Aspectual coercion
Interpretations of V-le in Mandarin Chinese

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Dynamic verbs followed by the perfective aspect morpheme -le (V-le) in Chinese typically designate bounded events but can also encode states. This article proposes that the eventive designations are at the basic level and the stative interpretations are at the derived level through aspectual coercion. The categorical shifts from the former to the latter may be brought about by a number of factors, which include sentences with nonagent subject/topic, general stative sentences, and certain adverbs. These factors introduce aspectual properties incompatible with V-le’s basic-level eventive interpretation. They trigger a coercion procedure to reconcile the incompatibilities, leading to aspectual reinterpretations. These findings are discussed in light of the principle of external override and the analytic nature of the Chinese language.

Keywords: aspect, coercion, interpretation, situation types, Chinese

1. Introduction

This paper presents a coercion account of multiple interpretations of verbs followed by the perfective aspect morpheme -le in Mandarin Chinese (hereafter referred to as Chinese). In the literature, the perfective aspect morpheme is commonly referred to as the perfective -le, the verbal -le, or simply -le, as opposed to the sentence-final particle le (without hyphen), which is not dealt with in this study. The perfective morpheme -le is generally attached to verbs, including state verbs, to indicate the perfective aspect. This study concentrates on its use following dynamic verbs, abbreviated as “V-le.”

The phenomenon motivating the present inquiry is that V-le can designate dynamic events or durative states without any change in the verb form, which means that V-le relates to aspectual categories or situation types (such as states, activities, and bounded events) – not on a one-to-one basis. Because Chinese is analytic in
nature and lacks inflectional morphology, shifts among aspectual categories are often implicit. Previous studies of aspect have identified major functions of aspectual markers and acknowledged some exceptions. It is well known that aspectual markers have specific functions (e.g., -le marks perfective situations); however, it is not as well known that their default functions are subject to contextual variation. In general, we know very little about how bits and pieces of aspectual information are put together during comprehension, what affects aspectual interpretation, and how multiple interpretations are reached.

This article discusses new observations regarding multiple interpretations of V-le and how they affect the analysis of aspectual semantics in Chinese. It explores the possibility of adopting a coercion analysis along the lines of recent developments in aspectual coercion (Asher and Hunter 2012; Fuhs 2010; Michaelis 2005; Moens 1987; Moens and Steedman 1988; Smith 1997; Swart 1998). As an initial attempt in this approach to Chinese aspect, this study focuses specifically on the shifts from eventive interpretations to stative interpretations of V-le.

To develop a coercion account, uses of V-le are characterized at two levels. Eventive designations are the default interpretation at the basic level, whereas stative designations are reinterpretations at the derived level. During comprehension, constituents in the clause that are external to V-le might introduce aspectual information incompatible with the default eventive interpretation. In such cases, a coercion procedure is triggered to shift from the basic-level eventive interpretation to the derived-level stative reinterpretation while the verb form stays constant. Thus, aspectual coercion examined in this article is an implicit reinterpretation process and a reconciliation measure at the sentence level. The overriding factors, referred to as coercing factors, function as aspectual modifiers that give rise to aspectual categorical shifts. The three types of coercing factors of V-le examined here pertain to the type of situation or situation entities presented by the predicate, the semantic features of the subject/topic NP, and the adverb yijing 'already.'

The analysis of aspectual reference and situation-type shifts presented in this article is framed within Smith’s (1997, 2003) two-component model of aspect. Her terminology – viewpoint (or grammatical) aspect and situation aspect – is also adopted. The analysis is based on and illustrated by actual uses of V-le in written narrative discourse (fiction). The sources of the examples are listed in the Appendix. Each example in this article is identified by the writer’s name followed by the page number of the work from which the example is extracted, for example,
“(Liang 15).” The English translation of the excerpts was also taken from published English editions of the works, which has the advantage of objectivity, as opposed to a translation supplied by me. In cases where the translation deviates from the original, a minor revision is made (shown in parentheses).

2. Literature review

In this section I review the relevant literature on aspectual coercion (2.1), the perfective aspect and V-le in Chinese (2.2), and the types of situation entities in discourse (2.3).

2.1 Aspectual coercion

People and languages are resourceful when expressing and interpreting meaning through linguistic forms. Normally, sentence meaning is determined by the words of the sentence, the semantic frames projected by the words, and the morphosyntactic rules in the grammar of the language. However, flexibility also allows placing a constituent of one class in the syntactic or semantic environment best suited to a member of another class. This flexibility may result in an altered interpretation of the constituent through a procedure of coercion. Although the general idea of compositionality is largely uncontroversial and coerced interpretations can be reached by speakers of a language without much difficulty, the mechanisms by which semantic reinterpretations are achieved are often poorly understood. In recent years, efforts have been made to elucidate the inner workings of the mechanisms and the process by which the meaning of a sentence is reassessed to overcome semantic mismatches. For the analysis of aspect, the concept of coercion has been applied to resolve clashes of aspectual features in different parts of the clause – a procedure that leads to aspectual reinterpretations.

The descriptive approach to aspectual reinterpretations pursued in this study owes much to a line of relatively recent research. The term coercion comes from Moens (1987), who originally stipulated a procedure to handle explicit aspectual category shifts. More recent work, including some psycho- and neurolinguistic studies, has defined coercion as an implicit procedure – without using any overt aspectual markers (Brennan et al. 2008; Fuhs 2010; Piñango et al. 2006; Pustejovsky 1991; Pustejovsky et al. 1996; Swart 1998; Townsend 2013). The process is syntactically and morphologically invisible while it modifies aspectual categories or situation types the same way a grammatical marker, such as the perfect and the progressive, does. It is governed by implicit contextual reinterpretation mechanisms invoked by the need to resolve aspectual or semantic conflicts (Swart 1998).
For illustration, examine (1), which uses the verb *knew*. In general sense, the state verb *know* designates a durative situation. But, the sentence in (1) also uses the adverb *suddenly*, which applies to dynamic events and is thus incompatible with a state verb. The two words thus create a semantic mismatch, but they do not necessarily result in ungrammaticality or incomprehensibility, because, according to the analysis, the incompatibility in (1) triggers a shift from the stative interpretation to an inchoative reading; that is, a change of state occurs, from not knowing something to knowing it, which is a dynamic event. In (2) the semelfactive verb *cough* is modified by *for*-adverbial, which is restricted to durative situations (states or activities). This modifier also triggers a reinterpretation (coercion) of the situation, resulting in an iterative reading. The mismatch in (3) is between the copular verb followed by an adjective and the progressive viewpoint. In English the progressive viewpoint normally occurs with dynamic verbs. In (3), the progressive viewpoint changes the stative predication into one of a dynamic event.

(1) Suddenly, I knew the answer.  
    (Swart 1998: 359)
(2) Mary coughed for an hour.  
    (Smith 1997: 53)
(3) John is being silly.  
    (Asher and Hunter 2012: 56)

Explicit aspectual marker changes differ from implicit coercion in an important way: The former denotes specific transitions from one category to another, whereas the latter may correspond to a number of different possible transitions, because the coercion is implicit. A central issue addressed by coercion analysis is that verbs that usually contribute a particular aspectual property may sometimes be understood differently because they have been coerced by context into having a different aspectual makeup from their usual usage.

Some coercion studies have focused on other types of semantic mismatches. In (4), for instance, the mass noun *beer* is used as a countable noun; in (5), the one-argument verb *bark* is embedded in a three-argument clause structure comprising an agent (*a gruff ‘police monk’*), a theme (*them*), and a goal (*back to work*).

(4) She had a beer.  
    (Michaelis 2005: 46)
(5) When a visitor passes through the village, young lamas stop picking up trash to mug for the camera. A gruff ‘police monk’ barks them back to work.  
    (Michaelis 2005: 46)

As these examples indicate, coercion is now seen as a general reconciliation mechanism, triggered by a variety of factors that caused mismatches in semantic or morphosyntactic components of the clause. Coercion may involve an explicit or
implicit type-shifting operation and a process of contextual reinterpretation to bridge the gap created by semantic mismatches.2

As Asher and Hunter (2012: 55) stated, if one assumes that temporal information is carried by spatial – temporal entities like events and states or by temporal entities like times or temporal intervals, aspectual coercion involves transforming the aspectual interpretation of some temporal predicate in a way that would be unexpected from a simple compositional calculation of meaning. (see also Brennan et al 2008)

Smith’s (1997, 2003) analysis of coercion focused on the surface structure of the sentence. In her analysis, verb constellations (i.e., verbs and their arguments) are associated with a given situation type according to their temporal features and by the general principles of basic-level categorization (illustrated in Table 1). The basic-level categorization is the default interpretation of the verb constellation. However, the relation between verb constellations and situation types is not one-to-one. Due to the range of aspectual choices available in the system, verb constellations may be associated with several situation types. The basic-level categorization is assumed unless there is reason to believe otherwise. The factors that introduce clashes of temporal features and trigger shifts in interpretation are usually other constituents in the clause, which include adverbial or other information from context. The outcome of the reinterpretation is derived-level categorization. Derived situation types fall into the same classes as those at the basic level. No additional situation types are needed to account for coercion.

For example, I knew the answer in (1) above is a neutral and standard presentation of the situation to know, designating a basic-level state. The momentary adverb suddenly introduces a mismatch in temporal feature, which triggers a shift to an inchoative reading. The coerced reading represents a dynamic event at the derived level. In (2), the verb cough is a basic-level semelfactive. The durative adverbial for an hour, incompatible with the verb in temporal feature, overrides the value of the basic-level verb constellation and triggers a shift in situation type into one of activity. As Smith (1997: 53) stated, “in case of a clash between the temporal feature values of a verb constellation and that of a form external to it, the feature value of the external form overrides the value of the verb constellation” (see also Michaelis 2005).

This line of research has brought to the fore the notion of aspectual reinterpretation and categorical shifts. It shows that in aspectual analysis we cannot simply associate one aspectual form with one particular category but, instead, we should take variations into account.

2. For further analyses, see Jachendoff (1990) and Kamp and Reyle (1993).
Two additional points are worth noting before introducing the next topic. First, coercion is not limited to aspect. The concept is used for many other cases in which incongruity calls for reconciliation, although in this article I discuss only aspectual coercion. Second, the felicity of an aspectual reinterpretation is strongly dependent on context and knowledge of the world. This point will be picked up again in Section 4.

2.2 The verbal -le and perfectivity in Chinese

Languages differ in how temporal and aspectual information is conveyed by morphosyntactic means. Chinese has no tense marking but uses a set of aspectual morphemes to indicate how a situation is viewed or presented. This section offers a brief description of the ways perfectivity is conveyed in Chinese. Both grammatical markings and situation aspect relevant to the present study are included in this description.

2.2.1 The viewpoint marker -le

The perfective aspect in Chinese is marked by the viewpoint (or grammatical) morpheme -le to present bounded events in their entirety. The events are typically indicated to have come to an end; they are discrete and intrinsically punctual, as opposed to durative or iterative (Chao 1968; Z. Shi 1990; Smith 1997; Xiao and McEnery 2004). As C. Li and Thompson (1981: 185) pointed out, “an event is viewed in its entirety if it is bounded temporally, spatially, or conceptually.” Smith (1997: 266) stated that “the perfective applies to nonstative situations and spans their initial and final endpoint.” Other researchers have emphasized that the perfective viewpoint signals the actualization of a specific event by a reference time (Lin 2003; Liu 1988; Xiao and McEnery 2004). In (6) is a typical example with V-le shown in bold.

(6) 他打了两个电话。

Ta da-le liangge dianhua.

‘He made two phone calls.’

3. To some researchers, for example, Xiao and McEnery (2004), telicity refers to a situation with a spatial endpoint, whereas boundedness refers to one with a temporal endpoint. This distinction is not maintained in this article. In addition, the perfective aspect may also be indicated by another marker -guo, which is not included in this study.

4. Glossing convention: ba/jiang = markers of preposed object; cl = classifier or measure word; dupl = duplication; mod = marker of noun modifiers (的, 之) or verb complements (得); pass = passive marker; poss = possessive marker; prt = sentence-final particles (的, 了, 吧);
Although -le is the most frequently used and discussed perfective marker in Chinese, its other uses have received little attention. Most previous studies examined constructed examples and isolated sentences, focusing on the meaning before and after -le is attached to a verb. Few have dealt with the interaction between -le and situation types. Xiao and McEnery (2004), in a quantitative study of -le based on empirical data, found that the issue can be complex, involving not only the verb and -le, but also the coordination with other bounding expression. Their data indicated that -le can be applied to all situation types, bounded or unbounded, activities, semelfactive, achievements, and accomplishments. “It is not uncommon for atelic situations (around one fifth of the total) to take -le” (Xiao and McEnery 2004: 102). In their conclusion, they spoke of tendencies, e.g., “the actual -le is expected to co-occur more easily with accomplishments and achievements” and “the compatibility of -le with atelic and unbounded situations is a matter of degree” (Xiao and McEnery 2004: 104, 110).5 In this regard, coercion analysis and the use of excerpts from actual discourse offer a complementary approach.

A conspicuous phenomenon regarding the use of -le is that -le is not required to convey perfectivity. Information from the other component of the aspect system, that is, situation aspect, may work either alone or together with -le to indicate perfectivity. We look at situation aspect in more detail in the next section.

2.2.2 Perfectivity conveyed by information from situation aspect

Situation aspect, as opposed to grammatical aspect, refers to aspe ctual information conveyed by the lexical content of the predication. It concerns the inherent nature of situations – for example, whether they are dynamic or static, durative or nondurative, telic or atelic. This line of research originated from Vendler’s (1957) seminal study of verb classification that divided verbs into four major types based on their temporal structures: states, activities, accomplishments, and achievements. To this list Comrie (1976) added one more category of semelfactive as single instantaneous events that consist only in the occurrence and have no result or outcome (also see Smith 1997). As the classification reflects fundamental cognitive distinctions that are language independent, it has been widely adopted in the

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5. This is a complex issue beyond the present study. See Xiao and McEnery (2004, Section 4.1.3) for further discussion.
analyses of many languages, including Chinese (Chu 1998; Smith 1990, 1997; Tai 1984; Teng 1985).

Table 1 illustrates the five classes with Chinese examples.\(^6\) Two major differences can be discerned. One is the division between states and events. States are \([-\text{dynamic}]\) situations involving no change; they are designated by state verbs (including adjectival predicates in Chinese). Events are dynamic \([+\text{dynamic}]\). The second difference is in telicity. Accomplishments and achievements are telic events with a natural endpoint; activities and semelfactives are atelic. The temporal features of the situation types contribute to aspectual meaning. For example, only telic events may convey perfectivity without using the grammatical marker \(-le\). In this article, the word *situation* is used as a cover term for all or any of these classes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Verb classification</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dynamic</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events</td>
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<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semelfactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplishments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Achievements</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Previous analyses of situation aspect have made an important point: Information is conveyed not only by the verb, but also by other constituents in the clause (Dowty 1979; Friedrich 1974; Smith 1990; Vendler 1957; Wald 1987). There has been a gradual expansion in the scope of study in this area, from the core of the predication (i.e., verb classification) to other, increasingly numerous constituents, for example, *in*-adverbial versus *for*-adverbial, internal and external arguments, and now to the role of other types of adverbials, such as *suddenly*. The more recent coercion analysis also incorporates aspectual interpretations at the basic-level and

\(^6\) In early stages of the analysis, semelfactives were treated as a special atelic subclass of Achievements (Dowty 1979; Vendler 1957). For Chinese, Tai (1984) combined Accomplishments and Achievements into one category – that of “telic events” – leading to his three-category classification of states, activities, and results (telic events). Since telic events are typically expressed by activity verbs followed by an RVC, it was claimed that Chinese has only two primitive verbal categories, state and activities. See Chu (1976), Smith (1990), Tai and Chou (1975), and Tai (1984).
the derived-level. For Chinese, Table 1 shows that telic events are encoded by an activity verb followed by a resultative verb complement (RVC), which typically encodes the result of the verb event. An RVC may be a verb, an adjective, or a word indicating the direction of a motion (C. Li and Thompson 1981; Lu 1977; Packard 2000; Ross 1990; Y. Shi 2002; Thompson 1973). We will soon see that a group of other expressions also plays a similar bounding role as RVCs do.

The example in (7) shows how RVCs work either alone or together with -le to convey perfectivity. Two RVCs can be found in (7). One is dao ‘attain’ in (a), following the activity verb zhao ‘look for.’ It indicates the attainment of the goal and the endpoint of the event. The other RVC is xialai ‘down’ in (b), indicating the direction of the sitting motion. It works together with -le to encode the perfective aspect. The two consecutive perfective clauses narrate temporally sequenced events in the order of the presentation. The endpoint of the first event, indicated by the RVC dao ‘attain,’ is also the beginning of the next event. Narrative time, thus, advances (W. Li 2012).

(7) (a) 他们找到座位, (b) Ø坐了下来。(Bingxin 265)
(a) Tamen zhao-dao zuowei, (b) Ø zuo-le-xialai.
‘They found their seats and sat down.’

A leading idea that emerged from more recent research is that, in addition to RVCs, various other constituents, all occurring in the postverbal position and collectively referred to as “bounding expressions,” also encode the endpoint of dynamic events (Xiao and McEnery 2004; W. Li 2012). They include verb quantification (e.g., yiyan ‘one glance’ in [9a]), verb duplication (8a), or prepositional phrases (9c). In the rest of the clauses in (8) and (9), activity verbs work with -le (8b–c; 9b), an RVC (8d; 9d), or a combination of -le and an RVC (9a) to narrate series of bounded events.

(8) (a) 她点点头, (b) Ø给佳佳打了针, (c) Ø取了药, (d) Ø走出儿科急诊室。(Chen 44)
(a) Ta1 dian dian tou, (b) Ø1 gei Jiajia da-le zhen, (c) Ø1 qu-le yao, (d) Ø1 zou-chu erke jizhenshi.
‘(She) nodded her head, got Jiajia an injection, picked up her medicine, and left the clinic.’
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Research has shown that bounding expressions are linked to the verb in different degrees of tightness. They delimit the events at different levels. For example, RVC and duplicated verbs are closely linked to the verb at the nucleus level. They are more likely to work without the -le. In comparison, verb quantification has a loose connection to the verb. It delimits the event at the clausal level and may require a co-occurring -le (Xiao and McEnery 2004). The coordination of -le and bounding expressions is a complex issue that calls for further research.

According to Smith’s (1997) two-component theory, situation aspect and viewpoint (grammatical) aspect converge to bring together grammatical and semantic information for the interpretation of aspect. In the coercion account described earlier (Section 2.1), the convergence produces the basic-level categorization of situation types before coercion occurs. Currently, it is unclear what exactly is associated with the basic-level categorization and whether the association could be different from language to language. According to Smith (2003), basic-level categorization is associated with verb constellations (i.e., verbs and their arguments). But the present study of Chinese shows, as we will see in the rest of this article, that subject/topic NP could be a coercing factor that leads to aspectual reinterpretation at the derived level.

The examples in (7)–(9) also demonstrate that perfective clauses may form topic chains to narrate a series of temporally sequenced events. The agent of the verb actions, i.e., ‘she’ in (8) and Lu Wenting (proper noun) in (9), is mentioned only once at the beginning of the chain as topic. Later reference to the same NP is represented by a coreferential null NP (Ø; D. Shi 1989; W. Li 2005). Topic chains of this pattern are significant in this study because they are a typical context for the eventive interpretation of V-le. In these topic chains, the canonical SV(O) word order encodes actions that typically transfer energy from the subject (agent) to the object (patient) and from one clause to the next. With the events being bounded

The role of subject may also be performed by an NP with the thematic role of experiencer with a lower degree of transitivity (C. Li and Thompson 1980).

(9) (a) Lu Wenting Deng-le Yuan yuanyan yiyan, (b) Ø1 mang gei Jiajia (a) (name) glare.at-le (name) once (b) Ø1 hurry for (name) tiao-le yifu, (c) Ø1 ba ta fang zai chuang.shang, (d) Ø1 ti ta take.off-le clothes (c) Ø1 BA her put zai bed-on (d) Ø1 for her gai-shang beizi.

‘Wenting snapped. She hurried to take off Jiajia’s clothes, put her in bed and pulled the covers over her.’
and sequenced, the narrative time moves forward. These patterns show that word order is crucial for the interpretation of V-le. We will see that when the word order of a clause with V-le deviates from SV(O), the nonagent subject/topic becomes a coercing factor that triggers reinterpretation of the situation type. In Section 3, an account of the multiple interpretations of V-le is presented. Before that, we need to take a brief look at situation entities in discourse that offer a glimpse of the variety of clauses involved.

2.3 Types of situation entities: Situations and general statives

In narrative discourse, the significant unit is the episode. Events and states are put together by a unifying theme to form the bulk of narrative text. They record situations that are temporally located prior to speech time.

However, narrative discourse does not consist only of events and states. Situations not located on the temporal storyline, such as general comments, evaluations, abstract statements, and perhaps arguments as well, may also be part of narrative discourse. In Smith’s (2003) analysis of discourse modes, three classes of situation entities were recognized: situations, general statives, and abstract entities. Different discourse modes, such as narrative, description, report, information, and argument modes, consist of different combinations and proportions of these situation entities. The present study examines the first two types, i.e., situations (including events and states) and general statives, illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Situations and general statives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation entities</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Situations</td>
<td>events</td>
<td>We walked to school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>states</td>
<td>Lee was sick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General statives</td>
<td></td>
<td>Dinosaurs are now extinct.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mary speaks French.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The present study noted one type of topic chain with bounded SV(O) clauses that does not encode events in this pattern. The topic chains have quantified expressions in the post-verbal position, as shown in the following example.

Tamen tan-le liangge xiaoshi, he-le sanping jiu.
they talk-le two.cl hour drink-le three.cl liquor
‘They talked for two hours and drank three bottles of liquor.’

The quantified expressions in the postverbal position indicate that the events last for a considerable period of time and that the time of the two events overlaps with each other – no temporal advancement is observed. This type of clauses does not have any impact on the present study.
As can be seen in Table 2, situations consist of events and states – specific episodes or isolated facts that take place, or hold, in the world (illustrated in Table 1). Perfective events and states are relevant to the present study. Narrative time advances with perfective event sentences based on temporal sequence: Bounded events tend to be interpreted as punctual and occurring in sequence, one after another. By contrast, narrative time does not advance with sentences that express states. Later in Section 3 of this article, narrative time advancement will be used as a test to see whether the recorded situations represent events or states.

General statives, in comparison, do not express particular events or states – they express regularity, expectations or make general statements, as shown by the two examples in Table 2. In Section 3.2, it will be shown that, general stative sentences may employ V-le to specify the circumstances in which the stated situations occur. The V-le carries the reading of a resultative state.

After this review of relevant notions and previous studies of V-le, I will turn to a coercion analysis of V-le (Section 3). I will show that V-le is used not only in clauses that narrate dynamic events, but also in those that describe durative states (including the resultative state). A coercion analysis will be proposed to account for this phenomenon.

3. Coercion of V-le in Chinese

Given that the basic function of V-le is to present bounded events, the problem for the present study is that V-le is also used to designate states or stative situations. Intuitively, the dual function is unexpected, because bounded events and durative states are semantically contrasting (see Table 1). For the same verb form to designate contrasting aspectual categories, there must be factors in the context that promote distinct designations. For the coercion account to yield results, coercing factors in the context that prompt aspectual reinterpretations must be identified.

I propose that coercion of V-le is a sentence-level operation. Although the eventive designation is the default basic-level interpretation, the stative designation is a derived reinterpretation at the sentence level. My task in this section is to examine the latter, that is, clauses with stative interpretations of V-le, and to tease out the factors in the context that trigger the coercion and the shift. The discussion appeals to the criterial attributes of eventive and stative predications: Event predications are dynamic. When bounded and sequenced, they are perceived as punctual with temporal progression. Stative predications, on the other hand, are durative and nondynamic. When they are sequenced, they show overlapping situation time; no temporal progression is observed.
The examination below is divided into subsections based on three factors that trigger coercion: nonagent subject/topic (3.1), general statives (3.2), and the adverb *yijing* ‘already’ (3.3).

3.1 Coercion of V-le triggered by nonagent subject/topic

One of the key observations of this study is that clause structure and word order are important factors determining the eventive versus stative interpretations of V-le. Chinese, as an SVO language, typically encodes dynamic actions in the canonical SV(O) word order. An agentive subject/topic, overt or covert, is required for the dynamic interpretation of V-le. Clauses that deviate from the SVO order would result in a nonagent subject/topic. Such clauses have a strong tendency to describe stative situations.

For illustration, this section brings together four constructions with V-le under the rubric of noncanonical word order and nonagent subject/topic: the existential construction, the passive construction, sentences with preposed patient/object, and the double nominative construction. All these constructions have corresponding structures in the SV(O) word order that describe the same scenario but with eventive designations. My goal in this section is to show that when the constituent order deviates from the SVO pattern and, as a result, when the clause has a nonagentive subject/topic, this feature becomes a coercing factor to shift the basic-level eventive designation of V-le to a derived-level stative reinterpretation. We will see that clauses in noncanonical word order are uniformly construed as denoting durative states.

3.1.1 The existential construction

The existential construction has a distinct word order. It starts with a locative subject/topic followed by a verb and a postverbal NP naming the entity that exists in the specified location. Depending on the theoretical approach, sentences in this category may differ in some features. For example, the most typical verb used in the construction is the existential verb *you* ‘there be,’ although some grammarians also consider sentences with placement verbs and posture verbs, e.g., those in (10)–(31), as existential constructions (Li & Thompson 1981; Gu 1992; Li 2014; Guo 2014).

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9. The correspondence is in meaning rather than syntactic derivation. They mainly differ in how the arguments are encoded.

10. This discussion excludes the “presentative construction” with a motion verb and a postverbal agent NP. See W. Li (2014) for a discussion of the differences between existential and presentative constructions.
Nie 1989; Ross 2002; Song 1989, 1991). The present study takes the latter view. Another difference has to do with the sentence-initial locative expression, which may be considered base-generated subject (Gu 1992), locative inversion (Pan 1996), or a topic NP (C. Li and Thompson 1981). The term subject/topic used in this article allows flexibility to accommodate different views. In (10) is an example of the existential construction with V-*le* (in bold).

(10) 墙上挂了一幅画。

\[ \text{Qiang-shang gua-le yifu hua} \]

wall-on hang-le one.CL painting

‘On the wall hangs a painting.’

It should be uncontroversial that (10) denotes a state, despite the fact that the verb is in the perfective form (i.e., V-*le*). It has been demonstrated that placement and posture verbs followed by -*le* in existential constructions are similar in meaning to the same verbs followed by -*zhe*, as in the well-recognized stative structure in (11) (Chao 1968; C. Li and Thompson 1981; Liu 1988).

(11) 墙上挂着一幅画儿。

\[ \text{qiang-shang gua-zhe yifu huar.} \]

wall-on hang-zhe one.CL picture

‘A painting is hanging on the wall.’

In (12)–(14) are additional examples drawn from the corpus of the present study, in which placement and posture verbs followed by -*le* designate states rather than actions. My contention here is that V-*le* in existential constructions does not designate a dynamic event viewed in its totality (perfective). Rather, it denotes the stative situation after the dynamic event is completed. The locative subject/topic (nonagent) is incompatible with the dynamic interpretation of V-*le*. The mismatch triggers reinterpretation, which shifts the basic-level eventive designation to the derived-level stative designation. As a result, (12) denotes the state of “her” powdered face; (13) depicts the condition of the courtyard after a heavy rain; (14), with V-*le* in (b), portrays a scene – a state – at sunset.

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11. Placement and posture verbs may also take the form of a verb-RVC (resultative verb complement) compound, e.g., *zhan-man* ‘stand-full’ in (19) before -*le* is attached.

12. Different views also apply to the subject/topic NPs in the other constructions to be discussed.
As discussed earlier, eventive and stative designations differ in punctuality or durativity. The former are punctual with temporal advancement, whereas the latter are durative. The durative situation designated by the existential construction can be verified in several ways. One is by what I call the “overlapping time” test. The rationale of the test is that consecutive clauses of stative descriptions overlap in time. They are in sharp contrast to the dynamic topic chain patterns with V-le seen in (7)–(9), in which narrative time advances. Thus in this test, if a series of existential clauses overlap in situation time, these clauses will be taken as evidence that the clauses are stative in nature. Such sentences are in fact found in the corpus of this study. In (15) is a topic chain with two existential clauses with V-le in (a) and (b). The locative NP caichang shangkong ‘the space under the market ceiling’ is the topic shared by both clauses. As we can see, the situation times of the clauses are durative; they overlap with each other. No temporal advancement is observed.

13. It is difficult, if not impossible, to find an English sentence that corresponds both in meaning and in structure to the existential construction in Chinese, especially in natural extended discourse. Here the SVO order is used in the translation. The same can be seen in many other examples.
Another way to verify the durative nature of (15a) and (15b) is that the -le in both clauses can be replaced by the imperfective aspect marker -zhe without altering their basic meaning. Thirdly, the English translation of these excerpts also reflects their stative nature by using either a stative predication – (13) and (15) – or the perfect (12), in which “dynamic sentences shift to states” (Smith 2003: 71, also see Swart 1998).

Because this discussion has touched on the similarity and the interchangeability of -le and -zhe in existential constructions, this is a good place to mention their differences – an issue that not only has received little attention but also has an impact on later discussions in this paper. The present study has observed that posture and placement verbs in existential constructions may generally be followed by either -le or -zhe with a slight difference in emphasis. -Zhe emphasizes the on-going posture of the postverbal NP referent(s), whereas -le denotes the existence of the postverbal NP referent(s) in the location as a result of the verb event. Other verbs, e.g., verbs of dynamic actions, may be marked only by -le; the interpretation is that they designate the result state of the verb event. Dynamic verbs in existential constructions cannot be marked by -zhe, mainly because the constructions cannot be used to describe on-going events.

For instance, (16) portrays the internal arrangement in a building, using three existential constructions in a row. The clause in (a) uses a dynamic event verb, she ‘set up;’ only -le may be attached to the verb to denote the result – the existence of a bar on the first floor as the consequent state of the verb event. Replacing -le with -zhe would make the clause infelicitous. In comparison, clauses (b) and (c) both use the posture verb bai ‘display.’ In (b), the verb is followed by -zhe to emphasize the on-going posture of the pastry – they are on display. In (c), the verb is marked by -le to focus on the result of the verb action – a few tables are now in the location. The English translation of the excerpt also reflects the difference: The on-going posture of the cheesecakes and brownies in (b) is depicted by the verb display, while in (c) the same verb is translated as ‘accommodated’ to denote simple existence.
‘The ground floor housed a drinks counter; cheesecakes and chocolate brownies were displayed in a glass showcase. The second floor consisted of one big room, which accommodated several tables.’

In (17), the verb-RVC compound, *zhan-man* ‘stand-full,’ denotes the result. Only *-le* can be used. Replacing it with *-zhe* would lead to an unacceptable sentence. The rationale is that an RVC designates the result specifically. When it is attached to an activity verb, the compound only entails boundedness. The duration associated with the verb action is no longer available for designation (Chu 1976; Tai 1984; Ross 2002). For (17), without the RVC *-man* ‘full,’ the *-le* could be replaced by *-zhe*.

As can be seen from this discussion, the stative designation of the existential construction with V-*le* is evident, although verb marking in the construction is a subtle issue. Later in Section 4, I will provide a more general explanation of the stative designation of V-(RVC)-*le* in existential constructions, linking it to the thematic features and the word order of the sentences.

### 3.1.2 Passive constructions

Passive constructions use patient NPs in the sentence-initial position as subject/topic, and the sentences carry a passive reading. Similar to the existential construction, they may use V-*le*, but the nonagent subject/topic is incompatible with V-*le*’s default eventive interpretation. A coercion process is then triggered to reinterpret it as designating a state.

There are two types of passive constructions in Chinese; both may involve V-*le*. One uses the formal passive marker *bei* as in (18), in which the agent NP, *xiaohaizi* ‘kids,’ is overtly mentioned. The agent NP may be implicit, as in (19).
(18) 牛奶瓶被小孩子砸掉了。 (A. Wang 151)

Niunai ping bei xiaohaizi za-diao-le.
milk bottle PASS child smash-up-LE

'Some kids smashed a bottle of milk.' (A bottle of milk was smashed by some kids.

(19) 江洪终于被战胜了。 (Liang 271)

Jianghong zhongyu bei zhansheng-le.
flood finally PASS curb-LE

'In the end the flood was curbed.'

The other passive construction, shown in (20b) and (21b), expresses the passive meaning without using the passive marker bei. It is referred to as the “notional passive,” “pseudo-passive,” or “middle construction” (Cheng and Huang 1994; Huang 2013; D. Shi 1997, 2000; Xiao et al. 2006).

(20) (a) 我们申请去加拿大，(b) 护照批下来了。 (Chen 54)

(a) Women shenqing qu Jianada, (b) huzhao pi-xialai-le.
we apply go.to Canada (b) passport approve-down-LE

'We applied to go to Canada, and our passports have been approved.'

(21) (a) 傅家杰还想哀求，(b) 那边的电话已经挂上了。 (Chen 104)

(a) Fu Jiajie hai xiang aiqiu, (b) nabian de dianhua yijing
(name) still want plead (b) the.other.end MOD phone already

gua-shang-le.
hang-up-LE

'Jiajie tried to plead with him, but the person at the other end had hung up.'

It is well recognized that passive constructions denote result (Xiao and McEvery 2004) or disposal (C. Li and Thompson 1981). In English, active sentences encode events that are agent initiated, sharply bounded, and fast changing. In the passive sentence, the same event is reframed as a resulting state. The copula verb reflects its stative nature. Thus the passive construction is a grammatical device to code “stativization” (Givón 1993; see also Jespersen 1931; Comrie 1976). Chinese passive constructions also encode states. They differ from those in English in that the verb form does not change when an active sentence is turned into passive. The passive meaning is expressed only by the word order, whereby the patient NP is put in the subject position.

Same as the existential construction, the durative nature of the passive constructions can be verified by the “overlapping time” test. In (22), two consecutive passive clauses in (a) and (b) record situations that overlap in time. In (23), three consecutive passive clauses in (b), (c) and (d) also overlap in time. No temporal progression is observed. We conclude that the clauses are stative in nature.
(22) (a) 外面的小木桌搬了进来，(b) 房子稍调整了一下，(c) 显得更整洁。

(a) Waimian xiao mu zhuo ban-le-jinlai, (b) wuzi shao tiaozheng-le-yixia, (c) xiange geng zhengjie.

'The wooden table (outside) had been moved into the bedroom and (with a little adjustment) the whole place looked a bit tidier and cleaner.'

(23) (a) 手术极其顺利，(b) 最后一针缝好了。 (c) 最后的一个结扎上了。
(d) 那移植上去的圆形材料, 严丝合缝地贴在了病人的眼珠上。

(a) shoushu jiqi shunli, (b) zuihou yizhen feng-hao-le. (c) zuihoude yige jie knot zha-shang-le. (d) na yizhi-shangqu de yuanxing cailiao, yansihefengde tie-zai-le bingrende yanzhu shang.

'The operation went extremely smoothly. When the last suture was put in place, and the final stitch knotted, the donor cornea had been precisely fitted into the patient’s eye.'

3.1.3 Sentences with preposed patient
Sentences with preposed patient are similar to passive constructions in that patient NPs appear in the sentence-initial position, e.g., gongqian ‘(work) payment’ in (24). Different from passive constructions, they do not carry a passive reading. A passive marker bei cannot be added to these sentences. The agent NP may be overtly mentioned, such as wo ‘I’ in (24a), or implied, as in (25b–c). These sentences also record states.

(24) 工钱我去打听了一下，

gongqian wo qu dating-le, work/pay I go inquire-LE

'(I have asked about the pay.)'

(25) (a) 她觉着百无聊赖：(b) 宴会, 吃腻了; (c) 舞, 跳累了；

(a) Ta juezhe baiwuliaolai: (b) Yanhui, chi-ni-le; (c) Wu, tiao-lei-le;

'(Her) boredom was increasing: she was sick of all the luncheons; she found the dancing tiresome.'
Sentences with preposed patient are a frequently used topic–comment construction in Chinese (C. Li and Thompson 1981; D. Shi 2000; Tsao 1979; Xu and Langendoen 1985). In English, they are highly marked with specific contextual requirements, e.g., for comparison. This is why the SV(O) word order tends to be used in the English translation of this structure. Note also that the preposed patient NPs, e.g., youxie shoushu ‘some operations’ in (26) and liwu ‘gift’ in (27), may serve as the topic and the center of attention over multiple clauses. The situation times overlap. It is clear that these are stative clauses that do not encode dynamic actions typically found in SV(O) sentences.

(26) (a) 有些手术，外国已经搞开了， (b) 我们还是空白。 (Chen 16)
(a) youxie shoushu, guowai yijing gao-kai-le, (b) women hai shi blank
‘(there do seem to be) some operations that other countries have managed and we still have not…’

(27) (a) 礼物我忘了， (b) 放在旅馆里。 (Hong 32)
(a) liwu wo wang-le, (b) fang zai luguan-li.
‘I left your presents in my hotel room,’

Again, to verify the durativity of the situation described, consecutive clauses with preposed patient can be used. This can be seen in (27a & b). The situations recorded in these two clauses overlap in time. They indicate that sentences with preposed patient do not denote dynamic and punctual events.

3.1.4 Double-nominative constructions

Double-nominative constructions also involve nonagent topics. They are so called because they start with two NPs side by side, commonly analyzed as two topic NPs. The first, e.g., nuren ‘woman’ in (28), is a primary topic, followed by a full-clause comment. Within the full-clause comment, the initial NP, toufa-shang ‘hair-on’ (the second NP in the construction), is a lower-level (secondary) topic. Semantically, the primary and secondary topic NPs are related by a whole–part, class–member, or possessor–possesee relation. This is also a unique structure in Chinese, for which English tends to use the SVO word order to translate.

(28) 女人头发上盘了好多布。 (Hong 61)
Nuren toufa-shang pan-le haoduo bu.
‘the women (bound) their hair up (with) cloth.’
It is interesting to note that when V-le is used in this construction, the full comment clause following the primary topic tends to be an existential clause. Thus, in (31), toufa-shang ‘hair-on’ plays double roles as the secondary topic of the double nominative construction and the locative subject of the existential clause. The existential clause here bears all the features of the existential construction discussed in Section 3.1.1. For example, it may use posture verbs followed by -le, e.g., pan-le ‘bound-le’ in (28), and the -le could be replaced by -zhe when it is not followed by an RVC. With an RVC following the verb, as dong-man ‘freeze-full’ in (29), the situation is bounded and the -le cannot be replaced by -zhe. Earlier it was shown that the existential construction is stative in nature. In the double nominative construction, the existential clause serves to comment on the higher level topic. The designated situation remains stative.

(29) 院子当中间儿冻满了冰,  
Yuanzi dangzhongjianhong-man-le bing,  
‘The middle of (the courtyard) was a sheet of ice.’

Double nominative constructions may also form topic chains. In (30) the primary topic shiti dingduan ‘the top of the stone steps’ and the secondary topic Liangbian ‘both sides’ are followed by two comment clauses with V-le, cheng-le ‘set.up-le’ in (a) and fang-le ‘put-le’ in (b). The situation times overlap. This verifies their stative nature.

(30) (a) 石梯顶端两边都撑了布伞, (b) 放了摊位…  
(a) Shiti dingduan liangbian dou cheng-le bu san,  
(b) fang-le  
(a) stone.steps top two.sides both set.up-le cloth umbrella (b) put-le  
tagweii.  
‘The pathway at the top (of the long flight) of stone steps was lined on either side with small stalls covered by large umbrellas’

In this section, the discussions of the four constructions have shown consistently that when clauses with V-le are in a noncanonical word order and have nonagentive NPs as subject/topic, they are stative predications. These observations suggest that word order and semantic features of the subject/topic NP may override the verb form in determining the situation type. In the next section, I turn to the stative reading of V-le in a different type of clauses – circumstantial clauses in general statives.
3.2 Coercion of V-le in general stative sentences

As discussed in Section 2.3, general statives do not express specific events or states – they describe regularity, expectations or make general statements. In this section, I show that V-le may be employed in general statives to specify the circumstances in which the stated situations occur. The V-le does not refer to specific dynamic events because of the stative nature of the sentence. Rather, they refer to the consequent state as a result of the verb action.

For example, the sentence in (31) is a general stative, in which the main predication in (c) states the tendency that rhinos in general (rather than a specific rhino or rhinos) are unwilling to breed. This situation occurs only under the circumstance specified by the V-le in (b), i.e., when they are “in captivity.” The issue of translation will be addressed shortly below.

(31) (a) 犀牛 (b) 到了动物园里 (c) 就更难交合生育， (Hong 159)
(a) Xiniu    (b) dao-le dongwuyuan-li (c) jiu gengnan jiaohuo
(a) rhinoceros (b) arrive-le zoo-in (c) then even.harder breed
shengyu,
give.birth
‘What’s more, they (rhinoceroses) were unwilling to breed in captivity.’

The same can be seen in (32), in which the main statements in (c) and (d) describe the obligations of eye surgeons for the circumstance specified in (b), i.e., when the doctors are “in the operating room.” Again, the V-le refers to a type of generalized situation and a state, rather than a particular incident or a dynamic event.

(32) (a) 一个眼科大夫 (b) 上了手术台， (c) 就应该摒弃一切杂念， (d) 全神贯注于病人的眼睛， (Chen 3)
(a) Yige yanke daifu (b) shang-le shoushutai, (c) jiu yinggai
(a) one.cl eye surgeon (b) step.on-le operating.podium (c) then should
pingqi yiqie zanian, (d) quanshenguanzhu yu bingrende
abandon all extraneous.thought (d) concentrate on patient’s
yanjing,
eye
‘An eye surgeon in the operating room must clear her mind of all extraneous thoughts and concentrate completely on the patient’s eyes.’

In English, a similar type of clauses, referred to as restrictive when-clauses, has been discussed in the literature (Carlson 1979; Krifka et al. 1995). Following are two examples given by Declerck (1988).

(33) People cannot be happy when they are unemployed.

(34) Bears are intelligent when they have blue eyes.
Declerck (1988) demonstrated that the normal use of *when* is to describe situations on a temporal basis. Those in (33) and (34), however, have deviated from the normal use and extended to cases where time is no longer the criterial factor. These *when*-clauses restrict the application of the main predication by defining the cases, in which the head clause is true. The relevant NP denotes a kind rather than an individual and the sentence tend to be interpreted generically. These *when*-clauses are characterized as atemporal and restrictive; they are assigned concomitant adverbial meanings, corresponding to the logical relations that exist between the two clauses. As Declerck (1988: 135) described, “a restrictive *when*-clause corresponds to *p* in the proposition ‘if *p* then *q*’.”

As one can see, Chinese circumstantial clauses with *V*-le in general stative sentences, as shown in (31b) and (32b), share a number of features with restrictive *when*-clauses in English. They both tend to occur in general statements about a kind – the statements abstract away from particular objects or individuals. The predications also abstract away from specific events or episode – they tend to be generalizations, regularity or expectations (Krifka et al. 1995; Declerck 1988). While clauses with *V*-le in Chinese and restrictive *when*-clauses in English both restrict the main predication in a similar way, as shown by the above examples, they could also be interpreted as contributing to the description of the referent set, restricting the subject NP to a well-defined subset (e.g., *rhinos in captivity* in [34], *eye surgeons in operating rooms* in [32], *people who are unemployed* in [33] and *bears with blue eyes* in [34]).

For the current discussion, the crucial point is that the state of affairs designated by the *V*-le is the consequent state brought about by the verb event, rather than the dynamic event itself. (31), for instance, is about a tendency in the behavior of rhinoceros as a species under certain circumstances, i.e., after they are captured and put in a zoo. Despite the fact that the circumstance is specified by the *V*-le, *dao-le* (*dongwuyuanli*) ‘arrive-at-le (zoo),’ the clause designates the resultative state of the action ‘arrive.’ This shaded meaning is rendered in the English translation by the prepositional phrase *in captivity*. In the example about eye surgeons in (32), the stative reading of (b) is also captured in the English translation by the prepositional phrase ‘in the operating room,’ rather than a past tense verb to denote a perfective event. *V*-le, because of its structural components, has the verb in its profile, even when it designates the resultative state.

Here, a disclaimer is in order. Referring to the English translation of the examples here does not mean that translation always faithfully renders the situation types of the original; nor does it imply that translation can be depended on for this analysis. In full recognition that translators have choices at their disposal, the translation of (31) and (32) still deserve credit for correctly capturing the stative interpretation of the *V*-le, because even when one tries to alter the translation,
for example, by changing (32) to “when an eye surgeon has entered an operating room, …” the perfect verb still carries a stative reading (Smith 1997, 2003; Swart 1998). For the V-le to be interpreted as referring to a specific dynamic event, the subject NP needs to be referential and definite (i.e., referring to a particular eye surgeon or surgeons) and the verb event needs to be specific, something like “when the eye surgeon entered the operating room…” This is clearly not the meaning of the original.

Because the circumstantial V-le in general statives does not designate dynamic events, the subject of the sentences may not be the agent of the verb. In (35), the subject NP, shuimo shanshui ‘watercolor landscape painting,’ is a preposed patient – a non-SVO word order – of the circumstantial clause. The circumstantial clause in (b), Hua-le yiqian nian ‘having been painted for a thousand years’ describes the general state of landscape painting as an art form, to which the main statement in (c) applies.

(35) (a) 水墨山水 (b) 画了一千年 (c) 也没有创新, (Hong 38)
(a) shuimo shanshui (b) hua-le yiqian nian (c) ye meiyou
(a) water.ink landscape (b) paint-LE one.thousand years (c) still have.no
innovation
‘Water-color landscapes were all much the same – always had been and always would be (even after one thousand years in practice).’

The sentence in (36) is about a psychiatric disease. The V-le in (b), jie-le (hun) ‘be married,’ specifies the state, which is the cure. Note that the subject in (a) is not the subject of the circumstantial clause in (b). The implied subject of the V-le in (b) is understood as the people who have zhezhong bing ‘this kind of disease.’ Thus (a) relates to (b) only by an indirect semantic relationship. This example clearly shows that (b) designates a consequent state rather than the verb action.

(36) (a) 这种病 (b) 结了婚 (c) 就会好的。 (A. Wang 239)
(a) zhe zhong bing (b) jie-le hun (c) jiu hui hao de.
(a) this kind disease (b) tie-LE marriage (c) then will cure
‘As soon as someone like that gets married everything’s fine.’
(The disease will be cured once the person gets married.)

One more point about these examples is worth noting: Since the main clauses are stative, they provide stative context for the stative reading of the circumstantial clauses with V-le. Conversely, if V-le is used in a dynamic context, e.g., as in (37)

14. As Comrie (1976: 86) pointed out, “The perfect relates a past action to a present state, i.e. can express a present state as being the result of some past action.”
– revised, based on (31) – the specific event of si-le ‘died’ in (c) would promote an eventive reading of the V-le in (b). Note that in that case the sentence would no longer be a general stative. The eventive interpretation of the predications in (b) and (c) would also require a referential and definite NP as subject. Therefore, different from (31), the same noun xiniu ‘rhinoceros’ in (37) is interpreted as referring to a specific individual animal: ‘the rhinoceros.’ In natural discourse, such an NP carries old information – it has already been talked about and thus has an antecedent in previous discourse.

(37) (a) 犀牛(b) 到了动物园里 (c) 就死了。
    (a) Xiniu  (b) dao-le  dongwuyuan-li (c) jiu  sile.
    ‘The rhinoceros died as soon as it arrived at the zoo.’

In summary, we have seen in this discussion that V-le in circumstantial clauses of general statements has a state reading. In these sentences, the atemporal and abstract statements are the context and a coercing factor that shifts the eventive interpretation of V-le to a resultative state. The role of context will be discussed further in Section 4.

3.3 Coercion of V-le by the adverb yijing ‘already’

This section examines the coercing role of the adverb yijing ‘already’ in the interpretation of V-le. It has been observed that yijing may affect the temporal reference of the sentence. When modifying V-le, yijing ‘already’ indicates that, by the reference time, the verb event has taken place and produced a result. An initial example is given in (38), in which the object clause (in bold) following the verb kanjian ‘saw’ is modified by yijing ‘already.’ The function of yijing can be seen if we compare the same clause with and without yijing. When yijing ‘already’ is not used, the clause would more likely be interpreted as seeing “Papa” walking in through the door. Thus the two events, kanjian ‘saw’ and huilai ‘return,’ took place at the same time. When yijing ‘already’ is added, the object clause designates the state of Papa being home – as a result following the event of huilai ‘return.’ In other words, yijing puts the event it modifies, i.e., huilai ‘return,’ ahead of the reference time (the time of kanjian ‘saw’). It indicates that by the reference time of kanjian ‘saw,’ the event of huilai ‘return’ has already taken place and produced result. The predication focuses on the resultative state.
(38) (a) 妈这么说着，(b) 我才看见原来 爸爸已经回来了，(Lin 14)
(a) Ma zheme shuo-zhe, (b) wo cai kanjian yuanlai Baba yijing
(b) I only.then see in.fact Dad already huilai-le.

‘It was only as Mama was saying this, that I saw Papa had already come home.’

In (39), clause (c) has a similar structure. The object clause (in bold) following the verb kanjian ‘saw’ designates the state of the outside room being bright.

(39) (a) 这时屋里漆黑，(b) 隔著布帘子空隙，(c) 可以看见 外屋已经点了灯。(Lin 41)
(a) zheshi wu-li qihei, (b) ge-zhe bulianzi kongxi, (c) keyi kanjian waiwu yijing dian-le deng.

‘The room was already pitch black and through the slit in the door curtain I could see that the lamp had already been lit in the next room.’

It is interesting to note that the word already in English has a similar function. Smith (1997) demonstrated that the adverb already facilitates the perfect reading, which is stative in nature. For Chinese, C. Li and Thompson (1981: 299) noted that yijing ‘already’ is “typically used in the description of states.”

There are several patterns involving yijing ‘already’ and the reference time in the Chinese sentence. One is that the reference time is overtly mentioned either in the same clause where yijing ‘already’ occurs, as xianzai ‘now’ in (40b), or in the immediate context, as xianzai ‘now’ in (41b).

(40) (a) 多多在打扫房间。(b) 她现在已经将一部分家务接了过去。(A. Wang 153)
(a) Duoduo zai dasao fangjian. (b) Ta xianzai yijing jiang yibufen
(b) she now already jiawu jie-le-guoqu.

‘Duoduo, who had already taken over some of the housework, was cleaning up the room.’

15. C. Li and Thompson’s discussion concerns the sentence-final le, rather than V-le.
(41) (a) 他已经耽误了十年, (b) 现在不该再占他的时间,
(a) Ta yijing danwu-le shi nian, (b) xianzai bu gai zai zhan tade
(a) he already waste-le ten year (b) now not should again demand his
time
‘... he had lost ten years’ time. She shouldn’t be making demands on his time
now.’

Reference time may be covert. It can be the narrative time, the speech time, or
inferred from the context, as in (42) and (43).

(42) (a) 外屋书桌上摆著那缸春天买的金鱼, (b) 已经死了几条, (c) 可是秀
(a) waiwu shuzhuo-shang bai-zhe nagang chuntian mai de
(a) outside.room desk-on display-ZHE that.CL spring buy MOD
jinyu, (b) yijing si-le jitiaoa, (c) keshi Hsiu-chen haishi tiantian
goldfish (b) already die-le a.few.CL (c) but Hsiu-chen still daily
qin-zhe huan shui
deligent-ZHE change water
‘On the table in the outer room was the bowl of goldfish which had been
bought that spring. Several of the goldfish were already dead, yet Hsiu-chen
still continued to change the water every day’

(43) (a) 已经剃了头, (b) 已经换上新衣新鞋, (c) 他以为这就十分对得起自
(a) yijing ti-le tou, (b) yijing huan-shang xin yi xin xie, (c) ta
(a) already cut-le hair (b) already change-on new clothe new shoes (c) he
yiwei zhe jiu shifen duideqi ziji le.
thought this then very.much treat.well self LE
‘His head was shaved, his clothes and shoes were new; he considered he had
done quite enough for himself’

The event time of the preceding clause may also serve as the reference time for a
clause with yijing ‘already’ and V-le. In (44), the event time of clause (a) – the time
of police’s arrival – serves as the reference time for clause (b). The adverb yijing
‘already’ in (b) puts the event time of the V-le it modifies, that is, du-si ‘poison-die,’
before the reference time, so that the dynamic event of poisoning took place before
police’s arrival. In effect, yijing ‘already’ triggers a shift in the interpretation of the
V-le to denote the resultative state – he was already dead by the time police arrived.
Although the two clauses are juxtaposed, their order cannot be changed.
(44) (a) 警察赶到抓他，(b) 他已经毒死了自己。
(a) jingcha gan-dao zhua ta, (b) ta yijing du-si-le ziji.
(a) police rush-arrive arrest him (b) he already poison-die-le self
‘When the police had arrived to arrest him he had taken some of the poison himself and had died.’

If the English rendition of these sentences could serve as reference, one could see that five out of eight of the above examples use the perfect construction to convey the resultative stative meaning and the other three use a copular verb followed by an adjective. This may not be accidental. The English translation may also use the subordinate connective when to express the reference time, as in (45). Chinese, in fact, has a similar structure, that is, to use an adverbial clause, such as … shi ‘(when) … time’ in (48a), to overtly encode reference time. No matter how the reference time is expressed, yijing ‘already’ exerts a resultative state reading of its immediate clause with V-le.

(45) (a) 待我折了一束花回到她身边时，(b) 她已经闭上了眼睛。
(a) dai wo zhe-le yi shu hua hui-dao ta shenbian shi, (b) ta yijing bi-shang-le yanjing.
(a) till I pick-le one bunch flower return-to her side time (b) she
‘She was dead when I returned with the blossoms.’

In Section 3, three types of coercing factors have been examined. We have seen consistently that these factors trigger coercion of V-le and result in a state reading. In the next section, some general observations and issues related to the findings will be made.

4. Discussion

This discussion looks at several issues related to the findings of this study in a more general picture: the role of external argument in aspectual interpretation (4.1), aspectual designations and event complex (4.2), word order (4.3), the role of context (4.4), and issues for further study (4.5).

4.1 The role of external argument in aspectual interpretation

As mentioned earlier, Smith (2003) associated basic-level interpretation of situation types with verb constellations (i.e., verbs and their arguments, including the external argument). The present study, however, has observed a phenomenon
unique to Chinese, which is not covered in Smith’s (1997, 2003) analyses. That is, basic-level interpretations in Chinese are associated with the verb and its complements (i.e., direct object and various types of bounding expressions). Subject/topic NPs, as external argument, could be a coercing factor that causes aspectual reinterpretation at the derived level. This point has been demonstrated by the ample examples presented in Section 3.

In literature, Ross (2002) is among the very few who have explored the relation between aspectual categories and thematic features of the sentence in Chinese. However, her study was limited to the lexical level in the account of verb classification. She pointed out that because of the absence of inflectional morphology, Mandarin completely lacks inflectional barriers to aspectual category shifts. “[A]spectual features interact with certain thematic features to determine the basic aspectual categories” (Ross 2002: 344). One thematic feature identified in her study is agency. Verbs that involve an agent ([+Agent], e.g., dynamic verbs) typically encode actions, whereas verbs that do not involve an agent ([−Agent], e.g., xihuan ‘like’ and yao ‘want’) tend to encode states. In fact, all verbs that are [−Agent], including adjectival predicates, are treated by the grammar as state verbs.

While Ross (2002) used agency to distinguish action verbs from state verbs, Xiao and McEnery (2004), in their work on Chinese aspect, attempted to see whether the semantic features of the external argument affect the situation type of the sentence. Unfortunately, their study was limited to the feature of [+− count] of the subject NPs, leading to their conclusion that external arguments do not affect situation types, irrespective of whether the NPs are [+count] or [−count].

The present study is a step forward from both Ross (2002) and Xiao and McEnery (2004). It demonstrates that agency plays an important role in determining the aspectual category of the predication at the sentence level when the verb form remains constant. For clauses with V-le, the SV(O) word order with an agentive subject promotes the eventive interpretation. Deviations from this word order that result in a nonagent subject/topic would lead to deviations from the default interpretation. Thus the feature of agency of the subject/topic NP is crucial for the interpretation of V-le.

4.2 Aspectual designations and event complex

The coercion phenomena of V-le examined in this article share one thing in common: The designations all shift from dynamic events to the consequent state. The shifts are subtle, as they only affect interpretation without any change in form. In terms of event structure, the endpoint of the events and the realization of the resultant state coincide at the same time point. As Smith (1997: 19) described, “(T)elic events have a change of state which constitutes the outcome, or goal, of the event.
When the goal is reached, a change of state occurs and the event is complete.” The event of a rock falling to the ground from a cliff is a telic event: the final endpoint is reached when the rock is on the ground – the endpoint of the event and the result state coincide in time.

This point is illustrated visually by Moens and Steedman’s (1988) diagram of event complex, as shown in Figure 1. It shows the association of a goal event, or “culmination,” with a “preparatory process,” by which it is accomplished, and a “consequent state,” which ensues. In the aspectual system of a language, different aspectual types highlight different parts of the event complex. In English, for example, the perfective aspect encoded by a dynamic verb in the past tense (e.g., *Harry reached the top*) refers to the punctual endpoint of the climbing event (culmination), which also includes a change of situation and the beginning of the result state (*Harry being on top*). In comparison, a perfect construction (e.g., *Harry has reached the top*) denotes the “consequent state” with no change over time.

![Figure 1. Event structure (Moens and Steedman 1988: 18)](image)

In Chinese, the default basic-level interpretation of V-le is a dynamic event of “culmination.” The coerced reinterpretations examined in this paper all designate a consequent state. The difference between Chinese and English is that while English makes use of different verb forms to denote the two situation types, Chinese uses the same verb form for both. As far as the verb form is concerned, the shift in Chinese is implicit. Consequently, the semantic contrasts in interpretation can be subtle; the distinction between the basic-level and derived-level designations is also fluid. This may be one reason the shifts have rarely been noted in the literature.

Another reason may reside in the scope and the approach of study. For English, because aspectual contrasts are often made explicit (although not entirely) by verb forms, studying aspectual contrasts by observing verb forms is generally effective. For example, both the stative nature of the passive construction (*be V-en*) and the existential construction (*there-be*) involve the use of a copular verb. When the designation of a bounded event shifts to the consequent state, the verb form changes to the perfect. Chinese is different. Because aspectual shifts involving V-le are not indicated by the verb form, focusing the analysis on the verb would not be effective. The scope of the examination has to be expanded to include semantic and syntactic features of the entire sentence.
4.3 Word order

Another word order characteristic of Chinese, i.e., adverbial modifiers before the verb, determines that V-le tends to occur at (or close to) the end of the clause. As a result, coercing factors such as nonagent subject/topic and adverbs occur before V-le. This feature has psycholinguistic consequences in the sense that it allows early projection of situation type in the clause. The environment for an eventive or a stative interpretation is established before V-le occurs. As soon as V-le appears and a semantic mismatch is identified, a coercion procedure is immediately launched and can be completed in no time. Therefore, in terms of language processing, this constituent order facilitates the coercion and reinterpretation of V-le.

In English, by contrast, coercing elements, such as adverbs and adverbials, are often placed after the main verb, as shown in the example Howard sent a large check to his daughter for many years (Townsend 2013). The culmination event sent a large check is coerced by the durative adverbial for many years, leading to reinterpretation of a single event as multiple events of sending different checks. Because the coercive element occurs at the end of the sentence, a question is raised: Does the processing of the aspectual information begin immediately when the main verb appears or it is postponed until the end of the sentence when all the information, including the coercing adverbial, is gathered? Although findings are inconclusive at this point, a common observation is that coercion of this kind increases processing time (Townsend 2013). In this regard, the Chinese order does seem to make the reinterpretation of V-le an easier task.

In Chinese linguistics, the importance of word order has long been recognized. This study is the first to acknowledge the range of coercion phenomena related to eventive and stative interpretations of V-le and to connect them with word order variations in the clause.

When it is clear that marked clause structures (with nonagent subject/topic) tend to encode a stative interpretation of V-le, an explanation is in order. We may pose an intriguing question: Why is constituent order in Chinese endowed with the function of designating eventive versus stative situation types? It is not unreasonable to speculate that Chinese, with no verbal conjugations, may lack the morphological means to encode shifts in aspectual meaning. To make up for the lack of marking in morphology, clause structure and constituent order at the sentence level may be tapped into as structural resources. The noncanonical word order characterized by nonagent subjects/topics may be a mechanism to encode shifts in aspectual meaning.

At the discourse level, the sharp contrast between clauses in the SV(O) and non-SV(O) word order reflects a major distinction in the structure of narrative text. Perfective clauses in the SVO word order, i.e., those in (7)–(9), encode
temporally sequenced dynamic events. These clauses narrate the major storyline with temporal progression. They constitute *foregrounded* portions of the discourse. By contrast, clauses that deviate from the SV(O) word order, even when they also use V-*le*, provide stative descriptions. They play supporting and elaborating roles to assist, amplify, or comment on the side. These clauses do not narrate major events and do not advance narrative time. They are *backgrounded* (Fleischman 1990; Hopper 1979; Hopper and Thompson 1980; Jones and Jones 1979; Reinhart 1984). Thus in Chinese, different word order has different textual functions. Their explanation resides in a higher level, functional framework of discourse grounding. This leads to the topic of context.

### 4.4 The role of context

The coercion account of V-*le* underscores the importance of a comprehensive approach and the indispensable role of context, not only the immediate context within the clause but also a larger context, such as the discourse mode of the passage. The dynamic topic chain pattern in (7)–(9) promotes eventive interpretations of V-*le*, whereas stative descriptions would promote coerced stative reinterpretations of V-*le*. The latter is illustrated in (46). The excerpt describes several rooms that used to belong to a family referred to as “they.” During the Cultural Revolution, the rooms were taken away from the family and used by other people. After the revolution ended, the rooms were returned to them and renovated to restore the original look. The excerpt describes the state of the rooms after the renovation. The clauses all use nonagent subject NPs and V-(RVC)-*le*, except (d) and (f) where no verb is found. Clauses (b) and (c) are existential constructions; (d), (f), (i), and (j) have the structure of “notional passive” (Section 3.1.2). The situation times overlap. Because the descriptions focus on the current state of the rooms as a result of the renovation, the agent of the actions – who did the renovation jobs – and the actual sequence of the jobs are unimportant and therefore unspecified.

(46) (a) 不几天，房管处来人将两间房间打通，恢复原样。 (b) 墙壁糊了贴墙布，(c) 地板上打蜡，(d) 沙发来了，(e) 三人的，双人的，单人的，(f) 茶几来了，(g) 宽的、窄的、长条的；(h) 立灯、窗幔……都来了。(i) 客餐厅重新建设起来了。(j) 现在，“文化大革命”以前的一切，都恢复了。

(A. Wang 309)

(a) Buji not.a.few tian, fangguanchu building superintendent lai come ren person jiang liangjian
(b) qiangbi hu-le

Within a few days the building superintendent sent someone over to restore the lower floor to its original condition by reconnecting the two rooms. After the walls were papered and the floors waxed, they bought some new furniture, including a sofa, a love seat and some stuffed chairs, plus coffee tables and end tables, lamps, curtains. . . . everything. Once again they had a dining room. They had now come full circle, for the place was exactly the same as before the Cultural Revolution.

These examples demonstrate the advantages of the discourse approach to the study. Sometimes, vague features of a single clause may be brought out more clearly when viewed in a passage. By examining multiple adjacent clauses or sentences in context, the window widens for a better understanding of the communicative goal of a discourse unit, which greatly influences the interpretation of its components.

4.5 Issues for further study

For the coercion account proposed in this paper, a number of further questions remain. We may ask whether coerced stative V-le takes the same types of NP arguments as the perfective verb and whether the coercion account can be extended to verbs followed by other bounding expressions. I will take a look at these issues briefly and pose further questions they lead to.

It is well known that when action verbs designate dynamic and perfective events, they are intimately related to their NP arguments.16 The temporal interval during which the activity is going on can be bounded by its interaction with a quantified object NP (Verkuyl 1972, 1993). Chao (1968: 248) explicated this close relation in Chinese, stating that the perfective suffix -le “is obligatory after a verb for past action if it has a quantified object.” The example in (6) serves as an exam-

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16. Both internal and external arguments of a verb may contribute to event bounding, although to different degrees. See Declerck (1979, 1989).
ple. It shows that the perfective verb form works with a quantified object NP to encode perfectivity. The question for the current proposal is: How does the issue of quantification figure in aspectual coercion? When V-le is coerced to encode a state, does it still take a quantified object?

An investigation in the present study shows that quantified object NPs generally do not tend to occur in sentences or clauses with a coerced V-le. When coercion is triggered by a nonagent subject/topic (Section 3.1), the V-le is not typically followed by a quantified object. In passive constructions (Section 3.1.2), the patient NPs appear in the subject position ([18]–[23]). The same is true in sentences with preposed patient (Section 3.1.3, Examples [24]–[27]). The existential construction, as the name suggests, describes the existence of something in a location. Although a quantified NP may appear after the verb, as in (10), it does not bound the situation. This also applies to the double-nominative construction, which depicts a location rather than narrating dynamic events. For the other two types of coercing factors, general statives and the adverb yijing ‘already,’ observations show that even when a V-le is followed by an object NP, the NP is less likely to be quantified. They tend to be a bare NP, as quantity is not important in a predication that focuses on the resultative state.

The second question, i.e., whether the coercion account can be extended to verbs followed by other bounding expressions, has to do with the similarity between -le and other bounding expressions. One wonders whether coercion applies to verbs followed by other bounding expressions, such as RVCs and verb quantification, the same way as to V-le. Because bounding expressions are a complex group, their bounding capacity, with or without a co-occurring -le, is different. We need to look at them separately. For RVCs, the answer is clearly positive. RVCs, without -le, bound the verb events at the basic level. In cases with coercion, e.g., (47)–(49), because of the nonagent subject/topic, the clauses are coerced to designate the resultative state. Note that (47) and (48) each consist of two juxtaposed verb-RVC combinations (in bold) to encode sequenced actions at the basic level.

17. This, however, does not mean that dynamic verbs with -le require a quantified object. Quantified object NPs introduce new entities into discourse. They occur at a much lower frequency in discourse than transitive dynamic verbs. Other types of NPs, such as definite bare NPs, also work with perfective verbs. This can be partly seen in Examples (7)–(9), where none of the ten perfective verbs is followed by a quantified object NP.

18. Sentences, such as Pingguo ta chi-le sange ‘Apples he ate three,’ are more complex in structure and subject to further study.

19. Note the dual function of zai as a preposition and an RVC in (47). See W. Li (2012) for further discussion.
With coercion (and preposed patient), each sentence describes a scene – a state – that incorporates the results of the two actions.

(47) 粉色的餐巾叠成鸟形插在高脚香槟酒杯中,  (Hong 154)

_Fensede canjin die-cheng niao xing cha-zai gaojiao xiangbin_
pink napkin fold-into bird shape insert-zai tall champagne

_jiubei-zhong_
wine.glass-in

‘in each champagne glass was a pink napkin folded in the shape of a bird.’

(48) 那件旗袍早就叠好放回盒子里,  (Hong 163)

_Najian qipao zaojiu die-hao fang-hui hezi-li,_
that.cl cheongsam long.ago fold-good put-back box-in

‘She’d long since got out of her cheongsam; it was safely back in its box.’

(49) 郁闷的梅雨季节，已被雨水洗净，  (Hong 41)

_Yumende meiyu jijie, yi bei yushui xi-jing_
depressing rainy season already pass rain wash-clean

‘The humidity had been washed away by the cleansing rain.’

For other types of bounding expressions, e.g., verb duplication (8a) and verbal quantification (such as _yiyan ‘a glance’ in [9a]), the answer to the question of whether they work with coercion is less clear. A complicating factor here is that even if they can work with coercion, they may require a co-occurring -le. This is an area that awaits further investigation.

Having considered coercion of V-le in various contexts in this article, I must make a disclaimer. For a morpheme as versatile as -le, coercion may not answer all questions. Neither is this paper intended to address all phenomena involving multiple designations of V-le. There is also ambiguity in its interpretation. As an initial attempt in a coercion account, this paper discusses some preliminary observations and a tenable analysis that could form the basis for further investigation. We may ask, for example, whether and how coercion applies to V-le in nominal positions. For a language like Chinese, what is the best way to implement the concept of coercion in general? As a reconciliation measure, is coercion a semantic operation or a pragmatic procedure? In addition, the coercion account of V-le presented here implies a causal relation between the coercing factors and the stative interpretations. Although this claim is supported by the examples, a quantitative study is desirable to strengthen the claim. These are only some of the considerations to be kept in mind as we explore further on.
5. Concluding remarks

In this article I have presented a coercion analysis of V-le by examining aspectual, syntactic, and discourse factors involved in the predication. I have shown that V-le has at least two possible aspectual interpretations available. One is the default designation of a dynamic event at the basic level; the other is a stative designation at the derived level. The former shifts to the latter through a coercion procedure when the verb form remains constant. The coercion is triggered either by context or by other constituents in the clause external to V-le when they present aspectual information incompatible with the default interpretation of V-le. The coercion typically follows the principle of external override.

There is good evidence that the coercion of V-le occurs in certain specifiable contexts. Three types of coercing factors have been examined. One involves noncanonical word order, which results in the use of nonagentive subject/topic in the clause. The four constructions in the noncanonical word order examined consistently designate stative situations. It is probably no exaggeration to say that the fundamental distinction of eventive versus stative designations underpins the canonical SVO versus noncanonical word order involving V-le. The second type of coercing factor is found in general statives, in which a clause with V-le is used to specify the circumstance or the condition for a main statement to apply. The third type involves the adverb yijing ‘already,’ which also triggers a shift in the interpretation of V-le. These observations demonstrate important distributional patterns regarding multiple interpretations of V-le. Though far from exhaustive, the coercing factors discussed in the article should be illustrative of the range of possibilities.

The proposed coercion analysis of V-le has a number of important advantages over past analyses. First, it provides a comprehensive treatment of multiple interpretations of V-le and a straightforward account in terms of the mechanism, procedure, and governing principles. Second, it offers more data accountability than previous studies and fills a gap in the study of aspectual semantics of Chinese. Third, it shows how aspectual reinterpretations of V-le are achieved in actual discourse. With the coercion account in place, we can reconcile the apparently incompatible aspectual information in the clause and the contrasting interpretations of the same aspectual form by making explicit the logical explanations that have been conspicuously missing in previous analyses. The study offers a new perspective in the approach to multiple interpretations of aspectual forms in general. Ideally, a framework should be developed that describes how all relevant meaning components hang together. The present study is one step toward that goal.
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References


**Appendix:. Sources of examples**


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