Perfective Aspect Marker LE in Chinese: A Sociolinguistic Perspective

Xiaoshi Li, Wenjing Li and Yaqiong Cui

Michigan State University

There are generally five aspect markers in Chinese: *zài*, *zhe*, and *ne* to indicate imperfective aspect and *le* and *guò* to indicate perfective aspect (Duff & Li, 2002; Erbaugh, 1992). The focus of this study, *le*, is the mostly widely studied. In addition to perfective aspect marker to indicate action completion, *le* can also serve as sentence final particle to indicate a currently relevant state (C. N. Li & Thompson, 1981). It is obligatory in some situations but optional in others. Also, because both verb suffix *le* and particle *le* can be sentence final, the picture is even more complicated.

So far, some studies examined first language acquisition of *le* (P. Li & Bowerman, 1998; P. Li & Shirai, 2000; P. Li, 1990), some investigated second language acquisition of *le* or reacquisition of *le* by heritage speakers (Cui, 2008; Jia & Bayley, 2008; Teng, 1999; Wen, 1995; 1997), and others approached it from the perspective of descriptive grammar (Li & Thompson 1981; Liu 2002; Tan, 2004; Zhang 2003). There have been few studies that document how Chinese native speakers actually use *le* and this study intends to fill the gap.

This study investigates how Chinese native speakers use *le* in oral discourse and the factors that influence their use. The data were collected from three discourse contexts including informal conversations, elicited narratives, and teacher classroom speech. Multivariate analysis of 2,359 tokens revealed that verb complement type and position of *le* have the strongest effects, followed by verb type, serial verb relationship, discourse context, time word presence/absence and sentence type. LE position in serial verbs, sentence polarity, speaker gender and occupation did not reach significance.

The results showed that the general patterns are

1) Quantitative complement of the verb (.79) and no complement (.55) favor overt *le*, while complement of degree (.43), resultative complement (.41), directional complement (.32), and temporal complement (.14) favor *le* omission;
2) Sentence final *le* – one-word sentence (.87) and multiple-word sentence (.64) – favor *le* but postverbal within sentence *le* (.33) favors *le* omission;
3) Model verbs (.64), existential verbs (.58) and action verbs (.51) favor *le*, whereas mental activity verbs (.48), verbal adjectives (.46), copula verbs (.18), and verbal nouns (.17) favor *le* omission;
4) LE is obligatory in verb duplication structures. Instrumental, parallel, causal, explanatory relationship of the verbs in serial verb structures and no-serial-verb sentences favor *le* but verb-object and temporal sequence relationship of the verbs favor *le* omission;
5) Classroom context favors *le* (.57), followed by elicited narrative (.51) and conversations (.45).
6) Time word absence slightly favors *le* (.53) but time word presence slightly disfavors *le* (.46).
7) LE is obligatory in exclamatory sentences. Declarative sentences favor *le* (.52) but questions favor *le* omission (.35).

Overall, this study reveals that *le* use is best explained from multiple perspectives and linguistic factors are the main constraints. The findings of this study help better understand linguistic and sociolinguistic variability in Chinese and provide a resource for future variation studies of L1 and L2 Chinese.

References

Cui, S. (2008). The acquisition of le by learners from Korea and Japan. *Yuyan Jiaoxue Yanjiu (Language Teaching Research)*, *131-133*.

Duff, P., & Li, D. (2002). The acquisition and use of perfective aspect in Mandarin. In M. R. Salaberry & Y. Shirai (Eds.), *The L2 acquisition of tense-aspect morphology* (pp. 417–453). Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Erbaugh, M. S. (1992). The acquisition of Mandarin. In D. I. Slobin (Ed.), *The crosslinguistic study of language acquisition* (pp. 373–455). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Jia, L., & Bayley, R. (2008). The (re)acquisition of perfective aspect marking by Chinese heritage language learners. In A. W. He & Y. Xiao (Eds.), *Chinese as a heritage language: Fostering rooted world citizenry* (pp. 205–222). Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, National Foreign Language Resource Center.

Li, C. N., & Thompson, S. A. (1981). *Mandarin Chinese: A functional reference grammar*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Li, P. (1990). *Aspect and Aktionsart in child Mandarin*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation: University of Leiden.

Li, P., & Bowerman, M. (1998). The acquisition of lexical and grammatical aspect in Chinese. *First Language*, *18*, 311–350.

Li, P., & Shirai, Y. (2000). *The acquisition of lexical and grammatical aspect*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Liu, X. (2002). The grammatical meaning of sentence final particle le. *Shijie Hanyu Jiaoxue (World Chinese Teaching)*, *3*, 70–79.

Tan, C. (2004). The syntactic, semantic and pragmatic functions of sentence final le. *Hanyu Xuexi (Chinese Learning)*, *4*(2), 26–31.

Teng, S. H. (1999). The acquisition of le in L2 Chinese. *Shijie Hanyu Jiaoxue (World Chinese Teaching)*, *1*, 56–64.

Wen, X. (1995). Second language acquisition of the Chinese particle le. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *5*, 45–62.

Wen, X. (1997). Acquisition of Chinese aspect: An analysis of the interlanguage of learners of Chinese as a foreign language. *ITL: Review of Applied Linguistics*, *117/118*, 1–26.

Zhang, L. (2003). "界变"论—关于现代汉语"了"及其相关现象. *Hanyu Xuexi (Chinese Learning)*, *2*(1), 17–21.