ON THE EQUIVALENT OF 'KILL' IN MANDARIN CHINESE

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1. Introduction.

Most Chinese-English dictionaries translate shā as 'to kill'. Most English-Chinese dictionaries, on the other hand, give the Chinese translation to 'to kill' as shā or shā-sī 'cause-die'. Shā has also been regarded by most Chinese grammarians as syntactically and semantically identical to the verb compound shā-sī, which is also translated as 'to kill' in Chinese-English dictionaries. The purpose of this paper is to show that shā and shā-sī are not identical, and that contrary to the commonly held assumption, there is no perfect correspondence between shā in Chinese and 'to kill' in English, nor between shā-sī and 'to kill'. It will be suggested that the closest Chinese equivalent to 'to kill' is nong-sī 'do-die', a perfect equivalent to 'to kill' being absent in Chinese.

2. A Fundamental Semantic Difference between shā and shā-sī.

The most likely interpretation of

(1) Zhāngsān shā le Līsī John 'killed' Peter.

implies the death of Līsī. Because of this implication, shā and shā-sī have been regarded as identical. However, sentences (2) (3) show that while shā-sī necessarily implies sī, shā may or may not imply sī.

(2a) Zhāngsān shā le Līsī liàngcì dōu méi bā tā shā-sī

John performed the action of attempting to kill Peter twice, but failed to kill him both times.

b. *Zhāngsān shā-sī le Līsī liàngcì dōu méi bā tā shā-sī

(3a) Līsī bèi shā le sī dào jīngrān méi sī

Peter was knifed ten times, but to one's surprise, he did not die.

b. *Līsī bèi shā-sī le sī dào jīngrān méi sī

The contrast between (a) sentences and (b) sentences in (2) and (3) with respect to grammatical shows that shā and shā-sī have different semantic contents. It can be seen that as

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opposed to the verb compound shā-sī, shā can occur in the pattern of X shā Y, Y not shī, X "kill" Y, Y not die. This indicates that shā does not necessarily imply shī. Our observation here can be further supported by the familiar expression zi-shā-wēi-sūi "kill" - not succeed (attempt to kill oneself without success).

As a matter of fact, shā may also result in shāng 'injured' as illustrated in

(4) Zhāngsān méi bā Līsī shā-sī, zhīshī bā tā shā-shāng le
    John did not kill Peter (dead), he only injured him.

(4) shows that the recipient of the action shā may be seriously injured, but not dead. Therefore, although the semantic range of shā and that of shā-sī are overlapping to a great extent, shā and shā-sī are by no means identical.

There are two pieces of syntactic evidence indicating that while shā is inherently an action verb, shā-sī is a resultative verb compound, of which the first part states an action, the second the result of the action. First, Ōng (1972) correctly observes that while English 'to kill' has both action and result aspects, shā has only the action aspect, despite the fact that it may imply the resultative state of shī. Thus, the sentence (6b) is ambiguous, with the adverbial scope of 'almost' referring to either the action or the result aspect of the verb 'to kill'. (5a), however, is not ambiguous, and it only has the reading of 'John almost performed the action of killing'.

(5a) Zhāngsān chāyìdiār shā le Līsī
b. John almost killed Peter.

If we compare shā and shā-sī with regard to the adverbial scope of chāyìdiār 'almost', we can see that unlike shā, shā-sī has both action and result aspects.

(6) Zhāngsān chāyìdiār shā-sī le Līsī

Sentence (6) is ambiguous. The adverbial scope of chāyìdiār can be assigned to either the action or the result.

Second, the first author (Tai 1973, 1974) notices that in Chinese the locative can function either as a preverbal adverbial modifying the action or as a postverbal adverbial modifying the result of the action. More precisely, he (Tai, 1974) has argued that the primary function of a preverbal place adverbial is to locate an action in space, whereas that of a postverbal place adverbial is to locate a concrete object in space. Shā can only take preverbal place adverbials (as shown in (7)). Shā-sī however, can have both yet with different functions (as shown in (8)).

(7a) Zhāngsān zài chuángshāng shā le Līsī
    (in the bed)
    b. Zhāngsān bā Līsī shā le zài chuángshāng

(8a) Zhāngsān zài chuángshāng shā-sī le Līsī
b. Zhāngsān bā Līsī shā-sī zài chuángshāng.

It is generally agreed among native speakers that while the locative zài chuángshāng in (8a) states the location of the action shā, in (8b) it places emphasis on the location of the recipient's, i.e. Līsī's, dead body. The contrast between (7b) and (8b) regarding grammaticality and the meaning difference between (8a) and (8b) can be accounted for.
naturally within the framework of Chinese place adverbial treatment which the first author has previously proposed, if we recognize shā as basically an action verb as against the resultative verb compound shā-sř.

On the basis of the above observations concerning the syntactic and semantic differences between shā and shā-sř, it is only reasonable for us to conclude that while shā is an action verb like dā 'to hit', shā-sř is a resultative verb compound like dā-sř, of which the first part indicates an action, the second part the result of the action. It should, however, be noticed that shā, unlike dā, may imply the death of the recipient, and that it can only take resultative complements sř 'die' and shāng 'injured'. dā does not imply any resultative states at all, and it can co-occur, in addition to sř and shāng, with compliments such as tōng 'pain' in dā-tōng and duān 'break' in dā-duān, etc.

3. Shā and shā-sř Compared with 'to kill'.

There are three kinds of selectional restrictions involving instrument, actor, and resultative complements which apply to shā and shā-sř as well, but which do not apply to English 'to kill'. First shā and shā-sř can co-occur with instruments like dāozī 'knife', but not with instruments like gūnzǐ 'stick' and shītou 'rock'. This can be illustrated in (9).

(9)a. Zhāngsān yòng dāozī shā-(sř) le Līsī
John killed Peter with a knife.

b. *Zhāngsān yòng shītōu shā-(sř) le Līsī
John killed Peter with a rock.

c. *Zhāngsān yòng gūnzī shā-(sř) le Līsī
John killed Peter with a stick.

(9b) and (c) show that while 'to kill' in English does not specify a particular kind of instruments, shā and shā-sř specify dāozī 'knife' as the instrument. This restriction on shā and shā-sř, in fact, testifies to the etymology of shā, i.e. tōng gūnzǐ shā-sř. Nevertheless, as more instruments have been adopted to perform the action of killing, shā and shā-sř seem to have become compatible with a broader range of instruments. For instance, one does not have to use a knife in performing an act of ān-shā 'dark-kill' (to assassinate), móu-shā 'plot-kill' (to murder), and zǐ-shā 'self-kill' (to commit suicide). In fact, the popular means of zǐ-shā seems to be jiù-qīng 'raise-gun' (with a gun), jū-dā 'take-poison' (by means of poison), and shāng-dìān 'up-hang' (to hang). The most used and effective way of ān-shā or móu-shā in the present time is by means of qīng 'gun'. In spite of the fact that the range of instruments compatible with shā and shā-sř have been broadened in the modern world, sentences in (9) clearly show that 'to kill' does not obey the same co-occurrence restrictions as shā and shā-sř in Chinese with regard to compatible instruments.

Second, while shā and shā-sř can only take a human actor, 'to kill' can take a human actor, an animate actor, a non-animate actor, or an abstract actor. This can be illustrated in (10).

(10)a. Zhāngsān shā-(sř) le Līsī
John killed Peter.

b. *shītōu shā-(sř) le Līsī

The rock killed Peter.

c. *lāohū shā-(sř) le Līsī

The tiger killed Peter.

d. *tā de huānxīng shā-(sř) le tā
His illusion killed him.
Third, as noted in section 2, shā can take resultative compliments sī and shāng. 'To kill' can not take any resultative compliment. Although some native speakers of English regard (11) as grammatical, they take it as semantically anomalous.

(11) *John killed Peter dead.
(12) *John killed Peter injured.

In sum, unlike shā and shā-sī, 'to kill' does not require a special kind of instrument, nor the actor be both human and animate. Furthermore, since it is redundant to say 'John killed Peter dead', unlike shā, 'to kill' necessarily implies the death of the recipient. Shā-sī is not redundant in Chinese. Shā states the action the actor performs, and sī states the result of the recipient after the action. This is indeed consistent with the fact that in Chinese an action-result relationship is often expressed by a general pattern of resultative verb compounds consisting of the first part describing an action and the second part describing an action and the second part describing the result of the action. To perform the action of shā, the actor must be able to handle a special type of instruments which only human beings can use. Shā and shā-sī therefore require a human and animate actor.


We have pointed out that most English-Chinese dictionaries translate 'to kill' into shā or shī-sī 'cause-die'. We have shown that neither shā nor shā-sī is a perfect equivalent of 'to kill'. One might want to see if shī-sī is a perfect equivalent of 'to kill'. Our informant's reaction to shī-sī indicates that it is merely a literal translation of 'to kill' and rarely used in spoken language. In Chinese, the idea of 'to cause to die' usually appears as in the (13a-c) forms, rather than as in (13d).

(13a). gōngzuò guódù shī tā sīwáng de yuán yīn
   (work) (excessive) (be) (his) (death) (reason)

Overwork was the cause of his death. (= Overwork killed him)

b. tā yǐn gōngzuò guódù ěr sī
   (he) (because) (work) (excessive) (so) (die)

He died from overwork.

c. tā sī yú ái-zhēng
   (he) (die) (of) (cancer)

He died of cancer.

d. ??ái-zhēng shī tā sī le
   (cancer) (cause) (he) (die) (aspect marker)

Cancer caused him to die. (= Cancer killed him)

Besides, there is a difference between 'kill' and 'cause to die'. As Vennemann (1973) has noted, 'kill' implies the physical involvement of the causer, 'cause to die' does not.

According to most Chinese-English dictionaries, nōng-sī also means 'to kill'. In terms of selectional restrictions, nōng-sī, different from shā and shā-sī, does not require an instrument to be necessary, nor does it specify that the instrument, if any, be of a certain kind. In this respect, nōng-sī is similar to 'to kill'. However, nōng-sī is still not perfectly equivalent to 'to kill', because the former requires an animate actor. (14) examplifies such a selectional restriction.

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Thus, we have so far found no causative transitive verbs or verb compound in Chinese which can be considered as identical to the English verb "to kill." The closest Chinese equivalent of "to kill" seems to be nong-sī 'do-die'.

We have no explanation for why it should be the case that there is no Chinese verb compound perfectly corresponding to "to kill" except the mere fact that while "to kill" does not specify the manner of action, action verbs of the pattern "verb-sī" must have the manner specified.

5. Conclusion.

We have pointed out that there exist syntactic and semantic differences between shā (or shā-sī) in Chinese and "to kill" in English, and that the latter has no perfect equivalent in Chinese, the closest one being nong-sī 'do-die'. This seems to reflect a general principle governing some discrepancies between Chinese and English lexicalization. This principle can be stated to the effect that while English has implicative action verbs such as "to kill", "to find", and "to learn", which necessarily imply an attainment of goal, their correspondents in Chinese must be expressed by means of verb compounds in which the first element indicates the action itself, the second the attainment of goal. Thus, "to find" is zhāo-dào 'seek-reach', and "to learn" is xué-hui 'study-know how to'. We have so far found no Chinese action verbs necessarily implying the attainment of goal.

We feel that this principle of verb compound patterning in Chinese covers a wide-range of differences between Chinese and English with regard to lexicalization of implicative action verbs. It is useful to make students of Chinese aware of the differences between shā (or shā-sī) and "to kill" and also those between other Chinese action verbs and English implicative action verbs.

NOTE

1. Chauncey C. Chu (1973) notices that English action verbs 'to find' and 'to learn' imply an attainment of goal which is meant to attain by the action.

REFERENCES


