

The Pragmatic Motivation Behind the Generating Mechanism of New “Bei +X” Construction

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Abstract

Recently, the new “bei +X” as a catch phrase has been gained much attention of researchers, such as “被代表” (being represented), “被幸福” (being happy), 被高铁 (being high speed rail) etc.. The new “bei+X” construction adopts the form of traditional “bei+X” construction, but applies the words and expressions which are not allowed in traditional “bei+X” construction in order to achieve pragmatic negation with distorted language form and a stressed “bei”. Based on this new construction, people can satirize some abnormal social phenomena and express their impotence. Previous studies of this construction mainly centered on forms and usages, and with more and more such kind of phrases appear, researchers began to study the generating mechanism of this construction. However, most previous studies of it are based on construction grammar and the study from the perspective of pragmatics mainly focuses on pragmatic effects and values while the generating mechanism is less explained. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the pragmatic motivation behind the generating mechanism of new “bei +X” in some specific principles: contexts constrain, requirement for the maxim of minimization, and face-saving. The findings will provide a complementary explanation of the generating mechanism of new “bei +X” construction and enable us to have a better understanding of this new construction.

Key words: New “bei+X” construction; Pragmatics motivation; Maxim of minimization; Context constrain; Face-saving model

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INTRODUCTION

Since the year of 2009, a new construction of “被+X” has been widely used in different medias and among people, such as “被代表” (being represented), “被幸福” (being happy), 被高铁 (being high speed rail) etc., because unlike traditional “被+X” that X can only be transitive verbs such as “杀” (kill) in “被杀” (being killed), “吃” (eat) in “被吃” (being eaten) etc., however in new “被+X”, X can not only be transitive verbs, but in high frequency intransitive verb at the beginning, such as “自杀”(suicide)in “被自杀” (being committed suicide), “失踪” (disappear) in “被就业” (being disappeared).

And as the time goes by, many new usages of X come into being: adjectives, such as “满意” (satisfied) in “被满意” (being satisfied); nouns, such as “处女” (virgin) in“被处女” (being virgin); other usages, such as “涨工资” (get a paid raise) in “被涨工资” (being gotten a paid raise). On the basis of those phenomena, many scholars have done some studies on it from the perspective of sociology and psychology.

In linguistics, some researcher discusses the forms and its collocations of new “bei+X”, and explores the conditions of using and specific usages (Wang, 2009). Some analyzes the rhetorical features of this construction (Zhou & Cai, 2009) and some tries to evaluate its social value and predicate its developing prospects (Cheng & Song, 2009). Liu (2010) fully analyzes the connotations, subjectivity and pragmatic effects, rhetorical functions , its social background and culture psychology.

Recently some researchers have tried to study this construction' generating mechanism, such as construction suppression (Liu & Zhao, 2009); decategorization (Zeng & Yuan, 2010), cognitive metaphor (Feng, 2010) and metonymy (She, 2013) and the viewpoints of memetics (Zheng, 2010).

However, based on pragmatics, many researchers only focus on the pragmatic effects or values of the new "bei+X" construction where the construction is used to describe vulnerable groups' helplessness and dissatisfaction for "being manipulated", "under duress and fraud" by some imperious and oppressive authorities (Liu & Zhao, 2009). It is used to reveal some social problems (Zhang, 2010) and promote the development of our society (Chai, 2010).

Therefore, this paper will explore the pragmatic motivations behind the generating mechanism of new "bei+X" construction from three specific aspects: Context constrain, requirement for the maxim of minimization, and face-saving.

1. CONTEXTS CONSTRAIN

Context is defined as referring to any relevant features of the dynamic setting or environment in which a linguistic unit is systematically used (Yan, 2009).

Because of the dynamic setting or environment, utterances will be dependent on them and the interpretation of one utterance depends on the knowledge computable from the physical context of the utterance. So sometimes we have to depend on specific context to understand one utterance. Similarly, the meaning of the new "bei+X" construction can only be understood in terms of specific contexts.

Sample 1:

天津“最严减负令”成空文? 我们“被自愿”补课了. (人民日报, 2014年4月14日)

Tianjin's order of alleviating burdens on students has been ineffective? We are "being willing" (which can be understood as "been forced") to have extra classes. (*People's Daily*, April 14th, 2014)

In Sample 1, if we want to understand what is "被自愿". We have to know what the context of this utterance is. In February 2014, Tianjin Municipal Education Commission put forward a very strict regulation for schools to alleviate the study pressure of students: shorten the time of students in school; forbid having extra classes during holidays; reduce homework and examinations.

However in order to keep students in school to study more, many schools force students write down a written promise that they voluntarily require to have self-study in school at night. besides, self-study is not real self-study for teachers will teach students new knowledge or explain some exercises. Therefore, many students have to stay

because they worry that their study will become worse due to the lack of classes at night.

Sample 2

我们有必要把荆州大桥被高速作为一个典型案例, 好好剖析, 吸取教训 (京华时报, 2013年3月21日)

We should regard Jinzhou bridge's "being high speed" as a typical case to analyze so we can learn from this mistake. (*Beijing Times*, March 21th, 2013)

Seeing this line, people can understand the meaning of "高速" but one will question that what "被高速" means. If one wants to know its meaning well, context should be considered: the local government allowed the bridge to be fast open to two-way traffic without the further reinforcement of the bridge, certified staff member training and other preparations are not good enough.

Therefore, people thought that the local government was not responsible for their safety and they did not know that the quality of the bridge was bad when the bridge was open to two-way traffic. If they knew the fact before, they will never allow government to do it, but fact is fact so they passively received the result and even they are under the risk of life when they cross the bridge.

Sample 3:

QQ, 作为您的忠实用户, 今天我们“被卸载”, 明天呢? (人人网, 2010113)

QQ, as your faithful user, today we are "being uninstalled", what about tomorrow? (<http://www.Renren.com>, 2010113)

When we see "being uninstalled", we will feel weird. What is the meaning of "we are being uninstalled". But when we put the context into consideration, we may know why people will say something like this. "Being uninstalled" happen when user is forced to do it and they have no other choice to do.

Therefore, people thought that QQ did not ask for users' opinions and forced them to install on this context. When people who has such experience, he will understand why the editor uses this word to describe their dissatisfaction.

There is a lot of news as the news above. From all the sample above, we can find that people create new "bei+X" construction because of specific situation; they create "被补课" because students are under a context of "being forced to study in school at night"; they create "被高速" because they are under the context of "being untold the truth about the bridge's quality but the bridge is very fast to be open to two-way traffic.

This construction occurs when the patient is under the context of "being forced", "being unwilling" and "being unwitting" (Chen, 2010; Peng & Gan, 2010).

In addition, contexts can be used to explain why X has plenty of choices but not only transitive verbs. In every context there is a focus that people care about most, e.g. in Sample 1, the focus is whether students are willing to study or not, but there is a contradiction between the

attitude of students and the schools that students did not want to study at night but they had to write a written promise because the school force them to do it, so they choose “自愿” (an intransitive verb) as the focus to be X.

In Sample 2, the focus is on why the bridge was so fast to be open to two-way traffic without telling them the truth that there were some problems of the bridge and they were passively received the truth, so they choose “高速” (a noun) as the focus to be X. As a matter of a fact, people choice of what kind of word to be X mostly depends on the focus of a specific context.

Therefore, a conclusion can be drawn that the generating mechanism of the new “bei+X” construction is based on the different contexts and the choice of X depends on the focus of a context. Context plays a vital role on the generating of mechanism.

2. REQUIREMENT FOR THE MAXIM OF MINIMIZATION

Levinson (1987) deems that people always conform to maxim of minimization when they communicate, which means that using words as less as they can be to realize communication purpose.

Dai (2002) also points out that it is a way of people’s using language that people tend to express some logical knowledge in their mind which is abstracted from their experience in a very concise way to predict more information.

In our daily life, we often do not want to express our ideas as clear and abundant as possible, and there are always some potential meanings that one wants the hearer to predict with his own knowledge and experiences. Meanwhile, this also proves that the cooperative principle of Grice is not suitable for every real communication in some contexts.

When it comes to the new “bei+X” construction, something is inappropriate to have a fully statement due to different contexts that they want to describe vulnerable groups’ helplessness and un-satisfaction for “being manipulated”, “under duress and fraud” by some imperious and oppressive authorities. So the new “bei+X” construction conforms to the maxim of minimization so that it can express some potential meanings, which are about to be explained in depth as the following samples:

Sample 1

浙江永康小学生被捐款惹争议, 官方称将悉数退还. (中国新闻网, 2014年3月15日)

Pupils’ “being donated” caused controversy in Yongkang, Zhejiang. Officials said that they will return all the money. ([Http://www.china news.com](http://www.china news.com), March 15th, 2014)

In this sample, in order to answer the call of Zhejiang province to control water pollution, the Yongkang

government advocated citizens to donate money to support the plan; however, primary students are involved in.

As we know, pupils have no money and their money all come from their parents but some schools even force these students to donate money. Although those students did not donate much money, they were told that they must do it. Therefore, many parents of those pupils said that their children were “被捐款了”.

Thus, we can find that a simple construction “被捐款” contains so many contents but people prefer to use it to cover many details because this case was a very sensitive issue where the authority was involved and people were forced to do things. People did not want to explain every issue in detail but for they had to express their idea so they use “被捐款” to be a cover term which had very rich meanings. The potential meaning should be predicted by hearers that there must be something wrong with the schools and the local government.

Sample 2

既然是满意度的调查, 理应实事求是地倾听客户的心声与意见, 如果成了整齐划一的“被满意”, 那么此调查还有什么意义呢? (齐鲁晚报, 2012年12月13日)

Since this is an investigation with satisfaction to clients, it is supposed to listen to clients’ advises and suggestions. If they are “being satisfied”, what is the point of this investigation? (*Qilu Evening Paper*, December 13th, 2012)

In Sample 2, it is a good thing to investigate the satisfaction to clients about their company’s service, for the higher executive can carry out some useful and beneficial ways for improvement based on clients’ advises, namely, if a company wants to develop fast, he must listen to clients’ advises and suggestions, and then tries to figure out some solutions.

In the news, we can find that they failed to carry out the provisions and the result was controlled by some man-made reason that some staff members in the company who took responsibility for this survey asked or begged his clients to click the button of “satisfied” in that the result had a directly linkage with their end of year examination. But in order to show their dissatisfaction with their behaviors, people used “被满意” to cover all the details for this is a very sensitive issue.

Sample 3

这个企业年利润只有10%, 在层层上报后变成了90%, 就这样, 该企业的利润“被90%”了, 该企业“被明星企业”, 厂长“被优秀企业家”了. 工人们每人多发一个月的工资, 也就同时“被幸福”了.

The year profit of this company was only 10%, but after several levels, the data had become 90%, thus, the profit of this company was “being 90%” and the company was “being Star Company”, and the factory director. All the workers were given one more month’s salary so they were “being happy”.

In Sample 3, we can find that the company was not good, and it could not fit the reputation it had got through the understanding of the context and background information. There must be some hidden rules. Since in the society, there hidden rules are default behavior.

There is no doubt that this company got all of profit based on those behaviors and it is obvious that this company could not have the quality to get these. Was the company a Star Company and were all the workers happy? Definitely no.

Because people sometimes cannot say the full thing or it is inappropriate to say something, so they conform to the maxim of minimization. In Sample 3, people choose “being 90%”, “being Star Company” and “being happy” to show their dissatisfactions. So they tend to use the least word to show the deepest meaning. Therefore, if the reader who knows the background, he must can get much information in such little word.

From those three samples above, we can find that as many socialists and psychologists study, the new “bei+X” construction is often used to describe vulnerable groups’ helplessness and un-satisfaction for “being manipulated”, “being control”, “being forced”, “against their will” etc..

People sometimes want to express themselves about those situations they meet but cannot fully explain in detail for some social reasons, so the new “bei+X” construction has become an emotional release vent.

On the one hand, they do not need to speak too much and they can express their idea powerfully and strongly, on the other hand, based on a specific context, other people can predict what they really want to express.

Therefore, minimization here does not only mean to speak as less as one can, but also use the least words to express the deepest meaning. Therefore, we can affirm that because of the requirement for the maxim of minimization, people tend to speak less but mean more in our society today. It owns a great power in people’s speech. The new “bei+X” construction owns such power that within a simple construction can people put so much and strong emotion in it. In fact the maxim of minimization provides people a way to express something that cannot be expressed actively and individually. The new “bei+X” construction is one of the best examples that people apply the maxim of minimization on.

3. FACE-SAVING

Leech (1983) looks on politeness as crucial in accounting for “why people are often so indirect in conveying what they mean”. Yule (1995) defines politeness as “the means employed to show awareness of another person’s face”.

Face refers to both the public self-image of a person and, emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize. In people’s

everyday social interaction, they generally behave as if their expectations about their public image, or their face wants, will be respected.

If someone who says something that represents a threat to another individual’s expectations about self-image, this behavior is threatening others’ faces, in order to lessen the possible threat, we need to save other’s face.

China is a country which attaches importance to politeness; therefore, Chinese people prefer to save face for others when they are communicating with other people, and seldom express something that is directly harmful for others’ feeling and emotion so as to eliminate risk of insult others’ faces.

Otherwise, Chinese people like to humble themselves and respect others especially when someone is in a higher social status than oneself, which is called governmentstandard value orientation. Therefore, we are apt to say something indirectly to express our ideas meanwhile we can save others’ faces.

The new “bei+X” construction is also used to save faces for others which will be explained in depth in the following samples:

Sample 1

我就业啦, 我就业啦, 太兴奋了, 而且是在不明真相的情况下被就业了! (天涯论坛, 2009年7月12日)

I got a job, I got a job, I am too exciting and I am “being gotten a job” without knowing anything. (*Tianya Forum*, July 12th, 2009)

In Sample 1, the news interpreted that some universities fabricate a false employment rate of graduates in order to enhance the university social reputation. But in fact, some students did not find a job, and they are all counted as someone who got a job without knowing anything.

It is a very normal phenomenon among a lot of university. Every year, there are numerous students who will graduate and go for a job, however due to different reasons, now many graduates cannot find a proper job they want, while the employment rate of an university is a very important indicator for judging a university good or bad, so many universities try every approach to enhance the employment rate of graduates. Therefore, fabricating a false employment rate of graduates has become a prevailing method.

In addition, there is no agent in the sentence, that is to say, the patient did not want to mention who did this, because he wanted to save face for the agent on the one hand. On the other hand, he did not want to use impolite words to criticize those frauds and trickeries but only emphasized his deep resignation by a simple construction “被就业” which also had sort of sense of black humor: Students did not go to find a job but in the end they found that their names were on the list of “someone who finds a job”. Everything seems very weird till they knew that this was their university’s “care and love” for them.

Sample 2

25岁女孩办证时发现“被结婚”，学历工作或泡汤。(齐鲁晚报, 2014年7月6日)

25-year-old girl found herself “being married”, and her academic qualification and job might be spoiled. (*Qilu Evening Paper*, July 6th, 2014)

In Sample 2, the girl went to obtain a residence certificate in the city where he just found a job but in her personal file she was told that she had been married. When she came to her born place, she found the reason that it was the fault of the local Bureau of Personnel that they gave her account to another girl.

Consequently, she was told that she must to apply a new account but her old experience might be deleted which is harmful for her former academic qualification and job that she just found.

When we read this piece of news, we might be very angry at the local Bureau of Personnel and have lots to say, but the tile uses a simple “被结婚” to describe such an issue in order to conform to the politeness maxims of Chinese so as to save face for the local Bureau of Personnel for the its name was not mentioned in the title. As mentioned in Sample 1, “被就业” saves faces for many universities and creates a sense of black humor as well, so “被结婚” also creates a sense of black humor to criticize some government administrative departments which are not very responsible for their work and people’s trust.

Sample 3

民主权利, 不能“被代表”. (腾讯新闻, 2009.12.27)

Democratic rights cannot “be represented”. (*Tencent News*, 2009.12.27)

In Sample 3, when we see this title, we can immediately realize the deep meaning in the title. In a country, democratic rights are the basis right people. But sometimes because of some reason, people’s democratic rights are often presented by some people or officials without permit of people. People want to express their dissatisfactions and complain. So people use “being presented” to express their anger and unfair treatments.

However, in this title we cannot find any person or officials’ name for in the eyes of Chinese people, saving face for others have become a custom. It is inappropriate to say the names because everybody needs face and people believe that governments will have a deep investigation according to their remarks on this issue.

On the other hand, maybe people do not want to have direct confrontation with those people and officials. Therefore, people use to “be represented” to express their emotion.

Chinese people do not like to point out others’ disadvantages in front of their faces especially when they are in very close relationship with us or they are in high social status or are very powerful.

Besides, it is easy to find that almost all new “bei +X” constructions focus on bad behaviors or acts of some powerful machineries of government or people which do much harm to ordinary people.

In Chinese people’s deep-seated thought, government official is up and people is down; high social status is high and low social status is down; rich is up and poor is down so that people think that they should show respect in the bottom of their hearts even though they do not realize. Thus, even though we get very angry at or unsatisfied with those authorities’ behavior, we are inclined to seek some tender and obscure way to express our ideas. Therefore, the new “bei+X” construction have provided ordinary people a good way to express their thoughts briefly but also save authorities faces

CONCLUSION

Since the new “bei+X” construction is widely used in our society, it deserves to be studied from many perspectives in depth. This paper does a study on the generating mechanism of the new “bei+X” construction from three pragmatic principles: contexts constrain, requirement for the maxim of minimization and face-saving.

We find that the new “bei+X” construction is on the basis of different contexts and the choice of X depends on the focus of a context, and contexts are extremely important on the generating of mechanism; because of the requirement for the maxim of minimization, people are inclined to speak less but want to express many potential meanings more in our society today, and people’s speeches own great power to express meanings; new “bei +X” constructions are used to save faces for some powerful machineries of government or people whose bad behaviors or acts do much harm to ordinary people. All the above analysis provides researchers a new perspective to study the generating mechanism of new “bei +X” construction.

However, there are also some limitations in this paper, on the one hand, with the high frequency of use of this new “bei” construction, it might gradually become sort of decontextualization and chunking, namely, it might store in people’s cognition as a chunk without considering the original context. Therefore, the new “bei+X” construction as a popular saying will gradually become a fixed usage as many other popular saying for its pragmatic values have been accepted by more and more people, and this paper enable us to have a better understanding of this new construction.

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