The implicit theme construction in Hakka: Interaction of structure, meaning, and discourse

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As observed in many languages, unexpressed arguments can often be on account of cognitive or pragmatic accessibility (Fellbaum & Kegl 1989; Goldberg, 1995, 2005, 2006). Goldberg (2005), for instance, argues that semantic recoverability and low discourse prominence can allow the theme arguments of verbs of emission/contribution in English to be underspecified. Similarly, argument omission commonly occurs in Spoken Hakka, one of the major Chinese languages. An implicit theme construction is characterized as syntactic configuration, where the obligatory theme argument remains underspecified or appears elsewhere. While the particular construct in Hakka is motivated by similar principles as cases in English in some respects, it nevertheless differs from those in English both structurally and semantically.

First, verbs that allow their themes to be unexpressed can be generalized to a wide array of verbs from verbs of ingesting, verbs of perception/verbs of communication, and verbs of doing, to verbs of sending, verbs of cooking, verbs of commercial transaction, and verbs of manner. Second, the syntactic forms also arrange from schematic to substantive, giving rise to diverse idiomatic meanings. On the one hand, some examples are syntactically rendered as \([\text{ASP } V_1 \psi \text{ASP } V_2 \psi]\) as in \(\text{gin}2 \text{lui}5 \text{gin}2 \text{kiau}1\) ‘to repeatedly pestle (the green tea, sesame, and peanuts) and stir (its powder)’, or represented as \([V \phi \uparrow V \phi \downarrow]\) as in \(\text{let}5 \text{song}2 \text{let}5 \text{ha}3\), ‘to walk up and down while holding (something) close with arms’ denoting durative, repetitive or inchoative aspect. On the other hand, some examples are unique frozen expressions, carrying idiomatic meanings. Clearly each of the examples has its theme unexpressed under certain discourse conditions. The parallel juxtaposition of the two contrastive verbs—hearing and talking as in \(\text{siit}3\text{tang}1\text{ng}5 \text{siit}3 \text{kong}2\) ‘I have heard (of this) but I have never talked (it) about.’, for example—is a discourse strategy to mark out the prominence of the action while deemphasizing the non-focal object. Third, moving into larger discourses, we find that the unexpressed theme is displaced rather than omitted. While a theme argument occurs pre-verbally, it can also take a post-verbal position although both portray the same scene. Such syntactic and semantic variations serve as linguistic devices to package the information for communication. The question is what makes the discourse coherent and what guarantees the smoothness of the information flow.

Thus, this study aims to tackle two issues: to scrutinize qualification for components to be in the implicit theme construction, looking into how form and meaning interact with one another to generate a range of meanings from schematic to substantive; and to offer an explanation for the observed preference for the implicit theme construction over its canonical structure in Hakka in terms of information structure. It is hoped to argue that any form-meaning pairings arise from the actual usage in context motivated by the information packaging strategies of language users.