The processing of Chinese coverb sentences

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Coverbs in Chinese form a complicated class of words in their properties and nature. The members in this category differ in their properties, for example some members can engage in A-not-A questions, but some cannot (Chen, 2002). Francis and Matthews (2006) grouped Cantonese coverbs into one homogenous category as verbs. Chen (2002) classified some coverbs as prepositions and others as both verbs and prepositions. A research question is how the parser represents coverbs in the mind. Using a self-paced reading experiment, we investigated the online processing of the coverb category. A norming test confirmed that there were two groups of coverb: the ZaiType coverb and the CongType coverb. The coverb phrase of CongType coverbs must co-occur with another verb phrase, whereas the coverb phrase of ZaiType coverbs can either stand alone with a subject noun phrase or co-occur with another verb phrase. This means that ZaiType coverbs can be the main predicate or a preposition.

(1) ***CongType coverbs***: __ **NP VP**

彼得剛才 [coverb phrase   從   黃山]   [verb遠眺]。
bide gangcai   **cong** huangshan   yuantiao
Peter just_now   from Mount_Huang gaze_afar
‘Peter gazed into the distance from Mount Huang just now.’

(2) ***ZaiType coverbs***: __ **NP (VP)**

(2a) *co-occuring with a verb*   (2b) *coverb phrase stand alone*

彼得剛才 [coverb phrase   在   黃山]   [verb遠眺]。 彼得剛才   在 黃山。
bide gangcai   **zai** huangshan   yuantiao bide gangcai   **zai**   huangshan
Peter just_now   at   Mount_Huang gaze_afar Peter just_now   at Mount_Huang
‘Peter gazed into the distance on Mount Huang just now.’ ‘Peter was on Mount Huang just now.’

In the self-paced reading experiment, we compared the reading times of sentences with ZaiType coverbs and CongType coverbs. The two factors were syntax ([coverb + N1 + N1] and [coverb + N1 + V]) and coverb-type (ZaiType coverb and CongType coverb). The results showed that the reading time of the final word of [ZaiType coverb + N1 + N2] was significantly longer than [CongType coverb + N1 + N2]. The reader may expect initially that the coverb was a preposition. At the final word which was the disambiguation point, the structure was reinterpreted when it turned out that there was no other verb in the sentence. The initially preferred [[PP P NP] V] structure was reinterpreted as [V NP]. No such reinterpretation can be made for the CongType coverb. The results suggested that the reader processes these two groups of coverb differently in the mind based on the different syntactic status of the coverbs. The result showed that the coverb is not a homogenous category.

Selected References

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