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ARTICLE

Integrating thematicity and agentivity: A Cognitive Grammar approach to retained object passives in Mandarin

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Abstract

The Mandarin retained object passive (ROP) poses a unique challenge to linguistic theories by allowing post-verbal object retention. This study combines Cognitive Grammar (CG) with quantitative analysis to examine the component structures of the ROP and their integration into the composite structure NP_1 + *bèi* + (NP_2) + P + *le* + NP_3. Findings reveal a prototypicality hierarchy within the predicate core (P), which has multiple phonological manifestations based on a common causative schema: the full instantiation constitutes the core, followed by the action-only instantiation as a secondary extension, and marginal result-only cases. This hierarchy correlates with participant selection, favoring human subjects (NP_1) and body-part objects (NP_3). To clarify the mechanism of object retention in the ROP, this study proposes a dual profile determinance model. This model posits that the passive marker *bèi* serves as the primary determinant of thematicity, while the RESULT component acts as a secondary determinant of agentivity. Cognitively, the ROP is motivated by the POSSESSOR FOR POSSESSED metonymy. Furthermore, this study explains the absence of the ROP in English and contributes to CG by introducing mixed orientation, in which thematicity and agentivity integrate rather than compete within a finite clause.

Keywords: clausal orientation; Cognitive Grammar; corpus linguistics; dual profile determinance; retained object passive (ROP)

1. Introduction

In canonical passives, the subject aligns with the patient role assigned by the verb. This principle generally holds for Mandarin, as in (1); however, Mandarin also exhibits a non-canonical construction where the patient is retained in the post-verbal object position, a pattern exemplified by (2):

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(1) 他 的 左臂 被 子弹 打 伤 了。
tā de zuǒbì bèi zǐdàn dǎ shāng le
3SG POSS left.arm PASS bullet hit injure PERF
'His left arm was injured by a bullet.'
(*People's Daily*, Jun. 1965)

(2) [周春阔]$_{NP_1}$ 被 [弹片]$_{NP_2}$ [打]$_{V_1}$ [伤]$_{V_2}$ 了 [手臂]$_{NP_3}$。
Zhōu Chūnkuò bèi dànpiàn dǎ shāng le shǒubì
name PASS shrapnel hit injure PERF arm
'Zhou Chunkuò had his arm injured by shrapnel.'
(Lit. Zhou Chunkuò was hit-injured [his] arm.)
(*People's Daily*, Dec. 1966)

In (1), *zuǒbì* 'the left arm' acts as the patient of the verb *dǎ* 'hit' and is positioned as the subject, standing in a possessive relationship with *tā* 'he'. In (2), however, the patient *shǒubì* 'arm' appears in the post-verbal position, while the subject position, typically designated for the patient (the arm), is occupied by its possessor. Although both convey similar propositional content, they differ in construal (Langacker, 2008): (1) profiles the state change of the possessed, while (2) profiles that of the possessor.

This distributive pattern, often referred to as the Retained Object Passive (henceforth ROP; e.g., Lü, 1984), can be schematically represented as: NP_1 + *bèi* + (NP_2) + P + *le* + NP_3, where P represents the predicate core.[1] The ROP is characterized by distinct properties: (i) the passive marker *bèi* introduces the agent (NP_2), which is syntactically optional; (ii) NP_1 and NP_3 are in a possessive relationship; (iii) the predicate (P) exhibits a morphological continuum between resultative verb compounds (henceforth RVCs; V_1V_2) and simplex verbs (V_1/V_2); and (iv) the perfective marker *le* indicates the completion of an action or a change of state. While these properties have been examined from various cognitive perspectives (e.g., Deng & Zeng, 2011; Jiang & Wen, 2023), existing research often lacks corpus-based quantitative evidence. More importantly, a crucial question persists regarding the established assumptions about verb argument structure: How can a passive construction retain an object?

To address this, the present study adopts the framework of Cognitive Grammar (CG) and suggests that the predicate core (P) is immanent in a causative schema that includes two relational components: ACTION and RESULT. These components constitute dual profile determinance, wherein the RESULT functions as a causative profile determinant that licenses the retained object. It is proposed that the ROP is not merely a structural anomaly but rather a motivated composite structure that effectively integrates thematicity and agentivity.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature and introduces the CG framework; Section 3 analyzes the component structures of the ROP; Section 4 develops a dual profile determinance model to address the apparent structural anomaly of the ROP; Section 5 discusses theoretical implications and Section 6 concludes the paper.

[1]This study distinguishes between two subtypes of retained object passives: one involving ditransitive verbs, where the indirect object becomes subject while the direct object remains (e.g., *He was given a book*), and another involving transitive verbs with possessed direct objects, as in (2).

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2. Background

2.1. Previous research

The ROP presents a significant challenge to established assumptions regarding the valence relations of passive constructions, as it retains the patient in the object position while promoting its possessor to the subject position. Generative accounts have drawn considerable attention to the case-assigning properties of retained objects, yet they face a theoretical dilemma regarding their classification. Proposals range from partitive (e.g., Xu, 1999) and nominative (e.g., Pan & Han, 2008) to accusative case (Quan & Han, 2021). This persistent lack of consensus indicates that the unique valence relations of the ROP cannot be adequately explained by rigid rule-based paradigms. To provide a more motivated account, cognitive linguistic research has shifted toward two interrelated dimensions: constituent properties and functional motivations.

Debates on constituent properties focus on the semantic relationship between the subject (NP_1) and the retained object (NP_3), as well as on the predicate core (P). While it is widely recognized that a broad possessive relationship exists between NP_1 and NP_3, including ownership, kinship and part-whole relations (Xu, 1999), cognitive linguistic analyses argue for a hierarchy of alienability that prioritizes part-whole relations in licensing the ROP (Wu, 2019; Yue & Wu, 2019). Ma (2013a, 2013b), however, argues against the inclusion of kinship. The nature of P also remains contentious. Both Ma (2013a) and Wu (2019) reject the notion of a simple verb (V_1) (Pan & Han, 2008; Tang, 2004; Xu, 2004), arguing instead that P must be realized as RVCs (V_1V_2).

Existing research generally agrees that the functional motivations for the grammatical realization of the ROP are rooted in affectedness semantics, with passives without a retained object as the prototype. The proposed mechanisms can be categorized into: (i) prototypicality, viewing the ROP as a decategorialized deviation from the prototype (Liu & Bai, 2011; Liu, 2012); (ii) conceptual integration, emphasizing metaphorical extension and cross-metonymic mapping within an 'affecting-affected' Gestalt (Deng, 2011; Deng & Zeng, 2011); and (iii) functional-relational approach, focusing on bridging semantic gaps through argument augmentation (Wu, 2019), autonomy/dependence analysis (Xu, 2022), and analogical leveling (Zhang, 2010).

However, the research landscape uncovers two significant gaps. First, discussions on the predicate core (P) often focus on a one-to-one correspondence between semantic and morphological structures, while overlooking the potential for a one-to-many relationship. Debates on the semantic relationship between NP_1 and NP_3 further indicate that current research inadequately addresses the semantic nature of the ROP. Second, current studies primarily emphasize functional motivations while neglecting structural ones. Although the ROP may emerge from affectedness through cognitive mechanisms like conceptual integration, its structural motivations for object retention remain underexplored. This gap complicates the understanding of the absence of the ROP in languages like English. Drawing on Cognitive Grammar, this study addresses these gaps by characterizing the ROP as a highly motivated composite structure, thus providing a unified account of its functional and structural coherence.

2.2. Theoretical framework

The present study is situated within the framework of CG (Langacker, 1987, 1993, 2008), which posits three basic types of structures: semantic, phonological and

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symbolic. Symbolic structures reside in the symbolization of semantic structures by phonological structures: [[SEM]/[PHON]]. Morphology and syntax are also symbolic in nature, suggesting that only symbolic structures are essential for the characterization of grammatical structure.

Symbolic organization comprises different dimensions. Each component structure engages in integration relationships with one another and compositional relationships with the composite structure. Effecting the integration is a correspondence that defines the conceptual overlap between component structures. This involves elaboration, where one component structure contains a schematic substructure that the other structure elaborates in finer detail. At the core is profile determinance, where the composite semantic structure profiles the same entity as one component structure, referred to as the profile determinant. Grammatical composition is defined by schematic assemblies, or constructional schemas, which are abstracted from specific instances. There is a categorizing relationship between schemas and instantiations, with schemas as categorizing structures and instantiations as targets. Schemas are not separate from their instantiations; rather, they are immanent within them.

Meaning is conceptualization shaped by construal, the capacity to view the same situation from alternative perspectives. Construal manifests in trajector/landmark alignment, where trajector and landmark are defined by primary and secondary focal prominence. They are not confined to specific conceptual levels; a trajector or landmark can profile not only entities but also a relationship. The alignment is facilitated by reference point relationships that establish mental connections between two entities, forming the basis for metonymy.

Finally, CG delineates force-dynamic events by distinguishing between maximally distinct thematic and agentive processes in terms of their profiling. A thematic process involves a single participant and is independent of any agentive causation. In contrast, an agentive process consists in bringing about a thematic process and is therefore conceptually dependent with respect to it.

In summary, CG offers a coherent framework for analyzing symbolically complex structures. This study seeks to clarify how thematic and agentive processes are integrated into a single finite ROP clause.

3. Component structures of the ROP

This section focuses on three component structures of the ROP: the predicate core (P), the subject (NP_1) and the retained object (NP_3). Using a dataset from the *People's Daily* sub-corpus of the BCC, the analysis begins by examining how P is characterized by a causative constructional schema immanent in its various instantiations.[2] Following this, the semantic categories of NP_1 and NP_3 are analyzed to identify the prototypical possessive relations that characterize this construction.

[2]The BCC, or Beijing Language and Culture University Corpus Centre, contains nearly 15 billion Chinese characters, accessible at http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/. All retained object passive constructions in this paper are sourced from the BCC corpus (Xun et al. 2016), which includes approximately 9.5 billion characters across five genre-based sub-corpora: news reportage (2 billion), literary works (3 billion), dialogues (600 million), multi-genre (1.9 billion) and Literary Chinese (2 billion). The corpus is annotated with parts of speech.

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3.1. Predicate core (P)

3.1.1. Causative constructional schema: Full and partial instantiations

To investigate how P is morphologically realized, this analysis examines instances where P is represented as either an RVC (V_1V_2) or a simple verb (V_1/V_2). It posits that P has multiple phonological manifestations, with its realization governed by a causative schema (ACTION + RESULT). This schema is defined as a trajector exerting force on the landmark to effect a desired change. Based on its phonological realizations and alignment with the specifications of the causative schema, P fully instantiates the causative schema when it appears as an RVC, while it partially instantiates the schema when it appears as a simple verb.

The full instantiation of the causative schema directly reflects the semiological function of language: both the ACTION and RESULT components at the semantic pole are individually symbolized by phonological elements. As demonstrated in Example (3), the ACTION is symbolized by *kǎn* 'cut' (V_1) and the RESULT by *xià* 'down' (V_2).

(3) 有 [一个人]$_{NP_1}$ 被 [人]$_{NP_2}$ [砍]$_{V_1}$ [下]$_{V_2}$ 了 [脑袋]$_{NP_3}$。
yǒu yī gè rén bèi rén kǎn xià le nǎodai.
exist one.CL.person PASS person cut down PERF head.
'A person's head was chopped off by someone.'
(Dec. 1951)

The notion of causation (ACTION + RESULT) emerges as an aspect of constructional meaning that is not always symbolized individually. However, the causative schema remains immanent in their instantiations, even when partially symbolized. The partial instantiation results from an asymmetric phonological realization of the causative schema, with only one component explicitly manifested while the other remains unsymbolized. For instance, in example (4), action-only instantiation occurs as the ACTION component is symbolized by *kǎn* 'cut' (V_1), while the RESULT component is 'zero' (symbolized Ø).

(4) 有 个 [战友]$_{NP_1}$ 被 [鬼子]$_{NP_2}$ [砍]$_{V_1}$ [Ø] 了 [头]$_{NP_3}$
yǒu gè zhànyǒu bèi guǐzi kǎn Ø le tóu
exist CL comrade PASS enemy cut Ø PERF head
'A comrade had his head chopped off by the enemy.'
(Apr. 2016)

Action-only instantiation calls into question the assumption that the RESULT component must be overtly symbolized for the ROP to be grammatical (e.g., Ma, 2013a; Wu, 2019). This study, however, argues the opposite, proposing that the RESULT component may remain phonologically unsymbolized due to functional redundancy. As illustrated in (3), *kǎn* 'cut' typically leads to *xià* 'down'. However, when grammaticalized, *xià* 'down' conveys the completion of the action more than the downward direction, leading to a semantic overlap with the aspectual marker *le* (Shen & Wei, 2010). Consequently, it becomes functionally redundant and thus phonologically unsymbolized.

The second type of partial instantiation, often neglected, is result-only instantiation, in which only the RESULT component is overtly specified:

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(5) [一个老年人]$_{NP_1}$ 被 [弹片]$_{NP_2}$ [Ø]$_{V_1}$ [伤]$_{V_2}$ 了 [膝盖]$_{NP_3}$。
yī-gè lǎoniánrén bèi dànpiàn Ø shāng le xīgài
one-CL elderly.person PASS shrapnel Ø injure PERF knee
'An elderly person had his knee injured by shrapnel.'
(May 1946)

In (5), the RESULT component is phonologically symbolized by *shāng* 'injured' (V_2), while the ACTION is manifested by zero (symbolized Ø). The RESULT is conceptually dependent: the conception of a state change from uninjured to injured presupposes the conception of the ACTION that brings about this change. Although the ACTION is left unexpressed, it can be pragmatically inferred from the Warfare ICM (Idealized Cognitive Model; Lakoff, 1987).

While P conveys causation at the semantic pole, its phonological structure varies depending on whether ACTION, RESULT or both are symbolized:

(6) **Full instantiation** (e.g., *kǎn xià* 'cut down' in Ex. 3):
[[ACTION]/[V_1]] + [[RESULT]/[V_2]] = [[ACTION RESULT]/[V_1V_2]]

(7) **Partial instantiation**
(a) **Action-only** (e.g., *kǎn* 'cut' in Ex. 4):
[[ACTION]/[V_1]] + [[RESULT]/[Ø]] = [[ACTION RESULT]/[V_1Ø]]
(b) **Result-only** (e.g., *shāng* 'injure' in Ex. 5):
[[ACTION]/[Ø]] + [[RESULT]/[V_2]] = [[ACTION RESULT]/[ØV_2]]

To assess the empirical validity of the diverse phonological manifestations of P, a detailed quantitative analysis of the collected data will follow.

3.1.2. Quantitative analysis: From attraction to redundancy

Data were sourced from the *People's Daily* sub-corpus (BCC), an authoritative reference for Standard Mandarin. This corpus shows that the varied phonological realizations of P are systematic variants rather than idiosyncratic errors, particularly for partial instantiations often overlooked or denied in previous studies. The search targeted two composite structures: *bèi* + NP_2 + V_1V_2 + *le* + NP_3 and *bèi* + NP_2 + V + *le* + NP_3.

The data were filtered according to three criteria. First, since null subjects are rather common in Mandarin, the search was conducted regardless of whether the subject (NP_1) was overtly manifested. Second, the selection focuses on instances where both ACTION and RESULT are symbolized by monosyllabic elements. Consequently, multi-syllabic instances such as *shùfù-zhù*, where the ACTION is specified by two syllables, are excluded to avoid interference from prosodic constraints (Ma & Lu, 1997). Third, only ROPs with an overt NP_2 were selected to ensure agentive causation, thereby providing a prototype for analyzing agentivity (Section 4).

This process yielded a total of 439 valid tokens. After removing duplicates, 366 unique tokens and 135 distinct types were identified. The results indicate a clear frequency hierarchy: full instantiation constitutes the prototypical core at 83.37%,

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followed by action-only instantiation as a notable secondary variant at 15.72%, while result-only instantiation remains largely marginal at 0.91%.

The analysis begins with full instantiation (V_1V_2), which prototypically symbolizes the causative schema of P. To move beyond intuitive judgments, this study employs covarying collexeme analysis (Stefanowitsch & Gries, 2003) to investigate the associative attraction between V_1 and V_2. The log-transformed odds ratio (Log OR) is used as the primary measure, as it is particularly effective for capturing the statistical contingency between these two variables.[3] Furthermore, by integrating the complete 2 × 2 contingency table (including cells *a*, *b*, *c* and *d*) to account for paradigmatic competition (Schmid & Küchenho, 2013), this analysis shifts the focus from simple frequency to internal cohesion. As a result, the Log OR serves as a probabilistic proxy for cognitive entrenchment (Schmid, 2020; Schmid & Küchenho, 2013), reflecting the degree to which V_1V_2 are routinized in the mental lexicon. When applied to the 135 types (366 tokens), this approach reveals a broad spectrum of association strengths. While all types conform to the causative schema by symbolizing both ACTION and RESULT, the differences in Log OR values indicate a continuum of cognitive entrenchment, ranging from novel structures to conventional chunks (Bybee, 2010). Among these, 73 types exhibit significant association (Log OR > 3), among which nine types demonstrate strong attraction (Log OR > 6), as illustrated in Figure 1.

The strong associations seen in Figure 1 can be attributed to two main factors: semantic underspecification and lexical conventionalization. First, actions that can lead to multiple outcomes need a clear endpoint to define the result. For instance, *jiāo miè* 'pour extinguish' (Log OR = 8.201) specifies the result as *miè* to distinguish it from alternatives like *shī* 'wet' or *tòu* 'through'. This highlights how the action and its outcomes work together to achieve semantic disambiguation. Second, lexical conventionalization arises from the close relationship between events based on experiential salience. In instances like *duó qù* 'seize away' (Log OR = 6.971), the resulting event is so closely intertwined with the action that they function as conventional units. The same applies to *kǎn xià* 'cut down' (Log OR = 4.966) in Example 3. However, since directional particles like *qù* 'away' and *xià* 'down' are grammaticalized into schematic units that convey a sense of completion within RVCs, they create functional redundancy that facilitates action-only partial instantiation.

Empirical evidence for action-only instantiation appears at the opposing end of the statistical spectrum. The collexemic analysis reveals a subset of data characterized by negative associative attraction (Log OR < 0), as shown in Figure 2. The most common are RVCs with *qù* 'away' as V_2, indicating that *qù* and its causative actions are loosely associated in actual usage events.

The statistical repulsion results from functional redundancy in the phonological manifestations of the causative schema of P. *Qù* is grammaticalized to assign an abstract endpoint to the bounded event (Lü, 1984), rather than indicating a movement of the trajector. Thus, it conveys a sense of completion that overlaps semantically with the obligatorily used perfective marker *le*, making its phonological realization redundant. This results in an economy-driven preference for action-only instantiation, where the RESULT remains conceptually active even when

[3]To ensure statistical stability and accommodate zero frequencies, a 0.5 correction (Haldane-Anscombe correction) was applied to all cells in the 2 × 2 contingency tables prior to the calculation of the log odds ratio.

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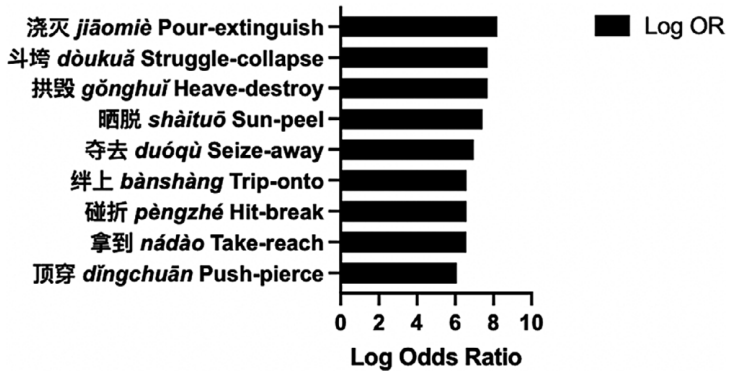


Figure 1. V_1V_2 with strong associative attraction (Log OR > 6).

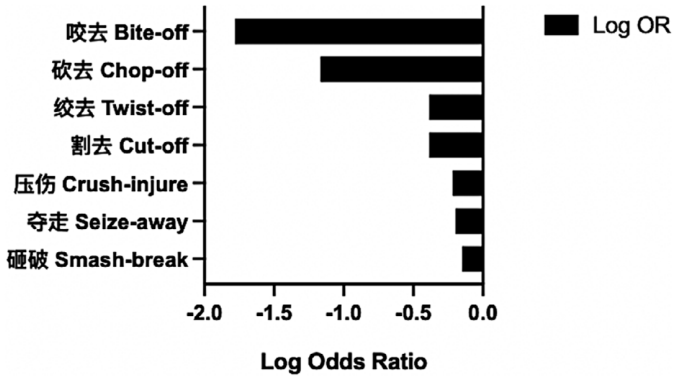


Figure 2. V_1V_2 with negative associative attraction (Log OR < 0).

unsymbolized. Viewed this way, *kǎn* 'cut' in Example 4 provides a more efficient alternative to *kǎn xià* 'cut down' in Example 3. Besides *qù* and *xià*, Mandarin also features several grammaticalized elements that express completive meanings. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of action-only instantiation, categorized by types of completion such as Fixation (immobilization), Detachment (removal) or Targeting (hitting a goal).

Upon closer examination, *yǎo* 'bite', *kǎn* 'cut', *duó* 'seize' and *zá* 'smash' in Table 1 serve as the first component of the composite structure V_1V_2, which exhibits negative associative attraction (Figure 2). The low type frequency of completion meanings, symbolized by a closed set of grammaticalized elements (Xuan, 2018), further contributes to their redundancy. However, among these, *duó* 'seize' exhibits a more intricate interaction: while it often independently symbolizes the causative schema, *duó qù* 'seize away' retains a positive associative attraction (Log OR = 6.971; Figure 1). This reveals a tension between lexicalized entrenchment and functional economy, as *duó qù* is so entrenched that it resists the pressure to leave *qù* unsymbolized. Crucially, while these grammaticalized elements overlap with *-le* in indicating

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Table 1. Frequency and types of completion of action-only instantiation (Tokens ≥ 3)

Predicate core (P)	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Type of completion (symbolized by)
mí 迷 'fascinate'	11	15.94	Fixation (*zhù* 住)
qiǎng 抢 'rob'	5	7.25	Detachment (*zǎu* 走/*qù* 去)
yǎo 咬 'bite'	4	5.80	Targeting (*zhòng* 中/*zháo* 着)
jiē 揭 'uncover'	4	5.80	Detachment (*zǎu* 走/*qù* 去)
zá 砸 'smash'	4	5.80	Targeting (*zhòng* 中/*zháo* 着)
kǎn 砍 'cut'	3	4.35	Detachment (*diào* 掉/*xià* 下)
zhā 扎 'stab'	3	4.35	Targeting (*zhòng* 中/*zháo* 着)
piàn 骗 'cheat'	3	4.35	Detachment (*zǎu* 走/*qù* 去)
duó 夺 'seize'	3	4.35	Detachment (*zǎu* 走/*qù* 去)
Others	29	42.01	–
Total	69	100	

completion, they do not fully grammaticalize as perfective markers; they provide semantic content (e.g., fixation) to license retained objects, even when unsymbolized (Section 4).

The statistical repulsion in Figure 2 suggests a potential reversal in functional redundancy, leading to a difference in partial instantiation strategy: result-only instantiation. In action-only instantiation, ACTION symbolizes the causative schema, while RESULT remains unexpressed due to its semantic overlap with *le*. Conversely, result-only instantiation symbolizes RESULT, leaving ACTION unexpressed. The common elements that symbolize the RESULT in result-only instantiation are *shāng* 'injure' and *pò* 'break', as they are loosely associated with their antecedent actions, supported by the negative associative attraction for *zá pò* 'smash break' (Log OR = −0.151) and *yā shāng* 'press injure' (Log OR = −0.218). This is attributed to their intermediate (or semantically neutral) status: *shāng* and *pò* have more semantic content than grammaticalized resultatives like *qù* 'away', yet are more schematic than lexical resultatives like *suì* 'shatter', which represents a specific instance of *pò* 'break'. Conceptually dependent, *shāng* and *pò* presuppose an ACTION that brings about these state changes; however, this ACTION is not a specific act but an ICM-based action cluster. Despite being infrequent (Table 2; $N = 4$), these instances indicate that the RESULT can independently evoke the causative schema.

As shown in Table 2, unsymbolized ACTION can be pragmatically inferred as action clusters based on ICMs. This arises from the principle of economy: specifying ACTION that is both ICM-dependent and inferable becomes redundant when RESULT carries greater communicative weight. In result-only instantiation, ACTION remains schematic and underspecified, whereas in action-only instantiation, RESULT is definite. This may explain the infrequency of result-only

Table 2. Result-only instantiation of the causative schema

Predicate core (P)	ICM	Action cluster (e.g.,)
shāng 伤 'injure'	Warfare	*guā* 刮 'scrape', *cā* 擦 'graze'
	Animal husbandry	*yā* 压 'press'; *zhuàng* 撞 'strike'
	Plant-human encounter	*cì* 刺 'stab'; *huá* 划 'scratch'
pò 破 'break'	Go match	*dǎ* 打 'hit'; *gōng* 攻 'attack'

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instantiation: although both types are guided by economy, result-only instantiation involves greater linguistic indeterminacy.

Overall, P is defined by a causative constructional schema immanent in its full or partial instantiations, resulting from the interplay between associative attraction and functional redundancy. The following analysis will explore the other two component structures: the subject (NP_1) and the retained object (NP_3).

3.2. Subject (NP_1) and retained object (NP_3)

This section examines two focused participants of the ROP, identifying NP_1 as the possessor and NP_3 as the possessed. In a possessive structure (NP_1 *de* NP_3), NP_1 typically acts as a landmark that provides mental access to the trajector (NP_3) (Langacker, 1995, 2016). However, NP_1 and NP_3 are positioned at opposite ends of the ROP, which reflects a conceptual realignment: the ROP elevates NP_1 from a landmark within the possessive structure to the status of clausal trajector.

Participants in the subject position (NP_1) are analyzed first. As shown in Table 3, the semantic categories of NP_1 can be classified into four types: humans, inanimates, plants and animals, with humans (86.56%) significantly surpassing the other categories. This pattern of distribution reveals a clear prototypicality hierarchy that is consistent with cognitive semantic principles (Langacker, 1991) or the proto-patient entailment of sentience (Dowty, 1991), wherein humans form the prototypical core while nonhuman entities occupy increasingly peripheral positions. This is not surprising, as *bèi* passives in Mandarin are associated with adversative meaning, typically identifying subjects as sentient and normally human. However, nonhuman entities can also appear in the subject position, albeit less prototypically (Li & Thompson, 1981: 492, 494–497).

The retained objects (NP_3) are likewise examined in terms of prototypicality. Following Langacker (1995: 56–60), body parts, ownership and kinship constitute the prototypical core of possession, while abstract entities are situated in the periphery. Accordingly, the semantic categories of NP_3 are classified into four types: body parts, ownership, kinship and others (Table 4). As shown, body parts make up the dominant category at 57.63%, followed by ownership at 10.93% and kinship at 0.68%. The 'Others' category, comprising 30.75%, includes abstract entities that serve as metaphorical extensions of the prototypical core. While this category includes items such as *quánlì* 'power' and *hún* 'soul', it is dominated by *shēngmìng* 'life', which accounts for 113 instances (25.74% of the total sample and 83.70% within the category). Through the metaphor LIFE IS A POSSESSED OBJECT, life is perceived as an object that can be possessed, despite its abstract nature.

Table 3. Distribution of subjects in the ROP across semantic categories

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Humans	380	86.56
Inanimates	35	7.97
Plants	15	3.42
Animals	9	2.05
Total	439	100.00

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Table 4. Distribution of retained objects in the ROP across semantic categories

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Body parts	253	57.63
Ownership	48	10.93
Kinship	3	0.68
Others	135	30.75
Total	439	100.00

To sum up, the predicate core (P) displays varied phonological manifestations that either fully or partially instantiate the causative schema, with full instantiation as the prototype. The subject (NP_1) and retained object (NP_3) stand in possessive relations, typically with NP_1 as humans and NP_3 as body parts. While passives with a focused theme offer an alternative to the agent orientation of canonical transitives, the question arises: how can an object be retained? This will be addressed in the next section.

4. From motivation to integration: Metonymic realignment and dual profile determinance

Having examined the component structures of the ROP, the analysis will now turn to how the components are integrated to form a composite structure. The discussion will first address the structural and cognitive motivations, followed by its underlying integration mechanism.

4.1. Structural and cognitive motivations for the ROP

4.1.1. Structural motivation: RESULT (V_2) as profile determinant

The ROP exhibits a structural mismatch: the passive marker *bèi* de-transitivizes its predicate, leaving the retained object (NP_3) without a licensing source. This apparent discrepancy often leads to its dismissal as a marginal deviation. This mismatch stems from structural hybridity. Emerging during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (Dong, 1989), the ROP serves as a transitional hybrid between the coordinate verb construction (CVC, V_2 as the profile determinant) and the RVC (V_1 as the profile determinant). It integrates the semantic and morphological features of the RVC while preserving V_2 as the profile determinant characteristic of the CVC (Li, 1984, 1992; Ren, 2001). Thus, V_2 can exert a causative force and function transitively, a capacity rooted in the causative use of intransitives in Classical Chinese, exemplified by the evolution of the intransitive verb *yuǎn* 'distance' (Chen, 2007; Pan, 1980; Wang, 1980).

(8) 远之 (*yuǎn zhī*) [$V_{2(caus)}$ + O]: 'distance it'

(9) 推而远之 (*tuī ér yuǎn zhī*) [V_1 + Conj + $V_{2(caus)}$ + O]: 'push and distance it'

(10) 推远之 (*tuī yuǎn zhī*) [V_1 + $V_{2(caus)}$ + O]: 'push-distance it'

Across this continuum, V_2 maintains functional autonomy in object licensing that would otherwise be suppressed: it independently profiles a causative event in (8) and (9), and its causative force persists as a structural legacy in (10).

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Applied to the ROP, the RESULT offers an alternative licensing source for NP_3, when the ACTION (V_1) is de-transitivized by the passive marker *bèi*. This constitutes a hybrid structure: while the clausal orientation is marked thematically by *bèi*, the RESULT (V_2) provides nested agentivity within the global thematicity. Since P has multiple phonological realizations (see Section 3.1), it licenses NP_3 in alternate ways:

(11) **Full instantiation** (V_1V_2): Analogous to the CVC, the RESULT (V_2) explicitly licenses NP_3.

(12) **Partial instantiation** ($V_1Ø$): Aligned with the RVC, the RESULT (Ø) latently licenses NP_3 despite being unsymbolized (Langacker, 2008: 194).

(13) **Partial instantiation** ($ØV_2$): With V_1 unsymbolized, the RESULT (V_2) explicitly and independently licenses NP_3.

The ability of the RESULT to license an object is not restricted to the ROP; it serves as a primary means of expressing transitivity in Mandarin, as illustrated by the oft-cited Pseudo-RVC:

(14) 他 哭 哑 了 嗓子。
tā kū yǎ le sǎngzi
3SG cry hoarse PERF throat
'He cried his throat hoarse.' (Lit. 'He cried hoarse the throat.')

While *kū* 'cry' (V_1) is intransitive, *yǎ* 'hoarse' (V_2) functions as a transitive verb. Transitivity does not operate at the verb level (lexically determined) but at the clause level (grammatically determined) through the V_2-NP sequence, leading to an inchoative-causative alternation. The shift in word order between V_2 and NP indicates a change in processual profiling (Langacker, 2008: 370–373):

(15) **Inchoative** (NP-V_2): *sǎngzi yǎ le* 'The throat became hoarse' profiles a thematic process, where *sǎngzi* 'throat' (NP) functions as trajector undergoing the state change specified by *yǎ* 'hoarse' (V_2).

(16) **Causative** (V_2-NP): *yǎ le sǎngzi* 'X causes the throat to become hoarse' profiles an agentive process, where trajector X exerts force to induce the state *yǎ* 'hoarse' (V_2) in landmark *sǎngzi* 'throat' (NP).

Since a trajector represents both an entity and a relationship, trajector X is relational in nature and is elaborated by the thematic process *tā kū* 'he cries'. The alternation shown in (15–16) is sketched in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Thematic process versus agentive process.

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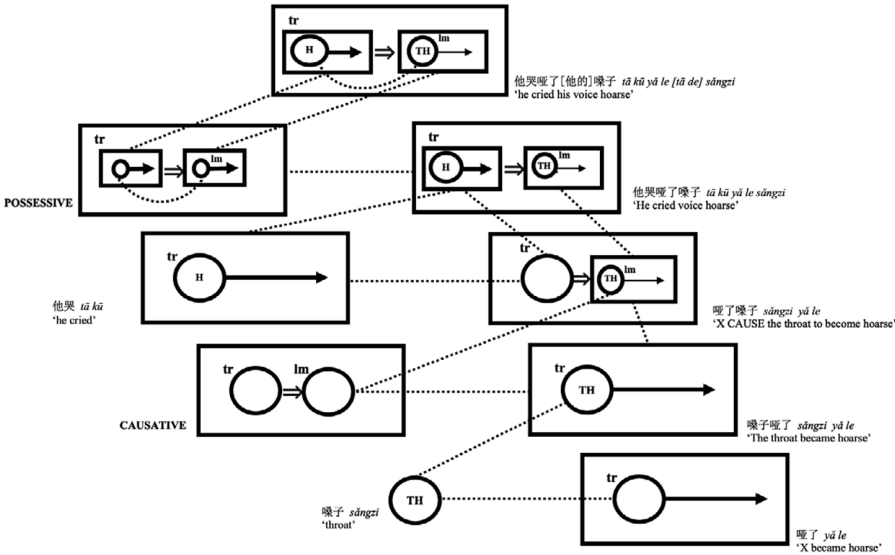


Figure 4. Integration of the component structures of *tā kū yǎ le sǎngzi* 'He cried his throat hoarse.'

Figure 3(a) illustrates a thematic process, where *sǎngzi* 'throat' (abbreviated as TH) functions as trajector (tr) of the state change specified by *yǎ* 'hoarse' (single arrow), independent of any inducing force or agent. In Figure 3(b), *yǎ* 'hoarse' serves as a causative profile determinant. The thematic process *tā kū* 'he cries' (single arrow) elaborates its relational trajector, where *tā* 'he' (abbreviated as H) acts as local trajector. The process of his crying exerts force (double arrow), causing *sǎngzi* 'throat' (lm) to become *yǎ* 'hoarse' (single arrow). Therefore, the Pseudo-RVC in (14) integrates thematicity and agentivity. Their integration is sketched in Figure 4.

In Figure 4, dotted correspondence lines serve as a graphic indication of conceptual overlap. At the first ('lower') level, the trajector is elaborated by *sǎngzi* 'throat' (TH), yielding the thematic process *sǎngzi yǎ le* (single arrow). It further integrates a CAUSATIVE element to produce the agentive process *yǎ le sǎngzi* (double arrow), where *sǎngzi* 'throat' (TH) is landmark but the clausal trajector remains schematic. The trajector is elaborated by the thematic process *tā kū* 'he cries', with *tā* 'he' (H) as local trajector, yielding the composite structure *tā kū yǎ le sǎngzi.* Finally, due to the absence of a possessive marker between *tā* 'he' and *sǎngzi* 'throat', a possessive link is required (dashed arc) at the highest level of organization.

The Pseudo-RVC provides the structural frame for the ROP, with the causative RESULT as the licensing source for NP_3. However, with NP_3 (the possessed) retained in the object position, why is it possible for the possessor (NP_1) to be promoted to the subject position? This question will be explored next.

4.1.2. Cognitive motivation: Metonymic realignment of prominence

The ROP reveals a mismatch between semantic relations and syntactic realization: the verb targets the possessed (NP_3) as the direct patient, while the possessor (NP_1) is realized as the syntactic subject instead. This study argues that this realignment is motivated by the POSSESSOR FOR POSSESSED metonymy, which is grounded in

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the transmission of energy along an action chain. According to the billiard-ball model (Langacker, 2008), an action chain involves forceful interactions where energy is transmitted between participants. In the context of possession, the energy from an action targeting the possessed (NP_3) ultimately transfers to the possessor (NP_1). This justifies the status of the possessor as a passive theme, the clausal trajector, and, consequently, the syntactic subject. By way of illustration, consider the contrast between (17–19):

(17) 父亲 的 膝盖 被 农奴主 挖 掉 了。
fùqin de xīgài bèi nóngnúzhǔ wā diào le
father GEN knee PASS serf-owner dig out PERF
'Father's knees were dug out by the serf-owner.'

(18) *父亲 被 农奴主 挖 掉 了。
fùqin bèi nóngnúzhǔ wā diào le
father PASS serf-owner dig out PERF
'Father was dug out by the serf-owner.'
(Intended: 'Father had his knee dug out by the serf-owner.')

(19) [父亲]$_{NP_1}$ 被 [农奴主]$_{NP_2}$ [挖]$_{V_1}$ [掉]$_{V_2}$ 了 [膝盖]$_{NP_3}$。
fùqin bèi nóngnúzhǔ wā diào le xīgài.
father PASS serf-owner dig out PERF knee
'Father had his knees dug out by the serf-owner.'

(Aug. 1965)

Example (17) represents the default case, where the direct patient is realized as the syntactic subject. Examples (18) and (19) illustrate metonymic realignment, with the father (NP_1) as the reference point for the knee (NP_3). In (18), the shift is absolute: the father serves as the sole focal participant, while the knee is backgrounded despite its role as the active zone (Langacker, 1987). In (19), the ROP elevates the father to trajector status, while the knee stays foregrounded as the active zone.

The contrast between (18) and (19) illustrates the interplay between cognitive and structural motivations. In (18), the absence of a retained object renders the construction ungrammatical, as the RESULT *diào* 'out' is related to the subject (father). This is particularly confusing because the predicate *wā diào* 'dig out' typically refers to actions performed on objects rather than on people. Example (19) addresses this by aligning *diào* 'out' with the retained object *xīgài* 'knee'.

In summary, the ROP is a highly motivated structure, both structurally and cognitively. It promotes the possessor to the subject position for primary focal prominence through metonymy. Additionally, the RESULT serves as a causative profile determinant, allowing the possessed to be retained as an object.

4.2. From component to composite: Integrating thematicity and agentivity

Moving from motivation to integration, this section models how the components of the ROP are integrated to form a coherent composite structure. The central proposal is that the ROP is characterized by dual profile determinance: the passive marker *bèi* profiles clausal thematicity, while the RESULT acts as a causative profile determinant that licenses NP_3. Given that a fully instantiated predicate core (V_1V_2), a human

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subject (NP_1) and a body-part retained object (NP_3) serve as prototypes, the analysis will focus on the structure NP_1 + *bèi* + NP_2 + V_1V_2 + *le* + NP_3, with findings applicable to all ROP variants.

A comparison between a canonical passive and its ROP counterpart reveals the re-construal of a thematic process as a thematic-agentive hybrid:

(20) 她 的 右臂 被 狗 咬 伤 了。
tā *de* *yòubì* *bèi* *gǒu* *yǎo* *shāng* *le*
3SG POSS right.arm PASS dog bite injure PERF
'Her right arm was injured by a dog bite.'

(21) [她]$_{NP_1}$ 被 [狗]$_{NP_2}$ [咬]$_{V_1}$ [伤]$_{V_2}$ 了 [右臂]$_{NP_3}$。 (Sept. 2006)
tā bèi gǒu yǎo shāng le yòubì
3SG PASS dog bite injure PERF right.arm
'She had her right arm injured by a dog bite.'

Example (20) profiles a thematic process wherein *yòubì* 'right arm' undergoes the state change specified by *shāng* 'injured'. In (21), *shāng* 'injure' (V_2) serves as a causative profile determinant, adding an agentive layer to the clausal thematic process [*tā bèi* …]. The agentivity is realized in [*gǒu yǎo shāng le yòubì*]. While *yǎo* 'bite' (V_1) is lexically transitive, as seen when *gǒu* 'dog' (abbreviated as D) bites *yòubì* 'right arm' (abbreviated as A), the passive marker *bèi* blocks the transitivity (the dashed, shaded circle in Figure 5). Consequently, *gǒu yǎo* 'dog bite' profiles a single-participant thematic process and functions as clausal trajector (tr). The transitivity is re-established by *shāng* (V_2): the dog-biting process (tr) exerts force (double arrow), causing *yòubì* 'right arm' (lm) to become *shāng* 'injured' (single arrow).

Figure 5 illustrates the emergence of agentivity, but understanding the conceptual integration of (21) requires a broader perspective. Figure 6 illustrates how *shāng* 'injure' (V_2) serves as a causative profile determinant that licenses *yòubì* 'right arm' (NP_3) to appear in a passive construction.

At the lowest level, *yòubì* 'right arm' (A) elaborates the trajector of the thematic process *yòubì shāng le* (single arrow). A CAUSATIVE element is then integrated, yielding the agentive process *shāng le yòubì* (right-oriented double arrow). The transitivity is restored by *shāng* 'injure' (causative V_2-NP; see (16)) when *yǎo* 'bite' is de-transitivized by the passive marker *bèi* (dashed, shaded circle). In the agentive process, *yòubì* 'right arm' (A) elaborates its landmark and the thematic process *gǒu yǎo* 'dog bite' elaborates the trajector, leading to *gǒu yǎo shāng le yòubì.* The passive marker *bèi* also imposes a thematic construal, with the clausal trajector elaborated by *tā* 'she' (abbreviated as S), yielding *tā bèi gǒu yǎo shāng le yòubì* (left-oriented double arrow). Finally, due to the absence of a possessive marker between *tā* 'she' and *yòubì*

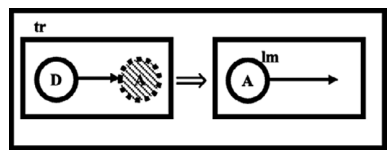


Figure 5. The re-profiling of *gǎu yǎo shāng le yòubì* 'The dog bit injured her right arm' in the *bèi*-construction.

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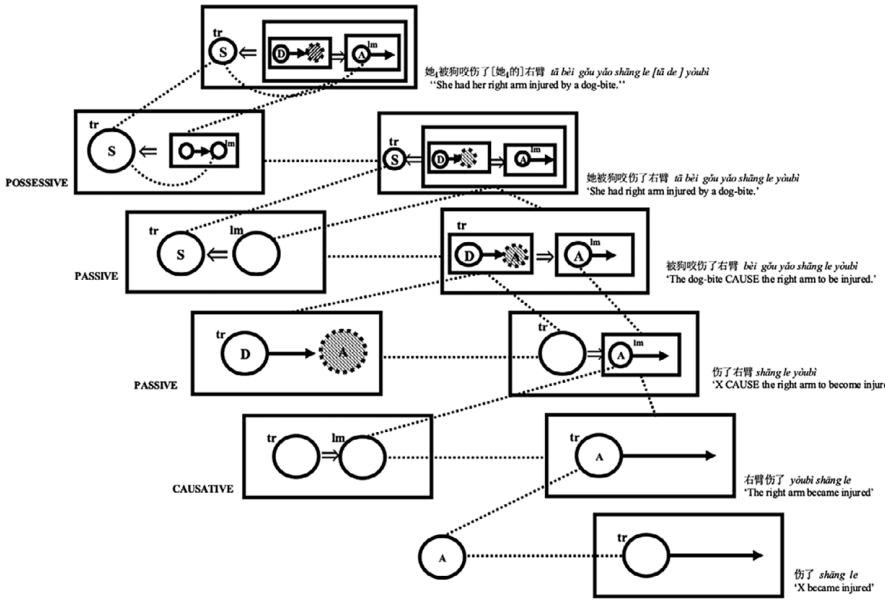


Figure 6. Integration of the component structures of *tā bèi gǎu yǎo shāng le yòubì* 'She had her right arm injured by a dog bite.'

'right arm', a POSSESSIVE link is required (dashed arc) at the highest level of organization.

In summary, the ROP is a motivated structure that integrates thematicity and agentivity, resulting from dual profile determinance: thematicity is profiled by the passive marker *bèi*, while agentivity is a function of the RESULT component.

5. The interaction of thematicity and agentivity and its implications

5.1. The interaction of thematicity and agentivity

The integration of thematicity and agentivity defines the ROP as a hybrid composite structure. As a passive construction, it designates the passive marker *bèi* as the primary determinant that profiles thematicity, while the RESULT component serves as the secondary determinant for agentivity. Thematicity, as the primary orientation, aligns with Mandarin's status as a topic-prominent language, where the subject identifies the entity discussed in the sentence (Li & Thompson, 1981: 15). However, the relationship between thematicity and agentivity is more complex than it appears in actual language use, as the predicate core (P) features three distinct phonological manifestations that highlight their dynamic interaction.

Given that phonological structures symbolize semantic structures (Langacker, 2008: 15), the thematicity-first and agentivity-second pattern is most evident in the full instantiation of P (V_1V_2), where thematicity (*bèi* + V_1) and agentivity (V_2) are directly and individually symbolized. Consequently, the phonological values of P function as a major factor in determining conceptual arrangement, with the

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phonological prominence of the ACTION and RESULT reflecting their conceptual significance.

(22) Full instantiation (V_1 V_2, 83.37%) (thematicity > agentivity). Thematicity is symbolized by *bèi* + V_1 and agentivity by V_2. The ROP achieves an optimal balance between thematicity and agentivity, justifying its status as the prototype.

(23) Partial instantiation (action-only) (V_1 Ø, 15.72%) (thematicity ≫ agentivity). Thematicity is symbolized by *bèi* + V_1 and agentivity by Ø. The ROP maximizes thematicity and serves as a significant variant.

(24) Partial instantiation (result-only) (Ø V_2, 0.91%) (thematicity ≈ agentivity). Thematicity is symbolized by *bèi* + Ø and agentivity by V_2. The ROP allows thematicity to be overridden by agentivity, accounting for its marginal status.

As illustrated above, (23) and (24) represent extensions of the prototype in (22). While (24) is often neglected due to its marginal status, (23) remains contentious. Consequently, the legitimacy of structures like (25) is questioned in previous studies (e.g., Ma, 2013a, 2016; Xu, 2022):

(25) [张三]$_{NP_1}$ 被 [杀]$_{V_1}$ [Ø]$_{V_2}$ 了 [父亲]$_{NP_3}$。
name bèi shā Ø le fùqīn
Zhang San PASS kill Ø PERF father
'Zhang San's father was killed.'

However, the 15.72% frequency supports action-only instantiation as a productive structure rather than a grammatical violation. In (25), *shā* 'kill' lexically entails *sǐ* 'dead'. While *sǐ* 'dead' is zero (symbolized Ø), it latently licenses *fùqīn* 'father' (NP_3). The zero role of *sǐ* 'dead' is allowed since it is an ergative verb that overlaps functionally with the perfective marker *le* denoting completion. Thus, what is often regarded as ungrammaticality is actually a defocusing of agentivity in favor of thematicity.[4]

5.2. Theoretical implications

First, the dual profile determinance model helps explain the absence of the ROP in English. In English, a finite clause allows only one component to serve as a profile determinant. Thus, English passives, also finite clauses, profile thematicity while excluding a retained object (agentivity). In contrast, Mandarin passives feature the RESULT component as a causative profile determinant for agentivity, alongside the

[4]As the reviewer suggests, the ungrammaticality of example (25) may result from the kinship relation between *Zhāng Sān* (NP_1) and *fùqīn* 'father' (NP_3), a point that merits consideration. Although structurally licensed under the dual profile determinance model in Section 4, the kinship relation between *Zhāng Sān* and *fùqīn* 'father' creates significant cognitive tension. The ROP typically requires NP_1 and NP_3 to have a conceptually dependent relationship, specifically a possessive one, with NP_3 acting as a dependent participant of NP_1. However, since *fùqīn* 'father' is conceptually autonomous, it results in reduced acceptability, but does not render the sentence ungrammatical.

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clausal thematicity profiled by passive marker *bèi*. Therefore, while the POSSESSOR FOR POSSESSED metonymy may be conceptually possible in English, it lacks the necessary structural basis for grammatical realization.

Furthermore, the dual profile determinance model contributes to CG by providing insights into how thematicity and agentivity interact within finite clauses. Langacker's (2008: 366–373) model introduces three coding strategies for agent and theme roles: agent orientation (where the agent acts as the trajector), theme orientation (where the theme serves as the trajector) and balanced orientation (which treats both roles equally). Languages that exhibit balanced orientation may be seen as subjectless, as agents and themes show similar grammatical behaviors in both one-participant and two-participant clauses. Langacker also notes that agent and theme orientations function as competing strategies. This study refines Langacker's model by introducing mixed orientation, where thematicity and agentivity coexist within a finite clause without competition, with one being primary and the other secondary.

Finally, the dual profile determinance model plays a crucial role in online processing. While the ROP integrates thematicity and agentivity to convey more information, it complicates real-time comprehension. In Mandarin, the subject of a passive construction typically corresponds to the theme, specifically the patient. However, the ROP identifies the subject as an experiencer and places the patient at the end of the clause. This structural arrangement can create a 'garden-path' effect, leading the reader or listener to initially misinterpret the subject as the patient until the true patient is revealed, thus increasing cognitive load. For example, in (25), readers or listeners might initially assume Zhang San is the victim, only to later realize it is actually his father who has been killed.

6. Conclusion

This study examines the ROP in Mandarin to elucidate the mechanisms by which it retains an object. By integrating CG with quantitative analysis, we investigate the component structures and how they are integrated to form the composite structure: NP_1 + *bèi* + (NP_2) + P + *le* + NP_3.

Empirical evidence indicates that the predicate core (P) has multiple phonological manifestations based on a common causative schema, establishing a prototypicality hierarchy: full instantiation as the core, action-only as secondary extensions and marginal result-only cases. This hierarchy corresponds to a prototypicality hierarchy of participant selection, where a preference for human subjects (NP_1) and body-part objects (NP_3) is evident. The integration of these components into the composite ROP is driven by structural and metonymic motivations. Structurally, the ROP follows a dual profile determinance model, with the passive marker *bèi* serving as the primary determinant for thematicity and the RESULT component as the secondary determinant for agentivity. Cognitively, the ROP is motivated by the POSSESSOR FOR POSSESSED metonymy.

Given these findings, this study provides insights into how the ROP retains an object and clarifies its absence in English. It also advances CG by introducing mixed orientation to elucidate the interaction between thematicity and agentivity within finite clauses. However, this study offers a limited analysis of NP_2, which is part of the trajector in the agentive process profiled by the ROP. Analyzing its explicitness, implicitness and animacy may offer insights into the conditions and motivations

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underlying ROP usage. Furthermore, experimental studies and validation across diverse registers are essential for a comprehensive evaluation of the dual profile determinance model in future research.

Abbreviations

CL	classifier
GEN	genitive (*de*)
PASS	passive marker (*bèi*)
PERF	perfective aspect marker (*le*)
POSS	possessive marker (*de*)
3SG	third person singular

Data availability statement. The dataset is available at https://osf.io/umha7.

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Competing interests. The authors declare none.

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