

## **An Aspectual Analysis of Mandarin Verbal *-le* and Sentential *-le***

**Background:** Mandarin Chinese particle *-le* may (sometimes) appear immediately after the verb (verbal *-le*) or sentence finally (sentential *-le*), or in both positions at once (double *-le*). See (1). The verbal *-le* has been argued to be a perfective marker (Li and Thompson 1981) or a realization marker (Sybesma 1999, Lin 2003), while the sentential *-le* has been argued to be a marker of ‘Current Relevant State’ (Li and Thompson 1981), inchoativity (Ross 1995), objective change (i.e., the coming about of a state of affair) or subjective change (i.e., new information to the hearer) (Sybesma 1999) or realization plus a result state (Lin 2003).

**Claim:** We propose that the verbal *-le* is a perfective marker (Li and Thompson 1981), while the sentential *-le* is a transition marker, which triggers a presupposition about an immediate past event that is in opposition to the one described by the sentence (see Dowty 1979, Pustejovsky 1990). In double *-le* sentences, the sentential *-le* has scope over the verbal *-le*.

**Problems:** **I.** The verbal *-le* and the sentential *-le* may give rise to the same reading (completive/terminative) in an achievement sentence (see (1a) and (1b)) or an accomplishment sentence that requires the event to be completed when the verbal *-le* is present (see Tai 1984). See (2). The verbal *-le* and the sentential *-le* have different reading possibilities (completive/terminative versus inchoative) when the sentence denotes an activity or an accomplishment that does not require the event to be completed when the verbal *-le* is present (see Tai 1984). See (3) and (4). The verbal *-le* is prohibited in states, while the sentential *-le* gives rise to an inchoative reading. See (5). **II.** Double *-le* sentences give rise to the same terminative/completive reading as in sentences with the verbal *-le*. This is shown in (6). Compare (4). **III.** The sentential *-le* can occur in sentences with *zhi* ‘only’ and *budao* ‘less than’ with some numeral phrases but not others. Numeral phrases indicating duration, frequency or distance (traveled) are prohibited with *zhi* ‘only’ and *budao* ‘less than’ when the sentence contains the sentential *-le*. Examples with *zhi* ‘only’ are given in (7) and (8).

**Solutions:** **I.** The verbal *-le* as a perfective marker always gives rise to a terminative/completive reading (though it may not appear with states in Mandarin). We will show in the paper that it does not trigger an inchoative reading (contra Shi 1990, Smith 1997, Sybesma 1997), nor does it provide a continuative reading (contra Lin 2003). The completive and inchoative reading associated with the sentential *-le* come from the interaction between the sentential *-le* as a transition marker and the event denoted by the sentence. In (1b), the sentential *-le* triggers a presupposition that there is an immediate past event of the form [we did not reach the top of the mountain]. In order for this past event to be in opposition to the current event, it must be the case that in the current event the top of the mountain is reached. The completive reading arises from the opposition that is set up by the sentential *-le*. (2b) receives the same account. In (3b), the sentential *-le* gives rise to an inchoative reading, with the terminative/completive reading left open (which we will show in the paper). The presupposition that is triggered by the sentential *-le* is of the form [he did not scold his child]. Because the scolding-event is non-bounded, the presupposition can only be interpreted as [he did not start scolding his child]. For the event described by the sentence to be in a successful opposition to this presupposition, it must be the case that the scolding event has started. (4b) and (5b) receive the same account. **II.** Double *-le* sentences always have the same completive/terminative as the verbal *-le* sentences because they contain the verbal *-le*, which provides the terminative/completive reading. The sentential *-le* then simply indicates a transition by triggering a presupposition of an immediate past event that is opposite to the terminated/completed event. **III.** In (8b), the sentential *-le* triggers a presupposition that there exists an immediate past event that is the opposite of [I only live here for five years], namely [I live here for more than five years]. Since the time axis only goes in one direction, one can only live at a certain place for n-years before he or she can live at that place for more than n-years, and the reverse is not possible. (8b) is ruled out because the assertion and the presupposition cannot both be true. There is no problem with having the sentential *-le* appearing with a quantity numeral that may increase or decrease with time, when the sentence contains *zhi* ‘only’ and *budao* ‘less than’. In (7b), the presupposition triggered by the sentential *-le* is [I have more than five bucks] in the past. This does not contradict with the assertion that [I only have five bucks] as the amount of money may increase or decrease.

- (1a) Women daoda le shan-ding.  
we reach LE mountain-top  
'We reached the top of the mountain.'
- (1b) Women daoda shan-ding le.  
we reach mountain-top LE  
'We have reached the top of the mountain.'
- (1c) Women daoda le shan-ding le.  
we reach LE mountain-top LE  
'We have reached the top of the mountain.'
- (2a) Ta zuo wan le gongke.  
he do finish LE homework  
'He finished his homework.'
- (2b) Ta zuo wan gongke le.  
he do finish homework LE  
'He has finished his homework.'
- (3a) Ta ma le ta de haizi.  
he scold LE he Poss child  
'He scolded his child.'
- (3b) Ta ma ta de haizi le.  
he scold he Poss child LE  
'He started scolding his child.' or  
'He has scolded his child.'
- (4a) Ta xie le na-feng xin.  
he write LE that-CI letter  
'He wrote the letter.'
- (4b) Ta xie na-feng xin le.  
he write that-CI letter LE  
'He has started writing the letter.' or  
'He has written the letter.'
- (5a) \*Wo xihuan le mugua.  
I like LE papaya  
'I liked papaya.'
- (5b) Ta xihuan mugua le.  
I like papaya LE  
'I like papaya now, which I did not before.'
- (6) Ta xie le na-feng xin le.  
he write LE that-CI letter LE  
'He has written the letter.'  
Not 'He has started writing the letter.'
- (7a) Wo zhi you wu kuai qian.  
I only have five buck money  
'I have only five bucks.'
- (7b) Wo zhi you wu kuai qian le.  
I only have five buck money LE  
'I have only five bucks now, which was not the case before.'
- (8a) Wo zai zher zhi zhu le wu nian.  
I at here only live LE five year  
'I only lived here for five years.'
- (8b) \*Wo zai zher zhi zhu (le) wu nian le.  
I at here only live LE five year LE  
'I have only lived here for five years.'