



## THE USE OF THE VERB "Bǎ" IN POLYSEMY

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### ABOUT ARTICLE

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**Abstract:** 把 "bǎ" is a word belonging to different parts of speech in the Chinese language, which not only acts as parts of speech such as verbs, nouns, counting words, prepositions, but also is a unit with multiple meanings and different functions within each part of speech. Each meaning of the Chinese hieroglyph 把 "bǎ" is expanded based on its main root verb meaning. There is also a semantic closeness between the verb meanings of 把 "bǎ." Within the semes of the verb 把 "bǎ," the precise meaning of the verb is first derived, which is related to the main action of the hand, then there is a gradual deviation from the meaning.

### INTRODUCTION

Polyfunctionality is a key factor that reveals the communicative nature of any word. While polyfunctionality has universal grammatical characteristics across languages, each language also possesses unique grammatical aspects specific to its structure. One of the factors that demonstrate the polyfunctionality of the 把 "bǎ" character is the phenomenon of polysemy. Polysemy, or multiple meanings within a single lexical unit, is a fundamental linguistic reality that reflects the dynamic and evolving nature of language.

Words with multiple lexical meanings are considered polysemous and constitute a significant part of the language. It is well known that words in a language are primarily used in their original (core) meaning. However, as the need arises, the functional transfer method is applied to the lexical-semantic meaning of words, resulting in functional-semantic meanings, as mentioned earlier. The functional-

semantic meaning of a word that emerges due to semantic shifts first transitions into a denotative meaning and later into a connotative meaning, which is then actively used in speech.

The semantic category of polysemy arises due to changes and developments in the semantic structure of lexical units. The evolution of a word's meaning occurs as a result of linguistic development over time, leading to the formation of new meanings based on its core meaning. In the Chinese language, polysemy is mainly observed in monosyllabic words, although modern Chinese also exhibits polysemy in polysyllabic words. For example:

- 算账 [suàn zhàng] – To calculate, to do accounting
  - o To settle accounts (in a personal or business-related dispute)
- 海 [hǎi] – Sea
  - o Lake
  - o Overseas, foreign countries
  - o A vast amount, countless

In the latest (seventh) edition of the Xiàndài Hànyǔ Cídiǎn (现代汉语词典) Modern Chinese Dictionary, the meanings of 把 "bǎ" include "to hold in hand" and "to fasten together to prevent separation", forming a polysemous group. This dictionary encompasses many meanings of 把 "bǎ". With societal development and change, new categories and concepts have emerged, making it difficult for people to assign a distinct linguistic unit to each concept. In such cases, a single linguistic unit takes on multiple conceptual meanings.

The grammatical categorization and schematization of objects and phenomena have not occurred randomly but rather follow systematic principles and linguistic rules. The expansion of word meanings has also taken place based on cognitive perception, logic, and linguistic laws, leading to the formation of interconnected polysemic paradigms. Each meaning of the 把 "bǎ" character has expanded based on its core meaning, demonstrating an internal semantic connection and systematic organization. As the language evolves, new meanings of 把 "bǎ" may continue to emerge and become part of this system.

## METHODS

In this study, we employed theoretical approaches that analyze the internal structure and functional laws of linguistic systems and phenomena, explaining their interconnections and interactions. Additionally, we utilized empirical research methods, including descriptive, comparative, and analytical approaches to explore the semantic and functional properties of 把 "bǎ" in different contexts.

## RESULTS

In the ancient Shuōwén Jiězì (说文解字) dictionary (which primarily provides explanations of Chinese characters), the original meaning of 把 "bǎ" is given as "握也" [wò yě], meaning "to hold in hand." This definition classifies 把 "bǎ" as a verb. In the modern Chinese dictionary, the first verbal definition of 把 "bǎ" is "用手握住" [yòng shǒu wòzhù], meaning "to grasp firmly with the hand."

As a noun, 把 "bǎ" refers to the handle or grip of an object. Semantically and functionally, 把 "bǎ" also functions as a numeral classifier, particularly for counting grouped objects and actions. Additionally, 把 "bǎ" is used as a preposition, playing an important syntactic role in sentence structure. Each of these meanings contributes to the polyfunctionality of the word, demonstrating its diverse linguistic roles.

By compiling the meanings provided in various dictionaries, it has been determined that the verb 把 "bǎ" has seven lexical meanings:

1. 用手握住 [yòng shǒu wòzhù] – To grasp, hold, or lift with the hand.
2. 让孩子大小便 [ràng hái zǐ dà xiǎo biàn] – To hold a child's legs from behind to help them urinate (a support action for the child).
3. 把持, 把揽 [bǎ chí, bǎ lǎn] – To seize, take control, or maintain dominance over a situation or authority.
4. 看守 [kàn shǒu] – To guard or protect (a gate, territory, or building).
5. 紧靠 [jǐn kào] – To lean against, be closely attached, or connected (commonly used in spoken language).
6. 约束使不裂开 [yuē shù shǐ bù liè kāi] – To bind or fasten firmly to prevent separation.
7. 给 [gěi] – To give (used in dialects).

There is a close semantic relationship between the various meanings of 把 "bǎ" as a polysemous word. The verb retains a core meaning related to holding, grasping, lifting, or securing something with the hand. Additionally, meanings such as supporting a child for urination, seizing or controlling a situation, guarding and protecting objects, being closely attached, fastening something firmly, and giving (in dialectal use) all stem from this fundamental concept of grasping or securing.

Chinese dictionaries do not list many lexical meanings for 把 "bǎ, bà", and some definitions lack clarity. However, when considering words formed with this morpheme, we can observe its broader semantic scope. Our primary objective is to analyze the semantic meanings of the verb 把 "bǎ" in the third tone, focusing on its role as a lexical element. To illustrate this, we will present a table showing the semantic expansion of 把 "bǎ".

The verb 把 "bǎ" originally conveyed the meaning of firmly holding or grasping something with the hands. As a verb within the motion domain, it primarily denoted physical actions involving the hands. For instance:

把船 [bǎ chuán] – to steer a boat

把方向盘 [bǎ fāng xiàng pán] – to control the steering wheel

把着冲锋枪 [bǎ zhe chōng fēng qiāng] – to hold a submachine gun firmly

The fundamental meaning of 把 "bǎ" is related to hand movements, and from this core meaning, the morpheme 把 "bǎ" developed the sense of pressing or applying pressure.

For example:

把脉 [bǎ mài] – to take a pulse (press on the veins to check circulation)

Although this differs slightly from the meaning of 握 [wò] (to grasp with the hand), both still relate to actions performed by hand. Similar meanings include:

端 [duān] – to lift or carry

拿着 [ná zhe] – to hold

For instance:

把酒临风 [bǎ jiǔ lín fēng] – to raise a cup of wine in the breeze

把玩古物 [bǎ wán gǔ wù] – to admire an ancient artifact by repeatedly handling it

These examples illustrate that the action of 把 "bǎ" must involve a concrete object that is physically held or manipulated by hand.

骆瑾瑜的眼睛一亮，伸出两手小心地接过傅烨磊递过来的玉卧马，仔细地看，反复把玩，表情十分专注，显然，他在这方面是有一定研究的，只见他脸上的神情越来越高兴，把玉卧马小心地递还给傅烨磊，连声夸赞道：“不错，不错”。

[Luò Jǐnyú de yǎnjīng yī liàng, shēnchū liǎng shǒu xiǎoxīn dì jiēguò Fù Yèlěi dì guòlái de yùwòmǎ, zǎixì dì kàn zhe, fǎnfù bǎwán, biǎoqíng shífēn zhuānzhù, xiǎnrán, tā zài zhè fāngmiàn shì yǒu yīdìng yánjiū de, zhǐ jiàn tā liǎn shàng de shénqíng yuèlǎiyuè gāoxīng, bǎ yùwòmǎ xiǎoxīn dì dīhuán gěi Fù Yèlěi, lián shēng kuāzàn dào: “bùcuò, bùcuò”.]

Luo Jinyu's eyes lit up. He carefully extended both hands to receive the jade reclining horse from Fu Yelei, meticulously examined it, and repeatedly admired it. His expression was highly focused, clearly indicating a certain level of expertise in the field. His face gradually showed increasing delight as he carefully returned the jade horse to Fu Yelei and repeatedly praised it, saying, "Very good, very good." Here, 把玩 [bǎwán] originally meant to play with or hold and examine an object. However, in this context, it extends to the idea of deep admiration and appreciation of an artifact through repeated handling.

Another example demonstrates how 把 "bǎ" evolved to express facilitation or assistance:

让孩子大小便 [ràng hái'zǐ dàxiǎobiàn] – to help a child urinate by holding their legs

In this case, 把 "bǎ" does not directly mean to hold something, but rather, it signifies an action where holding facilitates an outcome. The child's legs are held to assist with urination, linking 把 "bǎ" to a result-oriented meaning.

Similarly, in:

饭后散步一小时，洗漱完毕讲了四个故事倒头就睡，半夜一点起来把尿。

[Fàn hòu sànbù yī xiǎoshí, xǐshù wánbì jiǎng liǎo sì gè gùshì dǎotóu jiù shuì, bànyè yīdiǎn qǐlái bǎ niào.] After an hour-long walk after dinner, washing up, and telling four bedtime stories, he fell asleep. At 1:00 AM, he got up to help with urination.

Here, 把 "bǎ" again functions as a metonymic expression for assisting in urination, demonstrating how it transitions from a direct physical grasp to facilitating an action.

In production and daily life, materials such as wires are used to fasten objects firmly. People naturally associate these actions with 把 "bǎ", which originally conveyed firmly holding onto something. This led to phrases such as:

用铁丝子把住裂缝 [Yòng tiěsīzi bǎzhù lièféng] – To seal a crack using wire

Here, 把 "bǎ" no longer means to hold but rather to secure and prevent from loosening. This extension of meaning underlies the broader connotation of 把 "bǎ" as a verb associated with control, management, and restriction.

As seen in:

这是文学界之后期的罗马帝国,它的事务都由近卫军来把持。

[Zhè shì wénxué jiè zhī hòuqī de luómǎ dìguó, tā de shìwù dōu yóu jìnwèijūn lái bǎchí.]

This is the late Roman Empire of the literary world, and its affairs were controlled by the imperial guard.

他说：“有制度在那里把着，比管理者在那里督着要好得多。”

[Tā shuō : “yǒu zhìdù zài nàlǐ bǎzhe, bǐ guǎnlǐ zhě zài nàlǐ dūzhe yào hǎo dé duō.]

He said, “It is much better to have a structured system in place than to be under the direct supervision of a manager.”

These examples illustrate how 把 "bǎ" evolved from a verb denoting physical holding to a metaphorical verb expressing control, governance, and influence.

Upon hearing my direct question, 代霞 turned around, 把住 the room door, and gently closed it. From the look of it, it seemed like something mysterious.

[Dàixiá jiàn wǒ kāimén jiànshān de wèn, zhuǎnguò shēn bǎ zhù shì mén qīngqīng de guānshàng le, kàn yàngzi hěn shénmì.]

In language, abstract and intangible concepts are often conveyed through well-known, concrete linguistic tools. Metaphor plays a crucial role in this process, allowing the expression of essential aspects of abstract ideas. When considering the fundamental verbal meaning of 把 "bǎ", we find several abstract meanings that denote non-physical actions.

Among these, the verb 看守 [kànshǒu] (to guard, to protect, to oversee) relates to human actions but is somewhat removed from direct hand movements. However, since guarding and protecting typically involve holding weapons or using hands to fend off attacks, the application of 把 "bǎ" in such contexts is justified.

For example:

当我爹在牛栏里为你清理粪便时，那些老人，就像忠诚的老兵一样，把守着牛栏门口。

[Dāng wǒ diē zài niúlán lǐ wéi nǐ qīnglǐ fènbiàn shí, nàxiē lǎorén, jiù xiàng zhōngchéng de lǎobīng yīyàng, bǎ shǒu zhe niúlán mén kǒu.]

When my father was cleaning the cattle pen instead of me, those elderly men stood guard at the door like loyal soldiers.

真正有重大事情，还有一把手在把关。

[Zhēnzhèng yǒu zhòngdà shìqíng, hái yǒu yī bǎ shǒu zài bǎguān.]

When truly important matters arise, a high-ranking official personally oversees them.

In these sentences, 把守 [bǎ shǒu] takes 门口 [mén kǒu] (door entrance) as its object, while 把关 [bǎguān] refers to 事情 [shìqíng] (affairs, matters). Both cases involve protection and supervision, actions that inherently require the use of hands.

Due to the semantic expansion of 把 "bǎ", its meaning extends to expressions such as:

把持 [bǎchí] (to control, to hold onto power),

管理 [guǎnlǐ] (to manage, to govern).

The range of noun complements used with 把 "bǎ" has broadened to include terms related to property, locations, and government institutions.

For example:

这是文学界之后期的罗马帝国,它的事务都由近卫军来把持。

[Zhè shì wénxué jiè zhī hòuqī de luómǎ dìguó, tā de shìwù dōu yóu jìnwèijūn lái bǎchí.]

This is the late-stage Roman Empire of the literary world, and its affairs were controlled by the imperial guard.

他说：“有制度在那里把着，比管理者在那里督着要好得多。”

[Tā shuō : “yǒu zhìdù zài nàlǐ bǎzhe, bǐ guǎnlǐ zhě zài nàlǐ dūzhe yào hǎo dé duō.]

He said, "It is much better to have a system in place rather than being supervised by a manager."

These examples demonstrate how 把 "bǎ" evolves from a verb denoting physical holding or grasping into a metaphorical expression for abstract control, governance, and authority.

In the first sentence, 事务 [shìwù] (state affairs) and in the second sentence, 制度 [zhìdù] (governance system) function as complements within the sentence structure. These terms are related to administrative systems and government institutions. In the second sentence, 把着 [bǎ zhe] includes 把 [bǎ] along with the aspect marker 着 [zhe], which indicates the continuous or durative aspect of the verb.

When the primary characteristic of an object is emphasized, the verb 把 "bǎ" can metaphorically express the meaning of 抓住 [zhuāzhù] ("grasp," "firmly hold onto," "seize"). This conveys not only the physical act of grasping but also the abstract act of retaining information or understanding an essence.

For example:

- 把住事物的本质 [Bǎ zhù shìwù de běnzhì.] – To grasp the essence of a thing (to remember it, retain it in memory).
- 把握文件的精神实质 [Bǎwò wénjiàn de jīngshén shízhì.] – To comprehend the true essence of a document (to internalize or fully grasp it).

Another example illustrates this abstraction further:

当然，我们村的情况你也不是很了解，其实，创业机会还是有的，就看你如何把握。

[Dāngrán, wǒmen cūn de qíngkuàng nǐ yě bù shì hěn liǎojiě, qíshí, chuàngyè jīhuì háishì yǒude, jiù kàn nǐ rúhé bǎwò.]

"Of course, you are not very familiar with the situation in our village. In fact, there are opportunities for entrepreneurship, but it all depends on how you grasp and manage them."

Here, the verb 把 "bǎ" evolves from its literal meaning of "holding onto something firmly" to an abstract meaning of "mentally grasping or mastering something," such as seizing an opportunity, remembering information, or deeply understanding an idea.

Among the semantic meanings of the verb 把 "bǎ", its primary sense originates from a concrete action related to hand movement. Over time, this meaning gradually shifts away from its original concrete reference. Eventually, even when the verb is used in a manner that recalls its initial meaning, it no longer conveys a specific physical action. Instead, it takes on an abstract sense, often referring to intangible aspects of human emotions and inner experiences.

For example, in the phrase:

把不住内心的激怒 [Bǎ bù zhù nèixīn de jīnù] – "Unable to hold back inner anger,"

the verb 把 "bǎ" no longer signifies a physical act of holding but rather an inability to control one's emotions.

Similarly, in the sentence:

进了汽车的时候，这才回味到刘玉英刚才那笑，那脸红，那眼波，那一切的诱惑性，他把不住心头一跳。

[Jìn le qìchē de shíhòu, zhè cái huíwèi dào Liú Yùyīng gāngcái nà xiào, nà liǎn hóng, nà yǎn bō, nà yīqiè de yòuhuò xìng, tā bǎ bù zhù xīntóu yī tiào.]

"As he got into the car, he recalled Liu Yuying's smile, her blushing face, her fluttering eyes, and all the seductive emotions—his heart skipped a beat, and he could not hold back his excitement."

Here, 把 "bǎ" expresses an internal, involuntary reaction—his heart skipping a beat—rather than an explicit physical action. This illustrates how the verb evolves from a literal, concrete action to a metaphorical, abstract meaning related to human emotions and psychological states.

## CONCLUSION

Polyfunctionality is a linguistic phenomenon that emerges when words perform lexical-semantic, morphological, syntactic, and stylistic functions. Understanding polyfunctionality is essential for gaining a deep comprehension of Chinese grammar. In this regard, the internal structure of the language, the thinking patterns of the Han people, and the linguistic environment play a crucial role.

Each meaning of the Chinese character 把 "bǎ" has expanded based on its core meaning, demonstrating an interconnected and systematic nature. The 把 "bǎ" character is a polysemous word whose functional-semantic meanings have developed due to semantic shifts. These meanings transition from denotative to connotative, allowing for versatile usage in speech.

The evolution of 把 "bǎ" follows a systematic expansion from its fundamental meaning, maintaining internal connections between its various interpretations. This highlights the structured nature of its polysemy and its adaptability in different linguistic contexts.

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