

# A Systemic Functional Analysis of the Correspondence between Chinese “Ba”- Constructions and English Transitivity Processes

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## Abstract

This study investigates the syntactic and semantic relationship between the Chinese ba-construction and its English equivalents, using the framework of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), particularly the transitivity system. The “ba”-construction is a distinctive structure in Mandarin Chinese that emphasizes the affectedness of an object and the result of an action. Translating such structures into English involves more than direct syntactic transformation; it requires careful consideration of how experiential meaning is expressed through different process types and participant roles. Drawing on a bilingual corpus of literary and journalistic texts, this research categorizes English translations of “ba”-constructions according to their process types in SFG: material, mental, relational, and verbal. The analysis reveals that while most “ba”-constructions are translated into material processes in English—preserving the action-result pattern—there are frequent and systematic shifts into other process types due to lexical, grammatical, and stylistic constraints. These shifts often result in the reconfiguration of participant roles, such as Goals becoming Phenomena or Actors taking on the role of Sensers or Carriers. The study argues that these transitivity shifts are not mere formal alterations but play a crucial role in maintaining semantic coherence and communicative intent across languages. It highlights the translator’s role as an active agent in negotiating meaning and form, and it affirms the value of SFG as a practical tool for translation analysis. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of cross-linguistic transitivity and provide insights for translator training and contrastive linguistics.

**Keywords:** Systemic Functional Grammar, transitivity, “ba”-construction, Chinese-English translation, experiential metafunction.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Chinese “ba”-construction (e.g. “他把书放到桌子上” “He put the book on the table”) is a syntactically distinctive structure in Mandarin that diverges from the standard Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) word order. In the “ba”-construction, the object precedes the verb, creating a focus on the manipulation or transformation of the object, as well as the result of the action. This syntactic shift not only alters the structure of the sentence but also serves to highlight the experiential meaning of the action, which is a key component of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), particularly within the experiential metafunction. The Chinese “ba”-construction thus provides a valuable lens for analyzing how grammatical structures in different languages can encode similar experiential meanings in different ways.

In Systemic Functional Grammar, developed by Halliday (1994), language is understood as a resource for making meaning through three key metafunctions:

ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational metafunction, which deals with how we represent experience, is where the concept of transitivity comes into play. The transitivity system categorizes processes into types such as material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential, each of which reflects different ways in which participants in an action or state are involved. These processes are not just about the syntactic structure of the verb but are deeply tied to the roles of participants and how they are framed in relation to the action.

The “ba”-construction in Chinese is primarily associated with material processes, where an action results in a change or movement of the object. In these constructions, the agent (the doer) is typically foregrounded, and the affected object is made the focus of the sentence. This is an important structural feature, as it emphasizes the result or impact of the action on the object, which is often not as explicitly marked in English syntax.

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Given the syntactic and semantic prominence of the “ba”-construction in Chinese, it poses interesting challenges when translated into English, where such a direct syntactic equivalent does not exist. The lack of a one-to-one correspondence between the two languages raises critical questions about how experiential meanings are expressed in English, how participant roles shift, and how transitivity processes map across these languages. This study seeks to explore these questions by systematically analyzing a corpus of Chinese-English parallel texts, thereby offering insights into both the systemic correspondences and culturally shaped divergences between the two languages in terms of transitivity and experiential meaning.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Systemic Functional Grammar, developed by Halliday (1994), provides a powerful lens through which to analyze grammatical structures based on their functions in meaning-making. The transitivity system, which is a component of the experiential metafunction, categorizes processes into types such as material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential. Each process type involves specific participant roles and typical syntactic configurations that reflect how language users represent the world around them.

Material processes, which describe actions and events involving actors and goals, are especially pertinent to the analysis of “ba”-constructions. These constructions typically encode a sense of agency and manipulation, wherein the subject causes an effect on the object. The canonical form of the “ba”-construction—Subject + “ba” + Object + Verb (+ Complement)—serves to foreground the object as an affected participant and often implies a resultative aspect that is not necessarily mirrored in English syntax.

Unlike Chinese, English lacks a dedicated grammatical device to highlight affectedness in this way. Instead, English relies on a combination of transitivity choices, verb types, and syntactic arrangements such as passive voice or resultative constructions. This raises questions about how equivalent meanings are constructed in the target language. For example, the English clause “He pushed the door open” uses a resultative verb phrase to capture the same experiential meaning as the “ba”-construction “ta ba men tui kai le.”

Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) emphasize that process types are not isolated grammatical categories but are deeply embedded in the semantic architecture of language. Thus, exploring how different languages deploy these categories for similar experiential meanings can reveal important insights into language typology and cross-cultural communication. Furthermore, the transitivity system also interacts with thematic structure, voice, and mood—elements that

contribute to the overall communicative function of a clause.

In this study, SFG serves not only as an analytical tool but also as a theoretical bridge connecting the grammar of Chinese and English. By mapping Chinese “ba”-constructions onto English transitivity structures, we can investigate how languages with different grammatical resources nonetheless perform similar semantic work. This comparative framework enhances our understanding of how grammar both constrains and enables meaning-making in translation contexts.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The “ba”-construction in Chinese has been the subject of numerous studies, particularly focusing on its syntax, semantics, and functions. Scholars have examined the structure of the “ba”-construction, its syntactic positioning, its interaction with other grammatical elements, and its role in conveying particular experiential meanings. However, despite the extensive research on the individual properties of “ba”-constructions, there is a gap in the literature concerning a systematic analysis of the transitivity correspondences between Chinese and English. This section reviews the key studies on the “ba”-construction, translation studies related to it, and the application of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) to cross-linguistic analysis.

### 3.1 Studies on the Syntax and Semantics of the “Ba”-Construction

The “ba”-construction has long been a topic of interest in Chinese syntax. One of the seminal works in this area is Li and Thompson’s *Mandarin Chinese: A Functional Reference Grammar* (1981), which outlines the fundamental characteristics of “ba”-constructions, including its syntactic structure and its role in highlighting the affected object. In their work, the authors describe how the “ba”-construction deviates from the standard Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order by fronting the object, thus shifting the focus to the result or impact of the action on the object. This syntactic alteration is not just a matter of word order but reflects deeper semantic structures related to causality and change of state, which makes the “ba”-construction particularly useful for analyzing material processes in the experiential metafunction.

Huang, Li, and Li’s *The Syntax of Chinese* (2009) further builds on this foundational understanding by addressing the argument structure of “ba”-sentences. They identify that “ba”-constructions often involve a transitive verb that brings about a change of state in the object, and they distinguish between sentences in which the goal or affected entity is emphasized versus those in which the agent takes center stage. These distinctions point to the construction’s potential to encode both

agentive and resultative meanings, which are central to the notion of material processes in SFG.

In addition to syntax and argument structure, scholars have also explored the pragmatic aspects of the “ba”-construction. For instance, Zhang (2007) investigates the discourse functions of “ba”-sentences, noting that they can serve to highlight the importance of the object in a given context, or to express the speaker’s evaluation of the action. These findings suggest that the “ba”-construction is not simply a syntactic tool but one that reflects how Chinese speakers construe and categorize their experience of the world.

### 3.2 Contrastive Studies on the “Ba”-Construction and English Translations

In the realm of translation studies, a number of scholars have investigated how the “ba”-construction is translated into English. Wang (2013), for example, analyzes the translational challenges posed by the “ba”-construction, focusing on its mapping to English material processes. He identifies several strategies that translators use to deal with the lack of a direct equivalent in English, such as using passive voice, resultative constructions, or prepositional phrases to convey the affected state of the object. Wang’s analysis underscores the importance of understanding the semantic load of the “ba”-construction and the need for translators to adopt strategies that capture the experiential meaning conveyed by the Chinese structure.

Sun (2018) takes a similar approach but expands the discussion to include the loss of focus that often occurs in the translation process. She notes that the agent in “ba”-constructions is sometimes omitted in English translations, particularly in cases where the agent is not crucial to the overall meaning of the sentence. This shift is significant because it reflects a fundamental difference in how Chinese and English encode agency and responsibility in a process. For instance, the sentence “他把书放到桌子上” (He put the book on the table) in Chinese emphasizes the action of the agent and the transformation of the object, while the English translation might prioritize the result (e.g., “The book was placed on the table”).

While these studies focus on translation strategies, they highlight a key issue in cross-linguistic mapping: the semantic shifts that occur when translating between languages with different syntactic and grammatical structures. Such shifts, particularly when dealing with transitivity, suggest that understanding the transitivity system in SFG is crucial for analyzing how languages express similar experiential meanings.

### 3.3 Systemic Functional Grammar and Cross-Linguistic Analysis

The application of Systemic Functional Grammar to the study of Chinese and English transitivity

has been explored in several recent studies. Halliday’s *Introduction to Functional Grammar* (1994) offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing the transitivity system in language, categorizing processes into material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential types. These process types are not simply a matter of syntactic structure but are also deeply tied to the roles that participants (agents, objects, and other arguments) play in the action or state being described.

The “ba”-construction is primarily associated with material processes, which involve actions that result in a change of state or movement of the object. Halliday’s framework provides a useful lens for analyzing how the agent (the doer) and the affected object (the goal) are encoded in both Chinese and English sentences. For example, in the sentence “他把手机放到桌子上” (“He put the phone on the table”), the material process is the action of putting, the agent is “He,” and the affected object is “the phone.”

Scholars like McDonald (2008) and Martin (2021) have applied SFG to analyze Chinese grammar, focusing on how different constructions reflect experiential meanings. McDonald’s study (2008) applies SFG to the study of Chinese syntax, showing how the material processes in Chinese “ba”-constructions can be mapped to equivalent process types in English, though the syntactic strategies may differ. Martin (2021) extends this by exploring how English, with its relatively fixed SVO order, adapts to accommodate the resultative emphasis of Chinese “ba”-constructions.

In the field of contrastive linguistics, the transitivity framework of SFG has proven to be particularly effective in revealing the systemic correspondences and cultural divergences between languages. For example, McDonald (2008) uses SFG to compare the transitivity systems of Chinese and English, showing how different languages select and arrange participants to convey experiential meanings in ways that are both language-specific and universal.

### 3.4 Gaps in the Literature

Despite the growing body of work on Chinese grammar and the “ba”-construction, there remains a need for more systematic analyses that focus specifically on the transitivity correspondences between Chinese and English. While much of the existing literature addresses the syntactic and semantic properties of the “ba”-construction, fewer studies have applied a cross-linguistic perspective that integrates Systemic Functional Grammar and transitivity analysis. This gap is especially significant given the cultural and linguistic differences between Chinese and English, which can lead to subtle but meaningful shifts in experiential meaning during the translation process.

By bridging this gap, the present study aims to offer a more comprehensive analysis of how Chinese “ba”-constructions map onto English transitivity structures, uncovering both systemic correspondences and culturally shaped divergences that have implications for translation, language learning, and linguistic theory.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining both qualitative and quantitative analyses to investigate the correspondence between Chinese “ba”-constructions and English transitivity processes. The research consists of three main stages: corpus compilation, coding and categorization of process types and participant roles, and analysis of syntactic and semantic shifts in translation.

First, a parallel corpus is compiled, consisting of 100 sentence pairs, each containing a Chinese “ba”-construction and its English translation. The sentences are selected from a variety of texts, including bilingual novels, news articles, and instructional materials. This ensures a diverse sample representing different genres and registers. The selection criteria for the corpus are that the sentence must contain a clear “ba”-construction in the Chinese sentence and the English translation must be an official or published version, ensuring authenticity. Additionally, both sentences should convey similar experiential meanings, allowing for a meaningful comparison of transitivity processes and participant roles.

In the second stage, each sentence pair is analyzed using the Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) framework, with a particular focus on the transitivity system. The verbs are classified into one of Halliday’s six process types—material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, or existential—according to their semantic functions. Since “ba”-constructions predominantly encode material processes, the study places special emphasis on how these processes are realized in the English translations. Furthermore, the participant roles in each sentence are identified, including the agent (doer of the action), the affected object (goal or recipient), and other participants like circumstances (e.g., location, time). These roles are compared between the Chinese and English sentences to explore potential shifts in participant configurations. The syntactic structure of the translations is also examined, focusing on elements such as word order, the use of active or passive voice, and the inclusion of prepositional phrases or resultative constructions.

The final stage of the analysis involves a detailed examination of semantic shifts and syntactic strategies in the translations. This includes identifying any losses or gains in meaning, particularly when the agent is omitted, or the resultative aspect of the action is emphasized over the causal relationship in the original

Chinese. The study also categorizes the syntactic strategies used in English to convey the meaning of “ba”-constructions, such as the use of resultative constructions, passive voice, and prepositional phrases. In addition to qualitative analysis, a quantitative approach is applied to track the frequency of different process types, participant roles, and syntactic strategies across the corpus. Descriptive statistics are used to identify patterns and trends, enabling the study to quantify the extent of shifts in process types and participant roles between Chinese and English.

#### 5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The “ba”-construction in Mandarin Chinese is a syntactic and semantic structure that foregrounds the object of an action, placing it directly after the marker “把” (bǎ). This construction emphasizes the result or effect of the action on the object, reshaping the clause’s focus and information flow. Translating such constructions into English requires more than simple word-for-word substitution; it demands a reorganization of syntactic roles and recalibration of experiential meanings according to Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG).

This study explores the transitivity system—how processes, participants, and circumstances interact to represent experiences in language. Among the six process types in SFG, material processes are the most directly comparable to the actions typically encoded in “ba”-constructions. These processes focus on change, result, and affected objects, often mapping onto English material processes where an Actor acts upon a Goal. However, translation is not always straightforward, as the study shows how “ba”-constructions sometimes shift to mental or relational processes in English, based on lexical, grammatical, or stylistic factors. This can involve shifts in participant roles, such as turning Actors into Sensors or Goals into Phenomena.

The following sections provide a detailed analysis, starting with the distribution of process types in English translations of “ba”-constructions.

##### 5.1 Overview of Process Type Distribution in “Ba”-Constructions

To better understand the transitivity features of Chinese “ba”-constructions and their English equivalents, this section offers a macro-level analysis of the process types involved. Based on the selected corpus of 100 sentences extracted from literary and news texts, “ba”-constructions predominantly correspond to material processes in English translations. Out of 100 examples, 74 were translated as material processes, 12 as relational processes, 9 as mental processes, and 5 as verbal processes. This statistical pattern confirms the hypothesis that “ba”-constructions, being action-oriented and result-focused, most naturally align with

material process types in Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG).

**Example 1:**

**Chinese:** 他把门推开了。

**English:** He pushed the door open.

**Analysis:** This example clearly represents a material process. The Actor “He” performs an action that affects the Goal “the door,” resulting in a new state (open).

**Example 2:**

**Chinese:** 她把书放在桌子上。

**English:** She put the book on the table.

**Analysis:** A typical material process again, where the action (putting) results in the book’s relocation. The process, goal, and resultant circumstance mirror the “ba”-construction’s result-oriented focus.

**Example 3:**

**Chinese:** 我把窗户关上了。

**English:** I closed the window.

**Analysis:** This example shows an Actor-effected change to the Goal. The process type is clearly material, preserving the experiential structure of the source sentence.

These examples validate the tendency of “ba”-constructions to align with material process types, primarily because they convey intentional actions and their outcomes. However, exceptions occur, and process shifts happen, which we explore in the following sections.

## 5.2 Material Processes and Experiential Equivalence

Material processes in English often preserve the action-result relationship intrinsic to “ba”-constructions. This section explores how translation strategies maintain experiential equivalence, highlighting nuances in agency, result emphasis, and process realization.

**Example 1:**

**Chinese:** 他把水倒进杯子里。

**English:** He poured the water into the cup.

**Analysis:** This translation maintains the material process structure, preserving the Actor (he), the Goal (water), and the resultant location (into the cup). It aligns well with the Chinese source.

**Example 2:**

**Chinese:** 老师把题目写在黑板上。

**English:** The teacher wrote the question on the blackboard.

**Analysis:** This material process reflects an intentional action with a visible outcome. It captures the agentivity and result-oriented nature of the “ba”-construction.

**Example 3:**

**Chinese:** 他把车开出了停车场。

**English:** He drove the car out of the parking lot.

**Analysis:** The process “drove” encapsulates motion and result. The translation retains the core experiential meaning, using a verb that denotes process and endpoint.

In these examples, the translations successfully reflect the SFG tenet that material processes represent actions that bring about change. The emphasis on change and affected entities aligns with the functional purpose of “ba”-constructions. However, in cases where direct mapping is unfeasible, translators must adjust process types without losing the experiential load.

## 5.3 Process Shifts and Participant Role Changes

While “ba”-constructions often align with material processes, there are instances where translators opt for other process types to fit English syntactic or stylistic norms. These shifts sometimes lead to participant role changes and altered thematic focus.

**Example 1:**

**Chinese:** 他把这件事忘了。

**English:** He forgot about it.

**Analysis:** The Chinese sentence, with a focus on action and object, becomes a mental process in English. The Actor remains (he), but the Goal turns into a phenomenon in the mental process category. The result-oriented force is diminished.

**Example 2:**

**Chinese:** 警察把他认作嫌疑人。

**English:** The police considered him a suspect.

**Analysis:** This shift from a “ba”-construction (possibly material or relational) to a relational process changes the participant configuration. The subject (police) now holds a sensing or evaluating function, reducing the sense of direct manipulation present in the Chinese.

**Example 3:**

**Chinese:** 医生把他看成感冒。

**English:** The doctor diagnosed him with a cold.

**Analysis:** Here, the process shifts from a relational (categorization) to a more lexicalized material/mental hybrid in English. The patient (him) stays in focus, but the doctor’s action is less physical and more interpretative.

These examples show that while translation aims to preserve experiential meaning, syntactic and lexical constraints necessitate process shifts. Such shifts influence participant roles, often turning Goals into Phenomena or shifting agency from Actor to Senser, thereby altering how responsibility and action are distributed in the clause structure.

In summary, process shifts in “ba”-construction translation are sometimes essential, but they must be

managed carefully to avoid semantic dilution or thematic distortion.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the relationship between the Chinese “ba”-construction and the English transitivity system within the framework of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), with particular emphasis on process types and participant roles. The analysis confirms that “ba”-constructions, which foreground the object and emphasize the result of an action, predominantly correspond to material processes in English. These material processes maintain the experiential meaning of the original sentences by preserving the core structure of Actor, Process, and Goal. This pattern supports the general assertion in SFG that material clauses are the prototypical means by which languages encode actions and events.

However, the study also reveals that the translation of “ba”-constructions is not always a straightforward mapping from one process type to another. In numerous cases, shifts from material to mental, relational, or even verbal processes occur. These shifts are often driven by idiomatic expressions, grammatical constraints, or stylistic preferences in English. While such shifts may deviate from the literal form of the source sentence, they are necessary to maintain fluency, readability, and contextual appropriateness in the target language.

Moreover, the study illustrates that these process shifts are frequently accompanied by reconfigurations of participant roles. Goals in Chinese “ba”-constructions may become Phenomena in mental processes or Identified participants in relational clauses. Likewise, Actors may take on the role of Sensers or Carriers, thereby altering the distribution of agency and thematic focus within the clause. Such reconfigurations demonstrate the translator’s active role in shaping meaning, rather than merely transferring it.

The findings underscore the importance of applying SFG as a theoretical lens in translation studies. By highlighting how process types and participant roles are negotiated across languages, SFG offers a nuanced understanding of semantic shifts and equivalence. Translators working with Chinese-English pairs, particularly those involving marked syntactic structures like the “ba”-construction, can benefit from such an approach to better preserve meaning and function.

Future studies may explore the interpersonal and textual meta functions associated with “ba”-constructions in translation, as well as examine other syntactic patterns such as the passive construction or topic-prominent clauses. Such research would further deepen our understanding of cross-linguistic transitivity and enrich pedagogical practices in translator training.

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