

A Study on the Syntactic, Semantic and Pragmatic Functions of the Construction "Wang Si Li V"

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Abstract. Based on Construction Grammar and Cognitive Linguistics, this paper conducts a systematic study of the modern Chinese construction wang sili V (“to V to death/extremely”) from three dimensions: syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Syntactically, the construction is semi-fixed and semi-schematic. The verb V is mainly a monosyllabic volitional verb, often functioning as the predicate and capable of forming an independent clause, with various constituents co-occurring before and after it. Semantically, si (“death”) has grammaticalized from a resultative meaning to an intensifier. The verb has gradually generalized, giving rise to four variants: ba/jiang/gei/bei N jiu wang sili V. The construction as a whole is characterized by subjectivity, qualitative increment, and extremity. Pragmatically, it is predominantly derogatory but also has commendatory and neutral uses. It mainly conveys coercive directives via deontic modality and highlights the subject’s volition through dynamic modality, thus fulfilling functions of affective evaluation and interpersonal interaction.

Keywords: Wang Si Li V construction; syntax; semantics; pragmatics.

1. Introduction

Wang sili V is a frequently used special construction in modern Chinese, often employed to express high degree and subjective evaluation. For example:

(1) In the second month I was drafted into the army. Since I could not drill properly, the squad leader wanted to beat me to death. (People’s Daily, September 1948)

(2) He loves Chinese food and is crazy about it, yet after eating, when he returns to Geneva, he says he will shut off that part of his brain and never think about it again. (People’s Daily Overseas Edition, April 2001)

From the extreme action description in wang sili da (“beat to death”) in Example (1) to the intense emotional expression in wang sili ai (“love to death”) in Example (2), this construction exhibits rich semantic changes and distinctive pragmatic functions.

At present, domestic research on the wang sili V construction mainly focuses on the following four aspects.

First, regarding its syntactic properties, previous studies have mainly examined the overall structure and its components wang, V, and li. Representative works include Zhang Lirong (1993) [1], Yuan Dan (2008) [2], and Hu Xiao (2014) [3]. Nie Yanping (2019) [4] regards this structure as a semi-substantive construction encoding high degree and summarizes the verb types and usage patterns of the variable V.

Second, with respect to inheritance relations, scholars generally agree that wang sili V is inherited from constructions such as wang V li V and wang N li V. Based on diachronic corpus evidence, Ma Zhe (2009) [5] and Nie Yanping (2019) [6] have identified the inheritance links among wang A li V, wang V li V, and wang N li V. Nie Yanping (2020) [7] further demonstrates the inheritance relation between wang sili V and wang N li V, and on this basis supplements the spatial-noun properties of the verb si.

Third, in terms of semantic research, some scholars have noted that the semantic features of si and V not only give rise to the core meaning of high degree in wang sili V, but also lead to internal semantic hierarchy differences, as seen in Yuan Dan (2008) [8] and Ma Zhe (2009) [9].

Fourth, concerning pragmatic functions, researchers generally hold that wang sili V performs evaluative and reformulative functions, and have explored their motivations, including Li Xiaoqin & Chen Changlai (2020) [10] and Gong Wenjie (2021) [11].

Existing studies have made considerable progress in exploring the syntactic features, evolutionary patterns, and pragmatic functions of the construction. However, certain issues still deserve further investigation. First, in terms of syntactic structure, few studies have independently traced the evolutionary path of the syntactic properties of wang sili V; only Yuan Dan (2008) [12] and Nie Yanping (2020) [13] have analyzed its formation mechanism using the CCL and BCC corpora. Second, in semantics, quantitative analyses mostly focus on the word class and syllabic differences of V, with relatively little attention paid to the semantic types of V and the semantic roles of the whole construction. Third, the pragmatic functions of wang sili V as an independent construction have not been clearly defined.

To address the above problems and deficiencies, this paper, grounded in Construction Grammar and Cognitive Linguistics, attempts to answer the following questions:

First, what structural properties does wang sili V possess? Can it be identified as a construction? What elements can co-occur with it? Second, what semantic characteristics do the components of wang sili V display? Have their meanings evolved diachronically? Third, what affective coloring and modal functions does wang sili V typically convey?

The data for this study are drawn from the Peking University CCL Corpus and the Communication University of China MLC Corpus, totaling 136 tokens.

2. Syntactic Features of the Construction "Wang Si Li V"

2.1. Structural Properties of wang sili V

2.1.1. Analysis of wang X li

According to Modern Chinese Dictionary: wang is a preposition indicating the direction of an action; li is a locative noun meaning “inside, interior” (as opposed to “outside”).

The construction wang X li describes a process of movement from outside to inside, implying the durativity of the action. X is typically a noun denoting a place or space. For example:

(3) Last month I went into the garden, hung it on the gate latch, and forgot to take it back in. (Guang Bu Jing, Collection of Asian Languages)

2.1.2 Analysis of si

In addition to nominal elements, X in wang X li V can also be adjectival or verbal, covering a wide range. Thus, the three subpatterns overlap.

In Modern Chinese Dictionary, si has two common meanings:

As a verb: “a living being loses life, opposite to ‘alive, living’” (see Example 4);

As an adjective: “to an extreme degree” (see Example 5).

According to statistics, the two meanings account for 38.3% and 61.7% respectively. The frequency of the second meaning (si₂) is significantly higher than that of the first (si₁).

(4) Li Haisheng caught Wu De’ersate’s animal in the field and beat him to death without mercy. (People’s Daily, January 1953)

(5) Using the material dug up for him by the insurance company, he scared you to death and forced you to sign a complaint against her. (Cao Jinghua, The Postman Always Rings Twice)

2.1.3 Analysis of V

We conducted a statistical analysis of V in the wang sili V construction. The specific frequencies of V are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Verb Frequencies in the CCL and MLC Corpora

Types of Verbs	Verb (Frequency)[Verbs occurring only once are not marked with frequency for brevity.]
Monosyllabic Verbs	beat (68), fight (5), work (5), practice (3), send (3), run (3), force (2), whip (2), punish (2), drive (2), chop (2), strive (2), fix (2), eat, do, squeeze, carry, praise, pull, scold, stick, burn, collect, endure, lift, stab, push, drag, feed, study, train, bite, want, slaughter, beat, suck, act.
Disyllabic Verbs	tidy up (2), lash, assassinate, knock down, bargain, bargain, pick, default, intimidate, torture.

The study finds that in terms of syllable number, the verb "V" in the Wang Si Li V construction is mainly monosyllabic, as in wang si li da (beat to death), with 125 examples (91.9%). This is consistent with the feature that "monosyllabic verbs account for the majority" in the Wang A Li V construction (Yuan Dan, 2008)[14]. [Yuan Dan analyzed nearly 20 years of relevant corpus of Wang Si Li V and found that monosyllabic verbs accounted for 90.8% in Wang A Li V, which is close to the 91.9% obtained in the present study.] According to the Prosodic Syntax theory by Feng Shengli (2009: 93)[15], monosyllabic words can be attached to other syllables for light reading, thus avoiding problems such as "stress redundancy" and "prosodic conflict". Meanwhile, monosyllabic verbs are concise and colloquial, and can encode the core meaning of the construction while maintaining prosodic integrity. Therefore, monosyllabic verbs are significantly more frequent in the Wang Si Li V construction.

2.2. Constructional Properties of wang sili V

Goldberg (2007: 4) defines a construction as "a pairing of form and meaning" with unpredictability [16]. A phrasal pattern counts as a construction if some aspect of its form or meaning cannot be fully predicted from its components or from other existing constructions.

Wang SiLi V consists of four morphemes: wang, si, li, and V. However, its overall meaning is not the direct sum of its component meanings. Instead, it has become a fixed expression through lexicalization and grammaticalization. We therefore regard wang sili V as a construction. For example:

(6) Jin Gui said: "Dear girl... you will surely marry into a good family with a good husband, not like me, living a widow's life, with no one to turn to, letting people ride over me. I'm simple-minded... please don't pick on me to death... Besides, you can't meddle in the private affairs between husbands and wives in our household!" (Cao Xueqin & Gao E, *Dream of the Red Chamber*)

In context, wang sili tiaojian ("pick on to death") in Example (6) means to criticize extremely and sarcastically, expressing strong resentment. Here si clearly indicates high degree rather than literal death.

Regarding construction classification, Shi Chunhong (2024) distinguishes three types based on abstractness:

substantive constructions (fully fixed, e.g., zhenshide "really");

schematic constructions (fully variable, e.g., prepositional-object constructions);

semi-substantive, semi-schematic constructions (fixed parts plus open slots, e.g., yue lai yue XP "more and more XP") [17].

In wang sili V, wang sili is a fixed substantive component, while V is an open slot allowing various verbs. Therefore, wang sili V is a semi-substantive and semi-schematic construction (shortened to semi-schematic construction).

2.3. wang sili V and Its Co-occurring Elements

Elements co-occurring with wang sili V show the following features:

First, the subject is typically animate, mostly human. For example:(7) Wei Surong discovered that the village cadre's son was beating her husband to death and panicked, quickly grabbing a kitchen knife. (Chen Guidi & Chun Tao, *An Investigation of Chinese Peasants*)

In addition, 4 tokens have non-human subjects:(8) Little Zhou said to it: “Keren, run along this road! Run as fast as you can, run for your life!” (Yan Geling, *My Dog Keren*)

Second, pre-modifiers of *wang sili V* are usually adverbials of manner, cause, condition, or negation, mainly including conjunctive adverbs (Example 9), modal verbs (Example 10), prepositional phrases (Example 11), and negative adverbs (Example 12). They restrict or subjectively modulate the extreme action. For example:(9) The invaders were brutal; once they caught people, they beat them to death. Many villagers were killed, some thrown into mass graves. (*People’s Daily*, August 2015)(10) We must fight to the death, but keep them alive; we must show the power of people’s unity in struggle and eliminate reactionary ideas. (Ding Ling, *The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River*)(11) At any moment Father might beat him to death with his cane, on the back or on the head. (Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*)(12) He rushed in and advised Ren Bao’s wife: “Dear, don’t beat the child to death! A few scolds are enough.” (Feng Deying, *Winter Jasmine*)

Third, some co-occurring elements appear frequently and form fixed collocations with *wang sili V*, such as *yi... jiu...* “as soon as... then...” and *zhi yao V bu si, jiu...* “as long as not V to death, then...”, expressing conditional meanings.(13) What tortured and terrified Gao Shuqing most was that her youngest son Xu Gang had epilepsy, which struck without warning, and once it struck, he convulsed violently... (*People’s Daily*, December 1989)(14) “As long as you don’t work yourself to death, work like hell.” (*People’s Daily*, November 2017)

Fourth, post-posed elements are limited, usually modal particles such as *le, a, ma*, which strengthen emotion, enhance interactivity and immediacy, and are common in colloquial contexts like media interviews. For example:(15) This is just driving him crazy, squeezing him to death—in other words, asking for trouble. (*Tianjin People’s Radio, World News Talk*)(16) Once I have enough evidence, I’ll take you down. You really want to ruin me completely? (*Tianjin People’s Radio, World News Talk*)(17) Pesticides, noise, sewage, smoke—aren’t we driving them to extinction every day? (*People’s Daily*, July 1988)

2.4. Syntactic Features of *wang sili V*

In syntactic position, *wang sili V* mainly functions as predicate (111 tokens, 79%), with independence, eventivity, and predicativity, serving as the informational focus of the clause. Most such clauses are declarative (102 tokens, 70.5%); a small number express interrogative, imperative, or exclamatory meanings. For example:(18) Four and a half million yuan to repay loans that year, with superiors demanding results and villagers needing housing—wasn’t this pushing Liu Xiuxiang to the brink? (*People’s Daily*, February 1989)

Occasionally, *wang sili V* can form an independent clause (29 tokens, 21%), especially in spoken dialogue. Such clauses often take the form *gei X wang sili V*, with complete propositional meaning and strong emotion, typically used in imperative speech for commands or requests.(19) The bandit chief trembled with rage and ordered his men to drag Qing Hua aside, shouting: “Beat him to death for me!” (*People’s Daily*, July 1970)

3. Semantic Features of the Construction "*wang sili V*"

The semantic features of *wang sili V* are closely related to the semantic evolution of its component parts.

3.1. Semantic Evolution of *wang sili V*

3.1.1 Semantic Evolution of the Components of *wang sili V*

First, consider *wang X li*. *Li* is a locative noun meaning “inside, interior”. *Wang* is a preposition indicating direction or path. Thus, *wang X li* means “an entity moves along a path and attempts to enter the interior of something”, implying the durativity of the action. Meanwhile, Hu Xiao (2014) argues that the natural opposition between “inside” and “outside” also endows the construction with a metaphorical feature of the container schema: bounded by the container’s boundary, the interior is

the goal of movement, while the exterior is where the movement occurs. The construction thus acquires spatial and domain properties [18]. It is on the basis of this spatial metaphor that, when wang sili V expresses the concept of “the end of life”, it inherits and reflects the typical structural and semantic properties of wang N li V. For example:

(20) If Mr. Qian still refused to cooperate with the Japanese after receiving the letter, wouldn't Jin San be sending the child to his death? (Lao She, *Four Generations under One Heaven*, Part Three: *Famine*)

Second, the conceptual meaning of si “death” has been continuously bleached and grammaticalized. Based on the degree of semantic bleaching of si, Nie Yanping (2019) classifies wang sili V into three categories:

core members such as wang sili da “beat to death”;

peripheral members such as wang sili he “drink to excess”;

marginal members such as wang sili ai “love to death” [19].

We have found corresponding corpus examples:

(21) Li Haisheng caught Wu De's animal in the field and beat it to death without mercy. (*People's Daily*, January 1953) (22) At this time, some people, under the pretense of “concern”, spread negative comments: “These girls just want to show off; they're forcing themselves to the limit!” (*People's Daily*, February 1975) (23) Recently I saw teachers in tears. I asked what was wrong, and she said: “I really regret that I didn't praise every one of the 55 students in my class like crazy back then...” (*News 1+1*, Primary School “Professors”, 2011)

In examples like wang sili da “beat to death”, the participants are usually in hostile relations, and the verb is highly actional, so si retains a relatively concrete meaning of possible lethal outcome (Example 21). In cases like wang sili shou “endure to the limit”, interpersonal relations are more diverse, the actionality of the verb is weaker, and the meaning of si begins to bleach, developing a sense of subjective high degree on the basis of its original meaning (Example 22). In examples like wang sili kua “praise to death” (Example 23), speaker and hearer are usually in an alliance with shared interests, so si only expresses a subjective high degree of the action state, with no literal sense of killing.

From core to marginal members, si evolves from a physical result meaning “loss of life” to an abstract, hyperbolic marker of subjective extreme degree, demonstrating a systematic process of semantic change.

Finally, the verb V shows the characteristics of semantic concentration and semantic generalization. Verbs in wang sili V can be decomposed into a set of semantic features, such as [+action], [±transitive], [+volitional], [±durative], etc. Following Ma Qingzhu's (1988) criteria for distinguishing volitional vs. non-volitional verbs [Ma Qingzhu holds that a transitive verb V (excluding quantitative pseudo-objects) is volitional if it satisfies at least one of the following: (1) lai “come” or qu “go” can appear before or after V (e.g., qu kan dianying qu “go to see a movie”) without reduplication, complement, or suffix; (2) neither lai nor qu appears, but V alone or with an object can form an imperative; (3) one or two instances of lai / qu can occur around V.] [20]

This paper summarizes the semantic features of high-frequency verbs in wang sili V, as shown in Table 2:

Table 2 Semantic Features of High-Frequency Verbs (Frequency ≥ 2)

Verb	[+Action]	[+Volitional]	[\pm Transitive]	[\pm Durative]
beat	+	+	\pm	+
fight	+	\pm	-	+
work	+	+	-	+
practice	+	+	\pm	+
send	+	+	\pm	\pm
run	+	+	-	+
force	+	-	\pm	-
whip	+	+	\pm	-
punish	+	+	\pm	\pm
drive	+	+	\pm	-
chop	+	+	+	\pm
strive	+	+	-	\pm
tidy	+	+	\pm	+
fix	+	+	\pm	\pm

The analysis shows that verbs capable of entering the wang sili V construction mainly possess the semantic features of [+action] and [+volitional]. The subject's will and ability to act are the core criteria for verbs to enter the construction, which is consistent with the characteristic that "V in wang X li V is mainly composed of controllable verbs with subjective initiative" (Peng Zhenzhen, 2020) [21]. [In his article *The Volitional Category of Chinese Verbs and Its Syntactic Manifestations—A Re-recognition of the Volitional Category*, Zhang Wanhe argues that [+volitional] can be further subdivided into [+willingness] and [+controllable] (ability). For the sake of concise analysis, only the semantic feature of [+volitional] is retained here. [22]

With the gradual bleaching of the meaning of si ("death"), the semantic types of V have also gradually generalized. While verbs expressing strong actions (such as da "beat") still occupy a dominant position, verbs with weaker actionality and lower volitionality, such as xue ("study"), xun ("train"), and yao ("want"), have gradually entered the construction, making the semantic types of verbs increasingly diverse (see Example 28). Meanwhile, although verbs expressing emotions and feelings (such as gaoxing "happy" and ai "love") do not appear in the corpus, they are still frequently used in daily communication.

3.1.2 Semantic Development of the Variants of wang sili V

Traugott & Trousdale (2013: 22-26) divide the modes of constructional change into two types: constructionalization and constructional change [23]. Among them, constructionalization refers to the process of evolving from an "old form—old meaning" pair to a conventionalized "new form—new meaning" pair (Hou Wenyu, Shi Chunhong, 2025) [24]. Constructional change refers to changes occurring in a certain dimension within an existing construction (such as semantics, morphology, collocational restrictions, etc.), without involving the emergence of new constructions (Shi Chunhong et al., 2022) [25]. The wang sili V construction has undergone a process of "constructional change". According to the differences in collocational restrictions and semantic orientation, the degree of adhesion between the construction and preposed elements has gradually increased, giving rise to four types of variants.

Table 3 Corpus Quantity and Proportion of the Four Types of Variants

Construction	Corpus Quantity	Proportion
ba N wang sili V	24	17.6%
jiang N jiu wang sili V	5	3.7%
gei N jiu wang sili V	4	2.9%
bei N jiu wang sili V	3	2.2%

The first type is *ba N wang sili V*.

N is the patient object of the action V, i.e., the object directly governed and influenced by the action. At this time, *wang sili* semantically points to this patient, indicating that the agent's influence on the patient reaches an extreme degree. For example:

(28) He said: "The great leader Chairman Mao saved my family from death, while Liu Shaoqi pushed my family to the brink of death." (People's Daily, September 1969)

The second type is *jiang N jiu wang sili V*.

The semantic orientation of V in this construction is the same as that in *ba N wang sili V*. The *jiang* construction is a typical objective register (Tao Hongyin, 1999) [26]. In modern Chinese, it is suitable for use in recipes where subjective meaning is almost weakened to zero and objective meaning is dominant (Shen Jiakuan, 2002) [27]. Meanwhile, *jiang* is more archaic than *ba* (Diao Yanbin, 2012) [28], making the narration more calm. For example:

(29) Seeing that he could not get out of the predicament, Tang Xianlin held the knife handle tightly and stabbed Liu Changjian to death. (People's Daily, July 1998)

The third type is *gei N jiu wang sili V*.

There is an obvious difference in the reference of N in this construction compared with the previous two types. N is not the agent of the action; the real agent subject is often implied in the preceding context or discourse background and can be omitted in the sentence. In terms of semantic relations, N and the agent subject are often in a superior-subordinate relationship, so the agent subject can issue orders to N.

(30) That Assistant Commander Xu winked at the yamen runner holding the stick and said: "Qiao Zhiyong refuses to confess and even talks nonsense; beat him to death for me!" (Zhu Xiumei, Qiao's Grand Courtyard)

The fourth type is *bei N jiu wang sili V*.

N is the agent subject of the action V and the direct doer of the action. In the *bei* construction, most of the results of being disposed of have a pragmatic color of suffering and dissatisfaction. Therefore, compared with other constructions, *bei N jiu wang sili V* has significantly enhanced negative meaning. By pointing out the doer of the action, the speaker not only expresses obvious negative emotions but also implies the inequality in status between the agent and the patient.

(31) Liu Yuejin suddenly realized this and broke out in a cold sweat: "I said, just now under the bridge, that thief was being beaten to death by someone." (Liu Zhenyun, My Name is Liu Yuejin)

3.2. Subjectivity of *wang sili V*

In the process of semantic evolution, the subjectivity of *wang sili V* has been continuously enhanced.

3.2.1 The Subjectivization Process of *wang sili V*

E.C. Traugott holds that subjectivization is a semantic-pragmatic evolution, that is, "meaning becomes increasingly dependent on the speaker's subjective beliefs and attitudes towards the propositional content" (Shen Jiakuan, 2001) [29]. The semantic bleaching of *si* and the semantic evolution of V play an important role in the subjectivization process of *wang sili V*.

First of all, *si* has undergone an evolutionary process from a resultative meaning to a degree meaning. The speaker's emotional tendency penetrates into the description of "degree" and affects the interpretation process of the construction's semantics. For example, *wang sili lei* ("tire to death") and *wang sili wei* ("feed to the limit") in Example 32 express the speaker's subjective emphasis on the great hardships she has endured.

(32) She said, "Grape's already grown as tall as an eighteen-year-old. If I work her to the bone and feed her well for another two years, she'll be ready to marry Tie Nao." (From The Ninth Widow by Yan Geling)

Furthermore, the [+volitional] semantic feature of the verb further strengthens the subjectivity of the construction. The subject can flexibly initiate the action out of their own will, and control its

intensity and degree of involvement. Together with the word *si* (“death”), this gives rise to the subjective modality of the structure. For example:

(33) Bao Quan was busy, cursing inwardly: “Hmph, you’ll come back sooner or later. Just wait till I teach you a lesson — beat you to a pulp!” (People’s Daily, December 1981)

3.2.2 Qualitative Increment and Extremality

The construction *wang si li V* (“V to the point of death”) also exhibits the qualitative increment characteristic of the *wang A li V* pattern. At the same time, the unique meaning of *si* lends the structure an extreme quality. Qualitative increment is a type of subjective increment (Ma Zhe, 2009)[30], indicating that the speaker wishes the patient of the action to become closer to the property denoted by A. Regardless of whether the meaning of *si* has undergone grammaticalization, *wang si li V* consistently emphasizes that, in the course of the action, the result brought about by V increasingly approaches “death”. For example:

(34) Not only was he driven to spit blood from pulling carts and harvesting wheat, but he was also forced to confess to being a member of the “May 16th” group. When he refused, they locked him in a small dark room and beat him nearly to death... (From *Hot Dog* by Xu Kun) Meanwhile, unlike adjectives such as *xiao* (“small”) and *yuan* (“far”), the increment expressed by *si* is notably extreme. For example:

(35) Most of his works are set in the southern Shanxi region he knows well; narrowing it down further, they center on Wanrong County, Shanxi Province. (People’s Daily, August 2011)

(36) Looking further back, the starting point of the Sino-Japanese War can be traced to the fifth month of the *Jiawu* year. (From *Yishi Yutan* by Cai Youmei)

The incremental changes brought by “small” and “far” lack a unified standard, so they are often used in neutral contexts to simply indicate change toward a particular direction. By contrast, the incremental change implied by “death” is universal: this fundamental biological event represents an unquestionably negative endpoint among all possible changes. As a result, *wang si li V* carries a widely recognized negative and extreme incremental meaning. In daily communication, people use this structure frequently across contexts, transcending its literal association with life and death. Its purpose remains to express, through hyperbole, the speaker’s subjective judgment of the intensity of an action or emotion. This further confirms that subjectification is the central tendency in the semantic evolution of *wang si li V*.

4. Pragmatic Functions of the Construction "wang sili V"

The pragmatic functions of the construction *wang sili V* are the result of the combined effect of factors such as the semantic features of its components, the co-occurring elements before and after it, and the degree of subjectivization. The semantics of *si* (“death”) and the [+volitional] [+action] features of the verb V jointly determine that the construction presents systematic and tendentious pragmatic features in terms of emotional color and modal functions, making it a typical construction in modern Chinese that has both evaluative and interpersonal functions.

4.1. Emotional Color of *wang sili V*

First of all, *si* has a negative tendency of “end of life”, which makes the emotional color of *wang sili V* naturally tend to be negative. However, under the constraints of different agent-patient relationships and role identities, the construction can present three emotional colors: derogatory, commendatory, and neutral.

First, the derogatory sense is the core and most common emotional color of *wang sili V* (98 tokens, 72%). When the action agent is a negative role such as an attacker or oppressor, and the action object is a positive role such as an innocent person or a weak person, *wang sili V* often appears in the discourse of victims or onlookers to expose, criticize, and accuse, highlighting the cruelty and injustice of violence, strengthening the meaning of condemnation, and arousing social sympathy. It is worth noting that in the derogatory examples, the ratio of the resultative meaning to the degree

meaning of *si* is 5:4, indicating that whether *si* is grammaticalized or not does not affect the construction's function of expressing negative evaluation. For example:

(37) At this time, Da San was at the mine. Amid the chaos, he could only shout angrily: "Aren't people allowed to come up? Are we just going to burn the Chinese people to death alive?" (People's Daily, November 1949)

When the positions of the agent and patient are reversed—that is, when the action agent is a positive role such as the People's Liberation Army or a striver—*wang sili V* carries a commendatory color (23 tokens, 16.9%). At this time, this construction is used to express the determination to combat violence and evil, and to promote production and construction, eulogizing the revolutionary enthusiasm of being brave in battle, patriotic and striving (Example 38). It is often collocated with the structure "as long as *V* is not to death, then...". In a few cases, the action agent is an ordinary group such as students, used to express the determination to do one's best and never slack off (Example 39), or the intensity of the action (Example 40). At this time, *si* is mainly used in the degree meaning (18 tokens, 78.2%), with its semantics completely grammaticalized.

(38) Guo Feng rolled up his sleeves and said: "As long as we don't train ourselves to death, we will train like hell. We must blaze a trail for real-combat training!" (People's Daily, November 2015)

(39) "As long as we don't study ourselves to death, we will study like hell." (People's Daily, June 2015)

(40) Xiao Hu smiled and said: "Boss Xu, today our Director Yang is treating. Feel free to overcharge to your heart's content." (Writer's Digest, 1997)

The neutral color accounts for the lowest proportion (15 tokens, 11%), mainly appearing in news reports and academic analyses. There is no clear moral evaluation between the two parties of the action, and the construction only serves as an objective statement or scene reproduction. *si* is mostly used in the degree meaning (12 tokens, 80%), whose function is to objectively describe the intensity of the action without obvious praise or criticism, leaving room for readers to judge. For example:

(41) Reason, like a hanging sharp sword, drives the people who have become ghosts to the brink, forcing them to live quickly. (Can Xue, Can Xue's Selected Works)

4.2. Modal Functions of *wang sili V*

Modality refers to the speaker's "opinion" or "state of mind" about the propositional content of a sentence, including judgments on "truth or falsehood", "cognition", "evaluation", "possibility", etc. (Tang Tingchi, 2000) [31]. It is divided into epistemic modality, deontic modality, and dynamic modality (Palmer, 1986) [32], and is an important part of pragmatic functions. [Modality can be divided into semantic category or pragmatic category. When analyzing the modal functions of *wang sili V* in this paper, we focus on the pragmatic level, mainly examining the interpersonal functions and subjective attitudes such as instruction, emphasis, and willingness expression realized by the construction in communication.] Among them, epistemic modality expresses the speaker's speculation, inference, and assumption about the truth of the proposition; deontic modality involves the necessity and permission of performing certain actions; dynamic modality points to the subject's ability and willingness (Peng Lizhen, 2007) [33]. As a subjectivized construction, *wang sili V* does not involve inferences about the possibility or necessity of events, so it does not have typical epistemic modality. Its modal functions are mainly reflected in deontic modality and dynamic modality.

4.2.1 Deontic Modality

Sometimes *wang sili V* reflects the modal function of "deontic modality" (29 tokens, 21.3%).

Deontic modality describes a state in which an obligation is imposed on someone to produce a state of affairs, thereby making a proposition true. Its most common type is "instruction", which is often realized by "keyi" (can) and "bixu" (must) in Chinese, with a certain imperative meaning. This is consistent with the imperative usage of *wang sili V*. When *wang sili V* forms an independent clause in the format of "gei *N wang sili V*" (Example 42), there is often a relationship of command and obligatory service between the speaker and the hearer. The extreme semantics of *wang sili* highlights

the authority and coercive force of the instruction, requiring the hearer to perform the action to the extreme degree. Therefore, the wang sili V construction reflects distinct deontic modality.

(42) Li Xiuxia gave an order: "Beat him to death for me. At most, we'll compensate some money if he dies." (People's Daily, April 2000)

4.2.2 Dynamic Modality

In most cases, wang sili V reflects the modal function of "dynamic modality" (107 tokens, 78.6%).

Xie Jialing (2002) holds that dynamic modality is related to the possibility of the event being true, focusing on expressing the subject's ability or willingness, and reflecting the speaker's recognition and evaluation of motivation. This modality can be expressed by words such as "neng" (can) and "hui" (will) in Chinese [34]. In the wang sili V construction, most verbs have the semantic features of [+volitional] and [+action], so the action agent can usually independently control the intensity and process of the action. At this time, wang sili does not express an external instruction, but highlights the subject's own strong willingness to act and internal motivation, thus centrally reflecting the dynamic modality of the construction.

(43) They shouted hysterically: "We should let the top leader act freely and beat without mercy; for the second and third leaders, we should discredit them, and if we can't discredit them, we should drive them away." (People's Daily, December 1977)

5. Conclusion

Based on the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic analysis of the modern Chinese construction wang sili V, this paper responds to the three research questions proposed in the introduction.

First, at the syntactic level, wang sili V is a semi-substantive and semi-schematic construction consisting of the fixed components "wang + si + li + V", where V is mainly a monosyllabic volitional verb. Its subject is mainly animate, the preposed elements are mostly adverbials, the post-posed elements are mostly modal particles, and it mainly functions as a predicate in a sentence.

The overall meaning of wang sili V cannot be obtained by summing up the meanings of its components, thus it possesses the basic characteristics of an independent construction. As a semi-fixed, semi-schematic construction with incompletely predictable meaning, the open slot of this construction mainly allows monosyllabic volitional verbs (such as da "beat") to enter. Among them, the subject is mainly animate, mostly "human beings", and occasionally other animal subjects appear. The preposed elements are mainly adverbials composed of conjunctive adverbs, modal verbs, prepositional phrases, and negative adverbs, expressing state, manner, cause, or negation. The post-posed elements are relatively few, mainly modal particles such as le, a, and ma. Some co-occurring elements have formed fixed structures; for example, wang sili V can be attached to elements such as "yi... jiu..." ("as soon as... then...") and "zhi yao V bu si, jiu..." ("as long as not V to death, then...") to form fixed structures. The construction has strong predicativity, mainly functioning as a predicate, and can also form an independent clause, mainly expressing declarative and imperative moods.

Second, at the semantic level, based on spatial metaphor, the meaning of si ("death") has gradually grammaticalized from a resultative meaning to a degree meaning; the verb V has gradually undergone semantic generalization from typical action verbs, and formed four syntactic variants with differences in semantic orientation under the influence of prepositions such as ba, jiang, gei, and bei, showing distinct characteristics of subjectivity, extremity, and incrementality.

The semantic features of wang sili V are closely related to the semantics of its components. wang X li has gradually acquired the semantics of the container schema; si has gradually grammaticalized from a concrete meaning of "end of life" to a subjective extreme degree; V takes [+action] and [+volitional] as its core features and has continuously generalized later. Through constructional change, this construction has derived four types of variants, namely "ba/jiang/gei/bei N (jiu) wang sili V", which differ in agent-patient relationship, semantic orientation, and register color. At the same time, the subjectivization of wang sili V has been continuously enhanced, with both qualitative

increment and extremeness, showing an overall semantic evolution trajectory from expressing causative extinction to exaggerating degree.

Third, at the pragmatic level, wang sili V is mainly derogatory, and can also express commendatory and neutral colors. In terms of modality, it mainly expresses deontic modality and dynamic modality.

Affected by the semantic features of its components, the pragmatic functions of wang sili V are mainly reflected in two aspects: emotional color and modal functions. Among them, wang sili V is mainly used in a derogatory sense to expose and criticize dark atrocities; with the reversal of agent-patient roles, wang sili V can express a commendatory sense, and a neutral sense in a few contexts. On this basis, the construction further reflects modal functions centered on deontic modality and dynamic modality, which are manifested as instructions and orders with coercive force, highlighting the strong willingness to act and internal motivation of the action subject. Together, these two aspects make wang sili V a typical construction that can not only convey the speaker's subjective attitude but also realize interpersonal interaction.

On the whole, the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic features of wang sili V are interrelated and mutually driving, which is the result of the combined effect of constructionalization, semantic bleaching, and subjectivization. This study can provide certain reference for the in-depth exploration of similar extreme degree constructions.

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