

Semantic Divergence in Mandarin Passives: A Distinctive Colloexeme Analysis of Agentive and Agentless *Bèi* Constructions

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In Mandarin, *bèi* constructions may occur in either agentive or agentless forms (Ting, 1998), as illustrated in Example (1) and (2). Previous studies have not systematically scrutinized whether agentive *bèi* tend to occur in positive contexts (e.g., Example 1) or whether agentless *bèi* constructions are more strongly associated with negative contexts (e.g., Example 2). The semantic preference of these two construction types therefore remain controversial in the literature (e.g., (Law & Hirschberg, 2025); Li and Thompson (1989)). To address this gap, the present study applies Distinctive Collexeme Analysis to investigate whether agentive and agentless *bèi* constructions exhibit different semantic associations.

(1) tā bèi mà le

‘S/He was scolded.’

(2) Zhāngsān bèi rénmin xuǎn zuò dàibiǎo le

‘Zhangsan has been elected by the people to be (their) representative.’

Data for this analysis were retrieved from the Sinica Balanced Corpus of Mandarin Chinese. This study employs Distinctive Collexeme Analysis (Gries & Stefanowitsch, 2004) to identify subtle functional distinctions between near-synonymous *bèi* constructions. Finally, the top 20 verbs most strongly associated with each *bèi* construction were visualized through word clouds, with font size representing the relative strength of attraction between lexemes and each construction.

The word cloud results (Figure 1-2) reveal a clear contrast in the collexemic profiles of agentless and agentive *bèi* constructions. In the agentless *bèi*, the strongest collexeme is 捕 (*bǔ* ‘arrest’), which occurs in strongly negative contexts (cf. Example 3). In contrast, the agentive *bèi* construction is most strongly associated with 吸引 (*xī yǐn*, ‘attract’), which tends to appear in neutral or even positive contexts (cf. Example 4). Overall, the collexeme analysis suggests that the agentive *bèi* construction largely retains the negative semantic core traditionally associated with *bèi*. By contrast, the agentless *bèi* construction shows evidence of semantic bleaching, consistent with previous findings reported in Guo and Chow (2013).

(3) tā bèi bǔ le

‘He was arrested.’

(4) tā bèi Lǐsì shēnshēn xīyǐn

‘S/He was deeply attracted by Lisi.’



Figure 1. Top 20 Collexemes
Agentless *bèi*



Figure 2. Top 20 Collexemes
Agentive *bèi*

This study demonstrates a systematic divergence between agentive and agentless *bèi* constructions based on corpus evidence. Distinctive Collexeme Analysis shows that agentless *bèi* is associated with negatively loaded verbs (e.g. 捕 ‘arrest’, 害 ‘harm’, and 殺 ‘kill’), whereas agentive *bèi* tends to co-occur with neutral or positive verbs (e.g. 吸引 ‘attract’, 感動 ‘touch’ and 知道 ‘know’). Importantly, this study provides a quantitative account of the lexical basis of *bèi*’s semantic differentiation, an aspect underexplored in previous work. The results indicate that the contrast between the two constructions is not merely structural, but is systematically reflected in their collexemic profiles. Overall, the findings support a constructional account in which agentive and agentless *bèi* exhibit distinct semantic preferences. More broadly, the findings help resolve the long-standing debate regarding the semantics of the Mandarin *bèi* construction by corpus-based evidence for construction-specific semantic tendency.

Reference:

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