



# Recent Approaches to (non)-Agentivity in *Natural Language*

May 3-4 2019

Department of Chinese Studies, NUS

新加坡国立大学大中文系

## **Workshop on Recent Approaches to (Non-) Agentivity in Natural Language**

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**Department of Chinese Studies, National University of Singapore**

### **Background**

The notion of agentivity in linguistic research straddles the intersection between syntax, semantics, and conceptual structure. Agentivity is at heart a conceptual notion, intertwined as it is with properties of volitionality, force exertion, and internal control. Traditionally, semantic considerations appealing to differing degrees and facets of agentivity and related notions such as causation, force initiation, instrument status, etc. often play a part in morphosyntactic phenomena, including argument realization, grammatical alternations, case marking (see e.g. Fillmore 1968, Croft 1991, Dowty 1991, Van Valin and Wilkins 1996), among other phenomena. Recent work has studied agentivity-related effects in further depth and from different perspectives. The role of agentivity and intentionality has been studied in regard to sentence interpretation, pertaining in particular to the non-attainment of results (Copley and Harley 2013, Demirdache and Martin 2015, Martin 2015). Agentivity-related notions have also been considered in studies of finer-grained properties of types of events and participants in the encoding of events of caused change of state (Levin 2018). More fundamentally, Evers et al. (2017) examined cultural factors in attributing responsibility to a participant in different kinds of caused events. Given the various new takes on agentivity and its related notions of causation and intentionality in recent work, it seems timely to bring scholars working on these topics to re-examine the relationships between these sub-areas, and their potential implications for one another.

As the workshop will be organized by a Chinese department, a discussion of the grammatical effects of agentivity in Mandarin Chinese will constitute an important part of the workshop. The effects of agentivity are potentially pervasive in Mandarin. For instance, Zhang (2004) has argued that a transitive sentence in Mandarin is prototypically interpreted as encoding an agent-patient relationship. Support for this could come from ostensibly non-agentive sentences: “experiencer object” sentences in Mandarin involving verbs such as *ji1nu4* ‘to anger’, which need not involve an agent, have been argued to behave just like prototypical agent-patient transitive sentences (Verhoeven 2010). More recently, agentivity has been proposed to be one factor underlying asymmetries in the encoding of different types of events of caused change in Mandarin (Tham 2018). Through exploring agentivity-related notions from a cross-linguistic perspective, we hope to reach a broader and deeper understanding of relevant phenomena, and further allow research on the Chinese languages to both draw upon, and contribute to, phenomena and views provided by other languages.

**Invited speakers** (in alphabetical order):

Juergen Bohnemeyer (*University at Buffalo*)

Beth Levin (*Stanford University*)

Fabienne Martin (*Humboldt-Universitaet zu Berlin*)

Elisabeth Verhoeven (*Humboldt-Universitaet zu Berlin*)

Phillip Wolff (*Emory University*)

**Call for papers:**

We hope to include a small number of talks (30 minutes plus 10 for questions) and posters from other presenters. If interested, please submit an abstract that is no longer than 2 A-4 pages (at least 12 point size font, 1 inch margins; including examples and references). Please indicate whether you would like your submission to be considered for a talk, a poster, or both.

Please submit no more than one single-author and one co-authored abstract (whether for a talk or a poster). The workshop will be conducted in English, therefore please submit abstracts in English. Abstracts on (non-)agentivity phenomena in any language and from any theoretical perspective are welcome, but those pertaining to Chinese data are particularly encouraged.

Please submit your abstract(s) by email to [fasaslhl@nus.edu.sg](mailto:fasaslhl@nus.edu.sg).

**Submission deadline:** 15<sup>th</sup> March 2019; Notification of acceptance: mid to late March

**Workshop Organizer:** Tham, Shiao Wei.

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