汉语 “差点儿（没）” 结构

谢静 余小强
（湖南大学，湖南长沙市，410082）

摘要：本文主要从以下几个方面研究汉语 “差点儿（没）” 结构的语义：“没” 的功能；消除 “差点儿（没）” 结构歧义。在 “差点儿（没） ” 结构中， “没” 并不累赘。在不同的语境下，汉语 “差点儿（没）” 结构有不同的解释。消除歧义的方式有多种：补充语境；不同的方式分解结构；重音； “就” 的插入。

关键词：差点儿，没，歧义消除

1. Introduction
1.1 Research Object

In Chinese, the meaning of “NP +chadianer +VP” differs from that of “NP +chadianer mei +VP”. Moreover, the construction of “NP +chadianer mei +VP” is ambiguous, independent of context. The construction of “NP +chadianer mei +VP” is widely discussed among linguists and grammarians. However, it is hard to reach a consensus due to different theories and perspectives researchers adopt.

(1) a.ta chadianer shuaidao
他差点儿摔倒
He almost fall
He almost falled and did not fall down
b.ta chadianer mei shuaidao
他差点儿没摔倒
He almost Neg fall.
Interpretation 1: He did not fall. (negative reading)
Interpretation 2: He falled. (affirmative reading)

(2) a. Ta chadianer jige
他差点儿及格
He almost pass
He almost passed a test but did not.
b.Ta chadianer mei jige
他差点儿没及格
He almost Neg pass
Interpretation 1: He did not pass a test. (negative reading)
Interpretation 2: He passed a text. (affirmative reading)

1.2 Research Questions

Based on the above research objects, three issues are summed up as follows and will be addressed in the paper.
1.Is mei in the construction of “NP +chadianer mei +VP” redundant? If not, what is the function of mei?
2. What are cues for the disambiguation of “NP +chadianer mei +VP”?
1.3 The Organization of the Paper

This paper is composed of four parts. Part 1 gives a general introduction to the background, the research object and the organization of the paper; part 2 covers a literature review concerning three sub-sections: syntactic restrictions of chadianer, the function of mei, the semantic meaning of “NP +chadianer mei +VP”; part 3 explore three research questions and attempts to provide a solution to the research problem: the function of unredundant of mei and the disambiguation devices of “NP +chadianer mei +VP”; the last part is a conclusion.

2. Literature Review

The construction of “NP +chadianer mei +VP” has been a hit topic among linguists and scholars. The research on the construction of “NP +chadianer mei +VP” is diverse and fruitful. In previous studies, some similar negative forms have been identified, such as “hao(bu)+adj”, xianxie (mei) +VP”, “jihu(meii)+VP”, “nanmian (bu)”, “xiaoxin(bie)+VP”, etc. Among these construction, scholars have given extensive discussion on “chadianer mei+VP”. As for “chadianer mei+VP”, scholars including Zhu Dexi (1980), Shen Jiaxuan (1999) and Zhou Yimin (2003) have probed into the construction from various perspectives.

2.1 Syntactic Restrictions of Chadianer

Shen Jiaxuan (1987) identifies three syntactic functions of Chadianer, namely, a verb phrase, an adjective and an adverb. When Chadianer functions as a verb phrase, chadianer means “falling short of certain quantity”; as an adjective, it means “inferior or not good enough in quality”; and as an adverb, it means “almost”. In the construction of “NP +chadianer mei +VP”, chadianer functions as an adverb.

In terms of the grammatical function, it is widely accepted that chadianer involves a sort of negation. The construction of “NP +chadianer+VP” is interpreted as “almost VP, and not VP”, whereas the construction of “NP +chadianer mei +VP” has more than one interpretation. Zhu Dexi(1980), Lv Shuxiang (1980), Shen Jiaxuan(1999) and Zhou Yimin (2003) treat the grammatical function of Chadianer as negation. Some scholars affirms that mei is a redundant negator whereas others claims it as an intensifier.

2.2 The Function of mei

Zhu Dexi (1980) holds that a negative marker is added in front of verb phrase by the speaker in order to emphasize that the event doesn’t happen, and that mei here is therefore redundant. Scholars such as Shi Yuzhi (1993), Dai Yaojing (2004), Chen Wuxiang (2006) and Hou Guojin (2008) also agree with the viewpoint. Sometimes, the negator mei followed by carries a negative meaning, and sometimes it fails to function as a negator and becomes redundant. Hou Guojin classifies redundant negation into two groups and points out that the construction of “NP +chadianer mei +VP” is absolute redundant negation.

It is problematic to regard mei here as redundant because mei has other functions except logical negation.

However, some scholars don't agree that mei is redundant in the construction. Chen Yanlin (2006) argues that mei is not redundant even if two negative markers in the construction of “NP +chadianer mei +VP” express a negative meaning. Mei plays an important part in adjusting tone instead of negating the verbal phrase. Zhao Wanxun(2009) believes both “NP +chadianer+VP” and its counterpart “NP +chadianer mei+VP” have negative meaning. Their difference is crucial to the study of chadianer. The word mei in the negative form is not redundant at all. Zhu Di(2009) explores the double functions of mei in the construction of “NP +chadianer mei +VP” by comparing with “NP +chadianer +VP”. He holds that mei in that construction can serve both as a
negator and an intensifier.

2.3 Semantic Meaning of “NP + chadianer mei + VP”

Zhu Dexi (1980) analyzes the construction of “NP + chadianer (mei)+VP ” from the perspective of expectation. Mr. Zhu assumes that “NP + chadianer + VP” expresses a negative meaning while the meaning of the construction “NP + chadianer mei + VP” is ambiguous. The construction of “NP + chadianer mei + VP” is interpreted as affirmative if the things are what the speaker expects to happen, on the contrary, it expresses a negative meaning if the things are what the speaker does not expect to happen. Zhou yimin (2003) disagrees with the Zhu’s opinion. Zhou argues that the “expectation” theory cannot explain all the data. The sentence meanings may be completely opposite if the stress types of Chadianer mei VP are taken into consideration.

Shi Yuzhi(1993) points out that “chadianer mei” is often accompanied by verb-complement structures or resultative verbs, including positive verbs or negative verbs. Therefore, he divides the verbs phrases into positive verb phrases and negative verb phrases instead of positive expectation and negative expectation.

Regardless of “positive expectation vs negative expectation” “positive VP vs negative VP” and “effect inclination vs event inclination”, Zhou Yimin proposes that each construction of “chadianer mei VP” has two different interpretation. It is determined by the truth value of the context, with the help of assignment. He argues that all “chadianer mei VP” constructions are ambiguous. If the stress is placed on the verb, the construction has a negative interpretation; if the stress is placed between mei and the complement of the verb, the construction has an affirmative interpretation.

It is observed from corpus that such kind of examples as “chadianer mei tiao qilai” “chadianer mei ti jinqiu” “chadianer mei gen ta jiehun” cannot simply categorized into expectation or negative expectation independent of contexts. For example:

(3) jian shuo chadianer mei gen yuehan jiehun

简说: “差点儿没跟约翰结婚”

Jane say chadianer mei gen John marry

Interpretation 1: Jane wanted to get married with John, and in fact Jane got married with John.
Interpretation 2: Jane wanted to get married with John, and in fact Jane did not get married with John.
Interpretation 3: Jane did not want to get married with John, but in fact Jane got married with John.
Interpretation 4: Jane did not want to get married with John, but in fact Jane did not get married with John.

Dong weiguang (2001) realizes the fallacy of the accepted classification criterion of expectation and tries to provide a classification of VP. He argues that chadianer has two different tendencies, one to effect and the other to event. It is our psychological inclination to seek benefit and avoid misfortune that make things complicated.

3. The Function of mei

Whether the negative marker mei in the construction of “NP + chadianer mei+VP ” is redundant or not arouses great controversy among scholars. Zhu Dexi (1980), Shi Yuzhi (1993) and Hou Guojin (2008) agree that mei is redundant for it can be removed without changing the propositional meaning. However, some scholars including Zhao Wanxun (2009) and Haiyong Liu (2011) propose different arguments. Though no consensus has been reached on the issue, a possible hypothesis is that functions more than a logical negator. For example:
(4) ta chadianer ganshang huoche
他差点儿赶上火车
He almost catch train
He almost caught on the train, but he did not manage it.
(5) ta chadianer mei ganshang huoche
他差点儿没赶上火车
He almost Neg catch train
Interpretation 1: he almost caught on the train, but he did not manage it.
Interpretation 2: he almost caught on the train, and he managed it.

As “NP +chadianer+VP ” always gives a negative reading, “NP +chadianer mei+VP ” gives two interpretations: negative reading and affirmative reading. The striking difference resides in the
mei. Mei is not redundant in the construction of “NP +chadianer mei+VP ”, it has multifunction:intensifier and negative operator.

4. Disambiguation Devices for The Construction “NP +chadianer mei+VP ”

The construction of “NP +chadianer mei +VP” has different interpretations. The
disambiguation devices of the construction “NP +chadianer mei +VP” are elaborated in the part,
including context, redistribution of the construction, the stress, the insertion of jiu.
4.1 Context
The construction of “NP +chadianer mei +VP” is ambiguous, independent of context. The
typical example “zhege qiu chadianer mei jin”can be interpreted either a positive reading or a
negative reading. Some people may turn to stress for the segmentation of the construction. The
problem is that the audience can hardly listen to the radio very clearly when sorounded by the
noise. The semantic cues of desirability or expectation of VP is also a challenge for the
construction as well because jiugiu (the goal was made) goes beyond the scope. It is difficult to
tell whether jiugiu is desirable or not. Perhaps, it is desirable to the speaker or one party, but it is
undesirable to their rivals. Independent of contexts, the word is neutral lying between the state of
undesirability and desirability.
(6) Zhe ge qiu chadianer mei jin
这个球差点儿没进
That CL ball almost Neg in
Interpretation 1: It is in! Goal!
Interpretation 2: he/she has missed it.
4.2 Redistribution of the Construction “NP +chadianer mei+VP ”
It is widely accepted that chadianer in the construction “NP +chadianer+VP ” involves a sort
of negation. The whole construction is interpreted as “almost VP, and not VP”. It can be
elaborated by the typical example “ta chadianer shuaidao le”. The construction “NP +chadianer
mei+VP ” has two interpretations:affirmative reading and negative reading. When it gives an
affirmative reading, mei co-occurs with VP as a constituent and chadianer modifies the whole
constituent. Chadianer involvs a sort of negation and mei is a negator. Therefore, the computation
of two negators is affirmative reading. For instance, “ta chadianer+mei chuaidao” means that “ta
almost did not fall but felled”. When it gives an negative reading, chadianer co-occurs with mei as a
constituent and the whole constituent modifies VP. For instance, “ta chadianer mei +chuaidao”
means that “ta almost falled but not”. The following pictures are used to elaborate the structure of
the construction “chadianer (mei) +VP”.

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4.3 The Stress

When “NP + chadianer mei+VP” gives an affirmative reading, stress is assigned on mei and the complement of V. When “NP + chadianer mei+VP” gives a negative reading, stress is assigned on the V. For example:

(7) Na ben shu chadianer mei mai zhe wo de shihou jiu shengxia yi ben le

那本书我差点儿没买着，我去的时候就剩下一本了。(affirmative reading)

That CL book almost Neg buy ZHE I go DF moment just left-over one CL ASP

Fortunately, I almost bought the last book when I got there.

Na ben shu chadianer mei mai zhe dao wo qianmian yi ge ren zhenghao mei le

那本书我差点儿没买着，到我前面一个人正好没了。（negative reading）

That CL book almost Neg buy ZHE arrive me front one CL person just right Neg ASP

I almost bought that book, but I did not manage it, as one guy before me had already bought the last one.

(8) zhe beizi chadianer mei dasui rang wo jiezhu le

这杯子差点儿没打碎，让我接住了。（affirmative reading）

This cup almost Neg break, let me get ASP

This cup almost got broken, fortunately, I took hold of it.

zhe beizi chadianer mei dasui wo jiezhu le hou you diao zai di-shang le

这杯子差点儿没打碎，我接住了后又掉在地上了。（negative reading）

This cup almost Neg break, I get ASP after again fall at ground ASP

This cup almost got broken. Unfortunately, after I took hold of it, it slipped down the ground.

(9) zhuotian wanshang wo chadianer mei zhao ni qu yuanlai shi dasuan kan qiusai qu

昨天晚上我差点儿没找你去，原来是打算看球赛去。（affirmative reading）

Last night I almost Neg find you go yuanlai AUX plan watch match go

Last night I almost visited you, at first I planned to watch match.

zhuotian wanshang wo chadianer mei zhao ni qu gang xiang zou jia-li lai ren le

昨天晚上我差点儿没找你去，刚想走家里来人了。（negative reading）

Last night I almost Neg find you go nearly think home arrive person ASP

Last night I almost wanted to visit you. But a visitor came the moment I went out.

4.4 Insertion of jiu

The typical example arousing extensive attention is “zhege qiu chadianer mei jin”, which
can be interpreted either a positive reading or a negative reading. Some people may turn to stress for the segmentation of the construction. The semantic cues of desirability or expectation of VP proves to be challenging for the construction as well because jingri (the goal was made) goes beyond the scope. It is difficult to tell whether jingri is desirable or not. Perhaps, it is desirable to the speaker or one party, but it is undesirable to their rivals. Independent of contexts, the word is neutral lying between the state of undesirability and desirability. It is the same with the following examples:

(10) Shang-ge-yue wo chadianer mei qu shanghai
    上个月我差点儿没去上海
    Last month I chadianer Neg go shanghai
    Interpretation 1: last month I almost went to shanghai, but I did not manage it.
    Interpretation 2: last month I almost went to shanghai, and I managed it.

The constructions above are not ambiguous any more after the insertion of jiu. The insertion of jiu constrains the construction of “NP +chadianer mei+VP” to produce a affirmative reading, because mei here serves as a negative operator.

(11) Shang-ge-yue wo jiu chadianer mei qu shanghai
    上个月我差点儿就没去上海
    Last month I chadianer Neg go shanghai
    Interpretation: last month I almost went to shanghai, and I managed it. (affirmative reading)

5. Conclusion

The paper is an attempt to probe into the asymmetry between meaning and form in the construction of “NP +chadianer mei +VP”. Great efforts have been made to explore the function of mei in the construction and identify the syntactic constraints. This part will offer a brief summary of research questions and point out the implications and limitations.

As for the first question, is mei in the construction redundant? Based on the data, it is obvious that it is not redundant in the construction “NP +chadianer mei +VP”, as the construction gives two interpretations: negative reading and affirmative reading. It is also more than a simple constituent negator because it can co-occur with the perfective marker le in some contexts. It can also serve as intensifier.

As for the second question, the disambiguation devices include context, redistribution of the construction, the stress, the insertion of jiu. jiu can be inserted in all “NP +chadianer +VP” constructions between chadianer and VP, giving a negative reading. When jiu is inserted into “NP +chadianer mei +VP”, the construction gives a affirmative reading or produces an less acceptable sentence.
A Study of the Construction “NP+chadianer (mei)+VP”

Xie Jing    Yu Xiaohqiang

(Hunan University, Changsha, Hunan Province, 410082)

Abstract: The paper focuses on the construction "NP + chadianer (mei)+VP": a) the function of mei; b) the disambiguation devices of "NP + chadianer mei + VP". The analysis of the construction shows that mei in the construction of "NP + chadianer mei + VP" is not redundant. The construction of "NP + chadianer mei + VP" has different interpretations under different contexts. The disambiguation devices include context, different ways to divide the construction, the stress, the insertion of jiu.

Keywords: Chadianer; Mei; Disambiguation