The Development of VOC to VCO in Mai-Cantonese of Sanya in Hainan*

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This paper examines an on-going change of the resultative verb construction (結果補語) in the Mai (邁話) dialect spoken in Sanya (三亞), Hainan Province. Our fieldwork data show that two patterns co-exist for the resultative verb construction which differ in terms of the relative word order of the complement (C) and the object (O): VOC vs. VCO (such as da laoshu si 打老鼠死 vs. dasi laoshu 打死老鼠 ‘beat the mouse to death’). After considering a number of linguistic and extra-linguistic factors as well as the results of our fieldwork conducted among native Mai speakers of different ages, we argue that VOC is an older pattern while the VCO pattern is used more often by younger speakers, which can be primarily attributed to the influence of Standard Chinese as a result of language contact.

Key words: resultative verb construction, languages in Sanya of Hainan Province, language contact, diachronic change

1. Introduction

The Mai dialect investigated in this study is now mainly spoken in Sanya, at the southernmost tip of Hainan Province. In the past, Hainanese (海南話) and the Li (黎話) and Huihui (回輝) languages have been recognized as the three major linguistic varieties spoken in Hainan Province (see, for example, The Language Atlas of China, maps A4 and B8). In fact, according to the recent sociolinguistic surveys conducted by the authors’ team (Tsou et al. 2007b), Sanya has at least eight distinct linguistic varieties spoken as a first language by the inhabitants. Some of them are Sinitic languages such as Standard Chinese, Hainanese (海南話, a variety of the Min dialects), Mai (邁話, related to the Yue dialects according to Ouyang et al. 2005), Jun (軍話, literally ‘army speech’, a northern dialect brought by the army during the Ming dynasty, see Qiu 2005),

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Danzhou (儋州話, see Ting 1986) and Danjia (蜑家, a variety of the Cantonese dialects spoken by boat people). Other non-Sinitic languages include Li (黎話, of the Tai-Kadai family, see Ouyang & Zheng 1980, 1983), Huihui (回輝話, an Austroasiatic language related to the Cham language of Vietnam and Cambodia, see Zheng 1997) and Miao (苗話, a member of the Hmong-Mien family).

Approximately 15,000 people speak Mai (Ouyang et al. 2005) with about one-third living in the village of Yanglan (羊欄村), in Phoenix Township (鳳凰鎮), near the Sanya international airport. There is also a large population of Mai speakers in the village of Shuinan (水南村), Yacheng (崖城), roughly 50 kilometers west of Sanya.

Little research has been conducted on the Mai dialect, especially in terms of syntax. One of the reasons for this is that the linguistic affiliation of the Mai dialect is still unclear. Liang (1984) considers Mai to be a variety of Cantonese, while Huang & Li (1987), by comparing the Mai dialect with the dialects of Danzhou (儋州), Wenchang (文昌), Taishan (台山) and Linchuan (臨川), claim that Mai contains features of Cantonese, Min and Gan. According to their extensive fieldwork, Jiang, Ouyang & Tsou (2007) observe that Mai has two vowels which basically correspond to the long and short vowels [a] and [ə] in Standard Cantonese. Furthermore, Mai has three entering tones (i.e. 上陰入, 下陰入 and 陽入). On the other hand, Mai also possesses some features such as the implosive initials [ʔb] and [ʔd] that are typical of the Min dialect of Hainan. The reflexes of Middle Chinese voiced stops and affricate initials become voiceless aspirated stops in all tones in Mai. This feature is typical across most Gan and Hakka dialects. These phonological traits strongly suggest that Mai has assimilated phonological features from different dialects in the course of development.

In terms of syntax, Mai is a typical Southern dialect. For example, the comparative construction has the structure [NP1 V 通過 NP2]. The sentence “he is taller than me” is rendered as [ki 55 kou 13 kua 33 녀 33] 佢高過我 ‘he-high-surpass-I’. The double-object construction has the direct object preceding the indirect object, such as [녀 33 ㄠ 13 ań 5 bun 33 ㄦ 13 ㄠ 13 ki 55] 我分一本書分佢 ‘I-give-a-CL-book-give-s/he, I gave a book to him/her’. The gender marker comes after the head noun it modifies. Examples include [ㄠ 55 ㄠ 13] 牛公 ‘bull’ and [ㄠ 13 na 33] 雞乸 ‘hen’.

Another syntactic structure deserving our attention is the resultative verb construction (結果補語). Besides the resultative-verb construction, there are other types of verb-complement structures such as extent complement, phase complement and potential complement. In this paper, focus is placed only on the resultative complement.

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1 The use of 分 as the double-object verb may be an influence of the Hakka dialect.
2 Besides the resultative-verb construction, there are other types of verb-complement structures such as extent complement, phase complement and potential complement. In this paper, focus is placed only on the resultative complement.
The Development of VOC to VCO in Mai-Cantonese of Sanya in Hainan

(1) ki⁵⁵ tshẽ³³ ŋɔ³³ ʔdi³³ θan¹³ ʔbɔŋ¹³
渠扯我的衫崩
s/he tear I DE shirt broken
‘S/he tore apart my shirt.’

In (1), [tshẽ³³] ‘to tear’ is the main verb (V), [ʔbɔŋ¹³] ‘broken’ is the resultative complement (C) and [ŋɔ³³ ʔdi³³ θan¹³] 我的衫 ‘I-DE-shirt, my shirt’ is the object (O). The sentence has the word order of VOC.

At the same time, it is noted that sentence (1) can also be expressed with the word order of VCO. Consider (2):

(2) ki⁵⁵ tshẽ³³ ʔbɔŋ¹³ ŋɔ³³ ʔdi³³ θan¹³
渠扯崩我的衫
s/he tear broken I DE shirt
‘S/he tore apart my shirt.’

From the point of view of communication and cognitive processing, it can be argued that it is more effective and economical for a language to have one surface form for each syntactic construction. The co-existence of two word order patterns for the resultative verb construction in Mai thus raises some interesting questions. For example, which pattern (VOC or VCO) is native in Mai? Why and how did the alternate pattern come into existence?

2. VOC and VCO in the Mai dialect

In the following sections, we will trace the relative chronology of the two patterns (VOC and VCO) in the Mai dialect. We claim that VOC is an older pattern while VCO is a new pattern borrowed from Standard Chinese as a result of language contact. Our argument is based on linguistic and extra-linguistic factors. These include (a) iconicity; (b) the historical development of the resultative verb construction in the Chinese language; (c) the migratory history of the Mai people from the mainland to Hainan; and (d) language contact between Mai and non-Sinitic languages such as Li.

2.1 VOC and VCO in terms of iconicity

When we compare VOC and VCO, we note that the former reflects the temporal sequence of the action and the consequence observed in the real world: an action (V) is instigated by an agent on the object (O) which then reaches a resultant state (C). The
VCO pattern, on the other hand, does not fully conform to the temporal sequence of the action because the resultative complement (C) precedes the object (O).

It has been claimed that human language is not totally arbitrary in the sense that an iconic relationship between language and human experience can exist. In other words, our grammar can be shaped by iconicity. This suggests that the surface form of a syntactic construction usually begins in an order that parallels our experience in the real world (see Greenberg 1966, and Haiman 1980, 1985). In this regard, we have support for the postulation that VOC predates VCO in Mai.

In addition to the resultative verb construction, there are other syntactic constructions in Chinese that are iconically motivated according to the temporal sequence of the action (see, for example, Tai 1993). Consider the following example:

(3) 張三 從 香港 經過 珠海 到 澳門
Zhang San cong Xianggang jingguo Zhuhai dao Aomen
Zhang-San from Hong Kong pass Zhuhai arrive Macau
‘Zhang San went to Macau from Hong Kong through Zhuhai.’

It is clear that in (3), the sequence of the three locations follow the actual route that Zhang San took, i.e. starting from Hong Kong, then to Zhuhai and finally to Macau. It is interesting to note that such a parallel to the temporal sequence is not found in English.

If iconicity plays a role in shaping Chinese grammar, we would then expect that the same phenomenon (i.e. VOC predating VCO) could also be found in other dialects of the Chinese language. In the next section, we examine the diachronic development of the resultative verb construction in the Chinese language.

2.2 The diachronic development of the resultative verb construction in Chinese

The resultative verb construction in most modern Chinese dialects has the VCO order. Consider the following examples:

ta da po le beizi
s/he hit break ASP cup
‘S/he broke the cup.’
The Development of VOC to VCO in Mai-Cantonese of Sanya in Hainan

(5) 佢[打]V[噉]C咗[隻]O (Hong Kong Cantonese)

k’ɵy13 ta35 lan22 tsɔ35 tsεk3 pui55

‘s/he hit break ASP CL cup

‘s/he broke the cup.’ (他打破了杯子)


quick ADV wash clean CL hand (Li & Chang 1992:455)

‘Wash your hands clean quickly.’ (快點把手洗乾淨)

(7) 他眼睛一鼓嘍,[嚇]V[死]C[人]O (Changsha 長沙 Xiang)

he eye once open-wide scare die person SFP (Bao et al. 1999:311)

‘Once he opens his eyes wide, it can scare people to death.’ (他的眼睛瞪得老大,嚇死人)

(8) 衣裳[脫]V[落]C[它]O (Wuxi 無錫 Wu)

clothes strip off it (Qian 1992:1010)

‘strip off the clothes’ (脱掉衣服)

However, it has been reported that the VCO pattern only came into existence around the Southern and Northern dynasties (南北朝) (see, for example, Jiang 2000, Yue 2001 and Shi & Li 2001).³ Around the same time, VOC was another pattern expressing the resultative verb meaning. For example,


jin dang da ru qian liang chi zhe 卷11

now should beat you front two teeth broken

‘Now someone should break your two front teeth.’

(10) 即便以嘴[啄]V[雌鴿]O [殺]C (Bai yu jing 百喻經, 百喻經 二鴿喻)

ji bian yi zui zhuo cige sha Erge yu 二鴿喻

immediately then use beak peck female pigeon die

‘Then peck the female pigeon with its beak which causes it to die’


Zhou Zhongzhi yin jiu zui 酒醉雅量

Zhou Zhongzhi drink liquor drunk

‘Zhou Zhongzhi drank and got drunk.’

³ Notice that the complement (C) is also a verb (stative or intransitive). When tracing the historical development of VCO, scholars distinguished VCO from the V₁V₂O structure which has two concatenating verbs followed by an object.
Starting in the Song dynasty, the use of the VOC pattern began to decline and the VCO pattern became dominant (see Shi & Li 2001 and Jiang & Cao 2005). In other words, VOC was a major pattern for the resultative verb construction until the Song dynasty, after which point VCO replaced VOC. The historical development of the resultative verb construction in the Chinese language supports our claim that VOC predates VCO.

2.3 The development of the Mai dialect

Besides language-internal factors, there are extra-linguistic factors which can account for the dominance of VOC in Mai.

The migratory history of Mai speakers can also give us some clues on the relative chronology of VOC and VCO. According to the genealogical record of a Mai speaking informant’s family, their ancestors migrated from the mainland to Wenchang (文昌), Hainan, around the late 10th century. They subsequently moved further southward along the east coast and then settled in the Sanya area. When combining the demographic history of the Mai people and the diachronic development of the resultative verb construction in the Chinese language, as outlined in §2.2, we can postulate that the language of the early Mai people brought to Hainan still used the VOC order.4 The language then became isolated from other Sinitic languages and did not follow mainstream developments. Therefore, VOC continued to be used as the dominant pattern and did not undergo any change in word order to VCO, as in Standard Chinese.

2.4 Language contact

As discussed in §1, there are at least eight linguistic varieties spoken in Sanya. In other words, most people are multilingual and mutual influence among these languages is expected (see, for example, the various phonological features of Mai described in §1). Therefore, there has been on-going language contact among these linguistic varieties. In particular, the Li language (黎話) of the Tai-Kadai family deserves our attention. The Li people are understood to be the earliest settlers on Hainan.5 It is interesting to note that Li also uses a VOC resultative verb construction. Consider (12) and (13):

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4 It is irrelevant to our argument whether or not a distinct Mai dialect was in existence when the Mai ancestors moved to Hainan.

5 The first settlers of other languages or dialects such as Jun, Huihui and Min went to Hainan much later.
The Development of VOC to VCO in Mai-Cantonese of Sanya in Hainan

(12) 吃 草 飽 那 一 隻 水牛 (Ouyang & Zheng 1980:100)
\[
\text{tei}^5 \text{kən}^4 \text{khəm}^1 \text{ke}^4 \text{kur}^2 \text{puən}^4 \text{tshei}^1
\]
et grass full that one CL buffalo
‘the buffalo which has been well fed with grass’

(13) 我 做 工 完 也 休息 (Ouyang & Zheng 1983:568)
\[
\text{hou}^1 \text{vu:k}^7 \text{koŋ}^1 \text{ba:i}^3 \text{ŋan}^1 \text{tshur:k}^7
\]
I do work finish also rest
‘I will rest after finishing the work.’

In other words, contact between the Li language and Mai has facilitated the use of VOC.

2.5 Summary

We have considered different factors to work out the relative chronology of the development of VOC and VCO patterns in Mai. All of these factors have combined to suggest that VOC predates VCO. The development of the resultative verb construction in the Mai dialect can be outlined as follows:

When the Mai people migrated to Hainan in the late 10th century, the dominant pattern of the resultative verb construction in the language they brought with them was VOC. Their language became isolated and did not follow the language in the mainland to develop into VCO. Furthermore, the contact with the Li language, which also uses VOC, has contributed to maintaining VOC as the dominant pattern.

3. The increasing use of VCO in Mai

While VOC is claimed to be the native pattern in the Mai dialect, it is found that VCO is also used, especially among young and educated speakers. It is worth exploring the reason for the increasing use of VCO, and an obvious factor deserving consideration could be the influence of Standard Chinese, or Modern Standard Chinese, in which VCO is used.6

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6 A similar situation of language contact is also found in the Cantonese dialects of Nanning (南寧) and Baise (百色) as well as in Pinghua (平話) of the Central Guangxi region where both VOC and VCO patterns also co-exist. According to Kwok (2010), the VOC pattern was introduced from the Zhuang language. For details on the use of VOC and VCO in the Nanning Cantonese dialect, see Lin & Qin (2008).
The fast-changing sociolinguistic situation of Sanya in the last two decades has given rise to a situation in which Standard Chinese has become a relatively important linguistic variety in the community because it is the official language used by the government and in schools. One significant consequence is that some native speakers of Mai (such as school children) have shifted their home language to Standard Chinese so that a growing number of young Mai speakers are using Standard Chinese more frequently than their mother tongue, especially with their siblings and parents (Tsou et al. 2007a, 2007b, 2010, and Chin, Tsou & Mok 2008).

In addition, the syntax of Mai has also undergone significant change due to the impact of Standard Chinese. Aside from the resultative verb construction, we also note that some Mai speakers have begun to use the double-object construction with the indirect object preceding the direct object such as [ŋɔɔŋn ki55 aʔθi13] ʰ我分佢一本書’ for ‘I gave him/her a book’.7

4. A survey on the use of VOC and VCO in Mai

To gain a better understanding on the use of VOC and VCO in Mai, we did a preliminary study with three native Mai speakers in 2005. The background information of the three speakers is summarized below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Speaker 1</th>
<th>Speaker 2</th>
<th>Speaker 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education level</td>
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<td>Junior secondary</td>
<td>Junior secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Retired (former accounting clerk)</td>
<td>Village secretary</td>
<td>Shop assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother tongue</td>
<td>Mai</td>
<td>Mai</td>
<td>Mai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of other languages or dialects</td>
<td>Standard Chinese, Hainanese</td>
<td>Standard Chinese, Hainanese</td>
<td>Standard Chinese, Hainanese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language used at home</td>
<td>Mai</td>
<td>Mai</td>
<td>Mai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages used outside home/village</td>
<td>Standard Chinese, Hainanese</td>
<td>Standard Chinese, Hainanese</td>
<td>Standard Chinese, Hainanese</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7 The Li language is also found to be influenced by the Standard Chinese resultative verb construction. For example, the resultative verb construction can also be expressed with the VCO pattern (see Example (12) above): 我做完工也休息 (Ouyang & Zheng 1983:568).
While Mai is the mother tongue of these three speakers, they all also use Hainanese with other locals as well as Standard Chinese when they are outside of their local communities, in areas such as downtown and when using public transportation. All three also regularly watch TV and most programs are broadcast in Standard Chinese.

The survey was based on a list of about 30 sentences containing the resultative verb construction. The speakers were asked to produce the sentences in the Mai dialect first. If the VOC or the VCO pattern was used, the speaker would then be checked with the usage of the alternate pattern. Some examples are given below:

(14) 火燒死三個人  hua33 θiu13 θi33 θan13 kɔ21 non55 [VCO]
火燒三個人死  hua33 θiu13 θan13 kɔ21 non55 θi33 [VOC]
‘The fire burnt three people to death.’

(15) 剖開西瓜  pɔ55 hai13 θɔi13 kua13 [VCO]
剖西瓜開  pɔ55 θɔi13 kua13 hai13 [VOC]
‘Cut open the water melon.’

(16) 渠扭斷狗的頸骨  ki55 nau33 thuan21 kau33 ?di33 huaŋ21 kut3 [VCO]
渠扭狗的頸骨斷  ki55 nau33 kau33 ?di33 huaŋ21 kut3 thuan21 [VOC]
‘S/he twisted and broke the dog’s neck.’

(17) 渠砍斷木幹  ki55 khɛʔ5 thuan21 muk3 kuan21 [VCO]
渠砍木幹斷  ki55 khɛʔ5 muk3 kuan21 thuan21 [VOC]
‘S/he chopped off the piece of wood.’

(18) 渠的車碰死人  ki55 ?di33 tsha13 phuŋ33 θi33 non55 [VCO]
渠的車碰人死  ki55 ?di33 tsha13 phuŋ33 non55 θi33 [VOC]
‘His/her car ran over and killed a man.’

(19) 渠打傷先生 (i.e. 老師)  ki55 ?da33 θen13 θen13 θiŋ13 [VCO]
渠打先生傷  ki55 ?da33 θen13 θen13 θiŋ13 [VOC]
‘S/he beat the teacher.’

The distribution of VOC and VCO used by the three speakers is summarized below.8

8 The total number of sentences obtained from each speaker differs because some sentences were not necessarily rendered with a resultative-verb construction. For example, the sentence 他打開了門 was expressed as 他開了門.
Some key observations are obtained on the use of the two patterns. First, the youngest speaker (i.e. speaker 3) used the VOC the least, at a rate equivalent to only one-third that of the other two older speakers. It is interesting and important to note that for some sentences, speakers 1 and 2 allow the use of either VOC or VCO. This represents a transitional stage in which the shift of VOC to VCO is ongoing. However, their acceptance of VCO as the exclusive pattern is still low when compared with speaker 3.

5. Concluding remarks

In this paper, we examine the possible origin and the development of the resultative verb construction in the Mai dialect. We argue that the VOC and VCO patterns represent two syntactic strata in the dialect.

The development of VOC to VCO involves the displacement of the resultative complement. Displacement of constituents is not only found in the resultative verb construction. Other examples include the locative phrase and the dative construction. Peyraube (1996:181) has argued that the word order change of the dative construction from V1 + V2 + IO + DO to V1 + DO + V2 + IO was probably analogical to the serial verb construction with the pattern V1 + O1 + V2 + O2, which could also be the origin of the resultative verb complement construction.9

Although Peyraube (1996) mainly explained the historical development of Chinese syntax by means of language-internal factors, such as analogy, reanalysis and grammaticalization, he also emphasized that external borrowing should be taken into consideration as well. In this paper, we take an integral approach to show how both language-internal and language-external factors can enhance our understanding of the development of the resultative verb construction in the Mai dialect.

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9 For more details on the relationship between the serial verb construction and the resultative-verb construction, see Li (1987).
References


