The Features of ABAC Construction and Its Application in Chinese Second Language Teaching

Cheuk Ying Ng[1,a,*]

[1]Department of Chinese Language and Literature, Hong Kong Shue Yan University, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China
a. 201123@hksyu.edu.hk
*corresponding author

Abstract: This study aims to provide guidance on how to help students master ABAC construction better, in terms of syntactic features, semantic features, as well as pedagogical methods. Based on the literature review, we analyzed the internal structure of ABAC construction. We selected 38 examples of ABAC construction applicable to teaching Chinese as a second language combined with the textbook "Chinese Roadmap" used in junior high school classes in Hong Kong. These sentences were analyzed both syntactically and semantically to identify the commonalities of the ABAC construction's syntactic and semantic features, and investigated the patterns to obtain a systematic understanding of its characteristics. By integrating the characteristics of ABAC construction, we proposed teaching suggestions for teaching Chinese as a second language, including syntactic features, semantic rules, and teaching methods, hoping to deepen the learners' systematic comprehension of ABAC construction and to provide a valuable reference for teaching Chinese construction as a second language.

Keywords: constructive grammar, Chinese ABAC construction, teaching Chinese as a second language, syntactic features, semantic rules

1.   Introduction

Goldberg [1] proposed that "any linguistic expression that is unpredictable in some respect of its form, semantics, or function" can be considered a construction. Based on this, she proposed a constructive syntactic theory, saying that "C is a CONSTRUCTION iff def C is a form-meaning pair such that some aspects of Fi or some aspects of Si are not strictly predictable from C's components parts or from other previously established construction." In short, a construction is a combination of form and meaning that has its own unpredictable characteristics. The form, meaning, or function of a construction cannot be simply deduced from its constituent parts, as the whole is greater than the sum of its parts [1]. Based on this theoretical basis, we turned our attention to the Chinese ABAC construction format. Previous studies have disputed the semantic features of ABAC construction, prompting us to investigate the common rules among different semantic features. Traditional grammar typically teaches vocabulary and grammar in a dichotomous manner. However, some linguistic phenomena are difficult to classify as purely lexical or syntactic, necessitating the adoption of a syntactic-lexical continuum view in constructional grammar [2]. This poses a challenge for

Chinese learners trying to master the ABAC construction. In this study, we summarize the features of ABAC construction and discuss its application in teaching Chinese as a second language.

2.   Literature Review

Studies have pointed out that the ABAC construction is highly complex due to the various ways its elements can be combined. Fan [3] categorized the typicality of ABAC construction into three categories based on the number of structures that may be joined with various BC elements in the "A...A..." frame: typical, reasonably typical, and single structure. Meanwhile, Shen [4] divided the structure of ABAC construction into verb-complement, verb-object, partial, and theme, focusing on the relationships between the elements within the construction. After categorizing 908 examples of ABAC construction, Shen discovered that 341 examples are verb-complement relations, 291 examples are verb-object relations, 252 examples are partial positive structures, and 12 examples are subject-predicate and other structures. Moreover, scholars have also proposed a theory that the phonological stress pattern of ABAC-style tetrameter has a constraining effect on the choice of semantics [5], from a phonological perspective. Despite the existing research on ABAC structures, there are still questions worth exploring. It is necessary to discuss ABAC's characteristics from a constructive grammar standpoint, which combines syntactic structures and semantic properties.

Previous scholars have conducted research on second language teaching of construction. For instance, Chen [2] emphasized the distinctiveness and unpredictability of grammatical knowledge in second language teaching of construction. The theory also highlights the importance of strengthening the practice and use of structures in the process of language teaching. On the other hand, Huang [6] focused on the deviations in ABAC construction during second language acquisition and conducted an examination. The study found that Chinese learners struggle with five main issues: formal writing errors, semantic understanding errors, syntactic use errors, pragmatic processing errors, and emotional color usage errors. However, this study did not address how to expand second language teaching of construction. Therefore, the analysis of teaching ABAC construction is still inadequate and rarely suggested or analyzed by educators.

3.   The Features of ABAC Construction

This study focuses on using ABAC construction for second language teaching. Syntactically, incorporating ABAC construction can help learners expand their structural knowledge and have more concise structures. Semantically, it encourages learners to master ABAC-specific patterns, which can aid in deriving its semantic features. The study plans to supplement the content of the textbook "Chinese Roadmap" used in junior high school classes in Hong Kong, with ABAC construction. To select appropriate examples, we referred to He's (2012) study, which identified 1361 ABAC construction from the Chinese Dictionary V6.26 corpus. Based on this, we selected 38 examples of ABAC construction applicable to teaching Chinese as a second language combined with textbooks. These 38 ABAC examples will be analyzed both syntactically and semantically.

3.1. Syntactic Structure

The study by He [5] found that the lexical distribution of A is diverse, with predominance of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Pronouns, counters, quantifiers, auxiliary verbs, and affixes are less common. B and C are typically paired with nouns, verbs, adjectives, counters, or pronouns. This study examines ABAC construction examples based on He's classification of lexical items.

3.1.1. When A Is a Noun Word or Morpheme, B and C Can Be Nouns, Verbs, or Can Be Orientations Words

B and C are noun words or morphemes:古色古香
B, C is an orientation word:心上心下

3.1.2. When A Is a Verbal Word or Morpheme, B and C Can Be Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives, or Morphemes, as Well as Orientation Words

B and C are noun words or morphemes:有声有色、连日连夜、做人做事、合情合理、丢眉丢眼
B, C are verbal words or morphemes:如痴如醉、可喜可贺、累死累活、载歌载舞
B, C are adjectival words or morphemes:问寒问暖、惟妙惟肖
B, C is an orientation word:买东买西

3.1.3. When A Is an Adjectival Word or Morpheme, B and C Can Be Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives, or Morphemes

B and C are noun words or morphemes:多姿多彩、真心真意、诚心诚意、熟门熟路、原汁原味、呆头呆脑
B, C are verbal words or morphemes:难逢难遇、大彻大悟、大吃大喝、大吵大闹、敢作敢当
B, C are adjectival words or morphemes:美仑美奂

3.1.4. When A Is an Adverbial Word or Morpheme, B and C Can Be Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives, or Morphemes

B and C are noun words or morphemes:无时无刻、无缘无故
B, C are verbal words or morphemes:不见不散、不瞅不睬
B, C are adjectival words or morphemes:不屈不挠、不紧不慢、不冷不热、无忧无虑

3.1.5. When A Is a Pronoun, B and C Can Be Nouns, or Morphemes

B and C are noun words or morphemes:各种各样、各式各样

In our analysis of ABAC construction, we categorized the examples into two main groups based on the internal syntactic relations between A and B and A and C: modifier-head and verbal-object. Out of the total examples, 17 (44.7%) belonged to the modifier-head category, while 13 (34.2%) belonged to the verbal-object category. This pattern is consistent with the findings of He's study [5]. According to Modern Chinese [7], the modifier-head and verb-object structures reflect the syntactic features of "modification" and "domination".

3.2. Semantic Properties

Cao's (2000) analysis divides the semantic relationships between AB and AC into two categories: reinforcing and compatible. However, Zhao [8] considers these relationships as adhesive and non-adhesive. This study agrees with Cao's viewpoint that the semantic relationship between AB and AC must be related. Nevertheless, there are also special cases that require further analysis.

3.2.1. Reinforcement

In Cao's research [9], it was noted that for the first type of ABAC construction, the semantics is not merely a simple combination of AB and AC, but rather a new semantic compound. It is believed that

AB + AC serve to reinforce each other. For instance, the term "大吃大喝" (literally translated to "big eat and big drink") refers to eating without restraint, constantly. Semantically, "大喝" is not the focus of the expression, but it serves to express and strengthen the state of "大吃". Thus, it can be said that the effect of AB+AC is greater than ABAC. Meanwhile, Zhao's argument can also be applied to the concept of reinforcement. Zhao [9] pointed out that AC cannot stand alone but instead sticks to AB, making this category adhesive. For "大吃大喝", "大喝" sticks to "大吃" and cannot be used independently, but only as a modifier to "big eat".

3.2.2. Compatibility

Cao [9] proposed that the second type of ABAC has a simple addition and combination semantic relationship between AB and AC. After splitting, AB and AC represent two compound words respectively. Compatible means that AB+AC can express the original meaning of the ABAC construction. For instance, "不冷不热" ("not cold and not hot") means moderate temperature, neither too hot nor too cold. In this case, "不冷" + "不热" equals "不冷不热," achieving semantically compatible effects that represent average conditions. According to Zhao [8], AB and AC are separable, non-adhesive, and non-modifying, and "不冷" "不热" can be used independently.

4. The Application of ABAC Construction in Chinese Second Language Teaching

Wang and Marhaba [10] suggest that when teaching constructive grammar, it is important to teach both the syntactic and semantic features of the construction. In the following sections, we will discuss these aspects in more detail.

After discussing the syntactic features of ABAC, we discovered that the most common ways to construct ABAC structures are through modifier-head and verb-object. Wang and Sue [11] proposed the application of the class clustering rule, which suggests that if the embedded components (B and C) belong to the same lexical category, AB and AC will have the same syntactic relationship, and ABAC structures can form the same clustering class. For example, "有声有色"(having sound and color, which means a wonderful and vivid performance) is a verb-object structure, in which the verb "have" dominates "sound" and "color". If students know that the verb-object ABAC structure has a dominant relationship, they can relate it to "做人做事" (doing human and doing things, means to stand in society) in which the verb "do" governs the two objects "people" and "things". By clustering structures together, students can more easily understand the rules of B and C collocation and the syntactic pattern of expressions.

Regarding the semantic features of ABAC construction, according to Zhang [12], the unique characteristic of "ABAC" construction is its stability and regularity. In this construction, "A" remains unchanged, while "BC" can be replaced. However, the replaceable components cannot be entered randomly. Based on our previous investigation of the semantic features of ABAC, we found a semantically compatible relationship between ABAC elements. This relationship can be used as a law of ABAC construction to enhance our teaching methods. As an example, in the phrase "不紧不慢" ("not fast and not slow"), the dual use of "not" signifies a negative state that denies both the states of fast and slow, and instead indicates a middle state. The words "不紧" and "不慢" can also be used independently. To teach this structure, the teacher can explain the meaning of the dual negations, and then replace the vocabulary with an alternative idiom as "不冷不热" ("not cold and not hot") which has the same internal structure and indicates a state of continuous negation. By consistently listing similar internal states, students can grasp the structure of ABAC construction and replace the elements to learn more about this construction.

To facilitate constructive teaching scenarios, diagramming and activity-based teaching methods can be employed. Wang & Marhaba [10] suggested that teachers can design a picture based on a scene from a poem, and students can guess the corresponding verse. This approach can be similarly adapted to teach ABAC construction. For instance, when teaching "载歌载舞" ("singing and dancing"), the teacher could present a picture of people singing and dancing, and then ask students to guess the construction of the picture. Alternatively, students could organize activities such as singing and dancing, and then guess the construction. Such methods help students understand the vividness of the construction more intuitively, increase their learning enthusiasm, and reduce the difficulty of learning.

5. Conclusions

Through an analysis of the internal structure of the ABAC construction, we have identified that the modifier-head and verb-object are the main structure types. These structures reflect the syntactic features of "modification" and "domination", respectively. Additionally, the ABAC construction has compatible and reinforcing semantic features, which allow it to achieve the effect that AB+AC is equal to ABAC, or AB+AC>ABAC. In the teaching section, syntax, semantics, and pedagogy are three important aspects. Students can better grasp the syntactic relations of constructive components through analogies and be guided to understand the semantic laws of construction. This will help them to understand the connotation of construction more vividly in the teaching context. This study enhances our systematic understanding of the features of ABAC construction and provides a reference for teaching Chinese construction as a second language.

References

[1] Adele, G. (1995). Constructions: A Construction Grammar Approach to Argument Structure. Chicago University Press.

[2] Chen, M. (2009). The Enlightenment of Construction Grammar Theory to Second Language Teaching. Language Teaching and Research.

[3] Chen, M. (2009). The Enlightenment of Construction Grammar Theory to Second Language Teaching. Language Teaching and Research.

[4] Shen, X. (2013). The CAB Model of Chinese ABAC Idiom Constructions. Sichuan International Studies University.

[5] He, P. (2012). Research on Chinese ABAC four-character pattern under the nonlinear phonological structure. Northeast Normal University.

[6] Huang, L. (2006). The ABAC Format of Modern Chinese and Its Error Analysis in Second Language Acquisition. Minzu University of China.

[7] Huang, B., & Liao, X. (2017). Modern Chinese, Gao deng jiao yu chu ban she.

[8] Zhao, Y., & Bi, J. (1997). The Comparison of Chinese and Foreign Languages and Cultures and the Teaching of Chinese as a Foreign Language. Beijing Language and Culture University Press.

[9] Cao, D. (2000). Saying "ABAC" construction. Journal of Tai'an Teachers College, 46-49.

[10] Wang, X., & Marhaba, A. (2020). Application of Construction Theory in Chinese Teaching. University Chinese Construction.

[11] Wang, J., & Sue, S. (2021). On the Principle of Clustering in the Teaching of Chinese Idioms as a Foreign Language--Taking the "Not X Not Y" Idiom Format to be Embedded as an Example. Journal of Wuyi University, (40).

[12] Zhang, X. (2019). A Study on the Learning Situation of Chinese Language "ABAC" Format for International Students in Middle and Advanced Levels in Central Asia. Xinjiang University.