In this paper, I examine why directional verb compounds (DVC) and serial verb constructions (SVC) denote various meanings in Mandarin and propose a better explanation of a speaker’s interpretation of these constructions based on the interaction between the event templates (hypothetically) associated with the construction and the notions of PATH.

Less attention is paid to the semantic distinction between a DVC and an SVC (Kang 2001; Lu 1977; Newmeyer 2004; Paul 2004; Zhang 1991; Zou 1994). When describing a spatial change-of-location, both DVCs in (1)-(2) and SVCs in (3) are commonly used to encode directed motion events. At first glance, (1a) and (1b) are similar, except for each adjoining with a different V2, jin ‘enter’ and hui ‘return’. The varied interpretations of (1b) do not surface without provided context. The complicated differences can be seen as soon as we submit them to an adverbial time phrase qi dian ‘seven o’clock’ and a temporal scope-sensitive adverb cai ‘only’ (Bi 1988; Lai 1999), as shown in (2)-(3). Three major differences are observed. First, the interpretations of the SVC in (3a) and (3b) are distinct. Second, when comparing (2a) and (2b), we notice that the interpretation of (2b) is ambiguous. Third, the meaning of (2bii) somewhat overlaps with (3bii), but the felicitous interpretation in (iii) of (2b) and (3b) is actually in complementary distribution. The question remains then as to what triggers the dual interpretations: a lexical distinction (i.e. PATH V2), the construction (i.e. DVCs vs. SVCs), or both.

First, I show that the semantic event composition of sub-events is asymmetric across DVCs and SVCs. Secondly, I propose that the key to capturing the event composition is the distinction of PATH notions, viz. a minimal vs. an extended PATH (Beavers 2002; Wechsler 2003). Third, I demonstrate that three distinct event representations are associated with an SVC involving an extended PATH, while only one (result-salient) representation tend to be realized when appearing with a minimal PATH. Overall, I conclude that the varied reading exhibited in a DVC/SVC is actually a characteristic of the interaction between the representations (event templates) of DVCs (result-salient)/SVCs (manner/means-salient) and the notions of PATH. In terms of minimal vs. extended PATHs, we are in a better position to explain why inconsistent readings are obtained in other semantic tests (i.e. kuai ‘almost’; kaishi ‘begin’). Also, we are able to highlight the stage difference denoted by a DVC and an SVC in reference to the event headedness (Pustejovsky 1995) or stage salience (Caudal 2005).

(1a) Ta kai jin xuexiao qu le 3sg drive enter school DEIC LE ‘(lit.) S/He drove into the school (and arrived).’

(1b) Ta kai hui xuexiao qu le 3sg drive return school DEIC LE (i) ‘S/He is on her/his way to the school (by driving).’
(ii) ‘S/He arrived at the school (by driving).’
(iii) ‘S/He just drove back to the school.’

(2a) Ta qi dian cai kai jin xuexiao qu le 3sg seven o’clock only drive enter school DEIC LE ‘S/He didn’t drive into the school until 7.”

(2b) Ta qi dian cai kai hui xuexiao qu le 3sg seven o’clock only drive return school DEIC LE (i) ‘S/He didn’t arrive at school until 7.’
(ii) ‘S/He was on her/his way to school by 7 (by driving).’
*(iii)(lit.) S/He didn’t start to drive back to school until 7.”

(3a) Ta qi dian cai kai che jin xuexiao qu le 3sg seven o’clock only drive car enter school DEIC LE ‘S/He didn’t driving into the school until 7.”

(3b) Ta qi dian cai kai che hui xuexiao qu le 3sg seven o’clock only drive car return school DEIC LE (i) ‘S/He didn’t start driving back to school until 7.”
(ii) ‘S/He was on her/his way to school by 7 (by driving).’
*(iii) ‘S/He arrived at school at 7 (by driving).’