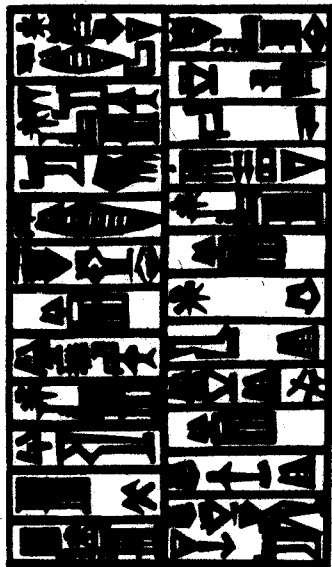


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A Study of Chinese le.*

Si Hui

§ 1. Le, one of the most commonly used words in Chinese, has been the focus of grammatical study for many years. Various hypotheses have been put forward with regard to its meaning and its usage—all, however, worked out within the framework of traditional grammar.

Le has been taken to be a member of an Aspect system, indicating whether an action has been completed or not. For example, Lü Jiping (1983) says that "le indicates an action that has been completed." Another scholar, Lü Shuxiang (1982) suggests that le has two meanings, one of which is the completion of an action and the other a decision on the part of the speaker. The le in the first meaning always appears after a verb or before an object; the le in the second meaning is always put at the end of a sentence. Thus:

1. 他早吃了饭了

ta zao chi le fan le
he early eat LE meal LE
He had his meal a long time ago

The first le in the sentence above would indicate that the action of eating has been completed, while the second le would indicate that the speaker has decided that the action is completed.

The le that follows a future action would have to be this second le. For example:

2. 开饭了, 请进来

kai fan le. qing jin lai
open meal LE. please come in
Dinner's ready. Please come in.

At the time of speaking, people are still outside the room. The meal has not yet started, so the le could not mean completion but would have to mean "decision".

* A report on the author's M.A. research.

Another hypothesis, which is a further development from the second one above, can be found in the work 800 Words of Modern Standard Chinese. This hypothesis is that le can be divided into le.1 and le.2, depending on the position occupied in the sentence. Le.1 appears after a verb or before an object, if there is one, and indicates that an action has been completed, while le.2 is used at the end of a sentence, and indicates the change of a situation or the future change of a situation. For example:

3. 刮风了
 gua feng le
 blow wind LE
 The wind starts blowing.

The message is that the wind has already started to blow. The weather has changed from windless to windy.

4. 快放假了
 kuai fang jia le
 soon begin vacation LE
 Vacation is coming soon.

The situation has not changed yet, but it is going to change.

In a sentence with two le's, the first le is le.1 and the second is le.2.

5. 我已经写了回信了
 wo yijing xie le huixin le
 I already write LE reply LE
 I have replied already.

The first le means that the action of writing has been done, while the second le means that the situation is changed from not writing to having written.

All three hypotheses mentioned above take the notion of Aspect as the basic meaning. However, this does not seem to furnish a satisfactory basis. For one thing, the division of le into le.1 and le.2 is not a convincing solution, for the completion of an action is not much different from a change of situation: When an action is done or completed, the situation is surely also changed. These appear actually to be two sides of

the same coin. A serious consequence of this ambivalence can be seen when there is only one le in a sentence and it occupies both the sentencefinal position and the position following the verb. In this case, one can hardly decide which le it is. To solve this problem, the traditional grammarians have invented still another term: le.1+le.2.

6. 那本书借出去了
 na ben shu jie chuqu le
 that CL book lend out LE
 That book has been lent out.

The le now presumably indicates that the action of 'lending' is finished and the situation of the book is changed at the same time.

A second problem with the Aspect hypothesis is that not all the completed actions are followed by le.

7. 邓秀梅刷好手帕回转身子
 Teng Hsiu-mei shuan hau shoupa huizhuan shenzi,
 Teng Hsiu-mei wash ready handkerchief turn-round body
 重新坐在船边上, 两手扯
 chongxin zuo zai chuan bian shang, liang shou che
 again sit ZAI boat side on two hand stretch
 着湿帕子让它在太阳里晒着
 zhe shi pazi rang ta zai taiyang li shai zhe
 ZHE wet handkerchief let it ZAI sun in dry ZHE
 Teng, having finished her washing, turned round and again sat on the side of the boat, stretching the handkerchief with both hands, to dry it in the sun.

As the English translation shows, 'wash' is a completed action in comparison with all the other actions. But le is not used after it. This is very strong evidence against the Aspect hypothesis, and this kind of evidence can be found on every page of any Chinese book.

A final problem with the Aspect hypothesis is that le actually can appear in any position; i.e., follow any class of word.

8. noun + LE:

春天了

cuntian le
spring LE
It is spring now.

numeral + LE:

四十了

sishi le
forty LE
Forty years old.

adjective + LE:

头发白了

toufa bai le
hair white LE
The hair turns grey.

adverb + LE:

快了

kuai le
soon LE

(When are you going to finish your paper?) Soon.

auxiliary verb + LE:

可以了

keyi le
can LE
It is all right.

preposition + LE:

为了他

wei le ta
for LE he
for the sake of him

Since verbs are not the only words le can follow, the Aspect hypothesis does not cover all instances of the occurrence of le.

In this paper, I will propose a new hypothesis concerning le. I will suggest that there is a common element in the messages conveyed by all sentences containing le. Once we grasp this common element, we are in a position to state its single exact meaning and we do not have to divide le into le.1 and le.2. The differences in the messages are to be accounted for by the different contexts in which le appears. Throughout this paper those aspects of the messages that are derived from the contexts will play a key role in pinpointing the meaning of le.

§2. Before we state our new hypothesis, let us see how (that is in what circumstances) le is used. The following exam-

ples give some of the typical uses of le, as found in the first two chapters of the Chinese novel Great Changes in a Mountain Village.

9. 洋船来了, 有浪

yang chuan lai le, you lang,
foreign boat come LE have wave

看船偏到一边了

kan chuan pian dao yi bian le
look boat slant to one side LE

There's a steamer coming! Mind its wash,
look at the way we are listing.

In this sentence, there is a sequence of verbs, four all together: lai (come), you (have), kan (look), and pian (slant). However, only the first one is directly followed by le. The message of this sentence is that the boatman is warning a group of cadres of the danger that their boat will be overturned by the waves caused by an approaching steamer. Obviously, the coming of the steamer is the initial cause of everything that follows; le is associated with this cause. The second le follows yi bian (one side) instead of the verb (slant). Actually, we could put a le after the verb, but the le after yi bian could still not be left out. The message we get from this positioning of le is that the situation is very dangerous because the boat is already slanting to one side. With le after one side, the boatman arouses more attention from the people on board.

This usage of le, to concentrate attention on a particular point, can be seen even more clearly in the next example.

10. 才想到这里, 只见山边的路上

cai xiangdao zheli, zhi jian shan bian de lu shang,
just think this then see hill side DE road on

来了一个背竹子的老汉子

lai le yi ge qian zhuzi de lao guanzi
come LE one CL carry bamboo DE old man

At this point she saw an old man with a bundle of bamboos on his shoulder coming along the hillside path.

Thinking this, she then saw that along the hillside path was coming LE an old man carrying bamboo.

Again, we have a series of actions: xiang (think), jian (see), lai (come), and qian (carry). Only lai is followed by le. At this point of the story, the author wants to introduce a new character, an old man who is going to play an important role in the following chapters.

Naturally our attention should be directed to an action that is important in connection with this new character. Think and see are the actions done by the main character (a woman cadre), and carry (an action treated as an attributive, thus playing a minor role) indicates the manner in which the new character (the old man) comes. Then come is the only important action, the one that deserves attention, and le goes with it.

Note also that there is a striking parallel in terms of Focus between Chinese and English: 'come le an old man' and "was coming an old man". The word order is the same. In both cases, the agent is put Not-In-Focus; i.e., in position after the verb. The backgrounding of the agent brings the action itself into focus. Hence le goes with come rather than with any other word.

In the above example, le is attached to the most important action in the sentence. In the following examples, le is used in a slightly different way.

11. 爷爷不在了

yeye bu zai le
father not present LE

My father is no longer living.

Zai in Chinese means 'present'. The sentence ta bu zai (he not present), without the le, means that somebody is temporarily absent. But when zai is followed by le, it means something or somebody is lost forever. So the message we get from (11) is that "father" is absent in such a significant sense that he is dead. Le picks up the more forceful sense of the word zai (present) and gives it a special interpretation.

A similar usage of le is found in the following:

12. 躲开了算了

duokai le suan le

avoid LE count LE

I would rather go right away from it all.

Here, suan le means a decision to do something. But the original meaning of suan is 'count'. It is not difficult to see a step-by-step extension of the lexical meaning: count / calculate quantitatively / calculate non-quantitatively / decision resulting from calculation. The further its meaning is extended, the more mental effort is required to pick out the interpretation appropriate to this particular context; le has the effect of alerting the hearer to the need for greater attention. Superficially, this usage of le is different from the one mentioned above.

However, if we look a little more deeply, we find that there is something in common between them. In both instances there is concentration of attention: in the one instance the reader is directed to concentrate attention on a particular part of the message; in the other, the instruction is to concentrate attention on the processing of a particular part of the message. The result of this processing is again a special interpretation.

A further development of this second usage of le can be found in the following expressions of time.

13. 两点半了

liang dian le

two o'clock LE

Almost two.

14. 太阳偏西了

taiyang pian xi le
sun incline west LE
The sun was getting into the west.

15. 天色不早了

tian se bu zao le
sky color not early LE
It's getting late.

When they are not followed by le, all these sentences except the last one are basically neutral in their messages about time; they simply state a fact. But once a le is put into them, a "lateness" message is produced; people are urged to pay more attention to time.

Given this kind of usage, it is only natural for le to be used in a sentence containing tai ('too', in the sense of 'very', not 'also'), for tai in its lexical meaning always pushes something to an extreme.

16. 太没得味了

tai meide wer le
too not interesting LE
Too dull for words.

17. 只是太调皮, 太爱笑了

zhi shi tai tiaopi, tai ai xiao le
only SHI too naughty too like laugh LE
She is too mischievous and giggles too much.

Since something in its extreme is always unusual, it occupies a central position in one's mind. People tend to put more attention on it and take a more positive or negative attitude towards it. For example in (16) the speaker has a strong desire to leave the village where she is now living. In (17) the speaker has a strong "opinion" against "her" joining the Youth League. In both cases, le goes very well with the word 'too' in the production of the desired message.

Since le has these peculiar usages (we'll come to its meaning bit by bit), its presence or absence can make a lot of difference in the output message.

18. 到了村里,有空请上我家

dao le cun li, you kong qing shang wo jia
 arrive LE village in, have time please to I home

来谈讲

lai tanjiang
 come chat

When you are in my village and have time to spare, come to my home and have a chat.

When dao is followed by le, a comma is usually put in after the locative phrase (here cun li 'village in'). It seems that a complete message is finished (or rather a sub-message in comparison with the message of the whole sentence). The effect is that there are two focal points, one before the comma and one after the comma. When le is not there, the comma would be left out and something further must be added. For example:

19. 到村里去看亲戚

dao cun li qu kan qinqi
 arrive village in go visit relative
 go to the village to visit relatives

"To visit relatives" is the purpose of "go". The purpose is what the speaker wants to indicate. So here there is only one focal point. The comma can't be used there anymore because the part before it would not form a focal point. So dao without le is low in the scale of attention. But once we put a le after it, as in (18), it is no longer low. So we can say that le can raise a word in the scale of attention.

A similar effect can be seen in the phrase construction "verb LE verb". (The repetition of a verb in Chinese often indicates that the action is done in a casual manner.)

20. 抹了抹脸

mo le mo lian
 wipe LE wipe face
 wiped her face

The le between two verbs can be left out, but the message we then get is that the wiping is more casual or quicker. With le, it is

still a casual wiping, but less so. So le seems to have raised the position of the wiping in the scale of attention.

It is consistent with these uses of le, that it is expected to be present after anything that occupies a prominent position in the message. For example:

21. 劳烦你, 把你累昏了

laofan ni, ba ni lei fan le
trouble you, BA you tire out LE
I'm afraid I have tired you out.

With this sentence, the speaker intends to invite Teng Hsiu-mei to come into her house for a rest. Fan indicates to what extent somebody is tired. That is what the speaker wants to stress, and le goes with it. Note that in Chinese when we want to stress the result of an action or to what degree an action is done, we usually put an adjective/adverb after the action-verb. Then this adjective/adverb becomes the focal point of the message.

22. 她自己生病, 把钱用光了, 还骂我

ta ziji shengbing, ba qian yong guang le, hai ma wo
she self sick, BA money use up LE but call I

背时

beishi
unlucky

It was she who had been ill and spent the money, but she called me the unlucky devil.

Here guang means that the money is spent to such a degree that all the money is gone.

Proof that the adj/adv after the verb is the focal point of the message can be seen in the English translation of the following sentence:

23. 是累了吧?

zou lei le ba?
walk tired LE QM
You must be tired.

Lei occupies such an important position and zou is so insignificant that only lei is translated and zou is left unmentioned.

In all these cases, le follows directly the degree-word and it is impossible to insert it between the verb and the degree-word.

The uses of le mentioned above can be used very well as an explanation of why the traditional grammarians assert that le.2 has a sentence-completing function. According to the grammarians, when le.2 appears at the end of a sentence, it usually indicates that the sentence as a grammatical unit is completed. Nothing more needs to be added. To the extent that this is true, we can explain it by saying that le indicates that the most important part of the message has been given. If it is not used, something further can be added, because the message may not be complete yet.

As indicated above, le has the function of focusing attention on whatever is before it. So there is no limit to the number of le's in a sentence. The speaker can put le after any word or phrase if he wants to put focus on it. For example:

24. 女同志爱笑,也都成了罪过了

nǚ tongzhi ai xiao, ye dou cheng le zuiguo le
female comrades like laugh also all become LE crime LE
for women comrades to be fond of laughing is now a crime

Here there are two le's. Either of them can be left out, but the message will be different. When the first le is absent, the word 'crime' becomes very prominent. The message is that whatever is being referred to becomes nothing else but crime. If the second le is absent, the stress is put on become instead of on crime. The message is that something happened to the persons concerned. What happened is not that important, although it is part of the occurrence as a whole. When both le's appear at the same time, the message is both that something happened and that what happened is important.

Since the presence of le depends on whether focus is to be put on a certain part of the sentence or not, there is no need to divide le into le.1 and le.2, or even le.1+le.2. My hypothesis is that there is only one le. Its meaning is not the completion of an action, but focus-presentation. It marks anything before

it as something important in the message and, in consequence, it raises it higher in the scale of focus in possible interpretation. As such, the hypothesis explains why le can appear anywhere rather than only after verbs.

§3. A key argument in the traditional hypothesis is that le indicates the completion of an action. It is true that most of the time le follows verbs and most of the actions are past, and therefore completed. But unfortunately there are still a lot of actions that are not past, even though followed by le. This fact casts doubt on the Aspect hypothesis. However, it also demands that if we propose a new hypothesis we face the problem of explaining why most of the verbs followed by le are past actions. This problem can be solved if we propose that le has different strategies that fall under the same meaning. This is exactly what this essay intends to do.

The first strategy that I propose for le is the action-realization strategy. By "action-realization", I mean that le indicates that an action is real, that it has actually taken place. For example:

25. 他 一连打了八个夜摆子

ta yilian da le ba ge yie baizi
 he in-a-row hit LE eight CL night malaria
 He had it eight nights running.

In the example, da is followed by le. The action is realized; that is, somebody is actually "having" or has "had" night malaria. If le is left out, the action is not a realized one. Nobody is "having" or has "had" night malaria. The reason why a verb followed by le deserves more attention or focus in a message is based on the idea that an action attracts more attention than does a state, and a real action attracts more attention than does a potential one. An analogy can be made in the contrast between "now-here" and "then-there" strategies. Of the two, the former is more vivid than the latter, hence deserves more attention. In example (25), the message is that the speaker wants the listener

to pay attention to what he says and agree with his conclusion that the person concerned is in a serious condition and can't be admitted into the Youth League. If le is omitted, not only is no such message produced, but also the sentence doesn't seem to be a complete statement. Something further must be added.

The action-realization strategy is the most important strategy and the most widely used. This strategy covers all the examples that the traditional hypothesis covers with its le.1; that is, all those actions that are said to be completed.

The second strategy of le is the "consequence-resulting" strategy. Le can be used after some verbs referring to future actions.

26. 说是竹木都要归公了

shuo shi zhu mu dou yao guigong le
say SHI bamboo timber all will go-to-public LE

That bamboos and timber will be taken over by the government.

The word yao ('will') indicates that guigong ('go to public') is a future action. The message we get from the sentence is that something serious is going to happen. We must be on the alert and do something about it. For example, cut and sell bamboos before they are taken over by the government. This is the consequence produced by le. If we leave out the le, the message would be that the speaker is simply conveying information to somebody. There is no comment, no implication that they should take some counter-action. Since le can invoke a serious consequence, it also can attract the listener's attention to what it follows. So it goes very well with our hypothesis, but the strategy is different.

The same strategy can be found in the following:

27. 快要散板了

kuai yao sanban le
soon will break-up LE

The team will soon break up.

The speaker is talking about the situation in his home village. Since the mutual-aid team is going to break up, which is not what they wanted to happen, the situation is very serious. It implies that some counter-action should be taken. So a certain consequence results.

This second strategy covers part of le.2 in the traditional hypothesis. Recall that le.2 has two characteristics simultaneously, to appear at the end of a sentence and to indicate the change or the future change of a situation. Then an interesting problem arises. It is possible to find a le in the middle of a sentence, but still following a verb referring to a future action or an action that has not yet happened. See the following:

28. 怕吵起架来, 失了面子

pa chao qi jia lai, shi le mianzi
fear quarrel up fight come lose LE face
he dislikes quarreling and losing face.

A closer translation would be: "He fears quarreling would make him lose face." 'Lose (face)', as something to be feared, has not happened yet. The le is a le.2 but it is not at the end of the sentence.

This is an insurmountable problem for the traditional hypothesis. But can we solve it in terms of our strategies?

As discussed above, the consequence-resulting strategy can cover some of the le.2 examples. However, example (28) is not an instance of this strategy, for no serious consequence threatens, as in the case of examples (26) and (27).

Can (28) be an instance of the action-realization strategy? My reaction is that it can be taken as a sub-strategy, a variation on the action-realization strategy. The message we get from the sentence is: What he fears is not quarreling but losing face. However, if he quarrels he will surely lose face. His anticipation that loss of face would be realized makes him do everything he can to avoid quarreling. So the loss of face is the key point and has the focus of attention in the message. This anticipated

realization of an action would thus be a variation on the action-realization strategy.

This discussion leads us to another, related, example:

29. 我建议你吃了饭再走

wo jianyi ni chi le fan zai zou

I suggest you eat LE meal then leave

I suggest that you leave after having your meal.

Before we proceed, it is worth mentioning that such examples are abundant in Chinese. They cannot be left unexplained.

The le in (29) is in the middle of the sentence, but it follows an action that has not happened yet. The message we get from (29) is "I know you want to leave, but I suggest you have your meal first," or "First make meal-taking realized, then leave." To generalize the message of all sentences of this kind, we can say they mean: "Somebody must make some action be realized first before he does something else." The le makes what it follows a realized action in some sense and thus brings to it the focus of attention in the message. Again, I take the example as a variation on the action-realization strategy.

The third strategy is what I term the "action in transition" strategy. The examples are as follow:

30. 我不小了

wo bu xiao le

I not little LE

I'm not little.

31. 不吵场合, 天都不黑了

bu chaochanghe, tian dou bu hei le

not quarrel sky all not dark LE (even/also/too)

If they don't quarrel, night will never fall.

If we leave out the le in the first example, the message would be a plain statement about the speaker's present age. It is a simple negation of a statement that the speaker is little. Once le is put there, the message is that "I used to be little, but now I am not little any more. I have become older." What is implied is that a transition has taken place between the old state

and the new state. If we take the transition or change of something as a kind of action, then the sentence without le is a pure state, and the sentence with le is taken as one with a transitional action. It is not a state any more. Note that my whole hypothesis is based on the fundamental idea that actions deserve focus and attention more than do states. Since the presence of le changes a pure state into something involving some sort of action, it brings focus of attention to it.

The second example is the same. Without le, the message is simply that the sky is not dark—maybe it is still dusk. But once le is there, it means that the regular law of night-and-day is changed. Night never falls any more. The changing of the regular law looks like a transitional action: a transition from night-falling to non-night-falling. Another example of how this strategy works can be seen in the following.

32. 饿吗?	饿了吗?
e ma?	e le ma
hungry QM	hungry LE QM

Are you hungry?

漂亮吧?	漂亮了吧?
piaoliang ba?	piaoliang le ba?
beautiful QM	beautiful LE QM
Is it beautiful?	

The questions without le are about the present state. They are plain questions, implying nothing further. The questions with le are different. They are questions about the present state, but they imply that something further happened before this state. Take the "hungry" question as an example. It implies that a fairly long time may have passed since the last mealtime, or that the person questioned may not have eaten much at the last meal. So his state is changed from not hungry to hungry.

The "beautiful" question is even clearer. It implies that something may not have been beautiful earlier, but that something happened later, or that somebody did something to it, so that now

it is beautiful. The present state is the result of some kind of transition. Since le implies this transition, it brings a focus of attention on the word before it.

We can represent this kind of action by the following diagram:

old state	-----	little, dark; not hungry, not beautiful
		LE
new state	-----	not little, not dark; hungry, beautiful

At this point I'd like to discuss some examples that seem to offer less clear support for the hypothesis.

33. 作了地主, 斗得你好看

zuo le dizhu, dou de ni hao kan
become LE landlord struggle DE you good look

If you'd been a landlord, the peasants would have fought you all right!

34. 老信子歇了一阵气原气恢复了

laoguanzi xie le yizhen qi yuanqi huifu le
old-man rest LE one-moment breath spirit recover LE

劲款款地只顾夸他的

jinbanbande zhigu hun tade
lively continuously boast his

After a rest, the old man had recovered his spirits, and continued to boast in lively fashion.

Le's occur in the first half of the sentence, which, in traditional terminology, are subordinate clauses. In the first example, this is a conditional clause, as is represented in the English translation. In the second, it is a time clause, which is translated in English by a prepositional phrase. Generally speaking, subordinate clauses are less important than main clauses. So when le appears in them, it seems to be contradictory to my hypothesis. Firstly, however, whether a clause is subordinate or not does not depend on the presence of le. That is, le does not make one clause less important than another; other reasons are involved. Secondly, the fact that a clause is subordinate does not necessarily mean that it is not important;

nor does it rule out the possibility that any one part of it can be made more important than usual. So the mere presence of le in a subordinate clause is not in itself a counter to the hypothesis. The strategies in the above two sentences are both instances of the action-realization strategy. The only difference is that the le in the first sentence is a variation of the strategy as discussed above.

§4. In the first section, I mentioned that le can actually follow any kind of word. But while discussing strategies, I only listed three and they are all concerned with verbs. It would appear that le has variation in strategy only with verbs because actions are peculiar in their connection with time. Since time can be past and future, then le can vary in its strategies when it is associated with variations in time. When le goes with a past action, it is a realized one. When it goes with a future action, it can put us on the alert for something that is going to happen. It can also make a state into a transitional action, which stands between past and future. But once le is used with words other than verbs, there is no such variation because objects, states, qualities, manners, etc. don't have variations in time or in any other dimension. The only thing le does with them is to bring in some special input into the message. A special interpretation can naturally attract our attention to the part that is followed by le. It is in this sense that le achieves the effect of making what it follows important (See (11)-(15), above). This is seen in the following examples:

35. 这是多年以前的事了

zhe shi duo nian yiqian de shi le
 this SHI many year ago DE matter LE
 That was many years ago.

36. 少一条也不行了

shao yi tiao ye bu xing le
 less one CL also not good LE
 We wouldn't do with one less.

In the first example, le follows a noun. If we leave it out, the sentence would be a simple statement that something happened many years ago. There is no comment. Nothing further is implied. Once le is put there, in this context, the message turns out to be that it is something that happened many years ago, and that it is no longer of any importance. Let us forget about it. It is not worth mentioning any more.

The second example is a little different. Without le, the sentence is a demand or order. The message is that the hearer must give a required amount of something. The speaker would not accept any offer with even one less. This is the usual interpretation of bu xing, which is a refusal to any unsatisfying offer. But once le is used after it, it is not a refusal any more. It has become something else. Here at this point of the story, the speaker is talking about the oxen in the village. After the unexpected death of some oxen, there remain just enough for ploughing the fields. With one less, they would not be able to do the work. So bu xing le here is a negative comment on the situation they are facing. This special interpretation that le brings to bu xing makes it unusual, attention-attracting, and hence important.

To summarize: A language has many means to bring focus to a certain part of a sentence. Phonetically, the speaker can stress any word or part of a word to attract the listener's attention to it. In writing, the writer can capitalize a word or part of a word to attract the reader's attention to what he wants focus on. Semantically, some part of a sentence with certain semantic values can naturally attract communicative attention. And contextually, new information is often in focus. Grammatically, the so-called topicalization is the best known means for focus-presentation. However, in addition to that, different languages have other different grammatical means. Chinese seems to use le to achieve this effect. Since le is just one of the many means available in the language, it is not surprising for us to find many sentences without le. In these, focus is presented by some

other means. Le is used only in cases where it is the best choice.

The meaning of le is focus-presentation. It marks what it follows as important. When le follows verbs, there can be variations in strategy. The reason seems to be that le is particularly sensitive to the factor of time. Time distinguishes a real action from an unreal one. According to this new hypothesis, there is no need to divide le into le.1 and le.2. The old le.1 and le.2 are but strategy variations of the same le.

Further, le does not enter a system with any other grammatical signals, such as guo and zhe; there is no consistent complementary relation among them. Its meaning is seen only in comparison with the absence of le. However, we cannot suggest that a zero signal (absence of le) exists that forms a system with le. The reason is that the absence of le does not have a consistent meaning itself. No semantic substance has been found that can cover completely both le and absence of le. So le is a signal that stands independently.

The above discussion is a preliminary study of Chinese le from a different perspective. Its purpose is to prove that the old Aspect hypothesis does not work. A new hypothesis is in order. On the basis of observing how le functions in producing messages, the new hypothesis is proposed. It is believed that this new hypothesis has at least some advantage over the old one, though further detailed work needs to be done.

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