Constraints on the position of definite objects in directional constructions: A corpus-based account

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The so-called 'directional verb compounds' or 'directional constructions' (DCs) have been widely studied in the literature. Much research has focused on the type of directional complements allowed, on their semantic features, and on the structure, order of constituents, and aspectual features of this construction. One interesting syntactic property of these verbs is the position of the non-locative object, which in complex DCs can appear in different positions:

(1)   a. 他拿出来一本书。
           tā ná-chū-lái   yī běn shū
           he take-out-come one CLF book
      b. 他拿出一本书来。
           tā ná-chū   yī běn shū lái
           he take-out one CLF book come
      c. 他拿一本书出来。
           tā ná yī běn shū chū-lái
           he take one CLF book out-come
           'He takes/took out a book.'

Several attempts have been made to describe and explain the different patterns observed in (1), which are subject to syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic restrictions (Li 2017). Zhu (1982) observes that, while indefinite 'Num CLF N'objects are found in all the three patterns, definite objects are excluded from the pattern in (1a). According to Paul (2022), there is a broad consensus in the literature on this constraint, which however has not yet received a satisfying account. Paul observes that proper nouns and definite animate DPs seem to be partially acceptable, while definite inanimate DPs are not. In addition, Paul observers cases where objects are only marginally acceptable in the pattern (1b), as e.g. ??他一个人搬过了我的书桌去 *tā yī ge rén bān-guò-le wǒ de shūzhuō qù* 'he one CLF person move-cross-PFV I ST desk go, he moved my desk over all on his own.' The marginality is explained by Paul with the asymmetry between 来 *lái* and 去 *qù* in the sentence final position:去 *qù* is not acceptable because it cannot be construed as an unaccusative verb in this construction.

In this paper we aim at observing the interaction between DCs and objects in authentic data drawn from a big-size corpus, namely the BCC corpus of Modern Chinese (15 billion characters). In this way, we aim at contributing to a better understanding of the constraints on the objects in this construction, in particular on definite objects (including both formally definite objects, like those modified by a demonstrative or proper nouns, and semantically and pragmatically definite objects; on definiteness, see Chen 2004).

. In particular, we will answer the following research questions:

-    Are definite objects always excluded after DCs displaying the adjacent order?
-    If not, which kind of definite objects are acceptable?
-    Which are the factors affecting the position of (non-locative) objects?

Corpus data confirm that the objects appearing after DCs in the adjacent order are mostly indefinite NPs, but also reveal several cases of different types of objects. Taking the verb 带回来 *dài-huí-lái* 'bring-back-come, bring back' as an example, we retrieved from the corpus a total of 207 sentences where this verb was followed by an object ('带回来 *dài-huí-lái* + Obj.'). Most of these objects (178 out of 207, i.e. 86%) are indefinite, confirming the general tendency to have indefinite NPs in post-verbal position. However, we also found out 29 definite objects (14%), specifically: 13 concrete inanimate objects (2); 2 concrete animate objects; 14 abstract objects (3).

(2)	雌企鹅[…] 还带回来给小企鹅的第一口食物。

| *cí* | *qǐ'é* | | *hái* | *dài-huí-lái* | | *gěi xiǎo qǐ'è* | *de dìyī kǒu* | | *shíwù* |

*cí	qǐ'é		hái	dài-huí-lái	gěi xiǎo qǐ'è	de dìyī kǒu	shíwù*
male	penguin		also	bring-back-come	for small penguin	ST first mouth	food
'The male penguin also brought back the first mouthful of food for the small penguin.'

(3)	他不仅带回来了中国的物质援助 […]

*tā	bùjǐn	dài-huí-lái-le	Zhōngguó	de	wùzhi	yuánzhù* […]
he	not only	bring-back-come-PFV	China	ST	material support
'He not only brought back China's material support […]'

As for the '带回 *dài-huí* + Obj. + 来 *lái*' pattern, we retrieved 287 sentences: in most cases the objects are locative (238, i.e. 82,9%), which is linked to the fact that locative objects, if present, must be placed before 来 *lái* or 去 *qù* in complex DCs. As for the remaining ones, 42 (14,6%) are indefinite objects, while 7 are definite (2,4%). Given the presence of 来 *lái*, we cannot explain the marginal presence of non-locative objects with the asymmetry between 来 *lái* and 去 *qù* (cf. Paul 2022). The pattern which displays less constraints on objects is '带 *dài* + Obj. + 回来 *huí-lái*'. However, a preliminary analysis of the data shows that abstract nouns are quite marginal in this pattern; abstract objects seem to be preferabily placed after DCs in the adjacent order (see Zhang 2010).

Keywords

directional constructions, directional complements, objects, syntax

References

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