

Aspecuality, temporality and modality: a relevance-theoretic analysis of some pragmatic markers in Mandarin Chinese

It is generally agreed that in Mandarin Chinese, tense (at least absolute tense) is not expressed morphologically but there is a number of verbal and sentence-final particles that express aspect and mood. These (in particular the aspectual ones) have been studied rather extensively throughout the last 50 years. The studies are generally based upon the assumption that there is a one-to-one relationship between form and semantic category aspect, tense or mood, i.e. that each grammatical form can only be either an aspect marker, a modal marker or a tense marker. The verbal particle *le* is thus assumed to encode perfectivity, its homophonous sentence-final counterpart *le* perfect aspect/tense, the verbal particle *guo* experiential perfect aspect/tense and the verbal particle *zhe* imperfective aspect. However, this characterization cannot satisfactorily account for the fact that one marker can give more than one reading depending on the context in which it occurs. For example:

- Verbal perfective marker *le* (LE) can be used to indicate "excessiveness" in certain contexts, rather like a modal particle:

(1) Ta gao le liang cun
he tall LE two inch
He has become two inches taller / **He is too tall by two inches**

Moreover, verbal *le* often occurs in typical perfect sentences in which the event time is prior to the reference time:

(2) Nimen xianzai zhaodao le fangzi zai nali?
you now find-arrive LE house at where
Have you found the house now?

- Sentence-final perfect marker *le* (LE²) can be used to express a "peak" in a discourse segment consisting of several events in a row. This function is not compatible with the characteristics of the perfect tense, which is normally used for backgrounding.

(3) Ta xiayishi de zhengli le yixia fuzhuang you naqi
she subconscious DE arrange LE a little clothes then take-up
shuzi, ba man tou lingluan de toufa shu le shu, ta kandao
comb BA full head messy DE hair brush LE brush she look-arrive
e shang de shangchu le, shi de, you qing you zi you
forehead on DE injury LE² be DE again green again lilac again
hong you zhong, shi hao da de yi kuai.
red again swollen be good large DE one CL
Without thinking, she arranged her clothes and then picked up a comb and brushed 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.

- Experiential perfect marker *guo* (GUO) is often found in sentences with perfective readings:

(4) Wo zai chadui de shihou wei guo
I ZAI work in production team DE time feed GUO
liang nian niu
two year cow
When I worked in the production team I fed cows for two years

- In existential sentences with verbs of placement and posture or verbs that have both an active and a stative meaning, either perfective marker *le* or imperfective marker *zhe*

(ZHE) can be used with no difference in reading:

- (5) Hongzhi shang xie zhe/le ge zhong zhuhe de hua
red paper on write ZHE/LE each sort congratulatory DE word
On the red paper all sorts of congratulatory messages were written

I propose that these grammatical markers in Mandarin Chinese be redefined within a relevance-theoretic framework as pragmatic markers, each with a semantic core meaning that interacts with contextual information and produces different aspectual, temporal and modal distinctions. Most prior accounts rely on conventional metaphorical descriptions of the aspects as opposed to the widely used time-relational definitions of the tenses. I will show that, by using a Reichenbachian time-relational definition of aspect, the relationship between aspect and tense (and between the aspects and the tenses) is made clearer and the problems concerning the non-default functions of the Mandarin markers *le*, *zhe* and *guo* can be solved.

Abbreviations:

BA	Disposal marker
CL	Classifier
DE	Nominalizing/genitive/associative marker
ZAI	Durative aspect marker

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