

The verb copying construction: A FormSet-based account

SHI Wenjun
Kyoto University seki.bunkun@gmail.com



KYOTO UNIVERSITY

1. Introduction

[The verb copying construction]

(1) 张三 擦 窗户 擦 得很 累
Zhangsan [_{VP} ca chuanguhu] [_{VP} *(ca) [_{XP} de hen lei]]
Zhangsan wipe window wipe DE very tired
'Zhangsan wiped the window and got tired.'

- Chinese has a phenomenon called the verb copying construction (henceforth VCC) (e.g., Cheng 2007, etc.), which allows two copies of an original verb to be co-pronounced in one clause and appears as 'Sub V1 Obj V2 XP' in which V1 and V2 are the same verb.
- When extra information *de hen lei* 'very tired' is added to the normal transitive clause *Zhangsan ca chuanguhu* 'Zhangsan wipes the window', the verb *ca* 'wipe' must be pronounced again.

[The main problem]

- Why does the second verb have to be pronounced?
- The same verb appears twice, but only one theta-role is assigned.
- I aim to analyze the derivation of the Mandarin Chinese VCC.

2. FormSet (FS)

[The definition]

- FormSet is a set-building operation, which Chomsky (2021:30-31) argues is necessary to account for unbounded unstructured sequences such as "John, Bill, my friends, the actor who won the Oscar."
- According to Fong & Oishi (2025:3), FormSet forms a set that "must be a coherent collection of *n* syntactic objects; i.e., members must observe some parallelism requirement to be licit."

[FormSet and the resultative construction]

- Fong & Oishi (2025) claim that FormSet can account for resultatives in English.
- (2a) is an example of a resultative in which wall serves as an argument for both paint and red as shown in (2b). (Fong & Oishi analyze *the* as a feature of N.)
- Since *paint* and *red* are both predicates, FormSet can be applied as shown in (2c). (The straight line represents FormSet.)

(2) a. Peter painted the wall red.
b. {paint, wall_{[the]}}, {red, wall_{[the]}}
c.

(adapted from Fong & Oishi 2025:14)

- Fong & Oishi (2025:14) proposes Strong Parallelism: "If FS [FormSet] set members obey predicate parallelism and have identical inscriptions as arguments, the arguments are (automatically) copies, and interpreted as such."
- Thus, the second instance of 'the wall' becomes a copy and 'the wall' is pronounced just once as shown in (3).

(3) a.

b.

(Adapted from Fong & Oishi 2025:14)

- Chomsky (2021) proposes FormCopy, which states that when an element α c-commands β , which has the same form and is in the same phase, only the highest α is pronounced.
- After the subject *Peter* merges with INFL, the lower *Peter* becomes a copy due to FormCopy. Finally, the resultative structure in (3b) is derived.

3. The proposal

- I propose that the type of VCC in (1) is derived from FormSet from a set containing {V, Obj} and the set {V, XP}.
- (1) is a subject-oriented VCC in which *hen lei* 'very tired' is the result of the activity *ca chuanguhu* 'wiping the window' and the argument of the result *hen lei* 'very tired' is the matrix subject (the argument cannot be someone else in the discourse).
- The internal structure of the resultative complement XP is (4), where Res refers to a resultative phrase in which *Zhangsan* is an argument of *hen lei* 'very tired' (Cheng 2007).

(4) 得 张三 很 累
[_{Res} DE [_N Zhangsan] very tired]

- I propose that (1) is formed from the two sets in (5). As (5a) and (5b) contain the same verb *ca* 'wipe', FormSet applies, and v^* and the subject *Zhangsan* are combined via merge, as in (6), where { } indicates a FormSet structure.
- Due to the application of FormCopy, the lower *Zhangsan*₃ becomes a copy of the higher *Zhangsan*₂.

(5) a.

b.

(6) {Zhangsan₂, {v* {wipe, window}, {wipe, DE Zhangsan₃ very tired}}}

- As shown in (7), T(INFL) and *Zhangsan*₁ are merged subsequently. Due to FormCopy, because *Zhangsan*₁ c-commands *Zhangsan*₂, only the highest subject *Zhangsan*₁ is pronounced. Through these operations, the VCC is derived.

(7)

4. The evidence

- In addition to the subject-oriented type of VCC, Chinese also has the object-oriented type of VCC (Cheng 2007) as shown in (8), in which the result *hen ganjing* 'very clean' refers to the object *chuanguhu* 'window' but not the main subject *Zhangsan*, unlike in (1).

(8) 张三 擦 窗户 擦 得很 干净
Zhangsan [_{VP} ca chuanguhu] [_{VP} ca de hen ganjing]
Zhangsan wipe window wipe DE very clean
'Zhangsan wipes the window and the window got clean.'

- Cheng (2007) argues that the subject-oriented type is derived by an operation in which V moves to v, and the object-oriented type is derived by sideward movement.
- Zhao (2022) proposes that all VCCs are derived in a unified way. Zhao assumes that Chinese *v* must be realized phonetically, so that the verb is pronounced in *v* again. Zhao suggests that the object-oriented type involves a *pro* that exceptionally takes the object as its antecedent.
- In previous research, head movement is widely accepted, which is not desirable due to the recent viewpoint of the Strong Minimalist Thesis (SMT) (Chomsky 2000).

- My proposal can explain both the subject-oriented and object-oriented types of VCC without requiring head movement, which is simpler from the perspective of SMT. Also, there is no need for pro to account for the object-oriented type.

- As for this object-oriented type, I suggest that the original sets are those in (9). FormSet applies to (9a) and (9b), so that the second occurrence of *chuanguhu* 'window' becomes a copy and is just pronounced once as shown in (10) due to Strong Parallelism.

(9) 擦 窗户 擦 得 窗户 非常 干净
a. {wipe, window} b. {wipe, {DE window very clean}}

(10)

5. Conclusion

- In this manner, both subject-oriented and object-oriented VCCs can be accounted for with the same operation, FormSet.
- While this proposal provides a unified FormSet-based account for both subject-oriented and object-oriented VCCs, further research is needed to determine if this analysis can be extended to other types of VCCs.

References

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