Construction, reanalysis, and stance: ‘V yi ge N’ and variations in Mandarin Chinese

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Abstract

Classifiers in Mandarin Chinese typically occur after a numeral and before a noun. In this paper, we examine the interactions that the Mandarin general classifier, ge, has with its neighboring elements as they form constructions. Taking the usage-based approach, we investigate post-verbal constructions involving ge, i.e., ‘V yi ge N’ and its variations. Because of repeated use, the prototypical ‘V yi ge N’ gives rise to some variant constructions through formal reduction and some other through reanalysis and decategorization. Some of the variant constructions can express the speaker’s stance, and we analyze the pragmatic inferencing steps that derive these evaluative meanings and study how some of these meanings are strategically exploited in clause structure and in discourse interaction. Our analysis points to the significance of the collocational/metonymic association between co-occurring linguistic elements in forming constructions and developing constructional meanings. Our study also shows that frequent use is the source for the establishment of the prototype, which in turn provides a point of departure for the application of pragmatic principles, formal reanalysis, and the inclusive interpretation of non-prototypical, extensional uses.

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1. Introduction

Constructions have been a major focus of interest in recent decades. Traditionally, constructions are defined as recurrent syntactic patterns (e.g., Quirk et al., 1985). Acknowledging the interdependence between semantics and syntax, linguists in Construction Journal of Pragmatics 36 (2004) 1655–1672

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Grammar focus on the form-meaning correspondences in constructions (e.g., Fillmore et al., 1988; Goldberg, 1995). In this paper, we will adopt the usage-based approach to constructions. Linguists researching the relationship between discourse/interaction and grammar have found that when constructions are examined in actual use, they have the following characteristics: (1) they are lexically skewed, (2) the lexically constrained constructions are cognitively processed, stored and accessed as a unit, and (3) these constructions serve interactional functions (e.g., Tao and McCarthy, 2001; Thompson, 2001, 2002). The notion of lexically-constrained constructions and their special cognitive status are readily apparent when we consider the Mandarin Chinese ‘numeral + classifier + noun’ pattern. While many classifiers are actively used in Modern Mandarin discourse, the general classifier, ge, is unequivocally the most frequently used member of all. Similarly, yi ‘one’, is the overwhelmingly most frequently used numeral. Thus, the Chinese ‘numeral + classifier + noun’ construction is most frequently realized as ‘yi + ge + noun’. In terms of clause structure, this construction can show up at the subject/topic position, the object position, and the various oblique positions. The elements in this construction and their collocational relationship are remembered and retrieved as a unit by the speakers through numerous uses in their daily language.

A brief discussion of Chinese classifiers is necessary here. Traditionally, (nominal) classifiers are said to have a classifying function as they may indicate, to various extents, the meaning and the semantic properties of the following noun. The general classifier in Mandarin, ge, however, does not have a true classifying function as it is vacuous in meaning, poses no semantic restriction, and can co-occur with practically any noun. On the other hand, studies have further shown that classifiers, including ge, have a distinctive discourse/textual function in signaling the saliency of the following noun as discourse participant (Hopper and Thompson, 1984; Li, 2000a,b). In this paper, we propose to look into constructions involving ge because we find that, beyond its textual function of marking the following N as a discourse salient participant, ge plays a critical role in these constructions which express the speaker’s stance towards what s/he is talking about.\footnote{The grammaticalization (and phonetic reduction in spoken Mandarin) of yi ge (or yi plus other classifiers) has also been discussed from other perspectives in recent literature, e.g., Chen (2003), Chirkova (2004), and Tao (2002).}

Back to the notion of construction, we notice that ‘smaller’ constructions can sometimes become part of a ‘larger’ construction. This is what happens when ‘yi ge N’ occurs at post-verbal positions. It can collocate with the V and together they form a larger construction, ‘V yi ge N’. However, variations of this (prototypical) construction abound if we take a collocational perspective on the neighboring elements of ge, and it appears that each variant construction has its own specified meaning and serves some discourse/interactional (textual and/or interpersonal) function. Variants of the ‘V yi ge N’ construction include (1) ‘V yi ge V’, (2) ‘V yi ge ZERO’, (3) ‘ZERO yi ge VP’, (4) ‘V ZERO ge Comp’, and (5) ‘V ZERO ge N’. While the prototypical ‘V yi ge N’ is extremely productive, some of the above variants are highly lexical-constrained and non-productive (e.g., (2) and (3)). In this paper, we will first study (1) (and (2) and (3)) as they manifest constructional prototypicality and reanalysis. Next, we discuss (4), which too illustrates constructional prototypicality and reanalysis, while it also expresses the speaker’s stance. In particular, we will examine (5),
‘V ge N’, for the speaker’s stance it expresses, the pragmatic inferencing that gives rise to this stance, the functional ‘division of labor’ between this variation and the prototypical ‘V yi ge N’, and how the speaker’s stance is strategically used in discourse to express subjectivity.2

As noted above, some of these constructions express the speaker’s stance towards what s/he is talking about. A vast literature is devoted to the fact that language can express the speaker’s subjective viewpoints (see review in Thompson and Hunston, 2000), and the notion of stance has been given various terms in previous literature, such as ‘evaluation’, ‘affect’, ‘attitude’, etc. It generally refers to the expression of the speaker’s attitude towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the things that s/he is talking about (Thompson and Hunston, 2000: 5). In this paper, we use ‘stance’, ‘affect’, and ‘evaluative meaning’ interchangeably.

Following the vast literature in semantic change that promotes pragmatic inferencing as playing a key role in the evolution of meaning as language change embeds in language use (e.g., Hopper and Traugott, 1993; Traugott and Dasher, 2002), we argue in this paper that the formation of the meaning of a construction and the speaker’s stance that it expresses can be accounted for in terms of pragmatic inferencing as well, since constructions are essentially formed through repeated use, and the particular meaning associated with a construction emerges from the association and interaction of the meaning of the individual linguistic elements in that construction. While meaning is surely a process of conventionalization (over time), we attempt to show that, given repeated use, metonymic pragmatic inferencing, that is, pragmatic inferencing working syntagmatically between frequently co-occurring linguistic materials, best accounts for the emergence of constructional meaning at its inception stage.

The model we see most useful in explicating the pragmatic inferencing involved in the ‘V yi ge N’ construction and its variations is the framework proposed by Levinson, which is one of the neo-Gricean reformulations of the classic Gricean maxims of conversation (Grice, 1989[1975]; Brown and Levinson, 1987[1978]; Levinson, 1995, 2000; Huang, 2000).3 The Levinsonian framework distinguishes three inferential principles or heuristics that account for the exercising of generalized conversational implicature in language use. The Q (for quantity) Principle maintains that what the speaker says is what s/he knows best. Therefore, the absence of an informationally stronger expression implicates that the interpretation associated with the stronger expression does not hold. The I (for informativeness) Principle points to the stereotypical expectation given our knowledge about the world. Therefore, one can ‘read into’ a speaker’s speech more specific information than his/her language literally refers to. The M (for manner) Principle concerns the choices between marked form and unmarked form. The use of a marked form implicates that the stereotypical interpretation associated with the unmarked form does not hold. We will use these three principles/heuristics to discuss how linguistic elements occurring in each

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2 The construction, ‘yi ge N’, can in fact be expanded to include an optional demonstrative, as ‘(DEM) yi ge N’. However, in this paper we disregard the referential (definite or specified) use of NP that arises from the presence of demonstratives (and their equivalents such as mei ‘every, each’). Likewise, we also disregard the quantifying uses of NP that arises from the use of specific numerals other than yi ‘one’.

3 Also see Horn (1984) for his bipartite reformulation of the Gricean maxims of conversation, and Traugott and Dasher (2002) for the ‘invited inferencing’ theory as applied to semantic change.
other’s neighborhood give rise to pragmatic inferencing, through which the constructional meanings emerge.

This study offers support from Chinese to the view that the evolvement of language structure arises out of language use, in particular, that frequent uses of the prototypical form of a construction can lead to the loosening up of categoriality, extension to non-prototypical combinations, reanalysis (of form), and reinterpretation (of meaning). The study also offers the Chinese data as yet another set of examples in which the conventionalizing of pragmatic inferencing arises in the regular association of linguistic materials in syntagmatic sequences. Finally, this study promotes the usage-based approach to the study of constructions and the relationship between discourse/interaction and grammar in general: constructions are (paradigmatically) lexically constrained and (syntagmatically) ‘adaptive’ to their local ‘environment’ to generate variants; constructions also serve interactional functions at the discourse level.

The examples used in this paper come from a database consisting of over 15 h of recordings of naturally occurring conversation and radio talk show programs in Mandarin spoken in Taiwan, and the 2 million-word Sinica Corpus, which is largely composed of written Chinese samples from Taiwan. Finally, constructed examples are also used to illustrate certain points.4

In the following, Section 2 discusses the ‘ge N’ collocational relationship in the ‘V yi ge N’ construction and the significance of its variations. Section 3 discusses the unusualness stance expressed by ‘V ge C’ in discourse, and the pragmatic inferencing that gives rise to it. Section 4 examines the trivialness/casualness stance expressed by ‘V ge N’ in discourse, the pragmatic inferencing that gives rise to it, the functional ‘division of labor’ between ‘V ge N’ and the prototypical ‘V yi ge N’, and how the trivialness/casualness stance is strategically employed in the actual use of the construction to express subjectivity. Section 5 is a summary and conclusion.

2. ‘V yi ge N’ and its variations

In this section, we consider variations at the N slot of the ‘V yi ge N’ construction, in which the relationship between ge and its following element is interesting from the point of view of categoriality.

2.1. ‘V1 yi ge V2’

As mentioned above, ge is typically a nominal classifier whose form (occurrence) and function are accountable in terms of the following N, and the construction, ‘yi ge N’, is realized in its various combinations in daily language with high frequency. As frequency often brings about change (e.g., Hopper and Traugott, 1993; Bybee and Hopper, 2001), the

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4 The gloss conventions used in this paper are: 2P—second person plural pronoun, 2S—second person singular pronoun, 3S—third person singular pronoun, CLFT—shi...de cleft construction, DEM—demonstrative, GE—classifier ge, PROG—progressive aspect marker, NEG—negation, PRT—(sentence-final) particle, SHI—copula shi, QUES—question marker, YOU—presentative you.
N slot in these various ‘ge N’ constructions can be occupied by expressions that are not prototypically nominal. Examples abound in spoken, interactive data. The following are those that occur post-verbally.

(1) 中國哲學很講一個悟. (conversation)
Zhongguo zhuxue hen jiang yi ge wu.
China philosophy very talk one GE realize
‘Chinese philosophy emphasizes (sudden) enlightenment.’

(2) 所以你們決定用春夏秋冬來，來一個分別. (radio interview)
Suoyi nimen jueding yong chun xia qiu dong lai, lai zuo yi ge fenbie.
So 2P decide use spring summer fall winter come come make one GE
distinction
‘So you guys decided to use the four seasons to make a distinction (i.e., to
categorize tour interests in terms of the four seasons).’

In the above examples, the elements occupying the N slot in the ‘V yi ge N’ construction are generally used as predicates (i.e., 悟 wu ‘realize, be enlightened’, 分別 fenbie ‘distinguish’). Given that there is no morphological marking for parts of speech in Chinese, the morphosyntactic role a lexical item holds in a clause is often interpreted according to the ‘context’. In the above examples, the nominalized interpretation of these verbs, or their noun status, is licensed by the preceding ge.

In fact, this nominalized interpretation is not restricted to ge. Other classifiers can license a nominalized interpretation of verbs occupying the same slot. However, our point here is that the nominalized-V-as-N cases involving ge (rather than other classifiers) typically take place in spontaneous discourse situations where the speaker is under great pressure to deliver speech rapidly, such as live TV/radio news coverage programs. These cases suggest that the ‘stretched’ construction is strategically preferred in on-line production. Indeed, the majority of the spoken data provided above came from radio talk shows. For the speaker in each case, the more stretched construction, ‘V1 (yi) ge Nominalized-V2’, is preferred to the more canonical and concise ‘V2’ construction as the way to express whatever s/he wants to say at that moment. In other words, (1) and (2) are preferred to their more concise counterpart, (1′) and (2′), which may be (one of) the expected ways of speaking (from the prescriptivist perspective):

(1′) 中國哲學很講怎麼悟.
Zhongguo zhuxue hen jiang zeme wu
China philosophy very talk how realize
‘Chinese philosophy emphasizes how one can attain (sudden) enlightenment.’

(2′) 所以你們決定用春夏秋冬來，來分別.
Suoyi nimen jueding yong chun xia qiu dong lai, lai fenbie.
So 2P decide use spring summer fall winter come, come distinguish
‘So you guys decided to use the four seasons to differentiate.’

Furthermore, the V1 in the preferred, stretched construction is sometimes an ‘empty’ verb, 做 zuo ‘do’, such as in (2) above and in (3) below:
Nimen bujiande quanbu yiding yao yong zhaopian lai daiti, huozhe shi nimen hui ronghe tupian gen manhua zhijian zuo yi ge, yi ge ronghe zheyangzi.

2P not-necessarily complete have-to want use photograph come replace, or be 2P can integrate picture and cartoon in-between make one GE one GE integrate like-this

‘You don’t need to replace all (of them) with photos; an alternative will be that you integrate photos and drawings and make an, an integration.’

It appears that the stretched construction is adopted simply to gain time to produce the key verb (V2). While we should not go so far as to claim that ge has developed a filler function, it is clear that the stretched ‘V1 (yi) ge V2’ construction provides a ‘buffer zone’ in the online production situation. Thus, we witness the loosening up, or put it differently, the extensional use, of the ‘ge-N’ collocational association due to processing factors. The N slot in ‘V yi ge N’ does not take NP only; it has turned into a slot for some grammatical element to get nominalized.

2.2. ‘V yi ge ZERO’ and ‘ZERO yi ge NEG-SV’

Two variations of the ‘V yi ge N’ construction further manifest the relationship between ge and its fellow constructional members: ‘V yi ge ZERO’ and ‘ZERO yi ge NEG-SV’.

First, there are cases where nothing follows ge, yielding ‘V yi ge ZERO’. Typically, ‘V yi ge ZERO’ occurs when the ZERO slot in the construction presumes an N, which is the object of the (transitive) V and is recoverable from the context, either anaphorically or deictically. For example,

(4) 吃一個! Chi yi ge! Eat one GE ‘Eat one!’

However, in spoken Mandarin, one can say the following, in which the ZERO after ge is non-recoverable or the V is prototypically non-transitive and takes no object.

(5) 親一個! Qin yi ge! kiss one GE ‘Have a kiss!’
(6) 香一個! Xiang yi ge! kiss one GE ‘Have a kiss!’
(7) 笑一個! Xiao yi ge! smile one GE ‘Smile!’
(8) 抱一個! Bao yi ge! hug one GE ‘Have a hug!’

Only very few verbs can fit into this construction, and the use of these expressions is restricted: they occur predominantly, perhaps only, in the imperative mode in casual conversation. The role that ge plays in these expressions is to trivialize the action (designated by the V) (see more discussion in Section 4.1), rather than to index the saliency of the following nominal element as it does in its prototypical use. The point here is that, even when there is nothing to follow, we still presume that there should be something after ge, and that something should be a N. Of course, this is due to the prototypical ‘yi ge N’ construction. Thus, again we witness that the frequency of the
prototypical construction licenses the ‘inclusive’ interpretation of non-prototypical occurrences.

The next constructional variation of ‘V yi ge N’ can be first schematized as ‘ZERO yi ge V’, as realized in the following examples:

(9) 一個不 小心  
yi ge bu xiaoxin  
one GE NEG careful  
‘(with) (a slight) carelessness, (with) an oversight’

(10) 一個不 留神  
yi ge bu liushen  
one GE NEG pay-attention  
‘(with) (a slight) carelessness, (with) an oversight’

In this variation, the V slot after ge is restricted to a negated stative verb, rendering a more detailed schema as ‘ZERO yi ge NEG-SV’. In these expressions, a stative phrase appears after the ‘yi ge’ fragment, while the V slot in the ‘V yi ge N’ construction is left empty. While it is hard to pin down what that non-occurring V should be, we presume that this construction is related to the prototypical ‘V yi ge N’ construction because these V-less expressions are typically used as adverbial phrases in discourse to feature the quickness of the taking place of some negative state (such as ‘being careless’) in an event.

To sum up Section 2, we have seen the ‘V yi ge N’ construction and some of its variations. From the ‘V1 (yi) geV2’ variation, we have observed the reanalysis of the N slot in the prototype construction and the reinterpretation of the function of ge in relation to non-prototypical co-occurring elements. From the ‘V yi ge (ZERO)’ and ‘(ZERO) yi ge NEG-SV’ variations, we gather further evidence for the fundamental role that reanalysis plays in the expansion of constructional frames.

3. ‘V ge C’ and unusualness

An important variation of the ‘V yi ge N’ construction in Mandarin is the omission of the numeral, rendering ‘V ZERO ge N’. The ‘V ge C’ construction in this section and the ‘V ge N’ construction in Section 4 are both realizations of this variant.

In Mandarin, one can say the following:

(11) 嚇個半死  
xia ge bansi  
scare GE half-die  
‘scared half to death’
(12) 哭個夠  
ku ge gou  
cry GE enough  
‘cry to one’s satisfaction’
(13) 說個不停  
shuo ge bu ting  
speak GE NEG stop  
‘speak incessantly’
(14) 講個沒完  
jiang ge mei wan  
speak GE NEG finish  
‘speak incessantly’
(15) 查個水落石出  
cha ge shuiluoshichu  
investigate GE water-recede-stone-expose  
‘investigate to the extent that the facts are all revealed’
(16) 轲個片甲不留
sha ge pianjiabuliu
kill GE piece-armor-NEG-stay
‘kill to the extent that even the armor of the enemy is destroyed’

These are examples of the ‘V ge C’ construction, which I have discussed in detail in Biq (2002a). I will briefly describe the construction and the speaker’s stance it conveys here and discuss the pragmatic inferencing deriving the evaluative meaning.

Many of the ‘V ge C’ examples are idiomatic expressions (such as (15) and (16)), some of them are frequently used ‘ready phrases’ in spoken discourse (such as (11), (13), and (14)), but the construction is in general a productive one. In this construction, ge is followed by C—complement expressions (adjectival/adverbial words, phrases or clauses) denoting the resultant state of the action designated by V. Generally, the state that C denotes is unusual; typically it refers to the ‘maximum’ point that doing V can reach. Of course, such a state can be hyperbolically or figuratively indicated. Thus, ‘half to death’ is a (hyperbolically) unusual state one reaches when getting scared; ‘(talking) incessantly’ is an unusual state one reaches when doing talking, and so on. Suggesting some state being unusual is contextual and subjective.

What is interesting is that the speaker’s stance about C, as the resultant state of V, is expressed through the use of the construction as a whole rather than through the use of any one (or more) of the elements involved in the construction. We argue that the basis for the derivation of the ‘unusual’ reading can be traced back to the association between ge and the following N in the prototypical ‘yi ge N’ construction. Just as the ‘nominalized V’ case discussed in Section 2, the C following ge here is reanalyzed as an element that has some nominal quality, conforming to the prototypical ‘ge N’ collocational association. Once the ‘noun-hood’ of a state is promoted, it becomes a focus of attention, or is interpreted as intended (by the speaker) to be the focus of attention. The formal markedness—that an adjectival/adverbial word/phrase/clause is indexed for nominal quality—further leads to the markedness in meaning—that the state designated by that adjectival/adverbial word/phrase/clause is unusual and deserves being the focus of attention, in the speaker’s opinion.

The ‘unusual’ reading as the evaluative meaning expressed by the ‘V ge C’ construction is the result of a two-step exercise of pragmatic inferencing in terms of Levinson’s framework. First, the I-Heuristic (the Informative Principle) gets the C reanalyzed as a nominal element, given the ‘stereotypical expectation’ about what is coming up after ge. Second, the M-Heuristic (the Manner Principle) gets the marked form a marked interpretation. It should be pointed out again that the reanalysis in the first step relies on the presumed ‘ge N’ collocational/metonymic association, which can be firmly established only through frequency, i.e., the prototypical ‘ge N’ collocation being repeated countless times in daily language use.

In summary, the ‘V ge C’ construction discussed in this section, just like the constructions discussed in Section 2, manifests reanalysis of the N slot in the prototypical ‘V yi ge N’ construction. The construction expresses unusualness as the speaker’s stance toward what s/he is talking about. This evaluative meaning is derived from the pragmatic inferencing involving the Informative Principle and the Manner Principle based on the
collocational/metonymic relationship between ge and N in the prototypical ‘V yi ge N’ construction.

4. ‘V ge N’ and trivialness

In this section, we examine another ‘yi less’ variation, i.e., ‘V ge N’, in which the N is prototypically the object of V.

4.1. Trivialness

In Mandarin, especially in spontaneous spoken discourse, speakers often use the ‘V ge N’ construction with an affect of indicating that the designated action is trivial, casual, and unremarkable (Liu, 1994). For example:

(17) 我去喝個水
Wo qu he ge shui
‘I’ll go drink some water.’

The ge in this construction is not in any qualifying relationship with the following N. Rather, what is expressed in ‘V ge N’ (e.g., 我去喝個水 Wo qu he ge shui) but not in ‘V N’ (e.g., 我去喝水 Wo qu he shui) is the speaker’s subjective stance toward the activity denoted by the V-N: the event is trivial, casual, and unremarkable. However, not all ‘V ge N’ uses express trivialness. We will come to this point at Section 4.2.5

Where does the sense of trivialness come from when ‘V ge N’ does express trivialness? We argue that the derivation of this evaluative meaning can be attributed to the collocational association between ge and the preceding yi. ‘V ge N’ is the phonetically reduced form of the ‘V yi ge N’ construction in spoken discourse as N prototypically refers to concrete and countable objects. Since yi is the numeral most frequently appearing at the NUM slot, the pragmatic inferencing based on ‘stereotypical expectations’, i.e., the I-Heuristic (the Informative Principle), accounts for the formal reduction. On the other hand, the numeral ‘one’ provides the association of minimal or

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5 Although it is a fact that ge is the most frequently used classifier, other classifiers do occur in actual use, albeit with very low frequency. Some nominal classifiers (NOM-CL) or verbal classifiers (VER-CL) can also be used to express trivialness, rendering a more generalized construction, ‘V (NOM/VER)-CL N’. For example, 抽根煙 chou gen yan smoke NOM-CL cigarette ‘smoke a cigarette’, or 看場電影 kan chang dianying watch VER-CL movie ‘watch a movie’. However, many other classifiers are not preferred in competition with ge for expressing the trivialness affect. For example, 釣條魚 diao ge yu fish GE fish ‘(go) fishing’ is preferred to 釣條魚 diao tiao yu fish NOMINAL-CL fish ‘catch a fish’ or 釣魚 diao hui yu fish VERBAL-CL fish ‘(do) fishing (once)’. There appears to be an implicational order. If the ‘original’ nominal or verbal classifier can bring up the trivialness affect in ‘VC LN’, then the same affect can be found in ‘V ge N’. The reverse does not hold. For classifiers that do express trivialness in this construction (such as 根 gen and 場 chang), their frequency in actual use—combined—is in no way competitive enough compared with that of ‘V ge N’. Thus, although the construction for the trivialness affect should be generalized as ‘V CL N’ (rather than ‘V ge N’) to cover all cases, we focus our discussion on ‘V ge N’ examples in this paper.
small quantity. The sense of minimum/small quantity gives rise to the trivializing interpretation of the entire verbal activity: in asserting doing some activity for the minimum in degree or quantity, the speaker suggests the trivialness, casualness, or unremarkableness in doing that activity. The pragmatic inferencing here relies on the Q-Heuristic (the Quantity Principle), which holds that when the smaller form is asserted, the larger quantity is indirectly denied. In other words, when the event takes place only once or is done to the minimal degree, the event is not remarkable and the impact of the event is not significant.\footnote{Our analysis of the pragmatic inferencing in the ‘V ge C’ and the ‘V ge N’ constructions basically parallels that in Li and Wang (2003) on similar constructions found in Taiwan Min.} Again, we see in this case that the ‘trivialness’ affect is expressed not through the use of any single element—such as the V or the N, but rather through the construction as a whole, in which ge interacts with V, with N, and even with the omitted and covert yi.

The trivialness (of event activities) can also be expressed in some other ways involving ge. As mentioned in Section 2, some of the idiomatic expressions in the form of ‘V yi ge ZERO’ can express trivialness/casualness: e.g., 親一個qing yi ge! ‘Have a kiss!’ (examples (5)–(8)). The same pragmatic inferencing applies here: the reduction of the form (covert and presumed N) suggests minimization of meaning (casualness and trivialness). However, as mentioned before, ‘V yi ge ZERO’ is both non-productive and limited in use. In contrast, the ‘V ge N’ construction is highly productive as a device for such affect.

Finally, a word about the contrast in the stance expressed by ‘V ge C’ and by ‘V ge N’. The unusualness suggested by ‘V ge C’ (as discussed in Section 3) is a kind of remarkableness, whereas the trivialness or casualness suggested by ‘V ge N’ is unremarkableness. The two sets of evaluative meaning are in direct opposition, although they are all pragmatically derived from the interaction of ge with its co-occurring elements. As discussed in Section 3, the unusual-/remarkable-ness in ‘V ge C’ stems from the association of ge with its following element, which is prototypically a N that typically designates a discourse prominent participant. On the other hand, as discussed above, the trivial-/casual-/unremarkable-ness in ‘V ge N’ stems from the association of ge with its preceding but covert prototypical numeral, yi, which suggests minimal quantity and degree. From this contrast we witness the power of the collocational relationship between frequently co-occurring linguistic elements that helps to create constructional meanings. This kind of collocationally or metonymically derived constructional meaning is, in turn, the driving force behind lexical polysemy and semantic change (Hopper and Traugott, 1993; Traugott and Dasher, 2002).

4.2. Ambivalence in ‘V yi ge N’ and ‘V ge N’

We stated above that ‘V ge N’ can express trivialness as speaker’s stance but not all of its occurrences convey this affect. The closely associated (prototypical) construction, ‘V yi ge N’, on the other hand, does not carry the trivialness affect. In the following, we first look at cases where ‘ge N’ is used in presentative and copula clauses. We then discuss cases where ‘V ge N’ and ‘V yi ge N’ are interchangeable in meaning.
4.2.1. ‘YOU ge N’ and ‘SHI ge N’

The phenomenon we are dealing here can be explicated by the examples Hopper and Thompson (1984) use in discussing the relationship between morphosyntactic marking and the discourse basis of N/V categoriality. According to Hopper and Thompson, the N in the predicate nominal construction, *ganbu* ‘cadre’, is morphosyntactically bare in (18a) because the idea denoted by the N is not to be taken up and developed in the following discourse. The same expression is morphosyntactically fully marked for its N categoriality in (18b) because the idea denoted by this expression will be developed in the following discourse (p. 716). In actual use, there is a third alternative, as given in (18c), i.e., the same N is morphosyntactically marked for its categoriality but not to its full extent.

(18a) 他是幹部  ta shi *ganbu* 3S be cadre  ‘S/He’s a cadre.’
(18b) 他是一個幹部  ta shi *yi ge ganbu* 3S be one GE cadre  ‘S/He’s a cadre.’
(18c) 他是個幹部  ta shi *ge ganbu* 3S be GE cadre  ‘S/He’s a cadre.’

We find that the third alternative (‘V ge N’) does not express trivialness and is thus identical to the ‘V yi ge N’ variant in meaning when the V slot is filled with the presentative, *you*, or the copula, *shi*. This is natural, since the minimizing/trivializing reading is contradictory to the discourse function of the presentative construction or that of the predicate nominal construction. In fact, the reduced form (‘ge N’) and the non-reduced form (‘yi ge N’) are in many occasions interchangeable and are used in discourse to rephrase or repair what is just said in immediate sequence. For example:

(19a) 我以前有個同學在那邊讀會計的，我們以前有個同班同學在那邊讀會計。
wo yiqian *you yi ge tongxue* zai nabian shi du kuiji de. Women yiqian *you ge tongban tongxue* zai nabian du kuiji.
‘I before have one GE classmate at there CLFT study accounting CLFT we before have GE same-class classmate at there study accounting
‘I have a classmate who studied accounting there. We have a classmate who studied accounting there.’

(19b) 它不是個純粹—個方法。
*ta bu shi ge chuncui yi ge fangfa*
3S NEG be GE pure one GE method
‘It’s not a pure—, a method.’

In our conversation database, there are 82 tokens of ‘YOU yi ge N’ (77%), and 24 tokens of ‘YOU ge N’ (23%). None of the latter shows the trivialness affect. However, the likelihood that each construction takes an N modified by a relative clause (i.e., N preceeded by a *de*-phrase/clause) is different: 20% of ‘YOU yi ge N’ (16 out of 82) but only 8% of ‘YOU ge N’ (2 out of 24). The non-reduced form (‘YOU yi ge N’) indeed confers more saliency onto the N while the reduced form (‘YOU ge N’) confers less; thus the latter construction has a smaller likelihood to co-occur with the morphosyntactically more elaborated NPs.

In our conversation database, there are 42 tokens of ‘SHI yi ge N’ (69%), and 19 tokens of ‘SHI ge N’ (31%). Just like the presentative case, when the reduced copula form is used
it does not carry the trivialness affect. The contrast between the two variant constructions with regard to the modifying *de*-phrase/clause also parallels that of the presentative case. 50% of the ‘SHI yi ge N’ examples co-occur with the *de*-phrase/clause (21 out of 42), while only 16% of the ‘SHI ge N’ examples do so (3 out of 19). Again, the reduced form (‘SHI ge N’) is at odds with morphosyntactically elaborated NPs.

4.2.2. The paradox in ‘V yi ge N’

When the V is a ‘standard’ verb, ‘V yi ge N’ does not express trivialness. What we want to address here is this paradoxical situation. As discussed in 4.1, the trivialness stance in ‘V ge N’ is derived from the association of *ge* with its preceding but covert prototypical numeral, *yi*, which suggests minimal quantity and degree. What is paradoxical is that the same evaluative meaning is not available in the full form, ‘V yi ge N’, despite the fact that the ‘yi ge’ collocation is overt. We propose that this is because when *yi* is overtly present, the ‘larger’ ‘yi ge N’ construction is itself a construction already carrying the discourse function of indexing the saliency of the N as a prominent discourse participant, as mentioned in Sections 1 and 4.2.1. This form-meaning association, as embedded in the generalized construction, ‘(DEM) yi ge N’, is strong and stable, as it is reinforced by numerous daily uses in not only the object position but also the subject and other various positions in a clause. The trivialness interpretation is in no way competitive enough to be associated with ‘(DEM) yi ge N’. That is why ‘V yi ge N’ has not developed a trivialness connotation.

On the other hand, when *yi* is not overtly present and the NUM slot in ‘yi ge N’ is empty, the morphosyntactic marking of the categoriality of N and of its discourse participant role is reduced to the “partial” form, ‘(ZERO) ge N’. As a result of the form-meaning iconicity principle, the saliency indexing function is not associated with the reduced form as strongly as it is with the full form. Only when this form-meaning association is weakened can the new interpretation arise. That is why trivialness is associated with ‘V ge N’, but not with ‘V yi ge N’.

4.2.3. ‘V ge O’ phrases/idioms

If the trivialness affect in ‘V ge N’ is not always expressed, where does it show up most conspicuously? The answer is when the V and the N constitute (conventionalized) V-O phrases/idioms, in which the N (or whatever that occupies the N slot) cannot be referential or affected, or is low on individuation or manipulability (Hopper and Thompson, 1984). For example, the N (or whatever that occupies the N slot) in the following examples can all be said to be non-referential, non-affected, non-individuated, and non-manipulable.

(20a) 開個刀 kai ge dao open GE knife ‘operate a medical surgery’
(20b) 洗個澡 xi ge zao wash GE bath ‘take a bath’
(20c) 插個嘴 cha ge zui insert GE mouth ‘interrupt’

Given that a V-O phrase/idiom is typically considered a ‘unit’ and *ge* (or other classifiers) is an added element breaking the unit, it is natural that the formal ‘expansion’—or formal markedness, for that matter—adds some affect onto the original expression. Technically, there is no reason why the same V-O sequence cannot be inserted with ‘yi ge’ and render
the full form, ‘V yi ge O’. However, when this happens, the trivialness affect is not available, just as with the standard ‘V yi ge N’ discussed in Section 4.2.2.

In summary, in Section 4.2 we have examined the complicated relationship between the trivialness stance and the two constructions, ‘V ge N’ and ‘V yi ge N’. The former construction does not express trivialness when it is used with the presentative or the copula. The trivialness stance is most clearly expressed when it is used with V-O phrases/idioms. With other verbs, it is ambivalent. By contrast, ‘V yi ge N’ does not express trivialness, despite the fact that the ‘yi ge’ collocational association is available. We propose to account for this in terms of a functional ‘division of labor’: ‘(V) yi ge N’ is associated with the function of indexing the N as a discourse-prominent participant, while ‘V ge N’ is associated with the trivialness stance.

4.3. Trivializing ‘V ge N’ in clause structure and interaction

In this section, we want to examine how the trivialness stance is exploited in interactional discourse. We tackle this issue by looking at the context in which ‘V ge N’ occurs. We find that ‘V ge N’ carrying the trivialness affect is seen in both main clauses and subordinate clauses. Here are some examples in which the ‘V ge N’ construction appears in the main clause:

(21) (In a conversation among A, B and C, A urges C to talk more.)
A: 半個小時，好像都我在講，好像現在該交個棒吧.
   ban ge xiaoshi, haoxiang du wo zai jiang, hao xiang xianzai gai jiao ge bang ba
   half GE hour seem all I PROG talk seem now should hand-over GE stick PRT
   [交鍵棒吧].

   Jiao ge bang ba
   Hand-over GE stick PRT

B: [你們兩個]不常聊天，是不是.
   Nimen liang ge bu chang liaotian, shibushi
   2P two GE NEG often chat be-not-be
A: It’s all me who’s talking for the whole half hour. Shouldn’t we take turns now?
   [Take it over, O.K.]
B: [You two don’t chat often], do you?

(22) 那到神戶不吃個牛排嗎?
   Na dao Shenhu bu chi ge niupai ma
   Then arrive Kobe NEG eat GE steak QUES
   ‘So don’t you want to have some steak when you are in Kobe?’

(23) 我這次去美國順便看個朋友.
   Wo zhe ci qu Meiguuo shunbian kan ge pengyou
   I this time go America by-convenience visit GE friend
   ‘This time to America (on business), I’ll visit a friend (while I am there).’

As the examples show, ‘V ge N’ can show up in imperatives, interrogatives, and declaratives, and the trivialness affect helps to soften a request in (21), mitigate the imposition suggested in the negatively formed question in (22) (i.e., tasting steak as
something that can be easily accomplished in Kobe, thus the question/suggestion is not too imposing), or simply indicate that the speaker views the event s/he is talking about, ‘visiting a friend during her trip to America’, as casual (and not difficult to accomplish) in (23).

‘V ge N’ can also occur in the subordinate clause, as in the following example, where the subordinate clause describes the temporal/causal background of the state expressed in the main clause:

(24) 你怎么回来有三千块，放假回来就没有了？
ni zemo huilai you sanqian kuai? fang ge jia huilai jiu meiyou le
2S how return have three-thousand dollar? take GE holiday return then NEG-have
PRT
‘How come that you had 3000 dollars when you returned, but now after the holiday it’s all gone?’

We also find the ‘V ge N’ construction with the trivialness affect occurring in chaining sequences. Here ‘chaining sequence’ is defined as a sequence of clauses in which all events described by the clauses before the final one lead up to the event reported in the final clause as the culminating event (cf. Hopper and Thompson, 1984). The ‘V ge N’ construction is typically used to report those events leading up to the culminating event. These events are the cause or condition for which, or the means through which, the final, culminating event takes place. In the following example, the ‘V ge N’ construction with the trivialness affect reports the first event in a serial verb ‘means-end’ sequence:

(25) 你们找个时间去唱歌嘛！
e women zhao ge shijian qu changge ma
hey we find GE time go sing PRT
‘Hey let’s find a time to go singing!’

In the following example, the ‘V ge N’ construction reports one of the events, “getting something to eat”, which takes place before, and leads up to, the culminating event reported at the end of the chain sequence, “go singing”.

(26) 就是，補完習，然後去吃個東西，然後就可以打包，去唱歌。
jiu shi, bu wan xi, ranhou qu chi ge dongxi, ranhou jiu keyi dabao, qu chang ge
then be, cram finish lesson, then go eat GE thing, then then can pack, go sing song
‘So, after cram school, (we’ll) go get something to eat, then (we can) pack up (the leftovers) and then go singing.’

In the 27 ‘V ge N’ examples we find in our conversation database, 13 report the main event, while 14 report an event in a chain prior to the culminating event. All examples have the trivialness affect regardless of whether the reported event is foregrounded or back- grounded in the discourse structure. Furthermore, in none of the examples there is the de- phrase/clause modifying the N. On the other hand, the construction with the trivialness affect is found to co-occur with ‘general extenders’, such as shenme(de), which serves as an
ideational and interpersonal hedge indicating that the speaker is being vague but is hoping the hearer knows what s/he means (cf. Overstreet, 1999). The following is an example:

(27) 那还不如要個號碼來做個什麼，抽個大家樂什麼的，簽個大家樂啊什麼，搞不好都會中。

na hai buru yao ge haoma lai zuo ge shenme, chou ge da jiale shenme de, qian ge da jiale a shenme, gaobuhao dou hui zhong

then still rather get GE number come do GE what, draw GE lottery what, sign GE lottery what, who-knows all can hit

‘It’s better that (we) take a number and do something, draw a lotto or something, guess (the numbers) in a lotto or something, who knows maybe we’ll hit the jackpot.’

Moreover, we also observe the ‘V ge N’ construction giving rise to fixed expressions, as exemplified by 舉個例子 ju ge lizi ‘for example’ (3 expression tokens out of the 27 construction tokens), which has virtually turned into a performative serving textual organizing function in conversation/spoken discourse. Consider the following example:

(28) 你舉個例子講，你比方像德紅，德紅這個地方呢跟緬甸接近。

ni xiang ju ge lizi jiang, ni bifang xiang Dehong, Dehong zhe ge difang ne gen Miandian jiejin

2S like give GE example say you for-example like Dehong Dehong this GE place PRT with Burma close

‘Let’s take an example. For example, Dehong. Dehong is close to Burma.’

4.4. Summary

In Section 4 we discussed the ‘V ge N’ construction and trivialness as the evaluative meaning it may express. Trivialness refers to the subjective stance of the speaker towards the event s/he is talking about: it is an unremarkable action in his/her view. The trivialness affective stance derives from pragmatic inferencing based on the collocational association between ge and the numeral that most frequently co-occurs with it, yi. ‘V ge N’ is taken as the reduced form of ‘V yi ge N’. When the transitivity between V and N is understood as being operated at minimal quantity/degree (i.e., once), the minimization of the entire event is inferred. The reduced form of ‘V ge N’ further reinforces the minimization interpretation. The paradoxical case regarding ‘V yi ge N’, that yi is overtly next to ge but the construction cannot count on this collocational relationship to express trivialness, is accounted for in terms of the more competitive textual function that ‘yi ge N’ serves, i.e., indicating the N as a prominent participant in the upcoming discourse. The form-meaning association between the ‘V ge N’ construction and the trivialness affect is not absolute, and the dissociation or association involve semantic, pragmatic, and discourse factors. For example, existential/presentative verbs and copula verbs do not generate the trivialness affect when they are followed by ‘ge N’; numerous cases involving standard verbs are ambivalent; and V-O phrases/idioms best exemplify the trivialness affect. At the textual level, the construction with the affect is not associated with any particular clause.
type, although the trivialness affect in chaining sequences can be accounted for by backgrounding, and the trivialness affect in expressing the main/foregrounded event can be accounted for by politeness (in the case of imperatives and interrogatives) and subjectivity (in the case of declaratives). These data show us that factors contributing to the form–affect association include the semantics of the V, the discourse properties of the N, the relationship between clause combination and discourse organization, interpersonal communicative strategies, and the expression of subjectivity.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have studied the interactions the classifier ge has with linguistic elements it co-occurs in a number of post-verbal constructions and discussed these constructions with regard to the relationship between form, meaning, and use. We first learned that for processing reasons the N slot after ge can go through reanalysis and become decategorized. We then reviewed the ‘V ge C’ construction and the unusualness affect that this construction expresses. We explicated the pragmatic inferencing for the case and pointed to the ‘ge N’ collocational/metonymic association and the Informative Principle and the Manner Principle as factors that contribute to the generation of the affect. We finally examined the ‘V ge N’ construction in detail and pointed out that this construction may convey trivialness as affect. The pragmatic inferencing behind the case was also explicated: the ‘yi ge’ collocational/metonymic association is critical to the account with the help of the Informative Principle and the Quantity Principle. We then confronted the paradox of why ‘Vy ge N’ does not convey trivialness whereas ‘V ge N’ does, when the ‘yi ge’ collocational association is claimed to be the basis for the emergence of the inference. Our account rests on the firmly established form–function association between the ‘(DEM) (NUM/yi) ge N’ construction and its marking of saliency of the N as discourse participant. This association is constantly reinforced in daily use. Compared to this indexing function, the trivialness affect is not competitive enough to become associated with ‘Vy ge N’. We also pointed out that whether and when a ‘V ge N’ construction conveys trivialness is a complicated issue involving the interaction of the component elements in the construction at semantic, pragmatic, and discourse levels. However, the trivialness affect works well in interactional discourse to express subjectivity.

We hope that in this study we have succeeded in elaborating on the following points. First, meaning is not always expressed through single lexical items. Meaning may be expressed by constructions; meaning may emerge from the interaction of linguistic elements that often co-occur with one another. Second, constructions can be examined at multiple paradigmatic levels (for categoriality) and multiple syntagmatic levels (for reduction, expansion, and/or integration). Recognition of the flexible and adaptive nature of constructions helps us appreciate the complexity in the relationship of form, meaning/function, and use. Third, while pragmatic principles can account for the derivation of the stance and the interaction between intra-constructional elements at the formal and functional levels, frequent actual use is the source for the establishment of the prototype, which in turn provides a point of departure for the application of pragmatic principles, formal reanalysis, and the inclusive interpretation of non-prototypical, extensional uses.
Thus, in this paper, we have used the notions of construction, reanalysis, and pragmatic inferencing to analyze our data and offer an account; we hope that through this study the fundamental role that frequency and discourse/use play in the understanding of linguistic structure has also been highlighted.

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