Grammatical Variations between Singapore, Mainland China, and Taiwan Mandarin: A Pilot Study of Aspect Marking

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Abstract

Current research on variations in Mandarin often focuses on the comparisons between Mainland China Mandarin (MCM) and other non-MCM varieties, and less between various non-MCM varieties. This study seeks to compare Mandarin across more regions, in this case, Mainland China, Taiwan and Singapore. This paper presents part of the findings of a pilot study on this issue, using aspect marking as a case study. It is found that a number of the variations identified in both Singapore Mandarin (SM) and Taiwan Mandarin (TWM) are in fact commonalities. A large-scale study of this may shed light on the variations that are, in fact, shared among non-MCM varieties and affect how these variations should be viewed in the large context of Global Chinese or World Chinese.

1 Introduction

Variations in the Mandarin spoken across different regions such as Mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong have long been observed and studied. These variations have been found in a range of linguistic categories, such as phonological, syntactic and even discourse. However, many of the current studies take Mainland China Mandarin (MCM) as a yardstick and investigate only the features that deviate from MCM (Lin et al. 2018). This may potentially lead to the neglect of features that are shared among non-MCM varieties; in fact, shared features between the non-MCM varieties, such as Singapore Mandarin (SM), Taiwanese Mandarin (TWM) and Hong Kong Mandarin (HKM), are not uncommon, given the similarities in their linguistic environments (Lin and Khoo 2018). An example of this situation can be seen in studies of aspect marking in SM, where most of the findings and observations about variations in aspect marking in SM are based on a comparison between SM and MCM.

For instance, Zhu (2008) identifies 中 *zhōng* in the construction "VP+中 *zhōng*" as a continuous aspect marker in SM; as this marker is rarely used in MCM and has very limited usage situations, this marker was identified by Zhu as a unique feature found in SM. Zhu (2008) compares the marker to the English suffix *–ing* and suggests that *-ing* is a possible source for the usage of the construction "VP+中 *zhōng*" in SM. Yet, 中 *zhōng* as an aspect marker is not a feature unique to SM. Diao (2013) has noted that the construction is commonly found in TWM, which has been influenced by a similar construction in Japanese; Diao also suggests that the use of 中 *zhōng* as an aspect marker in MCM and HKM is likely a product of TWM influence. With two different possible sources for one construction, many questions can be raised, such as if there are any differences between the two given their potentially varied origins. However, as most studies compare these non-MCM varieties against MCM, these questions remain unanswered.

This study seeks to compare Mandarin varieties between more than just two regions, which in this

case will be MCM, SM and TWM, in order to paint a more comprehensive picture of variations in Mandarin varieties via a corpus-based investigation. As this is a large-scale study, this paper will only focus on aspect marking as a pilot study.

2 Methodology and data

This study uses comparable corpora comprising of data from SM, TWM, and MCM, which are made up of narrative compositions written by senior high school students from the respective regions. For the purpose of this paper, 20 compositions from each region were selected to give a combined corpus of about 42, 000 characters (TWM=13, 000; SM=14, 000; MCM=15, 000). The students were tasked to write a narrative composition based on the sentence 到现在我都还深深记得那一天发生的事… 'To this date, I still remember vividly what happened on that day…'. They were given an hour to write a composition of no less than 500 Chinese characters without the aid of a dictionary and upon completion, each consenting student received a reward equivalent to SGD $10.

Each composition is manually examined clause by clause for the use of aspect markers and classified based on whether an aspect marker is used. These clauses are also examined based on the researchers' own acceptability judgements from both a Singaporean and a Mainland Chinese perspective; that is each clause is evaluated using the researchers' "subjective sense of the well-formedness, nativeness, or naturalness" (Myers 2017). Such an approach is driven by the belief that speakers of different Mandarin varieties have slightly different acceptability judgements on the same construction, given the differences found in these varieties. If one speaker finds that a certain construction is erroneous while the other finds it acceptable, the construction may be, in fact, a grammatical variation instead of a real grammatical error.

The frequencies of usage of each aspect marker were then tabulated; this includes instances that are disputed between the two researchers, and those that are deemed as 'unnatural' by both researchers. The data is then examined for trends in usage across the three varieties. Besides looking at the typical aspect markers (i.e., perfective marker 了 *le*, continuous marker 着 *zhe*, and the experiential marker 过 *guò*),

this paper also considers other markers like 有 *yǒu* and 中 *zhōng*, which have been argued to be aspect markers in non-MCM varieties.

Examples taken from the corpus will be marked with a tag in the following format: an abbreviation of the source region (i.e., SG= Singapore, CN= Mainland China and TW= Taiwan)–composition number–sentence number. Miswritten characters are kept as is; unrecognizable characters are marked with the letter "N".

3 Major Findings

A total of 324, 494, and 292 aspect markers are found in SM, MCM, and TWM respectively, giving relative frequencies of 23.1, 33.0 and 22.4 per 1000 characters. Notably, MCM uses aspect markers more frequently and has a wider range of aspect markers than the other two varieties, which do not differ much statistically. While this suggests that SM and TWM seem rather similar in their usage of aspect markers, a closer examination paints a different picture. A breakdown is presented in Table 1 below:

Aspect marker	SM	MCM	TWM
了 1 le_1	10.4	11.5	9.8
了 2 le_2	3.5	5.4	2.3
了 1+2 le_{1+2}	3.5	5.3	2.2
着 *zhe*	3.2	7.5	6.5
(正)在 *(zhèng)zài*	1.1	0.8	0.6
起来 *qǐlái*	0.6	0.5	0.1
有 *yǒu*	0.3	0.1	0.3
过 *guò*	0.1	0.9	0.4
中 *zhōng*	-	0.1	-
下去 *xiàqù*	0.1	0.1	0.1
Verbal reduplication	0.1	0.7	-
一下 *yīxià*	-	0.2	-
Overall	23.1	33.0	22.4

Table 1. Relative frequencies (per 1000 characters) of each aspect marker across SM, MCM and TWM

Some of the more typical examples of each aspect marker-in-use are given in Table 2.

Aspect marker	SM	MCM	TWM
(1) 了 1 *le₁*	(a) 文华非常害怕，又立刻跑出了教室。 'Wenhua was very scared and ran out of the classroom immediately.' (SG-006-12)	(b) 短短的几天而已，就这样决定了她余后的一生。 'She decided how the rest of her life would be in those few short days.' (CN-003-30)	(c) 但那天，從回家那個步驟開始出現了小差池。 'But on that day, everything went wrong from the moment I decided to go home.' (TW-002-03)
(2) 了 2 *le₂*	(a) 你快要迟到了！ 'You are going to be late! (SG-026-07)	(b) 又是一个碰瓷的专业人士，看来车主要倒霉了啊！ 'Yet another staged crash; seems like the owner is in deep trouble!' (CN-014-07)	(c) 他開始享用那半顆蛋，感覺他已經餓了好多天了。 'He started to eat the half-cut egg; it feels like he's been starving for the past few days.' (TW-009-06)
(3) 了 ₁₊₂ *le₁₊₂*	(a) 我的朋友都回去了。 'My friends have already gone back.' (SG-020-23)	(b) 现在这个愿望就这样被现实实现了。 'This wish has now been realized like that by reality.' (CN-012-19)	(c) 最終，我真的撐完了。 'Eventually, I have really held it out.' (TW-020-17)
(4) 着 *zhe*	(a) 大家围着我，来扶我一把。 'Everyone surrounded me and helped me get up.' (SG-016-19)	(b) 然后谈论着他俩之间的种种往事。 'Then, they started to talk all about their past.' (CN-012-21)	(c) 之後，也因此過著平凡無常的生活。 'After which, I began living a life of simplicity.' (TW-005-21)
(5) 过 *guò*	(a) 我没注 *yì* 过，但奶奶 *yǐ* N 很老。 'I have never really noticed it before, but grandma is really old already.' (SG-026-29)	(b) 人们说直到失去了你才会知道拥有过什么。 'People often say that you only know what you had after losing it.' (CN-006-21)	(c) 因為以前也被鐵板燙傷過的我，光是起兩個水泡，就痛的受不了。 'I was scalded by an iron plate before; just two blisters and I was crying out in pain.' (TW-016-09)
(6) 有 *yǒu*	(a) 他有放上许多好听的歌首，你们有时间一定要去听一听！ 'He had uploaded many nice songs, do check them out when you have the time!' (SG-021-18)	(b) 我也很乖，有听爸妈的话，也在好好学习。 'I am also very obedient, and I do listen to my parents and study diligently.' (CN-013-28)	(c) 我問她說今天怎麼了，是有發生什麼事擱攔了嗎？ 'I asked her about what the matter was and if there was another that held her back.' (TW-011-05)

(7) 在 *zài*	(a) 我立刻跑出去，看到妹妹的左手非常红，地上到是还在出 *yān* 的水，也看到妹妹在大哭。 'I ran out immediately and saw that my sister's left arm was very red; the floor was covered in smoking hot water and my sister was bawling her eyes out.' (SG-18-13)	(b) 我和姐姐还有弟弟在扑蜻蜓，爸爸在钓鱼。 'I was catching dragonflies with my sister and brother, while my father was fishing.' (CN-005-18)	(c) 但我的心却在淌血，我好捨不得，捨不得你的離開。 'But my heart was bleeding; I couldn't bear your departure, I couldn't bear it at all.' (TW-006-08)
(8) 中 *zhōng*	-	(a) 然后，邻居竟然不知道着火了还在熟睡中。 'My neighbour was still in deep sleep, not knowing his house was on fire.' (CN-020-07)	-
(9) 起来 *qǐlái*	(a) 欢呼起来吧！ 'Start cheering!' (SG-004-33)	(b) 仿佛周围一切都安静起来，足以细细聆听一切。 'It was as if the surroundings fell silent, so silent I could hear a pin drop.' (CN-019-13)	(c) 整個身體卻好像通電了那樣振奮了起來。 'It felt like a surge of electricity throughout my body and it excited me.' (TW-018-07)
(10) 下去 *xiàqù*	(a) 真地希望大家还会互相继续交往沟通，让友情永恒地话着下去。 'I wished everyone would keep in touch so that our friendship could live on forever.' (SG-004-09)	(b) 还是说命运之神抛弃了我，我竟一时不知道如何活下去。 'Or did fate abandon me? At that moment, I did not know how to continue living.' (CN-007-11)	(c) 要牠努力撐下去繼續創造我們共同的回憶。 'I wanted him to hold on and continue creating shared memories together.' (TW-001-06)
(11) 一下 *yīxià*	-	(a) 爸爸妈妈让我去帮他们收拾一下东西，我们应了一声："你们自己去呗，我不想去。" 'My parents wanted me to help them pack up a bit, but I replied to them: "You go yourselves, I don't want to do it."' (CN-018-04)	-

| (12) Verbal reduplication | (a) 虽然我自己还不信自己的能力，我还是<u>试试</u>。 'Even though I still did not believe in myself, I still went ahead to try it out.' (SG-001-19) | (b) 来林子里<u>坐坐</u>，<u>擦擦</u>汗。 'Come to sit in the shade a while and wipe off your perspiration.' (CN-015-10) | - |

Table 1. Examples for each aspect of the three regions

Through comparing the relative frequencies of each aspect marker, this paper makes the following observations: the relatively low usage frequencies of 着 *zhe* and 过 *guò* in SM stands in stark contrast to that of the other two varieties, in particular, of MCM; the usage of 'non-standard' aspect markers, particularly 中 *zhōng*, in MCM; and a potential tense marking using 了 *le* in SM. The following will address each observation in greater detail.

3.1 Relative lack of use of markers 着 *zhe* and 过 *guò* in SM and possible reasons

When examining the relative frequencies of individual aspect markers across the three varieties, it is noted that SM uses much less of the markers 着 *zhe* and 过 *guò* than in the other two varieties. Particularly outstanding is in 过 *guò* between SM and MCM, where the difference is as high as nine times. The case of 着 *zhe* in SM is less prominent, though it is still at least twice lower than in MCM and TWM. Even more interestingly, in the instances where 过 *guò* is used, the actions or events are all negated by 没 *méi*, and suggest the non-actualization of the action or event.

This raises some interesting questions: does this mean that the experiential and durative aspects are typically left unmarked? Or does SM employ other markers to mark experientiality and continuity? Taking 过 *guò* as a case study, one hypothesis is that SM uses 'non-standard' markers to mark these aspect markers. For instance, as Lock (1989) and Zhu (2008) suggest, 有 *yǒu* as an aspect marker can mark experientiality, such as in (13).

(13) 他们是会讲标准一点啊，因为他们<u>有</u>学嘛。
'They can speak [Huayu which is] a little more standard because they have studied it. (Lock 1989)

In these situations, 有 *yǒu* is interchangeable with 过 *guò*. However, while reviewing the data, it is found that 有 *yǒu* is not used in such a manner. This study proposes two possible ways to interpret the role of 有 *yǒu*. First, in (6a), while 有 *yǒu* can also express experientiality, that is the act of uploading songs is experienced at least once by the actor 他 *tā*, just like 过 *guò*, some form of habituality is also marked in this experience – that is, 有 *yǒu* emphasizes the ongoing nature of the experience. Second, 有 *yǒu* may also denote the experiential perfect aspect just as 过 *guò* does, but may be used in different situations. As pointed out above, 过 *guò* is only noted in sentences with negation, i.e., event was not actualized, while 有 *yǒu* is used only when the event was actualized. This suggests that SM speakers may mark realized and non-realized events using different markers, resulting in the lower frequency of the marker 过 *guò* due to less possible usage situations. Regardless of the function of 有 *yǒu*, the more important issue is to identify the patterns of use in the language variety and compare it against the other varieties. In the case of 过 *guò*, we note that in the use of the marker is lower in the two varieties that uses 有 *yǒu*, suggesting that there may indeed be some correlation between the usage of these markers. Testing this hypothesis would require a larger-scale study comprising of more data.

3.2 Use of 'non-standard' markers in MCM

It is not surprising that varieties like TWM and SM use markers like 有 *yǒu* since such markers are often a product of language contact. For instance, 有 *yǒu* is generally thought of as a marker usually found in Southern dialects, such as the Min dialects (e.g., Lock 1989; Chappell 1992; Tsao & Cheng 1995; Tsai 2002), which shape and influence the

development of SM and TWM due to language contact. What is more interesting is that the MCM speakers seem to also use these 'non-standard' aspect markers, that is, markers that are typically used in non-MCM varieties – there is a relative usage frequency of 0.1 for both 有 *yǒu* and 中 *zhōng* (examples can be found in (6b) and (8a) respectively). This may be an indication that MCM has been taking in features from non-MCM varieties just as these non-MCM varieties lean in towards MCM.

Particularly noteworthy is the usage of 中 *zhōng*. According to Diao (2013), 中 *zhōng* as a durative aspect marker is more commonly found in TWM than in MCM and HKM. Similarly, it should also be a more common phenomenon in SM (e.g., Zhu 2008). In these varieties, 中 *zhōng* is supposed to mark the durative aspect, such as in (14).

(14) 警方正漏液侦讯调查中。
 'The police are investigating this intensely.'
 (Diao 2013: 276)

However, this study finds no such usage in SM and TWM. This is in contrast to previous research – while Zhu (2008) and Diao (2013) suggest that uses of 中 *zhōng* in MCM is highly restricted to specific domains such as advertisements and formal documents, the appearance of 中 *zhōng* following a more generic verb like 熟睡 'in deep sleep', albeit only one instance thus far, seems to suggest that there might be a slow generalization of the usage of 中 *zhōng* as an aspect marker in MCM. A more in-depth analysis of the non-use of 中 *zhōng* in TWM and SM is needed, but this would require a much larger corpora comprised of texts from a much wider range of genres and registers.

3.3 Potential tense marking using 了 *le* in SM

This study also finds that 了 *le* in SM is often used when it is not required based on the MCM speaker's acceptability judgement. For instance, in (15), 了 *le* is used with 当 'to treat as', which is unacceptable in other varieties in this instance as the act of 当 'to treat as' is unbounded, that is, there is no endpoint expressed by the verb, and therefore does not allow the co-occurrence with the perfective 了 *le*.

(15) 他那次最艰的就是把我当了不重要而叫我离开他房间。
 'The worst that he did was to treat me as unimportant and chased me out of his room.' (SG-017-27)

Such a use makes up approximately 12% of all the instances of le_1 in SM, suggesting that it is not very uncommon in the variety. There are three main categories for the seemingly unnecessary use of 了 *le* in SM. The first is as mentioned above, in which 了 le_1 is used where it is deemed unacceptable in non-SM varieties, either due to the inherent properties of the verb like in (15) or due to the context of the sentence, as in (16). For instance, in (16), it should be interpreted as the class was still having their Physical Education lesson, based on how the sentence is constructed. If the lesson is ongoing, then the use of the perfective marker that denotes termination of an event should not be used as it contradicts with the internal temporal reference of the sentence. It is also seen to occur with verbs that take a clausal object, such as in (17).

(16) 有一天，我班上了体 *yù* 课，而伟诚说他不舒 *fú*，所以坐在书包边。
 'One day, while we had our PE lesson, Weicheng said he was unwell and sat beside the area where we put our bags.' (SG-011-05)

(17) 他话了他对我的犬 *shī* 望了，电脑本来是给我用到大学，不是用来玩玩地。
 'He said he was very disappointed in me because the computer was (bought) for my studies and not gaming.' (SG-017-26)

The second category comprises instances where 了 *le* is added in the wrong position, particularly in serial verb (18) and pivotal constructions (19).

(18) 奶奶用了非常 *wēnnuǎn* 的眼 *shěn* 看我，然后回答："孩子，我虽然你做了那些事，但我还非常爱你。
 'Grandma looked at me gently, and answered: "My child, even though you did those things to me, I still love you very much."' (SG-026-34)

(19) 我把一些歌放上网后受到许多 N 励和技持，家人和朋友们都帮<u>了</u>我提高自己对唱歌的信心。
'I received much encouragement and support after uploading some songs onto the internet, and my friends and family helped to boost my confidence in singing.' (SG-021-13)

In Mandarin, it is suggested that serial verb constructions are typically headed by the second verb because the first verb tends to be the component that "carries information such as location, manner/instrument, comitative, and condition, which is usually represented by adjuncts in a language" (Huang and Lin 2012). Using the MCM subcorpus of the Sinica Corpus (Huang 2009), Lin et al. (2012) also find that 了 *le* is typically attached to the second verb of a serial verb construction, which is also typically the head of the sentence. That is, the aspect marker 了 *le* has to be typically attached to the second verb when it is functioning as the head. The marker is only added to the first verb if the emphasis is on the completion of the first act before the inception of the second, as in 我们也找了一个旅馆住了一晚 'We also found a hotel and stayed for a night' (Lü 2010: 352). In the instances found in this corpus, the 了 *le* that is attached to the first verb and not to the second are often 'erroneous' in MCM because it has not been attached to the head of the construction[1], such as in (18). In (18), the first verb phrase serves to specify the manner with which the grandmother looked upon the protagonist; the second verb phrase is then the actual main verb, or the head of the clause, as it expresses the main action performed by the subject. As such, the perfective marker 了 *le* should not appear after the V1 用 'use'.

The third and last category comprises instances that see 了 *le* used in a wrong word order, like (20).

(20) 我刚开始上学时，父母买<u>了</u>给我一个新的手机。
'When I first started school, my parents bought me a new mobile phone.' (SG-020-03)

In MCM or TWM, the 了 *le* should be attached to 买给 'bought for' instead of just the verb 买, as 买给 functions as a verb compound.

These usages of the perfective aspect marker could be a result of the intimate language contact that SM has with English as a result of the bilingualism policy in Singapore. In these unique usages of 了 *le*, it is found that the role that the marker plays is less of a perfective aspect marker but more of a past tense marker. For instance, in (20), one possible reason behind the students attaching 了 *le* to the verb instead of the whole phrase might be that these students equated directly, but falsely, the structures 买给 and *bought for*. Since the past tense is marked solely on the verb in English, a similar process might have arisen in the SM speakers, thereby leading them to mark the supposed perfective aspect on the verb instead, which may slowly become interpreted as a past tense marker. The same goes for the other instances, such as in (15), where a verb that does not necessarily require or cannot take an aspect marker is given one, just because the act happened in the past. A larger-scale corpus is required so as to properly observe and analyze the patterns and trends of use. If this is observed in a larger amount of data, then it may show that the perfective aspect marker 了 *le* is being increasingly used as a tense marker, and therefore may suggest that SM, due to its language contact with English, is evolving from a primarily aspect-marking language into one that may also encode tense grammatically.

On a related note, it does seem that 了 *le* is not the only aspect marker that is undergoing a shift from being an aspect marker to being a tense marker in SM. The continuous marker 着 *zhe* also seems to show signs of being used as a tense marker, in examples such as (21), where the use of the continuous marker does not fit the typical mould of Mandarin.

(21) 那时我也差不多哭了起来，对自己想：明年就要上中学了，我们不再是社会里的小孩子，真地希望大家还会互相继续交往沟通，让友情永恒地话 [sic. 活] <u>着</u>下去。

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[1] This study recognizes that in certain contexts, 了 *le* can be attached to the first verb and not the second, as in 我们吃了饭看电影 'We will watch a movie after our meal'. The authors have accounted for these instances in the analysis and excluded such cases from the discussion in this section.

'Then, I almost cried and I thought to myself, 'Next year, we are all going to high school and will no longer be the kids we used to be. I really hope we will keep in touch and let our friendships continue blossoming.' (SG-004-09)

In such uses, 着 *zhe* seems similar to the *-ing* marker in English and marks the continuous tense. However, this phenomenon is far less common than that of the perfective marker at the moment.

4 Conclusion

In sum, this pilot study provides some insights on how aspect marking across the three varieties differ by providing some statistical evidence of the use of the aspect markers. Most notably, it points out some trends that differ from previous studies, e.g., the use of the aspect markers like 中 *zhōng* in MCM and not TWM and SM and the potential use of the perfective aspect marker 了 *le* as a tense marker in SM.

However, as this is only a pilot study with a relatively small corpus, the trends are not conclusive yet. Following from this pilot, the corpus will be expanded, not just in terms of size, but also in terms of genre and region – descriptive and explanatory compositions will also be included in the study, as with compositions of both genres from Hong Kong to represent the Hong Kong Mandarin (HKM) variety. There are also phenomena that are not discussed in the particular study, due to the relative lack of data thus far; for instance, while it has been noted that SM speakers do tend to leave out aspect markers in certain contexts, there is still too little data at the current point in time to make any generalizations about the situation.

Future expansions of the study will see more participants recruited to analyze these compositions based on their acceptability judgements. When completed, this study can contribute to theories relating to aspectual systems and language variations and to areas of applied linguistics. A larger-scale comparison will be able to useful in identifying commonalities between non-MCM varieties and affect how these variations from MCM are viewed from a global perspective.

Acknowledgements

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