

# Semantic Prosody: The Study of Gei in BA and BEI Constructions

Xiaolong Lu

Department of East Asian Studies  
The University of Arizona, Tucson, USA  
charmander@arizona.edu  
ORCID:0000-0001-6712-7303

**Abstract.** The spoken word *gei* in Chinese is often used in the disposal and passive contexts to construct two types of patterns: (i) *ba* NP *gei* VP, (ii) and *bei* NP *gei* VP. By comparing the distribution of the semantic prosody of the two patterns in corpora, I found that the pattern *ba* NP *gei* VP is more likely to be used in positive contexts than the pattern *bei* NP *gei* VP, but a negative semantic prosody is dominant in both patterns. The reason is that the meaning of *bei* NP *gei* VP as a passive construction was highly associated with negative interpretation in the historical development of BA constructions. The negative meaning of *ba* NP *gei* VP emerged late, but “causality” as its constructional meaning gives the negative interpretation in the corpus. From diachronic and synchronic perspectives, I suggest that the study of semantic prosody in Chinese should widen traditional discussions by transferring from synonym comparison to the investigation of widely used phrases or sentence patterns.

**Keywords:** *Gei* · BA construction · BEI construction · Semantic prosody

## 1 Introduction

*Gei* (给) is one of the most commonly used verbs in modern Chinese. When *gei* serves as a preposition, it can not only be used to mark the goal of the transaction named by the verb but also introduce recipients denoted by the benefactive noun phrases [1]. Lü [2] also mentioned the preverbal *gei* as a particle is often used with BA and BEI constructions, creating a colloquial style in Chinese. The study aims to examine the particle *gei* in Mandarin Chinese. To be specific, the syntactic function of *gei* allows it to be preverbal to form a *gei* VP construction. Although the *gei* VP construction does not constitute a complete sentence, it is frequently used in modern Chinese<sup>1</sup>. The VP is often composed of a verb-resultative or verb-directional construction, or a single verb. Consider the following examples:

(1) 他把茶杯给摔破了。 (VP = verb-resultative)

---

<sup>1</sup> The use of *gei* as a particle has 63103 cases in the spoken Chinese database of the BCC corpus (<http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/zh/search/3/%E7%BB%99v>). Our intuition shows that VP following the word *gei* is often used as a colloquial pattern.

Ta ba chabei gei shuai-po le.  
3SG<sup>2</sup> BA teacup PART throw-break PFV  
'He broke the teacup.'

(2) 椅子被老李给搬进来了。(VP = verb-directional)  
Yizi bei Lao Li gei ban-jinlai le.  
chair PASS PN DISP carry-enter PERF  
'The chair was carried in by Lao Li.'

(3) 空调坏了，我们给修。(VP = a single verb)  
Kongtiao huai le, women gei xiu.  
Air conditioner broken PERF 2PL DISP repair  
'If the air conditioner is broken, we repair it.'

Li and Thompson [2] also argued that the preverbal *gei* in the BA construction can highlight the disposal interpretation. Notice that in modern Chinese, the markers showing the meaning of disposal include *jiang* (将) and *ba* (把), and the disposal construction is mostly represented by the BA construction. In contrast, the markers indicating passivity consist of *rang* (让), *jiao* (叫), *bei* (被) and the like, and the typical passive construction is the BEI construction. *Gei* as a colloquial word often occurs in BA and BEI constructions, resulting in the following patterns, with forms and meanings described below:

- A. *Ba* NP *gei* VP (Disposal: the agent acts on the recipient by doing sth.)
- B. *Bei* NP *gei* VP (Passive: the recipient is affected by the agent who did sth.)

Based on my native speaker intuition and analysis of the BCC corpus, we know that the two constructions are commonly used and the words *ba* and *bei* can be optionally omitted. The goal of this paper is to investigate the syntactic and semantic behaviors of the particle *gei* in disposal and passive contexts (i.e., BA and BEI constructions), and to explore the semantic prosody of *gei* in the two constructions through corpus analysis.

## 2 Literature Review

The particle *gei* and its related constructions have been hotly discussed in Chinese linguistic studies since the 1990s. Standing from different perspectives, previous studies have discussed the syntactic and semantic characteristics of *gei* VP in Chinese

---

<sup>2</sup> The following abbreviations are used in this paper: 1SG = 1st person singular; 1PL = 1st person plural; 2SG = 2nd person singular; 2PL = 2nd person plural; 3SG = 3rd person singular; 3PL = 3rd person plural; ATTR = Attributive *de*; C = Complementizer *de*; COMP = Postverbal complement marker *de*; CL = Classifier; CP = Clause; EM = Emphasis marker; NEG = Negator; NP = Noun phrase; PART = particle *gei*; PERF: perfective/ perfect marker *le*; PREP = Preposition; PST = Past tense; S = Sentence final *de*; VP = Verb phrase; DISP = disposal marker *ba*; PASS = passive marker *bei*; PREP = Preposition *zai*; PN = proper name.

causative and passive sentences. For example, Xu [3] studied Chinese dialects in which the word *gei* can be used in BA and BEI constructions. Wang [4] examined how the disposal meaning is related to the *gei*-related constructions from a diachronic perspective. Based on pragmatic function, Wen and Fan [5] argued that the word *gei* is a type of natural focus marker. Moreover, Xiong [6] as well as Ye and Pan [7] analyzed the syntactic distribution and semantic features of *gei* by adopting a generative approach. Huang [8] employed the subjective concept of empathy to account for the syntactic and semantic behaviors of *gei*, along with the existence of *gei* in BA and BEI constructions.

In details, Wang [9] primarily examined the pattern *Ba...gei* VP and he found that the semantics of this construction focuses on a resultative interpretation. From a pragmatic perspective, the construction is used to indicate a complaint or warning, and usually occurs at the end of topic chains. Additionally, the use of *gei* as a particle can stress a sense of unpredicted result and topic closure denoted by BA constructions. Li [10] provided historical evidence to demonstrate that the *ba...gei* VP construction originated earlier than the *bei...gei* VP construction. He also found the particle *gei* occurs mostly in the speech of Northern Chinese, represented by the Beijing dialect. In another dialectal study, Shi [11] pointed out that the word *gei* has double duty in the spoken Beijing dialect, i.e., serving as both passive marker and disposal marker. Similarly, Li and Chen [12] historically investigated the *gei* VP construction in the Beijing dialect, showing the passive *gei* can be replaced with *bei*, the disposal *gei* can be substituted with *ba*, and beneficiary *gei* can be interchanged to *wei* (为) and *ti* (替). Meanwhile, they found the ratios of beneficiary, disposal, and passive interpretations in the *gei* VP construction are 32: 25: 41 in data from Chinese novels, suggesting that the passive interpretation outweighs the other readings. Regarding the semantics of *gei*-related constructions, Huang [8] stressed the fact that the verbs following the word *gei* usually have a sense of losing or suffering. Because of unexpected and unfortunate events in our life, the use of *gei* can better reflect the effect of empathy in speakers' feelings. Kou and Yuan [13] in their discourse analysis argued that the word *gei* is a subjective marker, emphasizing the reason why *gei* VP indicates counter expectation and resultative interpretation is associated with the speakers. They found that the use of *gei* suggests a high degree of subjectivity, empathy, and cognitive salience. Their findings are consistent with the discussion of *gei* within the empathy theory in Huang [8], as well as Wen and Fan [5], who argued that the preverbal *gei* is a focus marker to make the natural focus become the resultative focus.

Above all, the studies reviewed so far indicated the use of the particle *gei* in Chinese BA and BEI constructions often denotes counter expectation and resultative readings. In certain Chinese dialects, particularly northern dialects, the word *gei* can serve as a grammatical marker. However, some issues remain unclear. For instance, Huang [8] postulated that the post-*gei* verbs are mostly negative but she did not provide data to prove her argument. Also, through the data analysis of novels, Li and Chen [12] concluded that *gei* VP has a passive reading in a majority of cases. However, the genres of their corpus are not diverse, and they did not provide the exact percentages for the different readings. Given this, this study aims to fill a gap by examining different genres within the BCC corpus to investigate the frequency and semantic prosody of *gei* in BA and BEI constructions. My research questions are directed by the above discussions: (i) How often does *gei* occur in BA and BEI

constructions, and (ii) how does the semantic prosody of *gei* emerge in different genres of the Chinese corpus?

### 3 Research Methodology

To measure the distribution of semantic prosody, I checked against different kinds of databases in the BCC corpus [14], including magazines, weblogs, technology writings, literature, and multi-source databases (<http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/>). The sample size for each database is relatively balanced. The query for searching *gei* in BA and BEI constructions was 把 N 给 V and 被 N 给 V, respectively. The date for my initial corpus search was on July 5th, 2021. The semantic prosody of *gei* was measured by considering contexts and verbs. If both contexts and verbs had negative meanings, then the word *gei* was taken to indicate a negative reading. If both contexts and verbs were positive, then *gei* indicated a positive reading. If both contexts and verbs were neutral, then *gei* had a neutral reading. Take some sentences in BCC for example:

(4) 弟把车给弄丢了, 老爸老妈肯定心疼死了。

Di ba che gei nongdiu le, lao ba lao ma kending  
younger.brother DISP car PART get.lost PREF old papa old mom surely  
xinteng si le.  
distressed death PERF

‘My younger brother lost his car, our old papa and mom will surely be distressed to death.’ (both underlined context and verb are negative)

(5) 我这边有几个自行车友坚持骑自行车, 结果把肩周炎给治好了。

Wo zhebian you jige zixingche you jianchi qi zixingche, jieguo  
1SG here have several bike friend keep ride bike consequently  
ba jianzhouyan gei zhi hao le.  
DISP peri-arthritis of shoulder PART cure well PERF

‘On my side, there are a few bike lovers insisting on riding bikes, consequently their peri-arthritis of shoulder has been cured.’ (both underlined context and verb are positive)

(6) ...不过一边讲也就顺便把作文给背了。

...buguo yibian jiang yejiu shunbian ba zuowen gei bei le.  
but simultaneously speak then by.the.way DISP essay PART recite PERF

‘(s/he) spoke but simultaneously recited the essay.’ (both underlined context and verb are neutral)

## 4 The Semantic Prosody of *Gei*

### 4.1 Semantic Prosody

Semantic prosody or evaluative prosody is one of the key constructs in corpus linguistics. Louw [15] initially proposed semantic prosody in the study of irony as a rhetorical device in English texts. He argued that the study of semantic prosody of a linguistic structure is closely associated with its collocation with other constituents in corpora. Therefore, the judgment of semantic prosody does not only depend on speakers' subjective intuition or introspection. We need to see how semantic prosody emerges from usages in objective contexts. Sinclair [16] and Stubbs [17] further developed the idea of semantic prosody, showing that semantic prosody has been assigned a discourse function under the influence of contexts. Hunston and Thompson [18] defined semantic prosody as "the speaker or writer's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint or feelings about the entities and propositions that he or she is talking about" (p. 5). This shows that speakers with different backgrounds have different attitudes or evaluations towards topics in discourse.

The study of semantic prosody in Chinese emerged late but has played a crucial role in the development of lexical semantics studies. For example, Tao [19] proposed the "emergent lexical semantics", using the theory of semantic prosody to account for the semantic and pragmatic differences among a group of Chinese synonyms, such as *chuxian* 'emerge', *chansheng* 'produce', and *fasheng* 'happen'. By comparing English with Chinese, Xiao and McEnery [20] found that the English noun *consequence* has the same semantic prosody as *houguo* 'consequence' in Chinese, and the noun *result* or *outcome* corresponds to *jieguo* 'result' in Chinese. Moreover, they examined the distribution of different verbs that can be collocated with these nouns in the corpus. Their findings suggest that semantic prosody, based on a functional approach, centers on the semantic preferences of words and phrases in different contexts. It is through big data that we can dig into the semantic prosody of different constituents in a language, and this contributes to the knowledge of the semantic features of Chinese lexicon. In what follows, I will adopt the theory of semantic prosody to summarize and analyze the distribution of *gei* in BA and BEI constructions.

### 4.2 Semantic Prosody of *Gei*

In Table 1, horizontally speaking, the existence of the particle *gei* is dominant in BA constructions with all kinds of genres, including formal genres (e.g., magazine, technology, literature) and informal genres (e.g., weblog). For instance, the *ba* NP *gei* VP construction amounts to 86.6% in the technology database, and the percentage is far higher than that of *bei* NP *gei* VP (13.4%). Viewed vertically from the table, the number of cases for the two constructions is the highest (5595), surpassing the total sum (1390) of cases in magazine, technology, and literature genres. However, the frequency of *gei* in BA constructions is much higher than that in BEI constructions. This result shows that the two constructions have a higher frequency in informal or

spoken contexts (e.g., weblog) whereas have a lower frequency in written or formal contexts (e.g., technology, magazine).

**Table 1.** The frequency of the two constructions in BCC

BCC databases	Magazine	Weblog	Technology	Literature
Frequency				
Constructions				
ba NP <i>gei</i> VP	426 (88.2%)	4035 (72.1%)	306 (86.6%)	407 (73.4%)
bei NP <i>gei</i> VP	57 (11.8%)	1560 (27.9%)	47 (13.4%)	147 (26.6%)
Sum	483	5595	353	554

Regarding the semantic prosody of *gei* in BA and BEI constructions, I searched the BCC multi-domain database (with different genres) to calculate the distribution of semantic prosody in the two constructions. The results are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2.** The semantic prosody of the two constructions in BCC (multi-domain database)

Constructions	ba NP <i>gei</i> VP	bei NP <i>gei</i> VP
Distribution		
Semantic prosody		
Positive or neutral	1159 (28.6%)	12 (0.9%)
Negative	2894 (71.4%)	1269 (99.1%)
Sum	4053	1281

From above we know that although the word *gei* in BA constructions can occur in positive and neutral contexts, this possibility is only realized 28.6% of the time. In example (7), the VP *gei zhihao* ‘got cured’ denotes a positive context, whereas *gei xi le* ‘got washed’ in example (8) and *gei guo le* ‘have spent’ in example (9) both have neutral readings.

(7) 罗松巴登一连跑了七次，把病给治好了。

Luosongbadeng yilian pao le qi ci, ba bing *gei* zhidao le.  
 3SG at.a.stretch run PERF seven times DISP illness PART cure PERF  
 ‘Luosongbadeng ran for seven times at a stretch, which cured his illness.’

(8) 明天无论如何把车给洗了去！让你们再嘲笑我的车脏！

Mingtian wulunruhe ba che *gei* xi le qu! Rang nimen zai  
 tomorrow in.any.case DISP car PART wash PERF go let 2PL again  
 chaoxiao wo de che zang!  
 make.fun.of 1SG ATTR car dirty  
 ‘In any case (I) will go and wash my car tomorrow! (Don’t) Let you guys make fun of my dirty car again!’

(9) 今天提前把生日给过了，明天出差。

Jintian tiqian ba shengri *gei* guo le, mingtian chuchai.  
 Today in.advance DISP birthday PART spend PERF tomorrow take.business.trip

‘Today (I) spent my birthday in advance, (so that) I can take my business trip tomorrow.’

Instead, the word *gei* in BA constructions occurs mostly in negative contexts (71.4%). The frequent VPs that are collocated with *gei* are ranked as: *gua shang* ‘hang up’ (76 cases), *shuo wan/ chu* ‘finish telling/ speak out’ (34 cases), *xia si/pao/huai* ‘scare to death/ scare to run/ freak out’ (20 cases), *mie le/ diao* ‘destroy’ (19 cases), *wai le* ‘twisted’ (19 cases), *jie le* ‘abstained’ (18 cases), *shan le* ‘sprained’ (18 cases), *niu le* ‘twisted’ (17 cases), *xian le/ fan* ‘turned over’ (14 cases), and *wang le* ‘forgot’ (10 cases). We see that most of VPs and verb resultative constructions can create negative contexts where the construction *ba NP gei VP* occurs frequently. For example, *gei nong shang* ‘got hurt’ in (10), *gei qi si* ‘got pissed off’ in (11), and *gei mie diao* ‘got destroyed’ in (12) all have negative meanings. Another evidence is to see how the word *gei* is used in BA constructions to generalize negative readings in most contexts, as shown in Fig. 1 below:

(10) 昨天练瑜伽，动作幅度太大，把腰给弄伤了。

Zuotian lian yujia, dongzuo fudu taida, ba yao gei nongshang le.  
yesterday practice yoga movement range too big DISP waist PART hurt PERF  
‘Yesterday (I) practiced yoga, I hurt my waist due to my large movement range.’

(11) 结果有一位才子听写出来的让全班笑得东倒西歪，一塌糊涂，活活把老师给气死。

Jieguo you yi-wei caizi tingxie chulai de rang quanban  
Consequently there.be one-CL talented.person dictate out C make whole.class  
xiao-de dongdaoxiwai, yitahutu, huohuo ba laoshi gei  
laugh-COMP lying.on.all.sides in.a.complete.mess actually DISP teacher PART  
qisi.  
piss.off.

‘Consequently, there was a talented person whose dictated work made the whole class laugh so as to lie on all sides, such a complete mess, which actually got the teacher pissed off.’

(12) 每个月总有那么几天想把主人给灭掉。

Mei-ge yue zong you name jitian xiang ba zhuren gei miediao.  
every-CL month always have those days want DISP owner PART destroy  
‘Every month, there are always a few days when (he) wants to destroy his owner.’

视。。我操，你们下次来我请吃好的成不，我真错了有时候闭嘴会 **把人给逼** 疯看着好少啊，今年别多再来10件就好人人家大企业咱这都算渣渣可以  
 头走人，不会情绪失控？这货绝对不是白羊。。。用锤子砸阿胶块， **把大拇指给砸** 了。。。嗷嗷。。。哦，对了，今天晚上还有这个好蓝~~~这这这，哪  
 老姐和宝宝都健康康哒~那句奇怪语调出来的“我也爱你”着实又 **把姐给吓** 着了，直接粗口了。。。我忏悔。。。翻手机里的图翻到这位同学，  
 真愁人。。。岁叫去！这嘴长小了点看牙医不方便，打个哈欠都能 **把嘴角给咧** 破了。。。又是一下...这到底是闹哪样！坏了，我有点不敢睡了，万一  
 来了**霸**气外露啊！！肯得基神马的都系浮云！每个月总有那么几天想 **把主人给灭** 了!!!这才叫真正的九死一生！分享图片又见堆雪人高手...这货  
 。做寿司肯定要找这位姐姐，她做寿司给我吃，我给100块她竟敢 **把姐给删** 了！害我找了一通！回去做寿司给姐吃！竟敢把姐给删了！害我找了一  
 00块她竟敢把姐给删了！害我找了一通！回去做寿司给姐吃！竟敢 **把姐给删** 了！害我找了一通！回去做寿司给姐吃！成长是一个过程，撕皮扯肉的  
 ！我是外地的，我要回外地去是祸躲不过，可恶的偷车贼！！弟 **把车给弄** 丢了，唉，老爸老妈肯定心疼死了，又得花钱买了因为你，我忘了我自  
 了北漂，祝福我吧！！！甘肃还真够硬的，费劲巴咧的吃着，还差点 **把牙给崩** 下来，以后不吃了.....继续...继续...我得赶紧儿、麻利儿、快  
 的任务是刻盘.....看上一双雪地靴，但是深圳这种天气，穿着会不会 **把脚给烤** 熟了啊我没有想很多。。。有些人吧，实际行动这么果断及时。。哎哟  
 醒，别对国人时常挂在嘴上的豪言壮语信以为真。千万别让北大同学 **把汤子给砸** 了再补充，据说杨肖师哥一天不解决单身问题，那么老大哥和老师姐姐  
 ，又怕费电又怕我们给玩坏了，连彩笔都舍不得让我们多使，怕我们 **把水给用** 没，可你那一箱子彩笔呢啊，没了又不是不给你买，手这么紧，真不  
 能彰显下品味呢，听说美特斯邦维也不错，唉，好难选择啊。也不怕 **把文件给删** 了这老妈厉害，这样也能专心开会想听一下那歌什么调子我想起耳朵  
 了。唉//也是假古董】1963年，林徽因曾大声谴责：“你们真 **把古董给拆** 了，将来要后悔的！即使再把它恢复起来，充其量也只是假古董！”我

Fig. 1. Screenshot of *ba* NP *gei* VP construction in BCC

Meanwhile, *gei* collocating with BEI constructions is overwhelmingly dominant in negative contexts (99.1%), far outweighing the frequency in BA constructions. Those VPs which can be frequently used with *gei* include: *chui mie/ zou* ‘blow out/ blow away’ (10 cases), *ji le* ‘squeezed’ (6 cases), *pian le* ‘being cheated’, *hui le* ‘destroyed’ (5 cases), *ran hong* ‘reddened’ (5 cases), *pi si/ zhong* ‘struck/ struck to death’ (5 cases), *zhuang si* ‘knocked down to death’ (4 cases), *sha le* ‘killed’ (4 cases), *chao xing* ‘wake up’ (4 cases), *dian wu le* ‘tarnished’ (4 cases). From these VPs we know that there is a limited number of cases showing positive readings, but 12 examples were found to indicate positive contexts. For instance, *gei shouyang* ‘got adopted’ in (13), *gei jieju* ‘got solved’ in (14), and *gei jiule chulai* ‘got helped out’ in (15) all concern positive readings.

(13) 记得那年我们楼道也有 5 只被遗弃的小狗，后来都被好心人给收养了。  
 Jide nian women loudao ye you wu zhi bei yiqi de xiaogou,  
 remember that year 2PL stairway also have five CL PASS abandon ATTR puppy  
 houlai dou bei haoxin ren gei shouyang le.  
 later.on all PASS warm.heart.person PART adopt PERF  
 ‘Remember in that year there were also five puppies being abandoned in our stairway.  
 Later on, they were all adopted by people with warm hearts.’

(14) 困扰我多年的耳朵问题今天被老公给解决了!  
 Kunrao wo duonian de erduo wenti jintian bei laogong gei jieju le!  
 Trouble 1SG years ATTR ear issue today PASS husband PART solve PERF  
 ‘The ear issue that had troubled me for many years was solved by my husband today!’

(15) 但是后来，身陷囹圄的我却被人给救了出来。  
 Danshi houlai, shen-xian-ling-yu de wo que bei ren gei jiu  
 but after.that be.thrown.into.jail ATTR 1SG EM PASS person PART rescue



le chulai.

PERF out

‘But after that, a person helped me out when I was thrown into jail.’

In contrast, a large number of cases can be found to connect to negative readings, such as *gei chaoxing* ‘got woken up’ in (16), *gei pohuai* ‘got damaged’ in (17), *gei moshou* ‘got confiscated’ in (18), and *gei maimo* ‘being hidied’ in (19). Figure 2 below illustrates the fact that *gei* is most likely to be used with negative verbs in Bei constructions, thus creating negative contexts.

(16) 刚刚往椅背上一靠，我就睡着了，然后被电话给吵醒。

Ganggang wang yi bei shang yi kao, wo jiu shuizhao le, ranhou

Just.now to chair back on one lie 1SG then fall.into.sleep PERF then

bei dianhua gei chaoxing.

PASS telephone PART wake.up

‘I just lay toward the back of the chair, then I fell asleep, then I was woken up by the telephone.’

(17) 本来美好的一天都被一个人给破坏了。

Benlai meihao de yi-tian dou bei yi-ge-ren gei pohuai

Originally wonderful ATTR one-day EM PASS one-CL-person PART ruin

le.

PERF

‘Originally my wonderful day has been ruined by one person.’

(18) 昨天买了个三国杀，我连碰都没碰今天就被班主任给没收了。

Zuotian mai le ge San-guo-sha, wo lian peng dou

Yesterday buy PERF CF Killers.of.the.Three.Kingdoms 1SG even touch /

mei peng jiu bei banzhuren gei moshou le.

NEG touch then PASS head.teacher PART confiscate PERF

‘Yesterday (I) purchased a set of Killers of the Three Kingdoms, the head teacher confiscated the board game today even though I did not touch it at all.’

(19) 摄影的根源到底还是一门艺术，不能完全被商业给埋没了自己的灵性。

Sheying de genyuan daodi haishi yi-men yishu, bu neng wanquan

photography ATTR nature actually still one-CL art NEG can purely

bei shangye gei maimo le ziji de lingxing.

PASS business PART sacrifice PERF self ATTR intelligence

‘(I realized that) The nature of photography is purely a type of art, so I cannot sacrifice my intelligence of photography to pursue the business.’



Fig. 2. Screenshot of *bei* NP *gei* VP construction in BCC

### 4.3 Explanations of Semantic Prosody

From Table 2 we know that the probability of being negative in the construction *ba* NP *gei* VP approximates 71.4% while the percentage of being negative in the construction *bei* NP *gei* VP reaches almost 99.1%. This shows that the passive reading emerges mostly in the BEI constructions rather than the BA constructions. Literally, the use of the word *bei* can denote a sense of mischance and oppression, but it can also show something positive, as indicated in examples from (13) to (15). Furthermore, whether the word *gei* is used in the BA constructions or BEI constructions, the contexts in which it occurs tend to be negative in most cases. The reason probably lies in the historical development of the two constructions. First, the negative meaning associated with the BEI constructions is traditionally dominant. Zhang [21] examined the historical literary works, showing that from classical Chinese to modern Chinese, the semantic color of the BEI constructions has been changed from passive to neutral, then to positive reading. This shows that the BEI construction has been developed into a semantic network prioritizing a passive reading while absorbing positive and neutral meanings. Second, modern Chinese provided an environment for the extension of passive meaning in the construction *bei* NP *gei* VP. The passive reading can be increasingly found in some social media catchphrases, such as the wide use of the passive construction *bei* X (X = VP/AP/NP) in 2009. For example, the occurrences of *bei jiu* ‘be said to be employed’, *bei xingfu* ‘be said to be happy’, *bei zisha* ‘unwillingly suicided’ can reflect speakers’ strong sense of resistance and sarcasm to social conflicts and injustice. Except for the BEI constructions, the word *gei* can also appear in passive readings. For instance, *gei gui le*<sup>3</sup> ‘give me a break’ as an online buzzword in 2012 is still widely used to self-deprecate by surrendering to somebody or something. Compared with BEI

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%E7%B5%A6%E8%B7%AA%E4%BA%86#Chinese>

constructions, BA constructions firstly emerged in the Tang Dynasty (618-907AD) and became popular in the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368-1912AD). Compared with the BEI constructions, the BA constructions appeared late, and their passive readings have not been further developed, thus positive and neutral readings exist in historical BA constructions. Based on intuition, we also know that there is no dominant reading in the Ba constructions. Instead, different semantic prosodies become possible in different contexts.

Additionally, I agree with Huang's [8] empathy theory, which can be used to account for the subjective empathy reflected in BA and BEI constructions. Another explanation for the passive reading in the *ba* NP *gei* VP construction, however, is that the causativity denoted by the BA construction interacts with the meaning of *gei*, leading to a negative semantic prosody. This hypothesis echoes Zhang's [22] argument, showing that the basic meaning of the BA constructions denotes a causal relation instead of the traditionally called "disposal relation" [23]. For example, *ba dian nao gei nong diu le* 'got computer lost' tends to show the agent caused the computer to get lost instead of actively throwing (disposal) the computer away. The corpus analysis suggested that causativity often gives rise to a passive reading. The grammatical meaning of *ba* NP *gei* VP thus relies on the meaning of VP to emphasize that an agent acts on a recipient to produce a causative and passive result. It is worth mentioning the fact that the causativity meaning in BA constructions and the "unfortunate" meaning in BEI constructions both belong to passive readings, which provided a semantic context where the two meanings are compatible. There are a limited number of cases but the mixture of BA constructions and BEI constructions contributes to structural simplification (economy) and expressive effect to show passivity caused by the VPs. For example, *bei ta pian qu* 'be cheated by him' in (20) and *bei jianboqi zha shang* 'be punctured and injured by the radio detector' in (21) both stress the serious consequences after the actions denoted by VPs.

(20) 奉劝世间的嫖客及早回头，不可被戏文小说引偏了心，把血汗钱被他骗去。

Fengquan shijian de piaoke jizao huitou, bu ke  
kindly.suggest world ATTR prostitution.client ASAP mend.one's.ways NEG can  
bei xiwen xiaoshuo yin pian le xin, ba xuehanqian bei  
PASS dramas novels tempt mislead PERF heart DISP hard-earned.money PASS  
ta pian qu.

3SG cheat away

'Kindly suggest the prostitution clients in the world should mend their ways as soon as possible. Don't be tempted and misled by his dramas and novels, thus being cheated out of hard-earned money.'

(21) 排列撒线人员田进和，在撒线作业时不慎把脚被检波器扎伤。

Pailie saxian renyuan Tian Jinhe, zai saxian zuoye shi bushen  
arrange release.wire staff PN PREP release.wire work time inadvertent  
ba jiao bei jianboqi zha shang.  
DISP leg PASS radiodetector puncture injured

‘Tian Jinhe, the staff for wire arrangement and release, was punctured and injured his legs with the radio detector when he was releasing wires.’

## 5 Concluding Remarks

Grounded in the context of BA and BEI constructions, this study investigated the semantic prosody of the particle *gei* collocating with VPs in Chinese. The results reveal that the *gei* VP construction prefers a negative interpretation in different genres of texts. I hope the study can benefit other studies on the semantic prosody of collocations. The study also implies that research on semantic prosody calls for a transition from traditional synonym comparison to similar phrases and sentence patterns. As Partington [24] contended, “prosodies are not a property of words: they are a property of groups of recurring, inter-collocating words and phrases.” (p. 287). Also, he argued that “the distribution of evaluative meaning can spread across words and phrases both synchronically and diachronically” (p. 295). Therefore, I suggest the study of semantic prosody in the future should take different types of phrases into consideration. For instance, the verbal phrase V *lai* V *qu* ‘doing something back and forth’ might have negative interpretation in some contexts [25], and the same goes with the nominal phrase *zheyang nayang* ‘such-and-such things’<sup>4</sup>. Some sentence patterns, including comparative constructions, *lian* constructions (连字句), and exclamations, might also bear negative meanings. Another important research area is to quantitatively examine the semantic prosody of Chinese idioms as fixed phrases. For example, the idiom *an tu suo ji* (按图索骥) has two contrasting meanings; one is to show inflexibility in dealing with something (negative), whereas another is to indicate using clues to find something valuable (positive). The idiom *hu feng huan yu* (呼风唤雨) can be used to not only denote seditious activities (negative) but also express the power of humans over nature (positive). The idiom *qi wen gong shang* (奇文共赏) is used to mean a wonderful essay is appreciated by all (positive), but it can also be used to indicate a joint critique of problematic essays (negative). The frequencies of these idioms in our life are not as high as that of some synonyms, so we cannot easily judge whether they are negative or positive based only on our own knowledge and intuition. Only in a large number of collocations can we find semantic prosodies of these expressions, emerging from the speakers’ discourses. It is therefore believed that phrases and sentence patterns with positive and negative meanings in modern Chinese should receive more attention, with the goal of exploring their semantic preferences developed in different periods of time. The proportion of being positive and negative in lexical semantics can perhaps uncover the social cognition and rules of historical changes behind language use.

---

<sup>4</sup> 难怪街上这么吵闹，原来是你们这些家伙到处走来走去。(No wonder such a noisy street, it is you guys who walk back and forth on the street.)

一身白得象灰面，松塌塌的，一点儿无意思，还装模作态，这样那样。(The guy’s whole body looks like a block of grey flour, loose and languid, but he behaves in an affected way, doing such-and-such things.)

(c.f. BCC)

## References

1. Li, C., Thompson, S. A.: *Functional Reference Grammar of Mandarin Chinese*. University of California Press, Berkeley (1981)
2. Lü, S.: *Modern Chinese Eight Hundred Words*. The Commercial Press, Beijing (1999). (in Chinese)
3. Xu, D.: Grammatical marker *gei* in Beijing dialect. *Dialect*, **1**, 54-60 (1992). (in Chinese)
4. Wang, J.: The origin of disposal *gei* constructions. *Linguistic Research*. **93**(4), 9-13 (2004). (in Chinese)
5. Wen, S., Fan, Q.: *Gei* as a natural-focus marker in contemporary spoken Chinese. *Studies of the Chinese Language*. **1**, 19-25+95 (2006). (in Chinese)
6. Xiong, Z.: The syntactic-semantic properties of the passive category *gei*. *Modern Foreign Languages*. **34**(2), 119-126+218 (2011). (in Chinese)
7. Ye, K., Pan, H.: The syntactic nature of *gei* in the Ba construction. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*. **46**(5), 656-665+799 (2014). (in Chinese)
8. Huang, B.: *Gei* as subjectivity marker: remarks on the deficiencies of *gei* as syntactic marker. *Linguistic Sciences*. **83**(4), 377-390 (2016). (in Chinese)
9. Wang, Y.: The conditions required and the expressive function of *gei* in the sentence pattern of *ba...gei* V. *Language Teaching and Linguistic Studies*. **2**, 64-70 (2001). (in Chinese)
10. Li, W.: The auxiliary word *gei* in reinforcing the disposition/passive voice. *Language Teaching and Linguistic Studies*. **1**, 55-61 (2004). (in Chinese)
11. Shi, Y.: *Gei*: its double functions as passive and disposal markers. *Chinese Teaching in the World*. **69**(3), 15-26+2 (2004). (in Chinese)
12. Li, Y., Chen, Q.: The status and development of the passive *gei* construction in Beijing dialect. *Dialect*. **4**, 289-297 (2005). (in Chinese)
13. Kou, X., Yuan, Y.: Transitivity and some problems with the *gei*-VP construction in Mandarin. *Chinese Language Learning*. **6**, 12-20 (2017). (in Chinese)
14. Xun, E., Rao, G., Xiao X., Zang, J.: The construction of the BCC Corpus in the age of Big Data (in Chinese). *Corpus Linguistics*. **3**(1), 93-109 (2016) <http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/>
15. Louw, B.: Irony in the text or insincerity in the writer? The diagnostic potential of semantic prosodies. *Text and Technology: In Honour of John Sinclair*, pp. 157-176 (1993)
16. Sinclair, J.: The search for units of meaning. *The Search for Units of Meaning*, pp. 1000-1032 (1996)
17. Stubbs, M.: *Words and Phrases: Corpus Studies of Lexical Semantics*. Blackwell Publishers, Oxford (2001)
18. Hunston, S., Thompson, G. (Eds.): *Evaluation in Text: Authorial Stance and the Construction of Discourse: Authorial Stance and the Construction of Discourse*. OUP, Oxford (2000)
19. Tao, H.: Toward an emergent view of lexical semantics. *Language and Linguistics*. **4**(4), 837-856 (2003)
20. Xiao, R., McEnery, T.: Collocation, semantic prosody, and near synonymy: A cross-linguistic perspective. *Applied Linguistics*. **27**(1), 103-129 (2006) <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/ami045>
21. Zhang, Y.: *A Historical Study of Chinese Passive Constructions*. China Social Sciences Press, Beijing (2010). (in Chinese)
22. Zhang, B.: On the sentence meaning of Ba constructions. *Studies in Language and Linguistics*. **38**(1), 28-40 (2000). (in Chinese)
23. Wang, L.: *Modern Chinese Grammar*. Zhonghua Bookstore, Beijing (1943). (in Chinese)
24. Partington, A.: Evaluative prosody. In *Corpus Pragmatics: A Handbook* (Eds. Aijmer, K., Rühlemann, C.). pp. 279-303. CUP, Cambridge (2014) [doi:10.1017/CBO9781139057493.015](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139057493.015)

25. Lu, X.: A Cognitive Study on Modern Chinese Construction V-lai-V-qu. In Workshop on Chinese Lexical Semantics (pp. 202-224). Springer, Cham (2018)  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-04015-4\\_18](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-04015-4_18)