

DIFFICULTIES OF APPLYING PARTICLE 了 LE IN CHINESE

¹Olga Gorbatenko, ²Nicolay Ageev

Abstract- *The paper is dedicated to difficulties of applying particle 了 le in Chinese. The authors emphasize that applying particle 了 le is one of the most considerable difficulties in the Chinese language in terms of grammar. The issues related to the use of particle le on difficulties of applying particle 了 le in the Chinese language are of great current interest as learners often make mistakes when they have to apply the particle. The purpose of the work is to show a wide range of particularities regarding particle 了 le in the Chinese language. The novelty of the paper is that the authors have given a full analysis of specific varieties for the use of particle 了 le in different situations. The article incorporates 11 paragraphs and each paragraph is dedicated to different situations with regard to the particle. A number of examples have been given to underline the problems of the issue. One of the most considerable difficulties of the Chinese language in terms of grammar is the particle 了. Particle le may be viewed as the most difficult aspect for foreign learners to learn and understand Chinese. It can be explained by a wide range of application and immense variety of functions.*

Keywords: Chinese, particle le, mistakes, verbs, adverbs, sentence

JEL Classification: Z 130.

I INTRODUCTION

Particle / suffix 了 le in oral and written speech is used with an increasing frequency. It contains a number of structural and functional applications in the Chinese language. Particle 了 le does not have a definite, firmly established value by itself, its value is determined by the type of sentence, adverbs and verbs followed by the particle. Particle 了 le is often applied in accordance with the style, dialect, subjective view of the speaker and the language environment. In some circumstances, the meaning of 了 le may be close or similar to the learner's native language, and students often make mistakes when using it due to the interference of their native language. At the same time there is a lack of reasonable explanations of the grammar related to 了 le as well as insufficient systematic teaching materials. The authors analyze basic information regarding the use of 了 le in Chinese speech (Zheng et al. 2004).

¹ Department of foreign languages, Law Institute, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia

² Department of foreign languages, Law Institute, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia

II MATERIALS AND METHODS

The authors applied analytical and comparative methods for analyzing particle 了 *le* in Chinese. The study includes an analysis of the use of particle *le* in different situations. The comparative analysis facilitates to better understand the meaning of particle *le* depending on tense forms. Particular emphasis is laid on the fact that particle 了 *le* is most often used in sentences with a qualitative predicate. At the same time 了 *le* is also used in sentences with a verbal predicate to show the change of tenses where it is possible to select several subparagraphs for different types of verbs. Special attention is drawn to analysis of sentences with a shade of meaning of possibility as well as sentences with a nominal predicate, usually denoting time, age and weight. A comparative analysis is a contributory factor in analyzing the translation from Chinese into English.

III RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The functions of 了 *le* are as follows:

3.1. 了 *le* shows the change in the tense (situations, circumstances)

In this regard 了 *le* is always taken place at the end of the sentence and shows the change of tenses. Compare the examples:

(1) 天气很热。Tiānqì hěn rè.	(2) 天气热了。Tiānqì rè le.
-------------------------	------------------------

Example 1 shows that the weather is hot and example 2 shows that it is not only that the weather is hot but it also shows that the weather was not hot before but now it is hot, i.e. the situation has changed.

As regards the change of tenses particle 了 *le* is most often used in sentences with a qualitative predicate as in example 2. At the same time 了 *le* is also used in sentences with a verbal predicate to show the change of tenses where it is possible to select several subparagraphs for different types of verbs. Particle 了 *le* is used in sentences with a shade of meaning of possibility as well as in sentences with a nominal predicate, usually denoting time, age and weight. The examples are as followed:

① 了 *le* in sentences with a qualitative predicate (qualitative adjective+了):

1. 最近我不太忙了。Zuìjìn wǒ bú tài máng le. (以前很忙)	Recently, I have not been very busy.
2. 树上的叶子都红了。Shù shàng de yèzi dōu hóng le. (以前不红)	The leaves on the trees have become red.
3. 雪大了。Xuě dà le. (以前不大)	The snow has intensified.

4. 东西贵了。Dōngxiguì le. (以前不贵)	Things have become expensive.
5. 我母亲老了。Wǒ mǔqīn lǎo le. (以前不太老)	My mother has grown old.
6. 功课不多了。Gōngkè bù duō le. (以前很多)	Lessons (tasks) have decreased.

②了 *le* in sentences with a verbal predicate. In Chinese linguistics distinguish:

a) link-verbs(with the addition, or nominal part of the predicate). These verbs include 是 “is, am, are, essence, to be,” 像 “resemble, is similar to...”, 姓 “a surname, call by surname”, 叫 “to be called”, 属于 “to belong, to belong to ..., to be part of ...”, 成为 “to become, to turn into ...”, 仿佛 “to be similar (like), to be like ...”.

Examples:

1. 他现在是学生了。Tā xiànzài shì xuésheng le.	He is a student now.
2. 这个地方叫百花山了。Zhège dìfang jiào Bǎihuāshān le.	This place became known as Baihuashan (a mountain of many flowers).
3. 小王不是教员了。Xiǎo-Wáng búshì jiàoyuán le.	Xiao-Wang is a teacher no more. (stopped teaching)

b) verbs expressing the emotional-psychological state (with the object). These verbs include:爱“love, be in love”, 恨“hate, despise”, 想(念) “miss, miss, want”, 喜欢“love, like”, 讨厌“get bored”, 希望“Hope, hope, expect”.

c) verbs expressing the physical state (without an object) (Fan et al. 1989). These verbs include: 饿“to be hungry, to starve”, 累“to get tired, to be tired, to be exhausted”, 病“to get sick, to be hurt (to get hurt)”, 聋“to deafen, to be deaf”, 困“to get tired, to be tired, (to be sleepy)”, 醉“to get drunk, to be drunk”.

③了 *le* in sentences with an optional feature (with an effective morpheme with infixes 得 *de* or 不 *bu*). The examples are as follows:

1. 我看得懂中文杂志了。Wǒ kàn de dǒng zhōngwén zázhì le.	I can already read and understand Chinese magazines.
2. 现在我们都吃得饱了。Xiànzài wǒmen dōu chī de bǎo le.	We are all ready to eat.
3. 我看不见黑板上的字了。Wǒ kàn bu jiàn hēibǎn shàng de zì le.	I cannot make out hieroglyphs on the board any more.

jiàn hēibǎn shàng de zì le.	
4. 学生听得懂老师说的话了。 Xuésheng tīng de dòng lǎoshī shuō de huà le.	Students can understand by ear the words of the teacher.
5. 我们买得起那个车了。Wǒmen mǎi de qǐ nàge chē le.	Now we can afford to buy that car.

④了 *le* sentences with a nominal predicate denoting time, age, weight:

1. 五点钟了。Wǔ diǎnzhōng le.	It has run 5 o'clock.
2. 已经星期三了。Yǐjīng xīngqī sān le.	It's already Wednesday.
3. 现在一点多了，去睡觉吧。Xiànzài yī diǎn duō le, qù shuìjiào ba.	Now it's one o'clock, go to sleep.

3.2. 了 *le* emphasizes the subjective view of the speaker

In this regard 了 *le* is used along with adverbs of degree: 太 “very, too” or 最 “most” that are placed before the predicate “太/最 了”. The example are as follows:

(1) 中文太难。Zhōngwén tài nán.	(2) 中文太难了。Zhōngwén tài nán le.
----------------------------	--------------------------------

The meaning of phrases (1) and (2) is the same, “Chinese is too complicated”, the only difference is that the second phrase intonation is more emphatic.

3.3. 了 *le* shows the situation of the approaching change (it will happen right now or soon)

In this function 了 *le* is used in a construction with a modal verb 要 *yào* and adverbs 就 *jiù* or 快 *kuài* “快/就要 了”, and 快 with 要 can be used in different variations “快要 了, 快 了, 要 了”.

Interrogative forms are usually formed by the particle 吗 *ma*, and negative ones – only by 没有 *méi yǒu* (Zhang et al. 1982). The examples are shown below:

1. 爸爸要给我们照相了。Bàba yào gěi wǒmen zhàoxiàng le.	Dad is going to take a picture of us.
2. 飞机就要起飞了。Fēijī jiù yào qǐfēi le.	The plane is going to take off now.
3. 我们快要分别了。Wǒmen kuài yào fēnbié le.	We are going to leave soon.

4. 火车要到了吗？没有。Huǒchē yào dào le ma? Méiyǒu.	Is the train going to be here soon? No.
5. 这件事快做完了。Zhèjiàn shì kuài zuòwán le.	This business will soon be completed.
6. 明天他就来了。Míngtiān tā jiù lái le.	He'll be here tomorrow.

3. 4. 了 le is used in the meaning of duration of action or state

The duration of the action or state is expressed by the verb or the period of time from the beginning or end of the action or state to the time of utterance (Kondrashevsky et al. 2010). There are two possible uses of 了 le.

① The construction “verb + 了 + object of duration+ (direct object) + 了” is used when the action or state continues at a particular period of time (at the time of the statement). These are the examples:

② The construction “verb + 了 + direct object” is used when there is no finite 了, and there is only a post-verbal suffix 了. The construction shows that only the action or state occurred before the moment of speech is asserted but it is not indicated whether or not this action or state continues. Examples:

1. 小王学了三年英文。Xiǎo-Wáng xué le sān nián yīngwén.	Xiao-Wang has leaned English for three years.
2. 小丁的父母在纽约住了三年。Xiǎo-Dīng de fùmǔ zài Niǔyuē zhù le sān nián.	Xiao-Ding's parents have lived in New York for three years.
3. 哥哥当了两年多翻译。Gēge dāng le liǎng nián duō fānyì.	My brother has worked as an interpreter for more than two years.
4. 你在中国的时候教了几年书？Nǐ zài Zhōngguó de shíhòu jiāo le jǐ nián shū?	How long have you taught in China?
5. 那本小说他翻译了多长时间？Nà běn xiǎoshuō tā fānyì le duōcháng shíjiān?	How long has he translated that novel?
6. 上星期我工作了 20 个钟头。Shàng xīngqī wǒ gōngzuò le 20 ge zhōngtóu.	Last week I worked 20 hours.

3. 5. 了 le shows the completeness of an action in a design with a direct object (with a numeric and countable word)

In this event focus is laid on the perfect verb form and the post global vido-temporal suffix 了). The countable words can be either ordinary or expressing the multiplicity of the action (次 *cì*, 遍 *biàn*, 一下儿 *yíxiàr*, 一会儿 *yíhuìr*), that according to A.F. Kondrashevsky is highlighted in a separate topic (Kondrashevsky et al. 2010). From this angle 了 le is used in the following functions:

①The construction ‘verb + 了 + a numeral and an account word. + (direct object) + 了’ shows that the action is completed but according to 3.4.① it still continues at the time of the utterance, for example:

(1) 我买了两本书了。Wǒ mǎi le liǎng běn shū le. I have bought two books.

The phrase “I have already bought 2 books” might mean that he intended to buy 5 books but he has already bought 2 and there are 3 more books left for him to buy. It might also mean that “he” has bought 2 books and that’s enough, he is not going to buy anymore.

There are some more examples:

1. 小王吃了三碗米饭了。Xiǎo-Wáng chī le sān wǎn mǐfàn le.	Xiao-Wang ate three bowls of rice.
2. 我看了两次电影了。Wǒ kàn le liǎng cì diànyǐng le.	I have seen two films.
3. 今天我已经上了两节课了。Jīntiān wǒ yǐjīng shàng le liǎng jié kè le.	I have already attended two lectures today.
4. 我已经喝了两盘汤了，不能再喝了。Wǒ yǐjīng hē le liǎng pán tāng le, bù néng zài hē le.	I have already eaten two plates of soup and I cannot eat anymore.
5. 她已经结了三次婚了。Tā yǐjīng jié le sān cì hūn le.	She has been married three times.
6. 老师讲了好几遍了，他还是不懂。Lǎoshī jiǎng le hǎoji biàn le, tā hái shì bù dǒng.	The teacher has explained many times but he does not understand so far.

In Example 4, it should be noted that the second part of the sentence (after the decimal point) illustrates the categorical judgment reflected by particle 了 le (see below, 3. 10., Example 1).

②The construction “verb + 了+ direct object” shows that there is no finite 了 but only a post-verbal suffix 了 and that the action has taken place (Fu et al. 2005). Examples:

1. 他看了三次电影。Tā kàn le sān cì diànyǐng.	He has watched three films.
2. 小张买了四本书。Xiǎo-Zhāng mǎi le sìběn shū.	Xiao-Zhang has bought 4 books.
3. 上星期我们参观了一个工厂。Shàng xīngqī wǒmen cānguān le yíge gōngchǎng.	We visited a factory last week.
4. 那天来了几位客人？Nà tiān lái le jǐwèi kèrén?	How many guests came that day?
5. 李教授写了两本历史书。Lǐ jiàoshòu xiě le liǎngběn lìshǐ shū.	Professor Li written two books on history.
6. 他刚才休息了一会儿。Tā gāngcái xiūxi le yíhuìr.	He has got some rest.

3. 6. 了 le is used in negative sentences in terms of duration if the negation refers to the action

The construction “modifier of time+ 没(有) + verb + 了” (see 3. 4.) shows that the negation refers to the action (but not to the duration of the action), i.e. that the action did not take place or will not occur. In this event the modifier of time is placed before the predicate (Kondrashevsky et al. 2010), for example:

(1) 我两天没看见他了。Wǒ liǎng tiān méi kànjiàn tā le. I have not seen him for two days.

Some more examples are shown below:

1. 小李两天没有吃饭了。Xiǎo-Lǐ liǎng tiān méiyǒu chīfàn le.	Xiao-Li has not eaten for two days.
2. 我们八年没见面了。Wǒmen bā nián méi jiànmiàn le.	We have not seen each other for eight years.
3. 那个学生已经三天没来上课了。Nàge xuéshēng yǐjīng sān tiān méi lái shàngkè le.	That student has not attended classes for three days.
4. 已经一个月没下雨了。Yìjīng yíge yuè méi xià yǔ le.	It has not rained for a month.
5. 到明年四月，我们就三年没做事了。Dào míngnián sìyuè, wǒmen jiù sānnián méi zuòshì le.	In April next year, it will be three years as we do nothing.
6. 我们昨天一天没有看书了。Wǒmen zuótiān yì tiān méiyǒu kàn shū le.	We did not read books all day yesterday.
7. 他跟他太太差不多一个星期没说话了。Tā gēn tā tàitai chàbùduō yíge xīngqī méi shuōhuà le.	He and his wife have not talked for almost a week.

8. 那个孩子已经有三天没洗澡了。Nàge háizi yǐjīng yǒu sān tiān méi xǐzǎo le.	That child has not washed for three days.
---	---

3. 7. 了 le expresses the completeness of the action and simultaneously shows the change of the situation (two 了 are used)

In the phrase “modifier of time+ 没(有) + verb + 了” (a certain combination of 3. 5. and 3. 1.) two 了 are used, post-verb suffix and modal particle after direct object at the end of the sentence. There are no words denoting time, as well as numerals with scoring words, that could indicate the completion of the action or a change in the situation, for example:

(1) 他买了车了。Tā mǎi le chē le. He has bought a car.

The meaning of the phrase is that he did not have a car before but now it appeared. The action with the purchase of the car was completed. Such theory, according to A.F. Kondrashevsky, explains that the action is considered completed (Kondrashevsky et al. 2010, less. 30, p. 644–645).

See the examples below:

1. 孩子们都吃了饭了。Háizimen dōu chī le fàn le.	All the children have eaten.
2. 我写了信了。Wǒ xiě le xìn le.	I have written a letter.
3. 学生都下(了)车了。Xuéshēng dōu xià (le) chē le.	All students have left the bus.
4. 我们已经买了报纸了。Wǒmen yǐjīng mǎi le bàozhǐ le.	We have bought newspapers.

3. 8. 了 le shows that the action or situation has already taken place

In the construction “verb+ direct object + 了” only one 了 appears at the end of the sentence. Such sentences can be translated in non-perfect or perfect form of the verb, for example:

(1) 我们听音乐了。Wǒmen tīng yīnyuè le. We (have) listened to some music.

There are some more examples:

1. 我买(了)报纸了，你不必买了。Wǒ mǎi (le) bàozhǐ le, nǐ bù bì	I have bought a newspaper. You do not
---	---------------------------------------

mǎi le.	need to buy.
2. 我昨天在路上遇见(了)老张了。Wǒ zuótiān zài lùshang yùjiàn (le) Lǎo-Zhāng le.	Yesterday, on the way home, I met Lao-Zhang.
3. 你吃饭了吗? 我吃了。Nǐ chīfàn le ma? Wǒ chī le.	Have you eaten? I have eaten.
4. 这个问题你们讨论了没有? 我们讨论了。Zhège wèntí nǐmen tāolùn le méiyǒu? Wǒmen tāolùn le.	Have you discussed the issue? We have discussed.
5. 学生都预备功课了。Xuésheng dōu yùbèi gōngkè le.	The students were all preparing for the lessons.
6. 他吃牛肉了。Tā chī niúròu le.	He ate beef.

In Example 1, it should also be noted that the second part of the sentence (after the decimal point) illustrates a warning or categorical judgment demonstrated by particle 了 le (see below, 3.10., Example 2).

3. 9. 了 le shows the completeness of the action in sentences with complement of result, with a passive (with 被), with the preposition 把

了 le is taken place at the end of such sentences and expresses the completeness of the action.

① 了 le in sentences with productiveness morpheme “verb + completeness of result + 了” is taken place after the completion of result and at the same time at the end of the sentence and indicates the result or the completion of the action. The examples are as follows:

1. 这本书姐姐看完了。Zhèběn shū jiějie kàn wán le.	My sister has read the book.
2. 这些生字我都记住了。Zhèxiē shēngzì wǒ dōu jìzhù le.	I have remembered the new hieroglyphs.
3. 那个作业我已经写完了。Nàge zuòyè wǒ yǐjīng xiě wán le.	I have finished the homework.
4. 东西他都卖光了。Dōngxi tā dōu mài guāng le.	He has sold everything.

5. 屋子收拾干净了。Wūzi shōushi gānjìng le.	The room has been cleaned.
6. 汽车已经修理好了。Qìchē yǐjīng xiūlǐhǎo le.	The car has been repaired.

②了 *le* in sentences with a passive with a preposition”被“被 + noun (subjectofaction) + verb + complementofresult + 了” is taken place after the completeness ofresultand at the same time at the end of the sentence and indicates the completeness of the action. See the examples below:

1. 工具都被工人拿走了。Gōngjù dōu bèi gōngrén nǎzǒu le.	The tool has been carried away by the workers.
2. 他被大家说服了。Tā bèi dàjiā shuōfú le.	Everyone has persuaded him.
3. 老毛 被 人 选 作 代 表 了 。 Lǎo-Máobèirénxuǎnzuòdàibiǎole.	Lao-Mao has been elected as a delegate.
4. 一条小狗被车轧死了。Yítíao xiǎogǒu bèi chē yà sǐ le.	The dog has been crushed by a machine.
5. 自行车被人偷走了。Zìxíngchē bèi rén tōuzǒu le.	The bicycle has been stolen.
6. 这件事情被他发现了。Zhèjiàn shìqing bèi tā fāxiàn le.	He has discovered the case.

3. 10. 了 *le* in combination with negation and the modal verb expresses prohibition, warning or a categorical statement:

In such sentences, most often hortatory sentence, for example, with 不能/别/不要/不必/ 不能 + verb + 了, 了 *le* is taken place after a negation with a verb. The examples are as follows:

1. 我已经喝了两盘汤了，不能再喝了。Wǒ yǐjīng hē le liǎng pán tāng le, bù néng zài hē le.	I have eaten two plates of soup and I cannot eat anymore.
2. 我买(了)报纸了，你不必买了。Wǒ mǎi (le) bàozhǐ le, nǐ bù bì mǎi le.	I have bought a newspaper. You do not need to buy it.
3. 别忘了，一定要常来信。	Do not forget, be sure to write more often!

4. 不要找了，你的帽子在这儿。	Do not bother, your hat is here.
5. 别说话了，大家在看书呢。	Do not talk, everyone is reading.
6. 别客气了，这是我应该的。	Do not thank me, it is my duty.

3. 11. 了 le is usually used in phrases with an arbitrary enumeration of smth., where 了 is placed after each transitive verb

Such phrases are usually used in colloquial speech (Peng et al. 2004). The example is as follows:

(1) 我来北京以后玩了很多地方，颐和园了，故宫了，长城了，都去过。

Wǒ lái Běijīng yǐhòu wán le hěnduō dìfāng, Yíhéyuán le, Gùgōng le, Chángchéng le, dōu qùguo.

After coming to Beijing I went for a walk in many places: Yiheyuan, Gugong, the Great Wall of China.

IV CONCLUSIONS

The authors have analyzed and systematized the main cases of application of particle 了 le in the Chinese language. When 了 le shows the change in the tense (situations, circumstances) it is always taken place at the end of the sentence and shows the change of tenses. Particle 了 le is most often used in sentences with a qualitative predicate. Link-verbs encompass 是, 像, 姓, 叫, 属于, 成为, 仿佛. Verbs expressing the physical state (without an object) include: 饿, 醉. 了 le emphasizes the subjective view of the speaker and it is used along with adverbs of degree: 太 and 最 that are placed before the predicate “太/最 了”. 了 le is used in a construction with a modal verb 要 yào and adverbs 就 jiù or 快 kuài “快/就要 了”, and 快 with 要 can be used in different variations: “快要 了, 快 了, 要 了”. Interrogative forms are usually formed by the particle 吗 ma, and negative ones – only by 没有 méi yǒu. The countable words can be either ordinary or expressing the multiplicity of the action (次 cì, 遍 biàn, 一下儿 yíxiàr, 一会儿 yíhuìr).

The construction “verb + 了 + a numeral and an account word. + (direct object) + 了” shows that the action is completed. The construction “verb + 了 + direct object” shows that there is no finite 了 but only a post-verbal suffix 了 and that the action has taken place. In the construction “verb + direct object + 了” only one 了 appears at the end of the sentence. Such sentences can be translated in non-perfect or perfect form of the verb.

REFERENCES

1. Fan, Ping 樊平 et al. 1989. *Xiandai hanyu jinxu jiaocheng: Yufapian* (现代汉语进修教程：语法篇) ["Brush up" in modern Chinese grammar: basics and practice]. 2nd ed. Beijing: Beijing University of Language and Culture, pp. 118–122, 138–139, 208–213, 224–228, 263–268, 282–284.
2. Fu, Yuping 付玉萍, Cheng Wen 成文, Jin Jiwen 金纪文(ed.). 2005. *HSK yufa jianglian* (HSK 语法讲练) [HSK grammar (elementary and intermediate)]. 2nd ed. Beijing: Beijing University of Language and Culture, pp. 33–36.
3. Kondrashevsky, Aleksandr Fedorovich, Marina Vital'evna Rumyantseva, and Margarita Gennadievna Frolova (ed.). 2010. *Practical Chinese language course: 2 volumes*. 11th ed. Moscow: LLC "Vostochnaya kniga Publishing". ISBN: 978-5-7873-0425-1
4. Peng, Xiaochuan 彭小川, Li Shouji 李守纪, Wang Hong 王红. 2004. *Duiwai hanyu jiaoxue yufa shiyi 201 li* (对外汉语教学语法释疑 201 例) [Interpretation of the grammar of Chinese as a foreign language in 201 cases]. Beijing: Shangwu Yinshuguan.
5. Zhang, Zhigong 张志公 et al. 1982. *Xiandai hanyu* (现代汉语) [Modern Chinese]. Vol. 2. Beijing: Renmin Jiaoyu Chubanshe.
6. Zheng, Yide 郑懿德 et al. 2004. *Hanyu yufanandianshiyi* (汉语语法难点释疑) [Difficult Points in Chinese Grammar]. 3rd ed. Beijing: 华语教学出版社, pp. 1–45.