On the Argument Structures of the Transitive Verb *fan* ‘annoy; be annoyed; bother to do’: A study based on two comparable corpora

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the transitive uses of the verb *fan* ‘annoy; be annoyed; bother to do’, which exhibit both similarities and disparities between Beijing Mandarin and Taiwan Mandarin, as far as the data from Gigaword corpus, containing data from Mainland China (XIN) and Taiwan (CNA), are concerned. In terms of similarities, the causative (and agentive) use(s) of the transitive *fan* is/are shared by both Beijing Mandarin and Taiwan Mandarin. The disparity mainly lies in the mental use of *fan* ‘be annoyed’, which is not only unattested in the corpus of Taiwan Mandarin but also reported as weird by our informants. This mental use, on the other hand, is well attested in the corpus. In order to describe as well as explain the difference in uses between Beijing Mandarin and Taiwan Mandarin, we adopt the Theta System Theory (Reinhart 2002; Marelj 2004) to probe into the argument structures of the transitive verb *fan* and further pinpoint the fundamental syntactic difference between Beijing Mandarin and Taiwan Mandarin, that is, the absence or presence of the */+c* feature in the argument structure. In particular, Taiwan Mandarin requires the obligatory presence of the */+c* feature in the argument structure of *fan*, while Beijing Mandarin does not.

**Keywords:** transitive *fan*, corpus, Beijing Mandarin, Taiwan Mandarin, Theta System, */+c*

1. **Introduction: The intransitive *fan***

The verb *fan* in Chinese can function as an intransitive verb, meaning ‘annoyed/bothered’ as well as ‘annoying/bothersome’. These two uses are attested in both Beijing Mandarin and Taiwan Mandarin, as evidenced by the examples of (1)-(4) from the XIN and CNA, sub-corpora of Gigaword corpus.¹

(1) Ta dang daxue jiaoshou de he serve_as university professor DE faqin feidan bu guowen, father not_only NEG meddle fan’er yi kanjian ta jiu instead whenever see he then *fan*. (XIN)
be_annoyed ‘His father, as a university professor, does not meddle with his business; instead, his father seems to be annoyed whenever he sees him.’

(2) Shoufeiyuan shengyingdi shuo, “nimen cashier stiffly said you zenme zheme *fan*?” (XIN)
how_can so annoying ‘The cashier stiffly said that “How are you so annoying?”’

(3) Zuo taitai de jide serve_as wife DE remember

¹ XIN and CNA refer to Beijing-based Xin Hua News Agency and Taiwan-based Central News Agency, respectively.
As a wife, one should remember your own role of being a wife and refrain from talking about money, money, money all the time. Otherwise, the husband would get annoyed.

(4) Ni zenme name fan, 2SG how can so annoying name luosuo. (CNA)
so voluble
‘How can you be so annoying and voluble?’

In addition to the intransitive uses, fan can be used transitively, which is noted as [A fan B] in this paper. Unlike intransitive fan, transitive fan exhibits syntactic differences between Beijing Mandarin and Taiwan Mandarin. The data of transitive fan will be presented in section 2.

2. Data Presentation: The transitive fan

The transitive fan is found to be syntactically different between Beijing Mandarin and Taiwan Mandarin, as far as the data from XIN and CNA are concerned. In Beijing Mandarin, [A fan B] can mean ‘A annoys B’ as well as ‘A is annoyed by B’, depending on the context. They are exemplified in (5) and (6), respectively.

(5) Qiye genju enterprises according to shichang zishengzimie, buyong market run its course need not zai fan zhengfu. (XIN)
again bother government
‘Enterprises run their courses based on the market. There is no need to bother the government anymore.’

(6) Wo yixiang tong xiandaipai I all along with modernist gegeburu, wo bijiao incompatible I a bit fan tamen. (XIN)
feel annoyed them
‘I have never been able to get along well with the modernist school. I feel annoyed about them.’

The contrast between (5) and (6) seems to indicate that [A fan B] is bi-directional in the sense that A can be the Causer while B the Causee (as in 5), or the other way around (as in 6). However, the latter use of fan, as that in (6), is unattested in Taiwan Mandarin. Rather, in Taiwan Mandarin, [A fan B] is predominantly causative, in which A in is almost unambiguously interpreted as the Causer, as exemplified in (7).

(7) Wojiang bu xunqiu lianren, I will NEG seek reelection nimen weihe haiyao fan you why still annoy wo? (CNA)
me
‘I won’t seek for reappointment. Why do you still annoy me?’

In addition to the above-exemplified [A fan B], there is another type of transitive fan attested in the CNA corpus, as presented in (8) and (9).

(8) Ta shuo, …, yici zhi fan he said once only bother yi jian shi, na jiushi one CL issue that be paidianying… (CNA)
make film
‘He said that he only bothers to do one thing at a time, that is, film-making.’
(9) Dui ta laishuo, lianqin
as_for she as_for play_the_piano
yi xiaoshi ta buhui
one hour she won’t
fan xingzhengshiwu. (CNA)
bother administrative_services
‘As for her, when she plays the piano,
she won’t bother to think about any
administrative services.’

Albeit being transitive in (7)-(9), fan in (7)
differs from that in (8) and (9) in that the
former is causative while the latter is not. In
addition, they seem to impose different
restrictions of animacy on the object B.
Specifically, [A fan B] in (7) requires B to
be animate (in particular, Human) whereas
[A fan B] in (8) and (9) features the
inanimacy of B. This difference in animacy
is by no means trivial. Being inanimate, the
objects in (8) and (9) cannot be the ones that
are annoyed. As the free translations suggest,
they are the things that the subjects bother to
do, in one way or another, depending
on the context.

To complete the full picture, it should be
mentioned that the transitive use of fan in (8)
and (9) are not attested in the XIN corpus. In
spite of the data gap, our Beijing Mandarin
informants have no difficulty in
understanding them. Therefore, they are still
well-received in Beijing Mandarin.

Given the data collected above, we
summarize the three attested transitive uses
of fan in (10). Prior to our analysis in section
4, we label the two arguments of each
transitive use intuitively. They will be
refined in due course.

(10) [A fan B]:
a. causative: A Æ Causer
   B Æ Causee
b. mental: A Æ Experiencer
   B Æ Causer
c. agentive: A Æ Agent,
   B Æ Theme

These three types of transitive fan will be
analyzed in detail in section 3.

3. Data Analysis: Tripartite use
   of transitive fan

3.1 Causative and mental fan: swap of
   arguments?

At first glance, the causative and the mental
uses of fan are directionally opposite in the
sense that they just swap their arguments.
The evidence may come from the cases
where the same transitive verb fan can give
rise to two different interpretations at the
same time. This usually occurs in the neutral
context, as exemplified in (11).

(11) Zhangsan fan Lisi.
    Zhangsan annoy/be_angered Lisi
    ‘Zhangsan annoys Lisi.’ or
    ‘Zhangsan feels annoyed about Lisi.’

However, this analysis is more apparent than
real. The first difference lies in the animacy
condition of the Causer in these two cases.
Causer in (10a) is basically [+HUMAN].
Even though the Causer per se does not take
the animate form, it is most probably an
organization and thus metonymically refers
to people affiliated to that organization. This
is exemplified in (12), in which huaren
shetuan ‘Chinese associations’ and huaren
meiti ‘Chinese media’ refer to people
associated with these organizations through
the mechanism of metonymy.

(12) Huaren shetuan yu
    Chinese association and
    huawen meiti yi zhaodao
    Chinese media once find
    jihui jiu yi zhe ge
    chance then use this CL
    wenti qu fan Guijiani. (CNA)
    question go annoy Guijiani
    ‘Once Chinese associations and
    Chinese media find a chance, they use
    this question to annoy Guijiani…’
Crucially, inanimate entities which cannot give rise to any metonymic interpretations fail to serve as subjects of the causative *fan*. Even though they occur, they can only be encoded as instruments, as exemplified by *zhege wenti* ‘this question’ in (12), as an adjunct. Similarly, the inanimate cause of the causative *fan*, i.e., *zhe zhong wuliao de wenti* ‘this kind of stupid questions’ in (13), occurs in the serial verb construction. On a par with that in (12), the inanimate noun phrase in (13) is also interpreted as an instrument.

(13) Xiwang meiti jizhe bie
    hope media journalist NEG
   na zhe zhong wuliao de wenti
    use this CL stupid question
   lai fan ta. (CNA)
   come annoy him
   ‘(We) hope that journalists in the media not bother him with this kind of stupid question.’

It should be further noted that the above mentioned inanimate entities can never function as the subject of the causative *fan* ‘annoy’. This is illustrated by the unacceptability of (14) below:

(14) *Zhe ge wuliao wenti
    the CL stupid question
   fan ta.
   annoy him
   Intended: ‘This stupid question
   annoys him.’

On the other hand, in the case of the mental verb *fan* ‘get annoyed’, the Causer, in the form of a grammatical object, has no restrictions on its animacy. As exemplified in (15), the inanimate entity *dianhua* ‘telephone’, as the object, is the Causer for one’s getting annoyed.

(15) Mei you dianhua pan
    NEG have telephone long_for
dianhua, you le dianhua
   telephone have PERF telephone
   *fan* dianhua.
   be_annooyed telephone
   ‘When there were no telephones, people long for them; when there are telephones, people get annoyed because of them.’

The data exemplified above reveal that the semantic role Causer in the causative use of *fan* and that in the mental use of *fan* are crucially different, as the former must have the [+HUMAN] feature while the latter is not subject to any animacy restrictions.

Secondly, Causee and Experiencer, as the terms already suggest, are not the same. The Causee is the target of the “annoying” action while the Experiencer is the one who experiences the mental process of “being annoyed”. Even though both of them are animate, they cannot be reduced to one argument, mainly because the Causee does not necessarily experience the mental process. As exemplified in (16), the noun phrase *ta fumu* ‘his parents’ is the Causee of the causative verb *fan*, as the target of “annooy”. Crucially, this Causee might not undergo the mental process of “being annoyed”, as evidenced by the continuous sentence in (16), in which the statement of “his parents’ being annoyed” is negated. If Causee and Experiencer are identical, we would expect the sentence of (16) to be semantically anomalous. In actual fact, (16) is perfectly acceptable, indicating that Causee and Experiencer should be teased apart.

(16) Zhe ge xiaohai zai
    this CL child PROG
   fan ta fumu, dan ta fumu
   annoy he parents but he parents
   sihu bingbu
   apparently by_no_means
   *fan* ta.
   be_annooyed him
‘This child is annoying his parents. However, apparently, his parents are by no means annoyed by him.’

Having established the fact that the causative and the mental uses of *fan* are contrastive much beyond their opposite directionality, we proceed to the contrast between the mental and the agentive use of *fan*.

### 3.2 Mental and Agentive *fan*

The contrast between mental and agentive verbs can be teased apart through two tests. The first test is whether the verb can take degree adverbs. The second one is whether the verb can be embedded into volitional verbs like *qu* ‘go; start’ or *hui* ‘will’.

Prior to testing our target verb *fan*, let us first illustrate how these two tests work. We take the typical mental verb *xihuan* ‘like’ (as in (17a)) and the typical agentive verb *yanjiu* ‘study’ (as in 17b) as examples. As illustrated in (18) and (19), it is the mental verb, instead of the agentive one, that can be modified by a degree adverb. On the other hand, it is the agentive verb, rather than the mental one, that can be embedded into a volitional verb.

(17) a. Wo xihuan yuyanxue.
    (xihuan: mental verb)
    I like linguistics
    ‘I like linguistics.’

b. Wo yyanjiu yuyanxue.
    (yanjiu: agentive verb)
    I study linguistics.
    ‘I study linguistics.’

(18) a. Wo hen xihuan yuyanxue.
    I very like linguistics
    ‘I like linguistics very much.’

b. *Wo qu/hui xihuan
   I go/will like
   yuyanxue.
   *I will go and like linguistics.’

(19) a. *Wo hen yanjiu yuyanxue.
    I very study linguistics.
    *‘I study linguistics very much.’

b. Wo qu/hui yanjiu yuyanxue.
    I very study linguistics.
    ‘I will go and study linguistics.’

We apply the same tests to the verb *fan* in the XIN corpus and that in the CNA corpus. As shown in (20), the agentive verb *fan* is compatible with the degree adverb *bijiao* ‘a bit’; while it cannot collocate with the volitional verb *qu* ‘go’. That means, the verb *fan* in (20), a representative of Beijing Mandarin, behaves like a mental verb, on a par with *xihuan* ‘like’ in (17a).

(20) a. Wo yixiang tong xiandaipai
     I all_along with modernist
gengeburu, wo bijiao
incompatible I a_bit
*fan* tamen. (XIN)
feel_annoyed tamen.
‘I have always been against the grain
with the modernist school. I feel
annoyed because of them.’

b. #Wo yixiang tong xiandaipai
     I all_along with modernist
gengeburu, wo
incompatible I
qu *fan* tamen. (XIN)
go feel_annoyed tamen
#‘I have always been against the grain
with the modernist school. I feel
annoyed about them.’

‘I have always been against the
grain with the modernist school. I
go and annoy them.’

Conversely, the agentive verb *fan* in Taiwan Mandarin, as illustrated in (21) and (22), rejects degree modification. However, it goes well with the volitional verbs *qu* ‘go’

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2 (20b) is possible only when it is interpreted as a causative verb.
and/or hui ‘will’. Therefore, the transitive verb fan in Taiwan Mandarin should be treated as a real agentive verb.

(21) a. #Ta shuo, ..., yici zhi hen he said once only very fan yi jian shi, na bother one CL thing that jiushí paidianying… be make_film #“He said that he only bothers to do one thing at a time very much, that is, film-making.’

b. Ta shuo, ..., yici zhi qu he said once only go fan yi jian shi, na bother one CL issue that jiushí paidianying… be make_film “He said that he goes and bothers to do one thing at a time very much, that is, film-making.”

(22) a. #Dui ta laishuo, lianqin as_for she as_for play_the_piano yí xiaoshi ta buhui one hour she won’t hen fan xingzhengshiwu. verybother administrative_services #‘As for her, when she plays the piano, she won’t bother to do any administrative services very much.’

b. Dui ta laishuo, lianqin as_for she as_for play_the_piano yí xiaoshi ta one hour she buqu/ buhui fan not_go/won’t bother xingzhengshiwu. administrative_services ‘As for her, when she plays the piano, she doesn’t go or won’t bother to do any administrative services.’

In what follows, we adopt the Theta System (Reinhart, 2002; Marelj 2004) to analyze the argument structures of the three types of transitive fan.

4. Our Proposal under the Theta System

According to the Theta System Theory (Reinhart 2002), lexical entries are coded concepts with formal features defining the theta relations of verb entries. Basically, there are two features, namely, /c (cause) and /m (sentience), to describe thematic arguments, and each of the two features can have either positive or negative value. Those feature clusters are somehow equivalent to the established semantic roles, as show in (23).

(23) a. [+c+m]: agent;
   b. [+c−m]: instrument;
   c. [−c+m]: experiencer;
   d. [−c−m]: theme/patient
   e. [+c]: cause;
   f. [+m]: sentient;
   g. [−m]: subject matter/source;
   h. [−c]: goal/benefactor

In this study, we will use the feature clusters to describe the argument structures of different types of transitive fan, in order to work out the denominator as well as the minimal differing point of different uses of transitive fan.

Firstly, we analyze the causative use of fan. Recall that the subject of the causative fan ‘annoy’ obligatorily contains the semantic feature of [+HUMAN]. Moreover, an inanimate instrument can be licensed in this case, as exemplified in (11) and (12). Regarding this, the subject of the causative fan should be an Agent [+c+m], instead of a pure cause [+c], on the grounds that an Agent, instead of a Cause, can license an Instrument (Reinhart 2002). According to the analysis in Section 3, the object of the causative fan does not necessarily experience the mental process of “getting annoyed”. Therefore, the object should be a
Recipient/Goal [-c] instead of an Experiencer [-c+m]. Although the object is, in most cases, animate, it is still [-c] in the sense that the feature /m is irrelevant. Given the analysis, the Theta grid of the causative fan is shown in (24) below:

(24) The Theta grid of the causative fan:
([+c+m], [-c], ([+c-m]))
(the Instrument is optional)

We now move to the mental use of fan, which is proven to be exclusive to Beijing Mandarin. Like the mental verbs love and hate, the mental verb fan has a sentient [+m] as its subject. It should be noted that a sentient [+m] is different from an Experiencer [-c+m] in that the former obligatorily merges externally while the latter, as a mixed feature cluster, can merge either internally or externally (Reinhart 2000; Marelj 2004). Since we have already demonstrated that the object of the verb fan cannot be an Experiencer (rather, it is a Recipient or Goal), the subject of the mental fan should be a Sentient. In terms of its object, it is a [-m], a Subject Matter or Source, which can actually give rise to causal paraphrase (Marelj 2004: 11), as illustrated in (25).

(25) a. Max worries about his health [-m].
    (subject matter) (Marelj 2004: 9, 11)
    b. His health caused Max to worry.

The same alternation is applicable to the mental verb fan as well, as (26a) and (26b) are truth-conditionally equivalent to each other.

(26) a. Wo bijiao fan tamen.
    I a bit feel_annoyed them
    ‘I feel fairly annoyed about them.’
    b. Tamen rang wo bijiao fan.
    (causal paraphrase)
    they cause me a bit be_annoyed
    ‘They made me feel fairly annoyed.’

In this connection, one thing is worth noting. That is, the [-m] role, as an under-specified role, cannot bear the ACC feature. In other words, the mental fan is not an accusative case assigner. This is actually borne out, as mental verb fan can take a full-fledged sentence, without incurring any case problems. One of the examples is cited in (27), in which a whole sentence serves as the object of fan.

(27) Luting fan tamen wei
    Luting feel_annoyed them for
    zhe dian shiqing zhenglun
    this little thing dispute
    lai zhenglun qu. (XIN)
    come dispute go
    ‘Luting got fed of their disputing over this little thing repeatedly.’

Given our analysis, the argument structure of the mental fan is shown in (28).

(28) The Theta grid of the mental fan:
([+m], [-m])

Before we proceed, let us linger a bit on the mental fan. Our informants, especially Taiwan Mandarin speakers, tend to paraphrase a sentence containing the mental fan into a bi-clausal sentence, as shown in (29a, b).

(29) a. Wo hen fan ta.
    I very feel_annoyed him
    ‘I feel annoyed about him.’
    b. Wo juede ta hen fan.
    I think he very annoying
    ‘I think that he is quite annoying.’

Close examination shows that (29a) and (29b) are not semantically equivalent. The most obvious difference can be detected from the degree modification therein. The degree adverb hen ‘very’ in (29a) describes the degree of the Sentient’s (i.e., wo ‘I’) “feeling annoyed”, while the same adverb in
(29b) indicates the degree of “his being annoying”.

Lastly, we deal with the agentive verb fan, which is attested in Taiwan Mandarin and acceptable to Beijing Mandarin speakers as well, as exemplified in (8) and (9). We analyze this fan as a typical agentive verb with an Agent [+c+m] and a Theme [-c-m], as shown in (30).

(30) The Theta grid of the mental fan:
    \((+[c+m], [-c-m])\)

What is particular to the verb fan here is that it involves a coercion process, which introduces an action to the sentences. For example, fan in (8) can be interpreted as “bother to do”, with the action of “doing” coerced; while fan in (9) can be understood as “bother to think about”, even though the verbs of “doing” and “thinking” are not explicitly mentioned therein. Given this, the agentive fan is to a certain extent similar to the verb start in English. As illustrated in (31), the verb start is able to coerce different types of actions, such as reading and writing, into the sentence.

(31) He started a book. (coercion)
    a. He started reading a book.
    b. He started writing a book.

Having established the argument structures of the three types of transitive fan, we put them together in (32) so as to make a better comparison.

(32) [A fan B]:
    a. causative: \((+[c+m], [-c], [+c-m])\)
    b. mental: \((+[m], [-m]) \rightarrow \) (missing in Taiwan Mandarin)
    c. agentive: \((+[c+m], [-c-m])\)

The argument structures in (32) reveal that Beijing Mandarin and Taiwan Mandarin differ in the presence or absence of the \(+c\) feature. Specifically, Taiwan Mandarin treats \(+c\) as an indispensable feature of the transitive verb fan. Once this feature is missing, as in the case of (32b), the transitive fan will be filtered out. However, this condition does not apply to Beijing Mandarin. To sum up, the difference of transitive fan between Beijing Mandarin and Taiwan Mandarin is reduced to the \(+c\) feature.

5. The Residue

Due to the required presence of the \(+c\) feature in Taiwan Mandarin, the mental use of transitive fan is not attested, given that the subject of the mental fan is \([+m]\). There are, however, other attested transitive verbs to express the mental use of fan. As far as the corpus data are concerned, we find two general ways to express the equivalent meanings of the mental fan. Firstly, the verb takes the disyllabic form. The disyllabic verb may contain two synonymous components, such as yanfan ‘get fed up with’ in (33); alternatively, the disyllabic verb can be a resultative compound, such as fantou ‘be deeply annoyed’ in (34).

(33) Renmin yijing yanfan people already get_fed_up_with ta. (CNA)
    him
    ‘People have already been fed of him.’

(34) Yi ming bashiba sui de one CL eighty_eight year DE ye, fan-tou prostate pain
    le grandpa annoyed_thoroughly PERF shehuxian tengtong. (CNA)
    ‘An eighty-eight-year-old grandpa was browned off by his prostate pain.’

Secondly, there are three occurrences of fan-buguo ‘get annoyed so much that one cannot tolerate’ in the CNA corpus. Crucially, fan-buguo is transitive, as evidenced by its occurrence in the bei-passive as in (35) and
the presence of an object (i.e., ta ‘he’) between fan and buguo as in (36).

(35) You bushao muqin fanying have many mother report shi yinwei zhangfu bu be because husband NEG bangmang, jiashang bei help plus BEI xiaohai fan-buguo, child get_annoyed NEG_beyond renbuzhu jiu dongshouda cannot_help then lift_one’s_hand_on xiaohai. (CNA) child ‘Many mothers reported that they cannot help spanking children because their husbands do not help.’

(36) Maidanglao sihu fan MacDonald seem get_annoyed ta buguo… (CNA) he NEG_beyond ‘It seems that MacDonald cannot stand his consistent pestering …’

As a matter of fact, the disyllabic uses of yanfan ‘get fed up with’ and fantou ‘be deeply annoyed’ are also attested in the XIN corpus. Therefore, they are not exclusive to Taiwan Mandarin. In other words, monosyllabic and disyllabic mental verbs are not in complementary distribution between Beijing Mandarin and Taiwan Mandarin.

What is consistently true is that the mental use of the monosyllabic transitive verb fan ‘feel annoyed about’ is commonly used in Beijing Mandarin whereas it is completely missing in Taiwan Mandarin, due to the required presence of /+c feature in the Theta grid of the transitive fan in Taiwan Mandarin.

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