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Research Article

Nominal-To-Verbal Conversion In Chinese: Semantics And Structure

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the process of converting nouns into verbs in Chinese, highlighting the syntactic and semantic mechanisms that govern this transformation. In Chinese, nouns gradually lose their referential function and argument structure while acquiring eventive, stative, and agentive properties. Light verbs play a crucial role by providing a syntactic framework that allows nouns to verbalize, sometimes passing through an intermediate adjectival stage before becoming full verbs. The process illustrates a semantic and syntactic continuum: nouns first function as predicates, then acquire adjectival or stative characteristics, and finally evolve into verbs. Examples from modern Chinese demonstrate how argument roles and semantic features are systematically restructured during this conversion. This study sheds light on the dynamic interaction between syntax and semantics in Chinese noun verbalization and contributes to understanding cross-linguistic mechanisms of grammaticalization.

KEYWORDS

Chinese linguistics, noun-to-verb conversion, light verbs, nominal verbalization, semantic shift, syntactic merging, argument restructuring.

INTRODUCTION

The process of converting a noun into a verb is characterized by the loss of its referential function as a semantic role and the acquisition of eventive,



stative, or agentive properties, which is realized through interaction with a light verb. Under the influence of a light verb, the noun sequentially exhibits eventive characteristics, followed by stative features, and ultimately agentive properties, that is, it “begins to act,” transforming into an adjective or a verb. In this process, the noun functions as the complement of the light verb and, through syntactic merging, moves into the verbal position.

According to Hale and Keyser (1993), in English, noun-to-verb conversion is achieved with the participation of the light verb «have». It is important to emphasize that in this context, have does not carry its conventional meaning of “possess” but functions as a light verb, or a syntactic mechanism for verbalization. Its primary role is structural: it creates a syntactic position into which the noun can move in order to function as a verb, acquiring the properties of an action or an event. After merging with the light verb have, the noun, serving as its complement, occupies the verbal position and becomes a full verb (for detailed discussion, see C.T. James Huang, Y.H. Audrey Li, YaFei Li, 2009).

Examples of light verb have in English:

1. John had a nap.

The noun nap is verbalized via the light verb had, denoting the action “to take a nap”. [Structure: light verb have + noun → verb].

2. She had a dance.

The noun dance is verbalized as “to dance” through the light verb had.

3. They had a talk.

The noun talk is verbalized as “to talk” via the light verb had.

In Chinese, a similar conversion is also achieved through syntactic merging with a light verb. Besides the English-like have structure, there exist other light verb constructions that facilitate the transformation of nouns into verbs (see Cheng Jie, 2010; Wang Ming, Peng Jiafa, 2018).

Examples illustrating the stages of noun verbalization in Chinese:

毒药 — 很毒 — 毒死他 [noun — adjective — verb]

屋子里有土 — 穿得很土 [noun — adjective]

Thus, light verbs, such as have in English or their analogues in Chinese, act as a syntactic mechanism that allows nouns to “begin to act” and gradually acquire verbal properties, sometimes through an intermediate adjectival stage, reflecting the dynamic process of nominal-to-verbal conversion across languages.

The conversion of nouns into verbs represents a dynamic and multi-stage process. During this process, a noun originally functioning as a verb loses its argument position, that is, its role as a complement (object), and its referential semantic role gradually disappears. The noun begins to shift toward a non-argument function, and its semantics

transition to a non-referential or non-argument meaning.

This transformation typically proceeds in several stages: first, the noun functions as a predicate, then it may take on adjectival properties, and finally it becomes a full-fledged verb. The process can be schematically represented as follows:

1. [Noun → Noun as Predicate]

Referential meaning (entity) → Attributive meaning (property)

(a) Example: 草鸡 (free-range chicken) → 草鸡 (he raised a free-range chicken)

In the stage where a noun functions as a predicate, its referential meaning is lost and replaced by an attributive meaning. The noun ceases to act as an argument and assumes a non-argument role. The shift from argument to non-argument can be illustrated as:

Argument (subject/object) → Non-argument (predicate)

(b) Example: 白痴 (idiot)

As argument: 白痴来了 (the idiot came)

As non-argument: 你少白痴 (don't act foolish)

Additionally, semantic roles such as agent, patient, or instrument are transformed into features or attributes of the entity:

(c) Example: 草包 (straw bag)

As argument: 雨天用草包防洪 (use straw bags to prevent flooding)

As attribute: 的确草包一个 (truly a straw bag of a person)

The noun then undergoes further transformation from attributive meaning to a stative meaning, ultimately resulting in an adjectival form. This process can be represented as follows:

2. [Noun → Adjective]

Entity → Stative (state)

Argument → Non-argument

(a) Example: 土 (soil/dirt)

As argument: 屋里有土 (there is soil in the room)

As adjective: 穿得很土 (dressed in a very rustic style)

This multi-stage process illustrates how nouns progressively lose their argument structure and referential semantics while acquiring verbal or adjectival properties, reflecting the dynamic nature of noun-to-verb (and noun-to-adjective) conversion in Chinese.

The final stage of noun-to-verb conversion involves the transformation of a noun from a stative meaning into an action-oriented meaning. This stage can be schematically represented as follows:

3. [Noun → Verb]

Entity → Action



(a) Example: 梦 (dream)

Stative usage: 做梦 (to have a dream)

Action usage: 梦到发财了 (to dream of becoming rich)

Throughout the process of noun-to-verb conversion, a continuous semantic and syntactic continuum emerges, encompassing all stages from initial referential noun usage to full verbalization. The continuum can be summarized as follows:

(1) Noun → Noun as Predicate → Adjective → Verb

(2) Entity → Property → Stative → Action

This continuum illustrates the gradual semantic shift of nouns: initially, they denote concrete entities, then acquire attributive and stative properties, and finally assume action-oriented meanings. Such a progression reflects the dynamic nature of nominal-to-verbal conversion in Chinese, highlighting the systematic restructuring of argument roles and semantic properties as nouns evolve into verbs.

Although the verbalization of nouns has been discussed in previous studies, most of these approaches have primarily focused on cognitive or semantic perspectives. In contrast, the present study approaches noun-to-verb conversion from a generative grammar framework, integrating the notions of argument structure and semantic roles, along with the theory of light verbs, in order to systematically examine the underlying motivations and classifications of this phenomenon.

First, the motivation for noun-to-verb conversion can be attributed to the weakening of the noun's referential function. This semantic shift enables nouns to acquire eventive, stative, and agentive properties, thereby creating the structural and semantic conditions necessary for verbalization.

Second, the conversion process involves significant changes in both argument structure and semantic roles. Specifically, nouns gradually lose their argumental function, are no longer constrained by determiners, and progressively assume the status of lexical roots (nominal morphemes), which allows them to convert freely into verbs.

Third, noun-to-verb conversion demonstrates clear diachronic developmental patterns, leading to a bifurcation into two distinct lexical categories. On the one hand, monosyllabic nouns may evolve into derived nouns through affixation or form compound nouns with other morphemes, thereby maintaining their nominal status. On the other hand, monosyllabic nouns that convert into verbs retain a zero-derived form and function as monosyllabic verbs, ceasing to operate as nouns. As a result, the number of "self-referential" noun conversions remains limited, preserving the unmarked nature of this process and reflecting the morphological simplicity characteristic of the Chinese language.

Furthermore, the study highlights that noun-to-verb conversion is inherently dynamic and multi-staged, involving both semantic and syntactic restructuring. Throughout this process, nouns progressively lose their referential function and argument structure, transitioning from concrete

entities to attributive and stative meanings, and ultimately acquiring action-oriented properties as verbs. Importantly, light verbs—such as have in English or their functional analogues in Chinese—serve as crucial syntactic mechanisms that facilitate this transformation by providing a structural framework into which nouns can move and verbalize. Moreover, the process reveals a semantic continuum, whereby nouns pass through intermediate stages—including functioning as predicates and adjectives—before achieving full verbal status. This continuum demonstrates how argument roles, such as agent, patient, or instrument, are gradually reinterpreted as entity features or attributes during the conversion process. Examples from both English and Chinese not only underscore the universality of this mechanism but also highlight language-specific variations in the employment of light verbs.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, noun-to-verb conversion exemplifies the dynamic interplay between syntax and semantics, illustrating how linguistic elements can evolve in both function and meaning. Understanding this process provides valuable insights into the mechanisms of verbalization, the

role of light verbs, and broader patterns of grammaticalization and lexical innovation in natural language.

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