

# Character 把 “bǎ” in Chinese Linguistics

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**Abstract:** As a word, the character 把 “bǎ” in the Chinese lexicon is somewhat complex, yet it is one of the most frequently used, flexible, and widely applicable words in the language. This is due to its ability to occupy different syntactic positions in a sentence, thereby expressing various meanings and performing multiple functions. Chinese linguists have proposed a variety of perspectives and interpretations regarding the analysis of the character 把 “bǎ” in their research. This article presents and discusses the views of these scholars concerning the usage and functions of 把.

**Keywords:** 把 “bǎ” prepositional sentence, 把 “bǎ” character, classifier, noun phrase, object, verb, semantics, cognitive, function, grammar.

**Introduction:** In general linguistics, according to typological classification, Modern Chinese belongs to the isolating languages. For this reason, the Chinese language possesses a number of distinctive typological features. One of the main characteristics of Chinese is the polysemy of its words. Typically, in Chinese, a single character corresponds to a single simple word. Therefore, when examining both the semantic and grammatical meanings of a word, the role of the character is of great importance. Even in the interpretation of polysyllabic words, the meanings of individual characters are taken into account. In our case, a single character, namely 把 “bǎ”, exemplifies polysemy not only in terms of having multiple meanings but also demonstrates the necessity of studying it as a multifunctional unit.

## METHOD

In their studies on the character 把 “bǎ”, Chinese linguists have put forward numerous views and insights, providing extensive information regarding the structure and formation of the frequently used 把-construction in Modern Chinese. For example, Wang Hai (1984, 1985) conducted research on the characteristics of the object in the 把-construction, demonstrating its usage in definite, indefinite, and special contexts. Linguists such as Wang Shiyuan (W. Wang, 1964, 1969), Li Yingzhe (Y. Li, 1970), and Zou Ke

(1993, 1995) have explored the formal structure of sentences containing 把.

Regarding the functional analysis of the 把-construction, the views of Cao Fengfu are considered fundamental. He identified that the object following 把 carries several features of the sentence topic but does not occupy the primary syntactic position. Cognitive research on the 把-construction is a relatively new direction in Chinese linguistics. In this area, the works of scholars such as Zhang Bojiang (2000) and Zhang Wangxi (2001) can be cited as notable contributions.

## RESULTS

However, there are differing views among scholars regarding certain aspects of the 把 “bǎ” construction. M. Hashimoto and A. Hashimoto, for instance, proposed that the noun phrase following 把 functions as the subject of a subordinate clause. Another group of researchers argued that there is a semantic connection between the noun phrase that follows 把 and the one that appears after the verb. According to this view, originally both noun phrases served as complements of a single verb. Later, due to syntactic reordering, one of these noun phrases was moved to precede 把, although it still retained its role as the object.

Notable research on the functional analysis of 把-sentences has been conducted by Chinese linguists

such as Cao Fengfu (1986/2005), Zhang Wangxi (1991), Xue Fengsheng (1987, 1994), Fan Xiao (2001), and British scholar Emily Bender (2000). Among them, Cao Fengfu introduced the concept of the "main topic" (主要话题) in a sentence. He explains that in a 把-sentence, if the verb reflects an action performed by the subject toward the topic, the sentence demonstrates two key features: transitivity of the verb and the causative meaning (致使意义) often found in passive or resultative constructions.

Based on this, Cao Fengfu categorizes the semantic interpretation of 把-sentences into two types: one expressing transitivity, and the other reflecting reflexivity or a causative-passive relationship.

Zhang Wangxi (1991) emphasized that the application of the 把 "bǎ"-construction must involve a clear cause-and-effect relationship. In other words, when a speaker intends to highlight the causal and resultant connection of an action, the 把-construction is appropriate and effective for expressing such relationships.

The development of cognitive linguistics has further stimulated research into the 把 "bǎ" construction from this perspective. For instance, Zhang Bojiang (2000), building on Goldberg's Construction Grammar Theory, investigated the semantics of 把-sentences. Rather than focusing solely on the relationship between 把 and the verb, he emphasized the interaction between the verb and the overall sentence construction, considering 把-sentences as semantically complex sentence structures.

Shen Jiaxuan's definition of subjective control has been widely accepted by many linguists. According to Shen, subjectivity in language involves three aspects: the speaker's emotion, the speaker's viewpoint, and the speaker's awareness or understanding. These three dimensions are interrelated in 把-sentences, forming an integrated meaning. In such constructions, the subject is identified by its ability to exercise control or agency over the object, which appears as the complement of the sentence.

Studies on the use of the character 把 "bǎ" as a classifier are relatively limited. Among the notable works is that of Ye Guichen in his 2018 study *Qingdai biji xiaoshuo yanjiu* (Research on Anecdotal Novels of the Qing Dynasty), where he explores instances of 把 being used as a classifier. In addition, in his research on classifiers in the Chinese language during the Ming Dynasty, Ye also discusses how 把 "bǎ" functions as a measure word, particularly in reference to liquid substances.

For example, in the sentence:

大家见面，一把鼻涕，一把眼泪，个人诉说客人苦处。(Dàjiā jiànmiàn, yī bǎ bíti, yī bǎ yǎnlèi, gèrén sùshuō kèrén kǔchù.) "When everyone met, tears and mucus flowed uncontrollably, as each person began sharing the hardships they had faced while away from home."

In this sentence, 把 "bǎ" is used as a classifier for both tears and nasal mucus, indicating quantities of fluid emitted from the nose and eyes. This illustrates how 把 can function as a measure word specifically related to amorphous or liquid substances, expressing emotional intensity and quantity in a vivid, tangible manner.

Liu Shiru and Jin Guitao have also examined the usage of classifiers during the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, specifically highlighting the historical development of the classifier 把 "bǎ" during these periods. According to the authors, 把 was initially used as a nominal classifier and later evolved into an action classifier.

The data presented in their research indicate that the classifier 把 "bǎ" is derived from the verb 把, whose core meaning is associated with hand movements or manual manipulation. Therefore, when used as an action classifier, 把 typically quantifies actions that are carried out by hand. Furthermore, the syntactic position of 把 in a sentence helps determine whether it functions as a nominal or an action classifier.

For example:

那独眼老二就火了，一把揪住老三的耳朵。(Nà dúyǎn lǎo'èr jiù huǒ le, yī bǎ jiūzhù lǎo sān de ěrduǒ.) "That one-eyed second brother suddenly got angry and grabbed third brother's ear with one swift motion."

In this sentence, 把 "bǎ" functions as an action classifier, quantifying the single, forceful hand movement of grabbing. This usage reflects its semantic origin related to physical, manual actions and aligns with its grammatical development across historical periods.

Research on 把 "bǎ" as a Verb and Noun Although there are no comprehensive studies specifically dedicated to the use of the character 把 "bǎ" as a verb or noun, several scholars have commented on these functions in their grammatical analyses. For example, in his work "Osnovy kitayskoy grammatiki" (The Fundamentals of Chinese Grammar), Wang Liao-yi discusses the original verbal usage of 把 "bǎ" in the section comparing 把 [bǎ] and 被 [bèi].

Consider the example:

左手把其袖 (zuǒshǒu bǎ qíxiù) "He grabbed the sleeve with his left hand." In this sentence, 把 "bǎ" is used in

its original verbal sense, meaning ‘to hold’ or ‘to grasp by hand’. This early verbal usage of 把 underlies many of its later grammatical roles in Modern Chinese, including its evolution into a prepositional marker in the

Syntactic and Semantic Versatility of 把 “bǎ” Zhang Aimin and Wu Jianfeng, in their research on auxiliary words expressing approximation and estimation, have noted that the character 把 “bǎ” can also function as an auxiliary word in certain contexts.

Uzbek sinologist A.A. Karimov, in the appendix of his candidate dissertation titled “Classifiers in the Chinese Language: A Lexical-Semantic, Structural, and Functional Analysis”, includes 把 “bǎ” as an example. He explains that beyond its use as a classifier, 把 can belong to multiple word classes, and discusses phenomena related to its use, such as homonymy, polysemy, and syntactic inversion in Chinese characters .

For instance, in the third tone, 把 “bǎ” may function as different parts of speech:

- as a verb (e.g., ‘to hold’),
- as a classifier (used for objects grasped or manipulated by hand),
- as a prepositional marker (in 把-constructions),
- or even as an adverbial element in specific contexts.

These observations highlight the morphosyntactic flexibility and polyfunctionality of 把 “bǎ”, making it a subject of continued interest in both Chinese and international linguistics.

## CONCLUSION

Polyfunctionality in Chinese words is a prominent feature of Chinese grammar. It indicates the absence of a strict one-to-one correspondence between word classes and syntactic constituents, emphasizing that a single word can function in various syntactic roles without undergoing a change in its inherent lexical properties.

As demonstrated by the cited studies, considerable research in Chinese linguistics has been devoted to the use of 把 “ba” primarily as a prepositional marker, alongside investigations into its function as a classifier. The present study aims to comprehensively analyze the full range of meanings and functions of the character 把 “ba”. In doing so, we have drawn on the insights of previous scholars while also contributing our own reflections, analyses, and interpretations.

This holistic approach facilitates a deeper understanding of the polyfunctional nature of 把 “ba”

and its significant role in the structure and semantics of Modern Chinese.

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