

“Guo1” and “Guo2” in Chinese Temporal System

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the subtle nuances of meaning of two Chinese particles “guo1” and “guo2” as well as their different functions in Chinese temporal system. Two technical terms, “tense” and “aspect”, in traditional Chinese grammar are reconsidered in terms of the nature of these two concepts and the criteria to distinguish them. It is argued that in traditional Chinese grammar, “tense” and “aspect” are often mixed up by scholars, which has misled the study of “guo1” and “guo2”. Contrast to the traditional theory, this paper argues that “guo1” is the marker of the terminative aspect, while “guo2” is the marker of the past tense. Moreover, based on the markedness theory, the semantic and functional differences between “guo1” and “guo2” can be regarded as different usage of the particle “guo” in the unmarked or the marked sense.

1. Introduction

Tense and aspect, which share certain similarity but significantly differ in nature, are crucial

concepts in the temporal system of a language. Compared with English grammar, the temporal system of Chinese grammar has a short history and the concept of tense and aspect in Chinese have been confused with each other even by some renowned scholars. This has caused negative consequences in the study related to the grammaticalization of time. It has been widely accepted that three Chinese particles, “zhe” “le” and “guo”, are aspect markers in Chinese. And “guo” can be subdivided into two semantic variants called “guo1” and “guo2”, of which “guo1” has been regarded as expressing a sense of “completeness” and “guo2” has been regarded as the marker of the experiential aspect, which also means the completeness of an action. However, the traditional theory fails to answer questions like “what is the difference between ‘guo1’ and ‘guo2’ if they both mean ‘completeness’”, “what is the relation between ‘guo1’ and ‘guo2’” and “what is the nature of ‘the experiential aspect’ in Chinese”. This paper attempts to provide answers to all these questions.

2. The concept of tense and aspect in Chinese temporal system.

The temporal system of English grammar which draws a clear distinction between tense and aspect has been established at the beginning of the twentieth century. Poutsma (1926) defines “tense”

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as the change of verb form in relation to the time during which the action takes place, while “aspect” refers to the property of the action itself, such as being durative or momentary and so on. Jakobson (1984) uses the concept of speech event and narrated event to distinguish tense from aspect. He claims that tense is a concept related to both speech event and narrated event. If the narrated event takes place before the speech event, then the speaker should use the past tense, while if the narrated event takes place after the speech event, the speaker should use the future tense. As to the concept of aspect, it concerns only with the narrated event itself, such as whether the event has been finished or not.

Compared with English grammar, the temporal system of Chinese has been established much later. Wang Li (1985) is one of the earliest linguists that have elaborated on the temporal system of Chinese. He argues that the grammaticalization of time has two levels. The first is the time when an action takes place and second is whether the action is finished or not with no reference to the time when it happens. He calls the second one “Qingmao”. It seems that Wang Li has already drawn a distinction between tense and aspect, and the term “Qingmao” refers to aspect. He further proposes seven aspects in Chinese, which are “Putong Mao”, “Jinxing Mao”, “Wancheng Mao”, “Jinguoqu Mao”, “Kaishi Mao”, “Jixu Mao” and “Duanshi Mao”, and most of them have their counterparts in English grammar.¹ However, “Jinguoqu Mao” which belongs to the sphere of aspect in Wang’s theory, refers to the action that has just happened. And this is exactly the function of post-preterite tense in English. Chen Ping (1988) establishes a temporal system

¹ Based on Wang (1985)’s definition, “Jinxing Mao”, “Wancheng Mao”, “Kaishi Mao”, “Jixu Mao” and “Duanshi Mao” correspond to “durative aspect”, “perfective aspect”, “ingressive aspect”, “continuative aspect” and “momentaneous aspect” respectively in English grammar.

with phase, tense and aspect, which is consistent with English temporal system. Gong Qianyan (1995) develops Chen’s theory by further distinguishing eight aspects, and he regards Chinese particle “guo” as the marker of “the experiential aspect”. However, so far as the definition is concerned, the experiential aspect in Gong’s theory is the same as “Jinguoqu Mao” in Wang Li’s theory, and both of them belong to the concept of tense rather than aspect. Moreover, the claim that “guo” is only the marker of experiential aspect fails to account for various usage of “guo” in terms of its place in Chinese temporal system.

3. The distinction between “guo1” and “guo2”

Lyu Shuxiang (2002) divides the usage of “guo” into three types, among which two of them are related to this study. He thinks “guo1” should always follow the verb, indicating that the action denoted by the verb has been finished. For example:

- (1) Chi guo1 fan zai qu.
Eat finish food then go
“Go after you have finished your meal.”
- (2) Deng wo gandao nali, diyichang xi yijing yan guo1 le.
After I get to that place, the first play had already show finish
“After I got there, the first play had already been finished.”

On the other hand, “guo2”, indicates that the action denoted by the verb has happened in the past:

- (3) Zheben xiaoshuo wo kan guo2.
This novel I read before
“I have read this novel before.”
- (4) Women tan guo2 zhege wenti.
We talk before this question
“We have talked about this question before.”

Lyu further claims that one way to distinguish “guo1” from “guo2” is to insert “ceng jing” (which

means “at some time in the past”) before them. The construction “ceng jing + verb+guo2” is legitimate while “ceng jing + verb+guo1” is not grammatical:

(5) Zheben xiaoshuo wo cengjing kan guo2.

This novel I once read before
“I have read this novel before.”

(6) Women cengjing tan guo2 zhege wenti.

We once talk before this question
“We have talked about this question before.”

(7) *Cengjing chi guo1 fan zai qu.

Once eat finish food then go

(8) *Deng wo gandao nali, diyichang xi cengjing yan guo1 le.

After I get to that place, the first play once show finish

4. “Guo2” in Chinese temporal system

Contrast to Gong Qianyan (1995) who regards “guo2” as the marker of the experiential aspect, this paper argues that the function of “guo2” is more related to tense than aspect. Jakobson (1984) points out that tense is related to both speech event and narrated event, while aspect concerns only the narrated event itself. “Guo2” has the implication that the narrated event happens before the speech event thus should be regarded as a maker of the past tense.

On the other hand, “guo2” carries the implication of “completeness”, which means the action referred to by “verb+guo2” has already been finished. However, “guo2” is semantically different from the perfective aspect marker “le”. “Le” emphasizes the “realization” of an action, the change from one state to another, which is represented by Shi Yuzhi (1992) in the following diagram:

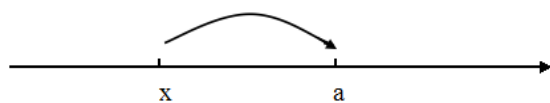


Figure 1. The meaning of “le”

In this diagram, “x” represents the starting point of the action while “a” is the end of the action. “Le” indicates the process from “x” to “a”. As to the meaning of “guo2”, it is argued that it should be represented as a dot in the diagram, rather than a segment:

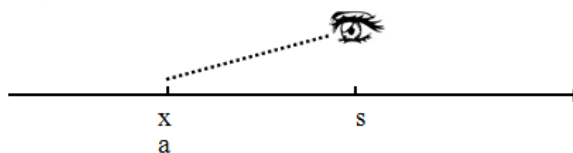


Figure 2. The meaning of “guo2”

In this diagram, “s” represents the time when the speech event takes place, while “x” and “a” respectively represent the starting point and end point of the denoted action. The speaker, at the “s” point, reflects an event that has happened before. Since “verb+guo2” represents an event as a whole rather than a process of realization, “x” and “a” coincide in the diagram. The subtle nuances of meaning of “le” and “guo2” are shown as follows:

(9) a. Ta he le liu ping piju.

He drink up six bottles beer
“He has drunk up six bottles of beer.”

b. Ta he guo2 liu ping piju.

He drink before six bottles beer
“He has drunk six bottles of beer before”

(10) a. Xiao Wang chuipo le qiqiu.

Xiao Wang blow burst finish balloon
“Xiao Wang has burst the balloon when blowing it up”

b. Xiao Wang chuipo guo2 qiqiu.

Xiao Wang blow burst before balloon
“Xiao Wang has burst a balloon when blowing it up before.”

(11) a. Bolichuang shang tie le chuanguhua.

Glass windows on decorate finish papercuts
“Windows have been decorated by papercuts.”

b. Bolichuang shang tie guo2 chuanguhua.

Glass windows on decorate once papercuts
“Windows were once decorated by papercuts.”

- (12) a. Xiao Ming dang le banzhang.
 Xiao Ming elect finish monitor of the class
 “Xiao Ming has been elected monitor of the class.”
 b. Xiao Ming dang guo2 banzhang.
 Xiao Ming elect once monitor of the class
 “Xiao Ming was once elected monitor of the class.”

The Chinese verbs in (9) and (10) denote actions. The construction “verb+le” represents the process of an action from the starting point to the end, and the ending point is the focus of attention. In (9a) the focus is on the fact that the sixth bottle is empty, while in (10a) the focus is on the burst of the balloon. Even though the focus is on the completeness of the action, the whole process of the action is within the meaning of “verb+le”, thus the meaning of “le” is represented by a segment of line in *Figure 1*. By contrast, “guo2” does not denote the process of an action, but suggests that the action denoted by the verb happened in the past. That’s why in the construction “verb+le”, the process of the action can be modified, but not in the construction of “verb+guo2”:

- (13) a. Ta hua liangge xiaoshi he le liuping jiu.
 He spend two hours drink finish six bottles of beer
 “He has drunk up six bottles of beer using two hours.”
 b. *Ta hua liangge xiaoshi he guo2 liuping jiu.
 He spend two hours drink before six bottles of beer.
- (14) a. Xiao Wang fei le jiuniuerhuzhili chuipo le qiqiu.
 Xiao Wang spend much effort blow burst finish balloon
 “Xiao Wang has blown up and burst a balloon with lots of effort”
 b. *Xiao Wang fei le jiuniuerhuzhili chuipo guo2 qiqiu.

Xiao Wang spend much effort blow burst before balloon

The Chinese verbs in (11) and (12) represent a state rather than an action, and in this case, “le” denotes the change from one state to another. For example, in (11a) “le” denotes the change of the window from “no decoration” to “being decorated by papercuts”; and in (12a) “le” denotes the change of the state from “an ordinary student” to “the monitor”. By contrast, when following the verbs of state, “guo2” suggests that the state denoted by the verb existed in the past, with the implication that the state does not exist now. For example, (11b) carries the meaning that there are no papercuts on the window now; while (12b) has an implication that Xiao Ming is no longer the monitor now.

Moreover, “verb+guo2” does not specify the inner structure of the action or the state denoted by the verbs, but views the action or the state as a whole and indicates that the whole event happened in the past. This semantic feature accounts for some of the constraints on the usage of “guo2”:

- (15) a. Romeo ai Juliet.
 Romeo love Juliet
 “Romeo loves Juliet.”
 b. Romeo ai guo2 Juliet.
 Romeo love before Juliet
 “Romeo loved Juliet before.”
- (16) a. Guowang xiangxin wushi de hua.
 The king believe wizard’s word
 “The king believes the wizard’s word.”
 b. Guowang xiangxin guo2 wushi de hua.
 The king believe before wizard’s word
 “The king believed the wizard’s word before.”
- (17) a. Ta zhidao shiqing de zhenxiang.
 He know thing of the truth
 “He knows the truth of it.”
 b. *Ta zhidao guo2 shiqing de zhenxiang.
 He know before thing of the truth
- (18) a. Ta renshi maozhuxi de mishu.

He know Chairman Mao of secretary
 “He knows Chairman Mao’s secretary.”

b.*Ta renshi guo2 maozhuxi de mishu.

He know before Chairman Mao of secretary
 All of the Chinese verbs in (15) to (18) denote psychological states. When these verbs are followed by “guo2” it means the psychological states denoted by these verbs existed in the past, just like (15b) and (16b), with the implication that these psychological states no longer exist now. However, some verbs, such as “zhi dao” (which means “know”) in Chinese, denote the psychological state that usually lasts forever, thus do not appear in the past tense. In this sense, the meaning of these verbs conflicts with the meaning of “guo2”, thus these verbs do not collocate with “guo2”, just like (17b) and (18b).

5. “Guo1” in Chinese temporal system

Compared with “guo2”, the usage of “guo1” is not so complicated; however, there are also disagreements about it among Chinese linguists. First of all, in terms of the nature of “guo1”, Lyu regards it as a particle, which is supported by Fang (2001), Chen and Li (2013). While Liu Yuehua (1983) argues that “guo1” functions as a complement and it is not a particle. This claim is supported by Gong (1995). It seems that Liu’s opinion is more likely to be true since “guo1” can be followed by the particle “le”, which indicates its function as something different from the particle:

(19) Chi guo1 (le) fan, tamen you jinyibu
 liaojie le qingkuang.

Eat up (complete) food they again further
 inquire situation

“After finishing their meal, they made a
 further inquiry.”

(20) Xingli jiancha guo1 (le), mei wenti.

Luggage check finish (complete) no problem

“The luggage has already been checked, and
 there is no problem.”

However, semantically, “guo1” does not specify the result of an action as those typical complements do. Comparing “da si” (“beat to death”) and “da guo1” (“finish beating”), “ran hong” (“dye sth. red”) and “ran guo1” (“finish dyeing”), one can feel that “guo1” only means that the action denoted by the verb has been finished, which is similar to the function of the particle “le”. Thus it is argued that from a formal perspective, “guo1” is a complement, but semantically it has the function of a particle. This paper places more emphasis on the position of “guo1” in the temporal system of Chinese grammar rather than the classification of “guo1” into certain word category.

In Chinese, “guo1” is not as frequently used as “guo2”. According to the Corpus of Contemporary Chinese Function Words, the frequency of “guo2” is 352 while the frequency of “guo1” is 13. Some of the studies, such as Liu (1983) and Gong (1995), concern only the classification of “guo1” into certain word category with few remarks on its position in Chinese temporal system; while those who have studied “guo” in terms of the Chinese temporal system, such as Chen (1988) and Shi (1992), fail to distinguish “guo1” from “guo2”.

It is argued that “guo1” is an aspect marker of Chinese, to be more specific, the marker of the terminative aspect. Based on the theory of Poutsma (1926), Mathesius (2008) and Trnka (1968), terminative aspect focuses on the final phase of an action. For example, the phrase “drink up”, and the construction “finish+verb” both denote terminative aspect. Similarly, the construction “verb+guo1” in Chinese denotes terminative aspect, and this implies that this construction can be found in all of the three major tenses, the past tense, the present tense and the future tense:

(21) Zuotian ta chi guo1 fan cai zou.

Yesterday he eat finish food then go

“Yesterday, after finishing his meal, he went.”

(22) Shiqing de jieguo zhiyou zuo guo1 le
cai zhidao.

Thing of result only if do finish complete
then know

“The result can only be known after you
have finished doing it.”

(23) Mingtian wo wen guo1 ta zai gaosu ni
Tomorrow I ask finish him then tell you
“After asking him about it tomorrow, I will
tell you.”

Sentences (21) to (23) are of the past tense, present
tense and future tense respectively. And “guo1”
appears in all of these sentences, which contrasts
greatly with “guo2”, since “guo2” only appears in
the sentences denoting past events. On the other
hand, “guo1” and “guo2” are similar in that both of
them can be represented by a point, rather than a
segment:

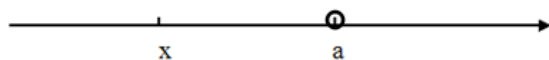


Figure 3. The meaning of “guo1”

In this diagram, “x” represents the starting point of
the verbal action while “a” is the end of the action.
“Guo1” denotes the point when the action is
finished, rather than denoting the process of the
action like “le” does. When “guo1” is followed by
“le” and form the construction “verb+guo1+le”, it
represents the process of the action while the focus
is on the end of the action. Moreover, since
“verb+guo1” represents the end of an action, if this
construction is followed by an adverbial adjunct
denoting a period of time, it does not mean the
time that the process of an action has lasted, but
the time starting from the end of the action, for
example:

(24) Chi guo1 fan (budao shi fenzhong) ta jiu
zou le.

Eat finish food (less than ten minutes) he then
go complete

“He went (less than ten minutes) after finishing
his meal.”

(25) Xinhaoqiang xiang guo1 (san miaozhong)
zhihou, xuanshoumen cai chongchu paodao.

Signal pistol fire finish (three seconds)
after contestants then run out track

“(Three seconds) after the sound of the starting
pistol, the runners were all quick off the mark.”

Moreover, it is argued that the relationship
between “guo1” and “guo2” can be viewed from
the perspective of the markedness theory. Jakobson
(1984) illustrates the concept of markedness and
argues that the difference between the marked
category and the unmarked category is that the
marked category announces the existence of
certain character, while the unmarked category
does not state whether this character exists or not,
for example:

(26) a. Man shall not live by bread alone.

b. He is a man, not a woman.

“Man” in (26a) is the unmarked category since
“man” means “human-beings” in a general sense
and gives no information about the gender of the
referred group. While “man” in (26b) is the
marked category since “man” here refers to “male”
which is more specific in meaning. Comrie
(2005:112) claims that “the meaning of the
unmarked category can encompass that of its
marked counterpart”, which is consistent with the
fact that the meaning of “human beings”
encompasses the meaning of both “male” and
“female”.

As to the relation between “guo1” and “guo2”,
it is argued that “guo1” denotes the completeness
of the verbal action, and it can be found in the past,
present and the future tense, while “guo2” only
signifies the completeness of a past event. Thus
“guo1” is the unmarked category, giving no
specific information about the time when the
verbal action takes place, while “guo2” is the
marked category signifying the sense of “happened

in the past”.

6. Conclusion

In light of the above analysis, it can be found that there are both similarities and differences between “guo1” and “guo2” in terms of their semantic meaning and grammatical function. “Guo1” denotes the completeness of the verbal action and functions as a marker of the terminative aspect. Though “guo2” also has the implication of completeness, it is used in the case when the narrated event happens before the speech event, and thus it is the marker of the past tense. Based on the markedness theory, the differences between “guo1” and “guo2” can be regarded as the different usage of the particle “guo” in an unmarked or a marked sense. “Guo1” is the unmarked category giving no specific information about tense, while “guo2” is the marked category signifying the past tense.

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