From caused-motion to spatial configuration
Placement verbs in Mandarin

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This study re-examines Mandarin Placement verbs from a lexical-constructional perspective and redefines the class with semantic-to-syntactic properties pertaining to lexicalization patterns in Mandarin. It aims to show that Placement verbs lexicalize a cognitively salient causal chain that extends from an agentive motion to locational change and to resultant spatial configuration. The event chain serves as the conceptual basis for linking motion-triggered events and states that are syntactically distinct in profiling the three contingent stages: caused to move → caused to be → spatially grounded. Although English Placement verbs (put, hang, etc.) are typically taken to be exemplars of the caused-motion construction, this study shows that Placement verbs may be distinguished syntactically and semantically from pure Caused-Motion verbs and posture-based Spatial Configuration verbs. While the three classes of verbs may be viewed as demonstrating respectively the individuated stages of the proposed event chain, Placement verbs are the only class that encompasses all three event types in their meanings and are associated with a wide range of semantically compatible constructions. The three stages are discussed with graphical representations and collocational distinctions. Further sub-classifications of the Mandarin Placement verbs are provided with different semantic profiles for each subclass. Crucial to the analysis is the fact that location-profiled uses of Placement verbs outnumber path-profiled uses in Mandarin, indicating a categorical shift from motional to locational predication. By teasing out the language-specific and class-specific lexicalization patterns that are collo-constructionally definable, the study demonstrates the usefulness of a lexical-constructional approach in fine-tuning verbal semantic distinctions for cross-linguistic and cross-categorial comparisons.

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