LUND UNIVERSITY

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

Ljungqvist, Marita

Published: 2003-01-01

Link to publication

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

Marita Ljungqvist Arin

Marita Ljungqvist Arin
Department of East Asian Languages
Lund University
Box 713
220 07 LUND, SWEDEN
arin@home.se

To Tobias,
my fellow traveller

# Contents

---

[1] Include definitions of all relevant terms used throughout this work.

# List of Figures

iv

# Acknowledgements

# Abbreviations

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

---

[2] 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.

[3] 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 [4] *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 unflexible. 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

---

[4] 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.[5] 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*.

---

[5] Cf. Liu (1990) whose study also shows that Mandarin-speaking people from mainland China and Tawian 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 (*VP*s) 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 sandwhiches* 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 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*.[6] 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

---

[6] 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[7]

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-

---

[7] 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:[8]

(1)

(a)     At five o'clock, John *had* (already) *left* (Pluperfect[9])          E–R-S[10]

(b)     John *has left* (Present Perfect)          E–R,S

(c)     At five o'clock, John *will* (already) *have left* (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'[11] 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.

---

[8] 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.
[9] 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.
[10] Example (1) from Comrie (1985).
[11] 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[12]

(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).

---

[12] 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 18th 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'[13], 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) critizises 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[14]). 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

---

[13] Another term for *situation type*.

[14] "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[15] agree that aspect, just like tense, is connected with time[16] 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[17]

*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

---

[15] 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.

[16] See for example Comrie (1976).

[17] 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*)[18] | *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

---

[18] 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*[19]

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.[20] 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".[21] Klein (1994)

---

[19] Example (10) from Comrie (1976).

[20] 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 auomatically), the difference between the two verb forms is that of imperfectivity vs. perfectivity.

[21] 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[22], 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,[23] which, in effect, means that it is "bounded" temporally, the imperfective signals that the temporal span of a situation includes the reference interval/point,[24] 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)

---

[22] Topic Time is Klein's term. It is roughly the same as the Reichenbachian Reference Time.
[23] This temporal structure will also be abbreviated as E incl in R
[24] 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.[25] 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 Elsness (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[26], 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

---

[25] (1) shows the three perfect tenses in English.
[26] 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[27]

(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,

---

[27] 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-relationally, 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.[28] 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).

---

[28] 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 unflexibility 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 | *guo* | Zhongguo | | |
| I | go | GUO | China | | |

I have been to China[29]                                    (experiential perfect)

(13)

| 他 | 睡 | 过 | 午觉 | 没有？ |
|----|----|----|----|----|
| Ta | shui | *guo* | wujiao | meiyou? |
| he | sleep | GUO | noon-sleep | NEG |

Did he take a nap?                                         (perfective)

(14)

| 我 | 吃 | 过 | 饭 | 了 |
|----|----|----|----|----|
| Wo | chi | *guo* | fan | *le* |
| 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.

---

[29] 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." (Tiee 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 *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

17

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[30]

(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

---

[30] 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)[31]), 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*.[32] 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

---

[31] 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.

[32] 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 *le*s 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?[33]

*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.[34] These claims will be further discussed in 2.2.5 and in chapter 6.

---

[33] Example (23) from Li and Thompson (1981).
[34] 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*[35] and *inchoativity*[36] 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.[37] 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)　　現在　　　他　知道　　了
　　　(Xianzai)　ta　*zhidao*　*le*
　　　(now)　　　he　know　　LE
　　　(Now) he knows[38]　　　　　　　　(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*:

---

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

[36] Inchoativity can be defined as focus on the start point of a situation (*The sky became red*).

[37] 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.

[38] 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[39]            (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.

---

[39] 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 the 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.[40] 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

---

[40] 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*[41] 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 | *le* | bao | | jiu | shui |
| I | read-finish | LE | newspaper | | then | sleep |

When I have finished reading the newspaper I will sleep

---

[41] 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 | *le* |
| 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[42]

(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[43]

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[44] (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[45]

---

[42] Example (28) from Hsiao (1991).
[43] Example (29) from Li (1999), translation mine.
[44] 'Don't tell him that I will use his washing machine (this afternoon)'
[45] 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[46]

(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

---

[46] 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[47]

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

---

[47] 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*[48]. 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[49]

(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

---

[48] 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.

[49] 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[50].

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[51] 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 | zuotian | qi | dian | zhong | yijing | xie | *le* | xin |
| he | yesterday | seven | point | clock | already | write | LE | letter |

He had already written the letter by seven o'clock yesterday

---

[50] See chapter 5.1.2.
[51] 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.[52] 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 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| <u>Dao</u> | <u>le</u> | <u>Niu</u> | <u>laoshi</u> | <u>jia</u> | <u>yihou,</u> | 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 |

<u>When we had arrived at teacher Niu's home</u>, 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?[53]

---

(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[54] |
|--------|------|------|------|
| 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[55]

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

---

[54] Example (53) from Li and Thompson (1981)

[55] 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".[56] 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 | *le* |
| this | CL | papaya | very | sweet | LE |

This papaya is very sweet[57]

"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 Reichenbachean 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

---

[56] The other categories are the durative/imperfective aspect and the punctual/ perfective aspect.
[57] Example (56) from Li and Thompson (1981).

(57)

上 我　　知道　　了
Wo　　zhidao　*le*
I　　know　　LE
Now I know[58]

(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

---

[58] 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 a 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"[59] 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

---

[59] 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.[60]

## 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 pronounciations 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[61]*. 了[62] seems to have become the dominant completive verb around the 9th or 10th century (Cao 1995). Shi

---

[60] 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.

[61] *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'.

[62] 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 pronounciation *liao* was exchanged for the pronounciation *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[63] |
| army | eat | LE | then | at once | cross | river |

After eating, the army started to cross the river [64]

(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[65] 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.[66] 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.

---

[63] Modern pinyin transcription is provided for the Chinese examples in this chapter.
[64] Examples (65) and (66) from Shi (1988).
[65] Wu has found these figures in Li and Shi (1997).
[66] 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[67] |
|---|---|---|---|
| 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.[68] In texts from late Tang a new structure can be seen:

Verb + 却 + object NP + 了

(68)

| 雪峰 | 放 | 却 | 垸 | 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.

---

[67] Examples (67), (68) and (69) from Cao (1995).

[68] This does not accord completely with Shi's conclusions. According to Shi's (1988) study of 10th 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

暝眩　　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 [69]
*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 10th 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 10th 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.[70] As 了 at the same time starts to replace

---

[69] Example (70) from Wu (1998).

[70] 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 pronounciation of *le* in some northern dialects, as has been observed by Liu 1998b). However, the reapperance 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[71] 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.

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).
[71] See Chao (1968) and Teng (1973) inter alia.

**2.3.2.1. Cantonese**

In Cantonese, a verbal marker 咗 *jó* expresses what is usually expressed by verbal *le* in Mandarin Chinese. The origin of 咗 *jó* is not attested. However, Mei (1979) has shown that it can be traced back to one Middle Chinese[72] pronounciation, *tiwo*, of the character 著 which is also the lexical source of modern Mandarin aspect marker 着 *zhe*. 咗 *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[73]. 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 咗 *jó*. Cheung argues that both 住 *jyuh* and 咗 *jó* have as their origin 著[74], 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 (咗 *jó*) the perfective. 咗 *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 咗 *jó*, resulting in a competition between 休 *hiu* and 咗 *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 咗 *jó* occurs with a changed tone verb, which seems to indicate that it is the later lost 休 *hiu*, and not the coexistent marker 咗 *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 咗 *jó* up to the 1970s. After that, 咗 *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 咗 *jó* in texts from before 1900. In fact, in the earliest textbook, Cantonese Chrestomathy, from 1841, there are no examples of either 咗 *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

---

[72] The era in Chinese history that spans between the years 201-1000 (Sun 1998)

[73] 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 20th century. Before that, the majority of the works were written in Mandarin. The earliest larger work in Cantonese, according to Cheung, dates to early 19th century but it is a mixture of vernacular and classical style.

[74] Since 著 here represents a classical morpheme for which the exact pronounciation 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 19ᵗʰ 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, 咗 *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, 咗 *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 咗 *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 咗 *jó* and Mandarin *le* originate from verbs, at a later stage developing into verbal complements expressing result and/or direction[75], it is not difficult to imagine that when both markers had become de-semantizised 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 咗 *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 咗 *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 咗 *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

---

[75] 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 9th century, writes Mei (1979), but it occurred only with stative verbs. In fact, it was not until the 12th 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 12th to 14th 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   *ta*   fan   *ta*
    eat   TA   rice   TA
    (Someone) has eaten[76]

(72)

    吃饭    达
    Tciafan   *ta*
    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',[77] further

---

[76] Examples (71), (72), (73), (74), (75) and (76) from Sun (1998).
[77] 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 (10th century) it is obvious that it also had a resultative sense, argues Sun (1998):

(73)

| 莫 | 著 | 卧床， | 佯 | 病 | 不 | 起 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mo | *zhe* | 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 | *zhe* |
| tip | QUE | door | front | CL | pole | ZHE |

Push over the pole in front of the door

In texts from the 14th-15th 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 | *zhe* | Wang | mou | *zhe* |
| 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 | *zhe* |
| 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.[78] 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　　*le*
> bomb　　explode　LE
> The bomb exploded /The bomb has (had)
> exploded[79]

In these cases, claims Chao (1968) two *le*s 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:

---

[78] 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.
[79] 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[80]

(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

---

[80] 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[81]

(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,

---

[81] Example (79) from Huang (1987).

50

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[82] 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[83]

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

---

[82] 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.
[83] Example (80) from Spanos (1979).

necessarily associated with completion.[84] 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.[85] 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*[86] |
| 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 *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').

---

[84] See 2.2.2.
[85] See 5.3.
[86] 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 | *yijing* | *zai* | *zuo* | zhe | dao | shuxueti | *le* |
| I | already | ZAI | do | this | CL | math problem | LE |

I have already started working on this math problem[87]

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 <u>le</u> are in fact different surface representations of the same underlying operator<u>s</u>, 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." (Roshenow 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.

---

[87] 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)[88]

(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

---

[88] 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*[89]　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　shir
　　　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)

---

[89] 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), were 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*.[90]

## 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

---

[90] 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 advocators 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 咗 *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[91] been discussed.

---

[91] 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 assumtions, 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 unusal 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[92]

(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 his 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)

---

[92] 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 critizised 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 thruth-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 entondons 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.[93]
> 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 Luscher shows in his first approach[94] to a description of the interpretive procedure of the Passé Composé:

---

[93] Example (101) from Luscher (1998).
[94] 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.

**Passé Composé**

|
E-S

récupérer un R                récupérer un R

R                                      R

tel que E,R                      tel que S, R
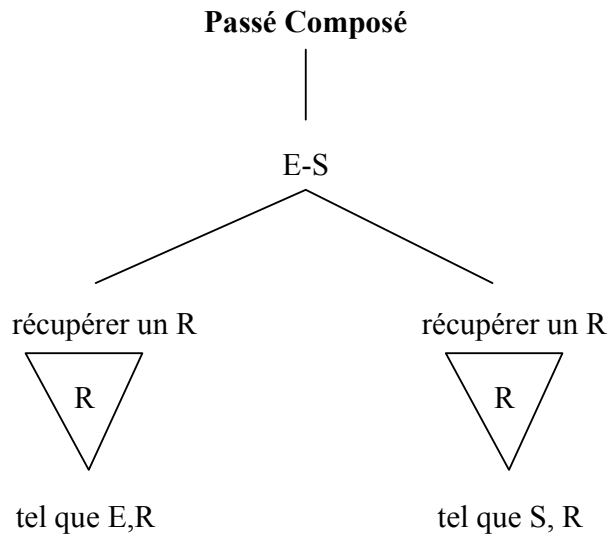
Figure 2

(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.[95]

---

[95] 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*

67

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[96]). 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

---

[96] 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)

現在　　　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)[97]

(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

---

[97] 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　*le*
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　*le*
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　*le*
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)[98]

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)[99]

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[100]). 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

---

[98] Example (110) from Chan (1980).

[99] 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

[100] 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 daozai 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

73

| 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)[101]

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

---

[101] 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[102]

| 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

---

[102] 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[103]

(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*[104], | 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)[105]

---

[103]Example (117) from Li and Thompson (1981)

[104] 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.

[105] 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.[106] 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.

---

[106] 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 that E incl in R.[107] 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[108]

(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

---

[107] 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.
[108] 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.[109] 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

---

[109] 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*[110] (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)

---

[110] 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　wifes

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,　nürenmen　*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[111] 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    <u>shen</u>    <u>shang</u>    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[112]

(133)

墙    上    挂    了    一    幅    画
<u>Qiang</u>    <u>shang</u>    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:

---

[111]For example resultant state verbs and possibly also resultative compounds and stative verbs when they are combined with *le* and get an inchoative meaning.
[112] Examples (132), (133) and (134) from Zhang (1998).

(134)

| 这 | 次 | 成功 | 体现 | 了 | 新 | 经济 | 政策 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 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*.[113]

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

---

[113] 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[114] 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 <u>already</u> 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)

---

[114] 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

88

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 |

89

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，　甫　　　　　　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　　juede　　shenme　dou　　name　　rongyi."
self　　LE　　NEG IMP　think　　what　　all　　that　　easy

90

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 that 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[115].

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[116]

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*:

---

[115] 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)
[116] 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[117] 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[118] 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

---

[117] 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.

[118] 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， |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| <u>yi</u> | 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. ρ 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 | kandechu | ta | yiding | <u>yi</u> | 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 <u>already</u> 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[119]

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:

---

[119] 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.*[120]

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 ρ as a stretch, running from some specified or unspecified point in the past up to R. The former promote a view of ρ 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.[121] 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 *san feng xin* 'three letters' is perceived of as **one** semantic entity instead of a string of entities.[122] The situation occurred at some unspecified time(s) during ρ. Notice the difference between

---

[120] Example (163) from Zhang (1998).

[121] 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 ρ 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.

[122] 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 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| <u>Dao</u> | <u>xianzai</u> | <u>wei</u> | <u>zhi</u> | wo | yigong | xie | *le* | san | feng | xin |
| to | now | as | end | I | altogether | write | LE | three | CL | letter |

<u>Up to now</u> 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 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| <u>Wo</u> | <u>zhe</u> | <u>beizi</u> | jian | *le* | hen | duo | xinxian | shi |
| I | this | life | see | LE | very | many | strange | thing |

<u>I have seen many weird things in my life</u>[123]

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 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| <u>Ni</u> | <u>bu</u> | <u>cuo,</u> | du | *le* | bu | shao | shu. |
| you | NEG | bad | read | LE | NEG | few | book |

<u>You're not bad</u>, *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

---

[123] Example (165) from Zhang (1998).

some experience(s) in her life.[124] 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 | 什麽 ？ " |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 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 | <u>yi</u> | zouxia | le | lou. |

---

[124] 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 <u>already</u> walk-down LE floor.
That guy still wanted to ask: "Thank me for what?", but Guo Dalu had <u>already</u> 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　<u>yijing</u>　*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* <u>already</u> *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.　<u>Xiao Han　ku　*le*　qilai.</u>　*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 ρ excludes E and is equivalent
with R/S:

(177)

| 你们 | 现在 | 找到 | | 了 | 房子 | 在 | 哪里？ |
|------|------|------|---|----|------|-----|-------|
| Nimen | <u>xianzai</u> | zhaodao | *le* | fangzi | zai | nali? |
| you | now | search-arrive | LE | house | at | where? |

Have you found the house <u>now</u>? (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 experiental 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*.[125] 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

---

[125] 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.[126] *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[127]
he　morning　eat　LE　rice
He had a meal in the morning

---

[126] It has been noted that syntactic position may be relevant for the default temporal interpretation of the sentence with *le*.

[127] 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 | *le* | 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 | *le* | 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

105

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[128]
　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[129] during which a

---

[128] 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

[129] 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　<u>jiu</u>　<u>dian</u>　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[130] 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.[131] 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 | *le* | fan |
| he | morning | eat | LE | rice |



---
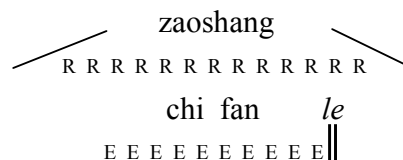
[130] Modal interpretations of sentences with verbal le are not mentioned here.

[131] 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 impossble 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).

(185)

| 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 |

```
            chifan    le
     E E E E E ‖
               ‖ R R R R R R R R
               ‖
               ‖ qu kan dianying
                    E  E  E
```

## 5.1.2.2. Conditional sentences

Palmer (1986) defines the hypothetical status of the two clauses in a conditional sentence like this: "Conditional sentences are unlike all others in that both the subordinate clause (the protasis) and the main clause (the apodosis) are non-factual. Neither indicates that the event has occurred (or is occurring or will occur); the sentence merely indicates the dependence of the truth of one proposition upon the truth of another." (Palmer 1986, p. 189)[132]

I will start by presenting some conditional sentences, the subordinate clauses (protases) of which contain verbal *le*:

(186)

| 如果 | 中国 | 真 | 是 | 有 | 了 | 这么 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Ruguo* | *Zhongguo* | *zhen* | *shi* | *you* | *le* | *zheme* |
| if | China | really | be | have | LE | this |

| 一 | 批 | 唐 | 元豹， | 少 | 一些 | 你 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *yi* | *pi* | *Tang* | *Yuanbao*, | shao | yixie | ni |
| one | CL | Tang | Yuanbao | less | a little | you |

---

[132] There are critics of this view, for example Schwenter (1999), who uses sentences like the following to validate his claim that not all conditional sentences involve hypothetical situations (originally Dik 1990, p. 241):
"[A and B are sitting inside A:s house. Through the window, they can see their friend Joan, who has just arrived, and is walking towards the front door. They know that Joan always takes her dogs wherever she goes]
A: Here comes Joan. Where are the dogs?
B: If Joan's here, the dogs are too.
…the conditional protasis in B's response is not employed to create a hypothetical "picture" in which Joan is here (i.e. a situation in which she is NOT here in reality…The protasis consists of the proposition that Joan IS here". (Schwenter 1999, p. 42)

| 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 | continuosly | 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![133]

---

[133] 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*le* | nei | liang | che |
| I | want | tomorrow | sell-off | that | CL | car |

I would like to sell that car tomorrow[134]

(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

---

[134] 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 | *le* | 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 | *le* | 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,　<u>zuotian</u>　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　<u>wanshang</u>　<u>ji</u>　qu　*le*　na　nüren　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　<u>zheme</u>　<u>zai</u>　<u>tongxue</u>　<u>de</u>
Li　Ya　and　Yi　Guang　just　this way　at　classmate　DE
妹妹　　　的　婚礼　　中　定　了　关系
<u>meimei</u>　<u>de</u>　<u>hunli</u>　<u>zhong</u>　ding　*le*　guanxi
younger-sister　DE　wedding　in　settle　LE　contact
And <u>that is how</u> Li Ya and Yi Guang got engaged—<u>at her classmate's sister's wedding</u> (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 <u>suddenly</u> 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 | <u>bian</u> |
| 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, | <u>hui</u> | <u>hou</u> | <u>bian</u> | 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 <u>then</u> *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, <u>when he came back</u>, 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[135] modality concerns the way the speaker's attitude towards the information in the sentence is expressed.

---

[135] 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 | 女孩子 | 总是 | 瘦 | 得 | 多。 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| keshi | nianqing | de | nühaizi | 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)

| 绫卿 | 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*.[136] 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.[137]

(213)

这儿 吵 了 一点， 我 爸爸 不 会 喜欢
Zher chao *le* yidian, wo baba bu hui xihuan
here noisy LE a little I father NEG will like
住 这儿。
zhu zher.
live here
It's a little bit too noisy here; my father won't like to live here.

---

[136] See chapter 6.3.
[137] 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[138]

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.

---

[138] Example (216) from Shi (1988).

118

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, <u>nothing</u> <u>has</u> <u>happened</u> – 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, -<u>le</u> can <u>only</u> 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[139] this

---

[139] 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 ρ. For example:

(220)

| 人家 | 已经 | 受 | 了 | 罪 |
|--------|--------|------|------|-----|
| Renjia | yijing | shou | *le* | zui |
| he | already | recieve | 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 (ρ) 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[140]

(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!

---

[140] 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 | *le* |
| 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).[141] 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?[142]

(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

---

[141] 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.

[142] 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[143] 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 | *le* |
| he | last year | graduate | LE |

He graduated last year[144]

---

[143] 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.

[144] 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 ambiguosity.

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[145], 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 | *le* |
| 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 | *le* | 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[146] 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*,

---

[145] 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.
[146] 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".[147]

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[148] 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 |
|-------------|------|------|-------|-----------|-------|-----------|-------|
| *Buxing* | *de* | *shi,* | *huati* | *liji* | *you* | *paodao* | *Zhude* |
| unfortunate | DE | be | topic | immediately | again | run-arrive | Zhude |

| 的 | 美国 | 朋友 | 没有 | 回 | 她 | 的 | 电话 |
|------|---------|----------|--------|------|------|------|----------|
| *de* | *Meiguo* | *pengyou* | *mei you* | *hui* | *ta* | *de* | *dianhua* |
| DE | America | friend | NEG | return | she | DE | call |

这 件 事 上去 了。 谈及 此 事，

---

[147] Although I prefer a broader description of its use, for example "closing a statement and/or opening up a discussion".

[148] 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.

127

| *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， | 茉德！ | 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 cues. 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![149]

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)

---

[149] 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.[150] 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'.[151] 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 | *le* |
| I | yesterday | go to | Zhang | home | eat | LE |

(Well), I (finally) went yesterday to have dinner at the Zhangs'[152]

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*:

---

[150] According to a time-relational definition of perfect, (231) is a perfective sentence and (232) is a perfect sentence.

[151] 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)'.

[152] 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.[153] 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

---

[153] 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.

中西合壁　　　　　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 | 跄踉 | | 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 |

133

| 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 |

move-on LE Wan Lu DE lip     move-arrive LE Wan Lu

| 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 | *daozai* | *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。 | "Zhen |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 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.[154] If their theory is

---

[154] "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 aquire-LE Buddhist-sutra and Buddhist-statue

correct that would not be without importance for the discussion on a unified treatment of all syntactical occurences 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 progress 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.[155] 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[156]

(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)

---

'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)

[155] 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 "overtones" (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*.

[156] 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[157]

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'.[158] 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.[159] As can be seen, the nature of the speech situation largely determines the interpretation of the sentence.

---

[157] Example (245) from Li and Thompson (1981).

[158] 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.

[159] 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'.[160] 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

---

[160] 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*[161] 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)[162]

(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

---

[161] This is the term that Li and Thomson (1981) use to explain this use of *le*.
[162] Example (249) from Li and Thompson (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 |

139

才　　是　　要　　引　　你　　走入　　正途！"
cai　　shi　　yao　　yin　　ni　　zouru　　zhengtu!"
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　*le*
he　too　fat　　LE
He is too fat

(256)

学费　　　太　　贵　　　　了
Xuefei　　tai　　gui　　　　*le*
tuition fee　too　　expensive　LE
The tuition fee is really too high[163]

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　*le*
soup　salty　LE
The soup is too salty[164]

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.

---

[163] Example (256) from Li and Thompson (1981).
[164] 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[165] 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) where 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*.[166] 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.[167] 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:

---

[165] In a few cases the source sentence did not contain a perfect tense form but strongly implied the sense of resultant state.

[166] 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.

[167] 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 le₁ [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 participal construction (15% Perfect tense, 4% participal 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)[168] 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, |

---

[168] 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*[169] *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)

---

[169] 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 茕茕 孑 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[170]

---

[170] 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 %)[171] 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.

---

[171] 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. [172] 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.

---

[172] 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 | shanzi | tiaowu |
| 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.[173] 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[174], which implicates that it could have both a perfect and a perfective reading:

---

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))

[173] 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.
[174] 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.

# References

## Books and articles

ASHER, A.E. *et al*. 1994. *The encyclopedia of language and linguistics*. Oxford Pergamon Press.

BINNICK, ROBERT I. 1991. *Time and the verb*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

BYBEE, JOAN.1994. *Evolution of grammar: tense, aspect and modality in the languages of the world*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

CAO, GUANGSHUN. 1995. 近代汉语助词 [*Chinese auxiliary words in modern times*]. Beijing: *Yuwen chubanshe*.

CARSTON, ROBYN. 1998. The semantics/pragmatics distinction: a view from relevance theory. *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics* 10. London: University College London.

CHAN, MARJORIE. 1980. Temporal reference in Mandarin Chinese. An analytical-semantic approach to the study of the morphemes *le*, *zai*, *zhe* and *ne*. *Journal of the Chinese Language Teachers' Association* 15:3, 33-79.

CHAO, YUENREN. 1968. *A grammar of spoken Chinese*. Berkeley: The University of California Press.

CHAPPELL, HILARY. 1986. Restrictions on the use of 'double le' in Chinese. *Cahiers de Linguistique Asie Orientale* 15, 223-252.

———. 1988. Aspectually-bounded structures in the Chinese pear stories: The two le's in Chinese: A case of homonymy, polysemy or neither? *In* KATE BURRIDGE AND WILLIAM McGREGOR (eds.). *La Trobe working papers in Linguistics* 1988:1. La Trobe University Department of Linguistics, 107-134.

———. 1992. Towards a typology of aspect in Sinitic languages. 中国境内语言及语言学 *Zhongguo jingnei yuyan ji yuyanxue* 1, 67-106.

———. 1994. The perfective aspect marker jó in Cantonese Yue spoken narratives. *In* THOMAS LEE, ALAIN PEYRAUBE, BENJAMIN T'SOU AND XU LIEJIONG (eds.). *Studia Linguistica serica*. Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong.

CHEUNG, SAMUEL HUNG-NIN.1997.Completing the completive: (Re)constructing early Cantonese grammar. *In* CHAOFEN SUN (ed.).*Studies on the History of Chinese Syntax*. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics Monograph Series* 10, 133-165.

CHU, CHAUNCEY C. AND W. VINCENT CHANG. 1987. The discourse function of the verbal suffix –le in Mandarin. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* 15:2, 309-333.

COMRIE, BERNARD. 1976. *Aspect. An introduction to the study of verbal aspect and related problems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 1985. *Tense*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

ELSNESS, JOHAN. 1991. *The perfect and the preterite: The expression of past time in contemporary and earlier English*. Thesis (PhD). Oslo University.

ERNST, THOMAS. 1995. Negation in Mandarin Chinese. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 13:4, 665-707.

FANG, YUQING (ed.). 1992. 实用汉语语法 [*Practical Chinese grammar*]. Beijing: Beijing Yuyan Xueyuan chubanshe. [Beijing Language Institute Press]

GONG, QIANYAN. 1991. 谈现代汉语的时制表示和时态表达系统 [On the system for expressing tense and aspect in modern Chinese]. 中国语文 *Zhongguo Yuwen* 1991:4, 251-261.

GRICE, PAUL. 1989. *Studies in the way of words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

HAMANN, CORNELIA. 1987. The awesome seeds of reference time. *In* ALFRED SCHOPF (ed.). *Essays on tensing in English vol I: Reference time, tense and adverbs*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 27-69.

HARDER, PETER. 1996. *Functional semantics. A theory of meaning, structure and tense in English*. Mouton de Gruyter.

HEDIN, EVA. 1987. *On the use of the perfect and the pluperfect in modern Greek*. Thesis (PhD). Stockholm University.

HSIAO, YUCHAU E. 1991. A cognitive grammar approach to perfect aspect: Evidence from Chinese. *In* LAUREL A. SUTTON, CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON AND RUTH SHIELDS (eds.). *Proceedings of the seventeenth annual meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*. Berkeley: Berkeley Linguistics Society, 390-401.

HU, MINGYANG. 1988. 语气助词的语气意义 [The modal meaning of Chinese auxiliary words]. 汉语学习 *Hanyu Xuexi* 1988:6, 4-7.

HU, MINGYANG. 1995. 汉语和英语的完成态 [The perfect aspect in Chinese and English]. 语言教学与研究 *Yuyan jiaoxue yu yanjiu* 1995:1, 25-38.

HUANG, LILLIAN MEEI-JIN. 1987. Aspect: A general system and its manifestation in Mandarin Chinese. Thesis (PhD). Rice University.

HUANG, LILLIAN MEEI-JIN AND PHILIP W. DAVIS. 1989. Negation in Ayatal and Mandarin: A comparison. Paper presented to the 22nd Sino-Tibetan Conference, Honolulu, Hawaii, October 1989. Available from: http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~pwd/publicationsamplesframe.html [Accessed 12 September 2002].

JACKENDOFF, RAY. 1990. *Semantic structures*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

KLEIN, WOLFGANG. 1994. *Time in language*. London and New York: Routledge.

KLEIN, WOLFGANG, LI PING AND HENRIETTE HENDRIKS. 2000. Aspect and Assertion in Mandarin Chinese. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 18, 723-770.

KWAN-TERRY, ANNA. 1979. The case of the two le's in Mandarin Chinese. *Computational analysis of Asian and African languages* 10, 39-55.

LI, CHARLES N. AND SANDRA A. THOMPSON. 1981. *Mandarin Chinese: A functional reference grammar*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

LI, CHARLES N., SANDRA A. THOMPSON AND R. M. THOMPSON. 1982. The discourse motivation for the perfect aspect: The Mandarin particle LE. *In* PAUL. J. HOPPER *Tense – aspect: Between semantics and pragmatics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 19-44.

LI, JINXI. 1924. *新著国语文法* [*A new grammar of the national language*]. Shanghai: Commercial Press.

LI, NA (CHARLES N. LI) AND SHI YUZHI. 1997. 论汉语体标记诞生的机制 [A discussion on the mechanism behind the birth of the aspectual markers in Chinese]. *中国语文 Zhongguo yuwen*. 1997:2, 82-96.

LI, TIEGEN. 1999. *现代汉语时制研究* [*The study of tense in modern Chinese*]. Liaoning Daxue chubanshe [Liaoning University Press].

LI, XIAOFAN. 2000. 现代汉语词尾 ” 了 “ 的语法意义在探讨 [A further discussion on the grammatical meaning of modern Chinese suffix "le"]. *语法研究和探索 Yufa yanjiu he tansuo* 10. Beijing: Commercial Press, 203-209.

LIU, HSIAO-YING. 1990. *An integrated analysis of Chinese verbal –le and clausal le: Relevant phonological, syntactic, semantic, and discoursal factors*. Thesis (PhD). Colombia University Teachers College.

LIU, XIANMIN. 1998. Le — an aspectual marker for change. *In* HUA LIN (ed.). *Proceedings of the ninth North American Conference on Chinese linguistics*. Los Angeles: GSIL (Graduate Students in Lingustics), 202-216.

LIU, XUNNING. 1998a. 现代汉语词尾 " 了 " 的语法意义 [The grammatical meaning of Modern Chinese affix "le"]. *In* Liu Xunning (ed.). *Xiandai Hanyu Yanjiu*. Beijing: Bejing Yuyan Wenhua Daxue Chubanshe [Beijing Language and Culture University Press], p.1-20.

———. 1998b. 现代汉语句尾 " 了 " 的来源 [The origins of sentence-final le in modern Chinese]. *In* Liu Xunning (ed.). *Xiandai Hanyu Yanjiu*. Beijing: Bejing Yuyan Wenhua Daxue Chubanshe [Beijing Language and Culture University Press], p. 21-34.

LU, SHUXIANG. 1996. *现代汉语八百词* [*800 words in modern Chinese*]. Beijing: Commercial Press. (Original edition 1980)

LUSCHER, JEAN-MARC. 1998. Chapitre 8. Procedure d'intérpretation du Passé Composé. *In* MOESCHLER, JACQUES (ed.). *Pragmatique de la référence temporelle*. Paris: Èditions Kimé, 181-196.

LYONS, JOHN. 1977. *Semantics*, Vol. II. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

MA, XIWEN. 1982. 关于动词 " 了 " 的弱化形式 / 。 lou/ [/lou/, the weakened form of verbal "le"]. *中国语言学报 Zhongguo Yuyan Xuebao* 1, 1-14.

MANGIONE, L. AND DINGXUAN LI. 1993. A compositional analysis of –GUO and -LE. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* 21:1, 65-122.

MEI, ZULIN. 1979. The etymology of the aspect marker tsi in the Wu dialect. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* 7, 1-14.

———. 1999. 先奏两汉的一种完成貌句式——兼论现代汉语完成貌句式的来源. *中国语文 Zhongguo Yuwen* 1999:4, 285-294.

MELCHERT, CRAIG H. 1980. Some aspects of 'aspect' in Mandarin Chinese. *Linguistics* 18, 635-654.

MOESCHLER, JACQUES. 1998a. Introduction: temps, reference et pragmatique. *In* MOESCHLER, JACQUES (ed.). *Pragmatique de la référence temporelle*. Paris: Èditions Kimé, 4-15.

——— (ed.). 1998b. *Pragmatique de la référence temporelle*. Paris: Èditions Kimé.

PALMER, F. R. 1986. *Mood and modality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

RAN, YONGPING. 2000. *The pragmatics of discourse markers in conversation*. Thesis (PhD). Guangdong University of Foreign Studies.

REICHENBACH, HANS. 1947. *Elements of symbolic logic*. London: Macmillan.

ROHSENOW, JOHN S. 1978. *Syntax and semantics of the perfect in Mandarin Chinese*. Thesis (PhD). University of Michigan.

ROSS, CLAUDIA. 1995. Temporal and aspectual reference in Mandarin Chinese. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* 23:1, 87-136.

SALKIE, RACHEL. 1989. Perfect and pluperfect: What is the relationship? *Linguistics* 25, 1-34.

SCHWENTER, SCOTT A. 1999. *Pragmatics of conditional marking: Implicature, scalarity and exclusivity*. New York: Garland

SHEN, JIAXUAN. 1995. " 有界 " 与 " 无界 [Bounded and non-bounded]. *中果语文Zhongguo Yuwen* 1995:5, 367-380.

SHI, ZIQIANG. 1988. *The present and past of the particle 'le' in Mandarin Chinese*. Thesis (PhD). University of Pennsylvania.

SHI, ZIQIANG. 1990. Decomposition of perfectivity and inchoativity and the meaning of the particle le in Mandarin Chinese. 1990. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* 18:1, 95-165.

SCHOPF, ALFRED. 1987. Past tense in English. *In* ALFRED SCHOPF (ed.). *Essays on tensing in English vol I: Reference time, tense and adverbs*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 177-226.

SMITH, CARLOTA S. 1983. A theory of aspectual choice. *Language* 59, 479-501.

SMITH, CARLOTA S. 1997. *The parameter of aspect*. Second edition. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

SPERBER, DAN AND DEIDRE WILSON. 1995. *Relevance: Communication and cognition*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd (Original edition 1986).

SUN, CHAOFEN. 1998. Aspectual categories that overlap: A historical and dialectal perspective of the Chinese zhe. *Journal of East Asian Linguistics* 7:2, 153-174.

SYBESMA, RINT. 1997. Why Chinese verb-le is a resultative predicate. *Journal of East Asian Linguistics* 6:3, 215-261.

TAI, JAMES H-Y. 1984. Verbs and Times in Chinese: Vendlers four categories. *In* DAVID TESTEN, VEENA MISHRA AND JOSEPH DROGO (eds.). *Papers from the parasession on lexical semantics: Chicago Linguistics Society*, 289-297.

TENG SHOU-HSIN. 1973. Negation and aspects in Chinese. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* 1:1, 14-37.

TIEE, HENRY HUNG-YEH. 1985. Modal auxiliaries in Chinese. *In* HENRY H. TIEE and NAM-KIL KIM (eds.). *Studies in East Asian Linguistics. Proceedings of Linguistic Conference on East Asian Languages held at the Univerisity of Southern California in Los Angeles on October 21-22, 1983*. Los Angeles: Department of East Asian Lang. & Cul., U of Southern California, 84-96.

THOMPSON, CHARLES J. 1968. Aspects of the Chinese verb. *Linguistics* 38, 70-76.

THOMPSON, CHARLES J. 1970. Aspects of the Chinese verb. A supplementary note. *Linguistics* 60, 63-65.

TRAVIS, L. 1985. On what is strictly speaking true. *Canadian Journal of philosophy* 15, 187-229.

TUNG, PING-CHENG AND D.E. POLLARD. 1982. *Colloquial Chinese*. London: Routledge and Kegan.

VENDLER, ZENO. 1967. Verbs and times. *Linguistics in Philosophy*, 97-121. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

VERKUYL, HENK J. 1972. On the compositional nature of the aspects. Foundations of Language Supplementary Series 15. Dordrect: Reidel.

VERKUYL, HENK J. 1993. *A theory of aspectuality: the interaction between temporal and atemporal structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

VERSHUEREN, PAUL. 1998. *Understanding pragmatics*. Edward Arnold.

MOCHIZUKI, KEIKO. 2000. 汉语里的 " 完成体 " [Perfect aspect in Chinese]. *汉语学习 Hanyu Xuexi* 2000:1, 12-16.

WU, FUYANG. 1998. 重谈 " 动＋了＋宾 " 格式的来源和完成体助词 " 了 " 的产生 [A further discussion on the origins of the structure "verb + le + object NP" and the emergence of the completive aspect auxiliary word "le"]. *中国语文* 1988:6, 452-462.

WU, GUO. 1999. On Chinese discourse Le. *IIAS Newsletter* [online], No. 18. Available from:
http://iias.leidenuniv.nl/iiasn/18/regions/e1.html
[Accessed 10 Dec 2001]

YONG, SHIN. 1997. 普通话中助词，了 " 所表达的时间范围及时态 [The time spans and aspects expressed by the particle le in Mandarin Chinese]. *中国语言学论丛 Zhongguo Yuyanxue Luncong* [*Studies in Chinese Linguistics*] 1, 49-66.

YUAN, YULIN. 1991. 祈使句式和动词的类 [Imperative mood and the verb classes]. *中国语文* 1991:1, 10-20.

ZHANG, LIHUA. 1995. *A contrastive study of aspectuality in German, English and Chinese*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

ZHANG, ZHENGSHENG. 1996. The grammar of aspect in Mandarin Chinese. *In* TSAI-FA CHENG, YAFEI LI AND HONGMING ZHANG (eds.). *Proceedings of the tenth North American Conference on Chinese linguistics*. Los Angeles: Graduate Students in Lingustics, 435-452.

ZHANG, ZHENGSHENG. 1998. The perfective and perfect meanings of the verbal –le. *In* HUA LIN (ed.). *Proceedings of the ninth North American Conference on Chinese linguistics*. Los Angeles: Graduate Students in Lingustics, 402-411.

ZHAO, JINMING. 1979. 敦煌变文中所见的 " 了 " 和 " 着 " ["Le" and "zhe" found in Dunhuang bianwen texts]. *中国语文* 1979:1, 65-69.

ZHAO SHIKAI AND SHEN JIAXUAN. 1984. 汉语 " 了 " 字跟英语相应的说法 [The expressions in English corresponding to "le" in Chinese]. *语言研究 Yuyan Yanjiu* 1984:1, 114-126.

# Literary works

A, CHENG. 1985. *棋王*. Available from:
http://www.shuku.net:8080/novels/chessking.html
[Accessed 16 October 2002]

FANG FANG. 2000. *白雾*. Available from:
http://www.shuku.net:8080/novels/baiwu.html
 [Accessed 16 October 2002]

FIELDING, HELEN. 1999. *单身日记：爱是空心菜*. [Bridget Jones: The edge of reason]
http://www.shuku.net:8080/novels/foreign/saeepjpwnyjyn/dsrj.html
[Accessed 16 October 2002]

FIELDING, HELEN. 1999. *Bridget Jones: The edge of reason*. London: Picador

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ, GABRIEL. 1967. *百年孤独*. [100 years of solitude]
http://www.shuku.net/novels/bainian/bainian.html

[Accessed 16 October 2002]

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ, GABRIEL. 1967. *Cien años de soledad*. Mexico: Editorial Diana.

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ, GABRIEL. 1967 (translation first published in 1970). *One hundred years of solitude*. London: Penguin Books

GU, LONG. 1972. *蝙蝠传奇* Available from:
http://www.shuku.net:8080/novels/gulong/liuxiang/bat/bat.html
[Accessed 16 October 2002]

GU, LONG. 1993. *欢乐英雄*. Available from:
http://www.sinc.sunysb.edu/Stu/yihe/novels/gulong/happyheros.html
[Accessed 18 Dec 2001]

ORWELL, GEORGE. *1984*
http://www.shuku.net:8080/novels/foreign/1984/1984.html
[Accessed 16 October 2002]

ORWELL, GEORGE. 1984. *1984*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (original edition published in 1949 by Martin Secker & Warburg Limited)

QIONG, YAO. 1985. *我是一片云* Available from:
http://www.shuku.net:8080/novels/qiongyao/qiongyao.html
[Accessed 16 October 2002]

QIONG, YAO. 1989. *女朋友*. Available from:
http://www.shuku.net:8080/novels/qiongyao/qiongyao.html
[Accessed 16 October 2002]

SAN, MAO. 1985. *送你一匹马*. Available from:
http://www.shuku.net:8080/novels/sanmao/sanmao.html
[Accessed 16 October 2002]

TAN, ZHU. 1997. *一生有多长*. Available from:
http://www.shuku.net:8080/novels/yishen.html
[Accessed 16 October 2002]

WANG, SHUO. 1988. *空中小姐*. Available from:
http://www.shuku.net:8080/novels/wangshuo/stewarde.html
[Accessed 16 October 2002]

WANG, SHUO. 1992. *我是你爸爸*. Available from:
http://www.shuku.net:8080/novels/wangshuo/baba/baba.html
[Accessed 16 October 2002]

WANG, SHUO. 1992. *千万别把我当人*. Available from:
http://www.shuku.net:8080/novels/wangshuo/dangren/dangren.html
[Accessed 16 October 2002]

ZHANG, AILING. 1937. *霸王别姬*. Available from:
http://www.shuku.net:8080/novels/zhangailing/bawangbieji.html
[Accessed 16 October 2002]