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Aspect, tense and mood:  
Context dependency and the marker *le* in  
Mandarin Chinese

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To Tobias,  
my fellow traveller

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## Abbreviations

BA	1) Sentence-final “solicit agreement” marker 吧 <i>ba</i> <sup>2</sup> 2) “Disposal” marker 把 <i>ba</i>
CL	Classifier
DE	1) Nominalizing/genitive/associative marker 的 <i>de</i> 2) Adverbializing marker 地 <i>de</i> 3) Complex stative construction marker 得 <i>de</i> , referring either to manner or extent 4) 得 <i>de</i> , infix in a resultative verb compound, expressing potentiality
GUO	Boundary <sup>3</sup> / Experiential marker 过 <i>guo</i>
JIANG	“Disposal” marker 将 <i>jiang</i>
LA	Combination of 了 <i>le</i> and sentence-final marker 啊 <i>a</i>
LE	Boundary marker 了 <i>le</i>
MA	Sentence-final question marker 吗 <i>ma</i>
NEG	Negative markers 不 <i>bu</i> and 没 (有) <i>mei(you)</i>
NEG IMP	Negative imperative marker 别 <i>bie</i>
QUE	Classical Chinese resultative complement / grammatical marker 却 <i>que</i>
TA	Grammatical marker 达 <i>ta</i> in the Xiang dialect
ZAI / ZHENGZAI	Durative marker 在 <i>zheng</i> / 正在 <i>zhengzai</i>
ZHE	1) Durative marker 着 <i>zhe</i> 2) Classical Chinese grammatical marker 着
ZHI	Nominalizing/genitive/associative marker 之 <i>zhi</i>

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<sup>2</sup> In the present study, the semantic essence of only one grammatical marker in Mandarin Chinese, *le*, will be analysed. In this list, for the sake of convenience, I have (when applicable) adopted Li and Thompson’s (1981) descriptions of other grammatical particles that will occur in the example sentences.

<sup>3</sup> It seems probable that the boundary notion expressed by the marker *le* can also be manifested by the marker *guo* and by resultative complements, although it is not a goal for this present study to examine this suggestion further.

# Introduction

## Why do we need another study on *le*?

Every student of the Chinese language sooner or later realizes that this language, the grammar of which may seem easy enough, does come with its drawbacks. I think I speak for most of us Chinese-learners when I say that the grammatical marker 了<sup>4</sup> *le* is definitely one of them. Learning how to use this marker is a difficult, if not impossible, task for learners of Chinese as a second language, at least in a classroom setting. It occurs in two positions in the sentence and is supposed to represent two morphemes expressed by the same sound and the same character but with different functions. We struggle with questions like what *le* actually does to the sentence, when either marker should and should not be used and how the two morphemes differ from each other. Consulting grammars and articles written on the subject is not necessarily of help. When I started studying the existing literature on aspect in Chinese, I noticed, for example, that while the majority of papers written on aspect in Chinese state that verbal *le* expresses perfective aspect, since there is no agreement among the authors on what perfective aspect actually **means**, the reader is still left in confusion. I also found that as sentence-final *le* could modify a sentence in a range of ways, existent proposals as to its correct label—change of state marker, inchoative marker, perfect marker—could not properly describe all its uses. I was left with the impression that, although a lot of significant and important work has already been done (Li and Thompson (1981); Chan (1980); Huang (1987); Shi (1988); Sybesma (1997) and Zhang (1996, 1998) to mention but a few examples) that have helped a lot of students (including myself) to get a somewhat better understanding of *le*, there is still uncertainty as to the exact contribution of *le* to a sentence. I wanted to know if it would be possible to arrive at a better and more exact description of the meaning of *le* that could in some way explain all its various uses.

## Aim and scope

Studying articles and books written on the subject of aspect in Chinese, I was puzzled by the tendency among many authors to define aspectual **categories** in vague and unprecise ways, while the classifications of the grammatical **forms** (markers) on the other hand appeared strict and inflexible. Since *le* seems to have functions of such kinds that they cannot easily be looked upon as variants of the expression of perfective aspect in the case

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<sup>4</sup> Henceforth, I will use only the pinyin transcription *le* when referring to the morpheme represented in written Chinese by the character 了.

of verbal *le*, or variants of a “change of state” meaning or perfect aspect in the case of sentence-final *le*, it struck me as odd that this was still how they were treated. On the other hand, the principle of Occam’s razor, as modified by Grice (1989), states that “senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity” (1989:47). Could it be that pragmatics does the hard work in determining how a sentence that contains *le* should be interpreted? I set out to study *le* in different contexts to see if there could be a better way of describing the very essence of this marker than labelling it as a marker of a specific tense, aspect or mood.

As I have already implied, I was primarily interested in the **meaning** of *le* and its **contribution** to the sentence and whether or not verbal *le* and sentence-final *le* differed significantly in this respect. The aim was to make an interpretation of *le*, based on its occurrence in sentences that have different temporal and modal meanings, and in particular to find out how the context affects the overall reading of the *le*-sentence. The **application** of *le* is not treated in this book other than as a support for my theory. Readers who are interested in learning more about when *le* should and should not be used are advised to turn to the excellent guide *Mandarin Chinese: A functional reference grammar* by Li and Thompson (1981).

## Methodology

In order to study the functions of *le*, both as a verbal and as a sentence-final marker, and verify that there was a common factor that could unify all its uses, I needed to examine the occurrence of *le* in a **context**. I used narrative texts in Mandarin Chinese downloaded from the Internet. Oral material has not been studied, mainly for practical reasons. The sentences found in this study are excerpts from modern (the majority of the texts were written during the 1980’s and 1990’s, though one was written in 1937) fiction. The authors were brought up in Mainland China and Taiwan and only Mandarin Chinese is represented in the corpus of texts. Although there may be vocabulary differences between the Mandarin spoken in Mainland China and that spoken on Taiwan, there does not seem to be any major differences in terms of syntax or semantics.<sup>5</sup> Further, the example sentences and their translations have been checked by native speakers from mainland China. A concordance software application, Wordsmith Tools 3.0, was used to search for occurrences of *le* in different environments in these texts and each sentence was then analysed in its context in order to establish the temporal or modal reading of the sentence. Apart from these excerpts I have also used example sentences from grammars and articles in order to illustrate my points, in particular to show the ambiguity of *le* in decontextualized sentences.

Relevance Theory, developed in the 1980’s by Sperber and Wilson, emphasizes the importance of contextual factors in utterance interpretation. I found it well suited as a framework for my ideas on the context dependency of *le*.

In chapter 7, I discuss the results of a small survey conducted by me in Beijing in 1999. Since it involved only six informants, I present the results as further indications—not as evidence—that there is a functional overlapping between verbal and sentence-final *le*.

---

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Liu (1990) whose study also shows that Mandarin-speaking people from mainland China and Taiwan use *le* in the same way.

Because of this I have chosen not to include the whole survey in this thesis, especially as it is rather voluminous. I emphasize that the results should only be seen as a footnote. Having said that, both my findings during the putting together of the survey and the results of the survey still support the theory presented in the rest of the thesis. The results may not be surprising, but still conflicts with the traditional treatment of *le* as two distinct morphemes.

## **Outline**

Chapter 1 and 2 provide the relevant background: terminology and a presentation of existent general and language-specific (Chinese) analyses on temporality and modality, as well as studies on the marker *le* in Chinese and problems with these. In chapter 3 and 4 I introduce Relevance Theory as a suitable framework for my hypothesis that *le* is a context dependent marker and give a proposal for the core semantics of *le*. In chapter 5 and 6 I present more detailed support for my theory; the results of my studies of *le* in different contexts. I unify the different contributions of *le* as manifestations of its semantic core feature boundary. I show that the labelling of *le* as a marker of a specific tense, aspect or modal distinction is unsatisfying as it cannot unify all the possible temporal and modal interpretations of a sentence with *le*, even if verbal and sentence-final *le* are considered separately, as two morphemes. In chapter 7 I discuss some further indications that the functions of verbal *le* and sentence-final *le* in fact overlap in many cases. Chapter 8 presents a short conclusion.

# 1. Situation types, tense, aspect and modality

This chapter is intended as a presentation of the terminology used in this book as well as of previous studies of the semantic categories *situation type*, *aspect*, *tense* and *modality*—both more general studies and language-specific studies focusing on Mandarin Chinese.

## 1.1. Situation types

Our understanding of experiences in the world is reflected in our use of language. One example is the way verbs or verb phrases (*VPs*) display temporal structures as part of their inherent meaning. Differences in these temporal structures distinguish *to know* from *to learn* and *to jump a rope* from *to jump a fence*. On the basis of the ontological entities that they represent, different classes of verbs or *VPs* can be distinguished. There is no generally accepted term for this linguistic category. In this work, the term *situation types* (Smith 1997) will be used.

The article “Verbs and Times” by Vendler (1967) is probably one of the first and definitely one of the most influential studies in modern time on situation types. He noticed that some verbs do not occur in the continuous tenses. For example, it is possible to say *I am running* but *\*I am knowing* is ungrammatical. The verbs that **do** admit continuous tenses, on the other hand, can be divided into two groups, those that have a set terminal point, or climax, and those that do not. It is true of a person that he did *run* if he stops running, but it is not true that he did *run a mile* if he stops running a mile. The difference between *run* and *run a mile* is that the former does not have a set terminal point while the latter does. Vendler calls the first group *activities* and the second *accomplishments*. In Mandarin Chinese, activities are verbs like 走 *zou* ‘walk’ and 找 *zhao* ‘look for’ or verbphrases like 推两辆车 *tui liang liang che* ‘push two carts’. Examples of accomplishments are 盖一个桥 *gai yi ge qiao* ‘build a bridge’ and 出版这本书 *chuban zhei ben shu* ‘publish this book’. The group of verbs or verb phrases that do **not** admit continuous tenses can be further divided into two groups, *states*, like *know* and *love*, and *achievements*, like *recognize* or *reach the hilltop*. Verbs like 存在 *cunzai* ‘exist’ and 像 *xiang* ‘resemble’ are stative and so are generic constellations like 喝酒 *he jiu* ‘drink liquor’ in its habitual reading. 打破 *dapo* ‘break’ and 找到 *zhaodao* ‘find’ are achievement constellations in Chinese. State verbs can be used with durative adverbials like *for three years* (*he loved her for three years*) while achievements can only be predicated for single moments of time (*he reached the hilltop at noon*). Accomplishments and achievements are similar in that they involve definite and unique time instants, while states and activities do not.

Other linguists who have worked on situation types include Verkuyl (1972, 1993) and Smith (1983, 1997). Shen (1995) uses a somewhat different approach, focusing on the binary opposition between bounded (dynamic) and unbounded (stative) situations. In his view, it is the presence vs non-presence of a single feature *boundary* that determines whether a situation is viewed as dynamic or stative. While the VP 跑到学校 *pao dao xuexiao* ‘run to school’ implies that the situation has a *natural* final boundary, 想家 *xiang jia* ‘miss home’ has no such natural boundary. Bounded situations are called events, unbounded such are called activities. Other examples of events are, according to Shen: 读红楼梦 *du Hongloumeng* ‘read *The dream of the red chamber*’, 写几个字 *xie ji ge zi* ‘write some characters’, 看那场电影 *kan nei chang dianying* ‘watch that movie’ and of activities: 读书 *du shu* ‘read books’, 写字 *xie zi* ‘write characters’, 看电影 *kan dianying* ‘watch movies’.

Zhang (1995) writes: “an accomplishment can be understood in terms of the source-*path* [*italics mine*]-goal schema in which the goal is achieved after traveling the path. For example, in *He read a book* the activity of reading a book is like a path with many pages symbolizing many stations. When *he* reached the last page/station – goal, *he* finished/completed the whole book/path.” (Zhang 1995, p. 33) Verkuyl (1993) describes the same phenomenon when he discusses the semantics of the verb arguments: “It has become clear that the semantic information ‘UNSPECIFIED QUANTITY OF X’ or ‘SPECIFIED QUANTITY OF X’ pertains directly or indirectly to the Time axis. That is, the quantities of X involved are expressible in terms of linearly ordered sets of temporal entities.” (1993, p. 72) He continues: “[T]he complements of *eat* and *walk* [in *Judith ate three sandwiches* and *John walked to three stores*] will be treated as providing the ‘space’ through which Judith and John are ‘going’. Still metaphorically, in both cases one may think of the external argument ‘going through’ a bounded set of indexed entities.” (1993, p. 226). It is obvious that the direct object nominal phrase (NP) 两辆车 *liang che* ‘two carts’ in 推两辆车 *tui liang liang che* ‘push two carts’ though quantified, is an activity and not an event, since it has no natural boundaries. Even if the action of pushing a cart is interrupted, it can still be said of the subject that he/she has pushed a cart. This shows that whether or not a quantified argument is capable of representing such a bounded set of temporal entities depends on the context.

In the present study, the term situation types refers to *the distinct semantic categories into which primarily the lexical content of the VP can be classified according to its temporal characteristics*.<sup>6</sup> These are characteristics such as the presence vs. non-presence of a natural boundary in the situation described by the VP and duration vs. non-duration of an action. The temporal characteristics of the lexical entities are expressed linguistically through

- The lexical semantics of the verb

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<sup>6</sup> See however chapter 4, in which I propose that the scope of an aspectual marker may have impact on which components in the sentence that form situation type. I argue that for example sentence-final *le* has a larger scope since it can produce ambiguity in certain decontextualized VPs between an inchoative vs a terminative reading. This means that situation type in those cases must be determined, not only by the semantics of the VP, but also by other factors such as temporal adverbs or even extra-sentential context.

- Path vs. non-path reading of the direct object NP
- Presence vs. non-presence of a durational adverb describing a bounded period of time during which the action takes place
- Mass/count reading of the subject NP<sup>7</sup>

The four situation types will be characterised thus:

- Accomplishments (durative) and achievements (non-durative) display natural boundaries
- Activities have only a potential boundary
- States have no boundaries at all

The situation type of a particular constellation determines for example on what phase (beginning, middle or end) of the situation described by the constellation the focus should be in an utterance situation, i.e., as the situation is positioned on a time line. I will discuss this in detail in chapter 4.

## 1.2. Tense

“[T]ense is grammaticalised expression of location in time.” (Comrie 1985, p. 9)  
This means that languages that have grammatical means to express location of a situation in time also have tense. What does it mean that a situation is “located in time”?

Reichenbach’s (1947) work on tense has had a tremendous impact on subsequent studies on tense and to some extent also studies on aspect. It is Reichenbach who introduces, in his tense semantics, the famous three notions used in most later studies on tense: *Speech Time* (S), *Event Time* (E) and *Reference Time* (R). While the two former concepts are both to some extent intuitively clear, the latter is harder to grasp and is not clearly defined by Reichenbach. The definitions used for these three notions in this present study will be as follows:

- Speech Time (S)—the time when the utterance is made
- Event Time (E)—the time when the situation described in the utterance obtains. E is represented by situation type, which is lexically manifested through the inherent temporal properties of the VP if the scope of the marker is verbal and by either the VP or the whole sentence if the scope of the marker is sentential.
- Reference Time (R)—the time from which the situation is seen. Implicit or explicit temporal reference provides the R for the situation described in a sentence

In this book, which follows the Reichenbachian framework, tenses are defined according to the temporal structures that they represent. *Absolute tense concerns the linear order between R and S and relative tense concerns the linear order between E and R.* The so-

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<sup>7</sup> Verkuyl (1993) shows that a mass NP in subject position can give a non-bounded reading to the situation described by the sentence.



called absolute-relative tenses in English manifest morphologically both the relation between E and R and the relation between R and S:<sup>8</sup>

- (1)
- |     |   |                     |
|-----|---|---------------------|
| (a) | At five o'clock, John <i>had</i> (already) <i>left</i> (Pluperfect <sup>9</sup> ) | E-R-S <sup>10</sup> |
| (b) | John <i>has left</i> (Present Perfect)  | E-R,S               |
| (c) | At five o'clock, John <i>will</i> (already) <i>have left</i> (Future Perfect)     | S-E-R               |

Mandarin is known as a tenseless language, since it has no formal means of expressing morphologically if a situation obtains before, simultaneously with or after the time of utterance (Smith 1997; Comrie 1976; Li and Thompson 1981; Fang et al 1992; among others). Time relative to the time of the utterance is expressed by temporal adverbs like 昨天 *zuotian* 'yesterday', 去年 *qunian* 'last year', 明天 *mingtian* 'tomorrow', etc, but it is generally agreed that there are no grammatical markers or inflectional morphemes that signal where on the time line the reference time of the utterance is positioned relative to the speech time. This means that Chinese grammatical markers such as *le* do not express absolute tense. It is true that just as 他昨天洗衣服 *ta zuotian xi yifu* means 'He washed/was washing his clothes yesterday', i.e. describes a past time situation, 他洗了衣服 *ta xi le yifu* can mean 'He washed his clothes', 'He has washed his clothes' or 'He had washed his clothes', i.e. describe a situation that is past with respect to the present moment. But while for the former sentence, only the absolute past tense interpretation is possible, the latter can have more than one temporal interpretation. 他洗了衣服 *ta xi le yifu* may for example occur in a sentence or subclause describing a situation that will be the case in the future with the readings 'He will have washed his clothes'<sup>11</sup> or 'When he has washed his clothes...'. Or it can occur in a subclause describing a situation that **might** be the case in the future: 'If he washes his clothes...'. In other words, while 昨天 *zuotian* 'yesterday' state explicitly that the situation described in the sentence is situated in the past, *le* makes no claims as to the position of a situation with respect to the speech time. Another important difference between a sentence that contains a temporal adverbial describing past time relative to the present moment and one that contains *le* is that while 他昨天洗衣服 *Ta zuotian xi yifu* 'He washed /was washing his clothes yesterday' does not specify whether the action was concluded or not, 洗了衣服 *xi le yifu* in a past context implies that the action of washing was concluded.

<sup>8</sup> Following Reichenbach (1947), in the visual representations of temporal structures, anteriority will be illustrated by a hyphen and simultaneity by a comma. Note that simultaneity does not necessarily imply that one time span is included in another. That is an aspectual distinction with which tense is not concerned.

<sup>9</sup> I will use capital initials to denote *grammatical forms*, while those terms without capital initials denote the *semantic content* of a certain aspect, tense or mood. For example, while *Pluperfect* (or *Past Perfect* as it is sometimes called) refers to the form commonly called Pluperfect (*had v-ed* in English), *pluperfect* refers to a temporal structure (E-R-S) that may be linguistically manifested through grammatical forms and/or a particular context.

<sup>10</sup> Example (1) from Comrie (1985).

<sup>11</sup> Often with 已经 *yijing* 'already'.

The fact that there are constraints on verbal *le* and another Chinese grammatical marker, 过 *guo*, for occurring with certain temporal expressions (such as 常常 *changchang* ‘often’) or aspect markers (such as 正在 *zheng zai*) is further indication of a difference between the semantics of grammatical markers and temporal adverbs such as 上个月 *shang ge yue* ‘last month’ and 昨天 *zuotian* ‘yesterday’:

(2)

(a) 他 上 个 月 常 常 去 美 国  
 Ta shang ge yue changchang qu Meiguo  
 he up CL month often go U.S  
 Last month he often went to The States<sup>12</sup>

(b) \*他 常 常 去 了 / 过 美 国  
 \*Ta changchang qu le/guo Meiguo  
 he often go LE/GUO U.S  
 He often went to The States

(3)

(a) 昨 天 小 王 到 家 的 时 候 ，  
 Zuotian Xiao Wang dao jia de shihou,  
 yesterday Xiao Wang arrive home DE time  
 丽 丽 正 在 看 那 场 电 影  
 Lili zhengzai kan na chang dianying  
 Lili ZHENGZAI watch that CL movie  
 When Xiao Wang came home yesterday Lili was (just) watching that movie

(b) \*小 王 到 家 的 时 候 ，  
 \*Xiao Wang dao jia de shihou,  
 Xiao Wang arrive home DE time  
 丽 丽 正 在 看 了 / 过 那 场 电 影  
 Lili zhengzai kan le/guo na chang dianying  
 Lili ZHENGZAI watch LE/GUO that CL movie  
 When Xiao Wang came home Lili was (just) watching that movie

In this present study, it is assumed that Chinese grammatical markers 着 *zhe*, *le* and 过 *guo* do not express neither absolute nor relative tense **in themselves**. However, in certain contexts, they can be used to express relative tense (着 *zhe* contribute to relative present, *le* and 过 *guo* to relative past).

<sup>12</sup> All example sentences not marked with a footnote that states the origin of that particular sentence or a number in parenthesis are mine and checked by native speaker as to their grammaticality and correct translation.

### 1.3. Aspect

The word *aspect* was first introduced into English in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and is a loan translation from Russian *vid*, ‘view’. But the phenomenon of aspect has been studied by philosophers, such as for example Aristotle, since ancient times. While tense is a relatively widespread concept among linguists as well as non-linguists around the world, aspect is not as familiar to non-linguists. Russian and other Slavonic languages are known as typical aspectual languages but also French and Spanish, for example, grammaticalise aspect. English, too, expresses an aspectual distinction, although it is not morphologically expressed. The difference between the periphrastic expression *he was reading* and the simple form *he read* is aspectual. Some linguists prefer to group situation type and aspect together under a common term *aspect* or *aspectuality*. Others see them as two categories in close interaction. Situation type is often described as a lexical, objective category, while aspect is defined as a grammatical, subjective category. “[W]hile all languages have lexical-semantic ‘Aktionsart’<sup>13</sup>, a verbal category referring to the temporal structure or the content-oriented aspect of verb meanings through morphological derivation in a narrow sense, not all languages have morphological ‘aspect’, a verbal category referring to the temporal structure or other content-oriented features of verb meanings through grammaticalization in the morphology”. (Zhang 1995, p. 1)

Binnick (1991) criticises the traditional view on aspect: “The grammatical tradition has generally operated with a rather broad treatment of aspect of just this kind, making minimal assumptions about the nature of aspectual phenomena: aspectual oppositions have to do with the nature of temporal objects (situations, events, episodes, etc.), without deictic considerations, without reference to the speech-act time. The consequence of such broad latitude is considerable confusion” (Binnick 1991, p. 209). He aims in particular at the confusion of aspects and situation types, which, in his eyes, is the result of this broad definition of aspect. The term ‘view’, for example, can allow both subjective and objective interpretations, and thus be used to describe the essence of both aspect and situation type.

In this work, situation type and aspect are viewed as two different categories. Situation type is primarily manifested on the lexical level and aspect primarily on the grammatical level (although some components, that primarily form the situation type of a sentence, can also contribute to the formation of a particular aspect. The resultative predicates in Chinese constitute one such example<sup>14</sup>). However, as we shall see in chapter 4, if the scope of an aspect marker is large, non-lexical components such as other grammatical markers **within** that scope can cause shifts in the situation type. I thus support Huang’s (1987) claim that aspect should be assigned a more extensive domain than the *verb*. Since this is not a typological study of aspect, I will rely on Huang’s evidence from several languages and the domain to which aspect is constrained in those languages that show the

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<sup>13</sup> Another term for *situation type*.

<sup>14</sup> “Both resultative complement and perfective *le* mark the endpoint of a situation, the main difference being that the former is a lexical unit, and the latter a grammatical one.” (Chan 1980, p. 55) See also Sybesma (1997) and Shen (1995) for interesting comparisons between the functions of resultative complements and verbal *le*.

correctness in her conclusion that the traditional definition of aspect as a verbal category is not correct. This opinion is further based on the fact that the Chinese marker *le* examined in this study may contribute to the temporal interpretation of a sentence both in cases where the lexical content is expressed by the VP and when it is expressed by the whole sentence. This will be shown in later chapters.

How, then, should the category of aspect be defined? While most linguists<sup>15</sup> agree that aspect, just like tense, is connected with time<sup>16</sup> not many, surprisingly enough, have attempted to formulate a precise definition of aspect as a category manifesting distinct temporal structures, in the way that tense has been characterized. Instead, most descriptions of what we call aspect in the linguistic literature are “entirely metaphorical in nature” (Klein 1994, p. 27). Typically, terms like “completed vs. non-completed situation” and “outside vs. inside view of the situation” are used.

It is generally accepted that aspect, and not tense, is expressed grammatically in Mandarin Chinese but there is little agreement on **what** aspectual categories are expressed grammatically in Chinese and **which** morphemes that are used to express **which** aspect. Li and Thompson (1981) represent the “main stream” opinion on aspect in Chinese. According to them, four aspectual categories are expressed in Chinese. These categories are

*perfective* aspect, expressed by the postverbal marker *le*

(4)

他 在 日本 住 了 四 个 月  
 Ta zai Riben zhu le si ge yue  
 He at Japan live LE four CL month  
 He/She lived in Japan for four months<sup>17</sup>

*imperfective (durative)* aspect, expressed by the preverbal marker 在 *zai* and the postverbal marker 着 *zhe*

(5)

张三 在 解释 文法  
 Zhangsan zai jieshi wenfa  
 Zhangsan ZAI explain grammar  
 Zhangsan is explaining the grammar

<sup>15</sup> In fact, Huang (1987) constitutes one exception. She claims that **time** is not the sole substance for the construction of aspectual systems. Such a broad view on what concepts should be included in the category of aspect is not taken in the present study.

<sup>16</sup> See for example Comrie (1976).

<sup>17</sup> Examples (4), (5), (6), (7), (8) and (9) from Li and Thompson (1981).

(6)

他 在 房 子 里 坐 着  
Ta zai fangzi li zuo zhe  
he at house inside sit ZHE  
He/she is sitting in the house

*experiential* aspect, expressed by the postverbal marker 过 *guo*

(7)

我 吃 过 日 本 菜  
Wo chi guo Riben cai  
I eat GUO Japan food  
I have eaten Japanese food (before)

and *delimitative* aspect, expressed by reduplication of the verb

(8)

你 喜 欢 唱 歌 ， 那 你 就  
Ni xihuan chang ge, na ni jiu  
You like sing song so you then  
唱 (一) 唱 吧!  
*chang* (yi)<sup>18</sup> *chang* ba!  
sing (one) sing BA  
You like to sing, so go ahead and sing a little!

Sentence-final *le*, which is treated separately, is not viewed as an aspect or tense marker at all, even though its function, to signal “Currently Relevant State”, is said to relate a state of affairs to a current situation, i.e. to relate one situation to another.

(9)

他 逃 得 出 来 了  
Ta tao de chulai le  
he escape DE out-come LE  
He can escape now

### 1.3.1. “Metaphorical” definitions of aspect

One popular definition of aspect is the one used by Comrie: “aspects are different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation” (1976, p. 3), another, similar, is Smith’s “camera-metaphor”: “Aspectual viewpoints function like the lens of a camera, making objects visible to the receiver. Situations are the objects on which

<sup>18</sup> The insertion of the morpheme 一 *yi* ‘one’ between the verb and the reduplicated syllable is optional.

viewpoint lenses are trained.” (1997, p. 61) The difference between aspectual viewpoints, according to Smith’s characterization, is how much of a situation they make visible. Comrie’s and Smith’s descriptions can serve as examples of the conventional definition of aspect. The difference between tense and aspect, claims Comrie (1976, p. 5), is that aspect is concerned with the internal temporal constituency of a situation, i.e. situation-internal time, while tense is concerned with relating a situation to a time-point, i.e. with situation-external time.

An unfortunate result of this use of vague definitions for aspect as opposed to the formal definition for tense is that the distinction seems more like one between vagueness and preciseness than one between different temporal concepts.

### 1.3.2. The time-relational definition of aspect

Comrie describes the aspectual distinction manifested in the two verb forms of the often quoted sentence

(10)

John *was reading* when I *entered*<sup>19</sup>

as a distinction in internal constituency, i.e. *was reading* (Past Progressive) places the listener internally to the situation while *entered* (Simple Past) presents the situation as a single whole. (10) would then illustrate the distinction between *imperfective* and *perfective* aspect.<sup>20</sup> Typically, the *perfective* is said to indicate a view of a situation from the outside, as a single whole, without paying any attention to the internal complexity of that situation (Comrie 1976) or to signal that a situation is bounded temporally (Bybee 1994; Li and Thompson 1981). According to the same view the *imperfective*, on the other hand, gives explicit reference to the internal structure of a situation, viewing it from within (Comrie 1976). The present study instead explains the difference between the two verb forms on the basis of the fact that they are manifestations of two distinct temporal structures involving two of Reichenbach’s (1947) times; Event Time and Reference Time. *Aspect concerns the inclusive/non-inclusive relationship between the Event Time and the Reference Time.*

Binnick (1991, p. 458) identifies aspect as a category involving “the relationship of event time E to the reference frame R; complexive (perfective) aspect has E within R, imperfective has E and R overlapping and perfect has E preceding R”.<sup>21</sup> Klein (1994)

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<sup>19</sup> Example (10) from Comrie (1976).

<sup>20</sup> English does not use inflectional morphology to make aspectual distinctions. The Simple Past in English is a tense form and not an aspect form. However (as Comrie notes) in the case above, in which the verb in question is non-stative and non-habitual (otherwise the perfective reading would be ruled out automatically), the difference between the two verb forms is that of imperfectivity vs. perfectivity.

<sup>21</sup> Binnick recognizes the perfect as an aspect and not as a tense. It should be noted here, that in this work, the perfect is defined as a tense and not as an aspect (see also p. 13). The term “perfect aspect” will only be mentioned with reference to the works of other authors and does not describe the view of the author of this present work.

presents a similar definition of aspect: “The lexical content of a clause has no place on the time axis. Hence, it bears no temporal relation to any other lexical content, nor to a distinguished subsegment of time, like the time of the utterance. It is not part of that structure which we call time. But it can be embedded in time – it can be hooked up to some time span, the topic time TT<sup>22</sup>, which in its turn stands in a temporal relationship to other time spans.” (Klein 1994, p. 99). This definition clarifies many things that have been left open for interpretation by many previous accounts of aspect. One of them is the relation between aspect and situation type. The lexical content of a clause (its situation type, representing E) is “hooked up to a time span” (R) through the use of an aspectual form. In a time-relational framework, the distinction between the perfective and the imperfective aspect concerns the way the two aspects relate to a temporal reference interval or reference point on a time line. In this present work, it will be assumed that for the expression of the perfective aspect, the situation described must have at least one boundary that is included in the reference time frame. Either the initial boundary, the final boundary, or both the initial and the final boundary of event time E must be included in R. The imperfective situation on the other hand, either has no boundaries at all or its boundaries are not in focus, i.e. they are not included in the reference time frame. While for the perfective aspect, the temporal span of the situation, or the initial or final boundary of that temporal span, is presented as included in this reference interval/point,<sup>23</sup> which, in effect, means that it is “bounded” temporally, the imperfective signals that the temporal span of a situation includes the reference interval/point,<sup>24</sup> which means that it is unbounded.

[I...I]	She bought three apples	(perfective)
[I...]	She suddenly knew the answer	(perfective)
[...I]	She reached the hilltop	(perfective)
...[...].	She was buying apples	(imperfective)

Figure 1

The square brackets ([ ]) in Figure 1 above represents the boundaries of the reference time frame R. The pillars (I) represents the boundaries of E. Zhang (1995) explains the concept of boundaries: “Boundedness is characterized as establishing a boundary showing a change between two different situations. ... From the perspective of boundary, bounded and unbounded situations can be understood in terms of source-path-goal in a spatial domain and in terms of beginning-middle phase-end in a temporal domain. Movement in space has a starting point as a source symbolizing a “left boundary”, and an end-point as a goal or destination symbolizing a “right boundary” (Lys 1988) as well as a path between the two endpoints or boundaries. Attaining an endpoint is establishing a boundary. Since a given path of moving may have one boundary, both, or neither, motion through space can be scanned with or without a boundary.” (Zhang 1995, p. 30)

<sup>22</sup> Topic Time is Klein’s term. It is roughly the same as the Reichenbachian Reference Time.

<sup>23</sup> This temporal structure will also be abbreviated as E incl in R

<sup>24</sup> This temporal structure will also be abbreviated as R incl in E

Basically all this means that the metaphorical view on aspect and the view of aspect as a category that concerns the relationship between temporal spans lead to the same conclusion; the imperfective aspect presents a situation as unbounded while the perfective aspect presents it as bounded in some way. However, there are several advantages with the introduction of the concept of Reference Time R and temporal structures in the discussion on aspect. Not only is the abstract made more concrete (metaphors like “viewing from the outside/inside” are exchanged for a description of the position of R, i.e. the topic time of the utterance, as either outside or inside E, the temporal span of the situation) but also the relationship between aspect and tense becomes clearer since both can be explained as manifestations of temporal structures in which Reference Time is a core concept. The introduction of R is particularly useful when distinguishing between the semantics of the perfective and the perfect, one an aspect and the other a tense.

### 1.3.3. The perfect and the perfective

In many languages, such as English, different forms are used to express different perfect tenses.<sup>25</sup> The perfects are relative because they relate E to R and they are absolute in that they relate R to S. In Tense (1985) Comrie advocates against a uniform treatment of the Present Perfect and the absolute-relative tenses, since the present perfect contains the element *current relevance*, which distinguishes it from the pluperfect and the future perfect. In fact, it is assigned a whole chapter in his earlier work Aspect (1976), though he admits that the Present Perfect is different from the other aspects. Salkie (1989), on the other hand, is of the opinion, like Elness (1991), that current relevance is a "natural inference from the basic temporal meaning of the perfect." (Salkie 1989, p. 6) Salkie claims that the perfects differ from each other for the same reasons that present and past tenses are different. This means that the pluperfect can describe an event both as a past state and a past event<sup>26</sup>, while the present perfect cannot because it is an instance of the present tense and, according to Salkie, the present tense in English cannot be used for events but only for states. Hedin (1987) seems to be of a similar opinion. She claims that the primary function of the Pluperfect in Modern Greek is to be a retrospective counterpart to the (present) perfect and as such, it often expresses current relevance in the same way. "The perfect, being marked for non-retrospectivity, locates the situation referred to within a present frame, the PRESENT ..., that is, *within a time frame still relevant at the time of utterance*. The relevance, then, is not one of the previous situation (or its result) but of the time frame within which the situation is located." (Hedin 1987, p. 62) According to Hedin, the present point serves as a point of reference within the PRESENT in the Present Perfect sentence (11) (a) below, while its parallel in the past is a

<sup>25</sup> (1) shows the three perfect tenses in English.

<sup>26</sup> Comrie's sentence *Bill had arrived at six o'clock*, that contains the Pluperfect, can have two readings:

- a) At six o'clock, Bill had already arrived (he was there)
- b) Bill arrived at six o'clock

This is not true of the present perfect, which is practically ungrammatical with temporal expressions denoting past time: \*Bill has arrived yesterday.



PAST frame including a point of reference and, as expected, the Pluperfect form is then used in English, as exemplified by (11) (b):

(11)

(a) Now we have given exams five times this year<sup>27</sup>

(b) At this time last year we had given exams five times

The distinction between what is in the literature alternately called perfect tense or perfect aspect and the perfective aspect is not often focused on or considered relevant in the way the opposition between the perfective and the imperfective is considered relevant. This would only have been natural in case there was a consensus that the basic difference between them is temporal, i.e. one is a tense, the other an aspect. There is, however, no such agreement. In some works, the distinction between the perfect and the perfective is simply ignored. Dahl (1985) writes: “In the linguistic literature, the terms ‘perfect’ and ‘perfective’ are often used interchangeably...it happens quite often that otherwise well-oriented linguists are astonished to find that there may be a difference.” (Dahl 1985:138) One might ask for what reasons the two have sometimes been treated as one aspect. Comrie notes that in many works, “there has been an unfortunate tendency to use the term ‘perfective’ for what is here termed ‘perfect’”. (Comrie 1976, p. 12) A possible cause is the terminology used. The so-called perfect tense in Latin happened to have the double function of marking both perfect and what in Greek was called aorist (past perfective). This double function “is responsible, no doubt, for much of the confusion surrounding the terms ‘perfect’ and ‘perfective’ in linguistics.” (Lyons 1977, p. 704) Sometimes the problem of distinguishing between the perfect and the perfective is not of a terminological but of a semantic character. The standpoint that aspect is a category that does not concern relating situations to time spans but instead can be defined in a metaphorical and non-precise way as “a bounded situation” or a “completed action” makes it harder to distinguish between the perfect and the perfective. This is probably one of the most important reasons why the two have been confused.

### 1.3.4. Problems with existing analyses of aspect in Chinese

At least one of three problematic features characterize most of the existent studies of aspectual markers in Chinese:

- It is assumed that one marker is connected with one and only one aspect (one marker—one label) or/and that one aspect can be expressed by only one marker.
- The markers are described as solely aspectual since they can occur in sentences describing situations both in the past, present and future. It is usually argued that, if a marker can occur in different tenses, it cannot be a tense marker. In fact, this is only true to some extent. It cannot be an absolute tense marker since absolute tense concerns the relation between a reference time R and the speech time S,

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<sup>27</sup> Example (11) from Hedin (1987).

which means that an absolute tense marker can only signal one temporal position relative to the speech time. However, it **can** be a **relative** tense marker, since relative tense relates the time of a situation E to a reference time R, and is, therefore, independent of speech time.

- Aspect is metaphorically, not time-rationally, defined. The different aspects are described as different ways of manifesting “stages” or “phases” of a situation, or different “viewpoints” from which a situation is seen (such as at its starting point, from within, at its final point, after it has occurred, before it has occurred, etc). The more abstract and simple the definitions of the different aspects, the easier it is to accept that a certain marker can express a particular aspect in all contexts.

I propose that the temporal categories be assigned less abstract definitions. If instead the **markers** themselves are assigned more abstract meanings and other contextual elements are recognized as contributors to the aspect, tense or mood of a sentence as well, then grammatical form can be separated from semantic category. Each marker might have a feature that does not attach specifically to a certain aspect, tense or mood but can be adjusted, by using contextual means, to conform and contribute to the linguistic manifestation of a certain semantic category. Hence, it is easy to explain why grammatical markers like 着 *zhe*, *le* and 过 *guo* differ as to what core feature(s) they express, but can sometimes still express the same aspect or tense.<sup>28</sup> One single such marker can even contribute to several aspects or tenses and is not restricted to one.

In this study, the perfective is presented as an aspect category and the perfect as a tense category. Therefore, the distinction between the perfective and the perfect is easily recognized. The perfective is defined, according to a time-relational framework, as the linguistic manifestation of a situation with a boundary *included* in the reference time of the utterance (E incl in R). The perfect is defined, according to the same time-relational framework, as the linguistic manifestation of a situation with a boundary positioned *anterior to* the reference time of the utterance (E-R).

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<sup>28</sup> Huang (1987) shows that 过 *guo*, when it does not express experiential perfect can express perfective aspect and in those cases, like *le*, does not co-occur with negation (see also Teng 1973). But Huang notes that 过 *guo* and *le* contrast semantically, even if they both may express perfectivity:

- (a) 狗 刚才 吃 过 你 的 苹果  
 Gou gangcai chi *guo* ni de pingguo  
 dog just-now eat GUO you DE apple  
 The dog just took a bite of your apple
- (b) 狗 刚才 吃 了 你 的 苹果  
 Gou gangcai chi *le* ni de pingguo  
 dog just-now eat LE you DE apple  
 The dog just ate your apple

In the first sentence, focus is only on the partial eating of the apple, while in the latter case, the total eating of the apple is implied.

The Chinese verbal *le* has commonly been regarded as a marker of perfective aspect, and the interpretations of the utterances where it occurs are therefore in many works invariably called perfective interpretations, even if they manifest all the characteristics of a perfect such. This is an unfortunate effect of the “one marker—one label” view on grammatical markers. It does not seem as if assigning the ability to express a certain temporal structure to the marker **itself** benefits an analysis of the aspectual system in Chinese. In fact, such rigidity in the system causes problems for the analysis of non-default examples. One example is Klein’s (2000) analysis. Though he uses time-relational definitions of the aspects, according to him, each particle is related to only **one** temporal structure, a fact that unfortunately accounts for the same inflexibility in Klein’s system as in the not time-relational ones, exemplified by Li and Thompson (1981). Huang’s (1987) examples show that the default interpretation of a sentence with the marker 过 *guo* is experiential perfect but in certain contexts, it can also give a perfective interpretation or a perfect of result reading:

(12)

我	去	过	中国		
Wo	qu	<i>guo</i>	Zhongguo		
I	go	GUO	China		
I have been to China <sup>29</sup>					(experiential perfect)

(13)

他	睡	过	午觉	没有？	
Ta	shui	<i>guo</i>	wujiao	meiyou?	
he	sleep	GUO	noon-sleep	NEG	
Did he take a nap?					(perfective)

(14)

我	吃	过	饭	了	
Wo	chi	<i>guo</i>	fan	<i>le</i>	
I	eat	GUO	rice	LE	
I have had my meal already					(perfect of result)

In this study, one of my tasks will be to explain how the same form *le*, through its interaction with the context, can express two or more different sets of temporal structures. It will be shown that once the traditional assumptions are discarded, a much more flexible analysis of grammatical markers can be made. Such an analysis should be able to explain interpretations of sentences where the markers occur that would otherwise have to be labeled ‘variants’ of a certain aspectual meaning.

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<sup>29</sup> Examples (12), (13) and (14) from Huang (1987).

## 1.4. Modality

Just like aspect, modality is a concept that has been defined in various diffuse and vague ways. *The encyclopedia of language and linguistics* (Asher et al. 1994) says under the entry Mood and modality that “A number of different ideas have been proposed for the identification and delimitation of modality: attitudes and opinions of the speaker, speech acts, subjectivity, non-factivity, nonassertion, possibility and necessity, or, with special reference to the English modal verbs, a group of concepts that include possibility, necessity, obligation, volition and ability.”(1994, p. 2536)

The most commonly recognized modal distinction is the one between *epistemic* and *deontic* modality. Epistemic modality is basically concerned with modes of knowing. It expresses the speaker’s judgement of the probability of the occurrence of a situation.” (Tee 1985:84). Deontic modality, on the other hand, is concerned with modes of obligation, i.e. it expresses permission, obligation and forbiddance. Epistemic and deontic modality are often viewed as the core notions of modality, since both modality types are non-factual (i.e. they relate to non-actual worlds) and subjective (reflecting the view of the speaker). But often other types of modality are discussed in the literature as well, such as for example *evaluative* modality. It concerns the speaker’s attitude towards the utterance, for example expressing that something is contrary to expectations.

Tense, mood and aspect are often treated together, among other things since it is not always obvious that a certain form is strictly restricted to expressing only one of these categories. The past tense in English, for example, can be used to express subjunctive mood. Dahl (1985) uses the term *TMA categories* for tenses, moods and aspects. “[T]he semantics of TMA categories is connected with concepts that are fundamental to human thinking”. (Dahl 1985:1) Since modality is not treated to any great extent in this work, I will not attempt to work out a clearer definition of modality than the one mentioned above. In this work, modality will receive a broad definition as a category expressing *the attitudes and opinions of the speaker*. Further, a rather wide view on the modal system is taken. Features mentioned here that would probably by some linguists be considered as discourse features rather than modal features are assumed to be included in the modal system. As Palmer says: “...it is by no means always possible to make a clear distinction between a discourse and a modal feature” (1986, p. 91). In this present study sentence features associated with the speaker’s attitude towards the proposition are regarded as modal while features associated with the relation between the sentence and other sentences in the discourse are regarded as discourse features.

In Chinese, modality is expressed by adverbs, modal auxiliary verbs, intonation and modal particles. Except for sentence-final particles like 啊 *a*, 吗 *ma*, 吧 *ba*, 呢 *ne* and their allomorphs, sentence-final 的 *de* and 的 *le* are sometimes recognized as modal particles, or modal auxiliary words (Chao 1968; Fang et al 1994; Hu 1988). Using modal particles is one way of expressing a certain attitude towards what is said in an interactive discourse.

## 1.5. Concluding remarks

Since the terminology discussed in this chapter will be used extensively throughout the rest of this book, a summary of **my** definitions of some of the expressions introduced so far follows below. From now on, unless stated otherwise, these terms should be interpreted as follows:

**VP**: The verb phrase, i.e. the verb and its arguments (in this present work, by *argument* I refer in particular to the direct object NP). Durational adverbs will here be seen as extensions of the VP since they, like quantified direct object NPs, contribute to the path reading of a situation, i.e. they specify the extent or duration of an activity.

**NP**: It is assumed here that the semantics of the argument nominal phrase (NP) is important for the expression of *boundedness* of a situation (which distinguishes activities and states from accomplishments and achievements) and *duration* of a situation (which distinguishes achievements from accomplishments).

**Situation types**: This term refers to the distinct semantic categories into which primarily lexical entities consisting of the VP (including durational adverbs if present) can be classified according to their temporal characteristics. See however chapter 4, in which I propose that the scope of an aspectual marker may have impact on which components in a particular sentence that form the situation type. Situation type is determined by features such as the presence vs. non-presence of a natural boundary in the situation described and duration vs. non-duration of an action. Accomplishments (*paint a house*) and achievements (*reach the top*) have **natural** final end points. Activities (*run*) contain only **potential** final end points and states (*be blue*) have **no** end points.

**Path**: A quantified NP (*two carts, five apples, etc*) can represent a bounded set of temporal entities, a path. Quantification of the NP often results in boundedness, i.e. it provides the whole verb phrase with a final boundary at the same time as it specifies the duration of the situation. Quantified NPs cannot denote a path with all verbs and in all contexts, however. *Push two carts* does not describe a bounded situation (i.e. it has no natural final boundary) while *build two carts* normally does.

**Resultative (verb) compounds**: In Chinese, the so-called resultative complements occur with verbs. They have a lexical content and function primarily on the situation type level (marking a boundary). They signal the result of the situation described by the verbs that they are attached to. According to Smith (1997), there are two classes of complements; the Directional (such as 上 *shang* 'ascend', 出 *chu* 'out' and 过 *guo* 'cross') and the Resultative (Resultative Result state complements such as 饱 *bao* 'full' and 错 *cuo* 'wrong' or Resultative Phase complements such as 好 *hao* 'good' and 完 *wan* 'finished') complements.

**Reichenbach's times**: I follow the Reichenbachian schema for temporal structures underlying the tenses and the aspects. It consists of three times: Speech Time, Event

Time and Reference Time. Each aspect or tense can be described as the linguistic manifestation of a certain temporal structure formed by two or all three of these times. They can be defined thus:

- Speech Time (S)—the time when the utterance is made.
- Event Time (E)—the time when the situation described in the utterance obtains. The lexical content of the constellation that forms the situation type represents E. It specifies the duration of a situation and whether or not it has an initial and/or final boundary.
- Reference Time (R)—the time from which the situation is seen. Normally, the temporal expression in a sentence is assigned the function of denoting the Reference Time of the situation described in the sentence, but it can also be contextually implied:

(15)

- What did you do during your vacation?
- I went to see my aunt (implicit: *during my vacation*), who lives in France.

Sometimes, the temporal adverb refers to a temporal interval that includes the “real” reference time, which is implicit. For example:

(16)

- (talking about calling a friend on his birthday which—as both parties are aware of—was on Wednesday)
- I forgot to call him last week (implicit: *on Wednesday* last week). I called him on Friday instead.

**Aspect:** Aspect is defined as a semantic category the substance of which is temporal relations, primarily the inclusion/non-inclusion of temporal spans in each other and specifically *the inclusive/non-inclusive relationship between the Event Time E and the Reference Time R*. For the perfective aspect, either the initial end point (boundary) of E (*The next moment, the sky became red*), the final end point (boundary) of E (*He arrived in Beijing at five o'clock*), or possibly both (*Last week he bought three books*), must be included in R (E incl in R). For the imperfective aspect, on the other hand, it is R that is included in E, which means that the boundaries of E are outside R (*At five o'clock, he was walking home from work*) (R incl in E).

**Tense:** Tense is defined as a semantic category the substance of which is temporal relations, namely *the linear order of Reference Time R with respect to Speech Time S (for absolute tense) or of Event Time E with respect to Reference Time R (for relative tense)*. The absolute tenses can manifest the temporal structure R-S (*He walked to town*), R,S (*He walks to town*) and S-R (*He will walk to town*). The relative tenses describe situations as either anterior to R (E-R) (*Having walked to town...*), simultaneous with R (E,R) (*Walking to town...*) or posterior to R (R-E) (*Being about to walk to town...*). For the absolute-relative tenses there are two relevant relations, the order between R and S

and the one between E and R. E can be positioned anterior to R (retrospective) as in *By five o'clock he had walked to town* (E-R-S), *He has walked to town now* (E-R,S) and *Tomorrow he will have walked to town* (S-E-R), simultaneous with R as in *Yesterday afternoon he walked/was walking to town* (E,R-S), *He walks/ is walking to town now* (E,R,S) and *Tomorrow he will walk/will be walking to town* (S-E,R), or it can be positioned posterior to R (prospective) as in *Yesterday he was about to go to town* (R-E-S)), *Now he is about to go to town* (S,R-E) and *Tomorrow he will be about to go to town* (S-R-E).

**Modality:** This semantic category expresses *the attitudes and opinions of the speaker*. Using modal particles, for example, is one way of expressing a certain attitude towards what is said in an interactive discourse.

## 2. Problems with previous studies of *le*

*Le* is a grammatical, atonal morpheme in Mandarin Chinese. It can occur postposed to verbs, nouns (rarely) and sentences but it is seldom obligatory.

(17)

他 吃 了 三 个 苹 果  
Ta chi *le* san ge pingguo  
he eat LE three CL apple  
He ate three apples / He has (had) eaten three apples

(18)

我 写 错 了 那 个 字  
Wo xiecuo *le* nei ge zi  
I write-wrong LE that CL character  
I wrote that character wrong / I have (had) written that character wrong<sup>30</sup>

(19)

春 天 了  
Chuntian *le*  
spring LE  
It is spring now

(20)

他 声 明 他 推 出 那 个 组 织 了  
Ta shengming ta tuichu nei ge zuzhi *le*  
he announce he withdraw that CL organization LE  
He announced that he had withdrawn from that organization

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<sup>30</sup> Examples (18) and (20) from Li and Thompson (1981). I have added another possible translation (*I have (had) written that character wrong*) of (18).



- (21)
- |  |     |      |    |  |
|--|-----|------|----|--|
| 老王                                     | 吃   | 肉    | 了  |  |
| Lao Wang                               | chi | rou  | le |  |
| Lao Wang                               | eat | meat | LE |  |
| Lao Wang eats meat now (didn't before) |     |      |    |  |

Sometimes, two *le* occur in one simple sentence; one after the verb and one at the end of the sentence.

- (22)
- |                                      |     |       |      |    |       |    |       |    |
|--------------------------------------|-----|-------|------|----|-------|----|-------|----|
| 我                                    | 在   | 日本    | 住    | 了  | 两     | 个  | 月     | 了  |
| Wo                                   | zai | Riben | zhu  | le | liang | ge | yue   | le |
| I                                    | at  | Japan | live | LE | two   | CL | month | LE |
| I have lived in Japan for two months |     |       |      |    |       |    |       |    |

In most studies *le* is treated not as one morpheme but as two homophonous and homographic morphemes, one that is a verb suffix (henceforth *verbal le*) and one that is a sentence-final particle (henceforth *sentence-final le*) on a par with other sentence-final particles such as 呢 *ne*, 吗 *ma* and 吧 *ba*. Like the verbal markers 着 *zhe* and 过 *guo* it has usually been classified as an aspectual morpheme when it occurs post-verbally. Some have claimed that when *le* occurs in post-verbal position it expresses completion (Kwan-Terry (1979); Chao (1968) and Klein (2000)), others that it signals perfective aspect (Li and Thompson (1981); Smith (1997) and Mangione and Li (1993)<sup>31</sup>), past tense (Ross (1998)), anteriority (Melchert (1980)) or result (Sybesma (1997)), among other things. Its sentence-final counterpart has been described as a marker of modality (Fang et al (1992)), change of state/new situation/inchoativity (Chao (1968), Chan (1980), Melchert (1980) and Yong (1997)) and, recently, perfect aspect (Li and Thompson (1982) and Mochizuki (2000)). There are two *le*, states Lu Shuxiang in his famous grammar *Xiandai Hanyu babai ci* [Eight hundred words in Modern Chinese] (1980). According to him, verbal *le* signals completed action while sentence-final *le* asserts that a change of state has occurred or will occur. His opinion reflects the traditional view on *le*, i.e. that there are two homophonous markers *le* in Mandarin Chinese. However, in cases where it occurs after a verb that is sentence-final it is difficult to identify *le*.<sup>32</sup> This is only one of the problems with the traditional two-*le* theory, which has been challenged, in particular during recent years, by linguists such as Rohsenow (1978), Huang (1987), Shi (1988) and Liu (1998). They claim that there is in fact only **one** morpheme *le* and that *le* (regardless of syntactic position) has a unique meaning that is present in all occurrences of the marker.

Perhaps one of the main problems with existing analyses concerns the terminology that is used. For example, the confusion when it comes to the meaning of the concept 完成体 *wanchengti* in Chinese is disturbing, since many authors use this term to describe the

<sup>31</sup> It should be noted that Mangione and Li in fact describe *le* as a perfective morpheme that marks "that the event described by a given sentence is to be understood as occurring before sentence's reference time." (Mangione and Li 1993:66). Thus, in fact, it is also defined as a marker of anteriority in their work.

<sup>32</sup> See for example Shi's (1988) example (91).

meaning of the verbal *le*. As Mochizuki (2000) points out, this term is sometimes used with the meaning ‘perfect aspect’, sometimes with the meaning ‘perfective (or completive) aspect’, while in fact the semantic difference between these two concepts is of great importance for the study of aspect and tense.

When studying the existing literature on the marker(s) *le* in Mandarin Chinese, the reader might find herself quite disconcerted at the sight of so many different opinions on its meaning. For one thing, every author has his/her own definitions of common terms used in this work such as perfective aspect, perfect tense, inchoativity, relative anteriority, etc. Second, many use descriptions of the meaning of *le* that on closer inspection do not agree with its functions in different contexts.

Finally, some assume that there are two *les* with different meanings and functions, others argue that there is in fact only one *le*—with one meaning—that can occur in two syntactic positions. I will discuss all three of these problems in turn.

## 2.1. Terminological problems

Li and Thompson (1981) stipulate that **verbal** *le* is a *perfective aspect* marker. Being a perfective marker, it indicates that an event is being viewed in its entirety, i.e. as *bounded* in some way. Interestingly enough, Li and Thompson, having said that, state that “[T]here are essentially four ways in which an event can be bounded:

- A. By being a quantified event
- B. By being a definite or specific event
- C. By being inherently bounded because of the meaning of the verb
- D. By being the first event in a sequence” Li and Thompson (1981, p. 185-186)

**Sentence-final** *le* is one of six sentence-final particles in the Chinese language, according to Li and Thompson. *Le* differs from the others in that it can occur with other sentence-final particles:

(23)

她 买 房子 了 吗？  
Ta mai fangzi le ma?  
she buy house LE MA  
Did she buy a house?<sup>33</sup>

*Le* has a communicative function; to signal a “Currently Relevant State”. This means that “*le* claims that a *state of affairs has special current relevance with respect to some particular situation.*” (Li and Thompson 1981, p. 240) In later works (1982), they develop this idea by arguing that this is in fact the characteristics of the perfect, therefore, sentence-final *le* can be said to mark perfect aspect.<sup>34</sup> These claims will be further discussed in 2.2.5 and in chapter 6.

<sup>33</sup> Example (23) from Li and Thompson (1981).

<sup>34</sup> Li, Thompson and Thompson (1982) define the perfect as an aspect and not as a tense.

According to Li and Thompson (1981), verbal *le* marks an event as perfective, or bounded, but it occurs only in sentences that already in themselves describe situations as bounded. One might ask: If this were really the case, would *le* not in fact be superfluous? Boundedness is not the same as perfectivity. It is assumed in this study that the boundary-notion applies on two aspectual levels. Failure to distinguish between these two levels creates terminological confusion. Mochizuki (2000), for example, seems to mix up *terminativity*<sup>35</sup> and *inchoativity*<sup>36</sup> with the expression of the perfective and the perfect. Similarly, Melchert (1980) claims that sentence-final *le* marks the “so-called ‘inchoative aspect’” (Melchert 1980, p. 638) and Shi’s (1988) use of concepts like perfectivity, inchoativity and relative anteriority is equally confusing and seems to lead to incorrect assumptions.<sup>37</sup> In fact, inchoativity is the result of the addition of an initial boundary to a stative situation (which is otherwise unbounded). Inchoative situations can in their turn achieve a temporal interpretation on a **higher** level. For example, they can have perfect or perfective readings:

(24)

- (a) 现在 他 知道 了  
 (Xianzai) ta zhidao le  
 (now) he know LE  
 (Now) he knows<sup>38</sup> (inchoative (stative verb *zhidao* + *le*) and perfect)
- (b) 他 突然 知道 了  
 Ta (turan) zhidao le  
 he (suddenly) know LE  
 He suddenly realized (inchoative (stative verb *zhidao* + *le*) and perfective)

Perfectivity is an aspectual distinction on a higher level than that of inchoativity. A time-relational description of the aspects and tenses implies that the semantics of the perfective and the imperfective aspect as well as the perfect tense concerns relations between “outer” times such as Event Time E, Reference Time R and Speech Time S, while inchoativity is unrelated to these concepts as was shown in above examples, which are all inchoative. The opposite of inchoativity is instead *terminativity*:

<sup>35</sup> Terminativity can be defined as focus on the end point of situation (*The man jumped into the river, He bought two books*).

<sup>36</sup> Inchoativity can be defined as focus on the start point of a situation (*The sky became red*).

<sup>37</sup> The problems with Shi’s study should, however, not overshadow the fact that it does present several very interesting and innovative ideas about the marker *le* and its use and how a unified analysis of the marker(s) can be formulated using a non-formal framework.

<sup>38</sup> Or rather: ‘It has become the case that he knows’

- (25)
- (a) 他 (已经) 死了  
 Ta (yijing) si le  
 he already die LE  
 He is already dead<sup>39</sup> (terminative (achievement verb *si* + *le*) and perfect)
- (b) 他 (突然) 死了  
 Ta (turan) si le  
 he suddenly die le  
 He suddenly died (terminative (achievement verb *si* + *le*) and perfective)

According to Comrie, “[i]n many languages that have a distinction between perfective and imperfective forms, the perfective forms of some verbs, in particular of some stative verbs, can in fact be used to indicate the beginning of a situation”. (Comrie 1976, p. 19) It seems then as if it is in fact the characteristics of the predicate or the sentence that determines if the interpretation is to be inchoative or terminative while the expression of the perfect tense and the perfective aspect, on the other hand, is unconcerned with these characteristics.

Finally, *relative anteriority* is a concept that cannot be equated with perfectivity. Relative tense, as I have already established, relates a situation to a reference time R (as anterior to, simultaneous with or posterior to R). It is true that in some sentences with *le*, the situation described is interpreted as anterior to a certain reference time, such as for example in the speech situations of (24) (a) and (25) (a) above. This however, only shows that *le* is not (only) a perfective marker, since these are the characteristics of the perfect tense. The perfective aspect manifests linguistically a situation that is looked upon as included in R, not as anterior to it.

Metaphorical descriptions of the semantics of both the perfective aspect and the perfect tense abound in the literature. These descriptions are often unable to capture the distinction between the two categories, which also affects the interpretation of the semantics of the marker *le*. One such example is Sybesma’s (1997) claim that perfective semantics is about an action affecting the whole object. In fact, situations that are described as perfect may **also** be interpreted as actions affecting the whole object, i.e. as completed actions.

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<sup>39</sup> Or rather: ‘He has already died’

- (26)
- (a) 他 昨天 晚上 吃 了 三 条 鱼  
 Ta zuotian wanshang chi *le* san tiao yu  
 he yesterday evening eat LE three CL fish  
 Yesterday he ate three fishes
- (b) 他 已经 吃 了 三 条 鱼 ( 了 )  
 Ta yijing chi *le* san tiao yu (*le*)  
 he already eat LE three CL fish (LE)  
 He has already eaten three fishes

Both in (26) (a), a perfective sentence and in (26) (b), a perfect sentence, the action denoted by the verb affects the whole quantified object *san tiao yu* ‘three fishes’ and is perceived of as completed. But there is a difference between the interpretation of (26) (a) and that of (26) (b): (26) (a) does not relate the action to a posterior moment in time, for example the speech time S. In the speech situation of (26) (b) the listener may either expect the subject to continue eating, or conclude that he is too full to eat another fish. In any case, the listener knows that the subject at the moment of speaking has eaten those fishes (they are in his stomach). In (26) (a) on the other hand, this is not necessarily the case. The speaker may be talking about his friend’s eating habits, telling the audience that at a specific time in the past (yesterday evening) his friend ate three fishes. Whether or not the subject has eaten since, for example, is irrelevant. Or the utterance could initiate an account of what the friend did yesterday, in which case it would be followed by information about what he did after having eaten the fish. While Sybesma’s claim that sentences containing verbal *le* may have both completive or terminative readings seems correct, this does not affect its interpretation as perfect or perfective.

“Though one is justified in claiming that the verbal *le* is a perfect aspect marker since in all cases it indicates the notion of completion, one must at the same time bear in mind the two somewhat different meanings this verbal *le* has according to whether it is used with a dynamic or a stative verb.” (Kwan-Terry 1979, p. 44) Kwan-Terry equates completion with perfect tense (in her words, perfect aspect). However, the temporal nature of the perfect is quite well established in the literature. It is simply unconnected with concepts such as completion, which has more to do with the nature of the VP than with higher temporal categories.<sup>40</sup> This is another example that shows the discrepancy between uses of tense- and aspect-related terms.

Time-relational approaches such as Mangione and Li’s (1993) and Yong’s (1997) for different reasons also fail to observe the distinction between the two temporal structures (E incl in R) and (E-R) that can be expressed by sentences containing *le*. Mangione and Li’s (1993) definition of the perfective aspect does not agree with the one advocated in this thesis, since it says that for the perfective the event time is positioned **before** the reference time of the sentence (E-R) and not **inside** it (E incl in R). Yong (1997) equates the past occurrence of an action with perfectivity and thus manages to include both the temporal structure E incl in R and E-R under the term perfective aspect. According to the

<sup>40</sup> See also 2.2.2.

view represented by this present work, the perfective aspect is characterized in itself only by **one** temporal structure, which is the former, E incl in R. The structure E-R, on the other hand, is assigned to the expression of an anterior tense, such as relative anteriority or one of the perfect tenses, and not perfective aspect.

## 2.2. Definitions that fail to explain the function of *le*

### 2.2.1. Verbal *le* as a perfective marker

Some authors claim that verbal *le* **must** be an aspect marker since it can occur in both past time and future time. However, this is not entirely true. There are certain constraints on the appearance of verbal *le* in sentences describing future time situations. When *le* occurs in a sentence that describes a future situation, the boundary cannot be included in the reference time of that sentence. In other words, verbal *le*<sup>41</sup> does not mark perfective aspect in future contexts. In such contexts, the situation described in the clause that contains *le* refers to an anterior situation:

(27)

我	看	完	了	报		就	睡
Wo	kanwan		<i>le</i>	bao		jiu	shui
I	read-finish	LE	newspaper	then		sleep	
When I have finished reading the newspaper I will sleep							

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<sup>41</sup> Sentence-final *le* can occur in main clauses describing future perfective situations (S-E incl in R), but it then usually seems to contribute to the modal rather than the temporal reading of the sentence. For example:

(son to mother who has been urging him to write to his aunt)

我	明天		就	写	了
Wo	mingtian		jiu	xie	<i>le</i>
I	tomorrow		then	write	LE
(OK, OK,) I'll write tomorrow (i.e. you're wrong to think I'm never going to do it) (example from Li and Thompson (1981))					

(28)

一	小时	后，	我	就	已	写	完	了
Yi	xiaoshi	hou,	wo	jiu	yi	xiewan		le
one	hour	after	I	then	already	write-finish		LE
这	个	剧	本					
zhe	ge	juben						
this	CL	manuscript						

In an hour, I will have finished writing this manuscript<sup>42</sup>

(29)

别	告	诉	他	我	用	了	他	的	洗	衣	机
Bie	gaosu	ta	wo	yong	le	ta	de		xiyiji		
don't	tell	he	I	use	LE	he	DE		washing	machine	
Don't	tell	him	that	I	have	used	his	washing	machine		

Don't tell him that I have used his washing machine<sup>43</sup>

As Li (1999) points out, sentence (29) can be used even if the speaker has not used the washing machine at the time of the utterance. *Le* is attached to a verb that describes a future situation. However, it is not future with respect to the reference time. In the speaker's mind, he constructs a situation where he has already used the washing machine and the listener is expected to act in a certain way (not to tell the owner of the washing machine about the occurred event). The event of using the machine is then not a future perfective event<sup>44</sup> (S-E incl in R) but a future perfect event (S-E-R).

### 2.2.2. Verbal *le* as a marker of completion

Does the perfective aspect necessarily mean completed action? If so, does that mean that verbal *le* marks completion? *Le* marks the perfective aspect but it does not mean completion, only *termination* claims Smith (1997).

The example below shows that in Mandarin Chinese completion is not a relevant feature for the distinction between the perfective and the imperfective aspect.

(30)

我	昨天	画	了	一	张	画，
Wo	zuotian	hua	le	yi	zhang	hua,
I	yesterday	paint	LE	one	CL	picture
可是	没	画	完			
keshi	mei	huawan				
but	not	paint-finish				

?I painted a picture yesterday but I didn't finish it<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Example (28) from Hsiao (1991).

<sup>43</sup> Example (29) from Li (1999), translation mine.

<sup>44</sup> 'Don't tell him that I will use his washing machine (this afternoon)'

<sup>45</sup> Example (30) from Tai (1984).

Tai (1984) claims that only *resultative verb compounds* such as 画完 *huawan* ‘paint-finish’ or 学会 *xuehui* ‘learn’ can describe accomplishments, i.e. imply the attainment of a goal while simple verbs such as 画 *hua* ‘paint’ and 学 *xue* ‘study’ cannot. Sentences like (30) show that the presence of *le*, which contributes to a perfective reading of the activity, does not guarantee a completive reading of the predicate.

Sybesma (1997), who does not see *le* as an aspect marker but as a resultative complement, defines perfective semantics thus: “As soon as the action denoted by the verb has affected the entire object, the action is over, it is finished, it has been completed.” (Sybesma 1997, p. 241) Consequently, according to his theory, whenever there is a bounded object on which the action of the verb (to which verbal *le* is attached) can be applied, the result must be a completive (perfective) reading, because, then, the action can affect the **whole object**. On the other hand, when a mass object is involved, the interpretation is that of termination and not necessarily completion:

(31)

\*我 吃 了 一 条 鱼 ， 可 是 没 有 吃 完  
 \*Wo chi *le* yi tiao yu, keshi meiyou chiwan  
 I eat LE one CL fish but NEG eat-finish  
 I ate a fish but I didn’t finish it<sup>46</sup>

(32)

我 吃 了 鱼 ， 可 是 没 有 吃 完  
 Wo chi *le* yu, keshi meiyou chiwan  
 I eat LE fish but NEG eat-finish  
 I was eating fish, but I didn’t finish

However, Sybesma indicates in his concluding remarks that he is aware of a serious problem with this theory. As he himself points out, for sentences that contain an effective verb, like 写 *xie* ‘write’, a non-completion reading is accepted even when a bounded object NP is present:

(33)

我 写 了 一 封 信 ， 可 是 没 有 写 完  
 Wo xie *le* yi feng xin keshi meiyou xiewan  
 I write LE one CL letter but NEG write-finish  
 I wrote a letter (I did some writing on a letter), but I didn’t finish it

It is obvious that the bounded/mass object distinction is not sufficient criteria for distinguishing sentences that get a terminative reading with *le* from those that get a completive reading with *le*. Instead, the distinction must be made not only on the basis of the combination of the semantics of the verb and the quantification/non-quantification of

<sup>46</sup> Examples (31), (32) and (33) from Sybesma (1997).



the direct object NP, but also on other things such as the semantics of the direct object and on the context.

(34)

(a) 他 吃 了 一 个 苹 果  
Ta chi le yi ge pingguo  
he eat LE one CL apple  
He ate an apple

(b) 他 吃 了 那 个 苹 果  
Ta chi le na ge pingguo  
he eat LE that CL apple  
He ate that apple /He ate from that apple

他吃了一个苹果 *Ta chi le yi ge pingguo* in its most natural meaning will mean that “he” ate the whole apple. For (35), with a definite pronoun 那 *na* ‘that’ the reading is contextually dependent:

(35)

他 吃 了 那 个 苹 果 可 是 没 有 吃 完  
Ta chi le na ge pingguo keshi meiyou chiwan  
he eat LE that CL apple but NEG eat-finish  
He ate (from) that apple but he didn’t finish it

Or in a discussion about a person who got sick because he took a bite of an apple:

(36)

(a) 他 吃 了 那 个 苹 果 吗 ？  
Ta chi le na ge pingguo ma?  
he eat LE that CL apple MA  
Did he eat from that apple?

(b) 他 吃 了 这 两 个 苹 果  
Ta chi le zhe liang ge pingguo  
he eat LE this two CL apple  
He ate from these two apples

In (36) “he” may have just taken a bite out of each of the apples, i.e., the quantified object does not necessarily mean that the objects were consumed. Likewise, in certain contexts,

- (37)  
 他 看 了 那 本 书  
 Ta kan *le* nei ben shu  
 He read LE that CL book  
 He read (from) that book

would not necessarily mean that “he” read the whole book.

- (38)  
 我 今天 去 图书馆。 在 那儿 看 了 三 本 书  
 Wo jintian qu tushuguan. Zai nar kan *le* san ben shu  
 I today go library at there read LE three CL book  
 I went to the library today. I read three books there/I read from three books there

(38) does not have to mean that “he” read through all three books, he may have just looked through them, or read a bit from all three of them. Another example is (39):

- (39)  
 (a) ? 他 杀 了 一 个 人 可是 没有 杀死  
 ?Ta sha *le* yi ge ren keshi meiyou shasi  
 he kill LE one CL person but NEG kill-die  
 \*He killed a person but didn’t kill him

While (a) is not so good in Chinese, (b) is unproblematic:

- (b) 他 杀 了 那 个 人 可是 没有 杀死  
 Ta sha *le* nei ge ren/Zhangsan, keshi meiyou shasi  
 he kill LE that CL person/Zhangsan but NEG kill-die  
 \*He killed that person/Zhangsan, but didn’t kill him

In (b), 杀 *sha* has the meaning of “try to kill” instead of ‘kill’.

Although sentences containing a quantified object and verbal *le* do not in all contexts denote that there was a change of state in the direct object NP as a result of the activity denoted by the verb, they **do** refer to terminated activities. The range that the quantified object specifies then simply denotes the range of objects upon which the action was performed, not necessarily how or to what extent the objects were affected by the activity.

Kwan-Terry (1979) assumes that *le* marks completion. But examples such as (40), (41) and (42) show that her claim that verbal *le* expresses completion of action with dynamic verbs and completion of transition into a state with stative verbs is not very well founded:

(40)  
 天 晴 了 三 天  
 Tian qing *le* san tian  
 sky clear LE three day  
 The sky was clear for three days

(41)  
 他 写 了 信 可是 没 写完  
 Ta xie *le* xin keshi mei xiewan  
 he write LE letter but NEG write-finish  
 He wrote a letter but didn't finish it

(42)  
 衬衫 小 了 三 寸  
 Chenshan xiao *le* san cun  
 shirt small LE three inch  
 The shirt is too small by three inches

In (40) *le* is attached to a stative verb but the sentence does not describe the completion of the transition into a state. Instead it describes a durational state that lasted for a limited period of time. 写 *xie* 'write' is a dynamic verb but (41) shows that verbal *le* does not have to mean completion of the action "write a letter". In (42) verbal *le* occurs with a stative verb 小 *xiao* 'small'. In the interpretation indicated by the translation of this sentence, there is simply no trace of either a completion or transition meaning despite the presence of *le*.

According to Yong (1997), the fact that *le* is obligatory in the subclause of sequential sentences regardless of whether the event time is past, present or future shows that it marks completion. But Liu's (1998a) example shows that this is not correct. (43) (a) that contains the resultative complement 完 *wan* unequivocally denotes completion, (43) (b) that instead contains *le*, does not:

(43)  
 (a) 吃完 才 觉着 有点儿 香味儿  
 Chiwan cai juezhe youdianr xiangweir  
 eat-finish only then feel some taste  
 Only *after having finished the meal*, I noticed it had a nice flavour

- (b) 吃了才觉着有点儿香味儿  
*Chi le cai juezhe youdianr xiangweir*  
 eat LE only then feel some taste  
 Only *when I ate (had tasted it, had taken a few bites)*, I noticed it had a nice flavour<sup>47</sup>

Liu presents further evidence that *le* cannot mark completion, or *wancheng*, in all its occurrences:

(44)

- (a) 说完 没有 ?  
*Shuowan meiyou?*  
 talk-finish NEG  
 Did you finish talking?

- (b) 说了 没有 ?  
*Shuo le meiyou?*  
 Say LE NEG  
 Did you say(it)?

(45)

- (a) 好容易 当完 兵  
*Haorongyi dangwan bing*  
 with difficulty serve-finish military  
 It is not easy to finish the military service

- (b) 好容易 当了 兵  
*Haorongyi dang le bing*  
 with difficulty serve LE military  
 It is not easy to become a military

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<sup>47</sup> Examples (43), (44) and (45) from Liu (1998a), translation mine.

### 2.2.3. Verbal *le* as a marker of anteriority

Melchert (1980), like Mangione and Li (1993), argues that verbal *le* marks *anteriority* and Li (2000) claims that *le* is a *perfect aspect* (完成体 *wanchengti*) marker<sup>48</sup>. According to Li, it can express either completion (完毕 *wanbi*) or inception (生成 *shengcheng*) depending on in what contextual environment it occurs but signals, in all cases, that something happened **anterior** to a certain point in time.

(46)

我 吃 了 三 碗 饭  
Wo chi *le* san wan fan  
I eat LE three CL rice  
I ate three bowls of rice<sup>49</sup>

(47)

他 念 了 三 年 中文  
Ta nian *le* san nian zhongwen  
he study LE three year Chinese  
He studied Chinese for three years

Melchert's (1980) claim that verbal *le* in Chinese fills the role of the Latin perfect is correct, since according to Latin grammars, the Latin perfect form encompasses both the modern perfect and the perfective. It could describe a situation either as **anterior** to a past, present or future reference time or as **included** in a (past) reference time. However, Melchert's analysis meets with problems when he tries to show that both the Latin perfect and Chinese *le* signal anteriority and equates to the English Preterite form. First, in simple sentences like (46) and (47), taken out of their context, there are often two possible readings: a perfective reading and a perfect reading. The perfect reading, however, is the only reading that signals that the situation is anterior to a point in time. Interestingly enough, Melchert uses the Simple Past to translate both (46) and (47) which illustrates only the perfective reading. Even though verbal *le* **can** contribute to a perfect reading ('has eaten three meals', 'has studied three years of Chinese') of a situation that is described in the sentence, it is not the default reading of a sentence with verbal *le*, and it is definitely not the only possible meaning. Besides, the English Preterite (i.e. Simple

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<sup>48</sup> As I have mentioned, there is great confusion when it comes to the exact meaning of *wancheng* among the authors and it is almost impossible to be sure of what meaning a particular author has in mind when using the term if it is not translated into English. Besides, not even the articles where the English terms *perfective* and *perfect* are used are "safe" from this confusion. For example, Mangione and Li (1993) (see p. 24) uses a definition of the perfective aspect that other linguists would understand as a definition of the perfect tense. Anyway, in the case of Li (2000), I have chosen the translation "perfect" for one single reason. His definition of *le*, in his view a marker of the aspect called *wanchengti*, coincides with the common definition of the perfect tense, as he claims that it signals that something happened **before** a certain point in time.

<sup>49</sup> Examples (46) and (47) from Melchert (1980).

Past) is an absolute tense form. According to the time-relational tense system presented here, the temporal structure that underlies the present tense is R,S. The Preterite, being a past tense form, places R in a position anterior to S (R-S)—therefore it cannot be [+present] as Melchert claims! This means that the Preterite form in English does have the anteriority feature, but the times that are being related to each other by using it are different than the ones that are being related to each other by using a perfect form, in which case the relevant times are E and R. Finally, it is only when verbal *le* implies anteriority that it can occur in future contexts, such as for example in sequential sentences<sup>50</sup>.

While both Mangione and Li (1993) and Melchert (1980) incorrectly define verbal *le* as a marker of anteriority, other authors, such as Klein (2000) fail to see that *le* can mark anteriority at all. Klein's analysis is still very interesting because it is one of the few articles that attempt to use time-relational definitions of the functions of all the so-called aspect markers in Chinese.

Yong (1997), who claims that the default reading of a sentence that contains verbal *le* is one where the event is interpreted as anterior to R/S, fails to see that it is not necessarily the presence of verbal *le* and the absence of a specific reference time in 他已经写了信了 *Ta yijing xie le xin le* 'He has written (the) letter(s)') that produces a reading where R is simultaneous with S (R,S). The semantics of 已经 *yijing* 'already' rules out any reading where E is included in R (E incl in R), in fact, if 已经 *yijing* is present, E **must** be anterior to R (E-R). Besides, the presence of sentence-final *le* often gives a default perfect reading (i.e. a reading in which E is anterior to R) in co-occurrence with verbal *le*. Furthermore, R is not by definition simultaneous with S in such sentences. If the topic time of the context is some other time than the speech time, R can be either a past or a future time. Examples in later chapters will show this.

Yong's example 他昨天写了信 *Ta zuotian xie le xin* 'Yesterday he wrote (the) letter(s)') is ambiguous in another way. Yong claims that if a sentence contains an explicit temporal expression, the situation described must be interpreted as included in the reference time (E incl in R) and conversely, that a situation described in a sentence that does **not** contain an explicit reference time must have an anteriority reading (E-R). This statement is not correct. Although a perfective reading<sup>51</sup> might be default for a sentence with verbal *le* that contains a temporal expression denoting past time, a perfect reading is not outruled. For example, if the adverbial 已经 *yijing* is present, a perfect reading is forced onto such a sentence:

(48)

他	昨天	七	点	钟	已经	写	了	信
Ta	<u>zuotian</u>	<u>qi</u>	<u>dian</u>	<u>zhong</u>	yijing	xie	le	xin
he	yesterday	seven	point	clock	already	write	LE	letter
He had already written the letter by <u>seven o'clock yesterday</u>								

<sup>50</sup> See chapter 5.1.2.

<sup>51</sup> Perfective is here intended to describe the semantic category that is characterized by the temporal structure E incl in R, even if Yong's definition of the perfective is different.

Yong's claim that *le* marks simultaneity to R in all cases where the sentence contains an explicit reference time is thus not justified.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand is not hard to find a sentence that **lacks** an explicit temporal adverb but still describe a situation as included in a specific reference time. The reference time can be provided by the context (underlined section):

(49)

到 了 牛 老 师 家 以 后 ， 他 问 我  
Dao le Niu laoshi jia yihou, ta wen wo  
 arrive LE Niu teacher home after he ask I  
 是 怎 么 来 的 。 我 说 是 坐  
 shi zenme lai de. Wo shuo shi zuo  
 be how come DE I say be sit  
 公 共 汽 车 来 的 ， 并 且 向 他  
 gonggongqiche lai de, bingqie xiang ta  
 bus come DE moreover towards he  
 讲 了 问 路 的 情 况 。  
 jiang le wen lu de qingkuang  
 tell LE ask way DE circumstances  
When we had arrived at teacher Niu's home, he asked how I had got  
 there. I said that I had come by bus and *told him about what had  
 happened when I asked for directions*

#### 2.2.4. Sentence-final *le* as an inchoative marker

Melchert (1980) discusses the specific function of **sentence-final** *le*. He argues that it implies an starting point but no endpoint for the condition expressed by the predicate. Yong (1997) claims that sentence-final *le* is an inchoative marker that marks the start point of a situation. The examples below undermine these statements:

(50)

你 上 个 周 末 做 什 么 了 ？  
 Ni shang ge zhoumo zuo shenme le?  
 you up CL weekend do what LE  
 What did you do last weekend?<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, R cannot be simultaneous with S (R,S) in sentences where there is an adverb specifying a reference time that is not the present moment.

<sup>53</sup> Examples (50), (51) and (52) from Liu (1998)

(51)  
 王 先生 上 个 月 去 中国 了  
 Wang xiansheng shang ge yue qu Zhongguo le  
 Wang Mr up CL month go China LE  
 Mr Wang went to China last month

(52)  
 他 昨天 看 大夫 了  
 Ta zuotian kan daifu le  
 he yesterday see doctor LE  
 He went to see a doctor yesterday

(53)  
 学费 太 贵 了<sup>54</sup>  
 Xuefei tai gui le  
 tuition too high LE  
 The tuition fee is really too high

In neither of these sentences does *le* mark the “entry into a state” or the starting point of the situation described by the predicate. Examples like these and (54) and (55) below show that Melchert’s implication that sentence-final *le* necessarily connects the act described in the sentence to the present time is also incorrect:

(54)  
 过 了 上 下 班 的 时 候 火 车 就 空 了  
 Guo le shang xia ban de shihou huoche jiu kong le  
 pass LE up down shift DE time train then empty LE  
 Once rush hour is over, the train becomes empty<sup>55</sup>

The situation that the train is empty does not obtain before the present moment, in fact, it is not described as related to the present moment in any way. Still, it is followed by sentence-final *le*.

(55)  
 我们 走 得 很 累 了  
 Women zou de hen lei le (describing an afternoon of walking)  
 we walk DE very tired LE  
 We had walked so much that we’d gotten very tired

<sup>54</sup> Example (53) from Li and Thompson (1981)

<sup>55</sup> Examples (54) and (55) from Li and Thompson (1981).



Sentence (55) can describe a situation as anterior to a specific time in the past (E-R-S), as the translation indicates. So the situation is unconnected to the present moment, even though the sentence contains sentence-final *le*.

### 2.2.5. Sentence-final *le* as a perfect marker

Li, Thompson and Thompson (1982) argue that sentence-final *le* in Chinese manifests the perfect aspect by signalling *current relevance*, i.e. that a state of affairs has special current relevance to a reference time, which, according to them, is the basic discourse function of the Perfect aspect. Following Friedrich (1974), they adopt a view on the perfect as one of three “basic aspect categories”.<sup>56</sup> This conflicts with the view taken in this book, that the perfect is a tense. Their description of the semantics of the perfect, however, does not differ in any significant way from others found in the literature: “the essence of the Perfect is its function of relating events/states to a Reference Time, either to the time of the narrative or to the time of the speech act”. (Li, Thompson and Thompson 1982:19)

An important difference between theirs and the conventional time-relational definition of the perfect lies in **what** exactly is being related to the reference time: “...in a broad sense, the Perfect aspect says that some event, state or **comment** [emphasis mine] is relevant to the “here and now” of the speech situation”. (Li, Thompson and Thompson 1982:22) It is evident that, according to this view, not only the time of an event described in an utterance, but **all kinds of information** conveyed by the utterance, can be said to constitute the “stuff” that is being related to some reference time:

(56)

这	个	木	瓜	很	甜	了
Zhei	ge	mugua	hen	tian	<i>le</i>	
this	CL	papaya	very	sweet	LE	
This papaya is very sweet <sup>57</sup>						

”Though not conveyed by the English translation, (28)B [(56)] means that the sweetness of the papaya is relevant for the current situation”. (Li and Thompson 1982, p. 24) Obviously, any kind of information in a message, also non-temporal such, can be regarded as “currently relevant”. Since (56) does not describe a situation as related to an anterior event it can, however, not be called perfect according to the Reichenbachian framework.

According to Li and Thompson (1981) there are five categories of sentences in which sentence-final *le* can express current relevance:

A: It is a changed state

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<sup>56</sup> The other categories are the durative/imperfective aspect and the punctual/ perfective aspect.

<sup>57</sup> Example (56) from Li and Thompson (1981).

(57)

我 知道 了  
Wo zhidao le  
I know LE  
Now I know<sup>58</sup>

(58)

他 逃 得 出来 了  
Ta tao de chulai le  
he escape DE out-come LE  
He can escape now (couldn't before)

B: It corrects a wrong assumption

(59)

咳， 呱呱！ 你 往 北方 去 了！  
Hai, Guagua! Ni wang beifang qu le!  
hey Quacky you towards north direction go LE  
Hey, Quacky! You're going north (and not south as you obviously are assuming)

C: It reports progress so far

(60)

我 昨天 到 张 家 吃饭 了  
Wo zuotian dao Zhang jia chifan le  
I yesterday go to Zhang home eat LE  
(Well), I (finally) went yesterday to have dinner at the Zhangs'

(61)

那 位 女士 怀 了 八 个 月  
Nei wei nüshi huai le ba ge yue  
that CL woman have (conceive) LE eight CL month  
孕 了  
yun le  
pregnancy LE  
That woman is eight months pregnant

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<sup>58</sup> Examples (57), (58), (59), (60), (61), (62), (63) and (64) from Li and Thomson (1981).

D: It determines what will happen next

(62)

我 喝 了 三 杯 了 !  
Wo he le san bei le!  
I drink LE three glass LE  
(Look—I tell you) I've drunk three glasses (so don't pour me any  
more / quit saying ganbei 'bottoms up' to me/ let's just talk now, etc)!

(63)

小 黄 快 要 来 了  
Xiao Huang kuai yao lai le  
Xiao Huang soon will come LE  
Xiao Huang is about to arrive (so: hide the gifts / put your pants on /  
get ready to holler "surprise" etc)!

E: It is the speaker's total contribution to the conversation at that point

(64)

学费 太 贵 了  
xuefei tai gui le  
tuition fee too expensive LE  
(I tell you,) the tuition fee is (really) to high!

These examples show another significant difference between Li, Thompson and Thompson's definition of the perfect and the time-relational definition: they obviously do not regard anteriority as a basic feature of the perfect. Only if the situation described can be seen as an anterior event (with effects on some posterior situation) or as the **result** of an anterior event can we speak about temporal anteriority and neither (59), (63) or (64)—at least not with the translations given—describe such situations. Furthermore, in (60) the temporal adverb 昨天 *zuotian* 'yesterday', can function as an "anchor"<sup>59</sup> to which the time of the event 到张家吃饭 *dao Zhang jia chi fan* 'go to the Zhang's for dinner' is linked, while the perfect does not have a definite (i.e. anchored) event time. In (63), although the current relevance is strongly implied, there is no sense of anteriority either

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<sup>59</sup> Elsness (1991) writes: "The PRET [preterite] tense can thus be said to have a two-fold meaning: it means (a) that the verbal situation is located in the past, and (b) that the speaker (encoder) has in mind a particular past time and further assumes that the addressee (decoder) should be able to infer what this time is. ... In the most typical, but in most texts probably not the most frequent, case a temporal adverbial will satisfy the contextual requirement imposed by (b):

(2:4) John was drunk last night.

I shall refer to temporal adverbials and other elements performing this function as **anchors**.  
(Elsness 1991, p. 24)

(the event described is one that will happen **after** reference time). Rather, this sentence would constitute a good example of what Comrie calls prospective aspect, the opposite of the perfect.<sup>60</sup>

## 2.3. One or two *le*?

Under this heading, three of the most common arguments in favour of a treatment of the marker *le* in Chinese as two homophonous morphemes with different functions will be discussed. Two of the claims, first that verbal *le* and sentence-final *le* have different historical origins and second that they correspond to two different morphemes in some Chinese dialects, will be examined in 2.3.1. and 2.3.2. respectively. In 2.3.3. I will discuss the third argument; that *le*, when it occurs in verbal position has semantic properties that are distinct from those of *le* in the sentence-final position. I will also look at some existent attempts to unified treatments of *le*. In the remaining chapters I will present further evidence from modern narrative texts that show that the dual syntactic position is not a valid argument for a divided treatment of the marker *le*.

### 2.3.1. The historical origin issue

Chao (1968) claims that the suffix *le* “should be distinguished from a homophonous particle *le*, probably a weak form of *lai*, ‘comes’”. (Chao 1968, p. 246) However, as Shi (1988) points out, *le* in modern Chinese and 来 *lai* are written with distinct characters and the characters 了 and 来 had distinct pronunciations and meanings in classical Chinese. It would therefore be difficult to explain how 来 *lai* could become *le* in modern Chinese. Shi’s alternative proposal is that 来 *lai* in classical Chinese corresponds, not to the sentence-final *le*, but to the sentence-final marker 来着 *laizhe* in contemporary Chinese.

According to Mei Zulin (1999), texts from the “Warring States” period (403-221 B.C.) show that the common method for expressing completive aspect during that time was to put a verb that expressed completion **after** the VP. The character 了 represented a verb with the meaning ‘finish, complete’ and was pronounced *liao*<sup>61</sup>. 了<sup>62</sup> seems to have become the dominant completive verb around the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century (Cao 1995). Shi

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<sup>60</sup> Cf Comrie (1976). In fact, Mochizuki (2000) also notes that sentence-final *le* can be used in prospective sentences, i.e. sentences that describe events as positioned posterior to a reference time (R-E) like (63). In prospective sentences, as in perfect sentences, an event is related to a reference time with which it is not simultaneous. It is possible that sentence-final *le* may contribute to a prospective reading when it is combined with certain contextual features, for example verbs like 要 *yao* ‘will’ and adverbs like 马上 *mashang* ‘immediately’. However, this type of sentences will not be treated in this thesis.

<sup>61</sup> *Liao* still exists as a verb in modern Chinese, having basically two meanings, ‘understand’ and ‘finish’. The character 了 is also pronounced *liao* when it occurs in the construction verb + 得 + 了, meaning ‘manage to X’, ‘be able to X’.

<sup>62</sup> The character 了 will be used instead of the transcribed form *le* in this chapter (except for in the transcription of the examples, where the modern form will be used), as it is unclear exactly when the pronunciation *liao* was exchanged for the pronunciation *le*.

(1988) states that in texts from the 10<sup>th</sup> century, 了 is only found in clause-final position, i.e. never **before** the object NP, and in 90% of the cases in the texts that Shi has analysed from this period, it is found in the subclause of complex sentences consisting of temporal clauses, signalling relative anteriority.

(65)

军官 食了， 便即 渡江  
 Junguan shi le, bian ji du jiang<sup>63</sup>  
 army eat LE then at once cross river  
 After eating, the army started to cross the river<sup>64</sup>

(66)

候脉了， 其人云。。。  
 Hou mai le, qi ren yun  
 wait pulse LE that person say  
 After taking the pulse, the man said...

According to Wu (1998), while the 了 that occurred in the structure verb + object NP + 了 during the Tang period (618-907) was always a main verb, in the co-existing simpler structure verb + 了 that lacked the object NP, it was usually a resultative complement. In 95% of the cases<sup>65</sup> when adverbs occur in the latter structure, they are found, not between the verb and 了 but before the verb, which shows that 了 is not a verb in those sentences. These ideas are in fact found already in Zhao (1979). Wu further claims that this resultative complement 了 was gradually grammaticalized and lost its semantic content so that it could be called a phase complement, a term which is sometimes used for a complement with semantics that is weaker and more closely tied to the verb than that of a resultative.<sup>66</sup> The weakening of the semantic content of 了 would then be one of the reasons why the structure verb + 了 + object NP, which is common in modern Chinese, could appear. Another reason, according to Wu, was the influence from the structure in which other phase complements such as 却, 将, 得, 去 and 来 occurred during the Tang dynasty. These complements signalled, writes Wu, the realization or completion of a situation but they had retained some semantic content that separated them from each other. For example 却, which had the meaning of '(get rid) of' can be compared to 得, which had the meaning of 'reach; achieve'. According to Mei (1999), 却 was probably the most influential complement for the transfer of 了 from post-object position to pre-object position. The phase complements could occur both in the structure verb + phase complement + object NP and in the structure verb + phase complement.

<sup>63</sup> Modern pinyin transcription is provided for the Chinese examples in this chapter.

<sup>64</sup> Examples (65) and (66) from Shi (1988).

<sup>65</sup> Wu has found these figures in Li and Shi (1997).

<sup>66</sup> Sometimes certain complements in modern Chinese, for example 完 *wan* 'finish' and 好 *hao* 'good'; 'finish' are called *phase complements* rather than resultative complements although syntactically, they function like resultative complements.

Verb + 却 + object NP

(67)

汉	帝	不	忆	李	将军，	楚	王
Han	di	bu	yi	Li	jiangjun,	Chu	wang
Han	emperor	NEG	remember	Li	general	Chu	prince
放	却	屈	大夫 <sup>67</sup>				
fang	que	Qu	dafu				
put	QUE	Qu	master				

The Han emperor did not call to memory general Li. The prince of Chu discarded master Qu.

This structure thus co-existed with the verb + object NP + 了 structure.

Sentences that contained the predicate 了 could have two kinds of interpretations, claims Cao (1995). They could either predicate of the state of a “whole situation” described in the sentence, or of the action represented by the VP. Soon, this structure started to appear at the end of sentences, instead of as before, in the subclause of complex sentences.<sup>68</sup> In texts from late Tang a new structure can be seen:

Verb + 却 + object NP + 了

(68)

雪峰	放	却	坑	水	了	运：	“	水	月	在
Xue Feng	fang	QUE	yuan	shui	le	yun:	“	Shui	yue	zai
Xue Feng	put	QUE	pond	water	LE	say	water	moon	at	
什摩	处？	”								
shenmo	chu?”									
what	place									

Xue Feng disturbed the water in the pond and said: “Where now is the moon in the water?”

This was a merge of the two co-existing structures for expressing completive aspect. Already in late Tang, 却 started to gradually become replaced by 了 and during Southern Song (1127-1279) the structure

verb + 了 + object NP (+ 了)

had become very common, claims Cao. According to him it is highly probable that 却 at this time had already disappeared completely from colloquial Chinese in favour of 了.

<sup>67</sup> Examples (67), (68) and (69) from Cao (1995).

<sup>68</sup> This does not accord completely with Shi's conclusions. According to Shi's (1988) study of 10<sup>th</sup> century texts, the few instances of this structure in sentence-final position (in which 了 in fact was a resultative complement rather than a verb, according to him) existed during the same period as the subclause construction.

(69)

人 要 为 圣贤， 须 是 猛起 服  
Ren yao wei shenxian, xu shi mengqi fu  
person want be virtuous need be use strength take  
瞑眩 之 药 相似， 教 他 麻 了  
mingxuan zhi yao xiangsi, jiao ta ma le  
dizziness ZHI medicine alike let he numb LE  
一 上 了， 及 其 定， 病 自 退 了  
yi shang le, ji qi ding, bing zi tui le  
one up LE reach its stability illness self recede LE  
If one will be virtuous, it is necessary to proceed stalwartly as when taking a  
numbing medicine; allow it to produce insensibility, and once it has reached its full  
effect, the illness will recede by itself

During Song (960-1279) the last step towards complete grammaticalization was taken, as other complements started to appear between the verb and 了:

(70)

如 今 都 教坏 了 学生， 个个 不 肯 读书<sup>69</sup>  
Ru jin dou jiaohuai le xuesheng, gege bu ken du shu  
Like now all teach-wrong LE student all NEG willing study  
Now that he has misinstructed the students, no-one is willing to study

That meant that 了 was no longer a complement to the verb but a grammatical morpheme expressing completive aspect. During the same period (late Tang to Song), the **verb** 了—which all this time had continued to appear after the direct object NP as a main verb—was, too, completely grammaticalized. This was the forming of today's sentence-final marker 了. According to Shi (1988), 10% of the occurrences of 了 in 10<sup>th</sup> century texts were found in main clauses, in sentences that shared certain features. “The usage of LIAO in these sentences is very similar to that of the sentential LE in modern Chinese. It occurs at the end of sentences that denote unbounded situations resulting in the inchoative reading of these sentences. This seems to indicate that the sentential LE has the same origin as the verbal LE, i.e. the verb LIAO in the 10<sup>th</sup> century.” (Shi 1988, p. 132)

Cao (1995) claims that when 了 appeared at the end of main clauses it was often followed by 也. As the sentences where it occurred became longer and more complicated it soon no longer had any direct ties to the VP. In texts from Northern Song (960-1127) the examples of sentences where 了 occurs at the end of main clauses are quite common and 也 starts to disappear from the structure.<sup>70</sup> As 了 at the same time starts to replace

<sup>69</sup> Example (70) from Wu (1998).

<sup>70</sup> 也 would reappear with sentence-final 了 during the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368). According to Cao (1995), this reappearance might have been caused by the style or rhyme of popular operas at this time, or by the influence from the Northern dialects on the political jargon. 也 seems to have remained longer as a sentence-final particle in the north than in the south (and can in fact still be traced in the pronunciation of *le* in some northern dialects, as has been observed by Liu 1998b). However, the reappearance of 也 with

却] at its position inside the VP, the sentence construction verb + 了 + object NP + 了 appears. Liu (1998b), too, mentions the use of 也 in combination with sentence-final 了. According to him, the combination 了 + 也 forms the origin of today's sentence-final particle 了. Evidence for this can be found in modern days in Shanxi dialects, where the morpheme 了 is pronounced differently depending on its syntactic position. The same goes for 也, which can occur both inside the sentence and sentence-finally in these dialects. The phonetic differences between the occurrences of 也 matches those between the occurrences of 了.

To conclude, the opinions as to the development of the verb 了 in classical Chinese into the grammatical marker 了 in modern Chinese appear to be, to a rather large extent, in accordance with each other. The main verb 了 started to appear in the modern structure as a result of the influence from phase complements that already existed in the structure verb + phase complement + NP and this was a step in the grammaticalization process from main verb via resultative/phase complement to grammatical morpheme. It also seems clear that the main verb 了 (*liao*) is the origin of both today's so-called verbal 了 and sentence-final 了. While 了 functioned as a resultative complement it still continued to appear in certain main clauses as a (sentence-final) main verb. Later (late Tang to early Song) this 了 became grammaticalized, i.e. gradually lost its verbness—and turned into a sentence-final grammatical morpheme 了—in about the same period as other complements started to appear between the verb and 了 in the new structure verb + 了 (+ object NP), the signal of complete grammaticalization of the former complement 了.

### 2.3.2. The dialect issue

It is sometimes claimed<sup>71</sup> that, since in some other Chinese dialects there are two different forms corresponding to the verbal *le* and the sentential *le* in Mandarin Chinese, there must be two distinct *le* in Mandarin Chinese. However, as I will show, this argument fails for many reasons. One reason is that the dialectal forms, though functionally similar to the Mandarin *le*, are no relatives of *le*. Some dialects (such as Cantonese) use a cognate to Mandarin *le* in sentence-final position (*laa3* in Cantonese). In verbal position, however, many dialects use markers that express basically the same as, but which are non-cognates to, Mandarin *le*. Another reason is that historically, as we have seen, many verbal complements were used in the same way as the origin to Mandarin *le*, *liao*, and had hypothetically speaking equal potentiality as *liao* to evolve into grammatical markers expressing what *le* expresses in modern standard Chinese. Nothing speaks against the possibility that, in fact, in some other dialects, this is exactly what happened. A third reason is that there may be constraints on the dialectal verbal markers that are not the same as those for Mandarin *le*, and vice versa.

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sentence-final 了 can be looked upon as a short-lived trend since it is no longer found in texts from the Ming dynasty (1368-1644).

<sup>71</sup> See Chao (1968) and Teng (1973) inter alia.



### 2.3.2.1. Cantonese

In Cantonese, a verbal marker 㗎 *jó* expresses what is usually expressed by verbal *le* in Mandarin Chinese. The origin of 㗎 *jó* is not attested. However, Mei (1979) has shown that it can be traced back to one Middle Chinese<sup>72</sup> pronunciation, *tiwo*, of the character 著 which is also the lexical source of modern Mandarin aspect marker 着 *zhe*. 㗎 *jó* became the sole representative for the perfective aspect after 1940, claims Cheung (1997) who has studied textbooks and teaching materials for Cantonese spanning over a period of about one hundred years, from 1841 to 1947<sup>73</sup>. So how did this form emerge?

According to Cheung, the rich aspectual system of Cantonese is expressed primarily through grammatical markers that are characterized by a velar initial. There are some exceptions to the rule, such as the durative marker 住 *jyuh* and the perfective 㗎 *jó*. Cheung argues that both 住 *jyuh* and 㗎 *jó* have as their origin 著<sup>74</sup>, which is the lexical source of both the durative marker 着 *zhe* in modern Mandarin and the combined perfective and durative marker 仔 *tsi* in Wu dialect. In Cantonese, two phonologically different suffixes emerged from this form, one (住 *jyuh*) expressing the durative and one (㗎 *jó*) the perfective. 㗎 *jó* kept the original ending of 著 according to the Middle Chinese rhyming dictionary Qieyun, *-o*. That means that Cantonese has one velar and one dental series in its aspectual system. Up until the 1940s, the two systems both had one perfective aspect marker each. In the velar system, it was the marker 休 *hiu* and in the dental the aforementioned 㗎 *jó*, resulting in a competition between 休 *hiu* and 㗎 *jó*, two markers that essentially shared the same functions. Cheung remarks that it is probable that both markers existed long before the 1850s, though the material examined is unable to show if this is the case. 休 *hiu* was preserved in the form of a changed tone on the verb as an alternative means to express perfective aspect long after the morphological form 休 *hiu* had disappeared from the language in the 1940s. The changed tone was probably the result of a fusion between the verb and 休 *hiu*, since early materials show cases where 休 *hiu* continues to appear with the changed tone verb. There are no cases where 㗎 *jó* occurs with a changed tone verb, which seems to indicate that it is the later lost 休 *hiu*, and not the coexistent marker 㗎 *jó* which is the origin of the changed tone in the verb. This way of expressing perfective aspect (changed tone verb) was used interchangeably with 㗎 *jó* up to the 1970s. After that, 㗎 *jó* was used as the only way of expressing perfective aspect.

In the data examined by Cheung, there are no examples of the character for 㗎 *jó* in texts from before 1900. In fact, in the earliest textbook, Cantonese Chrestomathy, from 1841, there are no examples of either 㗎 *jó*, 休 *hiu* or changed tone verb. Instead, there are a number of cases where the marker *liuh* (了), which is the counterpart of Mandarin

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<sup>72</sup> The era in Chinese history that spans between the years 201-1000 (Sun 1998)

<sup>73</sup> As Cheung points out, shortage of data is a problem for all diachronic studies in Cantonese, since writings in the regional idiom were very few up until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Before that, the majority of the works were written in Mandarin. The earliest larger work in Cantonese, according to Cheung, dates to early 19<sup>th</sup> century but it is a mixture of vernacular and classical style.

<sup>74</sup> Since 著 here represents a classical morpheme for which the exact pronunciation in different periods is somewhat unclear, I have not included a pinyin transcription.

*le*, is used as a perfective marker. *Liuh* does not occur in modern colloquial Cantonese and is probably a loan from the written language, which is to a large extent based on the northern language. It is very likely, says Cheung, that the *liuh* found in the 19<sup>th</sup> century texts was (in a quite common manner for writers in the colloquial style) used to represent a colloquial Cantonese marker that still had no graphic representation of its own, 𠵼 *jó*. In a later textbook from 1888, *liuh* alternates with 休 *hiu*. The two markers seem to have been used interchangeably but according to the data, *liuh* was much more prevalent than 休 *hiu* at the end of the century. If Cheung is right, 𠵼 *jó* appeared in Cantonese at least half a century before 休 *hiu*, since only *liuh* and no other perfective markers are found in the earliest texts.

Chappell (1994) lists the five main characteristics shared by the marker *le* in modern Mandarin Chinese and the marker 𠵼 *jó* in modern Cantonese:

- Both express completion of an event, typically interpreted as belonging to a past context
- Both may be used in irrealis contexts in the first clause of a sentence, to denote a condition that has to be fulfilled in order for another situation to take place
- Both may express anteriority of a past perfective event, similar to the English perfect aspect/tense
- Both may be used in imperatives to convey urgency or necessity
- Neither marker may occur in a negated clause

“All these uses can thus be semantically related by the feature of completion of an event” (Chappell 1994, p. 156) claims Chappell. If both Cantonese 𠵼 *jó* and Mandarin *le* originate from verbs, at a later stage developing into verbal complements expressing result and/or direction<sup>75</sup>, it is not difficult to imagine that when both markers had become de-semantised and as their earlier distinct meanings were gradually lost in favour of more abstract meanings, these meanings coalesced. However, according to Chappell there is one aspect in which 𠵼 *jó* and *le* differ. It concerns a syntactic restriction on, or rather a strong tendency of, Mandarin *le* to occur mainly in past contexts where the sentence contains a postverbal **quantified** noun. This restriction does not apply for Cantonese 𠵼 *jó* and therefore is not a motivation for its use, as it is for the marker *le*. Chappell argues that it is the discourse function of signaling a peak that motivates the use of 𠵼 *jó* rather than syntactic or semantic conditions such as the presence of a quantified complement or the completive meaning.

### 2.3.2.2. Other dialects

It is possible, says Chappell (1992), that the Minnan dialect shows evidence of an earlier stage of Sinitic since it does not use semantically empty markers to express aspect, but rather preverbal adverbs, a method which seems to have been used in early Chinese. In

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<sup>75</sup> According to Cao (1995), 着 *zhe* originated as a verb meaning ‘attach to; adhere’ and later developed into a complement with both directional and resultative meaning, expressing the movement and attachment of an object onto some other object.

Mandarin and Cantonese, with the rise of resultative complements and the extension of these into performing aspectual functions as well, a more grammaticized system emerged, while the Minnan dialect uses periphrasis or resultative complements as opposed to suffixes. This shows that the development of aspectual markers is similar, but not necessarily synchronous, in all dialects of Chinese.

It is not only in Cantonese that the perfective marker seems to have originated in the verb 著. In both Wu and Xiang dialects, cognates to Mandarin 着 *zhe* can be found expressing perfective aspect, according to Sun (1998). In Wu, as earlier observations by Mei (1979) show, the morpheme 仔 *tsi* is used to mark perfective aspect. The lexical source of 仔 *tsi* is 著. 著 as a suffix expressing the progressive can be found in texts from the 9<sup>th</sup> century, writes Mei (1979), but it occurred only with stative verbs. In fact, it was not until the 12<sup>th</sup> century that it became more widely used with activity verbs. A possible explanation to the route of development of 著 in Wu, according to Mei, relates to the fronting process that occurred in Mandarin, where elements such as resultative complements and potential complements were moved from sentence-final position to verbal position. Mandarin 了 was moved to a syntactic position after the verb in which it competed with 著. In texts from the 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> century both 了 and 著 are found in this syntactic position, according to Mei. Obviously, 了 won out as the perfective suffix in Mandarin while 著 (仔) won out in Wu.

仔's cognate in the Xiang dialect is 达 *da*, pronounced *ta* in this dialect, which is also a perfective marker. In fact, 达 *ta*, like *le* in modern Mandarin, can be used both as a verbal suffix and a sentence-final particle. In its sentence-final position, it has the ability of marking the perfect aspect, according to Sun (1998).

(71)

吃	达	饭	达
Tcia	<i>ta</i>	fan	<i>ta</i>
eat	TA	rice	TA

(Someone) has eaten<sup>76</sup>

(72)

吃饭	达
Tciafan	<i>ta</i>
eat	TA

It's time to eat

However, it seems as if the function of 达 *ta* is not completely identical to the function of Mandarin *le*, as in some cases it is more appropriately translated into Mandarin using verbal complements such as the directional 下来 *xialai* or 下 *xia* 'down',<sup>77</sup> further

<sup>76</sup> Examples (71), (72), (73), (74), (75) and (76) from Sun (1998).

<sup>77</sup> See Sun (1998).

evidence that the markers of aspect in Mandarin originate from postverbal complements in early Chinese.

Mandarin 着 *zhe* evolved from a verb to a directive verb before changing into an imperfective aspect marker and when it occurs with some activity verbs in older texts (10<sup>th</sup> century) it is obvious that it also had a resultative sense, argues Sun (1998):

(73)

莫	著	卧床，	佯	病	不	起
Mo	<i>zhe</i>	wofang,	yang	bing	bu	qi
stroke/touch	ZHE	bed	pretend	ill	NEG	rise

Stroking on/touching the bed, (he) pretended to be ill and wouldn't get up

(73) is ambiguous between a reading where the focus is on the resultant state of the hands resting on the bed and one where 著 has a progressive meaning indicating the ongoing activity of stroking.

One interesting fact is that in historical texts there are many examples of 著 occurring in sentence-final position, even after the object NP of the verb.

(74)

倒	却	门	前	条	杆	著
Dao	que	men	qian	tiao	gan	<i>zhe</i>
tip	QUE	door	front	CL	pole	ZHE

Push over the pole in front of the door

In texts from the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century it is used both as a postverbal perfective marker and as a sentence-final perfect marker, thus paralleling the use of its modern cognate 达 *ta* in Xiang dialect:

(75)

写	著	王	某	著
Xie	<i>zhe</i>	Wang	mou	<i>zhe</i>
write	ZHE	Wang	someone	ZHE

(On it my name) Wang has been written

(76)

我	减	了	五	钱	著
Wo	jian	le	wu	qian	<i>zhe</i>
I	reduce	LE	five	money	ZHE

I have already reduced five pennies

著 typically occurred sentence-finally in imperative sentences and probably marked perfect or inchoative aspect, according to Sun. In addition, 著 interacted with the middle

Chinese perfective aspect marker 却. In fact, it seems to have been interchangeable with 却, which also originated in a directive verb.<sup>78</sup> According to Sun, it is probable that in Wu and Xiang, the cognates to 着 *zhe* that at one time expressed the imperfective, perfective and perfect aspects derived their perfect meaning from their function of marking the imperfective aspect and the perfective meaning from the perfect one. However, it is also possible that “in Chinese, [cognates to] ZHE may obtain the perfective meaning metaphorically through its interactions with the Middle Chinese *que* [却]”. (Sun 1998, p. 171)

### 2.3.3. The syntactic/semantic issue

The marker *le* in modern Mandarin can appear in two syntactic positions in the sentence. One is directly after the verb or verb compound; the other is at the end of a sentence. When the verb is at the end of the sentence *le* occurs, as a matter of course, at the same time directly after the verb **and** at the end of the sentence:

(77)

炸弹	爆	了
Zhadan	bao	<i>le</i>
bomb	explode	LE
The bomb exploded /The bomb has (had)		
exploded <sup>79</sup>		

In these cases, claims Chao (1968) two *les* have merged into one as a case of haplology. In many grammars and articles written by proponents of the two-*le* theory, syntactic position is claimed to correspond to meaning. Verbal *le* is a perfective marker, sentence-final *le* a modal marker or a perfect marker and when *le* occurs after a sentence-final verb it is a perfective marker, a modal or perfect marker **or** a combination of a perfective and a modal or perfect marker. One example of such a traditional view on *le* is Li and Thompson's (1981).

When *le* occurs in sentence-final position directly after a verb, it can in fact only be sentence-final *le*, claims Kwan-Terry (1979), because in such sentences syntactic constraints such as the inability to co-occur with other aspect markers are not applicable. The reason, she says, why these sentences are ambiguous is that other aspect markers have been omitted from the sentence. For example, it can have a perfect interpretation because the omitted aspect marker 已经 *yijing* ‘already’ allows for a perfect interpretation, it can be interpreted as describing an imminent action because the marker 要 *yao* ‘will’ is omitted or it can have a progressive meaning because the aspect marker 在 *zai* has been omitted:

<sup>78</sup> As we have seen, 却 and 了 were also used interchangeably during a period of time, before 却 disappeared in favour of 了 in postverbal position.

<sup>79</sup> Example (77) from Li and Thompson (1981).

(78)

- (a) 孩子 (在) 哭 了  
Haizi (zai) ku le  
child (ZAI) cry LE  
The child is crying<sup>80</sup>
- (b) 孩子 (要) 哭 了  
Haizi (yao) ku le  
child (will) cry LE  
The child is going to cry
- (c) 客人 (已经) 走 了  
Keren (yijing) zou le  
guest (ALREADY) go LE  
The guest has already left
- (d) 客人 (要) 走 了  
Keren (yao) zou le  
guest (will) go LE  
The guest is about to leave

Kwan-Terry's explanation to the ambiguous sentences with *le* seems to be an ad hoc solution to a problem that does not really exist provided the assumption that there is only one marker *le* that can have different scopes. The fact that constraints on the occurrence with other aspect markers apply only when *le* is placed inside the sentence can be explained if we accept that the two syntactic positions of the marker are related to different scopes. Furthermore, as we will see, the adverbial 已经 *yijing* is not restricted to co-occurrence with sentence-final *le*. It is common in sentences with verbal *le* as well. Kwan-Terry's claim that the marker *le* can only be the sentence-final marker in ambiguous sentences like 客人走了 *keren zou le* because it is not subjected to constraints such as co-occurrence with other aspect markers is thus not supported.

### 2.3.3.1. Unified treatments of *le* in the literature

As early as 1968, J. Charles Thompson wrote in his article "Aspects of the Chinese verb" that "[t]he marker *le*, when it is attached to the sentence, indicates that the speaker has in mind the boundary between two events". (Thompson 1968, p. 71-72) In the article he unifies the different uses of *le*, regardless of syntactic position: "There is no longer any need to consider *le* of completed action, *le* of change of state, and *le* of incipient action as separate features." (Thompson 1968, p. 73) In a more recent thesis on aspect in Chinese, Huang (1987) develops this idea. She claims that *le* is a single morpheme with the function of marking a *semantic boundary*, either of an event, a proposition or of a larger unit. In her view, since verbal *le* marks an event boundary and its absence produces

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<sup>80</sup> Example (78) from Kwan-Terry (1979).

semantic vagueness, it can be considered a manifestation of the focused aspect in the binary opposition focused – diffuse:

(79)

(a) 李思 跳 了 绳 了  
 Lisi tiao le sheng le  
 Lisi jump LE rope LE  
 Lisi has jumped (a) rope now<sup>81</sup>

(b) 李思 跳 绳 了  
 Lisi tiao sheng le  
 Lisi jump rope LE  
 Lisi has jumped (a) rope  
 Lisi has begun jumping a rope  
 Lisi jumped a rope

In (79) (a) the endpoint of the event is focused upon, while in (79) (b) this is only **one** possible reading, since the verbal marker is absent. Sentence-final *le* cannot always give an inchoative reading, according to Huang. For example with achievement verbs such as 死 *si* ‘die’ or 倒 *dao* ‘fall down’, with VPs that have a natural non-activity reading such as 跳河 *tiao he* ‘jump into the river’ (as opposed to ‘jump a rope’) or with specifications of duration of the activity such as 三个钟头 *san ge zhongtou* ‘for three hours’ in 李思跳三个钟头的绳了 *Lisi tiao san ge zhongtou de sheng le* ‘Lisi jumped a rope for three hours’ (not \*‘Lisi has begun jumping a rope for three hours’), an inchoative reading with sentence-final *le* is improbable. The sentence-final *le*, like its verbal equivalent, draws a boundary between two states and indicates a contrast, a focused part in a situation, according to Huang. Since the domain of *le* can be the event/verb, the proposition/sentence or a larger unit, *le* can occur in both verbal and sentential position in one sentence.

Huang’s (1987) proposal that *le* is a marker of a *boundary* is an elegant solution to the problem posed by the seemingly various functions of *le* and the difficulty in determining whether it is a tense, aspect or even modal marker. If a certain TMA form is used to express other temporal structures than the one characteristic of a specific aspect or tense, for example, then it cannot be a marker of that particular aspect, tense or modal meaning only. We are then faced with two possibilities: either one marker represents several meanings or it has one meaning which in some way can produce all these different temporal structures or modal implications. I, like Huang, opt for the latter possibility. However, her analysis of *le* as a marker which emphasizes the focused-diffuse opposition does not capture the temporal essence of aspect and tense or in what way *le* is involved in expressing different temporal structures. Huang observes the semantic similarities between the two syntactic occurrences of *le*, i.e. both seem to mark a boundary (albeit of different domains) but she does not clearly distinguish between different temporal readings resulting from the presence of *le*. Neither does she explain why, in many cases,

<sup>81</sup> Example (79) from Huang (1987).

the syntactic position of *le* seems to be more or less irrelevant for the temporal reading of the sentence. These issues will be investigated later on in this book.

In the late 70s, Spanos (1979) conducted a survey in order to test the usage of *le*. Subjects were asked to insert *le* in sentences selected from prose and conversational contexts. Spanos found that extra-grammatical features played an important role for the subjects' use of *le*. For example, though it is often stated that when a transitive verb takes a simple unquantified object, the double *le* construction<sup>82</sup> is used, he found that only two subjects out of 39 claimed that two mandatory *le* should be inserted in sentence (80) while all subjects opted for the presence of a mandatory or optional sentence-final marker in the same sentence.

(80)

我	昨天	看	(了)	电影	(了)
Wo	zuotian	kan	(le)	dianying	(le)
I	yesterday	watch	LE	movie	LE
I watched a movie yesterday <sup>83</sup>					

The majority (18 subjects) chose a construction where either verbal *le* or sentence-final *le* was optional and the other mandatory.

Spanos further discusses the semantics of *le*: “The *LE* structures cited above... all seem to involve a *change* [italics mine] concerning the realization of some particular action, process, quality, or state of affairs. The change relates either to the internal semantic structure of the particular verb or phrase involved or to the entire clause or sentence to which *LE* is attached. In the former case, the realization of the change is construed in the sense of the completion of the particular action, process or quality associated with the verb or phrase. In the latter case, the realization is construed in the sense of a shift in the speaker's perception or attitude towards the particular predication and the state of affairs associated with it... [L]et us posit (Realization of *x*) as the basic meaning of *LE* where *x* is filled in by some morpheme, verb, verb phrase, or sentence... The syntactic position of *LE* in a phrase or sentence will usually enable us to tell what the content of the *x* variable in the basic meaning will be.” (Spanos 1979b, pp. 73-75) According to Spanos, the content of *X* will be clauses or sentences for sentence-final *le* and verbs and verb compounds for verbal *le*. Spanos' research represents the standpoint that *le* has an invariant meaning which is independent of syntactic position, a hypothesis that will be further developed in this present work. When it comes to the interpretation of sentences that contain *le*, however, his arguments are not satisfying. He states that the change that is associated with *le* is to be understood as completion in the case of verbal *le*, and as a shift in the speaker's perception or attitude in the case of sentence-final *le*. This is a very simplified, even incorrect, description of the interpretation of *le*. First, verbal *le* is not

<sup>82</sup> The double *le* construction is a construction in which both the verbal *le* and the sentence-final *le* appears, as in (22), for example. The double *le* construction will not be treated in this thesis. However, a short description of double *le* constructions and some preliminary suggestions for an analysis of them can be found in Conclusion.

<sup>83</sup> Example (80) from Spanos (1979).



necessarily associated with completion.<sup>84</sup> Second, while the use of sentence-final *le* is often related to modal distinctions (such as shifts in attitude or perception), in chapter 6 I will demonstrate that it can also be used to express temporal meanings, just like verbal *le*. Furthermore, the fact that also verbal *le* can contribute to the expression of modality should not be neglected.<sup>85</sup> While Spanos acknowledges a shared core feature (change) of verbal and sentence-final *le*, he fails to see that this shared core feature can mean shared functions.

Also Liu (1998) argues that *le* marks *change*. This is a proposal that is attractive for the same reason that the labelling of *le* as a marker of a *boundary* is attractive: it is free from any association with a particular tense, aspect or mood at the same time as it seems to be able to describe the essence of both verbal *le* and sentence-final *le* in practically all their occurrences (although one might argue that the concept of *change* carries a temporal connotation that is not ideal for describing the modal uses of both verbal and sentence-final *le* that will be discussed later in this work). However, there are numerous counterexamples to Liu's claim that sentence-final *le* indicates **subject change**, as the sentences below show:

(81)

你	真	给	我	一	个	难	题	了
Ni	zhen	gei	wo	yi	ge	nanti		le <sup>86</sup>
You	really	give	I	one	CL	difficult	problem	LE
You've really given me a knotty problem!								

(82)

他	把	信	拆	开	了
Ta	ba	xin	chaikai		le
he	BA	letter	tear-open		LE
He opened the letter					

(83)

我	孩	子	有	一	个	牙	活	动	了
Wo	haizi	you	yi	ge	ya	huodong		le	
I	child	have	one	CL	tooth	unsteady		LE	
My child has a loose tooth (a tooth which is loose)									

In fact, in (81) the direct object NP (难题 *nanti*) is transferred from one position to another, in (82) the change is in the object NP 信 *xin* 'letter', which is opened and in (83) the change is equally much in object NP 牙 *ya*, 'tooth' ('the tooth has become loose') as in the subject NP 我孩子 *wo haizi*, 'my child' ('the child has a loose tooth').

<sup>84</sup> See 2.2.2.

<sup>85</sup> See 5.3.

<sup>86</sup> Example (81), (82) and (83) from Li and Thompson (1981).

While the occurrence of verbal *le* usually implies change in the **object** noun, the temporal expression 已经 *yijing* denotes subject change, according to Liu. This is shown by the fact that it is incompatible with the imperfective situation type and with the occurrence of verbal *le*. However, example (84) shows that, contrary to Liu's claims, 已经 *yijing* **does** occur in imperfective sentences:

(84)

我	已经	在	作	这	道	数学题	了
Wo	<i>yijing</i>	<i>zai</i>	<i>zuo</i>	<i>zhe</i>	<i>dao</i>	<i>shuxueti</i>	<i>le</i>
I	already	ZAI	do	this	CL	math problem	LE
I have already started working on this math problem <sup>87</sup>							

Moreover, as chapter 5 will show, it often occurs with verbal *le* in sentences in narrative texts.

In his thesis *Syntax and semantics of the perfect in Mandarin Chinese* (1978), Rohsenow, adopting the framework of generative semantics, develops the idea that there is only one morpheme *le* in Chinese: "The position of this present study is that these two surface instances of *le* are in fact different surface representations of the same underlying operators, which differ in their relative height in underlying structure." (Rohsenow 1978, p. 26) All instances of *le* are analyzed as surface reflexes of the co-occurrence in underlying structure of two abstract operators, the atomic predicate COME ABOUT and an existential predicate (YOU). The occurrence of *le* thus indicates that a *change of state* has taken place.

Though Rohsenow does not discuss a possible functional overlapping between verbal *le* and sentence-final *le* and though he uses a different theoretical framework than the one used in this present work, his thesis is interesting as one of the first to propose a unified semantic treatment of the different surface occurrences of *le*. He also emphasizes the need to investigate the role played by the context. "[C]ontext must be taken into account for any complete understanding of temporal specification in Mandarin Chinese." (Rohsenow 1978, p. 133)

One of the most comprehensive studies that take the one-*le* perspective is the thesis *The present and past of the particle le in Mandarin Chinese* by Shi (1988). In his study, the particle *le* is presented as a marker of *relative anteriority*. Perfectivity is the result of the combination of a sentence describing a bounded situation and the particle *le* (verbal or sentential) and inchoativity is the result of the combination of a sentence describing an unbounded situation and the particle *le*. In the former case, the terminal point of a situation is marked as relatively anterior by the particle, in the latter case it is the initial point of the situation that is marked as relatively anterior.

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<sup>87</sup> Example (84) from Gong (1991), translation mine.

(85)

(a) 他 写 了 一 封 信  
Ta xie le yi feng xin  
he write LE one CL letter  
He wrote a letter

(perfective)<sup>88</sup>

(b) 我 对 美国 多少 了解 了 一些  
Wo dui Meiguo duoshao liaojie le yixie  
I about U.S more-less understand LE some  
I now more or less know something about the U.S. (inchoative)

(86)

(a) 他 去 纽约 了  
Ta qu Niuyue le  
he go New York LE  
He went to New York

(perfective)

(b) 他 会 写字 了  
Ta hui xiezi le  
he know write LE  
He knows how to write now

(inchoative)

The (a)-sentences in (85) and (86) above describe situations as perfective, according to Shi, while the (b)-sentences describe situations as inchoative. The position of the marker seems to be irrelevant for the aspectual readings of the sentences.

He also questions the truth in the common argument among supporters of the two-*le* theory: that verbal *le* and sentence-final *le* are negated in different ways, verbal *le* by the particle 没 *mei* and sentential *le* by the particle 不 *bu* as in the sentences below:

(87)

(a) 李思 打 了 张三  
Lisi da le Zhangsan  
Lisi beat LE Zhangsan  
Lisa beat Zhangsan

(b) 李思 没 打 张三  
Lisi mei da Zhangsan  
Lisi NEG beat Zhangsan  
Lisa did not beat Zhangsan

<sup>88</sup> Examples (85), (86), (87), (88), (89), (90), (91), (92) and (93) from Shi (1988).

(88)

(a) 他 吃 牛肉 了  
Ta chi niurou le  
he eat beef LE  
He eats beef now

(b) 他 不 吃 牛肉 了  
Ta bu chi niurou le  
he NEG eat beef LE  
He doesn't eat beef anymore

The negative of (88) (a), however, is not 他不吃牛肉了 *ta bu chi niurou le* 'he doesn't eat beef anymore', but 'he still doesn't eat beef' (他还是不吃牛肉 *Ta haishi bu chi niurou*), claims Shi. That means that the sentential *le* in (88) (b) predicates the state of affairs represented by 不吃牛肉 *bu chi niurou*, **including** the negation, and not by 吃牛肉 *chi niurou*, i.e. sentential *le* is not negated by *bu*. He further shows that sentential *le* can often be negated by either 没 *mei* or 不 *bu*, and so can the verbal particle. In fact, the default negation can sometimes even cause ungrammaticality, as in (90)(c):

(89)

(a) 他 去 纽约 了  
Ta qu Niuyue le  
he go New York LE  
He went to New York

(b) 他 没 去 纽约  
Ta mei qu Niuyue  
he NEG go New York  
He didn't go to New York

(c) 他 不 去 纽约 了  
Ta bu qu Niuyue le  
he NEG go New York LE  
He's not going to New York anymore  
\*He didn't go to New York

(90)

- (a) 我 知 道 了 这 件 事  
Wo zhidao *le*<sup>89</sup> zhei jian shi  
I know LE this CL matter  
I now know about this matter
- (b) 我 还 是 不 知 道 这 件 事  
Wo haishi bu zhidao zhei jian shi  
I still NEG know this CL matter  
I still don't know about this matter
- (c) \*我 还 是 没 知 道 这 件 事  
\*Wo haishi mei zhidao zhei jian shi  
I still NEG know this CL matter  
I still don't know about this matter

Instead of relating the choice of negation to the syntactic position of the particle, it should be related to the boundedness vs. unboundedness of the VP that is negated, claims Shi. The ambiguous sentences in which *le* is attached to a verb that is sentence-final show this very clearly:

(91)

- (a) 他 吃 了  
Ta chi *le*  
he eat LE  
He ate (that)  
He now eats (but didn't before)
- (b) 他 没 吃  
Ta mei chi  
he NEG eat  
He didn't eat (that)

---

<sup>89</sup> The original sentence is in fact:

我 知 道 这 件 事 了  
Wo zhidao zhei jian shi *le*  
I know this CL matter LE  
I now know about this matter

However, considering Shi's argumentation, it must be inferred that the intended syntactic position of *le* in sentence (90) is verbal and not sentence-final, i.e. that the sentence-final *le* in the sentence above is a typographical mistake on Shi's part. Further evidence that this is in fact the case is found in a later article by him (1990), where he uses the same kind of argumentation and exemplifies with the almost identical sentence: *Wo yijing zhidao le zhei jian shi de xiangqing* 'I now know about the details of this matter'.

- (c) 他 还是 不 吃  
 Ta haishi bu chi  
 he still NEG eat  
 He still doesn't eat

他吃 *ta chi* 'he eats' is ambiguous. If there is an NP present in the surrounding context, it can be understood as 'he ate that', however, if no NP is found in the context, it refers to "the general activity of eating" (Shi 1988, p. 108). Just as (91) (a) has two meanings, it has two negative counterparts, one for the bounded reading of the sentence, and one for the unbounded reading. In cases where the verb is unambiguous because of its inherent semantic meaning, then the sentence with *le* is also unambiguous, claims Shi:

- (92)  
 他 知道 了  
 Ta zhidao le  
 he know LE  
 He now knows (but didn't before) (inchoative)  
 \*He stopped knowing (perfective)

- (93)  
 他 死 了  
 Ta si le  
 he die LE  
 He died (perfective)  
 \*He is dying now (wasn't before) (inchoative)

I have already discussed some problems with Shi's study in 2.1. Another is his claim that *le* marks relative anteriority. A situation that is presented as relatively anterior cannot at the same time be presented as perfective. These two concepts are incompatible since one manifests a temporal structure in which E is prior to R and the other a temporal structure in which E is included in R. To say that *le* marks relative anteriority would be to exclude all perfective readings of sentences with *le*. Further, a temporal concept such as relative anteriority does not easily lend itself to an explanation of the modal uses of *le*.<sup>90</sup>

## 2.4. Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I have reviewed some of the existing literature on *le* and identified some of the problems found there. One problematic area concerns terminology. Terms like perfective aspect, inchoativity and relative tense seem to have no universally accepted

<sup>90</sup> Shi tries to explain the non-temporal usage of the marker by suggesting that it is an extension of the temporal usage, specifically a derived meaning from its inchoative use. "In both cases [the temporal use of *le* and the non-temporal use of *le*] some kind of comparison is involved. Specifically, in the inchoative use, the new state is compared to the old state. In the non-temporal use, it is the speaker's expectations and reality that is being contrasted" (Shi 1988, p. 107). This explanation still does not seem to justify the labelling of *le* as an anteriority marker.

definitions and places in the temporal hierarchy. Sometimes, for example, inchoativity has been treated as the opposite of perfectivity, while in fact these categories are manifested as temporal distinctions on different levels. Another example is the way perfective aspect and perfect tense have been confused, probably caused at least partly by abstract and metaphorical definitions of these terms.

Confusion has also been the result of the diverse descriptions of the essence of the marker *le*. In works that treat *le* as two homophonous markers based on the fact that it can occur in two syntactic positions, verbal *le* has been claimed to express among other things perfective aspect, completion and anteriority while the sentence-final marker is described as an inchoative marker or a perfect marker, for example.

Finally, I discussed the question whether *le* in fact represents two morphemes or only one. In particular in recent years, some linguists have suggested the latter possibility. I proceeded to analyse the three most widely cited arguments used by advocates of the traditional dual treatment of *le*: that verbal *le* and sentence-final *le* have different historical origins, that they correspond to two different morphemes in some Chinese dialects, and that *le* when it occurs in verbal position has semantic properties that are distinct from those of *le* in the sentence-final position. I tried to show that none of these arguments hold for a closer examination. First, results from several investigations indicate that both verbal *le* and sentence-final *le* originated from one single source, the classical verb *liao*. This implies that we can expect these markers to share at least some semantic features.

Second, it seems as if Chao's (1968) claim that there must be two different *le*—because in some dialects of Chinese verbal *le* is represented by one morpheme and sentence-final *le* by another—cannot be supported. *Le* is not a cognate to the suffixes in these dialects that correspond to verbal *le*. In both Cantonese, Wu and Xiang dialects, the suffixes 㗎 *jó*, 仔 *tsi* and 达 *ta* all have functions that are similar to those of verbal *le*, but it can be shown that their origin is not the verb *liao* but another classical verb—著—which later evolved into the grammatical marker 着 *zhe* in Mandarin Chinese. 著 underwent an historic development similar to that of 了 and seems to have competed with 了 when 了 started to occur in verbal position. In the dialects analyzed here, the cognates to 著 won out, while in Mandarin, 著 and other verbal complements were replaced by 了. The fact that a cognate to *le* is used sentence-finally in for example Cantonese simply suggests that in that particular dialect 了 remained in its sentence-final position, where it was grammaticalized.

I further discussed some of the attempts to unified analyses of modern Mandarin Chinese marker *le* in the existing literature. In general, the aim of these seems to be one-folded: to show that *le* has one invariant meaning but that its interpretation is sensitive to scope, syntactic conditions or the semantics of co-occurring verbs, for example. However, to my knowledge, the question if *le* can in fact even give the same aspectual or temporal interpretation in verbal position as it can in sentence-final position and vice versa has rarely<sup>91</sup> been discussed.

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<sup>91</sup> One exception is the article “The perfective and perfect meanings of the Verbal *-le*” by Zhang (1998) which will be discussed in later chapters.

Is it the case that the meaning of *le* can be fully attributed to its syntactic distribution? In fact, how important is the syntactic position for the interpretation of *le*?



### 3. Relevance Theory

In 1.3.4. it was established that, in order to explain why two grammatical markers can contribute to the expression of the same temporal or modal meaning and why one marker can contribute to the expression of more than one temporal structure, a less rigid framework than the ones proposed in traditional studies is needed. Such a flexible framework would in particular acknowledge the importance of contextual influence on the manifestation of tense, aspect and modality.

In the 80's Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson (1995) developed the so-called Relevance Theory. Relevance Theory builds upon Grice's ideas that meaning is determined by the context and by certain principles that the speaker and the hearer are both familiar with. In Relevance Theory, *inference* is a crucial term. According to Relevance Theory, the answer to the question how human beings communicate with each other is that they do so in two ways, through coded communication and ostensive-inferential communication. Ostensive-inferential communication is the result of the communicator's production of a stimulus which makes it mutually manifest to communicator and audience that the communicator intends, by means of this stimulus, to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions. Coded communication (e.g. through language) cannot be used on its own but only as a means of strengthening ostensive-inferential communication. Comprehension, on the other hand, involves the processing of this set of assumptions, in which some assumptions consist of new information that has to be processed in the context of information that has already been previously processed. The hearer uses information in his mind such as the interpretation of the previous utterance to process a new utterance. This so-called "immediate context" can be extended by the use of for example interpretations of utterances earlier in the exchange or by the immediately observable environment. The selection of a particular context for the utterance being processed is determined by the search for relevance.

The degree of relevance of a certain assumption is determined by, first, the size of its contextual effect. Contextual effect is small if the assumption for example does not contain new information or if it is inconsistent with the context. Second, it is determined by the amount of effort required to process the assumption. Optimal relevance is achieved when contextual effects are as large as possible and the amount of effort is as small as possible. The same goes for non-linguistic phenomena. Sperber and Wilson take as an example the smell of gas when one enters a room. This phenomenon carries in itself certain information that may lead to a range of assumptions, such as for example that there is a gas leak somewhere in the house, or that the gas company is not on strike. Which of these assumptions is more relevant than the other to the person who enters the room is determined by the size of the contextual effects and the efforts required to process each

one of them. In this case, the most likely assumption to be made, claim Sperber and Wilson, is that there is a gas leak, because of the encyclopaedic information we have about household uses of gas. The processing effort to arrive at that assumption is smaller than that for the assumption that the gas company is not on strike, and the contextual effects are larger. The hearer search for relevance even when selecting which phenomena to pay attention to, i.e. which phenomena manifests assumptions that are more relevant to him than assumptions manifested by other phenomena. Therefore it can be presumed that relevance is not just a property of assumptions that one has in one's mind, but also a property of phenomena, or stimuli, of linguistic or non-linguistic kind that lead to the construction of assumptions.

### 3.1. Ambiguity is semantic incompleteness

Sperber and Wilson further claim that of all the interpretations of a stimulus that agree with the principle of relevance it is the one that first occurs to the addressee that was intended. If two different interpretations come to him/her simultaneously, we have an unusual case of ambiguity. What is otherwise commonly called ambiguity of a linguistic phenomenon can often be explained by using the principle of relevance. *Peter's bat*, for example, could refer to the bat owned by Peter, the bat killed by Peter, the bat mentioned by Peter, etc. "Contextual information", explains Sperber and Wilson, "is needed to resolve what should be seen as the semantic incompleteness, rather than the ambiguity, of the genitive." (Sperber & Wilson 1995, p. 188) Likewise, the temporal notions expressed by the present perfect construction in English in the following two sentences receive their different interpretations from the one of the assumptions that each of them convey that agree with the principle of relevance:

(94)

I have had breakfast<sup>92</sup>

(95)

I have been to Tibet

For example, it is quite obvious that the speaker of (94) has had breakfast at some point in her life, so an experiential interpretation would not be as relevant as one where she wants to make clear that she is not hungry at the present time, in which case the information would be worth providing. In the case of (95), remarks Sperber and Wilson, "the mere fact that the speaker had visited Tibet at some point in her life could well be relevant enough, and in the absence of more specific information this is the interpretation that would be consistent with the principle of relevance." (Sperber & Wilson 1995, p. 190)

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<sup>92</sup> Examples (94) and (95) from Sperber & Wilson (1995).

The functional approach to meaning has played a marginal role in the linguistic tradition, mainly because, according to Harder (1996), the role of language in interaction has become linked with unreliability: "The logical distinction between semantics and pragmatics reflects this pattern of thinking: first the "clean" relation to the world of denotable objects, then the step into the messy world of users and interpreters". (Harder 1996, p. 80) The defining feature of function-based structures, says Harder, is their context-sensitivity: "[T]he way elements hang together internally must be understood in terms of the way the whole relates to the context." (Harder 1996, p. 92) The meaning of linguistic items must be investigated in their context, i.e. through a functionally oriented context-sensitive approach. "Properties of semantic substance", says Harder, "are thus far from being irrelevant—they are just not sufficient to qualify as descriptions of language." (Harder 1996, p. 158)

The formal semantic approaches to language study are often criticised by the relevance-theorists. Carston (1998), following the relevance-theoretic approach by Travis (1985), claims that it is impossible to determine the truth conditional semantics for a sentence. Below is one of Travis' examples:

(96)

The kettle is black

"The bearer of truth is not the sentence but the proposition or thought the speaker uses the sentence to express on the given occasion of utterance. One of the sources of these propositional differences in (5) [(96)] is the property communicated by the predicate 'black', both what property that is (clearly visible black, a wider colour spectrum taking in various dark browns, invisible black and any other way of being relevantly black) and what exactly it is taken to apply to (the whole kettle, just the outside, or some other salient part of it). According to this "pragmatic view", as Travis calls it, for any utterance, the contribution made by any, and potentially all, of the linguistic items employed is context-dependent, so that a statement of THE truth conditions of a sentence is not possible." (Carston 1998, p. 12)

### **3.2. Tense and aspect in a relevance-theoretic framework**

In Moeschler et al. (1998b), both tense and aspect are analysed within a relevance-theoretic framework. Moeschler's argument in favour of discarding formal semantics (that deals mainly with truth-conditional analyses of sentences) is that the truth-functional properties of clauses depend on the computation of inferences, which means that they are dependent on pragmatics.

One of Moeschler's crucial hypotheses is that contextual information is stronger than linguistic information: "[L]es marques temporelles (temps verbaux, connecteurs temporels notamment) n'encodent pas des concepts, mais des procédures. En d'autres termes, ce sont des *expressions procédurales*, dont la signification ne peut être réduite à un contenu conceptuel fixe, invariant. Une autre manière de formuler les choses serait de

dire que ce sont des expressions sensibles au contexte: elles changent de valeur d'un contexte à l'autre.” (Moeschler 1998a, pp. 4-5) So it would be wrong, according to this theory, to put labels on for example temporal markers according to the semantic implications that they provide to the sentence—because there *are* in fact no semantic implications to be drawn. Temporal markers act like chameleons and contribute to the linguistic presentation of an event in different ways depending on the context.

### 3.2.1 Non-linguistic information

Relevance Theory assumes that utterance interpretation is linguistically underspecified, and that linguistic information combines with non-linguistic such so as to achieve pragmatic interpretation. Now, what is meant by non-linguistic information? Moeschler (1998a) gives an example to show how the approach adopted to describe tense and aspect is at the same time *procedural*, *conceptual* and *contextual*:

(97)

Max poussa Jean. Jean tomba.

(98)

Jean tomba. Max l'avait poussé.

The approach is procedural because temporal order can be associated with procedural markers, i.e. temporal markers, such as in above examples (97) and (98), where *Passé Simple* and *Plus-que-parfait* is used.

But there is also a conceptual rule to be counted with, namely the causal connection between the verbs *pousser* ‘push’ and *tomber* ‘fall’. The event *pousser* causes the event *tomber*. So the preferred temporal order between these two events is already accounted for in our minds. Finally, the inference of temporal order by the listener can be explained by a discourse principle, a distinction between *narration* and *explication*. Narrative order applies when the linguistic manifestations of two events appear in the order that the real events occur. That means that in (97) the concept of causality and the default narrative interpretation are convergent. In (98) on the other hand, narration cannot be inferred since it clashes with the conceptual idea; the event of *tomber* does not cause the event *pousser*. That is why we understand (98) as describing a relation of explication between the two events.

Now, what if the speaker wants to describe a sequence of events in the real world between which the order is the reverse of the one in the default causal interpretation? According to Moeschler, she could make use of the narrative (99) (a) or explicative (99) (b) method:

(99)

- (a) Jean est tombé. Max l'a poussé.
- (b) Max a poussé Jean. Jean est tombé.

However, both methods are risky, because the causality rule will cause (99) (a) to get an explicative interpretation and (99) (b) a narrative interpretation, which is in conflict with the speaker's intentions. Here is where the advantages of the Relevance Theory approach can be seen. For an utterance to be optimally relevant, the amount of effort must be as small as possible at the same time as the cognitive effects are as large as possible. Therefore, the listener will interpret the sentence in the way that is most effortless and has the largest cognitive effects. He will follow the causality rule when interpreting (99) (a) so that it gets an inversed (explicative) reading, and when interpreting (99) (b) so that it get the narrative reading. To block the application of this rule contextual information must be added:

(100)

- (a) D'abord Jean est tombé, ensuite Max a poussé Jean.
- (b) Max a poussé Jean jusqu'au chemin. Il est tombé en se prenant les pieds dans une racine.

Moeschler notes that (100) (a) and (100) (b) are not the habitual ways of presenting temporal order, nevertheless, they show that as long as contextual information is clear, it may block both conceptual and procedural information from being processed.

In the same work, edited by Moeschler, Luscher (1998) writes: "L'hypothèse à l'origine de cet ouvrage est que les désinences verbales sont des marques pragmatiques. Par *marques pragmatiques*, nous entendons des morphèmes qui n'ont pas de dénotation propre, ou d'autonomie référentielle, mais qui jouent un rôle lors de l'interprétation des énoncés qui les contiennent: ces expressions ce caractérisent donc par leur contenu procédural... Nous considérons que le rôle des marques pragmatiques est d'assumer une fonction de guidage dans la sélection des informations pertinentes et de faciliter ainsi la constitution du contexte." (Luscher 1998, p. 181)

### 3.2.2 Procedure

Luscher assigns to temporal markers/inflections a much more abstract meaning than most linguists. According to him, they are merely pragmatic markers that can "guide" the selection of "relevant information" in the context. Nevertheless, there is a concept attached to them—*procédure*. What is *procédure*? Attached to the tenses are procedures, explains Luscher, structured units containing instructions that will allow the definition of the variables that in their turn define the semantics of the tenses and produce the different uses attached to these morphemes. That means that every reading of a tense form in an utterance corresponds to a "route" through a procedure and that all such possible routes constitute a unit that determine the meaning of that particular tense form. The

characteristic of all past tenses in French, for example—according to Lusher—is the relation

*E anterior to S*

The distinction between the three past tenses *Passé Simple*, *Passé Composé* and *l'Imparfait* is aspectual. A situation described by using *l'Imparfait* is looked upon as on-going (imperfective), while a situation described by using *Passé Simple* or *Passé Composé* is looked upon as a whole (perfective). The *Passé Composé* is special, however, because it can have two uses in a simple, de-contextualized utterance:

(101)

Le concierge a quitté les lieux.<sup>93</sup>

a) Le concierge a terminé son travail, il a fermé la porte et il a quitté les lieux. (perfective reading)

b) Nous ne pouvons pas entrer. Le concierge a fermé la porte et il a quitté les lieux. (perfect reading)

In the (a)-reading of (101), the reference point advances and is in every proposition posterior to the reference point established by the last proposition. In the (b)-reading, on the other hand, the order of events is not narrative. The order of the two events *fermer* 'close' and *quitter* 'leave' in the last sentence can be reversed and the meaning still would not change:

c) Nous ne pouvons pas entrer. Le concierge a quitté les lieux et (en plus) il a fermé la porte.

The focal interpretation of (101) in its (b)-reading; that we cannot get in because the door is locked, is sustained also in (c).

The procedure attached to the *Passé Composé* thus seems to be formed by two sub-procedures, as Lusher shows in his first approach<sup>94</sup> to a description of the interpretive procedure of the *Passé Composé*:

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<sup>93</sup> Example (101) from Lusher (1998).

<sup>94</sup> There is a final description that is more detailed, with references to examples and formulas that also make clear the distinction between the *Passé Composé* and *l'Imparfait*. However, the schema here is included in order to show, as simply as possible, that there are two procedures connected to the *Passé Composé* with relation to the positioning of Reichenbach's times.

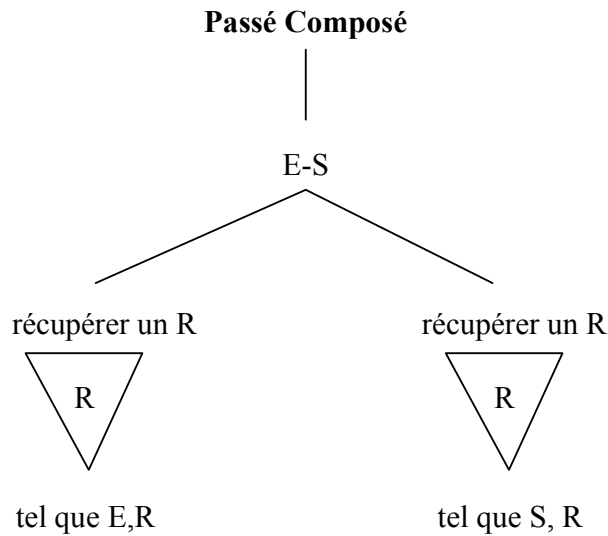


Figure 2  
(Lusher 1998, p. 191)

### 3.3. Concluding remarks

According to Relevance Theory, meaning is determined by the context. A relevance-theoretic framework promotes a pragmatic interpretation of all utterances. That means that non-linguistic information such as conceptual information about for example causal relations between verbs, information in temporal markers and contextual features cooperates with linguistic information in the utterance to produce a correct temporal interpretation of it. In its search for relevance, the audience chooses the interpretation that demands the least effort and produces the largest cognitive effects, i. e. the most relevant interpretation. In the following chapters, I will propose a relevance-theoretic approach to the Mandarin marker *le*. This proposal is based on empirical facts that show that the interpretation of *le* is highly context dependent.

## 4. *Boundary as an invariant semantic core-feature of le*

The presence of the Chinese marker *le* (postverbal or sentence-final) in a sentence can result in different temporal, aspectual and modal meanings. For example, much in the same way as the tense form *Passé Composé* in French, verbal *le* may contribute to both a perfective and a perfect view of an event. The perfective view is represented in French by the (a)-reading of (101) and the perfect view by the (b)-reading. The reason why sentences containing verbal *le* are seldom ambiguous is the same as that for the French example—conceptual and contextual factors contribute to the selection of interpretation.

I propose that the Mandarin particle *le* produces convincing proof that Relevance Theory is right. In itself, *le* has only an abstract meaning. Conceptual and contextual features determine the temporal, aspectual and modal interpretations of *le*. Of course, the morpheme *le* is different from the French inflectional morphemes, not only by being an isolated particle, but also because it can in itself contribute to more diverse interpretations of a sentence than the French tense forms. First, *le* is not only a temporal marker. It can be used to express temporal categories, such as the perfective aspect, the perfect tenses and relative anteriority, but it also has modal uses—it can be used to express the speaker's attitude towards the information in the utterance. These uses of *le* will be discussed in chapters 5.3 and 6.3. Apart from that, it has discourse-related uses that will be treated in chapter 6.1. Second, the characteristic of *le* cannot be the same as that which Luscher (1998) claims to be the characteristic of the past tense morphemes in French (E anterior to S). The prime reason for that is of course the non-temporal uses of *le* described above. Another is that even when *le* is used to express temporal relations, it is not constrained only to past situations. The perfective aspect seems to be confined to past time in Chinese, but the perfect is not. It is possible to describe a situation as future perfect using the marker *le* in Chinese.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>95</sup> See for example (28), a future perfect sentence with verbal *le*. Below sentence (from Mochizuki (2000), translation mine) is an example of a future perfect sentence with **sentence-final** *le*:

下	个	礼	拜	三	我	想	请	你	看	电	影		
Xia	ge	libaisan	wo	xiang	qing	ni	kan	dianying					
down	CL	Wednesday	I	want	invite	you	watch	movie					
很	可	惜	，	下	个	礼	拜	三	我	已	经	离	开
Hen	kexi,	xia	ge	libaisan	wo	yijing	likai						
very	pity	down	CL	Wednesday	I	already	leave						
日本	了												
Riben	le												
Japan	LE												

- I would like to take you to the movies next Wednesday
- What a pity, next Wednesday I will already have left Japan



I propose that the characteristic of *le* is an abstract semantic core feature *boundary*. Although *boundary* is a conceptual rather than a procedural feature, this proposal is in line with the hypothesis that Luscher poses in his analysis of the French tenses: "A une marque pragmatique correspond une et une seule signification." (Luscher 1998, p. 182) "Pour la description des temps verbaux également, nous dégagerons systématiquement un sémantisme minimal commun à tous les emplois d'un temps et des caractéristique pragmatiques propres à chaque type d'emploi." (Luscher 1998, pp.183-184). Instead of Luscher's "semantismes minimales" that consist of formulas (procedures) for time-relations such as E anterior to S, I use instead a non-formal semantic feature to avoid the strictly temporal association, which is unsuitable for the semantics of *le*.

I suggest that *boundary* is a concept well suited to describe the semantics of *le* because a boundary can be both temporal and non-temporal. There can be boundaries that divide factual or non-factual (as in the case of conditionals, for example) units of time. There can also be boundaries that divide non-temporal related domains such as *norm* and *deviation* or *right* and *wrong*. In this chapter I will present the proposal that *le* can be either a marker of a *temporal* boundary or an *attitudinal* boundary.

## 4.1. Time

In Chinese, inchoative and terminative readings seem to be mainly produced by other linguistic features than those that produce temporal readings such as perfect tense and perfective or imperfective aspect. However, grammatical markers such as *le* can sometimes act on both levels. That is why both verbal and sentence-final *le* can produce an inchoative reading of a stative predicate or sentence describing a state **at the same time** as they position it on the time line (as E incl in R or E-R<sup>96</sup>). I will show that both in sentences with verbal *le* and in sentences with sentence-final *le* some kind of boundary is present, which in its turn can be related to a reference time in different ways, depending on the context, and produce distinct temporal readings. Whether this boundary is to be interpreted as initial or final with respect to the situation described is determined by the nature of the VP or sentence. It can be shown that situation type of the verb may affect the grammaticality of *le* in one syntactic position but not in the other, and that when the scope of the marker is larger than the VP, shifts in situation type can occur. Depending on the syntactic position the occurrence and interpretation of *le* may be affected by different factors.

The **occurrence** of verbal *le* is more restricted than that of sentence-final *le*. Like other temporal markers in Chinese, its occurrence is to a certain extent dependent upon the situation type of the verbs. In particular, verbal *le* does not occur with a limited number

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<sup>96</sup> It should be noted that these schemas—that will be used for the sake of convenience as illustrations of the temporal structures underlying the perfective aspect and perfect tense/relative anteriority respectively throughout this work—should in fact be read as **final/initial boundary of E** included in R and **final/initial boundary of E** anterior to R respectively. *Le* marks a boundary of E. It is the orientation of that boundary with respect to the reference time that is relevant for the temporal reading of *le*-sentences.

of verbs describing states such as 是 *shi* ‘be’ and 像 *xiang* ‘resemble’. But the grammaticality of *le* is primarily dependent upon the features of temporal adverbs and super-lexical morphemes such as other grammatical markers. For example, there is a restriction on *le* co-occurring with adverbs expressing habituality, such as 常常 *changchang* ‘often’.

(102)

- (a) \*他 常常 看 了 电影  
 \*Ta changchang kan *le* dianying  
 he often watch LE movie  
 He often watches movies

However, sentence-final *le* works fine:

- (b) 他 常常 看 电影 了  
 Ta changchang kan dianying *le*  
 he often watch movie LE  
 He often watches movies now / He has started to go to the movies often

In (102) (a) 常常 *changchang* blocks the potential existence of any specific reference time to which the final boundary imposed by verbal *le* on the activity 看电影 *kan dianying* ‘watch movies’ can be linked. Therefore, the use of *le* is blocked. If it is assumed, on the other hand, that the scope of **sentence-final** *le*—i.e. the unit to which a boundary is added—is the whole sentence and not only the VP, the reason why the habitual reading of the situation described by the proposition “he often watches movies” can be kept intact in (102) (b) is clear. The situation has no natural boundaries of its own, it describes a habitual situation and is similar to a state. The result is an inchoative reading. This shows that when *le* occurs directly after the verb, its scope is normally the verb or VP and the durational adverbs. However, when it occurs sentence-finally, the scope can be larger than that and include other components in the whole sentence, such as expressions denoting habituality and even other grammatical markers.

The **interpretation** of a sentence with *le* is dependent upon on one hand the situation type of the VP or the whole sentence to which it is attached and on the other hand upon the context. The situation type of the VP or the sentence determines whether the situation described in the sentence gets an inchoative or a terminative reading. On a higher aspectual level, the position of the boundary relative to the reference time on an imagined time-line (and thus the expression of different temporal structures) is determined by temporal expressions and other intra- or extrasentential clues.

A stative situation type verb (which has no boundaries in time), needs to be combined with the boundary-marker *le*, for example, in order to be positioned on the time line. When a stative verb is combined with verbal *le*, it gets an *inchoative* reading, i.e. one where focus is on the start point of the situation:

(103)

现在 他 有 了 朋友  
Xianzai ta you le pengyou (stative verb)  
now he have LE friend  
He has (/had) friends now

If, on the other hand, verbal *le* is combined with a dynamic verb it gets a *terminative* reading, i.e. one where focus is on the end point of a situation:

(104)

她 犯 了 罪  
Ta fan le zui (dynamic verb)  
she commit LE crime  
She committed a crime / She has (/had) committed a crime/\*she has (had) started to commit crimes (now) (1)<sup>97</sup>

(105)

老 太太 上 了 年纪  
Lao taitai shang le nianji (dynamic verb)  
old lady go-up LE age  
The lady became old / The lady has (/had) become old / \*the lady has (/had) started to become old (now) (1)

The position of the boundary on the time line with respect to a reference time R may differ depending on the context resulting in distinct temporal readings:

(106)

(a) 你 那 天 学 了 多少 毛病  
Ni na tian xue le duoshao maobing  
you that day study LE how many bad thing  
How many bad habits you learned that day

In (106) (a) the focus is on a process of “learning bad things” that is not ongoing at the moment of speaking but terminated at a specific point in time, i.e. the final boundary marked by *le* is interpreted as **included** in the reference time (‘that day’).

(b) 你 看 你 已经 学 了 多少 毛病  
Ni kan ni yijing xue le duoshao maobing  
you look you already study LE how many bad thing  
Look how many bad things you have already learned

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<sup>97</sup> Example (104) and (105) were taken from literary works. See footnote 106 for references.

In (106) (b) the focus is also on a process but in this case the final boundary is **anterior** to the reference time, which is the present moment. The boundary is not necessarily the endpoint of the actual process but a point at which the process has reached a certain stage. The process is either actually terminated at that point or continues into the future (“you” may still be learning more bad things as we speak). In either case the present moment is posterior to the point in the process where the speaker wishes to draw a line (where the subject has learned many bad things).

For sentence-final *le*, the case is somewhat different. When the VP or sentence describes a state, sentence-final *le* contributes to an inchoative interpretation, just like verbal *le*:

(107)

他	是	学生	了
Ta	shi	xuesheng	<i>le</i>
he	be	student	LE
He is a student now (wasn't before)			

When the VP describes an event, sentence-final *le* contributes to a terminative reading, like verbal *le*:

(108)

他	去	纽约	了
Ta	qu	Niuyue	<i>le</i>
he	go	New York	LE
He has gone to New York			

Just as in the case with verbal *le*, the boundary that sentence-final *le* marks can be related to the reference time in different ways. In (108), for example, the boundary may be interpreted as **anterior** to the reference time, which in this case is the utterance situation. However, if a temporal expression that denotes a past time is inserted, the boundary is normally understood as included in the reference time:

(109)

他	昨天	去	纽约	了
Ta	zuotian	qu	Niuyue	<i>le</i>
he	yesterday	go	New York	LE
He went to New York yesterday				

The scope of sentence-final *le* is larger than that of verbal *le*. One interesting effect of that is that the result of adding sentence-final *le* to a VP or sentence that describes an **activity** can be an inchoative reading just like when *le* is used with stative VPs:

- (110)  
 他 喝 咖啡 了  
 Ta he kafei LE  
 he drink coffee *le*  
 He drinks coffee (now) (he didn't before)<sup>98</sup>

Chan (1980) describes the function of sentence-final *le*, the so-called "inchoative *le*" like this: "The occurrence of the inchoative with a stative verb results in a change of state, or a new habitual situation... Furthermore, verbs which normally denote a process can also be used to depict a new habitual situation when marked by the inchoative". (Chan 1980, p. 53)<sup>99</sup>

Verbal *le* has as its scope the **VP**, but it is in particular the nature of the **verb** that determines whether it gives an inchoative or terminative reading of the situation. *Kan* 'watch' is a dynamic and not a stative verb. The decontextualized VP 看电影 *kan dianying* 'watch (the) movie(s)' is therefore interpreted as either an activity or an accomplishment depending on how the argument NP 电影 *dianying* is perceived of (as a mass noun or a count noun<sup>100</sup>). An accomplishment has a **natural** final endpoint. An activity contains only a **potential** final endpoint. Both are emphasized when verbal *le* is added to the VP and the result is always a terminative reading as in (104) above or (111) (a) below. Verbs denoting states, on the other hand, has neither a natural nor a potential endpoint. When verbal *le* is used with such verbs they get an inchoative reading as in example (103) above. By using *le*, an initial endpoint is imposed upon the state. Sentence-final *le*, however, seems to have as its scope the whole sentence and not only the VP. As I have shown, the **occurrence** of sentence-final *le*, as opposed to that of verbal *le*, is not sensitive to for example adverbs denoting habituality. But to some extent also the **interpretation** of a sentence, specifically the interpretation of the situation type manifested by the sentence is sensitive to the scope of *le*. By using VPs that are ambiguous between an activity and an accomplishment reading with *le*, we find that the scopes of verbal *le* and sentence-final *le* differ. The VP 看电影 *kan dianying* can describe 1) a generic activity without boundaries 'watch movies' (as in regularly going to the cinema), 2) a (non-generic) activity, i.e. a situation with a potential final boundary 'watch movies' (a specific instance of engaging in this activity) or 3) an accomplishment 'watch a/the movie(s) (a specific amount of movies) depending on the context. While 1) is a stative situation, 2) can be either a dynamic or a stative situation, and 3) only

<sup>98</sup> Example (110) from Chan (1980).

<sup>99</sup> It should not be neglected, however, that sentences such as (110) can describe both an activity and an event. If it describes an event it can not get this inchoative interpretation but rather focus would be on the termination of that event:

他 喝 咖啡 了  
 Ta he kafei *le*  
 he drink coffee *le*  
 He has (had) had coffee/ he had coffee

<sup>100</sup> In Mandarin Chinese, an unspecified NP that occurs in postverbal position can be interpreted as either a mass noun or a count noun.

dynamic. If the VP is interpreted as describing a dynamic situation with a natural or potential boundary, the result is a terminative reading ((111) (a) and (111) (b)). If it is interpreted as describing a stative or generic situation, i.e. as a situation without inherent boundaries, the result is an inchoative reading ((111) (b)).

(111)

- (a) 他 看 了 电影  
 Ta kan le dianying  
 he watch LE movie  
 He watched movies/He watched the movie (terminative)
- (b) 他 看 电影 了  
 Ta kan dianying le  
 he watch movie LE  
 He watched movies/he watched the movie (terminative)  
 He is watching movies/the movie now (inchoative)

Such basic activity VPs can produce potentially ambiguous sentences when combined with sentence-final *le*, as they can have either an inchoative or a terminative reading. As can be seen from the translation of (111) (a), for verbal *le*, this ambiguity of decontextualized sentences between a terminative and an inchoative interpretation does not exist. Therefore, I conclude that for verbal *le*, the scope and relevant linguistic unit for determining situation type consists only of the verb or the VP while for sentence-final *le* the scope is larger and may consist of a whole sentence, which means that the context is allowed to alter the inherent situation type of a VP that occurs with sentence-final *le*.

In fact, the scope of sentence-final *le* may also include two or more events, succeeding each other towards a goal. For the linguistic manifestation of this type of process, we speak about a *discourse*, since such a manifestation typically consists of a "chunk" of several clauses or sentences.

(112)

他 轻轻 地 拥住 她， 轻轻 地  
 Ta qingqing de yongzhu ta, qingqing de  
 he soft DE embrace-steady she soft DE  
 贴住 她 的 唇， 她 一 凛， 本能 地  
 tiezhu ta de chun, ta yi lin, benneng de  
 glue-steady she DE lip she one cold instinct DE  
 往 后 一 缩， 就 倒在 床 上  
 wang hou yi suo, jiu dao zai chuang shang  
 towards back one withdraw then fall-on bed on  
 了。 他 低 头 凝 视 她， 眼  
 le. Ta di tou ningshi ta, yan  
 LE he lower head stare she eyes  
 底 有 一 抹 受 伤 的 神 色。 真

di you yi mo shou shang de shense. ”Zhen  
 bottom exist one CL be wounded DE expression really  
 这么 严重 吗？”  
 zheme yanzhong ma?”  
 that serious MA

*He gently embraced her and pressed against her lips. She went cold and stern, flinching instinctually she took a step back and fell onto the bed. He lowered his head and stared at her with an expression of hurt in his eyes. ”Is this really a big deal?” (1)<sup>101</sup>*

In order to distinguish between inchoative and terminative interpretations of sentences containing Mandarin marker *le*, it would be sufficient to make a binary classification between stative and dynamic situation types, i.e. between situation types that contain a natural or potential final end point (though, as the inchoative reading of the activity situation described in (111) (b) shows, potential endpoints can be blocked when the scope of *le* is larger than the VP) and situations that do not. However, a finer distinction within the dynamic class regarding this ability of the object NP in combination with a particular verb to express a path is necessary in order to be able to separate situations that can constitute a progress in time and those that cannot. Chapter 5 will demonstrate that the ability of an object NP in a given context to represent a path is of importance for the interpretation of a *le*-sentence. In particular, it contributes to the expression of different perfect types.

## 4.2. Attitude

For example, through utterances such as *That's the limit!*, we convey that when something has exceeded what is tolerated or accepted, a boundary in our minds has been passed. Mandarin *le* can be used to convey a boundary or a contrast between for example what agrees with the speaker and what does not, between expectation and reality, between a wrong and a correct assumption, etc.

(113)

这 双 鞋 小 了  
 Zhe shuang xie xiao le  
 this CL shoe small LE  
 These shoes are too small

(114)

这 双 鞋 小 了 两 寸  
 Zhe shuang xie xiao le liang cun  
 this CL shoe small LE two inch  
 These shoes are too small by two inches

<sup>101</sup> Example (112) is taken from a literary work. For reference, see footnote 106.

(115)

你 应该 看， 他 书 写 得 好  
Ni yinggai kan, ta shu xie de hao  
you should look he book write DE good  
You should take a look; he writes well<sup>102</sup>

我 看 过 他 好 几 本 书 了  
Wo kan guo ta hao ji ben shu le  
I read GUO he good some CL book LE  
(But) I have read quite a few of his books (i.e., you're wrong to think I haven't)

I will call this type of boundary *attitudinal* boundary, as opposed to *temporal* boundary.

### 4.3. Concluding remarks

It has been noticed that a flexible framework is needed to account for the functions of grammatical markers in Mandarin Chinese. According to the relevance-theoretic view, temporal markers are but pragmatic markers that have one single definition but can give different interpretations in different contexts. This view can be confirmed through the study of the marker *le* in Mandarin Chinese, which can contribute with different temporal, aspectual and modal distinctions depending on the context where it occurs. In this work, I claim that the semantic core feature of the marker *le* is *boundary*. The boundary can be temporal or attitudinal. The scope of *le* can be the VP, a whole sentence or an even larger unit. Later, more examples will be presented that show how the feature boundary, in close interaction with all kinds of contextual features, can contribute to different temporal or modal readings of the sentences in which the marker *le* occurs. A temporal boundary (a boundary between temporal domains) marks the start point or end point (or initial or final boundary) of a situation. *Le* thus adds this start or end point to the lexical unit or emphasizes an already present natural temporal start or end point in the situation type manifested by the unit. The semantic features of the unit within the scope of *le* determine whether focus should be on the beginning of a situation (inchoativity) or the end of a situation (terminativity). If the situation (E) is interpreted as stative, *le* adds an initial boundary to it, i.e. it marks the start point of the situation (inchoative reading). If the situation is interpreted as dynamic, *le* adds a final boundary to it i.e. marks the final point of the situation (terminative reading). The temporal characteristics of the **VP** (the situation type) determines whether the situation should be understood as inchoative or as terminative when *le* is attached to the verb. The temporal characteristics of the **sentence**, including temporal expressions and aspectual morphemes, determine whether the situation should be understood as terminative or inchoative when *le* is attached to the whole sentence. The initial or final boundary signalled by *le* thus represents the boundary of the event time E (though represented in the schemas here simply as E). It can be linked temporally to a reference time R. The expression of a certain tense or aspect category seems to be based on differences in the relations between R and the boundary or

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<sup>102</sup> Example (115) from Li and Thompson (1981).



boundaries of E and between R and S. If the boundary or boundaries of E are interpreted as included in R we get a perfective reading of the sentence. Relative anteriority is the result of the boundary/boundaries of E being interpreted as anterior to R. If the boundary/boundaries of E are anterior to R and R is related to Speech Time S as either anterior to, simultaneous with, or posterior to it, we get past, present or future perfect tense respectively. In the following chapters I will show how temporal expressions, grammatical constructions, verb semantics and (linguistic as well as non-linguistic) co(n)textual features provide clues for determining where the boundary signalled by the presence of *le* is positioned with respect to R. I will also show some examples of modal readings of both verbal and sentence-final *le*. In such cases, the boundary separates two non-temporal domains that have to do with the speaker's attitude towards what is expressed in the sentence. *Le* expresses a contrast between for example the norm and the deviation from the norm or between expectation and reality.

## 5. Verbal *le*

The opinion that the so called verbal *le*, i.e. the grammatical morpheme *le* occurring directly after the verb in a sentence, is a marker of the *perfective aspect* is held by many scholars and has rarely been challenged. It is true that many sentences that contain the marker *le* in postverbal position get perfective readings. Here are some examples of perfective sentences that contain verbal *le*, taken from grammars and narrative texts:

(116)

忽然	祖父	嘘	了	一	口	气
Huran	zufu	xu	le	yi	kou	qi
suddenly	grandpa	heave	LE	one	mouth	air
Suddenly, grandpa heaved a sigh <sup>103</sup>						

(117)

给	玛格塔	倒	了	杯	白	葡萄酒	后，
Gei	Mageta	dao	le	bei	bai	putaojiu	hou,
to	Magda	pour	LE	glass	white	wine	after
茱德	也	回来	了。	她	看看	玛格塔	的
Zhude	ye	huilai	le.	Ta	kankan	Mageta	de
Jude	also	return	LE	she	look-look	Magda	DE
下	腹	又	看看	我，	朝	我	
xia	fu	you	kankan	wo,	chao	wo	
lower	abdomen	then	look-look	I	towards	I	
斜	了	一	眼，	唐突	地	问，	“什么
xie	le	yi	yan <sup>104</sup> ,	tangtu	de	wen,	”Shenme
glance	LE	one	eye,	brusque	DE	ask	what
时候	生？”						
shihou	sheng?”						
time	give birth						

Was just pouring Magda a glass of Chardonnay when Jude reappeared, looked from Magda's stomach to me, and *gave me a filthy look*. 'Hi Magda', she said gruffly. 'When's it due?'(14)<sup>105</sup>

<sup>103</sup>Example (117) from Li and Thompson (1981)

<sup>104</sup>In examples that consist of several clauses or contain more than one instance of *le*, I have italicized the relevant passage both in the transcription and in the translated text for the reader's convenience.

<sup>105</sup>Examples (117) and (118) are taken from literary works. For reference, see footnote 106.

(118)

他们 相距 四 公尺 的 时候， 那 个  
Tamen xiangju si gongchi de shihou, na ge  
they apart four metres DE time that CL  
姑娘 绊 了 一 交， 几乎 扑  
guniang ban le yi jiao, jihu pu  
girl trip LE one fall almost pounce  
倒 在 地上。 她 发出 一 声  
dao zai dishang Ta fachu yi sheng  
fall at ground she let-out one CL  
呼 痛 的 尖 叫。  
hu tong de jian jiao.  
cry pain DE sharp call

They were perhaps four metres apart when the girl *stumbled* and fell almost flat on her face. A sharp cry of pain was wrung out of her. (15)

I wanted to investigate if there were sentences where verbal *le* could produce other than perfective readings. If that would prove to be the case, I also wanted to know under what conditions sentences with verbal *le* would get perfective readings and under what conditions they would get other readings. In this present study I have analysed around one hundred sentences containing verbal *le* that cannot be classified as perfective sentences according to the time-relational definition of the perfective aspect that was established in 1.3. The sentences were found in twelve narrative texts downloaded from the Internet.<sup>106</sup> The findings that I will present in this chapter challenge not only the traditional view of *le* as a perfective marker, but all views on *le* as a marker of one aspect type only.

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<sup>106</sup> The example sentences taken from narrative texts are followed by a number within parentheses which indicates from which work the data was taken (1-12 are the Chinese narrative texts used for the study presented in this chapter):

- (1) Zhang, Ailing: Bawang Bieji
- (2) Wang, Shuo: Wo shi ni baba
- (3) Qiong, Yao: Nüpengyou
- (4) Gu, Long: Bianfu xia
- (5) Gu, Long: Huanle yingxiong
- (6) A, Cheng: Qiwang
- (7) Qiong, Yao: Wo shi yi pian yun
- (8) Fangfang: Baiwu
- (9) Tan, Zhu: Yi sheng you duo chang
- (10) San, Mao: Song ni yi pi ma
- (11) Wang, Shuo: Qianwan bie ba wo dang ren
- (12) Wang, Shuo: Kongzhong xiaojie
- (13) García Márquez, Gabriel: Bai nian gudu [100 years of solitude]
- (14) Fielding, Helen: Danshen riji: Ai shi kongxincai [Bridget Jones: The edge of reason]
- (15) Orwell, George: 1984

## 5.1. Non-perfective interpretations of verbal *le*

### 5.1.1. Simple sentences

Some of the verbal *le* sentences that I studied did not describe a situation as included in a specific reference time. Instead, they presented situations that had already occurred by the reference time, i.e. their underlying temporal structure would be E-R rather than E incl in R.<sup>107</sup> I thus conclude that these sentences manifest all the characteristics of the perfect construction in Chinese. Below I have attempted to classify these sentences according to their characteristic features.

#### 5.1.1.1. Perfect sentences with *le*

- **Existential constructions**

According to Li and Thompson (1981), an *existential sentence* is a sentence that contains either the existential verb 有 *you* ‘have’ or a verb of posture. The typical existential sentence will contain a phrase that describes *locus*.

(119)

桌子 上 放 了 很 多 铅 笔  
Zhuozi shang fang le hen duo qianbi  
table on put LE very many pencil  
There are lots of pencils on the table<sup>108</sup>

(120)

水 里 漂 着 一 块 木 头  
Shui li piao zhe yi kuai mutou  
water in float ZHE one CL wood  
A piece of wood is floating in the water

There is an important difference between the verbs of sentence (119) and sentence (120). While 漂 *piao* ‘float’ in (120) denotes an activity that has no goal, 放 *fang* ‘put’ in (119) acts as a verb of placement containing the sense of motion, the movement of something onto or into a place. It has a natural end point, emphasized by the presence of boundary-marking *le*. But (119) lacks an agent. Li and Thompson point out that “sentences employing verbs of placement involve the subject placing the direct object somewhere *but do not specify where it started out.*” (Li and Thompson 1981, p. 404) This

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<sup>107</sup> In these sentences—main clauses that contain *le*—there are also explicit (through for example temporal expressions) or implicit indications of the position of the reference time with relation to the speech time S.

<sup>108</sup> Examples (119) and (120) from Li and Thompson (1981).

means that also in sentences where no agent is specified, the focus will be on the endpoint of the action. In a perfective *le*-sentence, the reference time R contains the **event**, i.e. the dynamic part of a situation. In (119), the reference time does not contain the event 放 *fang* ‘put’. The focus is not on the dynamic part of the situation but on the present position of the object entity as a **result** of an anterior event.

(121)

瓶子 都 装满 了 水  
 Pingzi dou zhuangman le shui  
 bottle all load-full LE water  
 The bottles are all filled with water

(122)

心 里 充满 了 快乐  
 Xin li chongman le kuaile  
 heart in fill-full LE happiness  
 His heart was filled with happiness (1)

(123)

眉 眼 口 鼻 的 轮廓 反  
 Mei yan kou bi de lunkuo fan  
 eyebrows eyes mouth nose DE contour instead  
 都 镀上 了 一 道 光  
 dou dushang le yi dao guang  
 all plate-on LE one CL light  
 The contours of her face were lit up by a beam of light (1)

(124)

来到 集美 药房， 门口 拉上 了 铁门，  
 Laidao Jimei yaofang, menkou lashang le tiemen,  
 come-arrive Jimei pharmacy, doorway pull-on LE irongate,  
 里面的 玻璃门 上 贴 着 纸条：  
 limian de bolimen shang tie zhe zhitiao:  
 inside DE glass door on paste ZHE note  
 When they arrived at Jimei pharmacy, the irongate had been shut and on the glass door behind it a bill was pasted: (1)

(125)

脸 上 像 冻上 了 一 层 冰壳  
 Lian shang xiang dongshang le yi ceng bingke  
 face on look like freeze-on LE one layer iceshell  
 It was as if a layer of ice had frozen on his face (1)

With a resultative compound *le* marks the transition, the boundary, between the active part of a situation and the stative part. But not only resultative compounds occur in this kind of sentences:

(126)

上 哪儿 玩 过 了 , 新 鞋 上 糊 了  
 Shang nar wan guo le, xin xie shang tu le  
 go to where play GUO LE, new shoe on smear LE  
 这 些 泥 ?  
 zhe xie ni?  
 this some mud  
 Where have you been playing, with all this mud smeared on your  
 new shoes? (1)

(127)

包子 上 印 了 铅 字  
 Baozi shang yin le qianzi  
 baozi on print LE letter  
 Letters were printed on the baozi (steamed dumpling) (1)

(128)

薄 薄 的 黑 发 梳 了 个 髻  
 Baobao de heifa shu le ge ji  
 thin DE black-hair comb LE CL bun  
 Her thin hair was combed up into a bun (1)

Let's take a look at the verbs in (119), (121), (122), (123), (124), (125), (126), (127) and (128). They all describe movement of the theme onto or into some entity. An agent is not specified. With both the resultative compounds and these simple verbs *le* seems to mark the transition between the active portion of the event implied by the verb and the result; the location of the theme or a property of the locus as a result of moving the theme.<sup>109</sup> The perfect involves, as Zhang (1998) puts it, "simultaneously a prior event and a subsequent state." (Zhang 1998, p. 407) Since there is no expressed agent that performs the action and the locus is placed in subject position, the event leading to the currently relevant state is implied but not focused upon. It is the result, or state, that holds at the

<sup>109</sup> It should be noted that there is a difference between the resultative compounds containing 满 *man* 'full' and the others since with 满 *man*, the object has to be unspecified as to quantity. See for example Jackendoff (1990) on "spray / load verbs". He claims that the sentence

? / \* Felix loaded the truck with some books

is hard to accept because the verb 'load' involves "distributive location", that is, the direct object has to be conceptualized as unbounded media that is distributed all over, throughout etc., the reference object. However, I believe that this semantic distinction is not one that is relevant for this discussion.

reference time of the sentence. The event that led to this state, naturally, is viewed as anterior to the reference time, i.e. E-R.

- **Resultant state verbs**

In the article "The perfective and perfect meanings of the verbal *-le*" by Zhang (1998) three different types of sentences where verbal *le* "actually has the semantic features of the perfect" (1998, p. 405) are presented. They are: sentences where *le* follows a resultant state verb, sentences containing temporal expressions denoting time spans that include the present and sentences where *le* follows an abstract verb. All these sentence types were found in the corpus. *Resultant state verbs* are for example 穿 *chuan* 'put on; wear', 戴 *dai* 'put on; wear' and 挂 *gua* 'hang' (transitive / intransitive). In two of the sentences below, other similar verbs also occur, 佩 *pei* 'wear' and 吊 *diao* 'hang' (transitive / intransitive).

(129)

许太太	开	门	进来，	微笑	望	了	他们
Xu taitai	kai	men	jinlai,	weixiao	wang	le	tamen
Xu Mrs	open	door	enter-come	smile	glance	LE	they
一望，	自	去	整理	椅垫子，	擦去		
yi wang,	zi	qu	zhengli	yidianzi,	caqu		
one glance,	self	go	arrange	armchair cushions	wipe-go		
钢琴上	茶碗	的	水渍，	又	把	所有	的
gangqin shang	chawan	de	shuizi,	you	ba	suoyou	de
piano on	teacup	DE	waterstain,	then	BA	all	DE
烟灰都	折在	一	个	盘子里，	许太太		
yanhui dou	zhezai	yi	ge	panzi li,	Xu taitai		
ashes all	turnover-at	one	CL	plate in	Xu Mrs		
穿了一	件	桃灰	细格子	绸衫，	很		
chuan le	yi	jian	taohui	xigezi	choushan,	hen	
put on LE	one	CL	peach-grey	fine-checked	silkblouse	very	
俊秀的	一	张	脸，	只是	因为	胖	
junxiu de	yi	zhang	lian,	zhi shi	yinwei	pang	
pretty DE	one	CL	face	only be	because	fat	
有点	走	了	样。				
youdian	zou	le	yang				
somewhat	go	LE	form				

Mrs Xu opened the door and came in; she beamed at them and then went about her own business, arranging the cushions on the chairs, wiping off the teacup waterstains left on the piano and emptying all the ashtrays into a plate. Mrs Xu *was wearing*<sup>110</sup> (had put on) a peach-grey colour, fine-checked silkblouse and had a pretty face, but looked out of shape because of her extra weight (1)

<sup>110</sup> The **interpretation** or **reading** of a sentence should not be confused with its **translation**. Some of these verbs are translated with English Simple Past or even Past Progressive. This does not mean, however, that verbal *le* in these sentences expresses perfective aspect or progressive aspect respectively. The Simple Past

(130)

英国 难得 天 晴， 到 了 夏季 风 和  
Yingguo nan de tian qing, dao le xiaji feng he  
England rare sky clear arrive LE summer wind and  
日 暖 的 时候， 爵 爷 爵 夫人们  
ri nuan de shihou, jue ye jue furenmen  
sun warm DE time noble man noble wives  
往往 喜欢 在 自己 的 田庄 上 举行  
wangwang xihuan zai ziji de tianzhuang shang juxing  
often like at self DE estate on hold  
这 种 半 正式 的 集会， 女人们 戴 了  
zhe zhong ban zhengshi de jihui, nurenmen dai le  
this kind half formal DE meeting, women put on LE  
颤 巍巍 的 宽 帽檐 的 草帽， 佩 了  
chan weiwei de kuan maoyan de caomao, pei le  
tremble lofty DE broad hatbrim DE strawhat wear LE  
过时 的 绢花， 丝质 手套 长过  
guoshi de juanhua, sizhi shoutao changguo  
outmoded DE silkflower silk-made glove go past  
肘际， 斯斯文文， 如同 参与 庙堂 大典。  
zhouji, sisi-wenwen, rutong canyu miaotang dadian.  
elbow refined-refined As if participate temple grand ceremony  
In England sunny days are rare. In the summer when the sun comes out and  
when there is a warm wind, the noblemen and their wives like to have these  
informal gatherings at their estates. The women wear (have put on) high floppy  
strawhats with broad rims, outmoded silkflowers and silk-gloves going up as  
high as their elbows, looking so refined as if they were assembling at some  
grand religious ceremony. (1)

(131)

街 上 倒 是 一 派 节日 景象，  
Jie shang dao shi yi pai jieri jingxiang,  
street on opposite be one CL festival scene,  
所有 的 高大 建筑物 都 挂 了 成  
suoyou de gaoda jianzhuwu dou gua le cheng  
all DE tall-big building all hang LE become  
串 的 灯， 路边 的 花坛， 树 上  
chuan de deng, lubian de huatan, shu shang

---

is a tense and not an aspect form and it is often interchangeable with the Past Progressive form, which expresses progressive aspect (R incl in E). This means that both forms can be used to express a state. This is not the case with *le*. With *le*, a stative verb gets an inchoative—i.e. dynamic—meaning. In all these sentences there is therefore a built-in reference to a prior event that has produced a certain state, although this is not always obvious in the translation.



string DE lamp, street-side DE flowerbed, tree on  
 也 吊 了 彩灯  
 ye *diao* *le* caideng  
 also hang LE colourlamp

But the streets were one big scene of festivity: strings of lights were *hanging* (had been hung) from all high buildings and colourful lanterns hung in the flowerbeds and trees on the side walks. (2)

Zhang claims that the perfect interpretation of these verbs is ensured by their lexical meaning. The stative readings of them have a "built in reference to prior dynamic events, which are responsible for these states in the first place." (Zhang 1998, p. 407) Although I agree with him that it seems very likely that verbs having inherent stative **and** dynamic aspects<sup>111</sup> readily can contribute to a perfect interpretation, I suggest that, as with the existential constructions, the context is often responsible for contributing to the perfect reading of these verbs. For example there is often a locus in these sentences:

(132)

他 身 上 穿 了 一 件 新 衣服  
 Ta shen shang chuan *le* yi jian xin yifu  
 he body on put on LE one CL new clothes  
 He has put on / is wearing a new jacket<sup>112</sup>

(133)

墙 上 挂 了 一 幅 画  
 Qiang shang gua *le* yi fu hua  
 wall on hang LE one CL picture  
 A picture has been hung / is hanging on the wall

It was observed earlier that locus in subject position is a feature commonly occurring with certain simple verbs and resultative compounds that express movement of a theme onto/into some entity and it seems probable that also with resultant state verbs it contributes to the perfect reading of these verbs, that may be, as Zhang puts it, "specially suitable for expressing the meanings of the perfect". (Zhang 1998, p. 407)

- **Abstract verbs**

Zhang (1998) also mentions so called *abstract verbs* as a group of verbs that are likely to get perfect interpretations. Such verbs are for example 体现 *tixian* 'embody', 反映 *fanying* 'reflect' and 表现 *biaoxian* 'show'. He says that for sentences where these verbs occur the time element is irrelevant. There is a reference time but probably no event time:

<sup>111</sup>For example resultant state verbs and possibly also resultative compounds and stative verbs when they are combined with *le* and get an inchoative meaning.

<sup>112</sup> Examples (132), (133) and (134) from Zhang (1998).

(134)

这次成功体现了新经济政策的  
Zhe ci chenggong tixian le xin jingji zhengce  
this time success embody LE new economy policy  
的正确性  
de zhengquexing  
DE correctness  
The success *shows / has shown* the correctness of the new economic  
policy

Other examples of this kind of verbs that I found in the texts I examined were 超过 *chaoguo* ‘surpass’ and 包含 *baohan* ‘contain’.

(135)

他过于依赖儿子了，甚至超过了  
Ta guoyu yilai erzi le, shenzhi chaoguo le  
he excessively depend son LE, even surpass LE  
儿子对他的依赖  
erzi dui ta de yilai  
son towards he DE depend  
He was too dependent on his son, so much that it *surpassed (had surpassed)*  
his son's dependence on him (2)

(136)

自己也不明白为什么要这样  
Ziji ye bu mingbai weishenme yao zheyang  
self also NEG understand why shall this way  
回答，这使我的话里包含了  
huida, zhe shi wo de hua li baohan le  
answer this make I DE reply in contain LE  
一点儿讽刺和自我安慰的味道。  
yidianr fengci he ziwo anwei de weidao  
some sarcasm and self comfort DE flavour  
I did not know why I responded the way I did, it *made* my answer *contain* a  
slight tinge of sarcasm and self-satisfaction (3)

The verbs in above examples all describe situations that are at the same time dynamic and stative. 超过 *chaoguo* is an event but also a state that is the result of a prior event and in (135) the act of surpassing is already over at the (narrative) present moment. In (136) 包含 *baohan* describes a state that is a fact already at the (narrative) present moment—the time when “I” answered. As with adjectives and stative verbs, if a boundary is imposed upon these abstract verbs—for example by adding verbal *le*—they become inchoative i.e. they describe the **entry into a state** rather than a **state**. However, it seems probable that also with these verbs the context has some effect on the aspectual

interpretation. Zhang (1998) in fact mentions that these sentences often contain noun phrases with abstract meanings, such as 成功 *chenggong* ‘success’ and 正确性 *zhengquexing* ‘correctness’.

- **Temporal expressions**

Zhang’s third type of sentences with verbal *le* that can have perfect interpretations are sentences containing "*temporal expressions denoting time spans that include the present*" (Zhang 1998, p. 407. Italics mine) such as 去年来 *qunian lai* ‘since last year’, 到现在为止 *dao xianzai wei zhi* ‘up to now’ and 我这辈子 *wo zhe beizi* ‘in my life’. These temporal "clues" can also be implicit, as is exemplified by his mini-discourse:

(137)

你 今天 干 什么 了 ?  
 Ni jintian gan shenme *le*?  
 you today did what LE  
 我 写 了 一 封 信  
 Wo *xie le yi feng xin*  
 I write LE one CL letter  
 - What have you done today?  
 - I *have written a letter.*<sup>113</sup>

Another, similar example is:

(138)

你们 近来 看 了 什么 戏 没有 ?  
 Nimen jinlai kan *le* shenme xi meiyou?  
 you recently see LE what play NEG?  
 Have you seen any play recently? (1)

The temporal expression 近来 *jinlai* ‘recently’ functions much in the same way as 今天 *jintian* ‘today’ in that it describes a bounded temporal frame that includes the present moment. Without 近来 *jinlai* this sentence might very well get a perfective interpretation, i.e. an interpretation of the event as included in a specific reference time (E incl in R). Say for example that the speaker wants to know if her friend went to see a play or not yesterday evening. She could then use the same sentence, without 近来 *jinlai*, of course. The temporal expression 昨天 *zuotian* ‘yesterday’ could, but would not necessarily have to, be inserted. Since the friend has knowledge about the context in which the sentence is uttered, he would probably draw the conclusion that the event she is talking about is relevant only if it happened yesterday evening and not today or this year even without this linguistic piece of information. The adverb 现在 *xianzai* ‘now’ in sentences (139) and (140) signals to the listener that the reference time of the sentence is the present moment, i.e. that the event must be

<sup>113</sup> Example (137) from Zhang (1998).

anterior to and not included in that reference time. In most languages of the world, the perfective aspect does not appear in the present tense<sup>114</sup> since present tense situations are by nature unbounded.

(139)

你们 现在 找到 了 房子 在 哪里？  
 Nimen xianzai zhaodao le fangzi zai nali?  
 you now search-arrive LE house at where?  
 Have you found the house now? (1)

(140)

现在 他 有 了 朋友  
Xianzai ta you le pengyou  
 now he have LE friend  
 He has friends now (1)

已经 *yijing* ‘already’ is an example of a temporal expression that denotes time anterior to R. In (141) there is a durational adverb, 两年 *liang nian* ‘for two years’. The sentence describes a situation that started two years ago and has been going on for two years. The presence of 已经 *yijing* signals that the timespan involved is positioned prior to R.

(141)

她 在 大学 里 已经 读 了 两 年 书，  
 Ta zai daxue li yijing du LE liang nian shu,  
 she at university in already read LE two year book,  
 交游 广阔， 暂时 虽 没 有 一  
 jiaoyou guangkuo, zanshi sui mei you yi  
 make friends vast temporarily although NEG have one  
 个 人 是 她 一 心 一 意 喜 欢 的，  
 ge ren shi ta yi xin yi yi xihuan de,  
 CL person is she one heart one mind like DE  
 有 可 能 性 的 却 不 少  
 you kenengxing de que bu shao.  
 have probability DE still not few  
 She had already been studying at the university for two years and made a lot of friends from far and near. Although for the time being there had not been one who enjoyed her undivided attention, quite a few had the potential (1)

<sup>114</sup> Cf. Dahl (1985).

On the other hand, a simple sentence such as

(142)

我 在 北 京 读 了 两 年 的 书  
Wo zai Beijing du le liang nian de shu  
I at Beijing read LE two year DE book  
I studied in Beijing for two years

will often get a perfective interpretation, provided there are no other clues in the context that will lead to a perfect such. There is, thus, a clear difference between the two sentences (141) and (142) in that the latter describes a bounded event (studying for two years) that occurred within a specific period of time—the reference time of the sentence— while the former describes an activity lasting during a time span that leads up to the reference time. It is obviously 已经 *yijing* that gives rise to the perfect interpretation in (141).

- **Non-temporal contextual clues**

(143)

你 呀 ， 你 就 叫 书 害 了 。 你  
Ni ya, ni jiu jiao shu hai le. Ni  
you YA you just let book ruin LE you  
在 车 上 给 我 讲 的 两 个 故 事 ，  
zai che shang gei wo jiang de liang ge gushi,  
at car on for I tell DE two CL story  
我 琢 磨 了 ， 后 来 挺 喜 欢 的 。 你  
wo zuomo le, houlai ting xihuan de. Ni  
I ponder LE afterwards really like DE you  
不 错 ， 读 了 不 少 书 。  
bu cuo, du le bu shao shu.  
NEG bad read LE NEG few book

Look at you, done in for by books. The two stories you told me in the car, the more I thought about them the better I liked them. You're not bad, *you've studied a lot*.

(6)

The last sentence in (143) contains no existential construction. The verb 读 *du* 'read/study' is not an abstract verb or a resultant state verb but a regular activity verb and there is no temporal expression that includes the present. So how come the most probable reading of 读 *du* in (143) is perfect and not perfective? In the absence of the mentioning in the intra- or extra-sentential context of a specific period of time, for example 去年 *qunian* 'last year' during which it would be known to both the speaker and the hearer that "you" in this sentence had studied hard (E would then be included in R) the speaker will interpret the "reading of many books" as an **experience** on the subject's part, an activity within a period leading up to the present moment, for example the time that has passed

since the subject was born. It is clear that contextual features other than temporal expressions, syntax and verb semantics can give rise to a perfect reading of a *le*-sentence. Some other examples are:

(144)

有 一 对 新人 站错 了 地方，  
You yi dui xinren zhanzuo le difang,  
 exist one couple newly-wed person stand-wrong LE place  
 指挥 的 人 提示 了 几 次，  
 zhihui de ren tishi le ji ci,  
 direct DE person point out LE several time  
 他们 仍 不 改正。  
 tamen reng bu gaizheng.  
 they still NEG correct

*A newly-wed couple stood in the wrong place (lit. had come to stand at the wrong place); the person in charge tried several times to make them aware of that but they still remained unchanged. (8)*

(145)

你 别 是 又 做 了 什么 亏心事？  
 Ni bie shi you zuo le shenme kuixinshi?  
 you NEG IMP be again make LE what deed-to-be-ashamed-of  
 You haven't done anything to be ashamed of again, have you? (1)

(146)

小 寒 剧烈 地 颤抖 了 一下， 连 她  
 Xiao Han julie de chandou le yixia, lian ta  
 Xiao Han violent DE tremble LE a little even she  
 母亲 也 感到 那 震动。 她 母亲 也  
 muqin ye gandao na zhendong. Ta muqin ye  
 mother also feel that shake She mother also  
 打 了 个 寒战， 沉默 了 一 会， 细声  
 da le ge hanzhan, chenmo le yi hui, xisheng  
 hit LE CL shiver reticent LE a while weak voice  
 道：“现在 我 才 知道 你 是 有意  
 dao: Xianzai wo cai zhidao ni shi youyi  
 say now I only understand you be intentional  
 的。” 小 寒 哭 了 起来。 她 犯 了 罪。  
 de. Xiao Han ku le qilai. Ta fan le cui.  
 DE. Xiao Han cry LE start she commit LE crime.  
 她 将 她 父母 之间 的 爱 慢吞吞 地  
 Ta jiang ta fumu zhi jian de ai mantuntun de  
 She JIANG she parents between DE love slow DE

杀死 了， 一 块 一 块 割碎 了 —  
 shasi le, yi kuai yi kuai gesui le —  
 kill LE one bit one bit cut-smash LE —  
 爱 的 凌迟！  
 ai de lingchi!  
 love DE dismember

A violent shudder went through Xiao Han, even her mother could feel it. Her mother too shivered but after a moment of silence she said softly: "Only now do I realize that you did it on purpose". Xiao Han started to cry. *She had committed a crime*. She had slowly killed the love between her mother and her father, dismembering it piece by piece like the ultimate punishment of "lingchi" a slow and painful death. (1)

(147)

我 不 出去， 我 有 权利  
 Wo bu chuqu, wo you quanli  
 I NEG out-go I have right  
 坐 在 课堂 里， 刘 桂珍  
 zuo zai ketang li, Liu Guizhen  
 sit at classroom in Liu Guizhen  
 老师 — 我 交 了 学费。  
 laoshi — wo jiao le xuefei.  
 teacher — I pay LE tuition-fee

I won't go out, I have the right to sit in this classroom, teacher Liu Guizhen, *I have paid the tuition fee*. (2)

(148)

“这 回 我 是 彻底 下 了 决心， 随  
 ”Zhe hui, wo shi chedi xia le juexin, sui  
 this time I be thorough put down LE decision follow  
 去， 甭 管 他 干 什么， 我 要 再  
 qu, beng guan ta gan shenme, wo yao zai  
 go NEG have to care he do what I if again  
 一 句 嘴 我 都 不 姓 我 姓。”  
 yi ju zui wo dou bu xing wo xing.”  
 one word mouth I all NEG be named I name  
 “有 决心 就 好。 其实 你们 马 锐 也  
 ”You juexin jiu hao. Qishi nimen Ma Rui ye  
 have decision then good In fact you Ma Rui also  
 少 了， 该 让 他 自 个 管 管  
 shao le, gai rang ta zige guanguan  
 little LE should let he self care-care  
 自 个 了， 别 觉 得 什 么 都 那 么 容 易。”  
 zige le, bie jue de shenme dou name rongyi.”  
 self LE NEG IMP think what all that easy

This time *I have definitely made up my mind*. Regardless of what he does to please himself, if I say another word, I'd give up my surname". "It is good to have made up one's mind. Actually that Ma Rui of yours is not a child anymore, it's time to let him take care of himself and realize that everything is not as easy as he thinks." (2)

(149)

老 太太 上 了 年纪， 有点 聋  
 Lao taitai shang le nianji, youdian long  
 old lady go-up le age somewhat deaf  
 [T]he lady had become old and she had trouble hearing (1)

(150)

有 一 回 骑 自行车 去 商场 买  
 You yi hui qi zixingche qu shangchang mai  
 exist one time cycle bicycle go supermarket buy  
 牙膏， 因为 存车处 的 老头 硬 将  
 yagao, yinwei cunchechu de laotou ying jiang  
 toothpaste, because parkinglot DE old man defiant JIANG  
 存车费 由 二 分 涨成 了 三 分， 致使  
 cunchefei you er fen zhangcheng le san fen, zhishi  
 parkingfee from two fen rise-become LE three fen, cause  
 贝贝 愤 地 争论 了 半 个 多 小时。  
 Beibei nu de zhenglun le ban ge duo xiaoshi  
 Beibei angry DE argue LE half CL more hour  
 There was this one time when he biked to the store to buy toothpaste. Because the old man in charge of the bike parking area arbitrarily *had raised the parking fee* from two cents to *three cents* on him, Beibei quarrelled in anger with him for half an hour. (8)

(151)

他 拿稳 了 你 心 里 只 有  
 Ta nawen le ni xin li zhi you  
 he make sure (lit. take-firm) LE you heart in only exist  
 他 一 个 人， 所以 他 敢 那么 随随便便  
 ta yi ge ren, suoyi ta gan name suisui-bianbian  
 he one CL person, therefore he dare thatway careless  
 的， 不 把 你 当 桩 事 看待。  
 de, bu ba ni dang zhuang shi kandai  
 DE, NEG BA you treat CL matter regard  
 He has made sure that in your heart there's only him. That's why he dares to act the way he wants and treat you as if you were nothing (1)



The parts of these sentences that in particular contribute to the perfect reading of the verb marked with *le* have been underlined. What these words or phrases add to the sentence is, in fact, nothing more than the sense that a *present* (either the time of the utterance or the narrative present) *situation* is in focus. That is why a verb marked with *le* in this kind of sentences most probably will not be interpreted as describing an isolated "whole" event, such as one event in a sequence, but as an anterior event with a result that holds at the reference time (E-R). The verbs 有 *you* (existential) and 是 *shi* (copula verb), for example, in sentences (144), (145) and (148) affirm that the situation described by the sentence as a whole is already a fact (a state holds) at a certain reference time and any verb marked by *le* is taken as describing an event that occurred at an indefinite time prior to that reference time, unless a specific time for its occurrence is explicitly mentioned. 这回 *Zhe hui* 'this time' in combination with 是 *shi*, in sentence (148) also makes clear that the speaker is focusing on the present situation. Sentences (146), (147), (149), (150) and (151) all implicate cause and effect or reason for a certain situation. The verb marked by *le* serves to describe the anterior event that caused that situation. When someone talks about a situation and the cause of that situation, the particular time of the causing event is often not important or even known by the speaker. What is important is that the result of that event is somehow related to the situation that holds or occurs at the reference time. Such conceptual information contributes to the interpretation of the events as anterior to R when they are expressed by a verb and the marker *le* as in the sentences above. It could be argued that if this is the case, then another type of sentences that involve such causal relations, exemplified by (152) and (153) would also qualify as perfect:

(152)

我 看完 了 报， 就 去 图书馆  
 Wo kanwan le bao jiu qu tushuguan  
 I read-finish LE paper then go library  
 When I have finished reading the paper I will go to the library

(153)

她 这 次 坐 得 离 卜 二 奶奶  
 Ta zhe ci zuo de li Bu er nainai  
 she this time sit DE away from Bu second grandma  
 远， 坐 了 一 会 就 去 找 女 主人  
 yuan, zuo le yi hui jiu qu zhao nu zhuren  
 far sit LE one moment then go search female host  
 告辞。  
 gaoci  
 take leave  
 This time she sat far from second grandma Bu and when she had sat for a while she went to look for the hostess to say goodbye. (1)

Notice, however, the difference between this kind of sentences and the ones describing cause and effect above. While sentences (146), (147), (149), (150) and (151) all describe situations that have happened at some time prior to another time which is perceived of as

either present (simultaneous with S) or past (with respect to S), the events in (152) and (153) are interpreted as anterior in time, but anterior relative to the main event in a sequence of events. In (152) and (153) *le* occurs in subclauses that in themselves **define** the reference time R of the main event ('**at the time when** I had finished reading/sat for a while') while in the perfect sentences discussed so far the event time described by verb + *le* is **subjected to** the position of the R of the whole sentence. Both sentence types share the anteriority relationship, however. As I will show later in this chapter, the subclauses in complex sentences like (152) and (153) should be treated as examples of *relative anteriority* and not of perfect tense.

### 5.1.1.2. Perfect types

Comrie, who calls them "specific manifestations of this general property [i.e. the continuing relevance of a previous situation]" (1976, p. 56), has found four types of perfect<sup>115</sup>.

The *perfect of result* describes a situation as a present state that is the result of a previous situation:

(154)

I have had a bath<sup>116</sup>

The *experiential perfect*, according to Comrie, indicates that the event is located in a temporal frame that leads up to the present:

(155)

Bill has been to America  
(since the war)

The perfect can also be used to show that a situation started in the past and continues up to the present. That type of perfect is what Comrie calls *perfect of persistent situation*:

(156)

I have been waiting for hours

When the Perfect tense form is used to describe a situation as very recent in time it is called the *perfect of recent past*:

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<sup>115</sup> Dahl (1985) notes that the use of the term 'perfect types' is not ideal, it "sounds as if we were dealing with different kinds of grammatical categories, although what they primarily are is types of *uses* of such categories". (Dahl 1985:133)

<sup>116</sup> Examples (154), (155), (156) and (157) from Comrie (1976).

(157)

Bill has just arrived

Elsness is critical towards the theories distinguishing between different perfect-types and claims that the perfect category should best be seen as "one unitary semantic category" (Elsness 1991, p. 87).

According to Salkie (1989), the property of expressing current relevance may manifest itself in different ways, depending on the lexical properties of the items in the sentence. It seems plausible that it is precisely the semantic characteristics, not only of the verbs, but also of other items in the sentence, that create the impression that there are different types of perfect. If this is the case also for Chinese, then not only can clues in the sentence and in the context determine whether the event should have a perfective or a perfect reading, but semantic information in the sentence can also tell us *in what way* the situation in question is currently relevant. Comrie claims that some languages use different syntactic means to express different types of perfect. Although it could be argued that the marker 过 *guo* in Chinese marks experiential perfect, since this chapter deals exclusively with the verbal *le*, I will only be discussing the cases where the perfect is related to the use of *le*, consequently, any differences in perfect interpretations should be taken to be the effect of other characteristics of the sentence than that of distinct syntactic markers.

I will show that Comrie's (1976) three perfect types<sup>117</sup> perfect of persistent situation, experiential perfect and perfect of result can all be expressed by using the Chinese verbal *le*. I propose that the difference between the three perfect types lies in the relationship between E, R, S and a higher reference time frame, a "higher R", henceforth symbolised thus:  $\rho$ . This is a temporal interval that includes the "lower" Reichenbachian R, which is the proper reference time of the sentence.  $\rho$  is either overtly expressed through temporal expressions or implied through the context. As we will see,  $\rho$  can have different characteristics and these characteristics determine which type of perfect that will be expressed by the sentence. Another factor that is influential in determining perfect type of a *le*-sentence is the direct object, whether it is quantified or non-quantified. In particular, it is of importance whether the quantified object in the particular environment where it occurs describes a path<sup>118</sup> or not. For example, an important difference between the verb phrases *read four books* and *see four girls* is that the four books in the former VP can form a path through which the subject "travels", by reading one book after the other. In *see four girls* on the other hand, the most probable reading is one where the subject sees the four girls at once, not one girl after the other. The girls in this context thus do not constitute a path while the books do and this difference may have an effect on perfect type. Only a path-VP may contribute to a perfect-of-persistent-situation reading of a sentence, for example. It is, however, not only the semantics of the object NP but of the whole VP that determine if the object can have a path reading or not. Combined with

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<sup>117</sup> It should be noted that the perfect of recent past differs from the other perfect types in that it can co-occur with specification of time (R) to which the event is anchored. This suggests that it is not really a semantic perfect, since the characteristics of the perfect according to this present study is E anterior to R. Therefore, it will not be discussed here as a perfect type.

<sup>118</sup> The *path* concept was also described in 1.1.

another verb, such as *kiss*, for example, the direct object *three girls* may very well have a path reading (*he kissed three girls*).

- **Perfect of persistent situation**

(158)

他 接着 又 道： “ 这些 鱼 说不定  
 Ta jiezhe you dao: "Zhexie yu shuobuding  
 he carry on add say these fish say-NEG-fixed  
 已 游 了 几 千 里 路，  
 yi you le ji qian li lu,  
 already swim LE how many thousand kilometre road,  
 所以 肉 也 变成 特别 结实 鲜美，  
 suoyi rou ye biancheng tebie jieshi xianmei,  
 therefore meat also become particularly firm delicious,  
 海 上 的 渔 夫 们 往 往 终 年 都  
 hai shang de yufumen wangwang zhongnian dou  
 sea on DE fishermen often all year all  
 在 等 着 这 一 次 丰 收 。”  
 zai deng zhe zhe yi ci fengshou"  
 ZAI wait ZHE this one time harvest

He went on: "These fishes might *have traveled thousands of miles already*, that's why their meat has become so firm and tasty. The fishermen who go to sea often look forward to this one harvest all year round." (4)

The phrase 几千里路 *ji qian li lu* ‘how many thousands kilometres’ expresses in itself a time span by being a quantified object NP that is capable of describing a path. It forms a string of entities (kilometres) that measures the result of the effort made by the fishes. Adverbs like 已经 *yijing* or 已 *yi* ‘already’ and 到现在为止 *dao xianzai wei zhi* ‘up to now’ all contribute to a linear perspective on the time involved.  $\rho$  is perceived of as a *directional temporal interval that leads up to the reference time R of the sentence*. With these kinds of temporal expressions, the path-denoting object NP gives the impression of a movement along a path that leads up R. These features guide the listener to an interpretation of the boundary signalled by the presence of *le* so that the situation is perceived of as terminated at R. This produces in effect a *perfect-of-persistent-situation* reading.

(159)

谁 都 看得 出 她 一定 已 吃 了 不 少  
 Shei dou kande chu ta yiding yi chi le bu shao  
 who all see-DE-clear she for sure already eat LE NEG little  
 苦 头 。”  
 kutou  
 suffering

Anyone could see that she had already suffered a lot (4)

The activity described in (159) is measured by the amount of suffering experienced up to the present point.

(160)

到 现在 为 止 我 一共 写 了 五 篇 文章  
Dao xianzai wei zhi wo yigong xie *le* wu pian wenzhang  
 to now as end I altogether write LE five CL article  
Up to now I have written altogether five articles<sup>119</sup>

The five articles in (160) represent a path through which the subject travels (by writing one article after the other). The temporal expression, 到现在为止 *dao xianzai wei zhi* ‘up to now’, represents a temporal interval during which E holds. This temporal interval starts sometime in the past and ends at R, which in this case is simultaneous with S, the present moment.

(161)

她 已经 有 了 三 个 月 的 身孕  
 Ta yijing you *le* san ge yue de shenyun  
 she already have LE three CL month DE pregnancy  
 She is already three months pregnant

(162)

她 已经 老 了 两 年  
 Ta yijing lao *le* liang nian  
 she already old LE two years  
 She had already become two years older (1)

The verbs in (161) and (162) are so called stative verbs. Normally, they get an inchoative reading with *le*. They then come to express a state that is the result of a change. But above examples (161) and (162) both contain quantified NPs that are capable of representing strings of entities, ‘three months’ and ‘two years’ respectively. These perfect sentences do not differ from the ones that contain active verbs and path-denoting object NPs when they occur with *yijing*. They describe accumulated results of certain activities or processes (acquiring vs. growing) that hold at R. Of course that means we have to accept that these verbs may describe either states **or** processes depending on their lexical environment. For now, this is what I will assume.

- **Experiential perfect**

Let’s take a look at Zhang’s (1998) mini-discourse again:

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<sup>119</sup> Example (160) from Zhang (1998).

(163)

- (a) 你 今天 干 什么 了 ?  
Ni jintian gan shenme le?  
you today did what LE  
我 写 了 一 封 信  
Wo xie le yi feng xin  
I write LE one CL letter  
- What have you done today?  
- I have written a letter.<sup>120</sup>

今天 *jintian*, claims Zhang, together with other temporal expressions denoting time spans that include the present, promotes a perfect reading of the sentence that contains verbal *le*. However, as I will show, the implicit temporal expression 今天 *jintian* ‘today’ in the reply in above discourse as well as the expression 我这辈子 *wo zhe beizi* ‘in my lifetime’ differ from adverbs like 去年来 *qunian lai*, 到现在为止 *dao xianzai wei zhi* and 已经 *yijing*. The latter expressions promote a view of  $\rho$  as a stretch, running from some specified or unspecified point in the past up to R. The former promote a view of  $\rho$  as a frame in which R is located. The perspective on time is that of time as a space, without direction. An alternative to the answer in (163) (a) would be:

- (b) 我 (今天) 写 了 三 封 信  
Wo (jintian) xie le san feng xin  
I (today) write LE three CL letter  
I have written three letters (today)

The speaker probably wants to tell us what she has done during a period of time (today) that includes R/S without any implications that she will continue to engage in that activity.<sup>121</sup> The quantified object NP 三封信 *sang feng xin* ‘three letters’ in this environment, i.e. in combination with the verb 写 *xie* ‘write’, is perfectly capable of representing a path. Normally, a person writes one letter at a time. However, in combination with an overtly expressed or implied temporal perspective of time as a non-directional space that encompasses R, the quantified object 三封信 *sang feng xin* ‘three letters’ is perceived of as **one** semantic entity instead of a string of entities.<sup>122</sup> The situation occurred at some unspecified time(s) during  $\rho$ . Notice the difference between

<sup>120</sup> Example (163) from Zhang (1998).

<sup>121</sup> It is important to be aware of the fact that the presence of an adverb like 今天 *jintian* ‘today’ does not **necessarily** predict an experiential perfect reading as extra-sentential context may influence the interpretation. (163) (b), for example, can be uttered in a context where the writing of three letters is part of a larger project of writing **five** letters that the subject is presently engaged in. It then expresses a stage reached at the present moment. 今天 *Jintian* may still serve to express the time interval during which the project is supposed to be carried out, but the real  $\rho$  is the time period leading up to the moment during the day when the utterance is made (the lower R), for example at two o’clock in the afternoon. The speaker expects that he/she will continue writing. So the presence of 今天 *jintian* does not exclude a perfect-of-persistent-situation reading.

<sup>122</sup> A temporal adverb that represents a temporal frame with a direction from the past up to the present puts more focus on the quantified object as a path.

(163) (b) that contains 今天 *jintian* and (164) below, which contains a temporal expression that represents a linear perspective on time:

(164)

到 现在 为 止 我 一共 写 了 三 封 信  
Dao xianzai wei zhi wo yigong xie le san feng xin  
to now as end I altogether write LE three CL letter  
Up to now I have written altogether three letters

In combination with a temporal expression that represents a view on time as a stretch or line, the quantified VP 写三封信 *xie san feng xin* ‘write three letters’ represents a path, an activity that the subject has been engaged in up to now that has reached a certain result. In (163) (b) the activity may have been scattered over several intervals during the day, alternatively concentrated to one single interval at some time during the day. In any case, the subject has had the experience of writing three letters during the period of time that 今天 *jintian* describes.

Also in sentence (165) the activity of seeing weird things is interpreted as an experience because of the temporal expression 我这辈子 *wo zhe beizi* ‘in my life’ where ‘my life’ is interpreted as a space encompassing the present moment.

(165)

我 这 辈子 见 了 很 多 新 鲜 事  
Wo zhe beizi jian le hen duo xinxian shi  
I this life see LE very many strange thing  
I have seen many weird things in my life<sup>123</sup>

I would like to refer to the type of perfect exemplified by (163) as some variant of the *experiential perfect* because it focuses on the occurrence of an event in a *non-directional temporal interval* ( $\rho$ ) that includes the reference time  $R$  of the sentence.

This reading can be achieved through the aid of other, non-temporal contextual features as well:

(166)

你 不 错， 读 了 不 少 书  
Ni bu cuo, du le bu shao shu.  
you NEG bad read LE NEG few book  
You're not bad, you've read a lot of books (1)

It is not the progress of the situation ‘read a lot of books’ (as with the perfect of persistent situation) that is of importance here, rather the characteristics of the person as result of

<sup>123</sup> Example (165) from Zhang (1998).

some experience(s) in her life.<sup>124</sup> 你不错 *Ni bu cuo* ‘you’re not bad’ implies that this is the case.

- **Perfect of result**

In the examples of perfect sentences so far, the direct object NP has been quantified. But what if the object NP is not quantified? As is often mentioned in articles about *le*, many native speakers do not accept a sentence with verbal *le* if the object NP is not quantified:

(167)

?	他	写	了	信	
?	Ta	xie	le	xin	
	he	write	LE	letter	
	He wrote/has written a letter/?letters /the letters				

“[T]here is often something strange and “unfinished” about a sentence containing *-le* and a simple unquantified direct object noun....such sentences need to be bounded by the addition of either a following clause or a sentence final particle *le*”. (Li and Thompson 1981, p. 200) However, examples of sentences that contains verbal *le*, an unquantified object NP or an object that is quantified but does not constitute a path (a "string of temporal entities") but which do **not** contain a subordinate clause or a sentence-final *le* were in fact quite common in the texts analysed.

(168)

人家	已经	受	了	罪，	你	还
Renjia	<u>yijing</u>	shou	le	zui,	ni	hai
he	already	recieve	LE	punishment	you	still
要	欺负	他？				
yao	qifu	ta?				
want	bully	him				
He has <u>already</u> been punished, why are you still bullying him? (5)						

(169)

这	夥计	还	想	问：	“感激	我	什麼？”
Zhe	huoji	hai	xiang	wen:	"ganji	wo	shenme?"
this	mate	still	want	ask	thank	I	what
郭	大路	却	已	走下	了	楼。	
Guo	Dalu	que	yi	zouxia	le	lou.	

<sup>124</sup> Of course, this interpretation is open to discussion. If the situation was such that the speaker wanted to compliment the listener on having already read so many books during a certain period of time leading up to the present moment this perfect sentence would rather be an example of the perfect of persistent situation. Since the object is quantified this is possible, but if the characteristic “not bad” in a person is interpreted as being a permanent such, then the perfect-of-experience interpretation seems to be the most probable.



Guo Dalu however already walk-down LE floor.  
 That guy still wanted to ask: "Thank me for what?", but Guo Dalu had already gone downstairs. (5)

(170)

我 刚刚 已经 说 了， 你 的 许多  
 Wo ganggang yijing shuo le, ni de xuduo  
 I just now already say LE you DE many  
 条件， 并 不 适合 我 的 要求， 但是  
 tiaojian, bing bu shihe wo de yaoqiu, danshi  
 factor really NEG suit I DE demand but  
 樵樵 已经 迷上 了 你， 我 也  
 Qiaoqiao yijing mishang le ni, wo ye  
 Qiaoqiao already confused-onto LE you I also  
 只好 接受 你  
 zhihao jieshou ni  
 have to accept you

As I just said, much of what you can offer does not meet my expectation;  
 but since *Qiaoqiao* has already fallen for you, I have no choice but to accept you (7)

(171)

小 寒 剧烈 地 颤抖 了 一下， 连 她  
 Xiao Han julie de chandou le yixia, lian ta  
 Xiao Han violent DE tremble LE a little even she  
 母亲 也 感到 那 震动。 她 母亲 也  
 muqin ye gandao na zhendong. Ta muqin ye  
 mother also feel that shake She mother also  
 打 了 个 寒战， 沉 默 了 一 会， 细 声  
 da le ge hanzhan, chenmo le yi hui, xisheng  
 hit LE CL shiver reticent LE a while weak voice  
 道： “ 现在 我 才 知道 你 是 有 意  
 dao: Xianzai wo cai zhidao ni shi youyi  
 say Now I only understand you be intentional  
 的。” 小 寒 哭 了 起 来。 她 犯 了 罪。  
 de. Xiao Han ku le qilai. Ta fan le cui.  
 DE. Xiao Han cry LE start she commit LE crime.  
 她 将 她 父 母 之 间 的 爱 慢 吞 吞 地  
 Ta jiang ta fumu zhi jian de ai mantuntun de  
 She JIANG she parents between DE love slow DE  
 杀 死 了， 一 块 一 块 割 碎 了 —  
 shasi le, yi kuai yi kuai gesui le —  
 kill LE one bit one bit cut-smash LE —

爱 的 凌迟！  
 ai de lingchi!  
 love DE dismember

A violent shudder went through Xiao Han, even her mother could feel it. Her mother too shivered but after a moment of silence she said softly: “Only now do I realize that you did it on purpose”. Xiao Han started to cry. *She had committed a crime*. She had slowly killed the love between her mother and her father, dismembering it piece by piece like the ultimate punishment of “lingchi” a slow and painful death. (1)

(172)

“这 回 我 是 彻 底 下 了 决 心 ， 随  
 ”Zhe hui, wo shi chedi xia le juexin, sui  
 this time I be thorough put down LE decision follow  
 他 去 ， 甭 管 他 干 什 么 ， 我 要 再  
 ta qu, beng guan ta gan shenme, wo yao zai  
 he go NEG have to care he do what I if again  
 多 一 句 嘴 我 都 不 姓 我 姓 。 ”  
 duo yi ju zui wo dou bu xing wo xing.”  
 more one word mouth I all NEG be named I name  
 “有 决 心 就 好 。 其 实 你 们 马 锐 也  
 “You juexin jiu hao. Qishi nimen Ma Rui ye  
 have decision then good In fact you Ma Rui also  
 不 少 了 ， 该 让 他 自 个 管 管  
 bu shao le, gai rang ta zige guanguan  
 NEG little LE should let he self care-care  
 自 个 了 ， 别 觉 得 什 么 都 那 么 容 易 。 ”  
 zige le, bie juede shenme dou name rongyi.”  
 self LE NEG IMP think what all that easy

This time *I have* definitely *made up my mind*. Regardless of what he does to please himself, if I say another word, I’d give up my surname”. “It is good to have made up one’s mind. Actually that Ma Rui of yours is not a child anymore, it’s time to let him take care of himself and realize that everything is not as easy as he thinks.” (2)

Since above VPs are unquantified they cannot constitute a path, hence the perfect-of-persistent-situation reading is outruled. Neither do any of these sentences contain clues that would allow the reader to construct in her mind, for the setting of the event described, a temporal frame that includes the present such as ‘this year’ or ‘today’. That means that the experiential perfect reading is not probable either. What (168), (169), (170), (171) and (172) all have in common is that the state or situation that is **the result of the anterior event** holds at the reference time R of the sentence. The reading is that of a single event having occurred at an *unspecified point of time prior to R*. This type of perfect is the perfect Comrie calls *perfect of result*. Below are two more examples, this time with stative verbs:

(173)

小 艾 恐怕 已经 有 了 身孕  
Xiao Ai kongpa yijing you le shenyun  
Xiao Ai probably already have LE pregnancy  
Xiao Ai may be already pregnant (1)

(174)

我 告诉 你， 她 已经 同意 了 我们 的  
Wo gaosu ni, ta yijing tongyi le women de  
I tell you she already agree LE we DE  
婚事， 你 还 有 什么 可 怀疑 的？  
hunshi, ni hai you shenme ke huaiyi de?  
marriage, you still have what can suspect DE?  
I tell you, she has already agreed to our marriage, what's making you  
still feel concerned? (7)

The same temporal expression, 已经 *yijing*, is used in both (175) and (176) below, but the difference between the two direct object NPs in these two sentences produce a difference in perfect type. Sentence (175) describes a persistent situation as the quantified direct object 两封信 *liang feng xin* 'two letters' can represent a path. The direct object in the second sentence, 你 *ni* 'you', cannot represent a path. Since the situation is interpreted as a single event, the sentence gets a perfect-of-result reading.

(175)

他 已经 写 了 两 封 信  
Ta yijing xie le liang feng xin  
He already write LE two CL letter  
He has already written two letters

(176)

樵樵 已经 迷上 了 你  
Qiaoqiao yijing mishang le ni  
Qiaoqiao already confused-onto LE you  
[B]ut Qiaoqiao has already fallen for you (7)

Another example of perfect of result is a sentence where  $\rho$  excludes E and is equivalent with R/S:

- (177)  
 你们 现在 找到 了 房子 在 哪里 ?  
 Nimen xianzai zhaodao le fangzi zai nali?  
 you now search-arrive LE house at where?  
 Have you found the house now? (1)

(177) describes an occurrence of an event in the past that is relevant for the present moment, 现在 *xianzai* ‘now’ refers to both R and S. As opposed to the examples of experiential perfect and perfect of persistent situation, no time frame in which the event is supposed to have happened is implied, it is simply irrelevant, but the **result** of the event may still be important for the present moment.

### 5.1.2. Subclauses of complex sentences

Complex sentences are sentences that consist of a subclause and a main clause. There are different kinds of complex sentences that contain verbal *le*.<sup>125</sup> What these sentences have in common is that the situation described by the main clause in one way or the other is dependent on the realization of the situation specified in the subclause. I will treat two types of complex sentences with *le* in this chapter. One is the *sequential sentence* type, in which the subclause describes a situation that will be or was realized before the main clause situation will be or was realized. That is, not only are the situations temporally subsequent but the realization of one of them is in some way related to the realization of the other. The second sentence-type that I will discuss is the *conditional sentence* type. This sentence-type is similar to the former in that it, too, describes a sequence of events in which the realization of the first situation is related to the realization of the second. The difference lies in this relationship. For the temporal sequential sentences, it is simply a temporal relationship, while for the conditional sentences, the temporal relationship follows from the fact that the subclause describes a condition under which the main clause situation **can** be fulfilled. The temporal relationship between the clauses in the conditional sentences is therefore hypothetical.

It has already been pointed out that the common argument in favour of the view that verbal *le* is a perfective aspect marker—that it can occur in future contexts—is problematic. It can occur in main clauses that describe future events such as (28). However, in all such cases it serves to mark anteriority i.e. it normally does not contribute

<sup>125</sup> In fact, not only verbal *le* but also its sentence-final counterpart can occur in the subclause of a complex sentence as Liu (1990) remarks:

你 不 高兴 在 作 妻子 了 , 你 就 丢 了 丈夫  
 Ni bu gaoxing zai zuo qizi le, ni jiu diu le zhangfu  
 You NEG happy ZAI act wife LE you then loose LE husband  
 If you don't like to be his wife, then leave your husband (example from Liu 1990, originally Li 1924)

However, this kind of sentences is not as common and will not be treated here.

to a **perfective** reading in future contexts. In subclauses of complex sentences, *le* occurs freely in the future tense:

(178)

他 明天 晚上 吃 了 饭  
Ta mingtian wanshang chi le fan  
he tomorrow evening eat LE rice  
就 去 看 电影  
jiu qu kan dianying  
then go watch movie  
Tomorrow, when he has eaten, he will go to the movies

The question is, does it mark perfective aspect in the subclause of (178)?

According to a relevance-theoretic framework, pragmatic markers, like tense and aspect markers, have only a semantic core meaning and the temporal interpretation of the sentence where such a marker occurs is a result of the combination of the semantics of this core feature and contextual or conceptual elements. In this work, *le* is defined as a pragmatic marker, the semantic core meaning of which is *boundary*. This outset solves many of the problems with *le* that earlier analyses have been unable to explain. I maintain that the common pairing of one marker with a single grammatical “label” (such as perfective aspect, for example) is bound to run up against problems. This is not less evident when complex sentences with *le* are examined.

As has been indicated in previous chapters, the marker *le* seems to be able to contribute to the manifestation of both the perfective aspect and the perfect tense, regardless of its syntactic position in the sentence.<sup>126</sup> *Le* simply marks the initial or final boundary of the situation expressed by a verb, a sentence or a series of sentences. For a perfective interpretation, the initial or final boundary added by *le* is perceived of as included in R, which may be explicit (for example through a temporal expression) or implicit (contextually implied). For a perfect interpretation, on the other hand, the initial or final boundary is perceived of as anterior to R. First let us look at a simple sentence in which R is explicit:

(179)

他 早上 吃 了 饭  
Ta zaoshang chi le fan<sup>127</sup>  
he morning eat LE rice  
He had a meal in the morning

<sup>126</sup> It has been noted that syntactic position may be relevant for the default temporal interpretation of the sentence with *le*.

<sup>127</sup> This sentence may not be accepted by all native speakers since it contains an unquantified object NP.

The event time E of 吃饭 *chi fan* ‘eat’ is included in the R of the sentence, which is expressed by the temporal adverbial 早上 *zaoshang* ‘morning’. *Le* marks the final boundary of 吃饭 *chi fan*. In a perfective reading of the sentence, as expressed by the translation of (179), this boundary is perceived of as included in R, i.e. the eating ended sometime during the temporal interval ‘morning’.

### 5.1.2.1. Sequential sentences

When *le* occurs in the subclause of a sequential sentence it seems to have some other function than that of marking the perfective aspect:

(180)

他	常常	吃	了	饭
Ta	changchang	chi	<i>le</i>	fan
he	often	eat	LE	rice
就	去	看	电影	
jiu	qu	kan	dianying	
then	go	watch	movie	
He often goes to the movies after having eaten				

In (180) that contains the adverb 常常 *changchang* ‘often’, the speaker does not have a specific time in mind for the situation 吃饭 ‘eat’. Since 常常 *changchang* gives the sentence a habitual reading the subclause situation is not anchored to a reference time and therefore cannot describe a perfective situation.

Second, in sequential sentences, *le* does something more than merely marking a boundary of the situation described by the VP to which it is attached. In fact, Li and Thompson (1981), among others, have pointed out that a simple sentence that contains a non-quantified verb phrase such as

(181)

他	吃	了	饭
Ta	chi	<i>le</i>	fan
he	eat	LE	rice
He ate / He has eaten / He had eaten			

would sound ungrammatical or at least somewhat strange, like “out of the blue”, if not followed by a second clause. This claim might be too strong. It is challenged by a large amount of similar sentences actually produced by native speakers or written down in narrative texts. In fact, quite a few such sentences are found as example sentences in this thesis. But it remains a fact that without a context to relate to, this sentence will sound awkward to many speakers. It is expected that it be followed by a main clause since it is

not perceived of as an independent sentence, but as a subclause. In fact, since it defines R for the main clause, it acts like a temporal adverbial:

(182)

- (a) 他 吃 了 饭 就 去 看 电 影  
 Ta chi *le* fan jiu qu kan dianying  
 he eat LE rice then go watch movie  
 a) When he had eaten (=at that time) he went to the movies  
 b) When he has eaten (=at that time) he will go to the movies

*Le* is almost obligatory in the subclause of most sequential sentences unless there is a RVC complement to fill the boundary-function:

(183)

?他 吃饭 就 走  
 ?Ta chifan jiu zou<sup>128</sup>  
 he eat then go

A view of *le* as a boundary marker does not seem to prevent us from defining the function of *le* in this type of sentences as that of marking relative tense. I have argued that *le* marks a temporal boundary for the situation expressed by the VP to which it is attached. This boundary might be positioned on the time line and related to an explicit or implicit R, as in main clauses. But it can also act as a temporal boundary on the time line to which another situation (the main clause situation) can be related, as in subclauses. This means that *le* can mark a boundary for a situation expressed by a lexical unit **and** a boundary that is in fact the initial endpoint of a reference time interval<sup>129</sup> during which a

<sup>128</sup> According to Hu (1995), this is one of the sentence types with *le* in which *le* is often wrongly excluded by English-speaking learners of Mandarin because of L1 interference.

I shall go and see you after supper  
 \*我 吃 晚 饭 去 找 你  
 \*Wo chi wanfan qu zhao ni

<sup>129</sup> It is obvious that *le* cannot mark the whole interval R for the main clause, as it is a marker of a boundary. R does not have to be a point or a boundary. It can also be an interval and the time of the main clause event may be further specified **within** that reference time interval. Several native speakers have told me that in such cases, the temporal relation between the two events is hypothetical rather than factual.

他 吃 了 饭 就 九 点 钟 去 看 电 影  
 Ta chi *le* fan, jiu jiu dian zhong qu kan dianying  
 he eat LE rice then nine point clock go watch movie  
 a) ?When he has eaten he will go to see a movie at nine  
 d) If he has eaten he will go to the movies at nine

new event can occur. If *le* is looked upon as a pragmatic marker with a core feature *boundary*, nothing prevents it from adapting to the context in the following ways<sup>130</sup> when it occurs in postverbal position:

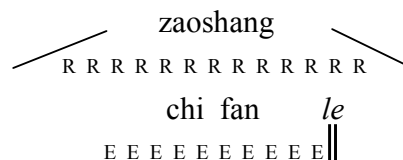
1) While marking the final (or initial) boundary of the Event Time represented by the VP to which it is attached, *le* can be combined with an explicit or implicit R resulting in a perfective (E incl in R) or perfect (E-R) reading of the situation. This is seen in simple sentences with *le*, like (179).

2) In subclauses, this boundary has a dual function. Like in main clauses, it acts as a boundary for the Event Time, represented by the temporal structure of the situation described by the lexical content of the VP. This boundary simultaneously acts outside that temporal structure, marking the initial endpoint of a reference time interval for a **later** situation resulting in a relative anteriority reading of the first situation.<sup>131</sup> This function is found in sequential sentences consisting of a subclause with *le* and a main clause.

Let's take a look at the resulting temporal structures for sentences (179) and (182), repeated here as (184) and (185) for the sake of convenience:

(184)

他	早上	吃	了	饭
Ta	zaoshang	chi	<i>le</i>	fan
he	morning	eat	LE	rice



<sup>130</sup> Modal interpretations of sentences with verbal *le* are not mentioned here.

<sup>131</sup> To say that *le* contributes to relative anteriority in sentences like (182) is in fact not entirely satisfactory. According to Hamann (1987), it could never be the main clause R that provides the subclause R for sentences like

After they had eaten everything, they left.

The “after-clause” is an adverbial clause that should be treated in the same way as other temporal expressions such as ‘yesterday’. Relative anteriority means anteriority of one event to another, i.e. to the reference time provided by a posterior event. If Hamann is right the main clause of complex sentences cannot provide such an R for the subclause event since that would imply a reciprocal providing of reference times between the subclause event and the main clause event, i.e., an impossible scenario where one provides the reference time for the other. Schopf (1987) has proposed that the event in the subclause introduces a new reference time to which the event in the main clause can be related. I use the term relative anteriority here because, at any rate, the **result** of *le* occurring attached to the verb in a subclause of a sequential sentence is an anteriority reading of that situation to the main clause reference time (that this same *le*, in itself, marks).





我 之 辈， 我 看 中国 的 事  
 wo zhi bei, wo kan Zhongguo de shi  
 I ZHI kind I see China DE matter  
 要 好 办 得 多！  
 yao hao ban de duo!  
 will good handle DE much  
 I think that *if China really had such a bunch of Tang Yuanbao's*,  
 and less people like you and me, China's problems would be  
 easier to solve by far! (11)

(187)

这 倒 是 真 的， 吃多 了 糖，  
 Zhe dao shi zhen de, chiduo le tang  
 this however be true DE eat-much LE sweet  
 最 容易 发 胖。  
 zui rongyi fa pang  
 most easy become fat  
 That is true, *if you eat to much sweets*, it's easy to become fat (1)

(188)

我 心 里 直 打鼓， 将来 万一 我  
 Wo xin li zhi dagu, jianglai wanyi wo  
 I heart in continuously beat future if I  
 不 小心 委屈 了 她， 她 还 不  
 bu xiaoxin weiqu le ta, ta hai bu  
 NEG careful wrong LE she she still NEG  
 得 死 给 我 看。  
 de si gei wo kan  
 must die for I see  
 My heart was beating like a drum. *If by some chance in the future I*  
*should wrong her through carelessness*, she would for certain make me  
 aware by killing herself. (12)

(189)

您 要 离 了 文化 队伍 我 都 不 知道  
 Nin yao li le wenhua duiwu wo dou bu zhidao  
 you if leave LE culture troop I all NEG know  
 您 是 什 么 人 了。  
 nin shi shenme ren le  
 you be what person LE  
*If you were to leave the culture troupe*, I wouldn't know what kind of person  
 you are. (11)

(190)

我 要是 在 外边 见 了 真 不  
Wo yaoshi zai waibian jian le zhen bu  
I if at outside see LE really NEG  
认识 你 了!  
renshi ni le!  
recognize you LE  
*If I had seen you somewhere else I wouldn't have recognized you!* (1)

(191)

不 要 不 要! 要是 告 了 她,  
Bu yao bu yao! Yaoshi gao le ta,  
NEG will NEG will if report LE she  
她 更 不 会 放 过 我 了! 求 求 您  
ta geng bu hui fangguo wo le! Qiuqiu nin  
she even more NEG will release I LE beg-beg you  
不 要 去 反 映!  
bu yao qu fanying!  
NEG will go report  
*Won't do, won't do! If you report her, she will be even more determined not to let me off! I beg you, please do not report it!* (9)

Obviously, *le* can occur in a protasis that describes a counterfactual situation as in (186) and (190), a hypothetical future situation as in (188), (189) and (191) or even a generic statement as in (187). However, in none of the sentences above does the subclause describe a factual situation. It defines the circumstances – the reference time – during which the main situation can or could occur. In conditional sentences, as in sequential sentences, *le* marks the initiation or termination (in non-factual time) of the first event and that point in time also marks the beginning of a reference time during which the second event can be realized. Since the event described by the verb to which *le* is attached is not anchored to a specific reference time, *le* cannot be a perfective marker in the protasis of conditional sentences either.

There is another type of sentences that could possibly be analyzed in a similar way as the subclauses of conditional sentences. These are imperatives. Verbal *le* may occur in imperatives and warnings in Mandarin:

(192)

喝 了 那 杯 药!  
He le nei bei yao!  
drink LE that cup medicine  
Drink that cup of medicine!<sup>133</sup>

<sup>133</sup> Examples (192), (193), (194), (195) and (196) from Li and Thompson (1981).

(193)

别	打破	了	杯子！
Bie	dapo	le	beizi!
NEG IMP	hit-break	LE	cup
Don't break the cup!			

(194)

别	碰	了	炉子
Bie	peng	le	luzi
NEG IMP	touch	LE	stove
Don't touch the stove			

(195)

别	选	了	那	堂	课
Bie	xuan	le	nei	tang	ke
NEG IMP	choose	LE	that	CL	subject
Don't take that course					

Li and Thompson (1981) explain this occurrence of *le* in imperatives by saying that for these sentences a possible following clause can be either overtly expressed or assumed:

(196)

别	选	了	那	堂	课，	你
Bie	xuan	le	nei	tang	ke,	ni
NEG IMP	choose	LE	that	CL	subject	you
又	跟不上					
you	genbushang					
again	follow-NEG-up					
Don't take that course, you won't be able to keep up again.						

The following clause express the same kind of situation that is found in the apodosis of conditional sentences, i.e. a hypothetical situation that will be realized if the event in the subclause should be realized. In that way, imperatives with *le* function like the subclauses in conditional sentences. However, there is an interesting fact about the occurrence of *le* in imperatives that may be worth noting. Several authors (Zhao and Shen (1984), Shi (1990), Yuan (1991) and Lu (1996)) have observed that when *le* occurs in imperatives, it can be substituted by the resultative complement 掉 *diao* 'off; out; away'. It has also been observed that in such cases it is often pronounced *lou* in the Beijing dialect (Ma (1982), Yuan (1991) and Hu (1995)). In fact, Sybesma (1997) goes as far as to claim that *le* is a resultative complement which explains why, when *le* occurs in imperatives and modal contexts, it is often replaceable with a resultative complement, but cannot co-occur with one.

(197)

我 想 明天 卖了 那 辆 车  
Wo xiang mingtian mai<sup>le</sup> nei liang che  
I want tomorrow sell-off that CL car  
I would like to sell that car tomorrow<sup>134</sup>

(198)

我 想 明天 卖掉 那 辆 车  
Wo xiang mingtian maidiao nei liang che  
I want tomorrow sell-off that CL car  
I would like to sell that car tomorrow

(199)

\*我 想 明天 卖掉 了 那 辆 车  
\*Wo xiang mingtian maidiao *le* nei liang che  
I want tomorrow sell-off LE that CL car  
I would like to sell that car tomorrow

He suggests that the reason for these constraints is that *le*, when it is more deeply embedded in the clause, is thematically more empty than other resultative predicates, and that one can have a three-predicate cluster only if the most deeply embedded predicate is the thematically empty *le*.

Zhang (1996) points out that while *le*, when is attached to a main verb, does not occur in negative or modal contexts, when it is attached to the first verb of a complex sentence, it can occur in such contexts:

(200)

\*他 没 /得 吃 了 一 碗 饭  
Ta mei /dei chi *le* yi wan fan  
he NEG should eat LE one CL rice

(201)

他 没 能 吃 了 饭 就 睡觉  
Ta mei neng chi *le* fan jiu shuijiao  
he NEG can eat LE rice then sleep  
He could not go to sleep right after eating

---

<sup>134</sup> Examples (197), (198) and (199) from Sybesma (1997)

写 *xie* 'write' is an effective verb, not an affective verb like 吃 *chi* 'eat' and 卖 *mai* 'sell'. The verb in an imperative construction with *le* usually has an affective meaning. However, in the subordinate clause of a conditional sentence, 写 *xie* produces no awkwardness:

(202)

你	要是	写	了	这	封	信，
Ni	yaoshi	xie	<i>le</i>	zhei	feng	xin,
you	if	write	LE	this	CL	letter
我	就	请	你	吃饭		
wo	jiu	qing	ni	chifan		
I	then	invite	you	eat		

If you write this letter, I will buy you dinner

Neither does the constraint that verbal *le* cannot co-occur with a resultative complement apply for subordinate clauses. Even when 写 *xie* 'write' is combined with a resultative complement, producing a three-predicate-cluster with *le*, the sentence is grammatical:

(203)

你	要是	写完	了	这	封	信，
Ni	yaoshi	xiewan	<i>le</i>	zhei	feng	xin,
you	if	write-finish	LE	this	CL	letter
我	就	请	你	吃饭		
wo	jiu	qing	ni	chifan		
I	then	invite	you	eat		

If you finish this letter, I will buy you dinner

When *le* occurs in irrealis contexts in main clauses its use clearly has restrictions that does not apply when it occurs in irrealis contexts in subordinate clauses. This phenomenon is explainable if we accept that *le* in imperatives and modal contexts functions as a resultative complement since resultative complements do not co-occur and are not restricted to certain contexts. Except for in these contexts, where *le* (or *lou*) is semantically richer in content, it marks simply a boundary.

## 5.2. Verbal *le* and the perfective aspect

While the default aspectual interpretation of a simple decontextualized sentence with verbal *le*, devoid of any temporal expressions, may in the majority of cases be perfective, it has been shown in this chapter that contextual information often causes the perfective reading to be outruled in favour of a perfect reading of a situation as anterior to R instead of as included in R. Contrastively, there are certain contextual features that seem to promote a **perfective** interpretation of the situation and exclude a perfect one. These are the adverbs that Elsness (1991) calls "anchors", they place the situation **at a particular**

point in time. Temporal expressions that denote past time in combination with certain manner and non-manner adverbs or extra-clausal context can produce a focus on the events **as they happened**, not on the subsequent results. The receiver then interprets the situations as tied to these specific times in the past as the times **at** (not **prior to**) which they are supposed to have occurred.

(204)

婉兰， 昨天 我 想 了 一 夜 你 的  
 Wan Lan, zuotian wo xiang le yi ye ni de  
 Wan Lan yesterday I think le one night you DE  
 留言， 你 说 我 知识 不 丰富，  
 liuyan, ni shuo wo zhishi bu fengfu,  
 message you say I knowledge not rich  
 不 自信， 悲观 等 都 很 对，  
 bu zixin, beiguan deng dou hen dui,  
 not selfconfident pessimistic so on all very true  
 这 也 是 我 努力 想 克服 的  
 zhe ye shi wo nuli xiang kefu de  
 this also is I make effort want conquer DE  
 Wan Lan, I thought about your message all last night. You said that my  
 knowledge is poor, that I have no selfconfidence, that I am pessimistic... This is  
 all true and I want to do my best to get rid of these [bad habits] (9)

(205)

田 平 晚上 即 去 了 那 女人 家  
 Tian Ping wanshang ji qu le na nuren jia  
 Tian Ping evening just go LE that woman home  
 That very evening Tian Ping went to that woman's home (8)

(206)

李 亚 同 亦 光 就 这么 在 同学 的  
 Li Ya tong Yi Guang jiu zheme zai tongxue de  
 Li Ya and Yi Guang just this way at classmate DE  
 妹妹 的 婚礼 中 定 了 关系  
meimei de hunli zhong ding le guanxi  
 younger-sister DE wedding in settle LE contact  
 And that is how Li Ya and Yi Guang got engaged—at her classmate's sister's  
wedding (8)

(207)

这 封 信 ， 爸 爸 ， 你 今 天 早 晨 留 给  
Zhe feng xin, baba, ni jintian zaochen liu gei  
this CL letter father you today morning leave for  
我 文 章 的 评 语 ， 使 我 突 然 一 下  
wo wenzhang de pingyu, shi wo turan yixia  
I article DE comment cause I suddenly all at once  
失 去 了 生 的 兴 趣  
shiqu le sheng de xingqu  
lose LE live DE interest

This letter, father, the comments you made on my article this morning, made me suddenly lose all interest in life. (10)

(208)

豆 儿 将 表 格 送 给 了 田 平 ， 田 平 便  
Dou'er jiang biaoge song gei le Tian Ping, Tian Ping bian  
Dou'er JIANG form give to LE Tian Ping Tian Ping then  
又 拉 他 下 了 馆 子 ， 喝 啤 酒 喝 得  
you la ta xia le guanzi, he pijiu he de  
again drag he go-down LE restaurant drink beer drink DE  
三 番 五 次 寻 厕 所 ， 回 后 便 连 夜  
san fan wu ci xun cesuo, hui hou bian lianye  
time and again look up toilet return after then that very night  
赶 制 了 三 千 字 的 采 访 记  
gan zhi le san qian zi de caifangji  
hurriedly produce LE three thousand character DE news report

Dou'er gave the form to Tian Ping. Tian Ping then dragged him off to a restaurant where they drank so much beer that he had to make several trips to the bathroom. The very same night, when he came back, he dashed off a three thousand word interview transcript. (8)

### 5.3. Modality

Regardless of its position in the sentence, *le* is often associated with temporal meanings. Sentence-final *le* is sometimes claimed to be a modal marker, i.e. capable of expressing modal meanings. These will be discussed in chapter 6.3. Very few authors, however, have mentioned the fact that also in **verbal** position, *le* can express modality. In this chapter, I will focus on the different ways in which this marker, when it occurs in verbal position, may contribute to the modal reading of a sentence. According to the definition established in this present study<sup>135</sup> modality concerns the way the speaker's attitude towards the information in the sentence is expressed.

<sup>135</sup> See chapter 1.4. for a more detailed discussion on the essence of modality.



Verschueren (1999) uses the term *modality* as a cover term for "various kinds of meaning ingredients [that] contribute to the 'modification' or 'colouring' of the proposition or reference-and-predication structure." (Verschueren 1999, p. 129) In interactive discourse not only are propositions made, we are also able of expressing our feelings and opinions towards these propositions through linguistic means. I propose that the marker *le* in Chinese can be used for this purpose through its core feature BOUNDARY. I have already argued that this core feature can be seen as a part of a larger system of time points and time frames in a temporal structure underlying the different tenses and aspects, where the boundary functions as a divider on a time line, marking an initial or final end point for the situation described in a sentence. However, in terms of modality, the boundary rather functions as a divider marking a **contrast** between different opinions or attitudes, between reality and mind or between (what is considered to be) norm and deviation from the norm. This use of *le* is non-temporal and concerns the speaker's subjective view on how the information in a certain utterance is related to the non-linguistic context. One could say that in these cases, *le* marks an **attitudinal** boundary as opposed to a **temporal** boundary.

(209)

梁太太道：你的腿太瘦了一点，  
 Liang taitai dao: ni de tui tai shou le yidian,  
 Liang mrs say: you DE leg too thin LE a little  
 可是年轻的男孩子总是瘦得多。  
 keshi nianqing de nuhaizi zongshi shou de duo.  
 But young DE girls always thin DE much  
 Mrs Liang said: Your legs are a little too skinny, but then young girls are always very slim. (1)

(210)

这凳子倒不错，只可惜太小了  
 Zhei dengzi dao bu cuo, zhi kexi tai xiao le  
 this bench actually NEG bad just pity too small LE  
 一些。  
 yixie  
 a bit  
 This bench is not too bad, it's just a pity that it is somewhat too small. (5)

(211)

凌卿立在镜子前面理头发，  
 Ling Qing li zai jingzi qianmian li toufa,  
 Ling Qing stand at mirror in front put in order hair  
 小寒又去抚弄她的耳环道：  
 Xiao Han you qu funong ta de erhuan dao:  
 Xiao Han then go fondle she DE earring say

“你除下来让我戴戴试试。  
 “Ni chu xialai rang wo daidai shishi.”  
 you remove down-come let I put on-put on try-try  
 ” 绫卿褪了下来，替她戴上了，  
 Ling Qing tun le xia lai, ti ta daishang le,  
 Ling Qing slip off LE down-come for she put on LE,  
 端详了一会，道：“不错——只是  
 duanxiang le yi hui, dao: ”Bu cuo — zhi shi  
 look up and down LE one while say NEG bad — only be  
 使你看上去大了几岁。”  
 shi ni kan shangqu da le ji sui.”  
 make you look on-go big LE a few year  
 Ling Qing was standing in front of the mirror fixing her hair when Xiao Han once again started playing with her earrings and said: “Take them off and let me try them on.” Ling Qing removed her earrings, and put them on Xiao Han. After taking a good look at her she said, “Not bad – it’s just that they make you look *a few years older*”. (1)

In all the above sentences—taken from narrative texts—verbal *le* is used with stative verbs to express **excessiveness**, i.e. that, in the speakers mind, a boundary has been passed between what is normal or preferred and what is not. This is a function that is often attributed to **sentence-final *le***.<sup>136</sup> Typically, *le* occurs with the adverb 太 *tai* ‘too’ as in (209) and (210). It is, however, not confined to such contexts, see (211). Another author that has observed this use of verbal *le* is Huang (1987). She notes that in sentences like (212), (213), (214) and (215) nothing really has happened, no action has taken place. In her view, *le* marks a boundary between the speaker’s expectations and the actual situation:

(212)

这双鞋子小了一点，我要七号。  
 Zhe shuang xiezi xiao le yidian, wo yao qi hao.  
 this pair shoe small LE a little I want seven number  
 This pair of shoes is a little bit too small; I want size seven.<sup>137</sup>

(213)

这儿吵了一点，我爸爸不会喜欢住这儿。  
 Zher chao le yidian, wo baba bu hui xihuan zhu zher.  
 here noisy LE a little I father NEG will like live here  
 It’s a little bit too noisy here; my father won’t like to live here.

<sup>136</sup> See chapter 6.3.

<sup>137</sup> Examples (212), (213), (214) and (215) from Huang (1987).

(214)

那 衬衫 红 了 一点儿  
Na chenshan hong le yidianr  
that shirt red LE a little  
That shirt is a little bit too red

(215)

他 大 了 我 十四 岁  
Ta da le wo shisi sui  
he old LE I fourteen year  
He is older than I by fourteen years

Also Shi (1988) has an opinion on this usage of *le*. He claims that the fact that verbal *le* can be used to express excessiveness “argues against the traditional two-LE analysis because in such cases, LE may also occur in the sentential position without any change in either the grammaticality or or (sic!) the meaning of the sentence in question.” (Shi 1988, p. 104). His example is:

(216)

(a) 火儿 小 了 一点  
Huor xiao le yidian  
fire small LE a little  
The flame was a bit too low<sup>138</sup>

which has the same meaning and is as grammatical as:

(b) 火儿 小 一点 了  
Huor xiao yidian le  
fire small a little LE  
The flame was a bit too low

Here, it should be mentioned that, when dealing with isolated sentences, it is sometimes hard to distinguish between the modal and the temporal use of *le*. Both sentences above could for example also have the meaning: ‘The flame has become low(er) now’, i.e. *le* could contribute with a temporal initial boundary to the state expressed by the stative verb *xiao* ‘small/low’. However, within a context, according to the principle of relevance, the speaker will interpret the sentence in the way that produces the largest cognitive effects and demands the smallest amount of effort. The most relevant interpretation will thus be chosen and the sentence will normally not appear ambiguous.

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<sup>138</sup> Example (216) from Shi (1988).

All this shows, again, that a labelling of *le* as being solely a perfective marker is incorrect. Huang (1987) illustrates this with the following example:

(217)

李司 高 了 三 寸  
Lisi gao *le* san cun  
Lisi tall LE three inch  
Lisi has grown three inches taller  
Lisi is three inches taller than average  
Lisi is three inches too tall

“In the last two glosses, Lisi’s tallness exceeds some limit, for instance, the average or some arbitrarily determined height, and with respect to that BOUNDARY, Lisi is tall by three inches. As we can see, in these two senses, nothing has happened – Lisi may have been introduced as a candidate for a stuntman; he is inspected and dismissed, and when it is inquired why Lisi was not accepted, the response is (18) [(217)] ... Here, -le can only index and make discrete the opposition between ‘acceptably tall’ and ‘too tall’ and can not be interpreted as a Perfective Aspect marker, although traditionally it has been treated so.” (Huang 1987, p. 189).

## 5.4. Concluding remarks

When determining the interpretation of a **main** clause with verbal *le* we seem to be dealing with, basically, four issues:

1) The **syntactic position of *le*** (i.e. verbal or sentential scope of *le*) to some extent seems to influence the temporal reading of the sentence where it occurs. The default reading of a verbal *le* sentence, for example, tends to be perfective. A possible explanation is that verbal *le*, by occurring inside the VP, signals termination or initiation of the situation described by the verb in particular and not the whole verb phrase or sentence (which could have both generic and non-generic interpretations), promoting a specificity reading of the event. The perfective is typically associated with specificity. On the other hand, the perfect category is not incompatible with specificity, which explains why verbal *le* may produce perfect readings of situations described as well.

2) The **nature of the verb** (dynamic verb or stative verb/ abstract verb / resultant state verb) and in particular choice of **grammatical construction** (existential) may influence the temporal reading of verbal *le* sentences. It also affects what phase of the situation that is focused on. In a perfect tense reading of a sentence with *le*, if the situation is an event, the event described explicitly by the verb is understood as having happened before R. If the situation is a state or habitual activity it is interpreted as being the result of an implicit event having occurred before R. With the exception of habitual (generic) activities<sup>139</sup> this

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<sup>139</sup> See chapter 4.1.

holds for both verbal *le* and sentence-final *le*. 有 *you* ‘have’ in the sentences below is a stative verb.

(218)

小 艾 恐怕 已经 有 了 身孕  
Xiao Ai kongpa yijing you *le* shenyun  
Xiao Ai probably already have LE pregnancy  
Xiao Ai may be already pregnant (may have already become pregnant) (1)

(219)

小 艾 恐怕 已经 有 身孕 了  
Xiao Ai kongpa yijing you shenyun *le*  
Xiao Ai probably already have pregnancy LE  
Xiao Ai may be already pregnant (may have already become pregnant)

3) The **nature of the direct object NP** (quantified or non-quantified, or more specifically, whether it can represent a path or not), affects the relation between the situation described and the time line, contributing to the expression of different perfect types.

4) **Intra-sentential and extra-sentential contextual features such as temporal expressions** affect the relation between E, R and S and thus temporal reading. They do this by implying inclusiveness of E in R (which means focus on an event as it happened—perfective aspect), simultaneity of R with S (which means focus on the speech situation—present perfect tense) or anteriority of E to R (which means focus on the result of an anterior event—perfect tense). They also produce different perfect types through their influence on the position of the three times with relation to a wider temporal frame  $\rho$ . For example:

(220)

人家 已经 受 了 罪  
Renjia yijing shou *le* zui  
he already receive LE punishment  
He has already got his punishment (5)

In (220) the adverb 已经 *yijing* ‘already’ defines the relation between E and R and thus determines the temporal interpretation of the VP + *le* by specifying E as anterior to R resulting in a perfect reading. It also contributes to perfect type (perfect of result), since it implies that E is incorporated into a temporal interval ( $\rho$ ) that leads up to R.

The occurrence of verbal *le* in the **subordinate** clause of a complex sentence has been used as an argument for a view of *le* as an **aspect** and not a **tense** marker, since these clauses can describe future situations. At the same time this occurrence seems to pose a

problem for the advocators of the same view. The event described in the subordinate clause of a sentence describing a sequence of events is not anchored to a specific reference time, which is the criteria for the perfective aspect, according to a time-relational definition. In this chapter I have proposed that the temporal boundary signalled by verbal *le* in a subclause can simultaneously form the initial boundary for a reference time interval, the R of the event in the main clause, so that the main event will be interpreted as realized **after** the subclause event is realized. The time line on which this boundary is positioned can be factual or non-factual, which explains why verbal *le* can occur in the protasis of conditional sentences as well. Constraints on *le* when it occurs in other future or irrealis contexts tell us that verbal *le* in its semantically empty form only occurs in future contexts in main clauses if the future situation is interpreted as anterior to a reference time (S-E-R). Otherwise, for example in imperative and negative contexts, it is subjected to certain constraints and seems to be a semantically more pregnant form of the former resultative complement *le*, which can be pronounced *lou* in the Beijing dialect.

## 6. Sentence-final *le*

Li, Thompson and Thompson (1982) have claimed that the sentence-final particle *le* has the ability to mark *perfect*. "[T]he essence of the perfect is its function of relating events/states to a reference time, either to the time of the narrative or to the time of the speech act." (Li, Thompson and Thompson 1982, p. 19) "[L]e claims that *a state of affairs has special current relevance to some particular Reference Time*. The Mandarin *le*, then, can be easily seen as an exponent of the perfect aspect, the basic discourse function of the perfect being, as has been said, to relate some state of affairs to the "current" time, i. e., in the unmarked case, the conversational setting in which the speaker and hearer are participating as interlocutors." (Li, Thompson and Thompson 1982, p. 22) This, unfortunately, also gives way for individual interpretations of what current relevance actually **is**, since it is a very vague concept. What information can in fact **not** be looked upon as "currently relevant" that is uttered in a dialogue?

In 2.2.5. it was noted that Li, Thompson and Thompson define the perfect differently than most others. First, anteriority is not looked upon as a basic feature of the perfect and second, the feature "current relevance" is not specifically associated with temporal information in the utterance but the whole statement per se can be viewed as currently relevant. "[L]e is required to tell the hearer that the proposition is relevant to the speech situation by being "newsworthy" in and of itself; it brings a statement into the current situation by tagging it as the speaker's total contribution as of that moment". (Li, Thompson and Thompson 1982:37)

(221)

(To friend who has asked why the speaker didn't choose a certain university)

- (a) 因为 那里 学费 太 贵  
Yinwei nali xuefei tai gui  
because there tuition fee too expensive  
The tuition is too high there<sup>140</sup>

(One student to another standing in line to pay fees)

- (b) 学费 太 贵 了  
Xuefei tai gui le  
tuition too high LE  
(I tell you) the tuition is (really) too high!

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<sup>140</sup> Example (221) from Li and Thompson (1982)

Li, Thompson and Thompson use above sentences to illustrate that *le* can serve to signal that some information is all that the speaker has to contribute at the moment, when its current relevance is not obvious for the speech situation.

Li, Thompson and Thompson's rather unorthodox definition of the perfect is thus very broad and does not conform to a view on the perfect as a temporal category such as the one taken in this present work.

## 6.1. Non-perfect interpretations of sentence-final *le*

I propose that the function of *le*, also when it occurs in sentence-final position, is to mark a boundary. Its presence may contribute not only to temporal interpretations of a described situation on the verb, sentence, and discourse level but it can also act as a marker of modality.

This does not have to mean that the marker *le* in itself has several functions or meanings. On the contrary, the semantic feature BOUNDARY can be present in all uses of sentence-final *le*, as an invariant core feature of this morpheme. In order to understand the reasons for different interpretations of sentences where *le* occurs we have to look at its linguistic and non-linguistic environment.

The fact that sentence-final *le* can contribute to a perfective interpretation of the event has also been observed by Shi (1991). According to the framework that he proposes, sentence-final *le* has the same function as verbal *le* and perfectivity is the result of bounded situations marked by *le* as relatively anterior, while inchoativity is the result of unbounded situations marked as relatively anterior. The natural outcome of that suggestion would be that bounded situations marked by *le* get perfective interpretations, regardless of syntactic position of *le*. He uses the English Simple Past form in his translation of example (222):

(222)

他	去	纽约	了
Ta	qu	Niuyue	<i>le</i>
he	go	New York	LE
He went to New York			

The problem with Shi's article is that he does not differ between the perfect tense and the perfective aspect. He seems to regard the perfect as equivalent to the perfective but with a "current relevance-touch". According to him, current relevance is not a feature of sentence final *le* as Li and Thompson claim, but is provided by the context: "[T]he "current relevance" ... meaning of (a) [(222)] above, i.e. "He is not here anymore" is not the core meaning of the sentential LE but is derivable from the context. ... The current relevance meaning "He is not here anymore" is only inferred from the truth of "He went to New York"." (Shi 1991, p. 111) While I agree with Shi that this meaning can be contextually derived (if R is perceived of as simultaneous with S), I do not think that it



can be inferred from the truth of sentence (222).<sup>141</sup> Rather, the presence of certain features in the context may lead to **either** a perfective (He went to New York, at a specific time in the past) or a perfect (He has gone to New York, he went there some (unspecified) time in the past, and he is there now) interpretation. What is also unclear in Shi's example is if his English translation is intended to be past tense or not. His use of the English Simple Past does not convey the sense of current relevance that the Present Perfect ('He has gone to New York') would. Only the Present Perfect form in English would carry the implication that "he" is not here anymore. Shi's claim that the implication "he is not here anymore" is inferred from the truth of the perfective interpretation of (222) conveyed by the English sentence 'He went to New York' is thus not correct.

Pollard and T'ung (1982) claim that the particular use of the sentence-final particle illustrated in (223), (224) and (225) below can be called "accomplished fact".

(223)

早晨 看 报 了 吗 ?  
 Zaochen kan bao le ma?  
 morning read paper LE MA?  
 Did you read the paper this morning?<sup>142</sup>

(224)

昨天 你们 在 城 里头 买 东西 了 没有 ?  
 Zuotian nimen zai cheng litou mai dongxi le meiyou?  
 yesterday you at town inside buy thing LE NEG?  
 Did you buy anything yesterday [when you were] in town?

(225)

你 在 那儿 碰见 谁 了 ?  
 Ni zai nar pengjian shei le?  
 you at there bump-see who LE?  
 碰见 老 王 了  
 Pengjian Lao Wang le  
 bump-see Lao Wang LE  
 Who did you bump into there? I bumped into Lao Wang

<sup>141</sup> For example, the speaker may intend to tell the hearer what places "he" went to on his trip around the world. In no way does this statement then have to imply that "he" is still in New York. He may very well be back again, or somewhere else. His whereabouts at the moment would in such a context be unimportant in relation to this particular event. Therefore, that meaning cannot be part of the truth of the information in the sentence.

<sup>142</sup> Examples (223), (224) and (225) from Pollard & T'ung (1982).

“The aspectual significance of the sentence-particle *le* is that the event so marked took place before a certain point. This point might be the moment of speaking, but equally there might be no connection to the present; one is simply facing or presenting a given situation, something that is over and done with, whether or not there might be implications for the present. (it is often difficult to distinguish this ‘past event’ *le* from the ‘new situation’ *le*, as both acknowledges some change in the picture of things.). While the verb-suffix *le* focuses on the act as it is realized, the sentence particle *le* establishes the fact that something has taken place. It follows that the context will in the latter case tend to be less specific, and the object the verb takes is often a generalized one.” (Pollard & T’ung 1982, p. 142-143)

Is Pollard and Tung’s description of these sentences correct, that they establish the fact that “something has taken place”? If that was the crucial function of these sentences, why would the speaker feel the need to add an adverb specifying the time when the event occurred, using expressions such as 早晨 *zaochen* ‘this morning’, 昨天 *zuotian* ‘yesterday’ and 在那儿 *zai nar* ‘there’? Also, as Pollard and Tung themselves acknowledge, the situation described may have no implications for the present. Rather it would be closer to the truth to say that these sentences establish that something **did** take place at and within a particular time, which means that they are examples of the expression of perfective aspect.

### 6.1.1. The discourse use of *le* and the perfective aspect: opening a discussion

Claudia Ross (1995) argues against Shi’s (1991) unified treatment of the two markers. She claims that those sentences in which sentence-final *le* seems to be identical with verbal *le* have other properties that cannot be attributed to the ones with verbal *le*. In a sentence like (226) below, the event is not only interpreted as past<sup>143</sup> but may also contain the sense that the graduation is “new information”, something that can be associated with inchoativity. How can this be explained, she asks, if one presumes that sentence-final *le* in sentences such as this is a perfective morpheme?

(226)

他	去年	毕业	了
ta	qunian	biye	<i>le</i>
he	last year	graduate	LE
He graduated last year <sup>144</sup>			

<sup>143</sup> According to Ross, the past tense interpretation of (226) is Shi’s basis for concluding that the sentence-final *le* is the perfective morpheme here.

<sup>144</sup> The temporal expression 去年 *qunian* ‘last year’ does not **exclude** a perfect interpretation. It could represent a reference time in the past that is posterior, and not simultaneous, to the event (‘Last year she had (already) graduated’). However, 已经 *yijing* ‘already’ seems to be used in many of these cases to avoid ambiguity.

On the other hand if it is accepted that *le* **neither** in postverbal position **nor** in postsentential position is a perfective morpheme, the contribution of *le* to the sentence would be easier explained. Perfectivity is a temporal feature and nothing prevents it from occurring with for example modal or discourse-related features, informing the receiver that the statement opens a discussion on a new subject, for example. Perfectivity, or E incl in R, is, however, naturally **not** compatible with the expression of anteriority of E to R, since it represents another set of temporal relations.

Perfective aspect has been assumed to stand in a close relation with specific direct object NPs<sup>145</sup>, in particular NPs that constitute a path, i.e. a linearly ordered set of temporal entities.

(227)

他	喝	咖啡	了
Ta	he	kafei	<i>le</i>
he	drink	coffee	LE

- a) He has/had started to drink coffee (used to not drink it before)
- b) He is/was drinking coffee now (ongoing activity)
- c) He drank coffee
- d) He has/had drunk coffee

(228)

他	喝	了	咖啡
Ta	he	<i>le</i>	kafei
he	drink	LE	coffee

- a) He drank the coffee
- b) He has drunk the coffee

Perfectivity demands that the situation can form a "blob", an isolated whole. How can a verbphrase describing an activity form an isolated unity? An activity is supposed to be ongoing without a natural beginning or end. Still, of the three possible activity-translations of the verbphrase in (227), the last two describe finished, and not ongoing, activities. I have already proposed<sup>146</sup> that the activity situation type contains a potential final boundary that can be emphasized by the presence of *le*. Like the similar verbal *le*-sentence (228), (227) can be anchored to a specific reference time ('He drank coffee') but it still differs from (228). (227) can be used to raise an issue that has not been mentioned before, to open a discussion, for example. While a sentence like (228) can be used to describe an isolated situation among others, moving the time forward in the story, (227) needs no background or context in order to be accepted. It signals, to use Li and Thompson's term, that the information in the utterance is "newsworthy" in itself. This discourse-related use of *le* seems to be constrained to the sentence-final occurrence of *le*,

<sup>145</sup> A sentence with verbal *le* containing an unspecified object, for example, is by some speakers regarded as ungrammatical in the absence of other perfectivizing elements in the context.

<sup>146</sup> See 4.1.

i.e. it is sensitive to the syntactic position and scope of *le*, and is probably identical with the use of *le* that Li and Thompson (1981) call "closing a statement".<sup>147</sup>

The perfect construction is often used as a backgrounding device or to present reasons and causes of later events, states or properties. This is what produces current relevance. The sentence is relevant for the current situation because the situation it describes is relevant for the current situation. However, sentences like (226) and (227) above with sentence-final *le* show, that also in contexts where sentence-final *le* does not contribute to a perfect interpretation<sup>148</sup> it functions to present a new topic. In a way these sentences **are** relevant for the speech situation. It seems as if it is the mere presence of *le* that produce this effect.

Ran (2000), who examines Chinese discourse markers (sometimes called modal particles) in his thesis *The pragmatics of discourse markers in conversation*, defines them as "linguistic elements including words and expressions used with a pragmatic meaning on a parenthetically linguistic level of discourse in order to signal for the hearer how the speaker intends the present contribution or utterance to be related to the preceding and/or following parts of discourse." (Ran 2000, p.50) Included among such elements are phrases such as 不过 *bu guo* 'but; however', 依我看 *yi wo kan* 'according to me', 由此可见 *you ci ke jian* 'from this can be seen', etc. I propose that sentence-final *le*, apart from its temporal use, has two discourse-related uses based on its boundary-function. One of them is to mark a statement as an opening cue. It is important to note that this is **not** an example of current relevance. The difference is that when sentence-final *le* occurs in non-perfect sentences and has this discourse function, it is not the **event** but the **information** in the utterance that **is relevant for the present situation**.

(229)

1982	年	8	月	4	日	放	暑假	了
1982	nian	8	yue	4	ri	fang	shujia	le
1982	year	8	month	4	day	release	summer holiday	LE

August 4 1982 summer-holidays started.

(230)

不幸	的	是	，	话题	立即	又	跑到	茱德
<i>Buxing</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>shi</i> ,		<i>huati</i>	<i>liji</i>	<i>you</i>	<i>paodao</i>	<i>Zhude</i>
unfortunate	DE	be		topic	immediately	again	run-arrive	Zhude
的	美国	朋友	没有	回	她	的	电话	
<i>de</i>	<i>Meiguo</i>	<i>pengyou</i>	<i>mei you</i>	<i>hui</i>	<i>ta</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>dianhua</i>	
DE	America	friend	NEG	return	she	DE	call	

这件事 上去 了。 谈及 此事，

<sup>147</sup> Although I prefer a broader description of its use, for example "closing a statement and/or opening up a discussion".

<sup>148</sup> For example (227) can, as is evident from the third translation 'He drank coffee', be used to describe an event in the past that is not related to a posterior situation.

*zhe jian shi shangqu le. Tanji ci shi,*  
 this CL matter on-go LE talk-arrive this matter  
 玛格塔 忙不迭 地 畅所欲言 起来， 说  
*Mageta mang bu shi de chang suo yu yan qilai, "Shuo*  
*Mageta immediately DE speak out freely start say*  
 真的， 茱德！ 我 不 能 理解...  
*zhen de, Zhude! Wo bu neng lijie...*  
 true DE Zhude I NEG can understand...

*Unfortunately things immediately swung back to the fact that Jude's American hadn't returned her call, at which Magda immediately undid all her good work. 'Honestly, Jude!' Said Magda. 'I can't understand... (14)*

(229) and (230) are other examples of sentences that contain sentence-final *le* which are perfective and simultaneously function as an opening cue. This function has been called a "social situation update/opening" by Wu and van den Berg (Wu 1999). According to their findings in a joint research project on sentence-final *le*, it can be used to present the setting for what comes later.

The second discourse-related use of *le* will be explained in detail below.

### 6.1.2. The discourse use of *le* and the perfective aspect: culmination of a progress

(231)

我 今天 早晨 吃 油条 了！  
*Wo jintian zaochen chi youtiao le!*  
 I today morning eat fritter LE  
 I had a youtiao this morning!<sup>149</sup>

Li and Thompson claim that above sentence is a non-perfective sentence, as opposed to sentences that also contain **verbal** *le* such as:

(232)

唐 诗 三 百 首 我 背 出来 了  
*Tang shi san bai shou wo bei chulai le*  
 Tang poem three hundred CL I memorize out-come LE  
 一 半 了  
*yi ban le*  
 one half LE  
 I've memorized half of the Three Hundred Tang Poems now (so far)

<sup>149</sup> Examples (231) and (232) from Li and Thompson (1981).

(232), according to them, is simultaneously a perfective **and** perfect sentence. However, both (231) and (232), they say, are examples of the perfect type Progress so far. They equal perfectivity with the presence of verbal *le* and ignore the incompatibility of the temporal structure of the perfective aspect with the temporal structure of the perfect tense. That explains how they can perceive of (232) as simultaneously perfective and perfect.<sup>150</sup> Li and Thompson argue that the sentence-final *le* in (231) signals to the listener that the speaker's experience of eating youtiao is a step in his/her pursuit of having as many experiences as possible while in China—hence a currently relevant state of affairs. However, the event itself is still described as isolated from the present moment by the speaker's use of the past time expression 今天早晨 *jintian zaochen* 'this morning'.<sup>151</sup> The combination of the presence of *le*, the situational context and temporal expressions denoting past time produce this perfective reading. But what about the implication of (231) that the event is a step in a progress? *Le* can simultaneously fill more than one function in the same sentence. I propose that *le* also can mark a temporal boundary that is not exclusively tied to the situation described in the sentence but in a larger discourse. Another example of this boundary function, similar to (231), is

(233)

我	昨天	到	张	家	吃饭	了
Wo	zuotian	dao	Zhang	jia	chifan	<i>le</i>
I	yesterday	go to	Zhang	home	eat	LE

(Well), I (finally) went yesterday to have dinner at the Zhangs'<sup>152</sup>

Li and Thompson (1981) claim that *le* can signal "progress so far" in a larger venture, project or ongoing concern, which is another way in which an event can be described as currently relevant. The temporal structure expressed by both (231) and (233) is E **incl** in R and R anterior to S. The nature of the speech situation and the temporal expressions in the sentences produce such a structure. I propose that *le* in these utterances marks **the peak in a progress, or the culmination of a larger project**. The events in these sentences are not currently relevant. The speaker looks upon the event as isolated from the present and included in a past reference time, but wants to highlight it, as the end of a progress described or implied in the discourse. The boundary-function of *le* here works both on the sentence level (perfective aspect) and on the discourse-level (peak in a larger project). Below are some further examples, taken from narrative texts, illustrating this double function of *le*:

<sup>150</sup> According to a time-relational definition of perfect, (231) is a perfective sentence and (232) is a perfect sentence.

<sup>151</sup> Other readings are possible. For example, if it is still morning when the utterance is made (which would exclude the perfective reading), the speaker could use *le* to signal a modal distinction such as "contrast to expectations": 'Today I will eat youtiao for breakfast (as opposed to what you expected)'.

<sup>152</sup> Example (233) from Li and Thompson (1981)

(234)

段	太太	眨	了	眨	眼睛，
Duan	taitai	zha	le	zha	yanjing,
Duan	mrs	blink	LE	blink	eye,
那	泪珠	就	再	也	无法
na	leizhu	jiu	zai	ye	wufa
that	teardrop	just	longer	also	no way
在	眼眶		中	停留，	终于
zai	yankuang		zhong	tingliu,	zhongyu
at	rim of the eye		in	stay,	finally
落在	旗袍	上			了。
luozai	qipao	shang	le		
fall-at	qipao	on	LE		

Mrs Duan blinked. The teardrop could no longer remain on the rim of her eye and *finally fell on her dress*. (1)

The event in the *le*-clause in (234) illustrates the culmination of a chain of events that happened within a specific past reference time. It is thus a perfective sentence. What differentiates this sentence from perfective sentences without sentence-final *le* is that it constitutes a culmination.<sup>153</sup> Culmination can also be described as the reaching of a peak or a boundary. Chappell (1988) has described this use of *le* as the marking of an “episodic boundary”. “Its main function is to bound segments or chunks of discourse within the narrative which corresponds to the end of a particular scene”. (Chappell 1988:123)

(235)

我	的	腿	发	酸，	口	发	渴，	头
Wo	de	tui	fa	suan,	kou	fa	ke,	tou
I	DE	leg	become	sour	mouth	become	thirsty	head
发	昏，	只得	又	在	烈日		下	
fa	hun,	zhide	you	zai	lieri		xia	
become	muddled	have to	again	at	scorching sun		under	
走回	喷水池。	最后，		我	总算		来到	
zouhui	penshuichi.	Zuihou,		wo	zongsuan		laidao	
walk-back	fountain	last		I	finally		come-arrive	
寻梦园	的	正房		了，	这	是	一	栋
Xunmengyuan	de	zhengfang		le,	zhe	shi	yi	dong
Xunmengyuan	DE	main building		LE	this	be	one	CL

<sup>153</sup> Li and Thompson (1981) calls this use “progress so far”, and defines it as a way in which a sentence can be currently relevant. However, the term “progress so far” (or “persistent situation”, which is used in the present work) is more applicable on sentences with a quantified object (that represents a string of temporal entities) in a co(n)text that produces an interpretation of the event(s) as prior to R, for example (232). Such sentences are actual perfect sentences. (231), (233) and (234), on the other hand, are perfective sentences. That means that aspectually, they describe an isolated, perfective situation but sentence-final *le* (if the context implies a preceding sequence of events, for example) simultaneously signals to the listener that that event constitutes the peak in a larger project.

中西合璧 似 的 二 层 楼房， 门  
 zhongxi-hebi si de er ceng loufang, men  
 Chinese-western mixture like DE two floor building door  
 前 有 台阶， 上 了 台阶， 大门  
 qian you taijie, shang le taijie, damen  
 in front of exist flight of stairs ascend LE flight of stairs entrance  
 大 开 著， 是 个 四方 的 大 客厅， 地  
 da kai zhe, shi ge sifang de da keting, di  
 big open ZHE be CL square DE big parlour floor  
 上 是 讲究 的 花 砖，  
 shang shi jiangjiu de huazhuan,  
 on be exquisite DE brick  
 窗 子 上 都 是 一 式 的 垂 地  
 chuangzi shang dou shi yi shi de chui di  
 window on all be one style DE approach floor  
 的 红 绒 窗 帘， 天 花 板 上 吊 著  
 de hong rong chuanglian, tianhuaban shang diao zhe  
 DE red velvet curtain ceiling on hang ZHE  
 欧 洲 宫 廷 里 那 种 玻 璃 灯。  
 Ouzhou gongting li na zhong bolideng.  
 Europe palace in that kind chandelier

My legs ached, my mouth was dry and my head was dizzy, but I had no choice but to walk back to the fountain under the scorching sun. *In the end, I finally reached the main building of Xunmengyuan.* It was a two-storey building, a perfect mixture of Chinese and Western style, with a flight of stairs leading up to the door. When I had climbed the stairs, I found myself facing a wide-open door that led into a big square parlour. The floor was covered with exquisitely coloured bricks and in the windows red velvet curtains were hanging, so long that they reached the floor. From the ceiling hang cut-glass chandeliers of the kind found in European royal palaces. (2)

The italicized sentence in (235) is clearly describing an event as perfective (E incl in R). Also this sentence describes the culmination of a progress. It marks the break between one situation and a new situation, which can be seen clearly from the way the story switches from a dynamic description (walking, reaching) to a static one (This was a two-storey building...). This is compatible with the semantic feature BOUNDARY.

(236)

过 了 半 天， 他 忽然 回 过 头 来，  
 Guo le ban tian, ta huran huiguo tou lai,  
 pass LE half day he suddenly back-pass head come  
 看 住 了 女 仆， 发 话 了 一 简 直 使  
 kanzhu le nüpu, fa hua le — jianzhi shi  
 look-firm LE maid deliver speech LE — simply cause  
 人 不 能 相 信 这 话 是 从 一 个



ren bu neng xiangxin zhe hua shi cong yi ge  
 people NEG can believe this speech be from one CL  
 五 六 岁 的 小 孩 嘴 里 说 出 来  
 wu liu sui de xiao hai zui li shuo chulai  
 five six year DE small child mouth in say out-come  
 的 :  
 de:  
 DE

After a while, he suddenly turned around, fixed his eyes on the maid and *spoke*—people simply could not believe that these were the words of a five or six year old child. (3)

(237)

女人 想 了 想 ， 终 是 响 应 他 了 ，  
 Nuren xiang le xiang, zhong shi xiangying ta le,  
 woman think LE think eventually be accept he LE  
 端 盅 抿 了 一 口 ， 她 想 在 今  
 duan zhong min le yi kou, ta xiang zai jin  
 hold cup sip LE one mouth she want at today  
 夜 逃 走 。  
 ye taozou.  
 night escape-go

The woman thought for a while and *eventually accepted*. She raised the cup and took a sip. She wanted to escape tonight. (4)

发话了 *Fa hua le* and 响应他了 *xiangying ta le* both describe perfective events in the context in which they occur in (236) and (237). The events they represent are the culminating events in progresses, something that is also verified by the presence of the adverb 终 *zhong* ‘eventually’ in the latter example.

(238)

她 下 意 识 的 整 理 了 一 下 服 装 ， 又  
 Ta xiayishi de zhengli le yi xia fuzhuang, you  
 she subconscious DE arrange LE a little clothes then  
 拿 起 梳 子 ， 把 那 满 头 零 乱 的  
 naqi shuzi, ba na man tou lingluan de  
 take-up comb BA that full head messy DE  
 头 发 梳 了 梳 ， 她 看 到 额 上  
 toufa shu le shu, ta kandao e shang  
 hair comb LE comb she look-arrive forehead on  
 的 伤 处 了 ， 是 的 ， 又 青 又 紫  
 de shangchu le, shi de, you qing you zi  
 DE injury LE be DE again green again lilac  
 又 红 又 肿 ， 是 好 大 的 一 块 。  
 you hong you zhong, shi hao da de yi kuai.

again red again swollen be good large DE one CL  
 Without thinking, she arranged her clothes and then picked up a comb and  
 combed through her messy hair. *She caught sight of the bump on her forehead.*  
 Yes. It was green, lilac, red and swollen. A real big one. (1)

The speaker, by using sentence-final *le*, highlights the event in the italicized phrase in (238) as a peak in a sequence of events.

(239)

车子 在 机场 大 门口 停 了 下来， 他  
 Chezi zai jichang da menkou ting le xialai, ta  
 car at airport big entrance stop LE down-come he  
 跳下 车， 冲进 机场， 机场 的 人  
 tiaoxia che, chongjin jichang, jichang de ren  
 jump-down car rush-enter airport airport DE people  
 怎么 那 么 多！ 他 踉 跄 的， 急 切 的  
 zenme name duo! Ta qiangliang de, jiqie de  
 how that many he stagger DE impatient DE  
 挤 向 出 境 口， 嘴 里 开 始 疯 狂 的  
 ji xiang chujingkou, zui li kaishi fengkuang de  
 press towards departure gate mouth in start desperate DE  
 叫 著：“小 蝉！ 小 蝉！ 小 蝉！”  
 jiao zhe: "Xiao Chan! Xiao Chan! Xiao Chan!"  
 scream ZHE Xiao Chan Xiao Chan Xiao Chan  
 挤 到 了 出 境 口， 他 一 眼 看 到 小  
 Jidao le chujingkou, ta yi yan kandao Xiao  
 press-arrive LE departure gate he one eye look-arrive Xiao  
 蝉 了！  
 Chan le!  
 Chan LE

The car stopped in front of the airport entrance. He jumped out and ran into the airport. How many people there were! Staggering impatiently he hurriedly forced himself forward towards the departure gate and started to scream in frenzy: 'Xiao Chan! Xiao Chan!' *When he had reached the departure gate he immediately spotted her!* (2)

(240)

早上， 阳光 从 窗帘 的 隙 缝 里 射 了  
 Zaoshang, yanguang cong chuanglian de xifeng li she le  
 morning sun beam from curtain DE crevice in shoot LE  
 进来， 在 室 内 缓 缓 的 移 动，  
 jinlai, zai shi nei huanhuan de yidong,  
 enter-come at room inside slow DE move  
 移 上 了 宛 露 的 嘴 唇， 移 到 了 宛 露  
 yishang le Wan Lu de zuichun, yidao le Wan Lu

move-on LE Wan Lu DE lip move-arrive LE Wan Lu  
 的 脸颊， 终于 映 在 她 那 低阖 著  
 de lianjia, zhongyu yingzai ta de na dihe zhe  
 DE cheek finally shine-at she DE that lower-shut ZHE  
 的 睫毛 上 了。  
 de jiemao shang le.  
 DE eye lash on LE

In the morning, the sunlight shone in through the opening between the curtains, slowly wandered around the room, fell on Wan Lu's lips, then on her cheeks and finally shone onto her lowered eyelashes (1)

(241)

他 轻轻 地 拥住 她， 轻轻 地  
 Ta qingqing de yongzhu ta, qingqing de  
 He soft DE embrace-steady she soft DE  
 贴住 她 的 唇， 她 一 凛， 本能 地  
 tiezhu ta de chun, ta yi lin, benneng de  
 glue-steady she DE lip she one cold instinct DE  
 往 后 一 缩， 就 倒 在 床 上  
 wang hou yi suo, jiu dao zai chuang shang  
 towards back one withdraw then fall-on bed on  
 了。 他 低 头 凝 视 她， 眼  
 le. Ta di tou ningshi ta, yan  
 LE he lower head stare she eyes  
 底 有 一 抹 受 伤 的 神 色。 真  
 di you yi mo shou shang de shense. zhen  
 bottom exist one CL be wounded DE expression really  
 这 么 严 重 吗？ ”  
 zheme yanzhong ma?  
 that serious MA

*He gently embraced her and pressed against her lips. She went cold and stern, flinching instinctually she took a step back and fell onto the bed. He lowered his head and stared at her with an expression of hurt in his eyes. "Is this really a big deal?" (1)*

Also in (238), (239), (240) and (241) *le* occurs in the phrase describing the final event in a sequence of events leading up to an outcome or goal. Interestingly, Chu and Chang (1987) have noted that also **verbal le** can be used with this purpose.<sup>154</sup> If their theory is

<sup>154</sup> "In terms of discourse, the verbal suffix *-le* is basically for marking the "peak" in the event line." (Chu and Chang 1987, p. 312) Below is one of their examples:

"(22)

- a. Yushi, Mingdi bian paiqian Caiyin he Qinjing liangge guanyuan dao Ø Yindu qu, qiuqu fojing. Tamen zoudao Ø xianzai Afuhan de yige difang, dedao-*le* fojing he foxiang.  
 Thereupon, Ming-emperor then send Caiyin and Qinjing two-M official to India go search Buddhist sutra they arrive-at now Afghanistan DE one-M place acquire-LE Buddhist-sutra and Buddhist-statue

correct that would not be without importance for the discussion on a unified treatment of all syntactical occurrences of *le*. But even disregarding Chu and Chang's analysis of verbal *le*, an interesting fact about this "peak-meaning" of sentences with sentential *le* is that there is a strong resemblance between *culmination* and *termination*, which has been discussed as a feature connected to the use of verbal *le*. When verbal *le* is used, it is usually the termination of a single event that is focused on, while in the sentences above with sentence-final *le* it is rather the termination of a process consisting of several events. This phenomenon might have led to the conclusion by Wu (1999) that sentence-final *le* is a discourse marker. However, this term is not entirely accurate. Sentence-final *le* can be used to signal perfect tense and it seems as if it is sometimes used merely to mark perfective aspect, without the discourse-functions that have been discussed here.<sup>155</sup> Sentence-final *le* thus contributes to temporal modifications on the sentence level but also on the discourse level, sometimes simultaneously. In addition, sentence-final *le* has a range of modal uses related to its core feature *boundary*.

## 6.2. Sentence-final *le* and the perfect tense

In 6.1. I showed that Li, Thompson and Thompson's (1982) definition of *le* as a perfect marker does not cover the cases where sentence-final *le* in fact occurs in perfective environments, as it then cannot contribute to a perfect interpretation of the utterance. However, it is true that sentence-final *le* is commonly used to express perfect tense as it is defined in the present work, i.e. a temporal structure in which the time of the situation is placed anterior to a reference time (E-R) that is either prior to (E-R-S), simultaneous with (E-R,S) or posterior to (S-E-R) the speech time.

(242)

我们 走 得 很 累 了  
 Women zou de hen lei le (describing an afternoon of walking)  
 we walk DE very tired LE  
 We had walked so much that we'd gotten very tired<sup>156</sup>

(243)

到 中山路 了  
 Dao Zhongshan lu le  
 arrive Zhongshan road LE  
 Here we are at Zhongshan road (we have arrived at Zhongshan road)

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'Thereupon, Emperor Ming sent two officials, Caiyin and Qinjing, to India to search for the Sutras. When they came to a place known today as Afghanistan, they found the Sutras and Buddhist statue.' (The first Buddhist temple...)" (Chu and Chang 1987, p.318)

<sup>155</sup> See for example (223), (224) and (225). Whether or not *le* actually does in itself contribute to perfectivity, or always carry modal or discourse-related "overtone" (See also Claudia Ross' argument earlier in this chapter), can probably only be determined through a survey of native speakers' perception of simple sentences with sentence-final *le*.

<sup>156</sup> Example (242) (243) and (244) from Li and Thompson (1981).

(244)

我 喝 了 三 杯 了  
Wo he le san bei le  
I drink LE three glass LE  
I've drunk three glasses

(245)

(那天) 她 出去 买 东西 了  
(Nei tian) ta chuqu mai dongxi le  
(that day) she out-go buy thing LE  
(That day) she had gone out shopping<sup>157</sup>

Li and Thompson argue that (245) is a possible utterance in a situation where for example two people are discussing whether or not Ms. Liao made a long distance call two days ago, i. e., the reference time (R) is in the past. Then, they say, the state of her having gone shopping would be relevant to the past reference time signalled by 'that day'.<sup>158</sup> They translate this sentence with the Simple Past in English ('That day she *went* out shopping'). However, the Simple Past does not convey the sense of relevance of one situation for another situation that Li and Thompson talk about, thus I have taken the liberty to use the Past Perfect in the translation instead. It should be noted, however, that (245) could be uttered in another situation in which it does not carry this sense of current relevance. Say for example that we are discussing whether Ms. Liao went to see her aunt or not on a particular day. Someone might object:

(246)

(那天) 她 出去 买 东西 了!  
(Nei tian) ta chuqu mai dongxi le!  
(that day) she out-go buy thing LE  
(That day) she went out shopping!

Here it would be correct to use the Simple Past form in the English translation, because the event in question will probably be interpreted as a past perfective event. That means that the listener will understand the situation described (Ms. Liao going out shopping) as holding **at** a specific reference time R prior to S.<sup>159</sup> As can be seen, the nature of the speech situation largely determines the interpretation of the sentence.

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<sup>157</sup> Example (245) from Li and Thompson (1981).

<sup>158</sup> In fact, under normal circumstances it would be understood as relevant for a particular reference time **within** that day, i.e. the time when she was supposed to have made the call.

<sup>159</sup> Except for contributing to the temporal reading of the sentence, *le* also seems to carry a modal load, what Li and Thompson later describes as "correction of a wrong assumption" (in this case the false assumption that she had visited her aunt that day). See chapter 6.3. for a description of this use of sentence-final *le*.

(247)

上 星期天 我 到 颐和园 钓鱼 了  
Shang xingqitian wo dao Yiheyuan diaoyu le  
up Sunday I go to Summer Palace fish LE  
Last Sunday I went fishing at the Summer Palace

Considering the nature of the temporal expression in sentence (247) ('last Sunday' denotes a specific past time) a perfective interpretation is perhaps the most probable one. But if the setting where the sentence was uttered was such that the speaker had been asked about her whereabouts last Sunday, and she wanted to explain that at that day she was away on a fishing trip (supposedly spanning over at least two days and starting before last Sunday), then the same sentence could be used and get a perfect interpretation, as illustrated by the English translation 'Last Sunday I had gone fishing in the Summerpalace'.<sup>160</sup> However, it is probable that the adverb *yijing* 'already' would be used if that was the case, to avoid misunderstandings:

(248)

上 星期天 我 已经 到 颐和园 钓鱼 了  
Shang xingqitian wo yijing dao Yiheyuan diaoyu le  
up Sunday I already go to Summer Palace fish LE  
Last Sunday I had already gone fishing at the Summer Palace (so I was away then)

### 6.3. Modality

Zhang (1996) says about the sentence-final particle that it: "clearly has modality meanings that cannot be reduced to such temporal notions of 'change of state' or 'perfect'". (Zhang 1996, p. 437) I claimed in the chapter on verbal *le* that *le* can have modal uses. However, *le* can contribute with more modal "nuances" when it occurs in sentence-final position than when it occurs in verbal position. On the following pages, we will take a look at the modal meanings that sentence-final *le* can express.

In chapter 4, I proposed that the modal meanings expressed by *le* stem from its core meaning BOUNDARY and can be subsumed under the notion of *contrast*. For verbal *le*, this contrast seems basically to concern the distinction between on one hand the norm and on the other the deviation from the norm. This use can be found also with sentence-final

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<sup>160</sup> There is another possible setting where this sentence could have a perfect interpretation, namely the same kind of setting as that intended for sentence (245): if the speaker refers to an (implicit) specific reference time **during that day**, which means *shang ge xingqitian* 'last Sunday' does not function as the actual reference time. Then the event can be interpreted as anterior to a certain reference time during that Sunday, and not anterior to the day itself. In such a context the utterance would not imply that the speaker went away **before** last Sunday, she could have gone on the same day. This interpretation, demands a context where both the speaker and the hearer have agreed upon a specific reference time last Sunday, for example when the speaker was supposed to have made a phone call, but claims she didn't: 'Last Sunday (on the time you refer to) I had gone on a fishing trip'.

*le* and will be discussed later. Another type of contrast is found in those sentences with sentence-final *le* that implicate *correction of a wrong assumption*<sup>161</sup> or *contrary to someone's expectations*.

(249)

(the dog Scamp calls out to his friend, Quacky the duck, who is flying past him supposedly migrating south)

咳，呱呱！你往北方去了！  
 Hai, Guagua! Ni wang beifang qu le!  
 hey Quacky you towards north direction go LE  
 Hey, Quacky! You're going north (and not south as you obviously are assuming)<sup>162</sup>

(250)

你一来我就认出你了，可  
 Ni yi lai wo jiu renchu ni le, ke  
 you one came I then recognize-out you LE but  
 你这么久都没认出我来  
 ni zheme jiu dou mei renchu wo lai.  
 you this long all NEG recognize-out I come  
 As soon as you came I recognized you, but you didn't recognize me until now (5)

In the present work it is proposed that the function of *le*, whatever its position, is to signal a boundary. This boundary can be related to the information provided by the VP, sentence or discourse or to *non-linguistic information related to the sentence*. (249) and (250), are examples of the latter. Here the speaker, by inserting *le*, tells the listener that she has information about this utterance that is not overtly expressed by its lexical content. A boundary can represent contrast. In (250) for example, one situation—the speaker at an earlier point recognizing the listener—is being contrasted with another—the listener, on the other hand, not recognizing the speaker. Since this extra information is very subjective, the different interpretations of the speaker's **reason** for using *le* in a sentence such as the one above may be multiple. This does not mean that these sentences are ambiguous. Wu (1999) states: "When isolated, a *le sentence* may be ambiguous in many ways, but there is no confusion in context—the signal is contextually efficient". (Wu 1999 [online]) In (250) the speaker actually reveals the nature of the contrasting situation in a following phrase 可你这么久都没认出我来 *ke ni zheme jiu dou mei renchu wo lai* 'but you didn't recognize me until now'. If it hadn't been for this clarification the contrast could have been of another kind, for example, if someone had (falsely) insinuated that the speaker had not recognized him, the speaker could say, indignantly: 你一来我就认出你了！ *Ni yi lai wo jiu renchu ni le!* 'As opposed to

<sup>161</sup> This is the term that Li and Thomson (1981) use to explain this use of *le*.

<sup>162</sup> Example (249) from Li and Thomson (1981).

what you claim) I recognized you the minute you came!’ In that context, *le* would rather signal the contrast between what is falsely assumed and what is correct. Both (251) and (252) illustrate this function of verbal *le*:

(251)

虽然	由于	习惯	使然，	党	总是	说
Suiran	youyu	xiguan	shiran,	dang	zongshi	shuo
even though	because of	habit	cause this	party	always	say
原子弹	是它	发明	的，实际	上		
yuanzidan	shi ta	faming	de, shiji	shang		
atomic bomb	be it	invent	DE reality	on		
原子弹	早	在	1940	年	就	问世了，
yuanzidan	zao	zai	1940	nian	jiu	wenshi le,
atomic bomb	early	at	1940	year	just	appear LE
十年	后	就	首次	大	规模	使用
shi nian	hou	jiu	shouci	da	guimo	shiyong.
ten year	after	just	first time	large	scale	use

Although the party, according to its habit, claims the invention for itself, *atomic bombs first appeared as early as the nineteen-forties*, and were first used on a large scale about ten years later. (15)

In (251) sentence-final *le* could be used to enforce the contrast between what the party claims and what is the truth. The presence of both the temporal expression 在1940年 *zai 1940 nian* ‘in 1940’ and the adverb 就 *jiu* ‘then’ will affect the temporal interpretation of the situation described by the VP 问世 *wen shi* ‘appear’ by focusing on the time when the situation occurred. The marker *le* in the italicized phrase is either part of the temporal content of the VP (i.e. marks a temporal boundary for the situation 问世 *wen shi*), thus contributing to the perfective reading, or/and adds “extra information” that concerns the speaker’s attitude towards the information in the sentence, indicating that it corrects a wrong assumption.

(252)

“你	不	是	现在	才	迷路，	你	是	老
”Ni	bu	shi	xianzai	cai	milu,	ni	shi	lao
you	NEG	be	now	only	loose way	you	be	old
早	就	迷路	了，	你	这	个	婚姻，	
zao	jiu	milu	le,	ni	zhe	ge	hunyin,	
early	then	loose way	LE	you	this	CL	marriage	
根本	就	走	在	歧路	上！	我	现在	
genben	jiu	zou	zai	qilu	shang!	Wo	xianzai	
simply	just	walk	at	forked road	on	I	now	



才 是 要 引 你 走 入 正 途 ！ ”  
 cai shi yao yin ni zouru zhengtū!  
 only be want lead you walk-in way

This is not the first time you've lost your way, *you got lost a long time ago*.  
 This marriage of yours is like taking the wrong fork on a road! I want to  
 lead you onto the right track! (1)

Another example, taken from Li and Thompson, illustrates their category "correcting a wrong assumption":

(253)

你 应 该 看 ， 他 书 写 得 好  
 Ni yinggai kan, ta shu xie de hao  
 you should look he book write DE good  
 You should take a look; he writes well

我 看 过 他 好 几 本 书 了  
 Wo kan guo ta hao ji ben shu le  
 I read GUO he good some CL book LE

(But) I have read quite a few of his books (i.e., you're wrong to think I haven't)

In the dialogue in (253) the verbal marker *guo* serves to mark experiential perfect, therefore, *le* is actually not needed for temporal modification. Rather it seems to contribute with a modal modification. In (253) *le* marks the boundary between what someone **assumes** to be the case and what actually **is** the case.

(254)

就 算 他 本 来 是 个 男 人 但 在 毒 药  
 Jiu suan ta benlai shi ge nanren dan zai duyao  
 just regard as he originally be CL man but at poison  
 里 泡 了 几 十 年 也 早 就 变 成  
 li pao le ji shi nian ye zao jiu biancheng  
 in soak LE several ten year also early then become  
 个 女 人 了  
 ge nuren le  
 CL woman LE

It's as if he were originally a man, but after being soaked in poison for several years, *he became transformed into a woman early on*. (6)

While in actual usage, a sentence is seldom tense- aspect- or modality-wise ambiguous, in some cases the modal meaning of *le* co-occurs with a temporal or aspectual such. In (254), it is possible that *le* simply marks a temporal boundary (in this particular case *le* cannot contribute to a perfect interpretation because the 就 *jiu*-phrase where it occurs describes a subsequent event, therefore the sentence has to be interpreted as perfective). It could also have a modal use, emphasizing a contrast, "his" unexpected change from man

to woman. Or it may fill both those functions in this particular context. The more context is provided, the easier it is to see what exact use *le* fills, but it seems probable that in many cases the boundary expressed by sentence-final *le* has a dual function, unless there is another marker that contributes to the temporal interpretation of the utterance, as in (253). For example, it can be at the same time temporal and modal or function as a temporal marker on both the sentence level and on the discourse level at the same time.

A second modal use of *le* has sometimes been called the “*excessive*” use of *le* in the literature (Shi 1988). When the speaker wants to emphasize that a certain state of affairs has passed the line for what is expected, preferred or considered the norm, *le* can be used. This use was treated in chapter 5.3. since it is also found with verbal *le*. Like verbal *le*, sentence-final *le* usually performs this function when it occurs with stative verbs but also when it occurs with VPs or sentences describing non-dynamic situations.

(255)

他	太	胖	了
Ta	tai	pang	<i>le</i>
he	too	fat	LE
He is too fat			

(256)

学费	太	贵	了
Xuefei	tai	gui	<i>le</i>
tuition fee	too	expensive	LE
The tuition fee is really too high <sup>163</sup>			

As Shi (1988) mentions, it might be argued that the excessive meaning in fact lies in adverbs such as 太 *tai* ‘too’. But since it is present also in sentences without such adverbs, Shi concludes that the excessive meaning is inherent to *le*.

(257)

汤	咸	了
Tang	xian	<i>le</i>
soup	salty	LE
The soup is too salty <sup>164</sup>		

I want to stress, again, the importance of the contextual influence on the reading of a *le* sentence. As Shi points out, (257) can for example also have a strictly temporal reading: ‘The soup is salty now / The soup has become salty’. Sentence-final *le* can carry a modal implication wherever it occurs, and as mentioned its temporal contributions sometimes co-occur with its modal contributions.

<sup>163</sup> Example (256) from Li and Thompson (1981).

<sup>164</sup> Example (257) from Shi (1988).

(258)

他 胖 了  
Ta pang *le*  
he fat LE

- a) He has become fat (temporal)
- b) He is too fat (modal)
- c) He has become too fat. (temporal and modal)

This is particularly obvious in the common cases where sentence-final *le* occurs in exclamations expressing that the speaker is unhappy with a new situation. In such utterances it is difficult to distinguish whether in fact *le* contributes to the temporal reading (by marking a boundary on a time line) or a modal reading (by marking a boundary between what is accepted by the speaker and what is not) or perhaps to both:

(259)

我 烦 了!  
Wo fan *le!*  
I fed up LE  
I'm (I have become) so tired of this!

(260)

我 饿 了!  
Wo e *le!*  
I hungry LE  
I'm so hungry (now)!

In Li and Thompson's (1981) account on sentence-final *le*, there is no mention of boundary or contrast as essential concepts for the interpretation of the use of *le* in these "excessive" sentences. Instead, they claim that *le* is used here to tag a sentence as "the speaker's total contribution as of that moment". (Li and Thompson 1981, p. 283) According to them, while similar sentences **without** sentence-final *le* would serve better as a response to a question or as background to a following utterance, sentence-final *le* completes the utterance and the speaker does not have to say more about it. "It is almost as though the *le* were functioning as a sentence-final punctuation marker." (Li and Thompson 1981, p. 283) I consider this to be a natural outcome of this particular modal use of *le*. If the statement, by the adding of *le*, expresses that a certain situation is different from what is expected, assumed or what is considered the norm in the speech situation where it is uttered, it will also hold a certain value as an independent utterance. The speaker is "justified" in introducing this subject even if the proposition in itself is not related to the previous linguistic context or further explained in the subsequent linguistic context. When the sentence contains a *le* that marks excessiveness, its proposition becomes what Li and Thompson calls "newsworthy".

## 6.4. Concluding remarks

Sentence-final *le*, by attaching to the whole sentence and appearing at the end of utterances, like other sentence-final particles easily lends to the function of relating the information in the utterance to the speech situation and the speech time. This is perhaps one of the reasons why it often gives perfect readings of sentences where it occurs, since the present perfect is associated with speech time focus. However, the presence of sentence-final *le* does not always coincide with a perfect interpretation (providing aspect and tense are defined as semantic categories based on temporal relations between E, R and S). An interesting fact is that in a study conducted by Zhao and Shen (1984), sentences with sentence-final *le* that would be translated with the Simple Past tense in English amounted to as much as almost a third of the collected samples. Many of the sentences with sentence-final *le* that I have presented here belong to that group. They present events, not as anterior to a certain reference time (characteristic feature of the perfect tense) but rather as included in a past reference time (characteristic feature of the perfective aspect). Since sentence-final *le* is also used to produce non-temporal distinctions such as the speaker's attitudes and feelings towards a proposition, it cannot be a "pure" perfect marker. The perfect tense relates earlier events to the reference time of the sentence (thus often used as a backgrounding device), which means that it could not be used in a sentence that describes an event as final in a sequence of events. In this chapter I have suggested that *le*, apart from functioning as a temporal marker on the sentence-level, also can work on the discourse-level by signalling the culmination of a progress or the initiating of a discussion and that it can function as a tool for the speaker to express her attitude towards the information in the utterance, by emphasizing a contrast between two situations. This chapter has shown that sentence-final *le* is a marker of a boundary. It operates on the verb (phrase), sentence and discourse level. Like its verbal counterpart, it can contribute to both temporal and modal modifications of a linguistically described situation.

## 7. One or two *le*—further indications of functional overlapping

In order to further study the relationship between the syntactic position of *le* and the expression of perfect tense in Chinese, 77 Chinese sentences with translations of English or (in a minority of the cases) Swedish perfect constructions or equivalent<sup>165</sup> were collected and examined. Originally I wanted to see whether or not verbal *le* would be used in any of the translations of English perfect constructions (which indeed proved to be the case), and this explains the over-representation of this kind of sentences in the material collected (the majority of the 77 Chinese translated sentences, 55, contain verbal *le* and not sentence-final *le*). This however, does not mean that verbal *le* was in reality used by the author in the majority of the cases where a translation of an English perfect construction was intended, since I had specifically sought out these particular instances. However, having decided to make a small experiment conducted on native speakers, I also set out to examine some sentences where sentence-final *le* was used to express perfect tense. Therefore, I extracted 22 sentences that contained sentence-final *le* and not verbal *le* and their English (or Swedish) perfect equivalents in the original texts and these were included into the collection of sample translations. The majority of the sentences (66 out of 77) were taken from the work *1984* by George Orwell and its Chinese translation. The rest of the sentences were extracted from the Swedish children's books *Pippi Långstrump* and its Chinese translation *Changwazi Bibi, Madicken* and its Chinese translation *Feng Yatou Madiqin de gushi* and *Madicken och Junibackens Pims* and its translation *Madiqin dong shi le*.<sup>166</sup> As a comparison to the statistics below it can be mentioned that the Chinese translation of *1984* contains 2126 instances of *le*, out of which 610 (about 30%) were clause-final. As a next step, all markers *le*, both the verbal and the sentence-final markers, were left out from the translations. I then asked six informants, all native Chinese speakers and university students with rather high proficiency in English, to study the English original sentences and the Chinese translations of the sentences.<sup>167</sup> They were told to fill in *le* where they found it appropriate, listing their first-, second- and third-hand choice for each sentence, choosing between verbal *le*, sentence-final *le* and double *le* (both verbal *le* and sentence-final *le* in the same clause). For each sentence they could also, if they so wished, list any alternative(s) out of the three that they found ungrammatical. The result of the task is shown in statistics below:

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<sup>165</sup> In a few cases the source sentence did not contain a perfect tense form but strongly implied the sense of resultant state.

<sup>166</sup> Since the children's books were in Swedish the extracted sentences from the original versions were translated into English with the help of an English native speaker.

<sup>167</sup> Some context was supplied for very simple sentences, in order to make sure that there would be no misunderstandings as to the temporal reading of the *le*-sentences.

- Sentences in which, in the **original** translation, **verbal *le*** was used to express perfect tense (55 sentences)

72% of the informants stated **verbal *le*** as their first alternative and 21 % stated it as their second alternative.

11% stated **sentence-final *le*** as their first alternative and 36% stated it as their second alternative.

17% stated **double *le*** as their first alternative and 38% stated it as their second alternative.

**Verbal *le*** was in no case deemed unacceptable by the informants.

For 36% of the sentences (20 out of 55) **sentence-final *le*** was deemed unacceptable by at least one, but never all (only in two cases more than two out of six), of the informants.

For 24 % of the sentences (13 out of 55) **double *le*** was deemed unacceptable by at least one, but never more than two, of the informants

- Sentences in which, in the **original** translation, **sentence-final *le*** had been used to express perfect tense (22 sentences):

40% of the informants stated **verbal *le*** as their first alternative and 33% stated it as their second alternative.

45 % of the informants stated **sentence-final *le*** as their first alternative and 30% stated it as their second alternative.

15 % stated **double *le*** as their first alternative and 30% stated it as their second alternative.

For 45% of the sentences (10 out of 22) **verbal *le*** was deemed unacceptable by at least one, but never all (in one case more than two), of the informants.

For 18% of the sentences (4 out of 22), **sentence-final *le*** was deemed unacceptable by at least one, but never all (in no case more than two) of the informants.

For 41% of the sentences (9 out of 22), **double *le*** was deemed unacceptable by at least one but never all (in four cases more than two) of the informants.

As can be seen, in several cases there was disagreement between the native speakers on the grammatical or most correct syntactic position of the marker, and their answers would often differ from the translator's choice of position of *le*. While over 83% of the informants acted in accordance with the translator when his/her choice was verbal *le* in translations of the English sentences, 33 % chose sentence-final *le* as either first- or second-hand alternative for the translations of these sentences and only a few found it ungrammatical (and only in a minority of the cases). For the sentences where the translator used sentence-final *le* to translate English sentences there was almost equally many verbal *le* choices as sentence-final *le* choices among the informants. Over all, there were very few cases where more than two out of six informants found a particular alternative ungrammatical, both for the sentences where verbal *le* was used in the original translation and those where sentence-final *le* was used.

This survey indicates that the functions of the markers *le* overlap in many cases, that there seems to be a lack of clear rules as to when to put *le* in one position or the other and, above all, that both verbal *le* and sentence-final *le* can be used to express perfect tense. Though Zhao and Shen (1984) write: "The kind of "completion [完成 *wancheng*]" that is expressed by *le*<sub>1</sub> [verbal *le*] in this construction [verb + *le* + object NP] in most cases apply to situations in the past, not related to the present, similar to the simple past in English", they also find that "[i]t can also apply to situations in the past, related to the present, similar to the Perfect aspect in English, but in the Chinese sentences expressions that signal relation to the present, such as "yijing" [already] and "gang" [just now] often occur...or there must be a certain utterance situation or context." (Zhao and Shen 1984, p. 116. Translation mine) Zhao and Shen have found that, out of 760 sentences of the type verb + *le* + object NP, 63% would be translated into English using the Simple Past tense form, 19% would be translated with Perfect tense or participial construction (15% Perfect tense, 4% participial construction) and the rest mainly by using the Simple Present tense (8%) or Simple Future (3%).

Sentence-final *le* is sometimes used in sentences that have perfective readings, although according to conventional views on aspect in Chinese perfective aspect is the essence of **verbal** *le*. In a limited study of some Chinese translations of the English works *1984* by George Orwell (1984) and *Bridget Jones: The edge of reason* (1999) by Helen Fielding and the Spanish *Cien años de soledad* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1967)<sup>168</sup> I found a number of cases where sentence-final *le* had been used to translate a sentence with an obvious perfective meaning. Below are some examples:

(261)

她 走 后 一 关 上 门 ， 他 就  
 Ta zou hou yi guanshang men, ta jiu  
 she walk after one close-shut door he just  
 似乎 忘 掉 她 的 存 在 了  
 sihu wangdiao ta de cunzai le  
 like forget-away she DE existence LE  
 As soon as the door had shut behind her he *appeared to forget her existence* (15)

(262)

温 斯 吨 想 ， 他 很 明 白 ，  
 Wensidun xiang, ta hen mingbai,  
 Winston think he very understand  
 他 很 明 白 我 要 问  
 ta hen mingbai wo yao wen  
 he very understand I will ask  
 的 是 什 么 ！ 想 到 这 里 ，  
 de shi shenme! Xiangdao zheli,

<sup>168</sup> In the examples taken from this work, I have also included the English translation.

DE be what think-arrive here  
 他的话 就 冲出口 了：  
*ta de hua jiu chongchu kou le:*  
 he DE speech then burst-out mouth LE  
 He knows, thought Winston suddenly, he knows what  
 I am going to ask! At the thought *the words burst out of him*: (15)

(263)

最初，乌苏娜给他们的衣兜都塞满了  
*Zuichu, Wusuna gei tamen de yidou dou saiman le*  
 first Úrsula for they DE pocket all stuff-full LE  
 钱，而阿玛兰塔总想把孩子留  
*qian, er Amalanta zong xiang ba haizi liu*  
 money and Amaranta always want BA child keep  
 给自己，可是后来，乌苏娜和阿玛兰塔  
*gei ziji, keshi houlai, Wusuna he Amalanta*  
 for self but afterwards Úrsula and Amaranta  
 都只送点礼品，充当教母了。  
*dou zhi song dian lipin, chongdang jiaomu le.*  
 all only give little present function as godmother LE  
*Al principio Úrsula les llenaba los bolsillos de dinero y Amaranta  
 intentaba quedarse con ellos. Pero terminaron<sup>169</sup> por limitarse a hacerles  
 un regalo y a servirles des madrinas.*  
 At first Úrsula would fill their pockets with money and Amaranta tried to  
 have them stay. But they finally *limited themselves to giving them  
 presents and serving as godmothers*. (13)

(264)

菲兰达在卧室里读信的时候，  
*Fenlanda zai woshi li du xin de shihou,*  
 Fernanda at bedroom in read letter DE time  
 孩子们慌忙打开箱了。  
*haizimen huangmang dakai xiang le.*  
 children hurriedly open box LE  
*Mientras ella leía la carta en el dormitorio, los niños se apresuraron a  
 abrir la caja.*  
 While she read the letter in her room, the children *hastened to open the  
 box*. (13)

<sup>169</sup> Spanish preterite indicates perfective aspect. It is used in the italicized parts of both (263), (264) and (265).



(265)

星期四，下午两点，霍·阿卡蒂奥  
Xingqisi, xiawu liang dian, Huo Akadi'ou  
Thursday afternoon two point José Arcadio  
去神学院了。

qu shenxueyuan le.  
go seminar LE

Un jueves a las dos de la tarde, José Arcadio *se fue al*  
*seminario.*

On Thursday, at two in the afternoon, José Arcadio *left for the*  
*seminary.* (13)

(266)

“他很孤独”，我有气无力地说。“是  
”Ta hen gudu”, wo youqi-wuli de shuo. ”Shi  
she very lonely I listless DE say be  
啊，对啦，没有配在身边，  
a, dui la, mei you pei zai shenbian,  
A right LA NEG have company at side

他就不得不载载子立，  
ta jiu budebu qiongqiong zi li,  
she just have to all alone stand  
孤孤单单地独自一个人打发  
gugu-dandan de duzi yi ge ren dafa  
all by oneself DE alone one CL person spend

两个小时了”。

liang ge xiaoshi le.  
two CL hour LE

’She was lonely’, I said lamely.

’Yeah, right. Because *she had to spend two hours on her own without Jeremy.*’

(14)

Further evidence for the hypothesis that sentence-final *le* can be used in perfective sentences is presented by Zhao and Shen (1984). They found that sentences containing sentence-final *le* are sometimes ambiguous out of their context. “This [ambiguous sentences with sentence-final *le*] shows that *le* has different functions and meanings in different contexts.” (Zhao and Shen 1984, p. 125. Translation mine) According to their study, as much as 30% of the sentences containing only sentence-final *le* (in the construction verb + object NP + *le*) would be translated with Simple Past in English<sup>170</sup>

<sup>170</sup> English has no formal means of expressing perfective aspect, but, although Zhao and Shen do not specifically mention this, the use of Simple Past in English is often equivalent with the expression of past perfective (depending on the nature of the verb). Cf also footnote 20.

and 22 % with Perfect tense (the rest would be translated with mainly either Simple Present (26 %) <sup>171</sup> or Future (12 %)).

## 7.1. Concluding remarks

The claim that verbal *le* and sentence-final *le* can perform the same functions in many contexts is verified also by tests on native speakers and analyses of translations both from Chinese into English and from English (/Spanish) into Chinese. For example, both verbal *le* and sentence-final *le* can be used in translations of the English perfect construction. There seem to be no agreed upon rule for when one or the other are used in such cases, as informants asked to insert either of the markers in a translated text differed between them as to which of the markers they chose. Further, even though, typically, verbal *le* is viewed as the perfective aspect marker, the examples above illustrate the fact that sentence-final *le* is sometimes used in translations of perfective sentences. Zhao and Shen's study also shows one of the reasons why it would be so difficult to point out one temporal function before the other as the core of either the verbal or the sentence-final marker – we cannot find one temporal category with a definition that captures all the functions that one of the markers can have.

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<sup>171</sup> In fact a perfect event is sometimes described using the present tense in English, and that may be the reason why *le* is present in this kind of verbphrases. There is an event, (that can be assumed from the presence of *le*), and that implied perfect event has caused the overtly expressed present state. Sometimes alternatives to the Simple Present can be used in the English translation of such sentences; for example perfect constructions such as 'has become' or 'has started to'.

## 8. Conclusion

### 8.1. Conclusion

Pragmatic markers do not express tense, aspect or mood in themselves but produce such distinctions through their semantic core features in cooperation with the context. In this study I have proposed a relevance-theoretic treatment of the Chinese marker *le* as a single pragmatic marker with a semantic core feature *boundary*. In all occurrences of *le* some kind of boundary is present. The boundary can be *temporal* and represent the initial or final end point of the time when the situation described in the sentence holds, the event time E. Whether it is interpreted as initial or final is determined by the nature of either the verb phrase or the sentence, depending on the scope of *le* (i.e. its syntactic position). The boundary signalled by *le* can also mark the end point of a sequence of events or the peak in a larger project. Its scope is then not the verb phrase or the sentence but a larger unit often consisting of several clauses or sentences. I further adopt the perspective that both aspect and tense are semantic categories that represent temporal structures: linear relations between Reichenbach's (1947) times E, R and S. Grammatical markers and contextual factors such as temporal expressions manifest these temporal structures linguistically. The boundary of E, signalled by *le*, can be positioned on a time line and put in relation to the reference time R of the sentence in which it occurs. I have showed that in what way the boundary is linked to R depends on the context, and not necessarily on the syntactic position of *le*. Certain adverbs, grammatical constructions, verb features and other co(n)textual factors provide clues for determining where the boundary is positioned with respect to R. The resulting temporal structures produce distinct temporal readings. A temporal structure in which the boundary of E is **included** in R leads to a *perfective* reading. It has to be positioned **anterior** to R for the situation to be interpreted as *perfect/anterior*.

Sometimes *le* does not mark a temporal boundary at all, but an *attitudinal* boundary. It then contributes to the modal meaning of the utterance. It marks a contrast between for example the norm and the deviation from the norm, or between the expected and reality.

It is my hope that this study has presented a more clear definition of the marker *le* in Mandarin Chinese, as it solves at least two significant problems with earlier analyses:

- that of assigning to *le* a label that incorporates all its uses.
- that of explaining the functional overlappings between verbal and sentence-final *le*.

The descriptive model that I have used here has *simplicity* in focus. It should not be neglected that, by taking the definition of *le* as a context-dependent marker as a starting-point, we achieve a comparatively speaking less complex and in my view more user-friendly method for explaining all the different functions of this common marker in the Chinese language. For that reason I hope that this model could be adopted also in the area of teaching.

It would be expected that a relevance-theoretic analysis could be applied also in studies of other so-called aspectual markers in Chinese, for instance 着 *zhe* and 过 *guo*, or sentence-final markers like 呢 *ne*.

## 8.2. Suggestions for further research

### 8.2.1. Negation and *le*

Some readers may have noticed that I have not brought up the issue of the relationship between negation and the use of *le* in this work. It is a very complicated problem and has been discussed at length in a number of articles and books such as Teng (1973), Shi (1992) and Ernst (1995). However, in my view, no one has come up with a satisfying explanation of the interaction between the two negative forms 不 *bu* and 没 (有) *mei(you)* on one hand and the marker *le* on the other. The negative counterpart of verbal *le* is sometimes claimed to be 没 (有) *mei(you)* (Teng (1973), Li and Thompson (1981)). According to Teng, 不 *bu* negates sentences with only sentence-final *le*. While 没 (有) *mei(you)* does occur mainly in past or relative past contexts it cannot be an absolute past tense negator since it is occasionally ungrammatical in past contexts (in particular sentences describing stative situations), instead, there are indications that it serves to deny the **occurrence** of an event. In fact, it seems as if *le*-sentences that describe the occurrence of a situation in the (absolute or relative) past are negated by 没 (有) *mei(you)*, **regardless** of the syntactic position of *le* in the affirmative version of the sentence. It is rarely (if ever) found in absolute future contexts and does not normally negate stative situations.<sup>172</sup> 不 *bu*, on the other hand, can occur both in past, present and future contexts and in past contexts typically negates stative or generic situations.

<sup>172</sup> A notable exceptions is that it can occur with the auxiliary verb *neng* (他没能来 *ta mei neng lai* – He couldn't come) and in sentences that describe durative situations:

他	没	拿	着	扇	子	跳	舞
Ta	mei	na	zhe	shan	zi	tiao	wu
he	NEG	take	ZHE	fan		dance	
He wasn't dancing with a fan							

Another is the fact that *mei(you)* also negates sentences that, while describing stative situations simultaneously have an “excessive” sense. Recall that the marker *le* can mark excessiveness both as a

It seems reasonable to assume that there is no one-to-one relationship between 没 (有) *mei(you)* and verbal *le* on one hand and 不 *bu* and sentence-final *le* on the other. However, more research is needed in order to determine the exact relationship between the marker *le* and negation in Mandarin Chinese.

### 8.2.2. “Double *le*” sentences

The so-called “double *le*” construction has rarely been discussed independently in the literature.<sup>173</sup> This study constitutes no exception, the reason being lack of time. The double *le* construction is often taken to represent a combination of what is claimed to be the meanings of verbal *le* and sentence-final *le* (Shi (1988); Li and Thompson (1981) and Chan (1980) *inter alia*), such as a perfective aspect meaning combined with for example a change of state meaning or a current relevance meaning. This combination would then produce a perfect reading of the sentence. Considering the fact that the presence of sentence-final *le* often contributes to a perfect tense reading of a sentence it is not surprising that the default reading of a decontextualized sentence containing the double *le* construction is a perfect tense reading. However, whether or not the double *le* construction can also have a **perfective** reading has, to my knowledge, not been discussed in the literature. As I have shown here, sentences containing verbal *le* can have both perfect and perfective readings depending on the context, and sentence-final *le* seems also to occur quite freely in environments that promote a perfective reading, though it has been labelled a perfect marker. In order to determine whether this is the case also for double *le*, it would take a thorough investigation of narrative texts and maybe tests on native speakers. Time limitations have prevented me from carrying out such investigations during the preparation of this thesis. However, there are strong indications that double *le* sentences sometimes get perfective interpretations as well. Yong (1997), for example, mentions that a simple double *le* sentence like (267) can be translated into English using either a Perfect or a Simple Past form of the verb<sup>174</sup>, which implicates that it could have both a perfect and a perfective reading:

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verbal and as a sentence-final marker.

梅玉	没 (有)	高	三	寸
Mei-Yu	mei(you)	gao	san	cun
Mei-Yu	NEG	tall	three	inch
Mei-Yu is not three inches too tall				

(Examples from Huang and Davis (1989))

<sup>173</sup> Chappell (1986) is an exception. She focuses on the difference between sentence *le* and double *le*. If there is a difference, it appears to be modal and not temporal.

<sup>174</sup> Shen and Zhao (1984) has noticed this as well; in their study, 8 out of 47 double *le* sentences (17 %) were translated into English using the Simple Past form.

(267)

我 早上 写 了 信 了  
Wo zaoshang xie le xin le  
I morning write LE letter LE  
I have written / wrote (the) letter(s) this  
morning

Sentence (268) also indicates that the double *le* construction is in fact not restricted to perfect sentences.

(268)

这 个 问 题 上 个 星 期 讨 论 了 两 天 了  
Zhe ge wenti shang ge xingqi taolun le liang tian le  
this CL question up CL week discuss LE two day LE  
We discussed this question for two days last week

It is obvious that more research is needed if we want to be able to explain the nature of double *le* sentences, with regard to both their temporal and their modal meanings.

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