

THE POLYSEMOUS PERFECT ASPECT IN MANDARIN

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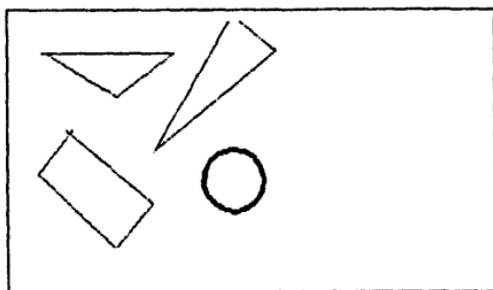
One of the most intriguing questions in the study of Mandarin (the standard dialect of Chinese) is the nature of perfect aspect, which, in principle, refers to the *le* construction. Although several studies have attempted to describe the complicated properties of this perfect marker, the various functions of *le* remain controversial. The common flaw of previous treatments is their separating one variant of *le* from another, as if they were unrelated particles.

In this paper, the first work providing a unified treatment for these variants, I argue using a Cognitive Grammar perspective that all of them function in part as markers of perfect aspect, which is a polysemous category subsuming a number of closely related meanings.

Some Relevant Concepts of Cognitive Grammar

Cognitive Grammar (CG) attempts to describe language with respect to various levels of conceptual organization. The units of grammar are held to be symbolic, or bipolar, consisting of a phonological pole and a semantic pole. An expression's semantic pole is referred to as a predication, which always has a certain scope, and within that scope it selects a specific substructure for designation. The scope of predication is known as the base, and the designated prominent substructure is called the profile (cf. Langacker (1986,1987,1988)). Consider figure (1):

Figure (1)



All the elements in figure (1) form the scope of predication, that is to say, the base, in which the boldfaced circle indicates the prominence of the designated substructure, namely the profile. Figures (2-4) illustrate three basic types of predication, i.e., a thing, a relation, and a process:

Figure (2)

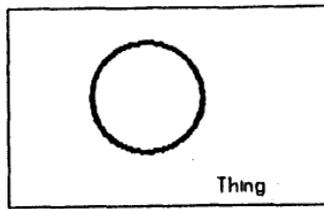


Figure (3)

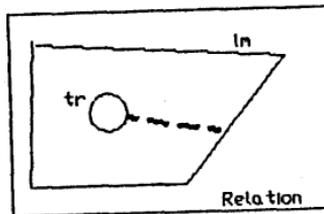
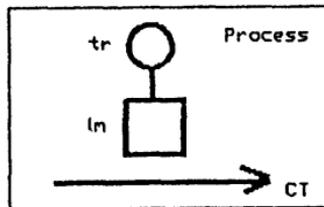


Figure (4)



A thing is a nominal predication, designating a region in some domain, as represented by the boldfaced circle in figure (2). A relation then profiles the interconnections between participants, the most prominent of which are called the trajector (tr) and the landmark (ln), as in (3). Due to the fact that Langacker views the conceived entities and their interconnections as being conceptually dependent, he defines relations such that the entities are profiled as well as the connections. I have not placed the trajector and the landmark in boldface in (3) because I want only to emphasize the connection itself. The trajector is the entity which is evaluated or accessed, and the landmark provides a reference point with respect to the trajector. An atemporal relation may refer to the predications of "adjectives," "adverbs,"

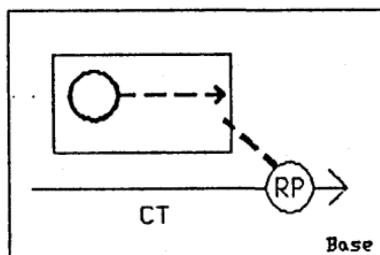
"prepositions" or "aspect markers," etc. As for a process, it profiles a continuous sequence of stages through conceived time, as in (4). The right-headed arrows represents the conceived time, and the symbol above simplifies a series of states of the activities between the trajector and the landmark. A process thus usually refers to the predication of "verb." Given the distinction between the base and the profile, we can now take a look at how the markers of perfect aspect *profile*.

Time Reference of *Le*

Perfect aspect markers usually profile an atemporal relation between a process predicated by the verb, and a reference time point with respect to this process (Anderson 1982; Chatterjee 1982; Tung 1982,1985; Langacker 1982,1990; Hsiao 1990). In other words, the process stands out as the trajector, and the reference time point serves as the landmark. Take for example, the uses of English perfect given in (1a-c), which are structurally depicted in figure (5): (CT = conceived time)

- 1(a) The bride *has* died.
 (b) The new semester *has* started.
 (c) I *had* kissed Lisa four times over the last week.

Figure (5)

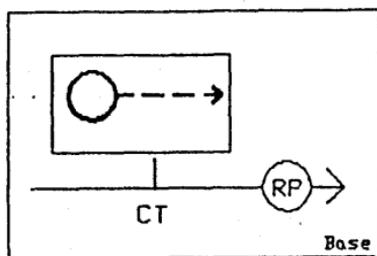


English Perfect

(1a) may suggest that at the time of the reference point the body of the bride is still warm, (1b) that somebody's mind is still on vacation, and (1c) that Lisa was still willing. In any case, a current relevance of the process to RP is profiled, shown by the boldfaced dashed line in figure (5). The simple past tense in English, on the other hand, shows no such current relevance but simply grounds the process at a time point in the past, as exemplified by (2a-c) and represented by figure (6):

- 2(a) The bride *died*.
 (b) The new semester *started*.
 (c) I *kissed* Lisa four times last week.

Figure (6)



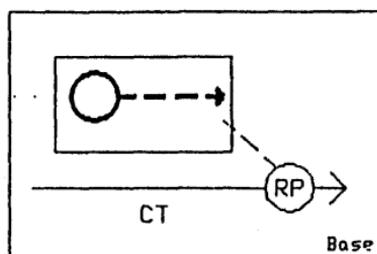
English Simple Past

(2a) may refer merely to the bride's death once upon a time, (2b) merely to an item on an academic schedule, and (2c) merely to the occurrences of the kissing process. Now consider the Chinese sentences in (3a-c):

- 3(a) Xinniàng sǐ ㄟ
 Bride die PRF
- (b) Xīn xuéqī kāishǐ ㄟ
 New semester start PRF
- (c) Shàng xīngqī wǒ qīn ㄟ Lǐsǐ sì cǐ.
 Last week I kiss PRF Lisa four time

What is of interest here is that these sentences could either have the English translations in (1) or have the English translations in (2). The reason for these alternative readings is that although the Chinese perfect marker ㄟ uses an atemporal relation in its base, connecting the process to a reference point of current relevance, it actually profiles the process but not the atemporal relation it self, as shown in figure (7), where the oblique dashed line is not boldfaced:

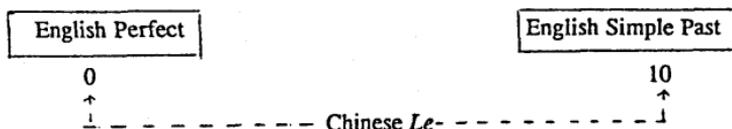
Figure (7)



Chinese Le

Consider also the scale in figure (8), which measures the prominence of such current relevance:

Figure (8)



In figure (8), the English simple past is scaled as *zero*, while the English perfect is arbitrarily scaled as *ten*, the highest. The *le* construction in Chinese might fall somewhere in between, i.e., its current relevance in (7) is not as prominent as in (5) but it is not precluded as in (6).

Furthermore, unlike English, the reference point in the *le* construction is not grounded by tense. The sentences in (3), as we have seen, can either be interpreted as happening in the present or be interpreted as happening in the past. They thus constitute evidence against any approach which imposes the function of tense-marking on *le*. For example, Li and Cheng (1984) propose the category of the "emphatic *le*" and consider it a past-tense marker. In their analysis, the "emphatic *le*" can only occur with a past reference point (or "narrative time," in their terms), and this category of *le* is emphatic because its presence or absence does not affect the meaning of a sentence. The inadequacy of this observation is self-evident in (4-6):

(4) Past

Qunian ta chuban *le* yi ben shu.
last year he publish PRF one CL book
'Last year he (had) published a book.'

(5) Present

Zuotian ta zuo *le* si ge zhongtou.
yesterday he work PRF four CL hour
'He (has) worked four hours yesterday.'

(6) Future

Wu tian zhihou, zhe fangzi ta jiu mai *le* shi nian.
five day after this house he then buy PRF ten year
'In five days, he will have bought the house for ten years.'

These examples show that *le* regularly occurs at different temporal locations. It is clear that *le* does not situate the process at a particular point in time, but rather what it signals is precisely that a process is completed prior to a reference point, which could be in the past, the present or the future.

The Complete Process \mathcal{L}

The next question then is what the \mathcal{L} construction profiles. The prototypical designation of \mathcal{L} is the completed aspect of a transition from an old state to a new state. In the most common cases, the transition may be identified with the complete process predicated by the relevant verb. In figure (9), the innermost square of the complete process \mathcal{L} (\mathcal{L}^C) is elaborated by the verb component, shown by the dashed arrow, and the process predicated by the verb is viewed as a single whole, all stages of which are profiled, as they are boldfaced. (T = Transition; P = Process)

Figure (9)

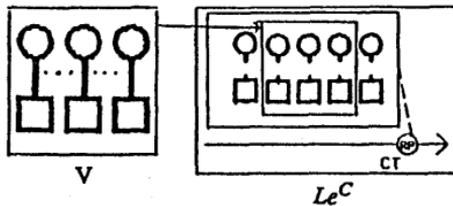
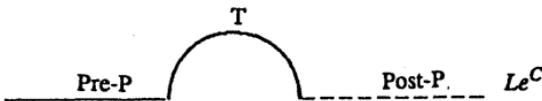


Figure (10) gives a more visualized picture of the transition, which is represented by the boldfaced arc. The level dashed line on the right represents the post-process new state, while the continuous line on the left represents the pre-process old state.

Figure (10)



The \mathcal{L} construction indicates a sense of the transition being completed. The verbs which can take \mathcal{L} include most action or activity verbs as well as some emotive verbs. (7-10) illustrate this:

- (7) Na zhi gou gangcai yao \mathcal{L} baba de pigu.
That CL dog just bite PRF father GEN hip
'That dog has just bitten father's hip.'
- (8) wo qin \mathcal{L} ta.
I kiss PRF her
'I have kissed her.'
- (9) Zhe shi ta yoyu \mathcal{L} hen jiu.
This matter he hesitate PRF very long
'This matter, he has hesitated for a long time.'

- (10) wo xiang \mathcal{L} xuduo shi.
 I think PRF many thing
 'I have thought through many things.'

In the examples above, the profiled transition is equated with the whole process of *biting* in (7), the whole process of *kissing* in (8), the whole process of *hesitating* in (9), and the whole process of *thinking* in (10).

The Terminative \mathcal{L}

There are verbs which intrinsically profile only the last few stages of a process, and which are usually followed by the second type of \mathcal{L} , i.e., the terminative \mathcal{L} (\mathcal{L}^T), as shown by (11-14):

- (11) Wo he-kuang \mathcal{L}^T jiaoshou de jiu.
 I drink-up PRF professor GEN wine
 'I have drunk up the professor's wine.'
- (12) Ta gang tuo-diao \mathcal{L}^T yifu
 He just take-off PRF clothes
 'He has just taken off his clothes.'
- (13) Meiguo zhongtong dao \mathcal{L}^T Such.
 America president arrive PRF Russian
 'The president of America has arrived in Russia.'
- (14) Huo mie \mathcal{L}^T duo-jiu?
 Fire go out PRF how-long
 'How long has it been since the fire went out?'

The \mathcal{L} component in figure (11) thus shows that the terminative \mathcal{L} profiles a transition out of the process predicated by the verb, and in figure (12), the noteworthy old state, represented by the left upper line, is actually the continuous sequence of states in this process before the profiled termination, represented by the boldfaced arc. The \mathcal{L}^T construction conveys that a process is ended, and the endpoint of the final transition constitutes a noteworthy new state, represented by the lower dashed line on the right.

Figure (11)

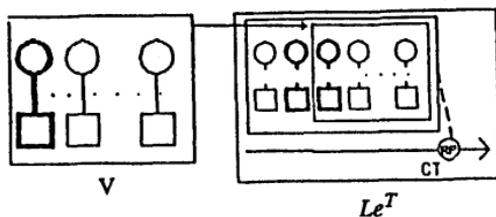
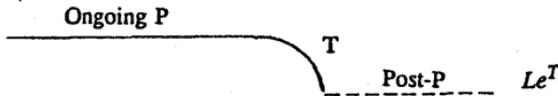


Figure (12)



An easy way to test the verbs which take ω^T is to bring in the durative marker *ze*, which profiles the ongoing aspect of a process. These verbs would not be able to be marked by *ze* since they practically designate the ending but not the continuation of a process. The ungrammatical output in (15-18) show that this prediction is in fact the case:

- (15)* Wo he-kuang *ze* jiaoshou de jiu.
I drink-up DUR professor GEN wine
'I drink up (DUR) the professor's wine.'
- (16)* Ta gang tuo-diao *ze* yifu
He just take-off DUR clothes
'He takes off (DUR) his clothes.'
- (17)* Meiguo zhongtong dao *ze* Sueh.
America president arrive DUR Russian
'The president of America arrives (DUR) in Russia.'
- (18)* Huo mie *ze* duo-jiu?
Fire go out DUR how-long
'How long has it been since the fire went out (DUR)?'

The Inchoative ω

In contrast to the verbs in (11-14), those in (19-22), which are subject to the third type of ω , i.e., the inchoative ω (ω), designate only the initial stages of a process.

- (19). Zhangsheng ru lei ban xiang ω qilai
Applause as thunder like resound PRF up
'The applause has started resounding like thunder.'
- (20). Niaor chang-chu ω meimiao de ge-heng.
Bird sing-out PRF beautiful GEN singing-voice
'The birds have started singing with beautiful voice.'
- (21). Xianzai wo eh ω .
now I hungry PRF
'I have started feeling hungry now.'
- (22). Yezi hong ω .
Leaf red PRF
'The leaves have started turning red.'

Figure (13)

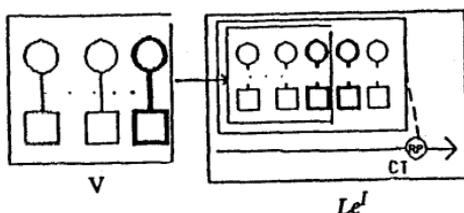
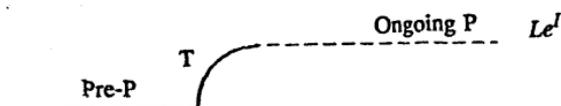


Figure (14)



In (19-22), l indicates the inception of a new state, that is to say, it profiles a transition into the relevant process, as structurally represented by the verb component in figure (13). Figure (14) then shows that the pre-process state goes through an inchoative drift and enters a state in the course of occurring. The noteworthy new state is a sequence of stages of the ongoing process.

The Accepted Reality l^B

Having established the polysemous nature of the perfect marker, I will now show how the usage of l discussed so far can be accommodated through semantic extension, but before I go any further, let me briefly introduce a verbal variant of l , namely, *liao*:

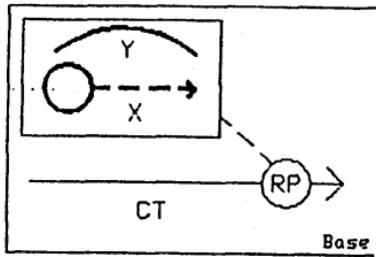
- (23). Bi li *liao*^A zhi. (Fu Zhai Ri Ji)
Use up strength accomplish it
'Trying one's best to accomplish it.'

- (24). Yan-jian de mei ge *liao*^U shi de ren song qu. (Shui Hu
Zhuan)
Eye-see to not CL understand matter DE person deliver go.
'(We) see no one who understands this matter can deliver it over.'

There are two meanings of the verb *liao*. In (23) the first type of *liao* means 'accomplish', and in (24) the second type of *liao* means 'understand'. Notice that the meaning of 'understand' implies some kind of mental accomplishment, therefore it appears that *liao*^U is an abstract version of *liao*^A. It is on the basis of the idea about abstract development that I would like to propose the fourth type of l , which I will call the accepted reality l^B . The previous three variants of l are verb-final, while

\mathcal{L}^R is a clause-final marker. In the following discussions, I would like to suggest that this clause-final \mathcal{L}^R is an abstract version of the verb-final ones. Compare figures (15) and (16):

Figure (15)

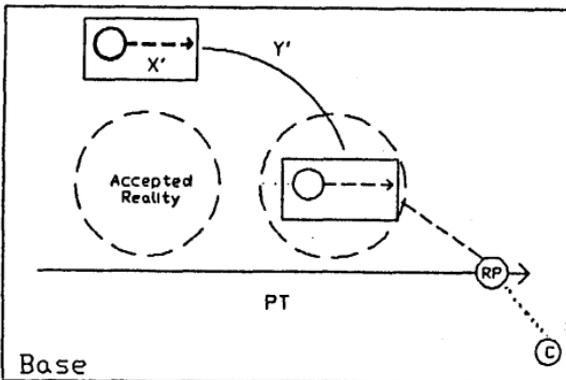


(C)

Le^C, Le^T, Le^I

(CT = conceived time)
(PT = processing time)

Figure (16)



Le^R

X in figure (15) and X' in figure (16) represent the relevant process, while Y and Y' represent the transition profiled or presupposed by \mathcal{L} . The notion of a transition can be construed abstractly as a completed journey along a mental path. The idea of the

mental path can come to represent the progression of the speaker or conceptualizer's thoughts. In figure (16) the two dashed circles, which indicate the domain of *accepted reality*, or subjective reality, show two subsequent states of the speaker's processing thoughts. In the second state, that is, the second circle, the process X' goes through a transition into the domain of accepted reality. The \mathcal{U}^R construction is then used with assertions to indicate the speaker's having definitely arrived at the conclusion and subjectively regarding the fact as having been established. In other words, given the structure of $\{...\} + \mathcal{U}^R$, it indicates the meaning of ' $\{...\}$ has been established as a fact', as exemplified by (25-28):

- (25). {Wo laopuo yo xiang sheng haizi} \mathcal{U}^R .
My wife again think birth child PRF
'(The fact is that) {My wife is, again, thinking of having a baby}.'
- (26). {Wo du bu wan zhe ben shu} \mathcal{U}^R .
I read not finish this CL book PRF
'(The fact is that) {I can't finish reading this book}.'
- (27). {Chuang tai xiao} \mathcal{U}^R .
Bed too small PRF
'(The fact is that) {the bed is too small}.'
- (28). {Ni zhe ge ren zui huai} \mathcal{U}^R .
You this CL person most bad PRF
'(The fact is that) {You, this person, are the worst}.'

The parenthesized explanations are not meant to be direct translations of \mathcal{U}^R , but they simply serve to spell out the idea of the abstract transition Y' in figure (16). Notice that unlike Y in figure (15), Y' in figure (16) is not boldfaced, that is, not profiled, but only presupposed as part of the base; the events in the curly brackets $\{...\}$ are accepted in reality only abstractly and subjectively. In other words, the accomplished aspect of the Y' transition in \mathcal{U}^R is not as perceptible as the accomplished aspect of the Y transition designated by the other three types of \mathcal{U} . This seems to represent a case of semantic bleaching from the core meaning of the perfect aspect, and it is why previous linguists tend to classify the clause-final \mathcal{U} as an unrelated category. It has been observed that the distinction between \mathcal{U}^R and the other three types of \mathcal{U} is not always clear-cut, in particular when they all occur clause-finally, as in (29-31):

- (29) Yifu wo xi \mathcal{U} .
Clothes I wash PRF
'I have washed the clothes.' (\mathcal{U}^R)
'(The fact is that) {I did wash the clothes}.' (\mathcal{U}^R)
- (30) Xinniàng si \mathcal{U} .
Bride die PRF
'The bride has died.' (\mathcal{U}^R)
'(The fact is that) {the bride died}.' (\mathcal{U}^R)
- (31) Wo eh \mathcal{U} .
I hungry PRF
'I have started feeling hungry.' (\mathcal{U}^R)
'(The fact is that) {I am hungry}.' (\mathcal{U}^R)

Each of the sentences presented above may have two interpretations. Chao (1968) suggests that cases like this involve the fusion of \mathcal{L} , in which \mathcal{L}^R appears to supplement the semantics contributed by the other three variants of \mathcal{L} . (32-34) show that when a complement or a modifier of the relevant verb is involved, the fused \mathcal{L} splits again:

- (32) {Yifu wo xi \mathcal{L} hen duo} \mathcal{L}^R .
Clothes I wash PRF quite many PRF
'(The fact is that) {I have washed many clothes}.'
- (33). {Xinniang si \mathcal{L} san tian} \mathcal{L}^R .
Bride die PRF three day PRF
'(The fact is that) {the bride has been dead for three days}.'
- (34). {Wo eh \mathcal{L} hen jiu} \mathcal{L}^R .
I hungry PRF very long PRF
'(The fact is that) {I have started feeling hungry for a long time}.'

Closing Remarks

This paper is a pioneering study which captures the relationship between the verb-final \mathcal{L} and the clause-final \mathcal{L} . Although some previous studies have attempted to, more or less, touch the issues of \mathcal{L} , they have not been able to give a proper unified treatment of it. Early Chinese grammarians define \mathcal{L} as a grammatical particle which serves various semantic and syntactic functions, including the perfect marking. A list of \mathcal{L} 's functions are thus separated from its perfect value. Wang (1957) differentiates two unrelated kinds of \mathcal{L} , i.e., a perfect aspect particle and a mood particle (similar to *ne*, *ba* and the like). What he is concerned with is the linear relation between \mathcal{L} and a post-verbal phrase or word (termed a target expression). He suggests that the target expression follows the perfect aspect particle \mathcal{L} but precedes the mood particle \mathcal{L} . This approach gives the misleading impression that \mathcal{L} is primarily related to whatever comes after the verb. Chao (1968) proposes seven separate functions of \mathcal{L} which mark progress in a story, isolated event in the past, action completed as of the present, et cetera. His analysis, however, does not show any possible linkage among those functions, and no detailed analysis or data are provided to focus on \mathcal{L} directly.

Recent grammarians pay more attention to the situations in which \mathcal{L} is or is not a perfect aspect marker. Li and Thompson (1981, 1982) argue that the clause-final \mathcal{L} indicates a Currently Relevant State, i.e., a state of affairs that has special current relevance with respect to some particular situation. Such relevance is actually central to the characterizations of this perfect marker, but they do not explain 'whether' or 'how' the clause-final \mathcal{L} might be related to its verb-final variants. Furthermore, they draw a clear-cut line of demarcation between the perfective and the inchoative functions of \mathcal{L} as if they belong to entirely different categories. Li and Cheng (1984) group together the perfective \mathcal{L} and the inchoative \mathcal{L} , defining them as the change of situation \mathcal{L} , which, they claim, occurs only with a future or a present time. It is obvious that they have made the classic mistake of treating aspect and tense as some sort of equivalents.

Aspect and tense are two basic phenomena in characterizing the time frames of a language. Tense pertains to temporal location (i.e., past, present and future), while aspect pertains to the temporal configuration of an action or a process. Although most of the Indo-European languages exhibit both, tense is not explicitly revealed in Chinese. In this paper, I have shown that the *le* form appears invariant in spite of different time specifications, and thus does not function as a grounding predication. Our evidence also suggests that the *le*-marking presupposes a prototypical 'transition' between atemporal states, which may be identified with the complete process predicated by the relevant verb, or with the beginning or the end of the process. In addition, I propose the notion of accepted reality to argue that both the verb-final *le* and the clause-final *le* are in fact variants constituting a polysemous category reflecting a set of family linked semantics.

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