of stereotypical relation which he refers to “the relations inherent in things themselves, and they could, through the cognitive refraction, be turned into a cognitive instrument in the process of language use” (2003, p. 8). In short, it is an inherent attribute of language, to be exact, of a syntactic construction. With the cognitive hypotheses “that syntactical rules are in nature the projection of the laws of objects in reality” (2003, p. 8), he sets up a theoretical model of stereotypical relation as an approach to the interpretation of syntactic constructions. The model is shown as follows (2003, p. 15):

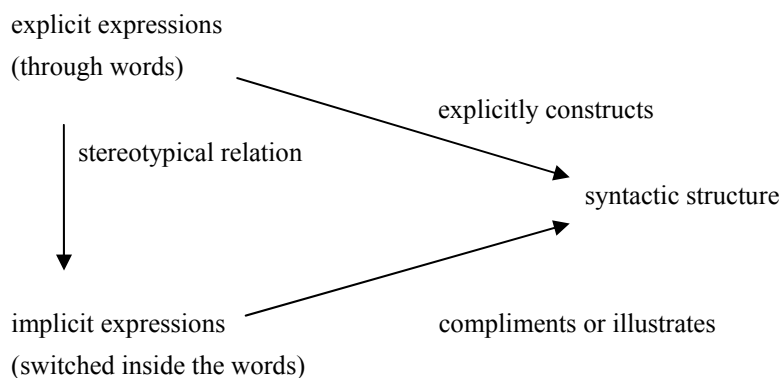


Figure 1. Theoretical model of stereotypical relation

As is shown in Table 1, a syntactic construction results from both explicative and implicative expression of semantic components. Apart from the explicature clearly shown through lexical elements, there are some implicatures that are closely related to stereotypical relations, and switched inside the words, functioning as complementary units.

According to this model, the syntactical construction of SVN, in which S stands for the subject, V for an intransitive verb and N for the object of this intransitive verb, can be well explained with the hypothesis of “Mutual Entailment of semantic elements between V & N”. The hypothesis assumes that the verb stereotypically entails a large amount of semantic elements, which denote various things, and the noun on the other hand also concerns a lot of concepts concerning the specific action of the verb. Thus SVN results from the mutual function of V and N where both make a selection among the provided semantic components denoting things or actions, and take the other as the reference respectively.

3. Theories for Guiding Analysis

3.1 Transitivity

In the light of cognitive grammar, transitivity can be understood as cognitive relevance, which is in reality universal between every process and object, despite the fact that the relevance may vary in degree of strength. As we know, a process involves at least one obligatory participant, with some other optional concepts, such as another participant, or some environmental elements. Whatever they are traditionally labeled as, transitive or intransitive, they are both transitive cognitively. It is this point that has fundamentally made the occurrence of so-called intransitive verbs taking nouns possible. We will discuss it in great detail in the next section within the cognitive frame.

When we look back at the three groups of irregular collocations, we will find that we have actually adopted the traditional view of transitivity. In the following sections, we will adopt our new definition of transitivity and try to gain some insight into the topic. Our general idea is that cognitive frames of verbs provide things which are related directly or indirectly, and thereby guarantee the possibility of manifesting them on the syntactic level. Meanwhile, setting from different perspectives of the frame will lead to different profiling of certain things, which in turn may result in various sentence patterns. With the principle of prominence, different concepts are assigned differed syntactic roles, such as subject, object, and adverbial, in terms of different degrees of prominence.

3.2 Cognitive Frames

Ungerer and Schmid (2001, p. 211) view a frame as “a type of cognitive model which represents the knowledge and beliefs pertaining to specific and frequently recurring situations”. In other words, it can be described as a cognitive context that provides interrelated cognitive categories. A situation can be viewed from different angles and perspectives and each perspective provides us a different profile of the situation and thus brings some concepts into the focus of our attention. When employing language to describe a situation, we can have a lot of alternatives. For instance, to describe a commercial event, we may choose various words like “buy, sell, pay, charge, cost, spend and so on” when the focus of our attention has been drawn to different relationships between certain concepts. As a matter of fact, the choice of the verb and its corresponding syntactic pattern that it governs is involved in the process of perspectivizing a certain profile. To put it another way, a general frame can be approached from various perspectives and thereby several syntactic patterns with counterpart verbs are obtained.

This article will not discuss the various alternatives of perspectivizing certain concepts by using various verbs. We will center on one perspective of the frame, which is closely tied to a certain verb, and we will focus on the syntactic realization of those concepts highlighted in that perspective. For example, we may narrow down the frame of commercial event, and we will just focus on the “buy” frame, where concepts of “buyer, goods, seller, and money” are engaged. Thus this frame is smaller than the frame of an event. Although the hearer’s attention has been mainly directed to the buyer and the goods, other concepts are introduced by some prepositions. For example:

David bought an old shirt from John for ten pounds. (Ungerer & Schmid, 2001, p. 206) (2)

In this sentence, besides the buyer “David” and the goods “an old shirt”, the original owner “John” has been introduced with the preposition “from” and the amount of money paid for it has been introduced by “for”. As a result, four concepts are chosen out of the cognitive frame and realized on the sentence level.

Now we can see that a frame actually functions as a cognitive base from which certain elements can be chosen as constituents to set up a clause pattern. However, this only provides a potential possibility, and all of these four concepts cannot be manifested simultaneously at the sentence level, as the attention of the speaker may be focused on some elements, but not others. What’s more, we may go further than these four concepts, for instance, the purchase can happen in a store, or in a yard where second-hands assemble. Also, it may involve a companion during the purchase. Thus, the connection can be extended further. Theoretically, the extension can be boundless and indefinite and the cognitive frame is actually a network of inter-related concepts. The recall of a cognitive frame automatically activates a number of most directly related concepts, which will in turn provoke their own closely related ones. The activation process lasts until the ultimately provoked concepts have little or nothing to do with the original frame. What is worth mentioning is that, concepts activated each time seldom enjoy the same status. Some are considered as central, others peripheral. By “central”, we mean that the concepts are basic, fundamental and prototypical, for example, the agent and the patient of a transitive verb; by “peripheral”, we refer to those optional concepts, such as location/place, time, and instrument. Both central and peripheral concepts, however, involve their prototypical and non-prototypical members. For example, the agent can be a person who carries out the action, which is prototypical, but it can also be a company, community or an institution, which is however nonprototypical. The more central a concept is, the easier it would be activated. On the contrary, effort is needed to recall those peripheral concepts. Therefore, to stimulate a group of concepts involves making different amounts of effort. To some degree, this may interfere with the syntactic realization of those cognitive concepts. However, the selection of these concepts to be practically realized in the sentence lies in the three cognitive principles introduced by Langacker (Ungerer & Schmid, 2001), which guide all human activities.

3.3 Cognitive Principles

Langacker proposes three cognitive principles, namely, principles of prominence, specificity and perspective (Ungerer & Schmid, 2001). By the principle of prominence, Langacker sets the world into three parts: figure, ground and setting, each with different degrees of prominence. According to the prominence scalar, figure becomes subject, ground object, and setting adverbials. However, it may happen that speakers may want to highlight a certain element, which only possesses a low degree of prominence, and thus upgrades it, leading to a change in syntactic structure.

The principle of specificity determines the level at which various facets of a real-world situation are approached. Considering cognitive processing, the most basic stage at which the principle of specificity applies is the derivation of more restricted domains from elementary domains (space, vision). Certainly a category like CLAW HAMMER requires a much more specific primary domain than the vague concept SOMETHING. Specificity is also important for the choice of the situationally relevant aspects of cognitive units and it has an influence on the selection of one action chain in preference to competing action chains. To put it plainly, principle of specificity indicates that speakers may pay little or no attention to certain elements, while attaching great importance to others and describing them in great detail.

The third principle, that is, principle of perspective, is more often called Viewing Arrangement by Langacker. This notion is best approached via the stage metaphor, where the normal or canonical arrangement is that the relationship between audience and onstage event is not expressed directly. What is rendered linguistically is the onstage event, and this is why the “third” person perspective is the norm. An alternative view, which is nevertheless also very frequent, is the egocentric viewing arrangement. Here the relationship between speaker/hearer and event is made explicit and expressed by the use of deictic first and second person pronouns. Other deictic items, such as “here and now”, this and other determiners are also understood as expressing

reference to the viewing position of the speaker. Therefore, plainly speaking, the principle of perspective decides that the speaker views an event from this point but not the other. These three principles are in fact indispensable to each other, and they function as a whole. From a particular perspective, we usually decide how to describe an event, in general or in great detail, and certain elements are definitely emphasized and come into the view.

Nevertheless, in each cognitive perception of a real-world situation, we distinguish between participants and the setting. Participants, usually engaged in a physical contact and mental interaction, are perceptually more prominent than the setting that is generally considered as comprehensive and stable. Besides, according to the figure/ground segregation, participants include agents and patients, which enjoy different prominence. The agent, as the initiator of the energy flow is the most prominent element in a situation and the patient, as the receiver of the energy emitted from the agent is less prominent.

Therefore, in the phase of linguistic level, the distinction among the three items seems to be precisely reflected in clause structure. Participants, that is, agents and patients respectively provide subjects and objects, while the setting is presented by adverbials, especially adverbials of location/place and time. Therefore, there is a prominence ladder where subjects enjoy a higher prominence than objects, which is in turn more prominent than adverbials. Nevertheless, it would be wrong and quite contrary to the nature of cognitive explanation to assume that the setting is completely homogeneous. Prominence is by definition a gradual phenomenon and it is proved that the degree of prominence that is given to the setting depends on the choice of the syntactic pattern. For a further illustration of what is gained by treating the prominence of the setting in terms of a gradient, consider the following set of sentences:

- a. Susan swam in the Channel. (3)
- b. Susan swam across the Channel.
- c. Susan swam the Channel. (Ungerer & Schmid, 2001, p. 184)

The Channel in sentence 3a is merely a place where the action of swimming takes place and it is linguistically expressed as an optional place adverbial, but in 3b it becomes a much more tangible setting, which has two boundaries and is fully traversed by Susan. The Channel is no longer optional and it is much more prominent than in 3a just as is implied by the preposition “across”. While in sentence 3c, the preposition is dropped and the Channel has apparently gained the status of syntactic ground and it is no longer a plain setting. Actually, it is treated more like a participant that is challenging Susan and to be overcome.

Apart from being raised to the status of objects, the setting can also occur as subject:

- a. The garden is swarming with bees. (Ungerer & Schmid, 2001, p. 184) (4)
- b. The hammer broke the glass (Note 2). (Ungerer & Schmid, 2001, p. 176)

In sentence 4a, the location “the garden” draws more attention and enjoys greater prominence than bees; as a result it is upgraded to the figure/subject. While in 4b, the instrument “the hammer” is highlighted and raised to subject.

To sum up, principle of prominence functions in two sections. In the first sense, the principle indicates that different concepts have different amounts of prominence, according to which figure, ground or setting has been distinguished. As a result, the principle puts them into corresponding slots in a sentence, forming a normal collocation of verb-object. Generally, different elements of a clause tend to enjoy different syntactic prominence as a reflection of the real-world situation where some concepts are conceptually prominent while others are not. Normally speaking, objects though less prominent than subjects is admittedly much more prominent than adverbials. While in the second sense, the prominence of a certain concept can be projected on purpose. In other words, a concept of a certain setting can be upgraded to ground, even figure, and correspondingly on the syntactic level, an adverbial may be raised to the object or subject. The consequence of the second function is that the normal arrangement of various components in a sentence is disturbed in terms of the new prominence ladder and irregularity occurs.

Next we will have a close examination on the production and understanding of the “ungrammatical” collocation, starting from the case study of the Chinese verb “chi (eat)”.

4. The Case Study of Chinese “Chi (eat)”

Many researchers have looked into the abnormal collocation of the verb “chi” from various aspects, and most of the study has been concerned with the phrase “chi shitang (吃食堂)”. Tao (2000) has started her study from the argument structure of the verb, together with the devices of discourse analysis and corpus linguistics. She has meant to identify the openness and dynamicality of the argument structure, and to make a classification of the

various collocations of the verb “chi” both diachronically and synchronically. Dong (2004) has adopted the theory of ICM (ideal cognitive model) and come to an enormous network of differed collocations of the verb “chi”. And he regards the elements other than the patient after the verb “chi” as adverbials but not objects as in “chi shitang, chi dawan, chi gongzi, etc.” Wang (2000) considers “shitang (canteen)” as a metonymic form of object, together with other kinds of objects whose nature are yet to be discussed. Ren (2000) has also carried out a quite thorough study towards “chi shitang”. But our paper will take a cognitive view towards the issue, armed with cognitive frames and principles and the parataxis feature of Chinese.

4.1 Cognitive Frame of “Chi”

As is known to all, the action of “chi (eat)” (Note 3) involves a person or an animal that eats and something to be eaten. First of all, materials are usually attained from a certain place like the market for a certain amount of money. Before they are cooked and eaten with the help of bowls, chopsticks, spoons and things alike, they have to be cooked with some cooking utensils. So far a group of concepts have been involved. However there has been an order in activating all these items. For example, among them, the primary items to be activated are the eater and the food, and then come afterwards the instrument, the location/place or the time, etc. From a much specific point of view, the eater might have a particular taste for some food, or a bad appetite that day. The food may have different categories like vegetables, meat and the like, and each category of food may have different colors or forms or specific taste. Besides, there must be a place where the food is produced/provided, cooked and eaten, a utensil for cooking or holding the food. Usually, the food is to be bought for a certain amount of money and in turn there is often a person to pay for it.

4.2 Various Collocations of “Chi (Eat)”

From what we have discussed above, we can see that the cognitive frame of “chi” contains a huge pile of relevant concepts, which may theoretically be extended indefinitely. It is impossible as well as impractical to make all of them syntactically realized on the sentence level. Only when those concepts have been brought into the focus of our attention, can these latent items be realized in the sentence. In effect, two steps are included in the process of arranging them into corresponding syntactic slots.

First of all, the first section of the principle of prominence functions. Concepts are graded with respect to different degrees of prominence, namely, according to their normal prominence ladder, and then they are set into different parts of the sentence correspondingly. For instance, the agent eater enjoys the highest prominence and becomes the subject. The patient food, including various kinds of food, concrete or abstract, is realized as the object, which manifests less prominence. The place where food is located or stored and the action of eating occurs can be introduced by a preposition and becomes a place adverbial. The time when the action happens is taken as an adverbial of time. Moreover, the instrument with which the food is cooked and eaten can also become an adverbial of manner introduced by a preposition. Besides, time and speed can be expressed through other adverbials, and other characteristics of the food can also be expressed by modifiers. In a word, the realization has been normal and we get a grammatical and regular collocation of the verb. Now we are going to look at some grammatical collocations:

a. 这是好几天以来，木兰第一次吃到的一碗清洁味美的饭 (Note 4)。 (Ibid, Chapter 3) (5)

It is the first time Mulan has eaten a bowl of clean and delicious rice for several days.

b. 有人吃得快，有人吃得慢。有人爱吃蟹黄，有人爱吃蟹肉，有人不嫌费事爱慢慢吃螃蟹腿。就和打牌一样—各人的脾气都受到试验。 (Ibid, Chapter 16)

Some eat fast, others eat slowly. Some enjoy crab roe, some love crabmeat, while others don't bother to eat crab feet. Like playing cards, people's tempertaton is to be tested.

Apparently, various concepts like “Mulan (木兰), diyici (第一次), yiwan (一碗), qingjie meiwei (清洁味美), fan (饭), kuai (快), man (慢), etc.” have been realized in the sentence. Actually, these concepts have been selected out of the cognitive frame according to the need of communication and finally positioned in the sentence with respect to their normal scalar of prominence, thus fulfilling their specific functions in the normally collocated sentence. This actually conforms to our logical translation of our thoughts into language, which is though not the focus of our study. However, it is an indispensable part of what we are discussing. In effect, what we are going to discuss in the second part of principle of prominence can only be achieved on the basis of this normal collocation of a basic sentence, where prototypically subject is closely related to agent, object is related to patient, and adverbial is tied to location, time, instrument, or other complementary concepts.

Considering the second section of principle of prominence, certain concepts with only a low degree of prominence, such as instrument, location, time, can be given extra prominence on purpose. When these less

prominent elements have been put in the focus and thus highlighted, their syntactical status is promoted correspondingly, from adverbials or modifiers (usually realized by those complementary concepts such as properties of things) to objects. As a result, the original scalar of prominence is disturbed and a new arrangement comes into being which in turn results in an “ungrammatical” collocation.

a. 她问我们：“你们两口子是不是吃食堂呀？都听不到你们做饭炒菜的声音。” (Baidu) (6)

She asks us: “Do you two eat shitang? We don’t hear you cooking.”

b. 第一件是她太爱和蒜亚出去吃小馆儿，第二件是太爱出去逛公园，逛市郊的名胜古迹。 (*Jinhua Yanyun*, Chapter 22)

The first thing is that she loves to go out and eat xiaoguaner with Sunya, the second thing is that she loves to visit parks and places of interest in suburbs.

c. “七爷！说好去吃五芳斋，你站到书摊儿就走不动了，让我一人儿干站着！” (*Da Zhaimen*, Chapter 22)

“Qiye, you said you want to eat wufangzhai, but you just stood still before the newsstand, leaving me alone.”

Different from the normal collocations, in the examples cited here, the noun after the verb is not patient, but location, such as: shitang (食堂, canteen), xiaoguaner (小馆儿, small snack bar), wufangzhai (五芳斋, shop name), etc. In this context the paradoxical location “食堂” is by no means a mere place where people eat. Instead it is usually the canteen of an institution that provides meals specially for the workers, typical of its convenience and fastness, but may not be so delicious as homemade. Therefore, these concepts are better understood as institutions that provide food and service of certain characteristics rather than places where one can simply have meals. Thus cognitively speaking, what these concepts like “shitang (食堂, canteen)” recall in our mind is their special food but not a place. That’s why we can still understand the “ungrammatical” collocation of taking the location after “chi”. But according to what we have discussed in the cognitive frame, effort is needed in the process of referencing and understanding.

Specific properties of food like tastes have been introduced and emphasized, for example, greasy/oily, salty, spicy, soft, etc. All these elements are originally realized as modifiers of the food, but here they are raised to object. They are so closely related to the food that when they appear after the verb of “chi”, people find no difficulty in recalling the food with these tastes. These certainly are indispensable to the sensations of the eater, which undoubtedly confirms the interrelated relationship between the concepts of a cognitive frame. Moreover, in terms of metonymy, features have been utilized to stand for the whole subject.

Other concepts like various cooking utensils can also be emphasized. Something to be noted is that what people eat is by no means the cooker, but the food contained inside. Moreover, different cookers may produce different taste or flavor for the same food, therefore, when a cooking utensil is emphasized, a particular cooking method is highlighted. This well illustrates that not only can we say “chi huoguo (吃火锅, eat hotpot)”, but also we can use “chi shaokao (吃烧烤, eat barbecue)”. Therefore, in the first case, container stands for the food contained, while in the second case, specific cooking method symbolizes the resulting food. Thus we have the following examples:

a. 吃火锅, 吃烧烤向来是备受人们喜欢的, 店里总是人满为患。 (Baidu) (7)

Eating hotpot and barbecue is always the most favorite thing. There are always crowds of people.

b. ……哎, 你爱吃红烧, 还是清蒸 (Note 5)? (*Da Zhaimen*, Chapter 14)

Er, do you love (meat) braised in soy sauce, or steamed in clear soup?

Besides cooking utensils, some tableware is also involved in the process of eating. For example, in the Chinese culture, bowls, chopsticks, spoons are commonly used; while in western countries, plates, knives, forks are more often used. Just as the cooking utensils can be emphasized, the tableware can also be highlighted and raised to the object as is shown in “chi shaozi (吃勺子, eat spoon)” where the underlying structure has been “to eat something with the help of a spoon”.

So far, object is never a homogeneous concept. It takes the patient as its prototypical one, including both concrete and abstract food; it also includes the imaginative or figurative patient, which is achieved with the aid of metonymy. Therefore, the canteen as well as restaurants stand for their feature food, while detailed properties about the food have been adopted to stand for the whole thing, and containers have been used to stand for the food contained inside. However, metonymy seems not work in “chi shaozi (吃勺子, eat spoon), chi le wubaiyuan (吃了五百元, eat 500 yuan), chi Xiao Wang (吃小王, eat Xiao Wang)”, although the component after the verb “chi” is still taken as object syntactically.

Just as we have stated previously that the second section of the principle of prominence can only function on the basis of the first one of the principle, it is worth mentioning that what becomes much more prominent is actually termed or defined with a potential target to be compared with. To put it another way, the reason why the speaker wants to project something is that it is somewhat different, which is normal and regular; while the particularly highlighted concept is taken as abnormal and irregular. Therefore if we say “chi shitang”, we want to deliver the information that “I do not eat at home”, which may imply, for instance, “I had to eat the terrible food provided by the canteen as my wife was out and didn’t bother to make meals for myself.” Or “it is too tiring and troublesome to make a dinner after the whole day’s work so we go to the canteen for convenience”. When a person wants to “chi dawán” or “chi xiaowan”, it indicates that the bowl he would be using this time is not of the normal size of the bowl they usually use. Thus, opposite to the specific context happening at the right time the speaker situates, there has been a norm for the general situation. The general and specific situations form a comparison cognitively. However, this comparison may not be necessarily displayed on the syntactical level as claimed by Tao (2000, p. 27). She maintains that many non-prototypical patients, especially those instrumental patients occur in pairs but not a detached simple sentence. Just as we have stated that all the concepts in the frame are not to be realized on the syntactical level, and those concepts that are normal in general situations may not be syntactically displayed.

5. Conclusion

Having carried out the thorough investigation, we finally reach the following conclusions.

Firstly, the cognitive frame of each verb is an enormous network embracing a large pile of interconnected concepts and thus providing the verb with various elements that are to be realized on the syntactic level. Namely, the cognitive frame has entitled the various collocations, either normal or abnormal, with the cognitive potentiality.

Secondly, the concepts inside one cognitive frame are never completely homogeneous. Some are central, while others are somewhat peripheral. Some concepts like the agent are obligatory, while others like the patient, place or time are optional, enjoying varied degrees of prominence. Meanwhile, different concepts, in the light of their relevance to the verb, require different amount of efforts to activate them. This can be seen that sometimes we need more time or efforts to understand some unfamiliar collocations, usually after a long process of inferring.

Thirdly, it is impossible as well as unnecessary to arrange all the concepts into one sentence and it is where the three principles function. When the speaker decides to look at the situation from a certain point of view, in general or in great detail from a particular perspective, certain concepts are drawn into the focus of our attention and only these will be realized in the sentence. However, the realization is guided by the principle of prominence with respect to different degrees of prominence each concept contains. Generally speaking, participants including the agent and patient become subjects and objects respectively, while the setting is expressed by adverbials, in particular by adverbials of space, time, instrument and so on. In this way, the normal collocation of a verb is obtained with the help of the first section of the principle of prominence.

However, in many situations, the principle of prominence functions in its second section. That is, the normal scale of prominence can be disturbed as some concepts may be purposefully highlighted. As a result, they might be elevated into the category of participants out of the setting and become the syntactic ground. And when transferred to linguistic expressions, they might become the object and sometimes even the subject, which results in the “ungrammatical” collocations that have been our subject in this article.

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Notes

Note 1. Most of the examples cited here come from the research study made by Guo (1999), Xu (2003), Liu (2004), etc.

Note 2. Actually the instrument "hammer" can be emphasized in many other ways, for example: It is with a hammer that Floyd broke the glass. However, "hammer" here is still better considered as a part of setting, instead of being elevated into figure or ground. Another example is that: Floyd used a hammer to break the glass. Here "hammer" is raised to ground/object. Nevertheless, it is the object of another verb "use" but not "break".

Note 3. Various meanings may derive from "chi" due to metaphor and metonymy. For example, it means "suffer, experience" in the phrase "chikui (吃亏), chiku (吃苦), etc."; while in "kaoshan chishan (靠山吃山), chi gongzi (吃工资), etc.", it means "live on sth". All these will not be included in the study which only focus on the original meaning of "吃", that is, "take (solid food or soup) into the mouth and swallow it for nourishment" (Oxford). The hypothesis has been that the collocation of a polysemous verb is subject to its specific meaning in a particular context. Besides, the paper will not take into consideration topic sentences where various objects usually are raised to be subject. Thus all the examples cited would contain animate subjects when pragmatic factors such as omission are not considered.

Note 4. "___" indicates that these concepts have been finally realized on the sentence level. But to be concise, subject and object will not be underlined in the rest examples of this group.

Note 5. Here the verb is omitted and we believe the structure is of the same nature as "吃红烧".

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