ABSTRACT. Chinese has a number of particles such as le, guo, zai and zhe that add a particular aspectual value to the verb to which they are attached. There have been many characterisations of this value in the literature. In this paper, we review several existing influential accounts of these particles, including those in Li and Thompson (1981), Smith (1991), and Mangione and Li (1993). We argue that all these characterisations are intuitively plausible, but none of them is precise. We propose that these particles serve to mark which part of the sentence’s descriptive content is asserted, and that their aspectual value is a consequence of this function. We provide a simple and precise definition of the meanings of le, guo, zai and zhe in terms of the relationship between topic time and time of situation, and show the consequences of their interaction with different verb expressions within this new framework of interpretation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Aspect, or aspect marking, has received a great deal of interest in Chinese linguistics in the last thirty years. This interest might be due to the fact that markers of aspect are the only kind of morphology-like devices in the language. In Chinese, there is no inflectional morphology to express tense, number, gender, or case. Hence, aspect is a special grammaticalised category in Chinese.

Most analyses of Chinese aspect in the literature focus on four aspect markers: le, guo, zhe, and zai. In a sentence, the first three markers follow the verb, while the last one precedes the verb. Despite the immense interest and the numerous studies devoted to Chinese aspect, the precise function of each of these markers is still under considerable debate. There is agreement that they do not relate the situation described by the sentence to the time of utterance but express various perspectives on the situation; hence, they express various aspect rather than tense relations, and are often called aspect particles or markers (Li and Thompson 1981). There is also agreement that zhe and zai somehow characterise the situation as ‘imperfective’, ‘progressive’ or ‘durative’ whereas le and guo express a

1 A conservative estimate is that over two hundred articles have been published on the linguistic analyses of aspect markers in Chinese.
‘perfective’ (or perhaps ‘perfect’) aspect. Detailed linguistic analyses of these particles vary considerably from author to author. In this introduction, we first present a standard version of the functions of aspect particles on the basis of standard analyses such as those espoused by Chao (1968) and Li and Thompson (1981). We then point out some problems with such analyses and our plan to proceed with a new analysis.

1.1. The Perfective Aspect Markers

The particle le is generally considered a perfective marker: according to traditional analysis, it presents a situation in its entirety, as an event bounded at the beginning and the end, and without reference to its internal structure. Le has often been characterised as marking completion (see Chao 1968). However, some researchers emphasise its perfectivity and argue that le does not by itself indicate a completed event or action (e.g., Li and Thompson 1981): the meaning of completion often comes from the meaning of the verb with which le occurs. For example, when the verb encodes a situation with a clear temporal boundary, le indicates that the situation comes to its natural endpoint, that is, it is completed, as illustrated in (1). But when the verb encodes a situation with no natural boundary, le signals the termination rather than completion of a situation, as in (2) (see Li 1990; Shih 1990; Smith 1991).

(1) Qi-chi zhuang-dao-le fangzi.  
    car hit-break -LE house  
    The car knocked down the house.

(2) Xiao yazi you-le yong.  
    duckling swim-LE stroke  
    The duckling swam.

The example in (1) contains a so-called ‘resultative verb construction’ (RVC; see section 4.3) that encodes a telic, resultative endpoint (i.e., the

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2 There is also a sentence-final le whose relation to the verb-final le is a matter of dispute in the literature. A clear demarcation of, or even the existence of, the two kinds of le has been difficult to prove in the literature (see Thompson 1968; Rohsenow 1976, 1978; Li 1990), especially when we are concerned with examples like Zhansan pang-le, in which le is both at the end of the sentence and at the end of the verb. Our discussion of the perfective le is relevant primarily to the verb-final le (including le that is both verb-final and sentence-final). Similarly, we ignore some of the complications associated with zai because of its function as a locative preposition (see Li 1993).