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NO Linguistic Effect on the Perceived Blame and Financial Liability – The Case of Chinese

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Abstract: Previous studies have shown that transitive agentive descriptions of an accident tend to lead the readers to attributing more blame and liability to the agent of the accident than intransitive non-agentive descriptions (Borodisky & Fausey, 2010; Fausey & Boroditsky, 2011). We examined this linguistic effect in Chinese by contrasting the non-agentive descriptions with two types of agentive descriptions, namely the SVO construction and the ba construction. Participants read only one version of two accident descriptions and answered questions about how much the person was to blame for the accidents and how much money should the person be asked to pay for the loss. The results revealed no significant difference among the three types of descriptions either in blame or financial liability. One possible explanation of the null results may have to do with the stronger field-dependence of the Chinese people for whom contextual information attracts more attention and may have overridden the subtle linguistic cues that distinguished the different descriptions.