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

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To Tobias, my fellow traveller

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Abbreviations

BA 1) Sentence-final "solicit agreement" marker $\square ba^2$

2) "Disposal" marker 担 ba

CL Classifier

DE 1) Nominalizing/genitive/associative marker 的 de

2) Adverbializing marker 地 de

3) Complex stative construction marker 得 de, referring

either to manner or extent

4) 得 de, infix in a resultative verb compound, expressing

potentiality

GUO Boundary³ / Experiential marker 过 guo

JIANG "Disposal" marker 将 jiang

LA Combination of \vec{J} le and sentence-final marker \vec{P} \vec{A}

LE Boundary marker $\vec{\int} le$

MA Sentence-final question marker \square 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

2) Classical Chinese grammatical marker 着

ZHI Nominalizing/genitive/associative marker $\angle zhi$

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.

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 $\int_{-\infty}^{\infty} e^{-t} dt$ 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 \vec{J} .

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. These are characteristics such as the presence vs. non-presence of a natural boundary in the situation described by the VP and duration vs. non-duration of an action. The temporal characteristics of the lexical entities are expressed linguistically through

• The lexical semantics of the verb

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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 NP⁷

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 <i>had</i> (already) <i>left</i> (Pluperfect ⁹)	$E-R-S^{10}$
(a)	At live o clock, John had (alleddy) teft (Tuperfeet)	L-IX-D

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

At five o'clock, John will (already) have left (Future Perfect) (c) 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 vifu means 'He washed/was washing his clothes yesterday', i.e. describes a past time situation, 他洗了衣服 ta xi le vifu 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 vifu 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' 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 vifu 'He washed /was washing his clothes yesterday' does not specify whether the action was concluded or not, 洗了衣服 xi le vifu 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.

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 年天 zuotian 'yesterday':

(2)

- 他 **F**. 月 常常 去 美国 (a) shang Meiguo Ta yue changchang qu ge CL month often U.S go Last month he often went to The States¹²
- *他 常常 去 美国 (b) 了/过 *Ta le/guo changchang Meiguo qu often LE/GUO U.S he go He often went to The States

(3)

- 昨天 小 到 时候, 王 家 的 (a) shihou, Zuotian Xiao Wang dao jia de yesterday Xiao Wang arrive home DE time नानं नानं 正在 看 那 场 电影 Lili zhengzai dianying kan na chang Lili **ZHENGZAI** movie watch that CL When Xiao Wang came home yesterday Lili was (just) watching that movie
- *//\ 王 到 家 的 时候, (b) *Xiao Wang dao de shihou, iia Xiao Wang arrive time home DE 那 场 电影 **时时时** 正在 看 了/过 Lili zhengzai kan le/guo chang dianying na ZHENGZAI watch LE/GUO movie that CL 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).

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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 example¹⁴). However, as we shall see in chapter 4, if the scope of an aspect marker is large, non-lexical components such as other grammatical markers **within** that scope can cause shifts in the situation type. I thus support Huang's (1987) claim that aspect should be assigned a more extensive domain than the *verb*. Since this is not a typological study of aspect, I will rely on Huang's evidence from several languages and the domain to which aspect is constrained in those languages that show the

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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 linguists¹⁵ agree that aspect, just like tense, is connected with time¹⁶ 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 months¹⁷

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

(5)

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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).

experiential aspect, expressed by the postverbal marker $\exists guo$

and delimitative aspect, expressed by reduplication of the verb

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.

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 -vi '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 entered¹⁹

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)

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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,

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 TT²², 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.

[II]	She bought three apples	(perfective)
[I]	She suddenly knew the answer	(perfective)
[I]	She reached the hilltop	(perfective)
[] Figure 1	She was buying apples	(imperfective)

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.

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 event²⁶, 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

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

 $_{20}^{25}$ (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

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 year²⁷
- (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 welloriented linguists are astonished to find that there may be a difference." (Dahl 1985:138) One might ask for what reasons the two have sometimes been treated as one aspect. Comrie notes that in many works, "there has been an unfortunate tendency to use the term 'perfective' for what is here termed 'perfect'". (Comrie 1976, p. 12) A possible cause is the terminology used. The so-called perfect tense in Latin happened to have the double function of marking both perfect and what in Greek was called aorist (past perfective). This double function "is responsible, no doubt, for much of the confusion surrounding the terms 'perfect' and 'perfective' in linguistics." (Lyons 1977, p. 704) Sometimes the problem of distinguishing between the perfect and the perfective is not of a terminological but of a semantic character. The standpoint that aspect is a category that does not concern relating situations to time spans but instead can be defined in a metaphorical and non-precise way as "a bounded situation" or a "completed action" makes it harder to distinguish between the perfect and the perfective. This is probably one of the most important reasons why the two have been confused.

1.3.4. Problems with existing analyses of aspect in Chinese

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

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

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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. 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).

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.

Huang (1987) shows that $\exists guo$, 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 $\exists guo$ and le contrast semantically, even if they both may express perfectivity:

狗 刚才 吃 过 苹果 (a) chi Gou gangcai guo ni de pingguo dog just-now eat GUO DE you apple The dog just took a bite of your apple

狗 吃 刚才 了 的 苹果 (b) Gou gangcai chi le ni de pingguo dog just-now eat LE you DE apple The dog just ate your apple

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 $\mathfrak{L} guo$ 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
                      Zhongguo
               guo
     I
          go
               GUO China
     I have been to China<sup>29</sup>
                                                    (experiential perfect)
(13)
     他
          睡
                 过
                       午觉
                                    没有?
     Ta
           shui
                       wujiao
                                    meiyou?
                guo
          sleep GUO noon-sleep
                                    NEG
     Did he take a nap?
                                                    (perfective)
(14)
                           了
     我
          吃
               过
     Wo chi guo
                      fan
          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 \square a, \square ma, \square ba, \square ne and their allomorphs, sentence-final \square 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 妇 bao 'full' and 岩 cuo 'wrong' or Resultative Phase complements such as 妇 bao 'good' and 元 wan 'finished') complements.

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

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

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

(15)

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

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

(16)

(talking about calling a friend on his birthday which—as both parties are aware of —was on Wednesday)

- I forgot to call him last week (implicit: *on Wednesday* last week). I called him on Friday instead.

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

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

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

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

2. Problems with previous studies of le

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

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

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 wrong³⁰

春天 了 Chuntian le spring LE It is spring now

(20)了 他 声明 他 推出 那 个 组织 Ta shengming tuichu ta nei ge zuzhi le withdraw that CL announce he 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).

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

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

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

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

2.1. Terminological problems

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

A. By being a quantified event

B. By being a definite or specific event

C. By being inherently bounded because of the meaning of the verb

D. By being the first event in a sequence" Li and Thompson (1981, p. 185-186)

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

(23)

房子 吗? 买 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 boundarynotion applies on two aspectual levels. Failure to distinguish between these two levels creates terminological confusion. Mochizuki (2000), for example, seems to mix up terminativity³⁵ and inchoativity³⁶ 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)

现在 知道 T (a) (Xianzai) zhidao ta le (now) he know LE (Now) he knows³⁸

(inchoative (stative verb zhidao + le) and perfect)

他 突然 知道 了 (b) Ta (turan) zhidao le (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 timerelational 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'

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

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

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

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³⁹ Or rather: 'He has already died'

- (26)他 昨天 晚上 吃 了 条 鱼 (a) le Ta zuotian wanshang chi tiao san vu he yesterday evening eat LE three CL fish Yesterday he ate three fishes
- 吃 了 (了) 他 已经 条 鱼 (b) Ta vijing chi le yu san tiao (*le*) already LE CL fish eat three (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 <u>le</u> 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 <u>le</u> 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

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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

(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))

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:

(29)别 他 的 洗衣机 le Bie de xiyiji gaosu ta wo yong ta LE washing machine tell he use he DE Don't tell him that I have used his washing machine⁴³

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 张 丽, Wo zuotian hua le yi zhang hua, yesterday paint LE one CL picture 可是 没 画完 keshi huawan mei but paint-finish not ?I painted a picture yesterday but I didn't finish it⁴⁵

Example (29) from Li (1999), translation mine.

⁴⁵ Example (30) from Tai (1984).

⁴² Example (28) from Hsiao (1991).

^{44 &#}x27;Don't tell him that I will use his washing machine (this afternoon)'

(31)*我 吃完 可是 没有 *Wo chi le yi tiao keshi meiyou chiwan yu, eat LE NEG one CL fish but eat-finish I ate a fish but I didn't finish it⁴⁶

(32)可是 我 鱼, 没有 吃完 Wo chi keshi le yu, meiyou chiwan but eat LE fish **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 Ξ *xie* 'write', a non-completion reading is accepted even when a bounded object NP is present:

(33)写完 我 写 信, 可是 没有 Wo xie le vi 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)

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

(36)

- 吃 了 那 吗? 他 (a) Ta chi pingguo ma? le na ge he eat LE that CLapple MA Did he eat from that apple?
- 了 这 两 苹果 他 吃 (b) 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)看 了 那 本 书 Ta kan nei ben shu le He read LE that CLbook He read (from) that book

would not necessarily mean that "he" read the whole book.

(38)

书 我 今天 图书馆。 在 那儿 看 T 本 Wo jintian qu tushuguan. Zai nar kan le ben shu san I today library there read LE three CL book go at 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)

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

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

杀死 他 杀 了 那 人 可是 没有 (b) Ta sha le nei ge ren/Zhangsan, keshi meiyou shasi he kill LE that CL person/Zhangsan **NEG** kill-die but *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)写 写完 他 信 可是 没 Ta xie le xin keshi xiewan mei write LE write-finish he letter but NEG He wrote a letter but didn't finish it

村衫 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. \exists 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 $\exists xiao$ '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 $\overrightarrow{\pi}$ wan unequivocally denotes completion, (43) (b) that instead contains le, does not:

(43)

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

才 有点儿 香味儿 (b) 吃 了 觉着 Chi le juezhe youdianr xiangweir cai eat feel some taste LE only then Only when I ate (had tasted it, had taken a few bites), I noticed it had a nice flavour⁴⁷

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

(44)

- (a) 说完 没有? Shuowan meiyou? talk-finish NEG Did you finish talking?
- (b) 说 了 没有? Shuo le meiyou? Say LE NEG Did you say(it)?

(45)

- (a) 好容易 当完 兵
 Haorongyi dangwan bing
 with difficulty serve-finish military
 It is not easy to finish the military service
- (b) 好容易 当 了 兵
 Haorongyi dang le bing
 with difficulty serve LE military
 It is not easy to become a military

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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) marker⁴⁸. 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.

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

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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 sentences⁵⁰.

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*vijing* 'already' rules out any reading where E is included in R (E incl in R), in fact, if 已经*vijing* 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 reading⁵¹ 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)

昨天 + 写 了 信 他 Ta zuotian <u>qi</u> dian zhong yijing xie le xin 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 老师 以后, 他 口 我 Niu laoshi Dao jia yihou, wo le ta wen arrive LE Niu teacher home after he ask 是 来 我 怎么 的。 说 坐 shi zenme de. Wo shuo shi lai zuo come DE be how I say be sit 公共汽车 来 的, 并且 向 他 gonggongqiche lai de, binggie xiang ta DE moreover towards bus come 了 讲 问 路 的 情况。 wen lu iiang le de gingkuang ask way DE circumstances tell LE When we had arrived at teacher Niu's home, he asked how I had got there. I said that I had come by bus and told him about what had happened when I asked for directions

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

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

(50)你 上 周末 做 什么 了? Ni shang zhoumo zuo shenme le? ge CL weekend what LE What did you do last weekend? 53

⁵³ Examples (50), (51) and (52) from Liu (1998)

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

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

(52)

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

(53)

学费 贵 太 Xuefei gui tai 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 ban de shihou huoche xia jiu kong le LE down shift DE train empty pass up time then LE Once rush hour is over, the train becomes empty⁵⁵

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)

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

Example (53) from Li and Thompson (1981)
 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". 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:

"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

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

⁵⁷ Example (56) from Li and Thompson (1981).

(57) 我知道了 Wo zhidao *le* I know LE Now I know⁵⁸

(58)

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

B: It corrects a wrong assumption

(59)

了! 咳, 呱呱! 往 北方 你 去 Hai, Guagua! Ni beifang le! wang qu north direction Quacky you hey towards 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 dao Zhang zuotian iia chifan le I yesterday go to Zhang home eat LE (Well), I (finally) went yesterday to have dinner at the Zhangs'

(61)

位 女士 怀 了 八 月 那 Nei nüshi huai wei le ba yue ge have (conceive) LE that CL woman eight CLmonth 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)

(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)

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

(64)

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" 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

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

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.

(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 \vec{J} 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 $\vec{\int}$ represented a verb with the meaning 'finish, complete' and was pronounced $liao^{61}$. $\vec{\int}^{62}$ seems to have become the dominant completive verb around the 9th or 10th century (Cao 1995). Shi

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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 具上 *mashang* 'immediately'. However, this type of sentences will not be treated in this thesis.

mustaning infinitediately. 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 \vec{J} is also pronounced liao when it occurs in the construction verb + 骨+ \vec{J} , meaning 'manage to X', 'be able to X'.

⁶² The character \vec{J} 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^{th} century, \vec{J} 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 67 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 \vec{J} that occurred in the structure verb + object NP + J during the Tang period (618-907) was always a main verb, in the co-existing simpler structure verb + $\sqrt{}$ that lacked the object NP, it was usually a resultative complement. In 95% of the cases⁶⁵ when adverbs occur in the latter structure, they are found, not between the verb and \vec{l} but before the verb, which shows that \vec{l} is not a verb in those sentences. These ideas are in fact found already in Zhao (1979). Wu further claims that this resultative complement \vec{I} 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 \vec{J} would then be one of the reasons why the structure verb $+ \vec{J}$ + 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 \vec{J} from post-object position to preobject 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.

65 Wu has found these figures in Li and Shi (1997).

⁶⁴ Examples (65) and (66) from Shi (1988).

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.

(67)

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 + \vec{J} structure. Sentences that contained the predicate \vec{J} 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:

(68)

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, $^{\frac{1}{2}}$ started to gradually become replaced by $^{\frac{1}{3}}$ and during Southern Song (1127-1279) the structure

had become very common, claims Cao. According to him it is highly probable that $\sharp I$ at this time had already disappeared completely from colloquial Chinese in favour of \vec{J} .

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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 10^{th} century texts, the few instances of this structure in sentence-final position (in which \vec{J} in fact was a resultative complement rather than a verb, according to him) existed during the same period as the subclause construction.

(69)

圣贤, 猛起 服 Ren yao shenxian, xu shi mengqi fu virtuous use strength person want be be take need 之 药 瞑眩 相似, T mingxuan zhi xiangsi, ta ma yao jiao le dizziness ZHI medicine alike let he numb LE 了 F. 了, 及 其 定, 病 自 退 ji ding, yi shang le, qi bing zi tui le LE reach its stability illness self recede LE one 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 \vec{J} :

(70)

了 学生, 如 教坏 肯 读书 69 le xuesheng, gege Ru jin dou jiaohuai bu ken du shu 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 \vec{J} 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** \vec{J} —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 \vec{J} . According to Shi (1988), 10% of the occurrences of \vec{J} 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 \vec{J} appeared at the end of main clauses it was often followed by $\vec{\Box}$. 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 \vec{J} occurs at the end of main clauses are quite common and $\vec{\Box}$ starts to disappear from the structure. As \vec{J} at the same time starts to replace

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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

 $\exists I$ at its position inside the VP, the sentence construction verb + \overrightarrow{J} + object NP + \overrightarrow{J} appears. Liu (1998b), too, mentions the use of 1 in combination with sentence-final \overrightarrow{J} . According to him, the combination \overrightarrow{J} + 1 forms the origin of today's sentence-final particle \overrightarrow{J} . Evidence for this can be found in modern days in Shanxi dialects, where the morpheme \overrightarrow{J} is pronounced differently depending on its syntactic position. The same goes for 1, which can occur both inside the sentence and sentence-finally in these dialects. The phonetic differences between the occurrences of 1 matches those between the occurrences of \overrightarrow{J} .

To conclude, the opinions as to the development of the verb \overrightarrow{J} in classical Chinese into the grammatical marker \overrightarrow{J} in modern Chinese appear to be, to a rather large extent, in accordance with each other. The main verb \overrightarrow{J} 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 \overrightarrow{J} (*liao*) is the origin of both today's so-called verbal \overrightarrow{J} and sentence-final \overrightarrow{J} . While \overrightarrow{J} 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 \overrightarrow{J} became grammaticalized, i.e. gradually lost its verbness—and turned into a sentence-final grammatical morpheme \overrightarrow{J} —in about the same period as other complements started to appear between the verb and \overrightarrow{J} in the new structure verb + \overrightarrow{J} (+ object NP), the signal of complete grammaticalization of the former complement \overrightarrow{J} .

2.3.2. The dialect issue

It is sometimes claimed⁷¹ 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 $\vec{1}$ can be looked upon as a short-lived trend since it is no longer found in texts from the Ming dynasty (1368-1644).

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

2.3.2.1. Cantonese

In Cantonese, a verbal marker 吃 jó expresses what is usually expressed by verbal le in Mandarin Chinese. The origin of $\pm j\delta$ is not attested. However, Mei (1979) has shown that it can be traced back to one Middle Chinese⁷² 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 1947⁷³. 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 吃 *jó*. Cheung argues that both 住 *jyuh* and 咗 *jó* have as their origin \overline{A}^{74} , which is the lexical source of both the durative marker 着 zhe in modern Mandarin and the combined perfective and durative marker 17 tsi in Wu dialect. In Cantonese, two phonologically different suffixes emerged from this form, one (住 *jyuh*) expressing the durative and one (咗 $j\acute{o}$) the perfective. 咗 $j\acute{o}$ kept the original ending of \overline{A} 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 the hiu and in the dental the aforementioned 吃 $j\acute{o}$, resulting in a competition between 休 hiu and 吃 $j\acute{o}$, 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. At 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 $\frac{1}{1}$ hiu, since early materials show cases where #\text{hiu} continues to appear with the changed tone verb. There are no cases where 成 jó occurs with a changed tone verb, which seems to indicate that it is the later lost 休 hiu, and not the coexistent marker 吃 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 吃 jó up to the 1970s. After that, 吃 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 $\not\sqsubseteq j \acute{o}$ in texts from before 1900. In fact, in the earliest textbook, Cantonese Chrestomathy, from 1841, there are no examples of either $\not\sqsubseteq j \acute{o}$, $\not \Leftrightarrow hiu$ or changed tone verb. Instead, there are a number of cases where the marker liuh (\vec{J}), 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 19^{th} 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, $\not\sqsubseteq j \acute{o}$. In a later textbook from 1888, liuh alternates with $\not \Leftrightarrow hiu$. The two markers seem to have been used interchangeably but according to the data, liuh was much more prevalent than $\not \Leftrightarrow hiu$ at the end of the century. If Cheung is right, $\not\sqsubseteq j \acute{o}$ appeared in Cantonese at least half a century before $\not \Leftrightarrow hiu$, 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 ঢ 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 $\not\vdash j\acute{o}$ and Mandarin ie originate from verbs, at a later stage developing into verbal complements expressing result and/or direction i=1, 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 $\not\vdash j\acute{o}$ and i=1 differ. It concerns a syntactic restriction on, or rather a strong tendency of, Mandarin i=1 to occur mainly in past contexts where the sentence contains a postverbal **quantified** noun. This restriction does not apply for Cantonese $i\not\vdash j\acute{o}$ and therefore is not a motivation for its use, as it is for the marker i=1. Chappell argues that it is the discourse function of signaling a peak that motivates the use of $i\not\vdash j\acute{o}$ rather than syntactic or semantic conditions such as the presence of a quantified complement or the completive meaning.

2.3.2.2. Other dialects

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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 \mathcal{F} 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 \vec{l} was moved to a syntactic position after the verb in which it syntactic position, according to Mei. Obviously, \vec{J} 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).

(72)吃饭 达 Tciafan ta TA eat It's time to eat

However, it seems as if the function of 3b 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

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 $^{^{76}}$ 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 $(10^{th}$ century) it is obvious that it also had a resultative sense, argues Sun (1998):

(73)

(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)

In texts from the 14^{th} - 15^{th} 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 $\not\succeq ta$ in Xiang dialect:

(75)

(76)

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. Recording 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* [封]". (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:

作弹 爆 了
Zhadan bao le
bomb explode LE
The bomb exploded /The bomb has (had)
exploded⁷⁹

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

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

⁷⁹ Example (77) from Li and Thompson (1981).

 $^{^{78}}$ 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.

(78)

- (a) 孩子 (在) 哭 了 Haizi (zai) ku le child (ZAI) cry LE The child is crying⁸⁰
- (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le keren zou le because it is not subjected to constraints such as co-occurrence with other aspect markers is thus not supported.

2.3.3.1. Unified treatments of *le* in the literature

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

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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 now⁸¹
- (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子 *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,

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⁸¹ Example (79) from Huang (1987).

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

In the late 70s, Spanos (1979) conducted a survey in order to test the usage of *le*. Subjects were asked to insert *le* in sentences selected from prose and conversational contexts. Spanos found that extra-grammatical features played an important role for the subjects' use of *le*. For example, though it is often stated that when a transitive verb takes a simple unquantified object, the double *le* construction⁸² 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.

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 xis 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 sentencefinal *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)把 了 他 拆开 Ta ba xin chaikai le he BA letter tear-open LE He opened the letter

(83)我 孩子 有 牙 活动 了 Wo haizi you ya huodong yi ge Ι have one CL tooth unsteady 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.

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)了 我 已经 作 泫 渞 数学题 Wo vijing zuo zhe dao shuxueti le already ZAI this CL math problem LE do I have already started working on this math problem⁸⁷

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 operators, which differ in their relative height in underlying structure." (Rohsenow 1978, p. 26) All instances of *le* are analyzed as surface reflexes of the co-occurrence in underlying structure of two abstract operators, the atomic predicate COME ABOUT and an existential predicate (YOU). The occurrence of *le* thus indicates that a *change of state* has taken place.

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

(perfective)⁸⁸

我 对 美国 多少 了解 了 — 脏 (b) Wo dui Meiguo duoshao liaojie yixie le 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 \nearrow mei and sentential le by the particle \nearrow 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
- 他 不 吃 牛肉 了 (b) 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
- 他 不 纽约 去 了 (c) bu Ta qu Niuvue le NEG New York he go He's not going to New York anymore *He didn't go to New York

(90)

- 知道 这 事 我 (a) le^{89} Wo zhidao zhei jian shi I know LE this CL matter I now know about this matter
- 还是 汶 事 我 不 知道 (b) Wo haishi bu zhidao zhei jian shi Ι still NEG know CL this matter I still don't know about this matter
- *我 还是 知道 泫 件 事 没 (c) *Wo haishi zhei mei zhidao jian shir Ι 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)

了 我 知道 这 件 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'.

⁸⁹ The original sentence is in fact:

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

性吃 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:

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(92)
      他
           知道
                    了
      Ta
          zhidao
                    le
           know
      He now knows (but didn't before)
                                        (inchoative)
      *He stopped knowing
                                        (perfective)
(93)
           死
                了
      他
      Ta
           si
                le
           die LE
      he
                                        (perfective)
      He died
      *He is dying now (wasn't before)
                                        (inchoative)
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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

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 $^{^{90}}$ 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 吃 $j\acute{o}$, f tsi and $tilde{t}$ 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— $tilde{T}$ —which later evolved into the grammatical marker $tilde{T}$ in Mandarin Chinese. $tilde{T}$ underwent an historic development similar to that of $tilde{T}$ and seems to have competed with $tilde{T}$ when $tilde{T}$ started to occur in verbal position. In the dialects analyzed here, the cognates to $tilde{T}$ won out, while in Mandarin, $tilde{T}$ and other verbal complements were replaced by $tilde{T}$. The fact that a cognate to $tilde{T}$ is used sentence-finally in for example Cantonese simply suggests that in that particular dialect $tilde{T}$ 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 breakfast⁹²

(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)

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 $^{^{92}}$ 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 ongoing (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 approach⁹⁴ 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.

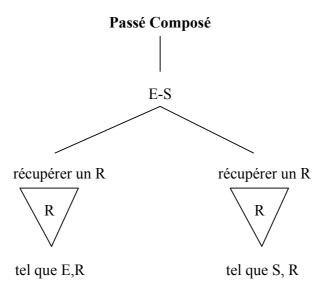


Figure 2 (Lusher 1998, p. 191)

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	手 三	我	想	请	你	看	电影
Xia	ge liba	isan	wo	xiang	qing	ni	kan	dianying
down	CL Wee	dnesday	I	want	invite			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	Wednesd	ay	I	already	leave
very 日本	了				•		·	
Riben	le							
Japan	LE							

⁻ I would like to take you to the movies next Wednesday

⁻ What a pity, next Wednesday I will already have left Japan

I propose that the characteristic of *le* is an abstract semantic core feature *boundary*. Although *boundary* is a conceptual rather than a procedural feature, this proposal is in line with the hypothesis that Luscher poses in his analysis of the French tenses: "A une marque pragmatique correspond une et une seule signification." (Luscher 1998, p. 182) "Pour la description des temps verbaux également, nous dégagerons systématiquement un sémantisme minimal commun à tous les emplois d'un temps et des caractéristique pragmatiques propres à chaque type d'emploi." (Luscher 1998, pp.183-184). Instead of Luscher's "semantismes minimales" that consist of formulas (procedures) for timerelations 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-R⁹⁶). 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:

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

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

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

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

(103)

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

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

(104)

她 犯 了 罪
Ta fan le zui (dynamic verb)
she commit LE crime

She committed a crime / She has (/had) committed a crime/*she has (had) started to commit crimes (now) $(1)^{97}$

(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

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)

多少 你 那 天 毛病 (a) Ni tian le duoshao maobing na xue 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').

你 了 多少 毛病 看 你 已经 (b) duoshao maobing Ni kan ni yijing xue le study LE how many you look you already 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:

他昨天 去组约 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)<sup>98</sup>
```

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

Q.

```
他喝咖啡了
Ta he kafei le
he drink coffee le
He has (had) had coffee/ he had coffee
```

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:

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)
- 他 看 电影 了 (b) 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
                                  妣,
                                          轻轻
                                                   地
                  拥住
Ta
    qingqing
             de
                  vongzhu
                                          qingqing
                                                   de
                                  ta,
             DE embrace-steady
he
    soft
                                  she
                                          soft
                                                   DE
贴住
                                      凛,
                                                         地
            她
                 的
                      唇,
                             她
                                                本能
tiezhu
                 de
                     chun.
                            ta
                                 yi
                                      lin.
                                                benneng
                                                         de
            ta
glue-steady
            she DE
                     lip
                             she
                                 one
                                      cold
                                                instinct
                                                         DE
         后
                     缩,
                                                        上
往
                                就
                                      倒在
                                              床
wang
         hou
                     suo,
                                jiu
                                      daozai
                                              chuang
                                                       shang
               уi
               one
towards
         back
                     withdraw
                                then
                                      fall-on
                                              bed
                                                        on
了。
                    头
                          凝视
                                    她,
                                           眼
       他
            低
le.
       Ta
            di
                    tou
                          ningshi
                                   ta,
                                           yan
LE
            lower
                          stare
       he
                    head
                                   she
                                           eyes
底
        有
                    抹
                        受伤
                                     的
                                          神色。
                                                     真
```

di shou shang "Zhen you yi mo de shense. bottom be wounded really exist one CLDE expression 严重 吗? " 这么 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 小 T 4 Zhe shuang xie xiao le liang cun 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)

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

```
了
我
     看
           过
                  他
                       好
                                    本
                                           书
Wo kan
                       hao
                                    ben
                                           shu
                                                  le
           guo
                  ta
                              ji
     read
           GUO
                  he
                       good
                                   CL
                                           book LE
                             some
(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 — 口 气 Huran zufu xu le yi kou qi suddenly grandpa heave LE one mouth air Suddenly, grandpa heaved a sigh¹⁰³

(117)

后, 给 玛格塔 倒 杯 白 葡萄酒 T Gei dao Mageta le bei bai putaojiu hou, pour to Magda LE glass white wine after 茱 德 也 了。 她 玛格塔 回来 看看 的 Zhude ye huilai le. Ta kankan Mageta de LE she look-look Magda DE Jude also return 下 腹 又 看看 我, 朝 我 xia fu you kankan wo, chao wo lower abdomen then look-look I towards I "什么 斜 1 眼, 地 同, 唐突 yan¹⁰⁴. "Shenme le tangtu de xie γi wen, glance LE one eye, brusque DE what ask 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

¹⁰³Example (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)时候, 他们 相距 公尺 的 那 shihou, Tamen xiangiu si gongchi de na ge they apart four metres DE time that CL 交, 姑娘 绊 T 几乎 扑 guniang ban le jiao, jihu γi pu one fall pounce LE almost girl trip 倒 地上。 妣 发出 吉 dao zai dishang Ta fachu sheng yi fall at ground she let-out one CL胓 叫。 痛 的 尖 hu de jian jiao. tong sharp call pain DE

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. The findings that I will present in this chapter challenge not only the traditional view of *le* as a perfective marker, but all views on *le* as a marker of one aspect type only.

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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 table¹⁰⁸

(120)

水 块 木头 Shui piao zhe kuai mutou yi float ZHE water in one wood A piece of wood is floating in the water

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

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 $^{^{107}}$ 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 $\mathcal{H} fang$ '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)

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

(122)

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

(123)

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

(124)

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

(125)

上 层 像 冻上 了 脸 冰壳 Lian dongshang bingke shang xiang le yi ceng face 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:

上 哪儿 了, **+**. 了 玩 Shang le, xin xie shang le nar wan guo tu go to GUO LE, where play new shoe LE smear 贮 这 ni? zhe xie this mud some

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 Baobao de heifa shu le ge ii thin DE black-hair comb LE 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. 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

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.

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

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 \mathcal{F} chuan 'put on; wear', \mathbb{R} dai 'put on; wear' and \mathbb{R} gua 'hang' (transitive / intransitive). In two of the sentences below, other similar verbs also occur, \mathbb{R} pei 'wear' and \mathbb{R} diao 'hang' (transitive / intransitive).

(129)

微笑 许 太太 开 []讲来, T 他们 Xu taitai kai men jinlai, weixiao wang le tamen Xu Mrs door enter-come smile glance LE they open 望, 椅垫子, 自 整理 擦去 去 yidianzi, yi zi zhengli caqu wang, qu one glance, self go arrange armchair cushions wipe-go 钢琴 水渍, 的 上 茶碗 的 又 把 所有 chawan shuizi, de gangqin shang de vou ba suoyou waterstain, piano teacup DE then BA all DE on 烟灰 都 盘子 里, 许 折在 太太 yanhui yi panzi li, Xu taitai dou zhezai ge plate ashes CL Xu Mrs all turnover-at one in 穿 了 件 桃灰 绸衫, 很 细格子 taohui xigezi choushan, hen chuan le yi jian fine-checked put on LE one CLpeach-grey silkblouse very 俊秀 的 张 脸, 只 胖 是 因为 junxiu de yi zhang lian. zhi shi vinwei pang pretty DE CL face be because fat one only 走 T 有点 le youdian zou yang LE somewhat go 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 (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 dao le xiaji feng he ging, England sky clear LE wind rare arrive summer and 日 暖 的 时候, 爵 爷 爵 夫人们 furenmen ri nuan de shihou, jue ye iue DE time noble noble wifes sun warm man 目己 举行 在 上 往往 喜欢 的 田庄 tianzhuang wangwang xihuan zai ziji de shang juxing often like at self DE estate hold on 半 这 种 正式 戴 了 的 集会, 女人们 jihui, zhe zhong ban zhengshi de 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 de maoyan caomao, le pei tremble DE DE lofty broad hatbrim strawhat wear LE 的 绢花, 丝质 手套 过时 长过 guoshi de iuanhua, 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)

F. 是 景象, 街 倒 节日 派 shang pai jieri Jie dao shi jingxiang, yi CL street on opposite be one festival scene, 所有 建筑物 成 高大 都 挂 1 的 jianzhuwu suoyou de gaoda dou диа le cheng all all DE tall-big building LE become hang 花坛, 串 的 灯, 路边 的 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 aspects¹¹¹ 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 F. 新 衣服 Ta yi shen shang chuan le jian yifu xin body on put on LE one CL clothes new He has put on / is wearing a new jacket 112

(133)

T 墙 H. 排 画 Qiang le hua shang gua γi fu 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:

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 $^{^{111}}$ For example resultant state verbs and possibly also resultative compounds and stative verbs when they are combined with le and get an inchoative meaning.

Examples (132), (133) and (134) from Zhang (1998).

(134)

成功 汶 次 体现 新 经济 政策 Zhe ci chenggong tixian le xin jingji zhengce this success embody economy policy time LE new 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 excessively depend son LE, even surpass LE 儿子 对 他 的 依赖 dui de yilai erzi ta DE son towards he 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		明白	为什么		要	这样	
Ziji	ye	bu	mingbai	weis	shenme	e 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	mak	ie I	DE	repl	ly in	contain	LE
一点儿	讽刺	Ī	和 自我	安慰	的	味道。		
yidianr	fengci	h	e ziwo	anwei	de	weidao		
some	sarcas	m a	nd self	comfort	DE	flavour		
T 1' 1 4 1	1	т	1 1 /1	т 1'1	., 1		, .	

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)

```
干
你
    今天
                什么
            gan shenme le?
    jintian
Ni
    today
            did
                what
                        LE
you
我
      写
                             信
            T
                      封
Wo
            le
                yi
     xie
                      feng
                            xin
     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 хi meiyou? vou 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

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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 哪里? Nimen xianzai zhaodao le fangzi zai nali? where? search-arrive LE house you now Have you found the house now? (1)

(140)

现在 朋友 他 有 了 you Xianzai ta 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)

妣 在 大学 里 已经 读 了 两 年 书, Ta zai daxue li yijing du LE liang nian shu, LE she university already read at in two year book, 交游 广阔, 暂时 虽 没 有 jiaoyou guangkuo, zanshi sui mei you make friends temporarily **NEG** have one vast although 个 是 人 妣 心 意 喜欢 的, shi xin xihuan de, ge ta yi yi yi CL is she mind like DE person one heart one 有 可能性 的 却 小 不 kenengxing de shao. you que hu 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)

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¹¹⁴ Cf. Dahl (1985).

On the other hand, a simple sentence such as

(142)

```
两
                                   年
                                              书
我
     在
         北京
                  读
                        了
                                          的
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)

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 $\not\not\equiv du$ '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 $\not\equiv du$ 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 $\not\equiv qunian$ 'last year' during which it would be known to both the speaker and the hearer that "you" in this sentence had studied hard (E would then be included in R) the speaker will interpret the "reading of many books" as an **experience** on the subject's part, an activity within a period leading up to the present moment, for example the time that has passed

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

(144)

有 对 新人 了 地方, You vi dui xinren zhanzuo le difang, newly-wed person exist stand-wrong LE place one couple 指挥 的 几 次, 人 提示 1 zhihui tishi de ren ci, le ji direct DE person point out LE several time 他们 仍 不 改正。 bu tamen reng 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 一下, 剧烈 地 颤抖 了 连 她 Xiao Han chandou vixia, lian julie de le ta Xiao LE Han violent DE tremble a little even she 母亲 感到 那 震动。 她 母亲 巾 也 muqin zhendong. Ta gandao muqin ye ye na mother also feel that shake She mother also 打 T 个 寒战, 沉默 T 会, 细声 hanzhan, chenmo hui, xisheng da le ge le yi LE CL shiver reticent LE while weak voice hit a 道: 我 知道 是 有意 "现在 才 你 dao: Xianzai cai zhidao shi wo ni vouvi Ι understand intentional say now only you be 的。,, 小 寒 哭 了 起来。 她 犯 了 罪。 de. Xiao Han ku le qilai. Ta fan le cui. DE. LE Xiao Han start she commit LE crime. cry 将 父母 之间 她 她 的 慢吞吞 地 Ta jiang fumu zhi jian de ai mantuntun de ta She **JIANG** between DE love slow DE she parents

了, 块 了 杀死 块 割碎 shasi le. yi kuai kuai le yi gesui kill LE LE bit bit one one cut-smash 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 Ι NEG out-go have right 坐 在 课堂 里, 刘 桂珍 li, Guizhen Liu zuo zai ketang Guizhen sit Liu at classroom in 老师 我 交 了 学费。 laoshi xuefei. wo jiao le teacher I LE tuition-fee pay

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)

" 试 我 是 下 了 决心, П 彻底 陏 "Zhe shi chedi juexin, hui, wo xia le sui follow this time Ι be thorough LE decision put down 管 去, 痡 他 十 什么, 我 要 beng gan shenme, qu, guan ta wo yao zai NEG have to what I if care he do again go 我 嘴 不 姓 旬 都 我 姓。" xing." zui wo dou bu xing wo yi ju I one word mouth Ι all **NEG** be named name 好。 马 "有 就 其实 锐 决心 你们 也 "You juexin hao. Qishi nimen Ma Rui jiu ye decision then In fact have good you Ma Rui also 少 了, 管管 该 让 他 自个 shao le, gai rang ta zige guanguan little LE let self should he care-care 了, 容易。, 自个 别 觉得 什么 都 那么 zige bie shenme dou name rongyi." le, juede self LE **NEG IMP** think what all that easy

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

(149)

年纪, 垄 老 太太 <u>۲</u> T 有点 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 自行车 口 骑 去 商场 买 You zixingche shangchang mai vi hui qi qu exist one time cycle bicycle supermarket buy go 牙膏, 老头 因为 存车处 的 硬 cunchechu de laotou jiang yagao, yinwei ying because parkinglot old man defiant JIANG toothpaste, DE 存车费 由 分 涨成 了 分, 致使 cunchefei er fen zhangcheng fen, zhishi you le san parkingfee rise-become from two fen LE three fen, cause 贝贝 愤 地 争论 T 半 个 名 小时。 Beibei xiaoshi nu de zhenglun le ban ge duo Beibei LE CL DE argue half more hour angry 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 guarrelled in anger with him for half an hour. (8)

(151)

了 你 里 他 拿稳 心 只 有 li. Ta le ni xin zhi vou nawen LE you he make sure (lit. take-firm) heart in only exist 他 所以 个 人, 他 敢 那么 随随便便 ta ren, suoyi name suisui-bianbian yi ge ta gan he CL person, therefore he dare thatway careless one 不 扡 的, 你 当 桩 事 看待。 de, bu ba ni dang zhuang shi kandai DE, NEG BA you treat regard CL matter 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 报, 就 去 图书馆 Wo kanwan le bao jiu qu tushuguan read-finish LE paper library then When I have finished reading the paper I will go to the library

(153)

1 她 汶 得 奶奶 次 坐 离 zhe Bu nainai Ta ci zuo de li er she this time DE away from Bu grandma sit second 会 沅, 坐 了 找 女 主人 就 去 yuan, zuo zhao zhuren le yi hui jiu qu nu far sit LE one moment then go search female 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 perfect¹¹⁵.

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).

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: p. This is a temporal interval that includes the "lower" Reichenbachian R, which is the proper reference time of the sentence. p is either overtly expressed through temporal expressions or implied through the context. As we will see, ρ 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 path¹¹⁸ 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

1

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)

" 这些 他 渞: 说不定 接着 又 "Zhexie Ta jiezhe dao: shuobuding you yu sav-NEG-fixed he carry on add say these fish 已 游 了 几 千 路, li ji qian lu, yi you le already swim LE how many thousand kilometre road, 也 所以 肉 变成 特别 结实 鲜美, suoyi rou biancheng tebie jieshi xianmei, ye therefore also become particularly firm delicious, meat 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 着 汶 丰收。" 次 fengshou" zai deng zhe zhe ci yi harvest ZAI wait ZHE this time one He went on: "These fishes might have traveled thousands of miles already,

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. p 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)

了 少 谁 都 看得出 吃 不 kandechu yiding Shei dou chi le bu shao yi who all see-DE-clear she for sure already LE **NEG** little eat 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)

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)

(162)

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).

- 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:

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. The quantified object NP \equiv \sharp \sharp \sharp sang feng xin 'three letters' in this environment, i.e. in combination with the verb \sharp 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 \equiv \sharp \sharp san feng xin 'three letters' is perceived of as **one** semantic entity instead of a string of entities. The situation occurred at some unspecified time(s) during ρ . Notice the difference between

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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.

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)

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)

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 (ρ) 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)

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 了 罪, 还 Renjia yijing shou le zui, ni hai already recieve LE punishment he vou still 要 欺负 他? qifu ta? yao want bully him

He has already been punished, why are you still bullying him? (5)

(169)

这 夥计 还 : 同: "感激 Zhe huoji hai xiang wen: "ganji wo shenme?" thank this mate still want ask what 郭 了 楼。 大路 却 走下 Guo Dalu que <u>yi</u> zouxia le lou.

12

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

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

(171)

一下, 小 寒 剧烈 地 颤抖 了 连 她 Xiao de lian Han iulie chandou le vixia, ta LE a little Xiao Han violent DE tremble even she 母亲 母亲 也 感到 那 震动。 她 巾 gandao Ta muqin ye na zhendong. muqin ye She mother also feel that shake mother also 打 T 寒战, 沉默 了 会, 细声 da le hanzhan, chenmo le hui, xisheng ge yi LE CL reticent LE hit shiver a while weak voice 道: "现在 我 知道 是 才 你 有意 dao: Xianzai wo cai zhidao ni shi youyi you Now Ι only understand be intentional say 的。,, 小 寒 哭 了 起来。 她 犯 了 罪。 de. Xiao Han ku <u>le</u> qilai. Ta fan le cui. DE. Xiao Han LE she commit LE start crime. cry 将 父母 之间 她 她 的 爱 慢吞吞 地 Ta jiang fumu zhi jian de ai mantuntun de ta She **JIANG** DE love DE she parents between slow 块 块 杀死 了, 割碎 了 le shasi le, kuai kuai yi yi gesui kill LE bit bit LE one one cut-smash

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)

了 " 试 我 是 下 决心, 陏 口 彻底 "Zhe shi chedi hui, wo xia le juexin, sui Ι LE this time be thorough put down decision follow 他 去, 干 我 要 甭 管 他 什么, 再 ta qu, beng shenme, wo yao zai guan ta gan he NEG have to he do what Ι if again go care 名 句 嘴 我 都 不 姓 我 姓。" duo dou xing." yi ju zui wo bu xing wo more Ι all be named I one word mouth **NEG** name " 有 好。 马 决心 就 其实 你们 锐 也 "You juexin hao. Qishi nimen Ma Rui jiu ye you have decision then In fact Ma Rui also good 不 少 该 让 他 T 管管 , 自个 shao le. gai rang zige guanguan bu ta NEG should self care-care little LE let he 别 自个 都 ſ, 觉得 什么 那么 zige le. bie iuede shenme dou name rongyi." self LE **NEG IMP** think what all that

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)

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

(174)

我 已经 了 我们 的 告诉 你, 她 同意 Wo gaosu ni, tongyi yijing de ta le women she tell already agree DE you LE we 的? 婚事, 你 还 有 什么 怀疑 可 hunshi, ni hai shenme ke huaiyi de? you 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 <u>already</u> written two letters

(176)

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

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

(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

丢 了 你 不 高兴 作 了, 丈夫 Ni bu jiu diu le zhangfu gaoxing zai zuo qizi le, you then loose You NEG happy ZAI act wife LE 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.

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:

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
                                         饭
     Ta
          mingtian
                     wanshang
                               chi le
                                         fan
     he
          tomorrow
                     evening
                               eat LE rice
                          电影
      就
            去
                  看
     jiu
                  kan
                          dianying
            qu
     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:

 $^{^{126}}$ 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 $\[\]$ $\[\]$ $\[\]$ $\[\]$ chi fan 'eat' is included in the R of the sentence, which is expressed by the temporal adverbial $\[\]$

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:

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

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

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

(182)

- 他 吃 电影 看 (a) Ta chi le fan jiu kan dianying qu rice then movie go watch 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)

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

```
I shall go and see you after supper
*我吃饭饭去找你
*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

 $^{^{128}}$ 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.

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 ways¹³⁰ 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:

After they had eaten everything, they left.

same le, in itself, marks).

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

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

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

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		this
	批唐	元豹	,	少	一些	你
yi	pi Tang	Yuan	bao,	shao	yixie	ni
one	CL Tang	Yuan	bao	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.

[&]quot;[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)

之 辈, 看 的 事 我 我 中国 zhi bei. kan Zhongguo de shi wo wo I ZHI China kind I see DE matter 要 得 好 多! 办 hao ban de duo! yao 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 chiduo dao shi zhen de. le tang this however be true DE eat-much LE sweet 最 容易 发 胖。 zui rongyi fa pang easy become fat most

That is true, if you eat to much sweets, it's easy to become fat (1)

(188)

我 475 里 直 打鼓, 将来 万一 我 Wo xin li zhi dagu, jianglai wanyi wo heart in future I continuosly beat if I 不 还 不 小心 委屈 她, 她 1 hai bu bи xiaoxin weigu le ta, ta **NEG** careful wrong LE she she still **NEG** 得 死 给 我 看。 de si gei wo kan die for Ι 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 culture NEG leave LE troop I all know 您 是 什么 人 了。 nin shi shenme ren le LE what person

If you were to leave the culture troupe, I wouldn't know what kind of person you are. (11)

(191)

不 要 不 要是 告 了 妣, Bu yao bu vao! Yaoshi gao le ta. will NEG will NEG if LE she report 会 您 她 更 不 放过 我 了! 求求 ta bu hui fangguo wo le! Qiuqiu geng nin will she even more NEG release I LE beg-beg you 反映! 要 不 去 fanying! bu yao qu report NEG will go

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 medicine cup 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! hit-break NEG IMP LE cup Don't break the cup! (194)炉子 别 了 碰 Bie peng le luzi NEG IMP touch LE stove Don't touch the stove (195)别 洗 T 课 那 Bie le xuan nei tang ke **NEG IMP** choose LE CL subject that

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 课, 你 那 Bie xuan nei ke, ni le tang **NEG IMP** choose LE that CL subject you 跟不上 又 genbushang you 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 明天 卖了 那 辆 车 Wo xiang mingtian mai*le* liang che nei tomorrow want sell-off that CLcar I would like to sell that car tomorrow¹³⁴

(198)

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

(199)

*我 车 想 明天 卖掉 了 那 辆 *Wo xiang mingtian maidiao le nei liang che want tomorrow sell-off LE that CLcar 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 吃 了 饭 /得 Ta /dei mei chi le wan fan yi he NEG should eat LE one CL

(201)

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

 $^{134}\,\mathrm{Examples}$ (197), (198) and (199) from Sybesma (1997)

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写 xie 'write' is an effective verb, not an affective verb like 吃 chi 'eat' and 荬 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)
                    写
                            了
     你
            要是
                                 弦
                                         封
                                                 信,
                                 zhei
     Ni
           yaoshi
                    xie
                           le
                                         feng
                                                 xin.
                          LE
           if
                    write
                                 this
                                         CL
     you
                                                 letter
     我
           就
                   请
                          你
                                 吃饭
                                 chifan
     wo
          jiu
                   ging
                          ni
           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 Ξ *xie* 'write' is combined with a resultative complement, producing a three-predicate-cluster with le, the sentence is grammatical:

```
(203)
  你
         要是
  Ni
         yaoshi
                 xiewan
                              le
                                   zhei feng
                                               xin,
                              LE
  vou
        if
                 write-finish
                                   this
                                         CL
   我
                     你
                          吃饭
       就
  wo
      jiu
              qing
                     ni
                          chifan
              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 夜 你 的 Wan Lan, zuotian wo xiang le yi ye ni de Wan Lan I think one yesterday le night DE you 留言, 说 我 知识 不 丰富, liuyan, shuo zhishi bu fengfu, ni wo message Ι knowledge not rich you say 不 自信, 悲观 都 对, 很 bu zixin, beiguan deng dou hen dui, not selfconfident pessimistic so on all very true 努力 汶 是 我 想 克服 的 巾 shi nuli zhe ve wo xiang kefu de this also is Ι make effort want DE conquer 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)

平 \coprod 晚上 即 去 了 那 女人 家 Tian Ping wanshang ji 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 亦 这么 在 同学 的 同 光 就 Li Ya Yi zheme tong Guang jiu zai tongxue de Li Ya and Yi Guang this way classmate just at DE 妹妹 的 婚礼 中 T 关系 定 de hunli ding le guanxi meimei zhong younger-sister DE wedding in settle LE contact And that is how Li Ya and Yi Guang got engaged—at her classmate's sister's wedding (8)

(207)这 封 信, 爸爸, 你 今天 早晨 留 给 Zhe iintian feng xin, baba, zaochen liu ni gei leave this CLletter father you today morning for 我 的 评语, 使 我 突然 →下 文草 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 T 田平, 田平 便 Dou'er jiang biaoge song gei le Tian Ping, Tian Ping bian Dou'er **JIANG** give LE Tian Ping Tian Ping then form to 喝 得 又 拉 他 下 了 馆子, 喝 啤酒 vou la ta xia le guanzi, he pijiu he de drag he go-down LE restaurant drink beer drink DE again 三番五次 寻 厕所, 口 后 便 连夜 san fan wu ci lianye xun cesuo, hui hou bian time and again that very night look up toilet return after then 千 赶 字 采访记 制 7 的 zhi le de caifangji gan san qian zi hurriedly produce LE three thousand character DE news report Dou'er gave the form to Tian Ping. Tian Ping then dragged him off to a restaurant where they drank so much beer that he had to make several trips to the bathroom. The very same night, when he came back, he dashed off a three thousand word interview transcript. (8)

5.3. Modality

Regardless of its position in the sentence, *le* is often associated with temporal meanings. Sentence-final *le* is sometimes claimed to be a modal marker, i.e. capable of expressing modal meanings. These will be discussed in chapter 6.3. Very few authors, however, have mentioned the fact that also in **verbal** position, *le* can express modality. In this chapter, I will focus on the different ways in which this marker, when it occurs in verbal position, may contribute to the modal reading of a sentence. According to the definition established in this present study 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 一点, Liang taitai dao: ni de tui tai shou le vidian, leg Liang mrs say: you DE too thin LE a little 可是 总是 得 年轻 的 女孩子 痩 多。 keshi nianging de nühaizi zongshi shou de duo. But DE always thin DE young girls much Mrs Liang said: Your legs are a little too skinny, but then young girls are always very slim. (1)

(210)

了 这 凳子 倒 不 错, 只 可惜 太 小 Zhei dengzi dao bu zhi kexi xiao le cuo, tai bench **NEG** LE this actually bad just pity too small 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 理 头发, 前面 Ling Qing li zai jingzi qianmian li toufa, Ling Qing mirror stand at in front put in order hair 小寒 又 抚弄 她 的 耳环 道: 去 Xiao Han you funong ta de erhuan dao: qu Xiao Han then fondle she DE earring go

"你 下来 让 我 试试。 除 戴戴 "Ni xialai daidai shishi." chu rang wo down-come let vou remove I put on-put on try-try ,绫卿 了 褪 下来, 她 戴上 了, Ling Qing xia lai, ta daishang *le*, tun le ti put on Ling Qing slip off LE down-come for she LE, 是 端详 会, 只 道: "不 1 yi "Bu duanxiang le hui, zhi shi dao: cuo look up and down LE one while say NEG bad only be 使 上去 岁。" 你 看 大 1 几 shi ni kan shangqu da le ji sui." make vou look on-go big LE a few vear

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. Typically, le occurs with the adverb $\pm tai$ '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 XX 鞋子 小 一点, 七 号。 Zhe shuang xiezi xiao le yidian, wo yao hao. qi LE a little this pair shoe small I number want seven This pair of shoes is a little bit too small; I want size seven. 137

(213)

这儿 吵 一点, 我 爸爸 不 会 喜欢 Zher chao le vidian, baba bu hui xihuan wo here noisy LE a little I father NEG like will 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).

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)

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)

which has the same meaning and is as grammatical as:

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).

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:

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

Lisi is three inches too tall

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

5.4. Concluding remarks

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

- 1) The **syntactic position of** *le* (i.e. verbal or sentential scope of *le*) to some extent seems to influence the temporal reading of the sentence where it occurs. The default reading of a verbal *le* sentence, for example, tends to be perfective. A possible explanation is that verbal *le*, by occurring inside the VP, signals termination or initiation of the situation described by the verb in particular and not the whole verb phrase or sentence (which could have both generic and non-generic interpretations), promoting a specificity reading of the event. The perfective is typically associated with specificity. On the other hand, the perfect category is not incompatible with specificity, which explains why verbal *le* may produce perfect readings of situations described as well.
- 2) The **nature of the verb** (dynamic verb or stative verb/ abstract verb / resultant state verb) and in particular choice of **grammatical construction** (existential) may influence the temporal reading of verbal le sentences. It also affects what phase of the situation that is focused on. In a perfect tense reading of a sentence with le, if the situation is an event, the event described explicitly by the verb is understood as having happened before R. If the situation is a state or habitual activity it is interpreted as being the result of an implicit event having occurred before R. With the exception of habitual (generic) activities 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 恐怕 已经 有 了 身孕 Xiao Ai kongpa yijing shenyun you le 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):

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 城 里头 买 东西 没有? Zuotian litou dongxi nimen zai cheng mai meiyou? le inside thing yesterday you at town buy LE NEG? Did you buy anything yesterday [when you were] in town?

(225)

你 在 那儿 碰见 谁 Ni pengjian shei zai nar le? there bump-see who LE? you at 碰见 王 1 Wang le Pengjian Lao Lao bump-see 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 past¹⁴³ 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 year¹⁴⁴

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.

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 NPs¹⁴⁵, 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 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*,

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 $^{^{145}}$ 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)

年 月 放 了 1982 日 暑假 1982 8 yue 4 ri fang shujia nian le. 1982 vear month day release summer holiday LE August 4 1982 summer-holidays started.

(230)

不幸	的 是,	话题 立即	<u> </u>	ス 跑到	茱德
Buxing	de shi,	huati liji	yo	ou paodao	Zhude
		topic imm	ediately ag	gain run-arriv	e Zhude
的 美国	朋友	没有 叵] 她	的 电话	
de Meiguo	pengyou	mei you h	ui ta	de dianhua	
DE America				DE call	
这件	事 上記	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.

jian shi zhe 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 immediately Mageta DE speak out freely start say 莱德! 真 的, 我 不 理解... zhen de. Zhude! Wo liiie... bu neng DE Zhude I **NEG** understand... true can 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)

今天 早晨 吃 我 油条 了! Wo iintian zaochen chi voutiao le! Ι LE today morning fritter eat 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 首 我 了 诗 百 出来 Tang shi bai shou chulai san wo le Tang poem three hundred CL LE Ι memorize out-come 半 T yi ban le LE one half

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 voutiao 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 morning². 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 张 到 吃饭 Wo dao Zhang jia chifan zuotian le go to yesterday Zhang home eat (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*:

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Example (233) from Li and Thompson (1981)

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

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)'.

(234)段 太太 眨 了 貶 眼睛, Duan taitai zha le zha yanjing, Duan mrs blink LE blink eye, 那 泪珠 就 再 巾 无法 na leizhu jiu zai ye wufa that teardrop iust longer also no way 终干 在 眼眶 中 停留 zai yankuang zhong tingliu, zhongyu at rim of the eye in finally stay, T 落在 **F**. 旗袍 luozai shang le qipao fall-at LE qipao on

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)

10	1	_	1
12	Ĵ	Э	

我	的	腿	发	į	酸,	口	发	渥	; ,	头
Wo	de	tui	fa	S	suan,	kou	fa	ke	,	tou
I	DE	leg	becon		sour	mouth	becom	e thi	rsty	head
发		昏,	戶	(得	又	在	烈 日		下	
fa	ŀ	nun,	zh	ide	you	zai	lieri		xia	
become muddled have to again at scorching sun under								r		
走回		喷	水池	٥]	最后,	我	总算	来到		
zouhu	i	pe	nshuicl	ni. 2	Zuihou,	wo	zongsuan	laid	ao	
walk-		for	untain	1	last	I	finally		e-arriv	-
寻梦	元		的	正是	房	了,	这	是		栋
Xunm	engyu	an	de	zhen	igfang	le,	zhe	shi	yi	dong
Xunm	engyı	ıan	DE	mair	n building	g 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 楼房, 门 层 loufang. zhongxi-hebi si de er ceng men like floor building Chinese-western mixture DE door two T 上 台阶, 大门 前 有 台阶, damen qian you taijie, shang le taijie, LE in front of exist flight of stairs ascend flight of stairs entrance 著, 是 客厅, 大 开 个 四方 的 大 地 ge da kai zhe, shi sifang de da keting, di CLbig open **ZHE** be square DE big parlour floor 上 是 讲究 的 花砖, shang shi jiangjiu de huazhuan, exquisite DE brick on 是 的 地 窗子 上 都 式 垂 chuangzi shang dou shi shi de chui di yi window DE floor all be one style approach on 绒 的 红 窗帘, 天花板 F. 吊 著 de rong chuanglian, tianhuaban hong shang diao zhe DE red velvet curtain ceiling hang **ZHE** on 欧洲 里 种 玻璃灯。 宫廷 那 Ouzhou bolideng. gongting li na zhong 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. LE half suddenly pass dav he back-pass head come 发 看住 了 女仆 话 了 简直 使 kanzhu le nüpu, fa hua le jianzhi shi LE deliver LE look-firm maid speech simply cause 话 人 不 能 相信 这 是

xiangxin shi ren bu neng zhe hua cong yi ge people NEG can believe this speech be from one CL 五. 六 岁 的 小 孩 嘴 里 说 出来 liu de xiao hai zui li shuo chulai wu sui five child six DE small mouth out-come year in say 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 他 了, 响应 Nuren shi xiang xiang, zhong xiangying le ta le, woman think LE think eventually be accept he LE 了 今 端 盅 抿 妣 在 \Box , 想 yi jin duan zhong min le kou, ta xiang zai hold LE cup sip one mouth she want 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)

的 一下 服装, 妣 下意识 整理 了 X Ta xiavishi de zhengli le yi xia fuzhuang, vou subconscious DE LE she arrange a little clothes then 把 拿起 梳子, 那 满 头 零乱 的 naqi shuzi, ba na man tou lingluan de take-up BAfull head messy DE comb that 上 头发 了 梳, 她 看到 额 梳 toufa shu le shu, ta kandao shang е hair comb LE comb look-arrive forehead she on 的 了 的, 伤处 是 又 青 又 de shangchu le, shi de, you you zi qing injury green DE LE be DE again again lilac 又 红 又 肿, 是 好 块。 大 的 hong you zhong, shi hao da de kuai. you yi

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 停 了 下来, 在 机场 大 \Box 他 Chezi menkou zai jichang da 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 iump-down rush-enter airport airport DE car people 怎么 那么 多! 他 急切 的 跄踉 的, duo! zenme name Ta giangliang de. jigie de DE how that many he stagger impatient DE 挤 向 出境口, 嘴 里 开始 疯狂 的 chujingkou, 1i kaishi fengkuang ji xiang zui de towards mouth press departure gate in start desperate DE 叫 著: 蝉! 蝉! 小 蝉! "/ 小 jiao zhe: "Xiao Chan! Xiao Chan! Xiao Chan!" Chan scream ZHE Xiao Chan Xiao Chan Xiao 挤到 了 出境口, 他 眼 看到 小 Jidao le chujingkou, ta yi kandao Xiao yan 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 的 里 射 了 窗帘 隙缝 Zaoshang, chuanglian xifeng li she yanguang cong de le curtain morning sun beam from DE crevice in shoot LE 内 进来, 在 室 缓缓 的 移动, jinlai, zai shi nei huanhuan de yidong, inside slow DE enter-come at room move 了 宛 移上 了 的 嘴唇, 移到 露 宛 Wan Lu yishang Wan de zuichun, yidao le le Lu

lip move-on LE Wan Lu DE move-arrive LE Wan Lu 脸颊, 终于 映 她 著 的 在 那 低圖 lianjia, de dihe zhongyu yingzai ta de na zhe DE cheek finally shine-at she DE that lower-shut ZHE 的 睫毛 上 了。 de jiemao shang le. LE DE eye lash on

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)

轻轻 他 轻轻 地 拥住 她, 地 Ta de vongzhu de gingging ta. qingqing DE He soft DE embrace-steady she soft 凛, 贴住 妣 的 唇, 她 本能 地 tiezhu de chun, lin, benneng ta ta yi de glue-steady she DE lip she one cold instinct DE 往 后 缩, 上 就 倒在 床 jiu hou wang yi suo, daozai chuang shang towards back one withdraw then fall-on bed on 了。 低 头 她, 他 凝视 le. Ta di tou ningshi yan ta, LE head stare she eyes he lower 底 有 抹 受伤 的 神色。 真 di shou shang "Zhen you yi mo de shense. bottom be wounded exist one CL DE expression really 严重 这么 吗?" ma?" zheme yanzhong 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

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¹⁵⁴ "In terms of discourse, the verbal suffix $\underline{-le}$ is basically for marking the "peak" in the event line." (Chu and Chang 1987, p. 312) Below is one of their examples:

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<u>-le</u> 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. 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)

^{&#}x27;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).

(245)

出去 买 东西 了 (那天) (Nei tian) chuqu mai dongxi ta le thing (that day) she out-go buy 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'. 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:

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 sentencefinal le.

(247)上. 星期天 到 颐和园 钓鱼 了 Yiheyuan diaovu Shang xingqitian dao le 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'. However, it is probable that the adverb *yijing* 'already' would be used if that was the case, to avoid misunderstandings:

(248)星期天 上 到 颐和园 了 已经 钓鱼 Shang xingqitian dao Yiheyuan diaoyu le wo yijing Sunday 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! 往 北方 去 了! Hai, Guagua! Ni wang beifang le! qu Quacky towards north direction hey you LE go Hey, Quacky! You're going north (and not south as you obviously are assuming)¹⁶²

(250)

你 了, 你 认出 可 Ni lai renchu wo jiu ni le, ke yi recognize-out LE you one came I then you but 没 我 来 你 这么 认出 ni zheme iiu dou mei renchu wo lai. all NEG recognize-out I come vou this long 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

¹⁶² Example (249) from Li and Thompson (1981).

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¹⁶¹ This is the term that Li and Thomson (1981) use to explain this use of *le*.

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 always party sav 上 原子弹 是 它 发明 的, 实际 faming shiji yuanzidan shi de, shang ta atomic bomb be it invent DE reality on 原子弹 早 在 年 就 同世 了, 1940 yuanzidan zao zai 1940 nian jiu wenshi le, atomic bomb early 1940 appear LE at year just 十 年 后 就 首次 大 规模 使用 shi nian hou jiu shouci da guimo shivong. after first time large scale ten year just 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 2ai 1940 inan '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)

是 "你 不 现在 才 你 老 迷路, "Ni shi bu xianzai cai milu, ni shi lao NEG be loose way you now only be old you 早 T 迷路 你 这 个 婚姻, hunyin, jiu milu le, ni zhe ge early then loose way LE this CL marriage you 根本 歧路 上! 我 现在 就 走 在 Wo genben jiu zou ailu shang! xianzai zai I simply walk forked road now just at on

才 是 要 走入 正途! " 引 你 cai shi yin ni zouru zhengtu!" yao you be lead walk-in way only want 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

Another example, taken from Li and Thompson, illustrates their category "correcting a wrong assumption":

(253)

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

lead you onto the right track! (1)

我 好 书 了 看 过 他 本 Л Wo kan hao ji ben shu le guo read GUO he good some CLbook 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 是 男人 在 他 本来 仴 毒药 benlai shi ge dan zai duyao Jiu suan ta nanren originally CLbut poison just regard as he be man at 里 佨 T 几 年 也 就 变成 li biancheng pao le ji shi nian ye jiu zao LE several ten in soak year also early then become 女人 了 个 nuren le ge 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)
               胖
                      了
     他
          太
     Ta
          tai
               pang
                     le
     he
          too fat
                     LE
     He is too fat
```

(256)

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.

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
                   了!
           烦
     Wo fan
                  le!
          fed up LE
     I'm (I have become) so tired of this!
(260)
     我
            饿
                    了!
     Wo
            e
     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 [元成 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)

关上 她 就 走 门, zou Ta hou guanshang men, jiu yi ta she walk after one close-shut door he just 似乎 忘掉 妣 的 了 存在 sihu wangdiao ta de cunzai le. she DE like forget-away existence LE As soon as the door had shut behind her he appeared to forget her existence (15)

(262)

温斯吨 想, 很 明白, 他 Wensidun xiang. hen mingbai, ta Winston think he very understand 他 明白 很 我 ta hen mingbai wo wen yao he understand I will ask verv 的 是 想到 这里, 什么! de shi shenme! Xiangdao zheli,

¹⁶⁸ In the examples taken from this work, I have also included the English translation.

DE what think-arrive be here 了: 他 的 话 冲出 口 de chongchu kou le: ta hua jiu 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)

乌苏娜 了 最初, 给 他们 的 衣兜 都 塞满 Zuichu, Wusuna gei tamen de yidou dou saiman le they first Úrsula DE pocket all stuff-full LE for 阿玛兰塔 总 钱, 把 孩子 留 而 qian, er Amalanta zong xiang ba haizi liu want BA money and Amaranta always child keep 给 自己, 可是 后来, 乌苏娜 和 阿玛兰塔 he keshi houlai, Wusuna gei ziji, Amalanta afterwards Úrsula for self but and Amaranta 都 只 送 点 礼品, 教母 了。 充当 song chongdang jiaomu dou zhi dian lipin, le. only give all 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 信 的 时候, 在 卧室 读 Fenlanda zai woshi li du xin de shihou, Fernanda at bedroom read letter DE in 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)

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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 点, 霍。阿卡蒂奥 Huo Akadi'ou Xingqisi, xiawu liang dian, **Thursday** José Arcadio afternoon two point 去 神学院 了。 shenxueyuan le. qu seminar go 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", youqi-wuli de shuo. "Shi wo DE she very lonely Ι listless say be 啊, 对 啦, 没 有 配 在 身边, you shenbian, a, dui la. mei pei zai right **NEG** have side Α LA company at 他 子 <u></u>, 就 不得不 茕茕 budebu li, ta jiu qiongqiong zi have to stand she just all alone 孤孤单单 地 独自 人 打发 gugu-dandan duzi de vi ren dafa ge all by oneself DE alone one CL spend person 两 个 小时 了 "。 liang xiaoshi le. ge 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

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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.

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 $^{^{171}}$ 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 $\overline{\Lambda}$ 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, \sqrt{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. $^{172} \rightarrow bu$, on the other hand, can occur both in past, present and future contexts and in past contexts typically negates stative or generic situations.

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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
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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

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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:

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 verb¹⁷⁴, which implicates that it could have both a perfect and a perfective reading:

verbal and as a sentence-final marker.

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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
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(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)

Sentence (268) also indicates that the double *le* construction is in fact not restricted to perfect sentences.

(268)

It is obvious that more research is needed if we want to be able to explain the nature of double *le* sentences, with regard to both their temporal and their modal meanings.

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