

Perfect in Modern Mandarin Chinese^{*}

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This paper looks at the category of perfect in Modern Mandarin Chinese (Putonghua). There are two main perfect marker “imposters” in modern Mandarin, namely the verbal suffix *guo* (过) and the sentence-final particle *le* (了). The paper examines the properties and usage of the two elements in turn, paying special attention to the notion of evidentiality in respect to these elements. Examples for each property are provided, which are borrowed from electronic corpora, prior literature on the subject, and personal conversation. We argue that while both elements possess certain features of a perfect marker, the sentential particle is closer to this function according to its usage, although it is not part of the verbal paradigm.

Keywords: Mandarin Chinese, perfect markers, sentence-final particle *le*, suffix *guo*, Mandarin aspectual system

Introduction

It is widely known that Chinese, even in its contemporary state, tends to be an isolating language and does not have a lot of verbal grammatical categories. However, some scholars claim that the category of perfect does exist in Mandarin; though there are different opinions on which element marks the perfect. According to one hypothesis, this element is the suffix *guo* (过), which is traditionally labeled as experiential marker; another point of view represented in literature on the subject is that the perfect is marked by the sentence-final particle *le* (了), which primarily expresses the change-of-state meaning. We will examine their meanings and usage below. Since the notion of perfectness correlates with that of perfectivity, we will give a brief overview of perfective markers in Mandarin before considering perfect markers themselves. The paper is structured as follows: The “Perfect and Perfectivity” section discusses the definition of perfect and its relation to perfectivity. The second section gives an overview of perfective markers, namely the suffix *le* (了) and the resultative verb compound. The third section discusses the meanings and usage of the first candidate for the role of a perfect marker: the experiential *guo*. Our special attention is given to the evidential function of the affix. The fourth section describes the sentence-final particle *le*. Finally, the last section gives a summary of the two markers’ features and analyses their correspondence to the notion of perfect. The data used in this paper come from the electronic corpus of the Peking university, as well as personal conversation with native speakers of Mandarin.

Perfect and Perfectivity

Aspect, according to Comrie (1976), represents the internal temporal constitution of a situation. In this

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sense, perfect is different, for it tells us nothing directly about the situation in itself, but rather “relates some state to a preceding situation”. For instance, the difference between the following two English utterances: “I broke my leg” and “I have broken my leg” is that the perfect implies that my leg is still broken, whereas the simple past does not have such an implication. The most common definition of perfect is that it indicates the continuing relevance of a prior situation for the reference time. Thus, it expresses a relation between two time points: the time of the prior situation and the time of the state resulting from that prior situation. This makes the perfect different from other aspects, where only one time point is involved.

The perfect construction is most commonly made up of an auxiliary with a participle, but it can also be derived from a verb with completive meaning, which is the case in most East Asian languages (Plungian, 2011). We will see that both aspectual markers that are being analyzed fit this latter description well.

Comrie and many other researchers point out that although the perfect is different from all other aspect markers, it is often placed in the same category as aspect due to tradition, but it would be more precise to say that it occupies a borderline position between aspectual and temporal categories. It is worth mentioning, though, that the perfect, being a marker of relevance of the result of a prior situation, overlaps semantically with perfective, which denotes a situation seen as a single whole, i.e., includes its final point into the scope. For this reason, we will first give a brief overview of perfective markers in Mandarin.

Overview of Perfective Markers

Aspect is probably the most grammaticalized verbal category in Modern Mandarin. The temporal meanings are not usually expressed by grammatical means; there only exist two markers that are on the way of grammaticalization from modal verbs towards future tense: *yao* (要: debitative) and *hui* (会: probability) (see Examples 1-2).

Example (1) míngtiān tā yào jiéhūn le

tomorrow he DEB marry CRS

He is going to marry tomorrow

Example (2) xià yī nián tā huì yǒu gèng hǎo de biǎoxiàn

next one year he PROB have more good ATTR performance

Next year he will probably perform even better.

Two markers of perfectivity are traditionally recognized in Mandarin: *le* (perfective) and *guo* (experiential); both are derived from verbs and are strongly grammaticalized in modern language. Resultative verb compounds are sometimes considered to be part of the same category. We will examine these markers in turn.

The Suffix *le*

Its etymology goes back to the verb *liao* (finish, complete) (see section “The History of Development of the Two *le*’s” for more details).

Le as a suffix is to be distinguished from the homonymic particle *le* which occurs in the very end of a sentence (or, to be more precise, of a clause). Furthermore, it is important to note that despite traditional Chinese descriptions, it has no reference to the past (see Example 3):

Example (3) wǒ xià yī nián jiù huíqù-le.

I next one year already come.back-PFV

I will come back next year.

Dragunov (1952) pointed out that the meaning of completeness most strikingly shows up in contexts where “one action is completed before the other starts” (see Example 4):

Example (4) lái, lái, wǒmen chī-le fàn zài tán ba!

Come come we eat-PFV rice again chat HORT

Come, come, we'll have another chat after we finish eating (Dragunov, 1952)

A special marker *mei* (you) is used in perfective contexts with negation (see Example 5):

Example (5) zuìfàn Wú Lihóng shī-shēng jiào-dào: “wǒ méi xiǎng-dào yǒu nàme duō zhèngrén!”

criminal Wu Lihong lose-voice shout-finish I NEG.PFV think-finish have so many witness

The criminal Wu Lihong couldn't help crying out: I didn't think there would be so many witnesses!

The affix occurs with verbs denoting different types of actions and gains, respectively, different aspect readings.

When added to a stative verb or an adjective, it obtains an inceptive meaning (see Example 6):

Example (6) tā hóng-le liǎn

he red-PFV face

His face turned red.

In combination with events, the affix gets a punctual meaning (see Example 7):

Example (7) tā qù nián sǐ-le

he last year die-PFV

He died last year.

The verb *si* “die” is an event in Mandarin: For instance, it cannot occur with progressive *zhe* and durative *zai* *¹*ta si-zhe*, unlike “he is dying”, which is felicitous in English.

Example (8) děng wǒ juéding-le, yíding huì tōngzhī dàjiā

wait I decide-PFV definitely can inform everyone

Wait, I'll definitely inform everyone after I decide.

In Example (8), the verb *juéding* “decide” has no duration either; it refers to the instantaneous moment of taking a decision; a proof for that could be the ungrammaticality of limitative reduplication “to do sth for a limited period of time” **juéding-le-juéding*, **juéding-yi-juéding*.

The processes render various interpretations to *le*. It can be a marker of punctivity (see Example 9):

Example (9) tā gàosu-le wǒmen shénme shì zhēnzhèng de zìxìn

he tell-PFV we what be true ATTR self.faith

He told us what true self-confidence was.

It can also be a marker of limitative (with a circumstance of duration) (see Example 10):

Example (10) qí-le yī-ge xiǎoshí-de chē, zhǎo-dào-le Lífāng-de jiā.

take-PFV one-CL hour-ATTR bus seek-finish-PFV Lifang-ATTR house

[he] rode a bus for an hour and found Lifang's place.

¹ An asterisk (*) marks an ungrammatical phrase.

This set of meanings (i.e., inceptive, punctual, and limitative) is defined as perfective in (Plungian, 2011), which does not contradict the common terminology for the affix *le*, although it usually has a narrower sense in Mandarin studies tradition, and only pertains to punctivity.

Resultative Verb Compound

One construction in Modern Mandarin Chinese which can be correctly considered together with other perfective markers is the resultative verb compound. It is built up by adding a predicative (a verb or an adjective) or an affix with completive meaning to the main verb. The completive affix is a grammaticalized verb of completion (compare Examples 11-12):

Example (11) tā kàn-wán-le shū
 he read-finish-PFV book
he read the book to the end

Example (12) tā kū-hóng-le liǎn
 she cry-red-PFV face
She cried so that her face went red.

The verb *wán* “finish” from Example (11) is strongly grammaticalized and can be treated as a verbal affix: It is untoned and has a large distribution. Example (12) differs in the sense that both elements are full predicatives.

The meaning of the RVC can be described as follows: “A situation V1 has taken place with the result being situation V2”. For instance, “V1 = she cried, with the result being V2 = her face is red now” (constructions from Germanic languages such as *I hit him dead*, *Ich schlug ihn tot* can serve as an analogy for this construction).

In some cases, the RVCs have a tint of a degree (V1 to the extent that V2) (see Example 13):

Example (13) wǒ lèi-sǐ-le
 I get tired-die-PFV
I'm tired to death (lit. got so tired that died)

XIAO and McEnery (2004) suggested that there are two types of RVCs: completive and resultative, depending on whether completiveness or resulting state is in the focus of meaning of the construction. In our opinion, this distinction correlates primarily to the extent to which the second element of the RVC is grammaticalized. The completive reading is typical for grammaticalized elements (see Example 14):

Example (14) tā xiě-hǎo-le wénzhāng
 he write-good-PFV article
He completed writing his article

Whereas full predicates obtain a resultative reading more often (see Example 15):

Example (15) tā bǎ yīfu xǐ-gānjìng-le
 she DO clothes wash-clean-PFV
She washed the clothes clean.

The Suffix *guo* (过)

According to some works written on this topic, *guo* stands for perfect in Mandarin. This point of view is

expressed, for instance, by Smith (1997) and Chappell (2004). This hypothesis is in the first place triggered by the fact that *guo* expresses the experiential meaning, which is one of the common usages of perfect.

The suffix *guo*, as well as all the other verbal suffixes in Modern Mandarin, has a verbal etymology. It is derived from the verb “cross, pass by” gone through a state of a second element of a RVC.

Like the suffix *le*, it is negated by the means of the special particle *mei* (see Example 16):

Example (16) wǒ méi qù-guo Měiguó, suǒyǐ shuō-cuò-le yě bié xiào.

I NEG.PFV go-EXP USA so say-mistake-PFV even PROH laugh

I haven't been to the US, so don't laugh at me even if I make a mistake.

Let us consider the usages of this suffix.

Experiential. The central usage of *guo*, mentioned in almost every work on Mandarin aspectual system, is that of experientiality (see Example 17):

Example (17) wǒ bù néng shuō fēidié yíding cúnzài, dànshi wǒ quèshí kàn-jiàn-guo wúmíng fēixíng-wù

I NEG can say flying saucer definitely exist, but I really look-see-EXP UFO

I cannot say that flying saucers necessarily exist, but I did see a UFO

The usage of *guo* as an experiential marker is not bound to contexts with animate subjects: Its meaning can be defined as “a situation took place at least once during a certain period of time”, the subject of the action not necessarily being an animate being undergoing a certain experience (see Example 18 from Tantucci (2013)):

Example (18) shìjiè-shàng cúnzài-guo kǒnglóng

earth-LOC exist-EXP dinosaur

There existed dinosaurs on earth (at some point).

As can be seen from Example (18), *guo* is not only used when somebody has had some experience in the past, but also when a situation has taken place once, no matter whether this situation had an animate subject or not. Such an “extension” of the notion of experientiality does not contradict its definitions given in Comrie (1976) and Dahl (1985): The basic use of the experiential is in sentences in which it is asserted (questioned, denied) that an event of a certain type took place at least once during a certain period up to a certain point in time (Dahl, 1985). A given situation has held at least once during some time in the past leading up to the present (Comrie, 1976).

Cancelled result. There is a very important constraint on the usage of perfective *guo*: It denotes a situation with a cancelled (or discontinuous) result. This means that the situation marked by the main verb is over, but its result no longer holds or cannot be observed. In this usage, the affix is counterposed to perfective *le* (compare Examples 19-20 from Chao (1968), as cited in Smith (1997)):

Example (19) wǒ shuāiduàn-le tuǐ

I break-PFV leg

I have broken my leg (= not specified whether it is still in cast)

Example (20) wǒ shuāiduàn-guo tuǐ

I break-EXP leg

I have broken my leg (= it has healed since)

The third element of this opposition (inclusivity marker) is the particle *le* (see below).

Evidentiality. Some recent research works (Chappell, 2004; Tantucci, 2013) are devoted to the question

of whether evidentiality is grammaticalized in Mandarin. These authors claim that *guo* stands for evidential marker (i.e., marker of immediative and inferitive). Chappell (2004) compared several Chinese dialects in her work and came to a conclusion that *guo* denotes inferitive in most of them, including Mandarin. As experience is only relevant for animate first person subjects (which, however, does not correspond to the definitions provided in Dahl and Comrie, see above), experiential should not be used as a core feature defining the semantics of the category, wrote Chappell (2004). Referring to various studies on evidentiality, she stated that one of the sources for developing evidentials are perfects, and *guo* and its relatives in other Chinese dialects are not exceptions from this rule (thus, treating *guo* as a marker of perfect).

Sentences with first person subjects with *guo* have no inferential reading in Mandarin. Chappell (2004) explained that given the fact that a first person subject is personally involved in the situation, and therefore does not judge it on the basis of a logical assumption, but can only observe it directly. However, inferitive can occur with first person in world languages: This problem is discussed, in particular, in Maisak and Tatevosov (2000), where examples of first person inferitive in Bagvalal and Mishar Tatar languages are provided. The speaker, even if he/she was the initiator of the action being described, could for some reasons not know or have forgotten about the fact that he/she did it, and reconstruct it afterwards on the basis of a logical assumption.

The examples given in Chappell (2004) and, later, in Tantucci (2013), can be interpreted as evidential (see Example 21):

Example (21) *shìjiè-shàng cúnzài-guo kǒnglóng*
 earth-LOC exist-EXP dinosaurs
There (once) existed dinosaurs on earth.

The fact that there existed dinosaurs is known to the speaker on the basis of some common knowledge, wrote Tantucci (2013); this common knowledge is the source of information to which the evidential marker refers. However, we claim that *guo* cannot be treated as the bearer of evidentiality in this sentence: *guo* being replaced by durative *zài*, the source of information still remains an element of common knowledge. Moreover, there exist contexts where fully grammaticalized evidentiality would definitely be marked but that do not allow the use of *guo* (see Example 22):

Example (22) *Investigating a robbery, having seen some footsteps under the window*
xiǎotōu tōngguo zhè shān chuānghu jìn le fángzi.
 Thief through this CL window come.in-PFV house
The thief has penetrated into the house through this window.

As *guo* can only refer to a discontinuous situation, as was stated above, it would be ungrammatical in a sentence like this. It is only felicitous in examples such as Example (23):

Example (23) *The speaker comes into the room and feels the cold, the window is closed:*
nǐ kāi-guo chuānghu (le) ma?
 You open-EXP window (CRS) Q
Did you open the window?

The speaker makes an assumption on the basis of the fact that it is cold in the room. Since the condition that the result no longer holds is fulfilled, using *guo* is possible. If the speaker presumes that the

window is still open (for example, the window cannot be seen from his/her point of view, he/she can only feel the cold), *guo* cannot be used.

Given the evidence above, we thus cannot refer *guo* as a grammaticalized marker of evidentiality in Mandarin. Using *guo* is only possible in certain contexts and only with certain constraints.

The Sentence-Final Particle *le*

Another possible perfect marker “imposter” in Mandarin is the sentence-final particle *le*.

This claim is made, in particular, in the well-known work (LI, S. A. Thompson, & R. M. Thompson, 1982). Following LI and S. A. Thompson (1981), other authors have written about *le* as a perfect marker. The great difficulty in exploring this particle lies in the fact that it is homonymic to the perfective affix *le* (see section “The suffix *le*” of this paper); the affix immediately follows the verb, while the particle completes the clause, so it can be problematic to distinguish them if the verb holds the final position in a clause. In this paper, we tried to select only the examples where the two markers can be unambiguously distinguished by word order, to avoid different interpretations (see Examples 24-25):

Example (24) *tā chī-le fàn*.

He eat-PFV rice

He ate.

Example (25) *tā chī-fàn le*.

He eat-rice CRS

He ate/he is eating (= new state)²

The word *fàn* “rice” is (although formal, but) the object here, and follows the verb in a direct word order sentence. If the affix *le* is used, it occurs immediately after the verb; if it is the case for the particle *le*, it occupies the place after the object, at the end of the sentence.

The two markers can cooccur in one sentence (see Example 26):

Example (26) *tā chī-le fàn le*.

He eat-PFV rice CRS

he ate (= new state).

The History of Development of the Two *le*’s

The perfective marker *le*, according to most researchers (SHI, 1989), has derived from the full verb *liao* (complete, accomplish). In Early Mandarin (the 10th-15th centuries), it started replacing other verbs of similar meanings in the V O *liao* construction (Zograf, 2005). Then the V O *liao* construction gradually transformed into V *liao* O, with the verb *liao* immediately following the main verb. Simultaneously, the phonetical reduction of *liao* into *le* took place. By the 15th century, the process of transforming *liao* into *le* has apparently been completed.

The history of developing the clitics *le* is not as clear cut. XIAO and McEnery (2004) assumed, relying on other works, that the verb *liao* first transformed to the final particle *le*, and then over to the affix *le*. This hypothesis does not, however, explain why the final particle holds its position in the sentence and why it

² The particle *le* is glossed CRS = Currently Relevant State after LI and S. A. Thompson (1981).

cooccurs with the perfective affix. The explanation given in SUN (1996) looks more plausible, according to it, the clitics *le* has derived from the verb *lai* (come, approach), which started to be used as a perfect marker in Early Mandarin and established in this function approximately in the 15th century. The phonetical reduction into *le* is likely to have taken place afterwards, with the result being that the perfective marker and the clitics have become homonymous and started using the same character.

Some Features of the Particle *le*

Clausal scope. There is an apt remark in SHI (1990) that the particle *le* unlike other particles in Mandarin has a scope of a clause and not of a sentence. Indeed, when building up a complex sentence (a temporal or a relative) the particle *le* can occur in a dependent clause (see Examples 27-30 from SHI (1990)):

Example (27) Chī-fàn le de rén...
eat-rice CRS ATTR people...
People who ate

Example (28) Chī-fàn le yǐhòu...
eat-rice CRS after...
After having eaten...

Whereas the question particle *ma* cannot occur in such contexts:

Example (29) *Chī-fàn ma de rén...
eat-rice Q ATTR people

Example (30) *Chī-fàn ma yǐhòu...
eat-rice Q after...

Negation. Unlike the affixal *le*, the particle *le* can be negated both by means of *mei* (you) and *bu* (see Examples 31-32):

Example (31) kuài chī diǎn ba, nǐ yǒu hěn jiǔ méi chī-fàn le!
Quick eat a little HORT, you have very long time NEG eat-rice CRS
Eat a bit, quick, you haven't eaten anything for a long time!

Example (32) Wǒ bù chī-fàn le, qǐng tā bǎ fàn ná-zǒu.
I NEG eat-rice CRS, ask he DO rice take-go
I am not going to eat, ask him to take away the food.

Usages of the Particle *le*

One can regard the relevance of a certain event for the state of affairs at the reference time as the common component of different usages of *le*. Based on this idea, many scholars assume this particle to be the perfect marker in Mandarin.

The first person to use the notion of “perfect” referring to the particle *le* was Dragunov (1952). Although by that time, the notion of perfectness was not yet fully developed, he had shown an acute intuition in this regard. Unfortunately, his work was published in Russian and remained unknown to Western readers, so the right of discovering this category in Mandarin is ascribed primarily to LI and S. A. Thompson (as cited in LI, S. A. Thompson, & R. M. Thompson, 1982).

Despite the fact that all the usages of perfect have this common element of relevance for the current state

of affairs, specific meanings of perfect markers in different languages vary dramatically. Let us consider those that are expressed by the particle *le* in Modern Mandarin Chinese.

Change of state. The meaning that, following LI, S. A. Thompson, and R. M. Thompson (1982), is highlighted by most researchers is that of change of state. A situation held in the past is relevant for the reference time if the changes it has involved are relevant for it (see Example 33):

Example (33) tā yǐjīng zhīdào nèi jiàn shì le
 he already know this CL matter CRS
He already knows this (= he didn't know before)

The same sentence without *le* would be a mere statement of his knowledge of something; the particle *le* highlights the fact that the state of affairs used to be different before, so that the situation is new as compared to the previous state: He did not know this before (see Example 34):

Example (34) wǒ jīntiān lǐng-le gōngzī, kěyǐ gěi nǐ mǎi píjiǔ le.
 I today grasp-PFV salary, be possible DAT you buy beer CRS.
I got my salary today, so (now) I can buy you a beer (= I couldn't before)

The situation “I can buy you a beer” is new comparing to the previous state of affairs: Getting the salary by the speaker led to the change in situation, with the result being that he/she can buy a beer; that is why using *le* is appropriate.

The change of state cannot only be objective, but also subjective; in other words, *le* can also express the fact that the situation is new from the point of view of the speaker, even if it has held before. In the following sentence, quoted in various works, *le* cannot only be used when the rain has just started, but also if it started long ago, but the speaker has only noticed it now (see Example 35):

Example (35) Xià yǔ le.
 Descend rain CRS
It is raining (= it has just started, or = I have just noticed)

Just recently a new notion of *iamitive* was proposed by Östen Dahl, that seems to fit this usage of *le*; very unfortunately, though, there are no published works about *iamitive* so far.

Examples like the one above can be treated as inferentive: *le* in this example can be used if the speaker does not observe the rain immediately, but, for example, hears the raindrops falling down on the roof or sees the wet sidewalk. However, it seems that one cannot claim *le* to be the grammaticalized marker of inferentive; as it was stated above, there are contexts where the inferentive reading needs to be chosen, but it is not expressed by grammar means (see the section about evidentiality and *guo*).

Contrary to expectations. Another usage of *le* mentioned in some works is that that of expressing an unfulfilled expectation. In LI and S. A. Thompson (1981), it is labeled as “correcting a wrong assumption” (p. 263), in Soh (2009)—“contrary to expectation” (p. 631). These are the cases where the situation described by the speaker does not coincide with the listener’s prior assumptions. One can say that in this case, the state of affairs is relevant for the reference time (see Example 36 from LI & S. A. Thompson (1981) and Example 37 from Soh (2009)):

Example (36) *a fairy-tale: The dog cries to his friend duck who is flying above, thinking that he is flying south:*

hāi, guāguā! nǐ wàng běifang qù le!

Hey, quack-quack! You towards north go CRS

Hey, quack-quack! You are flying north (= not south, as you are thinking)

The dog uses *le* to highlight the fact that the duck's assumption that he is flying south is incorrect. Without *le*, this sentence would merely state that he was flying north:

Example (37) Zhè piàn xīguā hěn tián le. Bú bì jiā táng le.

This CL watermelon very sweet CRS. NEG need add sugar CRS

This watermelon is (already) sweet, no need to add sugar (= the listener assumed he/she needed to add sugar).

The particle *le* used in Example (37) indicates that the listener had a wrong assumption, namely, he/she thought he/she needed to add sugar to it. The speaker tells him/her that this assumption was wrong. Another reading of the same sentence (change of state: The watermelon was not sweet before, but has become sweet now) is not available because of the presence of the adverb *hen*: It is only used with states and properties and does not allow inchoative reading; in the opposite case, it would be omitted (*zhè piàn xīguā tián le*).

In a certain sense, this usage of *le* is opposite to admirative (expressing speaker's surprise or admiration of the fact that the utterance refers to): They should not be confused, because admiration expresses a mismatch of the fact with the speaker's assumptions, whereas in the case of *le* the discrepancy is between the fact and the assumptions of the listener.

This usage of *le* (contrary to expectations) is similar to Russian contrastive particles, such as *zhe*, *vse-taki*, *taki*, as well as English *already*, German *schon*, French *si*, and others (see Example 38):

Example (38) Ya zhe uzhe pī kōfē!

I ZHE already drink.PST.M.SG coffee

I have already had coffee (= don't you know that?).

This utterance is appropriate in a situation where the listener does not know or has forgotten that the speaker has already had coffee, and the latter reminds him/her of the fact. The dictionary entry for *zhe* states that "the particle highlights what has been said with a tint of irritation or discontent". We argue that the "irritation or discontent" is not included in the core meaning of the particle; it is more likely a pragmatic implication; the core meaning of the particle is the discrepancy between what the listener assumes and the reality. This is what makes it similar to the Mandarin particle.

Inclusivity. One perfect-like usage of *le* is not very common worldwide (among European languages it is presented, for instance, in English and Spanish) and does not usually draw attention of sinologists: It is the inclusive usage, where the fact that the situation still holds is highlighted rather than the result of this situation (see Example 39):

Example (39) tā yǐjīng kàn-le sān-ge xiǎoshí [de diànshì] le.

She already watch-PFV 3-CL hour [ATTR TV] CRS.

She has already been watching [TV] for three hours.

Using *le* in this sentence makes it inclusive: She has watched the television for three hours and is still watching it. Without *le* both interpretations would become possible: "has watched and finished watching" or "has watched and still is".

The two sentences below illustrate the triple opposition of the particle *le*, the suffix *le*, and the suffix *guo*: The sentence using the particle *le* can only be translated as inclusive: “I still live here”, whereas *guo*, as was stated above, has the meaning of discontinuous result and hence only allows the “discontinuous” translation “I don’t live here anymore”. The suffix *le* is neutral with respect to inclusivity, it can also be used in the latter context (see Examples 40-41):

Example (40) wǒ zài zhèlǐ zhù-le qī nián le

I LOC here live-PFV 7 year CRS

I have been living here for 7 years

Example (41) wǒ zēng zài zhèlǐ zhù-guo(-le) qī nián, dàn hòulái wǒ bèipò bān-zǒu-le.

I already LOC here live-EXP(/-PFV) 7 year, but later I have to move-go.away-PFV

I have lived here for 7 years, but then I had to move out.

Modal usage of *le*: attenuation of categoricity. The particle *le* is also used in a way that does not directly correspond to perfectness, i.e., to the relevance of a result for the reference time: It is used to show the attenuation of categoricity of an utterance. One and the same utterance: “don’t be late” can be coded differently depending on the level of categoricity of the speaker (see Examples 42-43):

Example (42) bié chídào!

PROH be late

don’t be late! (the teacher says to the students in school)

Example (43) bié chídào le!

PROH be late CRS

don’t be late! (mother says to her kid, worrying that the kid is acting too slowly)

Despite certain remoteness of the modal usage from perfect meanings, attenuation of categoricity can also be explained by the relevance of the result: By using *le*, the speaker shows his/her interest in the listener, his/her involvement in the situation and, therefore, its relevance. There is a good reason why this usage of *le* is very common in imperatives: Using *le* in an imperative highlights the interest of the speaker in that the request should be fulfilled.

LI and S. A. Thompson (1981) attributed this group of examples to the meaning of “closing a statement”. In their view, the relation of closing a statement and its relevance for the reference time is explained by the fact that a closed statement is important in itself, as a contribution to the conversation which does not elicit an “and what about it?” response. In fact, the examples they provided fit the “mild categoricity” meaning: Most contexts differ in whether the speaker and the listener are strangers to each other or if they are fairly close. Two close friends will say when departing (see Example 44 from LI & S. A. Thompson (1981)):

Example (44) hǎo, míngtiān jiàn le!

good tomorrow see CRS

Good, see you tomorrow!

Whereas two business partners most likely will not use *le*.

Thus, several usages of the particle *le* can be distinguished, and all of them can in one way or another be generalized as coding the relevance of the situation for the reference time. This generalization allows us to treat *le* as a marker of perfect, as such relevance is exactly the core meaning of this category.

Conclusions

We have provided an overview of the meanings and usage of two markers in Modern Mandarin Chinese that have a claim on being perfect markers. Both markers have a verbal etymology and have derived from the resultative construction, which is considered a common source for perfect markers.

The core meaning of the suffix *guo* is experiential. Also, it has a constraint on its perfective usage: the discontinuous result. As was stated above, it cannot be named a grammaticalized marker of evidentiality.

The particle *le* codes inclusivity, “change of state” and “contrary to expectations” meanings, as well as the “attenuation of categoricity” usage. The evidential semantics of this marker is also secondary.

Thus, the two markers share some meanings common to the perfect, so that the variety of opinions on which of them should be treated as perfect is completely understandable. We have proven, however, that the constraint on discontinuous result, that is a property of *guo*, somehow contradicts the semantics of perfectness coding the relevance of the result for the reference time. One counterargument to this would be that a discontinuous result is still a result and its discontinuity can also be relevant (in such case, we would be bound to state perfect usage of the cases like Russian imperfective “ty otkryval okno?” (did you open the window?)).

The usages of the particle *le* are more consistent with the semantics of perfect, so there is no wonder that the followers of the idea that it stands for perfect are more numerous. Some difficulty arises from the fact the fact that it is not a part of the verbal paradigm, being a clause-final particle.

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Appendix: The Full Name of the Abbreviation Used in This Paper

| | |
|----------|---------------------------|
| ATTR | attributive |
| CL | classifier |
| CRS | Currently Relevant State |
| DAT | dative |
| DEB | debitative |
| DO | direct object |
| EXP | experiential |
| HORT | hortative |
| LOC | locative |
| NEG | negative |
| NEG.PFV | negative perfective |
| PFV | perfective |
| PROB | probability |
| PROH | prohibitive |
| PST.M.SG | past masculine singular |
| Q | question particle |
| RVC | Resultative Verb Compound |
| ZHE | Russian particle zhe |