

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Zhu Chungeng.** (2019). *Chinese aspectual particle le: A comprehensive guide*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press. 219 pp. ISBN 978-988-8528-10-3

**Reviewed by Yong-Kang Khoo** (Nanyang Technological University)

As one of the most frequently used particles in Mandarin, 了 (henceforth, *le*) has long been the topic of discussions among linguists. Yet, even after much debate, there is still no consensus regarding the functions of the *le*-particle; this has brought about many implications, both in linguistic theory and in applied linguistics. In particular, it affects how second language learners learn and use the particle – because of the enigmatic nature of the particle and the lack of a systematic explanation for its behaviors, many second language learners are unable to grasp the nuances of its various usages and teachers are unable to explain such complexities in a systematic and understandable manner. In this respect, Zhu's monograph dedicated to the study of the aspectual *le* comes in very handy. Targeted at the English-speaking learners of Mandarin, Zhu focuses not solely on the theoretical explanations behind the functions of the aspectual *le*, but also provides many examples to guide the learners in their understanding of the elusive morpheme.

Prior to the current monograph, Zhu co-authored another book, *A Chinese Grammar for English Speakers*, which has provided second language learners with a much-needed tool in grasping the grammatical system of Mandarin as a whole. It addresses the problems and issues that these learners, in particular, English-speaking learners of Mandarin, have when it comes to understanding the complexities of the language. *Chinese Aspectual Particle le: A Comprehensive Guide* can be seen as an extension of the earlier guide, though this time, it is devoted to just one aspect of the complicated grammatical system of Mandarin. As a comprehensive guide to the aspectual particle, as apparent from the subtitle of the monograph, the book systematically presents explanations of the different possibilities and interpretations of *le* with illustrative examples to the second language learners.

The book consists of an introduction and ten main chapters. The introduction provides background information on the aspectual *le*, laying out and defining several grammatical concepts, such as the classification of aspects in Mandarin; in this case, the Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK), given that English-speaking learners form the majority of the monograph's intended audience. It also succinctly highlights the differences between how aspects are marked in

English and Mandarin and briefly introduces the historical developments of the aspectual *le*, noting its grammaticalization pathway and the basic functions that it performs throughout history, with a focus on its modern-day usage – wherein the aspectual *le* can be used either as a perfective aspect marker or a transformative aspect marker. The differences between how temporality is marked in English and in Mandarin are also mentioned throughout the monograph, where applicable, helping the second language learners grasp the grammatical patterns in the use of the aspect *le* in Mandarin through comparisons with a language that they may be more familiar with. Such an approach also serves to clear up several cases of false relations between the Chinese aspectual *le* and the English tenses, which may arise when English-speaking learners attempt to understand the aspect marker using English.

The ten chapters that follow, Chapters 1 through 10, delve into the more intricate details of the different interpretations of the particle, with a stronger emphasis being placed on the perfective aspect account of the aspectual *le* – the first five chapters are devoted entirely to explaining how the perfective *le* can be and is used in Mandarin. This is an understandable approach to the issue due to the more varied circumstances under which the perfective aspect *le* can be used, as evidenced by the different focuses of each of the five chapters. Defining the perfective *le* as denoting a completed action, Chapter 1 discusses instances where the use of the perfective *le* is obligatory, the constraints it faces as a perfective aspect marker, and the verbs that are compatible with the perfective *le*-particle. Zhu also draws attention to the differences between the aspectual *le* and the resultative complemental *le*, a possible area of confusion amongst English-speaking learners of Mandarin.

After looking at situations that are compatible with the perfective *le*, Zhu then moves on to deal with situations that are incompatible with the marker since it is not just important for second language learners to know when they can use the particle but also when they should not. He presents the different situations in four sub-sections, with each focusing on entire constructions, attributives, adverbs, and verbs respectively. Chapter 3 delves into the optionality of the aspectual *le* in different types of sentences and under different contexts. Zhu demonstrates this pattern of use through many examples and explains at great length how to decide on the retention or omission of the particle when it is optional based on the nuances in the intended effect. Beyond looking at what is possible and what is not, Zhu also explicates the differences between the *le* and two other commonly-used post-verbal aspect markers, 过 (henceforth, *guo*) and 着 (henceforth, *zhe*), which often pose a challenge to the second language learners due to the seemingly interchangeability of the markers in certain contexts. The differences are organized along the lines of different types of meaning

expressions and sentence constructions; for instance, the perfective *le* is distinguished from the experiential *guo* when the emphasis is placed on experience and the discontinuity of the experience; between *le* and *zhe*, sentence constructions become more pertinent to the distinction, where each marker occurs with a different type of sentence, such as *le* with dynamic existential sentences and *zhe* with durative ones. Interchangeability between *le* and *guo* and *le* and *zhe* are also discussed to provide a more comprehensive look into the meanings and constraints of each marker.

Chapter 6 brings the readers' attention to the use of *le* as a transformative aspect marker, in which it denotes a change of state. In this case, *le* is often used at the end of a sentence, that is, sentence-finally, as opposed to the post-verbal perfective *le*. Zhu discusses what the transformative *le* can do in Mandarin, such as being able to complete a sentence. Because the transformative *le* is compatible with virtually every sentence type in Mandarin, Zhu also dedicates this chapter to the nuances of the change of state expressed by the marker, which can surely help second language learners understand the different possibilities with the transformative *le*. The chapter ends off with the main features and constraints of the transformative *le* as a summary and overview of the discussions put forth by the entire chapter. Closely related to the transformative *le* is the use of the sentence-final *le* as a modal particle; as a modal particle, *le* conveys the speaker's mood or state of mind. As Zhu points out, this function is often used in conjunction with the aspectual one, though it should be noted that the transformative *le*, in and of itself, does not denote a particular feeling or emotion. Rather, it expresses various sentiments, such as softening the tone by adding a hint of concern, care, or affection, and expressing affirmation of a fact in the declarative mood. Understanding the modality of *le* can prove to be beneficial for second language learners particularly when they begin to converse in the language – given that such a use of *le* is fairly common in everyday speech. This is also the reason for the discussion on the use of *le* in discourse in Chapter 8; in particular, instances where *le* in discourse, that is, *le* in context, differs from *le* at the sentence-level are brought up, since an inattention to these differences can lead to incoherence when learning to use the marker. Zhu also explicates some of the common errors in the usage of the transformative *le*, a truly helpful gesture for second language learners as an understanding of the reasons behind these errors will undoubtedly help them avoid the grammatical pitfalls of using the transformative *le*.

Chapter 9 moves beyond discussing the two aspectual *le* in isolation and instead looks at the collaboration of the two in any given sentence. Being derived from the same verb form and having distinctive identities and functions, the two aspectual *le* are not mutually exclusive, though there are some constraints surrounding their co-presence in a sentence. For instance, when a change of state is

denoted using the transformative *le*, it is unnecessary, as Zhu observes, to use the perfective *le* to code for completion at the same time, since a change of state presupposed that occurrence or completion. The chapter that truly sets Zhu's monograph apart from the other theses and books can be said to be Chapter 10 – which elucidates the lexicalization of the construction “X *le*”. This is an aspect of *le* that is seldom discussed in detail by research on the aspectual *le* since it does not seem to be fully performing as an aspectual marker under such circumstances. Zhu raises the six most common lexical items in the form of the construction “X *le*”, including 好了 ‘good’, 行了 ‘good’, 算了 ‘enough’, 罢了 ‘merely’, 完了 ‘finished’, and 得了 ‘do at will’. As these words have been lexicalized, *le* can no longer be interpreted separately from the verb or adjective it has merged with – while native speakers will have no issues with understanding these words, second language learners may find it confusing when they come across these words. An explanation of the meanings behind these words is as important as clarifying the functions and features of the aspectual *le*.

The monograph is truly, as the subtitle suggests, comprehensive, encompassing all the different types of sentences in which *le* can be used. As a pragmatic handbook for second language learners, this monograph does extremely well in expounding the complexities of the aspectual *le*, and provides not just linguistic, but also cultural information for the learners as a tool for them to grasp the elusive marker. The examples provided by Zhu are also very typical, and are, therefore, very accessible to the readers and can very clearly demonstrate the subtleties in the usage of the marker. Zhu has also done a great service to language educators – where many may have previously relied on intuition when teaching the marker, this monograph provides them with a simple structure and a coherent set of explanations to use in the classroom. As more around the globe take an interest in the learning of Mandarin, it does seem critical for grammarians to also consider how the different grammatical features in the language can be taught more clearly to these second, or even third language learners.

## Address for correspondence

Yong-Kang Khoo  
 School of Humanities  
 Nanyang Technological University  
 Singapore  
 yongkang001@e.ntu.edu.sg