A Tough Construction Analysis of the Shanghainese “Passive”

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1 Introduction

Shanghainese is a Wu Chinese dialect spoken primarily in Shanghai, China. Like Mandarin Chinese, there are no overt markers for case, tense, gender, or number, nor is there grammatical inflection (Zhu 2006). Verb aspect is distinguished through markers, and the perfective aspect in particular by the particle le.

In this paper, I will focus on a construction in Shanghainese that is similar to what Huang (1999) calls in Mandarin Chinese the long passive. Both the Shanghainese and Mandarin constructions are characterized by the internal argument of the main verb being realized as the subject, the external argument being present, and a morpheme Mandarin bei or Shanghainese be. I will call the Shanghainese construction the be-construction. An example of the be-construction is (1), with the corresponding Mandarin long bei-construction in (2).¹

(1) tsapincare bo lisi da lo?.
    Zhangsan BE Lisi hit PFV
    ‘Zhangsan was hit by Lisi.’

(2) Zhangsan bei Lisi da le
    Zhangsan BEI Lisi hit PFV
    ‘Zhangsan was hit by Lisi.’

Example (1) is roughly translatable to the English ”Zhangsan was hit by Lisi” which retains the external argument in what is known as a by-phrase. Interestingly, however, there is no grammatical Shanghainese equivalent to the English ”Zhangsan was hit,” which Huang calls in Mandarin the short passive. In other words, Shanghainese does not allow deletion of the external argument. We can compare the ungrammatical Shanghainese sentence in (3) with the well-formed Mandarin short passive in (4).

(3) *tsapincare bo da lo?.
    Zhangsan BE hit PFV
    ‘Zhangsan was hit.’

¹The Mandarin example sentences used in this paper are taken from Huang (1999). Grammaticality judgments for Shanghainese sentences come both from myself and another native speaker of Shanghainese. All Shanghainese examples are in IPA as there is no standard romanized Shanghainese orthography like there is Pinyin for Mandarin.
This grammaticality difference is interesting because overt agents are considered universally optional in passives. Kiparsky (2013) states, “If a language has passives with agent phrases, these are optional.” Yet in Shanghainese, the agent is clearly obligatory. It is therefore necessary to ask whether the universal notion of passives must be redefined or if it is possible for Shanghainese to lack a ‘true’ passive. Before addressing how this work contributes to the overarching question of what a passive is, I will first develop an analysis for the Shanghainese *be*-construction.

Literature on Chinese passives focuses primarily on Mandarin, which between its long and short passives satisfies the principle of agent-optionality. Huang (1999) suggests that the Mandarin long passive is similar to tough-constructions, with a combination of A-movement with a null operator, and predication. He analyzes *bei* as neither a preposition nor a transitive two-place predicate, but actually an intransitive verb which selects a predicate. He analyzes the short passive not as a derivation of the long passive, but as a case of A-movement of the patient, which is an empty category PRO, followed by co-indexation of PRO with the matrix subject through subject control. Thus the Mandarin long and short passives are both analyzed as biclausal. In this paper, I will analyze the Shanghainese *be*-construction in the same way that Huang analyzed the Mandarin long passive, providing support for Huang’s separate analyses in Mandarin.

Through comparison with English by-phrase passives and the Mandarin long passive, I will analyze the *be*-construction as similar to English tough constructions. This work is relevant to the cross-linguistic typology of passives and we will evaluate how the Shanghainese passive with its obligatory overt agent fits into existing literature.

### 2 Tough Movement Analysis

The Shanghainese *be*-construction exhibits passive-like features. Comparison of an active construction like (5) with the *be*-construction in (6) shows that in the latter, the patient “Zhangsan” of the verb “hit”, rather than the agent “Lisi”, acts as the subject of the sentence.

(5) lisi daŋ lo? tsaŋsc.
Lisi hit PFV Zhangsan
‘Lisi hit Zhangsan.’

(6) tsaŋsc bo lisi daŋ lo?.
Zhangsan be Lisi hit PFV
‘Zhangsan was hit by Lisi.’

The agent of the verb can also occur as a pronoun which is never interpretable as referring
to the matrix subject. Note the corresponding restriction on coreference in the English translation.

(7) tsaŋse_i bø ji_{i/j} daŋ lo?.
    Zhangsan BE him hit PFV
    ‘Zhangsan was hit by *himself/him.’

Like a passive, only transitive verbs can occur in the be-construction. (8) is ungrammatical in using be with the intransitive verb “arrive,” as is the corresponding English passive in the translation.

(8) *tsaŋse bo lisi le lo?.
    Zhangsan BE Lisi arrive PFV
    *‘Zhangsan was arrived by Lisi.’

English passives such as (9) involve promotion to subject position of the internal argument, and an optional agent by-phrase (instead of suppression of the external argument), and are restricted to transitive verbs.

(9) Bob_ti was hit t_i (by Alan).

Shanghainese be-constructions like (6) and (7) appears to share those features with English passives such as (9), with the exception that stating the agent is obligatory. (10) is well-formed, but (11) is ungrammatical for omitting the agent.

(10) tsaŋse bo lisi daŋ lo?.
    Zhangsan BE Lisi hit PFV
    ‘Zhangsan was hit by Lisi.’

(11) *tsaŋse bo daŋ lo?.
    Zhangsan BE hit PFV
    ‘Zhangsan was hit.’

The Shanghainese be-construction in (10) is superficially comparable to the English by-phrase long passive in (9).

English passives are typically analyzed with A-movement, with the internal argument moving to Specifier of the main VP. (9) involves the A-movement of the internal argument “Bob” to subject position and a prepositional by-phrase to indicate that the external argument is “Alan.” (12) analyzes the Shanghainese sentence (6) as a canonical passive with A-movement. The NP tsaŋse is coindexed with the object position trace t after movement to subject position.
If the Shanghainese be-construction is a result of A-movement, the object position of the matrix verb *daŋ* (‘hit’) cannot be filled, since it is already occupied by the trace of the moved argument.

(13) shows be-construction sentences with filled object positions. Indeed, when the object position is overtly filled, the sentences are ungrammatical.

(13)  

a. *tsaŋسة bə liši dàŋ lə? ji
   Zhangsan BE Lisi hit PFV 3SG
   ‘Zhangsan was hit (*him) by Lisi.’

b. *tsaŋسة bə liši dàŋ lə? zika
   Zhangsan BE Lisi hit PFV REF L
   ‘Zhangsan was hit (*self) by Lisi.’

c. *tsaŋسة bə liši dàŋ lə? wàŋwu
   Zhangsan BE Lisi hit PFV Wangwu
   ‘Zhangsan was hit (*Wangwu) by Lisi.’

(13a) attempts to fill the object position with a pronoun, (13b) with a reflexive pronoun, and (13c) with a referential expression. All three are ungrammatical. The fact that attempts to fill the object position result in ungrammatical sentences suggests that the object position is occupied by a trace. The behavior shown in (13) is consistent if the sentences are derived through A-movement.

(12) is the only available A-movement analysis of the Shanghainese be-construction that obeys locality constraints, by analyzing be as a preposition. If be were analyzed as a verb, ‘Lisi’ would have to be analyzed as the external argument of the verb of the embedded finite clause. A-movement prohibits moving NPs that have already received case, so if we had an embedded finite clause, ‘Zhangsan’ would be receiving accusative case from the verb ‘to
hit.’ Moreover, A-movement prohibits moving across existing A-positions, and ‘Lisi’ would be one such position as the subject of the embedded clause.

However, *be* could not be a preposition because a) the resulting hypothetical PP cannot move as typical PPs do and b) *be* does not form a constituent with the following NP.

Shanghainese PPs are generally able to move across time constituents or prepose to sentence-initial position. (14) and (15) provide examples of such in Shanghainese, with (14b) moving the PP across a time constituent, and (15b) preposing the PP to sentence-initial position.

\[(14) \quad \begin{align*}
\text{a. } & \text{nu zu} \text{[ge} \text{tsa}s\text{c}] \text{ t}f_{\text{o}} \text{ la } \text{bo}t\text{zi} \\
& \text{I yesterday with Zhangsan } \text{e} \text{at PFV buns} \\
& \text{(cf. I ate buns yesterday with Zhangsan.)} \\
\text{b. } & \text{nu } \text{[ge} \text{tsa}s\text{c}] \text{ zu} \text{mi } \text{t}f_{\text{o}} \text{ la } \text{bo}t\text{zi} \\
& \text{I with Zhangsan yesterday ate PFV buns} \\
& \text{(cf. I ate buns with Zhangsan yesterday.)}
\end{align*} \]

\[(15) \quad \begin{align*}
\text{a. } & \text{nu } \text{[ge} \text{tsa}s\text{c}] \text{ lo } \text{ga}n-\text{d}a-lon\text{ x}o? \\
& \text{I with Zhangsan very get-along PTCL} \\
& \text{I get along very well with Zhangsan} \\
\text{b. } & \text{[ge} \text{tsa}s\text{c}] \text{ nu lo } \text{ga}n-\text{d}a-lon\text{ x}o? \\
& \text{with Zhangsan } \text{I very get-along PTCL} \\
& \text{I get along very well with Zhangsan}
\end{align*} \]

However, (16) contrasts the well-formed (16a) with the ungrammatical (16b) and (16c), showing that it is neither possible for *be*-NP to be moved across a time-constituent as in (16b), nor to prepose as in (16c).

\[(16) \quad \begin{align*}
\text{a. } & \text{tsa}s\text{s with Zhangsan yesterday } \text{BE Lisi hit PFV} \\
& \text{(cf. Zhangsan was hit by Lisi yesterday.)} \\
\text{b. } & \text{*tsa}s\text{s with Zhangsan BE Lisi yesterday hit PFV} \\
& \text{(cf. Zhangsan was hit yesterday by Lisi.)} \\
\text{c. } & \text{*[bo lisi] tsa}s\text{s } \text{da}n\text{ la}? \\
& \text{be Lisi Zhangsan hit PFV} \\
& \text{(cf. It was by Lisi that Zhangsan was hit.)}
\end{align*} \]
Comparison of (16b) with (14b) and (16c) with (15b) make it clear that \textit{be}-NP is not a PP.

The inability of \textit{be}-NP to move is not yet sufficient reason to rule out A-movement as an analysis, if we continue comparing the Shanghainese \textit{be}-construction to the English by-phrase passive, for example (9). The Shanghainese \textit{be}-NP and the English \textit{by}-NP seem to contribute similar meanings, describing the agent of the action. A further similarity is that English by-NPs are unable to prepose either, while other English prepositional phrases can. This is because the English by-phrase is analyzed structurally as an adjunct to a Passive Phrase. (17) shows the ungrammaticality of topicalizing a by-phrase, whereas (18) shows that other prepositional phrases are easily topicalized.

(17) *By Alan, Bob was hit.

(18) a. Amelie skips stones for fun.
   b. For fun, Amelie skips stones.

But English \textit{by}-NPs can be moved across time constituents, while we found in (16b) that Shanghainese \textit{be}-NP cannot:

(19) a. Bob was hit yesterday by Alan.
   b. Bob was hit by Alan yesterday.

I thus conclude that Shanghainese \textit{be}-constructions do not behave like English by-phrase passives either. Crucially, the by-phrase is optional to the English passive (recall (9)), while \textit{be}-NP is, of course, not optional to the Shanghainese \textit{be}-construction.

Furthermore, applying the coordination test tells us that \textit{be} does not form a constituent with the following NP as it would if it were a preposition. In English passives, it is possible to coordinate by-NPs such as in (20).

(20) I was helped [[by Mary] and [by Jane]].

In Shanghainese, however, \textit{be} does not form a constituent with the agent NP to the exclusion of the following VP, such as in (21a). The fact that the second conjunct can occur without \textit{be} is evidence of embedded clauses (shown in brackets) rather than \textit{be}-NP being a constituent. (21b) further shows that coordinating two \textit{be}-NPs would be ungrammatical.

(21) a. tsaŋsə bɔ [lisi dàŋ lɔʔ liq ʈɔq], [wʌŋwu tì loʔ ɕɛ təŋ]
   \hspace{1em} Zhangsan BE Lisi hit PFV two times, Wangwu kick PFV three times
   \hspace{1em} ‘Zhangsan was hit twice by Lisi and kicked three times by Wangwu.’
   
      \hspace{1em} Zhangsan BE Lisi and BE Wangwu hit PFV
      \hspace{1em} ‘Zhangsan was hit by Lisi and by Wangwu.’

So while the by-phrase is an adjunct in English, \textit{be}-NP in Shanghainese is not, since it is not even a constituent. Despite the Shanghainese \textit{be}-construction having superficial similarities to canonical passives, A-movement is not a feasible analysis.
I instead analyze Shanghainese as tough movement, following Huang’s (1999) analysis of Mandarin long passives. Tough constructions are sentences where the syntactic subject of the matrix clause is the logical object of the embedded clause. (22) gives an example of an English tough construction, where “Chris” is base-generated in the matrix clause, and co-indexed to a null operator Op that raises in the embedded clause, while a null pronoun PRO acts as the subject of the embedded clause. “Easy” is one of several English adjectives that allow the tough construction.

(22) Chris$_i$ is easy [Op$_i$ PRO$_{arb}$ to please $t_i$].

I argue, following previous literature on Mandarin long passives (Huang 1999), that the Shanghainese be-construction is a case of tough movement. Under this analysis, be is a verb that selects a predicate and a subject. Within the complement, a null object undergoes $\lambda$-movement. The subject of the be-construction is base-generated as Specifier of the main VP and receives a theta-role from be. (23) shows the be-construction as a tough construction, where “Zhangsan” is co-indexed with a raised null operator within the embedded clause that is the object of the embedded verb “hit”. Be is a special verb in Shanghainese that allows the tough construction.

(23) tsaŋșci$_i$ bɔ [Op$_i$ lisi$_j$ daŋ lɔ? $t_i$]

Zhangsan$_i$ be [Op$_i$ Lisi$_j$ hit PFV $t_i$]

‘Zhangsan was hit by Lisi.’

Example (24) represents (23) as a syntactic tree.²

(24) 

²Tough movement analyses typically posit $\lambda$-movement of the null operator Op to Spec of CP, but I follow Huang (1999)’s analysis here and adjoin the operator to the embedded IP.
Comparing the Shanghainese be-construction in (23) to the English tough-construction in (22), one clear difference is that English tough-constructions only take non-finite complements (the embedded clause can only have a PRO subject) while Shanghainese be-constructions only take finite complements (the embedded clause can only have an overt subject). Mandarin, however, with its short and long passives, can take non-finite and finite complements, as seen respectively in example (25).

(25) a. Zhangsan, bei [PRO_i da le t_i]
   Zhangsan, be [PRO_i hit PVF t_i]
   ‘Zhangsan was hit.’

b. Zhangsan, bei [Op, Lisi da le t_i]
   Zhangsan, be [Op, Lisi hit PVF t_i]
   ‘Zhangsan was hit by Lisi.’

These differences can be implemented through selectional features, which in English are located on tough adjectives, but in Mandarin and Shanghainese are located on be and be respectively. English tough adjectives select for non-finite IPs with a [uIP_{nonfin}] selectional feature, while Mandarin be selects for any IP with [uIP] and Shanghainese be selects for finite IPs with [uIP_{fin}].

Regardless of be only being able to take a finite complement, a tough movement analysis for Shanghainese is effective in accounting for the same data as A-movement did in (13). The examples in (26), which are the same as in (13), are still predicted to be ungrammatical when the embedded clause’s object position is filled with a pronoun, reflexive, or referential expression. This is because tough movement posits A-movement of a null operator Op from the object position to the edge of the embedded clause. Thus, the object position of the embedded clause is filled with the trace of the operator, precluding any other DP from taking this position.

(26) a. *tsaŋse_i bọ lisi daŋ lo? ji_i
   Zhangsan BE Lisi hit PFV 3SG
   ‘Zhangsan was hit (*him) by Lisi.’

b. *tsaŋse_i bọ lisi daŋ lo? zika_i
   Zhangsan BE Lisi hit PFV REFL
   ‘Zhangsan was hit (*self) by Lisi.’

c. *tsaŋse bọ lisi daŋ lo? waŋwu
   Zhangsan BE Lisi hit PFV Wangwu
   ‘Zhangsan was hit (*Wangwu) by Lisi.’
The Shanghainese examples (26a-26c) can be compared to English tough constructions like (27a-27c), which for the same reasons do not allow the object position of the embedded verb to be filled.

(27)  
   a. *Chris is easy to please him.  
   b. *Chris is easy to please himself.  
   c. *Chris is easy to please Tom.

Like Mandarin Chinese, Shanghainese exhibits long-distance dependency in sentences like (28) and (29). In (28), the gap occurs in the object position of ‘arrest’, which is embedded two layers deep in the sentence. (29) exhibits an even larger distance between the filler ‘the letter’ and the gap in the object position of the triply embedded verb ‘send’. This behavior is characteristic of \( \bar{A} \)-movement, where the dependency relation between a gap and its filler is unbounded.

(28)  
\begin{align*}  
& \text{tsaNsE} \\
& \text{ Zhangsan } \text{ be } Lisi \text{ send police } \text{ catch-away PFV} \\
& \text{ ‘Lisi sent the police to arrest Zhangsan.’} \end{align*} 
\begin{aligned}  
\text{lit. ‘Zhangsan was “sent-police-to-arrest” by Lisi.’} 
\end{aligned}

(29)  
\begin{align*}  
& \text{go } \text{ foN } \text{ jin} \text{ bo } \text{ nu } \text{ dzo } \text{ lisi } \text{ tj\textsuperscript{h}nu} \text{ waNwu } \text{ tj\textsuperscript{h}} \text{ ji } \text{ me\textsubscript{me} dzi-t\textsubscript{to} } \text{ la?} \\
& \text{This CL letter } \text{ BE } \text{ lsg } \text{ tell } \text{ Lisi } \text{ ask } \text{ Wangwu } \text{ request his sister } \text{ send PFV} \\
& \text{ ‘I told Lisi to ask Wangwu to request his sister to send that letter.’} \end{align*} 
\begin{aligned}  
\text{lit. ‘That letter was “told-Lisi-to-ask-WangWu-get-his-sister-to-send” by me.’} 
\end{aligned}

But Shanghainese is sensitive to extraction islands, as is exhibited in (30). One phrase that prohibits \( \bar{A} \)-movement of Op is the relative clause. (30) is ungrammatical with a gap in the relative clause of the embedded clause; only with a resumptive pronoun can it be well-formed, since long-distance dependency does not extend into the relative clause.

(30)  
\begin{align*}  
& \text{tsaNsE} \text{ bo } \text{ nu } \text{ toN } \text{ dzi } \text{ lisi } \text{ ne } \text{ mu } \text{ *(ji) o? si ze ma tso\textsubscript{o} la?} \\
& \text{Zhangsan } \text{ be } \text{ me } \text{ inform } \text{ Lisi } \text{ take insult } \text{ *(him) POSS book all buy away PFV} \\
& \text{ ‘Zhangsan had me inform Lisi to buy up all the books that praise him.’} \end{align*}

This island sensitivity explains why tough movement is a more effective analysis than something simpler like treating the embedded clause as a complementizer phrase; \( \bar{A} \)-movement of the object out of the CP would not be possible if it were a relative clause.

\( \bar{A} \)-movement of Op to the edge of the embedded clause explains the co-indexation of Op with the overt object DP in (24). The further co-indexation of Op with the matrix subject ‘Zhangsan’ can be explained with a base-generation account of tough movement. Rather than a long movement analysis where \( t \) \( A \)-moves to the edge of the embedded clause and then \( A \)-moves to matrix subject position, I propose avoiding improper movement by applying Huang (1999)’s base-generation analysis of Mandarin long passives to the Shanghainese
be-construction. Huang suggests that the embedded clause, headed by the null operator Op, is actually a predicate by lambda-abstraction, so that be is a verb that takes a subject and a predicate. The matrix subject ‘Zhangsan’ is co-indexed to Op because the embedded clause is actually a secondary predicate of ‘Zhangsan’, with the meaning, has “the property of being an x such that Lisi hit x” (Huang 1999, Rezac 2006). Therefore, ‘Zhangsan’ satisfies the EPP not through movement but by being base-generated in the matrix subject position.

3 Discussion

This work has ramifications for the analysis of Mandarin long and short passives. Showing that the Shanghainese be-construction obligates an agent provides support for Huang (1999)’s two distinct analyses for the Mandarin long passive and the Mandarin short passive. The Shanghainese be-construction’s behavior patterns with that of the Mandarin long passive, and the fact that Shanghainese lacks a counterpart to the Mandarin short passive is support for the Mandarin short passive not being derived from the Mandarin long passive.

In comparing Shanghainese and Mandarin, it is clear that although the be-construction and the long passive share the same tough movement analysis, Shanghainese be and Mandarin bei differ in the selectional features they carry. Shanghainese be selects only a finite complement with [uIPfin], while Mandarin bei selects nonfinite and finite complements with the more general selectional feature [uIP].

The Shanghainese be-construction provides a counterexample to principles generally thought to be universal for passives. Kiparsky (2013) states as a universal for canonical passives, “If a language has passives with agent phrases, these are optional,” and omits Mandarin “passive-like constructions” from his discussion, describing them as “interactions of passivization with another phenomena.” Keenan and Dryer (2007) define passives as requiring a decrease in valence. Shanghainese very clearly violates Kiparsky’s universal for canonical passives, because only those constructions with explicit agents are grammatical, and any omission of the agent results in ungrammaticality. And while Shanghainese does not exhibit a valence decrease in a typical way, with agent suppression or deletion, we can argue that by analyzing the be-construction with tough-movement, the movement of a null operator within the embedded clause and a base-generated subject for be mean that, technically, there is a valence decrease in terms of overt arguments.

Huang (1999) also notes that familiar theories of passivization are 1) argument suppression, b) case absorption, and c) NP movement, but concludes that none of these is a universal property of passivization, though some languages may employ some of those strategies, while others can resort to type-shifting via null operator movement and predication. He does concede that the one universal of passives is intransitivization (distinguishes passives from inherent intransitives) and a dependency relation between the surface subject and underlying object position (gives rise to sense of passivity).

In his 2013 paper, Huang goes on to categorize the Mandarin long passive as a non-canonical
passive. Considering the parallel in analysis between the Mandarin long passive and the Shanghainese be-construction, Shanghainese would then only have a non-canonical passive. This seems rare for a language; even Mandarin at least has the short, agent-less passive, and even the languages reviewed by Legate (2014), though exhibiting what she calls a cline of passives, all have a canonical passive as well. Yet Huang (1999) does mention that Taiwanese and Cantonese allow the equivalent of Mandarin long passives, but disallow agent-less short passives. In addition, upon consulting a speaker of Suzhou, another Wu Chinese dialect, I have found that Suzhou behaves similarly as Taiwanese, Cantonese, and Shanghainese. Thus the Shanghainese phenomenon of having only an agent-obligatory passive-like construction seems generalizable to Wu and other Chinese languages such as Hokkien and Yue. Within the context of most studied languages, Shanghainese is perhaps non-canonical, but for a Chinese language, this behavior seems more common than believed. The be-construction calls for future work to re-examine and expand cross-linguistic knowledge of passives and attempt to redefine universals, if such a goal is desired.

Finally, an important remark should be made regarding the examples and grammaticality judgments of sentences in this paper. Though Shanghainese has been affected by Mandarin phonetically and syntactically (Zhu 2006), I have tried evaluating these sentences with as little Mandarin-influenced bei coercion as possible. It is interesting that Mandarin bei and Shanghainese be seem like they could be cognates, yet exhibit grammatically divergent behavior. Further work to explore the diachronic analysis of these morphemes and others in Vietnamese and other Chinese languages would be fruitful for an understanding of Southeast Asian passives.

4 References


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