Verbs of body movement and event quantification: a corpus investigation on patterns yi-V, yi-V-yi-V, V-le jǐ V and V-le yǐjī xià

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Previous studies show that each of the various devices dedicated in Mandarin Chinese to event quantification (verbal reduplication, the so-called verbal classifiers, but also preverbal yi, ‘once’, and iterative patterns such as “yi-V-yi-V”) exhibit specific semantic features which may account for their pragmatic and narrative values. We investigate here the behavior of some 30 frequent verbs expressing body movement, which occur in a set of patterns encoding event quantification: verbal reduplication (VV, V-yi-V, V-le(-yi)-V, V(-le)-jǐ-V, V(-le) yí xià, V(-le) jǐ xià, and also yi-V and yi-V-yi-V. We selected verbs of body movement for the following reasons:

a) Previous studies show that verbs expressing body movement are prevalent among the verbs that appear in patterns V(-le) jǐ xià (Gan Zhilin 2005), yi-V (Chen Guang 2003 etc.), and yi-V-yi-V (Yin Zhiping 1996).

b) Many of the body movement verbs that were attested in our corpus for several of the patterns we investigate are not listed in A Dictionary of Verb Usage in Modern Chinese (Meng Cong et al. 1999). This dictionary provides information about verb reduplication and pattern V(-le) jǐ xià.

c) Body movement and body contact verbs also seem to be involved in syntactic and semantic distinctions proposed in previous works on event quantification. For instance Paris (2013, Verbal reduplication and verbal classifiers in Chinese) argued that there are weak and strong verbal classifiers in Chinese, and that only the latter may co-occur with numerals other than 1 or 2 with event-counting function. Zhang (Niina Zhang, 2014, the syntax of event-internal and event-external verbal classifiers) argues that Mandarin verbal classifiers may encode either event-internal frequentative meaning or event-external frequentative meaning (events repeated during disconnected occasions). Strong verbal classifiers and event-internal frequentative meaning both tend to involve some kind of body motion or body contact (‘knock, push, poke, beat, punch, jump, hit, kick, shoot, slap, cut’, etc., see also Li Yunyu 2001 for a study on verbs which occur with event-counting yí xià).

d) The event-counting reading of “V yíxia” as “V once” and the possibility to fit in the pattern “yi-V-yi-V” have also been mentioned as possible tests to identify semelfactives (see Peck, Lin and Sun, 2013, Aspectual Classification of Mandarin Chinese Verbs: A perspective of Scale Structure, Chen Qianrui, 2002, A study of Chinese Iteratives, and Ma Qingzhu 2004). Event-internal frequentatives (see c above) correspond to the “multiplicative meaning” discussed by Xrakovskij (1997:28, Typology of Iterative Constructions), who notes that it closely correlates with the semelfactive meaning.

Based on the data gathered through our investigation, we discuss the following issues:

1) What distinguishes patterns yi-V, V-le-V and V-le yíxià for a single past event?

2) How do “yi-V-yi-V” and “yi-V” interact? To what extent can these patterns be related with semelfactivity and iterativity (as was suggested in some previous studies)?

3) What does our corpus survey tell us about the pragmatic, textual and narrative uses of each of these patterns?