On Mandarin Chinese Aspect and Teaching

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Abstract

Mandarin Chinese aspect has two features: first, Chinese aspect markers are optional; second, they have semantic aspectual property constraints and generally cannot be used alone. The said features have given rise to difficulties in teaching Chinese. For example, although many textbooks have defined -zhe as activity-durative rather than activity-progressive, students still found it difficult to understand the differentiation between durative and progressive. In this paper we introduce the preceding studies of Chinese verbal aspect, focused on -le & -zhe, and discuss how to apply the studies to Chinese classroom teaching. Due to the complex features of Chinese aspect, we should not only teach students the semantic meaning of aspect markers, but also teach them how to use the aspect markers combined with adverbs, resultatives, numeral-classifier compounds and modality particles.

Key terms: Mandarin Chinese, Aspect, Suffix, -le, -zhe

1. Introduction

Aspect is different from Tense. Comrie (1976) generalized that “aspects are different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation” (p.3), while “tense relates the time of the situation referred to… to the moment of speaking” (p.2). The most common tenses that we know are past (prior to the moment of speaking), present (simultaneous with the moment of speaking) and future (subsequent to the moment of speaking). In Chinese, tense is represented by using time nouns, such as “昨天” [yesterday], “今天” [today], “明天” [tomorrow], “一小时前” [an hour ago], or adverbs, such as “刚” [just], “已经” [already]. Chinese aspect is different from both Japanese and English aspect because it has no grammatical tense.

Chinese has the following system of verbal aspect (Li & Thompson 1981, p.185):

i. Perfectivity: -le and perfectivizing expressions

ii. Imperfectivity(durative): zai, -zhe

iii. Experiential aspect: -guo

iv. Delimitative: reduplication of verb

In this paper, we focus on the first two verbal aspects, introduce the preceding studies of -le & -zhe, and discuss how to apply the studies to Chinese classroom teaching.

2. The Features of Chinese Aspect

Chinese aspect has the following two features, which also give rise to certain difficulties in teaching Chinese:

i. Chinese aspect markers are optional.

In Chinese, bare-verbs can represent various English and Japanese aspects. This is illustrated by the following examples (Sanui, 2000, p.54):

(1) 你 （平时） 喝 什么 酒？
you usually drink what wine?
What do you drink?
いつも何を飲んでるの？

(2) 你 （要） 喝 什么 酒？
you want drink what wine
What will you have?
何を飲む?

(3) 你 （在）喝 什么 酒？
you zai drink what wine?
What are you drinking?
何を飲んでるの？

(4) 你 喝(了) 什么 酒？
you drink-le what wine?
What did you drink?
何を飲んだの？

ii. Chinese aspect markers generally cannot be used alone, and they are constrained by semantic aspectual properties.
The verb in the predicate with perfective marker -le must be talic, for example, (5), while (6) sounds unfinished because the verb is “吃”[eat], which is an atelic verb. In this case, the perfective marker -le cannot be used alone. But if the verb is followed by a resultative wan (7), or numeral-classifier compounds (8), then the sentence is acceptable.

(5) 小李 关了 窗。
Xiao Li close-le window
Xiao Li closed the window.

(6) 小李 吃了 饭。
Xiao Li eat-le meal
Xiao Li finished his meal.

(7) 小李 吃完 了 饭。
Xiao Li eat finish (resultative wan) -le meal
Xiao Li finished his meal.

(8) 小李 吃了 一碗 饭。
Xiao Li eat-le one-CL meal
Xiao Li ate a bowl of rice.

The semantic aspectual property constraints are also applicable to -zhe, which is an imperfective aspect suffix. -zhe cannot be used in the main predicate of (9). It must be used in the subordinate clause (10), or the sentence with modality particle “呢” (11).

(9) 我们 说着 话。
we say-zhe word

(10) 我们 说着 话， 他 来 了。
we say-zhe word he come le
He came while we were talking.

(11) 我们 说着 话 呢。
we say-zhe word Mod.
We were talking.

3. Preceding studies
3.1 le
In Chinese, le can be placed after the verb or at the end of the sentence. Chao (1968) and Zhu (1982) advocated treating le placed in two different syntactic positions as two types of le, while Shi (2000) argued that there is just one le.
We agree with the former’s point of view. No matter what the historical relationship between two le is, the grammatical functions and meanings that they represent are apparently different. For example, -le, placed after the verb, may occur with the verb (12a), but it cannot occur with the noun or the negative word “not” (12b), while the sentence-final le may occur with both the noun and the negative word (13).

(12) a. 我 没 去 学校。
I did not go to school.
b. *我 没 去了 学校。
I did not go-le school
(13) 我 没 去 学校 了。
I do not go to school (now).

In addition, by arguing that le has only one meaning or function, it is not possible to explain why two le are needed in sentences like the following example (14). The utterance sounds semantically unacceptable if the verbal suffix -le is missed, and the meaning of the sentence will be different with or without the sentence-final le, which explains they are two different types of le.

(14) 我 吃了 一 碗 饭 了。
I have eaten one bowl of rice.

As for le in (15), Chao (1968) argued this le should be regarded as the combination of two le, namely the verbal suffix -le and the sentence-final le (p.247). We agree with his view on this point.

(15) 我 吃了。
I have eaten.

3.1.1 Verbal suffix -le
Regarding the definition of -le, “realization aspect” and “perfective aspect” are the most influential. The advocates of the “realization aspect” definition argued the concept of “complete” should be represented by the resultative, wan. The meaning delivered by wan is different from –le; that is, V-le ≠ V wan. This is illustrated by the following sentences cited from Liu (1988, p.6-7):

(16) a. 吃了 有点儿 香味
ate-le just feel a little bit fragrance
b. 吃完 有点儿 香味
finished eating (resultative wan) just feel a little bit fragrance

(17) a. 好 容易 当了 兵
very easy become-le soldier
b. 好 容易 当 完 兵
very easy become finish (resultative wan) soldier

(18) a.有 什么 问题 去了 再说
Put the matter aside after you have been there.

b. 有 什么 问题 去 完 再 说

Put the matter aside until you come back.

(19) a. 忙了 我 就 来 找 你

I will call on you for your help if I am busy.

b. 忙 完 我 就 来 找 你

I will call on you after I finish.

Advocates of the “realization aspect” definition produced two pieces of evidence to prove their point of view:

i. –le represents an actual state, for example, face blushed, head lowered, agreed, burnt and red in (20)～(24).

(20) 红了 脸 说

blushed and said

(21) 低了 头 走

lowered the head and walked

(22) 同意了 我的 看法

has agreed with my viewpoint

(23) 燃了 好 大 一块

a large area has been burnt

(24) 哭 红了 眼睛

eyes were red from crying

ii. The negative form of (25) is (26), which means the state “prepared” does not exist. Therefore, -le expresses the opposite of “没(有)”[not have] and it is a marker indicating an actual state.

(25) 做了 准备

prepared

(26) 没 （有） 做 准备

did not prepare

Kimura (1997) held the opposite viewpoint against “realization aspect” definition. From the first evidence that “realization aspect” definition raised, he argued that the so-called “actual state” was not its primary meaning, but an extended meaning. “Actual state” cannot explain the difference between (27a) and (28a). However, he suggested if an adverb, for example, suddenly, is respectively added to these two sentences, the difference can be easily reflected. (28b) sounds odd if the adverb suddenly and –zhe are used together. In addition, Kimura also disproved the second piece of evidence. He argued (26) was not only the negative form of (25),
but also the negative form of (29) and (30). So the conclusion can be inevitably drawn that (29) and (30) also represent “state of fact” and the differentiation among -le, -zhe and -guo becomes vague, which cannot be explained clearly in terms of “realization aspect” definition.

(27)  
a. 红了 脸  
red-le face  
turned red  
b. 突然 红了 脸  
suddenly red-le face  
suddenly turned red

(28)  
a. 红着 脸  
red-zhe face  
has turned red  
b. 突然 红着 脸  
suddenly red-zhe face

(29)  
做着 准备  
do-zhe preparation  
has been preparing

(30)  
做过 准备  
do-guo preparation  
has prepared

3.1.2 Sentence-final le

The sentence-final le is also a modality particle. Li & Thompson (1981) argued le represents “Currently Relevant State” and has a communicative function:

The basic communicative function of le is to signal a ‘Currently Relevant State’ (abbreviated as CRS). What this means is that le claims that a state of affairs has special current relevance with respect to some particular situation (p. 240).

Meanwhile, Li & Thompson (1981) also pointed out CRS represented by le can be divided into five categories with the examples as follows (p.244-289):

A. Is a changed state

(31)  
a. (in response to being asked whether one knows about a meeting)  
我 知道  
I know  
Yes, I know.  
b. (The speaker, who went to the wrong room once before, has been reminded which room the meeting will be held in.)  
我 知道 了  
I know -le  
Now I know (i.e., I have learned.)

B. Corrects a wrong assumption

(32)  
(protesting to someone who doesn’t believe that the speaker has had enough to drink)  
我 喝了 三 杯 了  
I drink-le three glass le
(Look—I tell you) I’ve drunk three glasses!

C. Reports “progress so far”

(33) (Talking about the “project” of my living arrangements)

我 在 那里 住了 两个 月 了
I at there live-le two-CL month le
I’ve lived there for two months (now).

D. Determines what will happen next

(34) 我 洗好了 衣服 了
I wash-finish-le clothes le
I’ve finished washing the clothes (so now: we can go to the movies/you can do your yoga in the laundry room/I’m free to play)

E. Is the speaker’s total contribution to the conversation at that point

(35) a.我 在 那里 住了 两个 月 了.
I at there live-le two-CL month le
I’ve lived there for two months.

b.我 在 那里 住了 两个 月, 可是 还 不 太 习惯.
I at there live-le two-CL month but still not too used to
I have lived there for two months, but I’m still not very used to it.

Liu (2001) also pointed out the communicative function of sentence-final le is conveying a new piece of information and the change of state. For example, le in (36), not only conveys the fact that today is Friday, but also reveals the speaker feels time goes too fast. In (37), B just tells A the fact that today is Friday.

(36) 今天 都 星期五 了，时间 过 得 真 快.
today all Friday le time pass DE really fast
Today is Friday! How time flies!

(37) A:今天 是 星期 几?
today be week how many
What day is today?

B:今天 是 星期五.
today be Friday
Today is Friday.

3.2 -zhe

Wang (1948) and Lü (1980) argued -zhe represents activity-progressive. Lü (1980) pointed out –zhe has the following four meanings and usages:

i. activity-progressive

(38) 雪 正 下着 呢.
snow PROG fall-zhe MOD
It is snowing.

(39) 他们 正 看着 节目 呢.
they PROG watch-zhe program MOD
They are watching the programs.

ii. state-durative

(40) 门 正 开着 呢.

(41) The door is opening.

(42) He is wearing a new coat.

iii. the existential sentences

(43) There is a throng of people around the door.

(44) There is a Chinese dictionary in his/her hand.

iv. the sentence pattern “V1 + -zhe + V2”

(45) He is jumping into the pool laughing and shouting.

Chen (1980) argued -zhe is different with activity-progressive represented by “-ing” of English. He pointed out (46a), (47a), (48a) and (49a) sound unfinished, as -zhe cannot be used in the main predicate, due to its subordinating function.

(46) It began to snow when they were having the meeting.

(47) It is snowing, but not cold at all.

(48) A busy discussion goes on and hasn’t finished until deep into the night.

(49) He is singing "I love Beijing Tian’an men Square".
He walked on the stage while singing “I love Beijing Tian’an men Square”

Qian (2000) pointed out adverb zai has the function of expressing “新闻性”[new information], which is not possessed by -zhe. This function makes zai become an activity-progressive marker. Although -zhe can occur with “正”[adverb], “在”[adverb], “正在”[adverb] and “呢”[modality particle], representing activity-progressive, -zhe by itself does not express this progressive meaning. -Zhe only functions to explicate and describe the durative state of the event. For example, we can say (50)~(53) as follows, but (54) sounds unfinished. Neither “跳舞”[dance] itself has “新闻性”[new information], nor -zhe expresses “新闻性”[new information]. Only when it occurs with the words representing activity-progressive, such as “正”[adverb] or “呢”[modality particle], can it make the sentence express “新闻性”[new information] (p.2).

\[(50) \quad \text{他们正跳着舞。} \]
\[\text{they PROG jump-zhe dance} \]
They are dancing.

\[(51) \quad \text{他们跳着舞呢。} \]
\[\text{they jump-zhe dance MOD} \]
They are dancing.

\[(52) \quad \text{他们跳舞呢。} \]
\[\text{they jump dance MOD} \]
They are dancing.

\[(53) \quad \text{他们快乐地跳着舞。} \]
\[\text{they joyfully jump-zhe dance} \]
They are dancing joyfully.

\[(54) \quad ?\text{他们跳着舞。} \]
\[\text{they jump-zhe dance} \]

Toudou and Aihara (1985) argued that -zhe represents the speaker’s modality of recognition and decision. The meaning and function of -zhe and zai are different. Zai expresses the speaker’s recognition and decision regarding different kinds of activity; for example, playing baseball, playing football, or reading the newspaper, etc. The question “What is he doing?” is actually asking what kind of activity. So V-zhe is unacceptable as the answer. V-zhe is the representation of aspect describing appearance of the activity. The difference is illustrated by the following example.

\[(55) \quad \text{A:小明做什么呢?} \]
\[\text{Xiao Ming do what MOD} \]
What is Xiao Ming doing?

\[\text{B:a.小明在打篮球。} \]
\[\text{Xiao Ming PROG play basketball} \]
Xiao Ming is playing basketball.

\[\text{b.小明打篮球呢。} \]
\[\text{Xiao Ming play basketball MOD} \]
Xiao Ming is playing basketball.

\[\text{c.小明打篮球。} \]
\[\text{Xiao Ming play -zhe basketball} \]

In Chinese, the element, corresponding to -ing in English and -teiru in Japanese, is not -zhe, but zai. Currently, many textbooks have defined -zhe as activity-durative, rather than activity-progressive. But students still found it difficult to understand the differences between durative and progressive. As -zhe must occur with zai and ne, many textbooks often introduce zai and ne when
teaching -zhe. However, the usage and function of zai and ne are not explained at all, which more easily leads to students’ misunderstanding of -zhe as having the same meaning as -ing.

4. How to teach le and -zhe

4.1 Verbal suffix -le

As we mentioned above, Chinese has no grammatical tense. Verbal suffix -le does not represent past tense. It is a perfective aspect marker. Many Japanese students misunderstand -le also representing past because -sita in Japanese represents both perfective aspect and past tense. In teaching, we should emphasize the fact that the verbal suffix -le is different from -sita of Japanese.

i. The verbal suffix -le is used optionally to represent things that happened in the past, but particularly, -le cannot be used in the negative sentence (56b) and (57b), or the sentence with repetitive activity (58b) and (59b).

(56) a. 我 昨天 没有 吃 午饭。
   I yesterday not have eat lunch
   I did not have lunch yesterday.
   b.*我 昨天 没有 吃了 午饭。
   I yesterday not have eat-le lunch

(57) a. 我 明天 不 吃饭 就 去 学校。
   I tomorrow not eat meal soon go school
   I go to school without eating meal tomorrow.
   b.*我 明天 不吃了 饭 就 去 学校。
   I yesterday not eat-le meal soon go school

(58) a. 以前 我 常去 那个 商店 买 东西。
   before I often go that shop buy things
   I often went to that shop to buy things before.
   b.*以前 我 常去 那个 商店 买了 东西。
   before I often go that shop buy-le things

(59) a. 上学期 他 天天 迟到。
   last semester he day-day late
   Last semester, he was late everyday.
   b.*上学期 他 天天 迟到了。
   last semester he day-day late-le

ii. The verbal suffix -le is frequently used if the object bears the numeral-classifier compounds or time classifier, and meanwhile expresses the event in the past. Chao (1979) declared “this perfective suffix is obligatory after a verb for past action if it has a quantified object, as (60)” (p.248)

(60) 我 昨儿 碰见了 一个 老 朋友，他 请我 吃了一顿饭。
   I yesterday meet-le one old friend, he invite I eat-le one-CL meal
   Yesterday I met an old friend and he invited me to a dinner.

(61) 我 昨天 看了 一个 小时 电视。
   I yesterday watch-le one-CL hour TV
   I watched TV for one hour yesterday.

iii. In the sentence pattern V + numeral-classifier compounds + O, if there is not a complement after the verb, -le must be used, such as (62a). Although the complement is different with -le in meaning, the complement sometimes can substitute -le to make the sentence acceptable, such as in (63). The complement more frequently tends to describe the change of the object, while -le primarily
describes the completion of an activity and it does not matter about the change of the object (Kimura, 1982).

(62) a. 我 昨天 看了 一本 书
I yesterday read-le one-CLS book
I read a book yesterday.

b.*我 昨天 看 一本 书
I yesterday read one-CLS book

(63) 我 昨天 看完 一本 书
I yesterday read finish (resultative wan) one-CLS book
I finished a book yesterday.

iv: The verbal suffix -le is often used in the sentence expressing a couple of things happened in succession.

(64) 我 吃了 饭 去 学校。
I eat-le meal go school
I ate my meal and then went to school.

(65) 他 看了 书 散步。
He read-le book walk
He read the book and then went for a walk.

4.2 Sentence-final le
The sentence-final le indicates the concept of “past”, “change” and “the new information”. See the following example cited from the textbook currently used in APU (*Jia You! Zhong Guo Yu*, p.132)

(66) 我 父母 来 北京 看 我 了。
I parents come Beijing see I le
My parents have come to Beijing to see me.

This le is obligatory. Without this le, the utterance sounds unfinished, and can only be completed by adding one more sentence. For example:

(67) 我 父母 来 北京 看 我, 我 得 陪 他们。
I parents come Beijing see I have to accompany they
My parents came to Beijing to see me and I have to accompany them.

This sentence-final le also cannot be changed to the verbal suffix -le:

(68) 我 父母 来 北京 看 我 了。 ≠ 我 父母 来 北京 看了 我。
I parents come Beijing see I le ≠ I parents come Beijing see-le I
My parents have come to Beijing to see me. ≠ My parents came to Beijing to see me.

It might be difficult to explain the meaning of this sentence-final le only by looking at one sentence. However, the context might help our understanding.

(69) 阳子: 这 两天 你 怎么 没 来 上课?
Youko: this two day you how not come go to class
Youko: Why haven’t you come to class these past two days?

理惠: 我 父母 来 北京 看 我 了。
Li Hui I parents come Beijing see I le
Li Hui: My parents have come to Beijing to see me.

We may say that the function of sentence-final le is to tell the listener some new information. Li Hui tells Youko the new information that her parents have come to Beijing to see her. For another example (70), it is difficult to explain the differentiation
between sentence-final *le* and the verbal suffix `-le` only by looking at one sentence alone. However, if we apply this sentence to a conversation, the differentiation of two *le* can be easily explained.

(70) A: 吃饭去吧。 
    eat meal go MOD

Let’s go for lunch.

B: a. 不好意思，我吃午饭了。 
   sorry I eat lunch *le*
   I am sorry, I have eaten my lunch.

b. ?我吃 le meal

c. ?我吃了两碗饭。 
   I eat-le two bowls meal

In this conversational situation, Li Hui does not know Li Hong has already had her lunch. Li Long thinks it is necessary to tell Li Hui this new information that she has already eaten. So the sentence-final particle *le* is used here. Although Li Hong also wants to tell Li Hui the activity of eating has been completed, she wants to convey more the intention that “you don’t know it and now I want to tell you.” Therefore, this *le* is obligatory. Of course, if Li Hong, at the same time, additionally wants to express a completed activity, she can say (71) or (72). In a word, only verbal suffix `-le` cannot be used alone here.

(71) 我吃了饭了。 
    I eat-le meal *le*
    I have eaten.

(72) 我吃完饭了。 
    I eat finish (resultative wan) meal *le*
    I have finished the meal.

`-le` indicates completion, which is not necessarily indicated by *le*. In teaching this, we should tell students although sentence-final *le*, in some cases, can be translated as signifying completion of activity the same as `-le`, it nevertheless does not indicate the completion of activity. On the contrary, the said action has not been completed yet. For example (73):

(73) 你听，下雨了！ 
    you listen fall rain *le*
    Listen! It is raining.

(74) 下了雨。 
    fall -le rain
    It rained.

In this sentence, aspect suffix `-le` cannot be used because (74) expresses the completion of activity (raining). The Rain has stopped already, which is contradictory to “你听” [Listen!] in (73). So what the speaker wants to express must not be the completion of activity (raining). Here *le* in (73) performs the function that the speaker conveys and reminds the other party that the affair of raining is a new piece of information. In addition, under certain language environments, “下雨了” in (73) can also express the idea that the speaker himself/herself found the fact of raining. For example:

(75) (After two hours meeting, the speaker came out of the office building and found it was raining.) 
    哟，下雨了！我没带雨伞。
    Oh fall rain *le* I not take umbrella
    It’s raining! I didn’t take my umbrella.
4.3 -zhe

-zhe indicating activity-durative is different with zai indicating activity progressive. Zai functions to narrate activity progressive, but not to describe things. -zhe and zai are different in terms of their meaning and function. For example, (76b) sounds odd if -zhe is used here to represent activity progressive.

(76) a.你 在 干 什么?
   you zai do what
   What are you doing?

b.你 干着 什么?
   you do-zhe what

Although -zhe can indicate activity-durative, this usage nevertheless is rather constrained by semantic aspectual properties. In addition, Liu (2001) declared the following:

This kind of -zhe ((77)～(78))usually appears in the background of the literary works before its story is developed. It is not narrating the activity progressive. That is to say, the major function of -zhe indicating activity progressive is still describing things, which is seldom used in spoken Chinese. For those who don’t want to write the novel, this -zhe is rarely usedї (p.396).

(77) 赵永进 静静地 听着，一 声 也不 响。
    Zhao Yongjin quietly listen-zhe, one sound also not sound
    Zhao Yongjin listened quietly and silently.

(78) 她的 眼 里 闪动着 泪花。
    her eyes in flicker-zhe tears
    Tears flickered in her eyes.

Due to the constraints of -zhe, should we consider not to teach activity-durative -zhe first? Or if we compose textbooks, should we postpone the appearance of -zhe in the texts? We can think about learning -zhe’s other usages first. Arakawa (2010) generalized a couple of the following usages of -zhe and proposed i and iv should be taught first. We can consider teaching “zai”, “…ne” and “zai….ne” first, indicating activity progressive, since these words are less constrained by semantic aspectual properties.

i. usage of adverbial modifier
ii. usage of subordinating sentence
iii. descriptive sentence
iv. existential sentences
v. usage of “说着，…”[said and then…]

5. Conclusion

In this paper we introduced the preceding studies of le and -zhe, and discussed how to apply those studies to teaching. Chinese aspect is different from both Japanese and English aspect because it has no grammatical tense. For example, “我吃了饭”[I ate the meal] sounds unfinished. As a perfective aspect suffix, -le is unacceptable unless the predicate has a telic verb or is followed by the resultative or numeral-classifier compounds, while both “gohan wo tabe-ta” of Japanese and “I ate the meal” of English are acceptable. In addition, -zhe has often been regarded as having the same function with -ing of English and -sita of Japanese. However, only when occurring with the adverb zai and modality particle ne, does -zhe represent the activity progressive. Due to the particular features of Chinese aspect, this requires us not only to teach students the meaning, but also to teach students to use le and -zhe combined with adverbs, resultatives, numeral-classifier compounds and modality particles.
Notes
i. In this paper we use “?” to refer to an utterance that sounds odd but not necessarily grammatically wrong to native speakers.
ii. “*” refers to an utterance structurally or semantically unacceptable to native speakers.
iii. The English translation is ours.

References