

# Temporal and aspectual references in Mandarin Chinese<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper proposes three descriptive generalizations about temporal and aspectual references in Chinese. First, temporal and aspectual references in a clause display a positional distinction: temporal location is indicated before the main verb and aspect after the main verb. The distinction characterizes an important pattern of information distribution within the clause; it also provides a unified explanation for a number of word order phenomena discussed in previous synchronic and diachronic studies. Second, temporal and aspectual references are managed at different levels. The former is to a large extent a discourse phenomenon, while the latter is managed at the clause level. Third, in narrative discourse, major devices to indicate perfectivity, i.e., the perfective marker *-le* and “bounding expressions,” serve as mechanisms to facilitate narrative advancement. These proposals are supported by evidence from natural discourse.

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## 1. Introduction

Temporal and aspectual references are a central issue in linguistic analysis. In inflectional languages, a great deal of the information is conveyed by grammatical markings on the verb, while word order is not particularly involved. Mandarin Chinese (referred to as “Chinese” hereafter), as an isolating language, adopts a different strategy. On the one hand, Chinese is “strikingly indeterminate on the surface” (Smith 1997[1991]) because of its meager grammatical marking. It is “tenseless,” i.e., with no systematic and overt tense marking on the verb. Temporal location of events is conveyed by other means, such as time adverbials, and through context. The language does employ a set of grammatical markers to indicate aspectual distinctions, but the use of these markers is optional rather than obligatory. In natural discourse, the majority of clauses show no use of aspectual markers. This leads to the question of how aspectual information in the “unmarked” clauses is conveyed and interpreted.

The word order of Chinese, on the other hand, has been found to play an important role in the grammatical system. A number of observations have led to the claim that the language takes on “positional distinction in meaning.” That is, syntactic constituents carry specific semantic functions because of their positions in the clause alone. For example, NPs before the main verb are definite while those after the main verb are indefinite. Adverbials before and after the main verb also differ in meaning (detail in Section 4.2.3).

So far in the analysis of Chinese, temporal/aspectual reference and word order have been treated separately. The present study examines these seemingly unrelated grammatical phenomena together and proposes a unified account.

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I show that, in Chinese, there is a close relation between syntactic positions and temporal/aspectual reference. Generally speaking, situations' temporal and physical locations are indicated before the main verb, while aspectual information is provided after the verb. The two types of information are also managed at different levels: Temporal interpretation is essentially a discourse phenomenon, managed to a large extent through cross-clausal references. Aspectual reference, by comparison, operates at the clause level. This pattern, while having important implications for language processing, characterizes Chinese at the syntax–semantics interface. It also facilitates temporal progression in narrative texts. To verify these claims, a preliminary examination of 953 clauses of narrative texts (54 excerpts from works of five contemporary Chinese writers) is included in the present study. The results show that the vast majority of the clauses support the claims of this study; roughly 5% remain unsettled and need further study.<sup>1</sup>

This article is organized as follows: Section 2 outlines the descriptive approach and the theoretical background of this study, including the nature and types of temporal and aspectual references. Sections 3 and 4 elaborate my position regarding temporal and aspectual references in Chinese, respectively. In Section 5, excerpts from natural discourse are brought in for illustration. A number of residual issues are also discussed. Section 6 demonstrates the role of perfectivity encoding in narrative advancement. Section 7 is the conclusion.

## 2. Descriptive approach and literature review

### 2.1. Temporal reference

In this study, temporal reference refers to the indication of a situation's location on the time axis. The reference can be made directly by a time expression, such as *in 1980* in (1), or by encoding the relation of the situation time to a reference time (the default being the time of speech or writing), e.g., by tense marking in English (Reichenbach, 1947; Smith and Erbaugh, 2005).

- (1) 我1980年出生。  
*Wo 1980 nian chusheng.*  
 I 1980 year (be)-born  
 'I was born in 1980.'

A comparison of the Chinese and English versions in (1) shows that the English sentence encodes both situation time (*in 1980*) and tense marking (past tense). In Chinese, there is no overt tense marking on the verb. Situation time may be expressed by adverbials of time such as *1980 nian* 'in 1980' in (1) or inferred by other means (details in Section 3).

### 2.2. Aspectual reference

Aspectual reference indicates how a situation is viewed or presented (e.g., as a complete event or an on-going event). The present study concurs with the general consensus in the field that aspectual reference is a result of the interactions of categories both within the grammar and between the grammar and lexicon. Smith's (1983, 1994, 1997[1991]) two-component view, including her terminology of viewpoint aspect and situation aspect, is adopted as the descriptive framework of this study.<sup>2</sup> A brief sketch of this approach is laid out below using English examples.

#### 2.2.1. Viewpoint aspect

Viewpoint aspect, by a classic definition, indicates the "different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation" (Comrie, 1976: 3), that is, whether a situation is viewed as a single whole or only one part of it (beginning, middle or the end) is focused on. Viewpoint aspect is indicated by grammatical markings on the main verb. For this reason, it is also called "grammatical aspect." Commonly occurring and widely discussed aspectual distinctions include perfective and imperfective, durative and non-durative, inceptive and completive, and progressive and non-progressive aspects. They are part of the underlying meaning of natural languages and thus belong to universal semantic categories. This article examines two most basic aspectual distinctions, *perfective aspect* (viewing a situation in its entirety) and the *imperfective aspect* (focusing on part of an event typically without the endpoint). Below is an example from Comrie (1976: 4).

- (2) (a) John read a book yesterday; (b) while he was reading it, (c) the postman came.

<sup>1</sup> The unsettled cases mainly include special constructions such as serial verb constructions, *yi* followed by a verb (e.g., in [49b]), the various uses of *zai* (which is discussed throughout this paper) and some directional Resultative Verb Complements (Section 4.2.1) that may not indicate event endpoint.

<sup>2</sup> See Chen (1988) for a similar approach with a three-component view of the Chinese temporal system (i.e., temporal location, aspectual marking and situation types).

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