

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 shǐ-sǐ 'cause-die'. Shā has also been regarded by most Chinese grammarians as syntactically and semantically identical to the verb compound shā-sǐ, which is also translated as 'to kill' in Chinese-English dictionaries. The purpose of this paper is to show that shā and shā-sǐ 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-sǐ and 'to kill'. It will be suggested that the closest Chinese equivalent to 'to kill' is nòng-sǐ 'do-die', a perfect equivalent to 'to kill' being absent in Chinese.

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

The most likely interpretation of

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

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

(2)a. Zhāngsān shā le Lǐsì liǎngcì dōu méi bǎ tā shā-sǐ

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

b. *Zhāngsān shā-sǐ le Lǐsì liǎngcì dōu méi bǎ tā shā-sǐ

(3)a. Lǐsì bèi shā le shí dāo jǐngrán méi sǐ

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

b. *Lǐsì bèi shā-sǐ le shí dāo jǐngrán méi sǐ

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

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opposed to the verb compound shā-sǐ, shā can occur in the pattern of X shā Y, Y not sǐ 'X "kill" Y, Y not die'. This indicates that shā does not necessarily imply sǐ. Our observation here can be further supported by the familiar expression zì-shā-wèi-sù "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 bǎ Lǐsì shā-sǐ, zhǐshi bǎ 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-sǐ are overlapping to a great extent, shā and shā-sǐ are by no means identical.

There are two pieces of syntactic evidence indicating that while shā is inherently an action verb, shā-sǐ is a resultative verb compound, of which the first part states an action, the second the result of the action. First, Teng (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 sǐ. Thus, the sentence (5b) 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'.

(5)a. Zhāngsān chāyìdiǎr shā le Lǐsì

b. John almost killed Peter.

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

(6) Zhāngsān chāyìdiǎr shā-sǐ le Lǐsì

Sentence (6) is ambiguous. The adverbial scope of chāyìdiǎr 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-sǐ, however, can have both yet with different functions (as shown in (8)).

(7)a. Zhāngsān zài chuángshang shā le Lǐsì
(in the bed)

b. *Zhāngsān bǎ Lǐsì shā le zài chuángshang

(8)a. Zhāngsān zài chuángshang shā-sǐ le Lǐsì

b. Zhāngsān bǎ Lǐsì shā-sǐ zài chuángshang.

It is generally agreed among native speakers that while the locative zài chuángshang in (8a) states the location of the action shā, in (8b) it places emphasis on the location of the recipient's, i. e. Lisi's, dead body. The contrast between (7b) and (8b) regarding grammaticality and the meaning difference between (8a) and (8b) can be accounted for

Third, as noted in section 2, shā can take resultative compliments sǐ 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-sǐ, '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-sǐ is not redundant in Chinese. Shā states the action the actor performs, and sǐ 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-sǐ therefore require a human and animate actor.

4. Shǐ-sǐ and Nòng-sǐ.

We have pointed out that most English-Chinese dictionaries translate 'to kill' into shā or shǐ-sǐ 'cause-die'. We have shown that neither shā nor shā-sǐ is a perfect equivalent of 'to kill'. One might want to see if shǐ-sǐ is a perfect equivalent of 'to kill'. Our informants' reaction to shǐ-sǐ 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).

(13)a. gōngzuò guòdù shì tā sǐwáng de yuányīn
(work) (excessive) (be) (his) (death) (reason)

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

b. tā yīn gōngzuò guòdù ér sǐ
(he) (because) (work) (excessive) (so) (die)

He died from overwork.

c. tā sǐ yú ái-zhèng
(he) (die) (of) (cancer)

He died of cancer.

d. ??ái-zhèng shǐ tā sǐ 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, nòng-sǐ also means 'to kill'. In terms of selectional restrictions, nòng-sǐ, different from shā and shā-sǐ, 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, nòng-sǐ is similar to 'to kill'. However, nòng-sǐ is still not perfectly equivalent to 'to kill', because the former requires an animate actor. (14) exemplifies such a selectional restriction.

(14) *shítou nòng-sǐ le Lǐsì

The rock killed Peter.

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 nòng-sǐ '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-sǐ' must have the manner specified.

5. Conclusion.

We have pointed out that there exist syntactic and semantic differences between shā (or shā-sǐ) in Chinese and 'to kill' in English, and that the latter has no perfect equivalent in Chinese, the closest one being nòng-sǐ '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'¹, 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 zhǎo-dào 'seek-reach', and 'to learn' is xué-hù '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-sǐ) 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.

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