

A Cognitive Linguistics Account of the Chinese Particle *Le*

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Over many years of investigations of the Mandarin Chinese language, *le* (了) has proven to be one of the most puzzling linguistic items for linguists to describe. This is largely due to the fact that *le* is highly polysemous. Previous studies have made important descriptive findings on the semantics of *le*, identifying at least ten different meanings, such as denoting perfective aspect, a 'past' event, a new situation (i.e. 'now'), an excessive degree, Currently Relevant State, and correcting a wrong assumption, among others (Chao, 1968; Li & Thompson, 1981; Huang & Davis, 1989; Smith, 1997; Chu, 1998; van den Berg & Wu, 2006). Grammatically *le* marks perfective aspect, temporal relations (i.e. 'after'), conditional relations (i.e. 'if'), adjectival/degree relations, and a peak event. Despite descriptive advances, no satisfying, unified account of this polysemy has been offered. Most of the previous studies assumed the aspectual meaning of *le* as its central sense and the starting point of their analyses. This paper argues that this focus has resulted in analyses which tend to remain at the surface-level and with the many meanings of *le* represented by a list of seemingly unrelated, even contradictory senses.

Different from the previous studies, the present corpus-based study seeks to explore the semantics of *le* from a cognitive, usage-based approach (e.g., Langacker, 1987, 2008; Bybee & Hopper, 2001). Taking a diachronic approach, the corpus data employed in the study involve eleven books and the Corpus of the Center for Chinese Linguistics of Peking University, covering a history of 3,000 years from the early Western Zhou (1046-771 BCE) to modern times. 1,026 tokens of *liao*¹/*le* were examined, and over 30 senses associated with *liao/le* were identified. The study provides strong evidence of the semantic development and grammaticalization paths of *le* (e.g., Kuryłowicz, 1965; Heine, Claudi & Hünnemeyer 1991; Hopper & Traugott, 1993; Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca, 1994; Traugott & Dasher, 2002). Adopting Principled Polysemy Methodology (PPM, Tyler & Evans, 2003), the analysis begins with the earliest attested meaning, i.e. the proto-scene, and establishes a semantic network organized around the proto-scene. The network systematically represents all the meanings of *le* identified in the corpus data. It illustrates how the senses and functions of *le* are connected and extended from one another in systematic and motivated ways. Moreover, the semantic network is able to represent the diachronic evolution of the senses and functions of *le*.

The shift of starting point from the aspectual meaning of *le* to its earliest meaning is not trivial. The proto-scene (as represented in *Shuowen Jiezi* [Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters]) is 'a newborn baby without arms'. When we consider the formidable living conditions two thousand years ago, when the character first arose, this image invites the inference that the child's life is finished or will soon to be finished. Once the sense of 'finish' became entrenched in *le*'s semantics, *le* began to evolve into a perfective aspect marker indicating that an event is viewed as an integral whole. In sum, the present study establishes a persuasive, integrated account which takes social-historical contextual aspects into account. The meaning development of *le* in conjunction with the emergence of various grammatical functions provides concrete evidence that semantic extension is often grounded in our non-linguistic knowledge, e.g., our knowledge of the world, our socio-cultural context and our experience with the world and language, to which words facilitate access (Evans, 2015).

References

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¹ *Liao* is the earliest attested pronunciation of the Chinese character 了 (*le*).