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Locative inversion and temporal aspect in Chinese

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1. Overview

Basically, there are three properties that characterize locative inversion (Levin and Rappaport Hovav (L&RH) 1995):

- (i) non-canonical word order: “PP V NP” word order as the result of switching the positions of the NP and the PP in the canonical “NP V PP” word order
- (ii) the presence of PP in preverbal position
- (iii) “with rare exceptions, the verb in locative inversion construction must be intransitive” (an exception in L&RH: “take place”)

Examples in English:

- (1) On the windowsill is a flowering plant.
- (2) In the distance appeared a man dressed in black.

- Chinese locative inversion departs from the general description in a number of ways
- The purpose of this paper is to study these differences in Chinese with special reference to the interaction with aspect markers. A better understanding of the phenomenon can be obtained.

2. Locative inversion in Chinese - the phenomenon

Compared with the English characterization, the locative inversion in Chinese departs from the English case in a number of ways:

- (i) locative inversion is not exclusive to intransitive verbs;
- (ii) those selected transitive verbs in this type of construction are not passivized transitives;
- (iii) aspect marker is obligatory in the construction (compared with English);
- (iv) verbs may be divided into two types according to their compatibility with different aspectual markers in this construction;
- (v) there are semantic differences between locative inversions with different aspect markers.

2.1. Aspect markers in locative inversion

- aspect marker is obligatory in the locative inversion construction in Chinese (compared with English):

(3) chuang shang fang *le/zhe* yi ben shu
 bed above put PFV/DUR one CLS book
 ‘On the bed was put a book.’

(4) *chuang shang fang yi ben shu
 bed above put one CLS book
 (more like an imperative, but still sounds very odd.)

2.2. Intransitive verbs in locative inversion

- verbs seem to be divided into two types according to their compatibility with different aspect markers in this construction

(5) men kou chu-xian *le/*zhe* yi ge ren
 door mouth appear PFV¹/*DUR one CLS person
 ‘At the door appeared a person.’

(6) jia li lai *le/*zhe* san ge ren
 home in come PFV/*DUR three CLS person
 ‘In our home came three men.’

(7) zai wo de dui-mian zuo *le/zhe* yi ge ren
 at 1sg. GEN opposite sit PFV/DUR one CLS person
 ‘Opposite me sat a person.’

2.3. Transitive verbs in locative inversion

- unlike English, some transitive non-passivized verbs such as *fang* ‘put’, *xie* ‘write’, *ke* ‘carve’, *gua* ‘hang’ can undergo locative inversion in Chinese:

(8) zhou shang ke *zhe/le* yi ge zi
 desk above carve DUR/PFV one CLS word
 ‘On the desk was carved a word.’ or ‘A word was carved on the chair.’

(9) heiban shang xie *zhe/le* yi ge zi
 blackboard above write DUR/PFV one CLS word

2.4. Agent in locative inversion

- for the perfective *le*, agent can occur in the construction. Whereas for the durative *zhe*, agent is obligatorily absent:

¹ Abbreviations: PFV: perfective aspect marker, DUR: imperfective durative marker, CLS: classifier; GEN: genitive marker; SFP: sentence-final particle; NEG: negative particle

- (10) qiang shang xie *le/zhe* yi ge zi
 wall above write PFV/DUR one CLS word
 ‘On the wall was written a word.’
- (11) qiang shang John xie *le* yi ge zi
 chair above John write PFV one CLS word
 ‘On the wall was written a word by John.’
- (12) *qiang shang John xie *zhe* yi ge zi
 wall above John write DUR one CLS word

2.5. Locative inversion and nature of postverbal NP

- there is a difference in the nature of the postverbal NP with *le* (perfective aspect) and *zhe* (durative):

- (13) chuang shang tang *zhe/le* yi ge ren
 bed on lie DUR/PFV one CLS person
 ‘On the bed lied a person.’
- (14) chuang shang tang *zhe* John
 bed above lie DUR John
 ‘On the bed lied John.’
- (15) ???/*chuang shang tang *le* John
 bed above lie PFV John

Consider the following exchange. A was looking for a book he borrowed from the library and B pointed to him that that book was lying on the bed.

- (16) A: wo zeme ye zhao bu dao wo cong tu-shu-guan jie
 1sg.how also find NEG reach 1sg. from library borrow

lai de War and Peace....
 come GEN War and Peace...

‘I can’t find the War and Peace I borrowed from the library.’

B: chuang shang fang *zhe* nei ben shu ne
 bed above put DUR that CLS book SFP
 ‘See. On the bed is lying that book.’

B’: *chuang shang fang *le* nei ben shu ne
 bed above put PFV that CLS book SFP

The definiteness of the postverbal NP for locative inversion involving *le* is more restricted than *zhe*. As far as we can tell, the postverbal NP in *le*-locative inversion is always indefinite while that in *zhe*-locative inversion can sometimes be definite.

3. Related studies in locative inversion

3.1. Bresnan and Kanerva (1989)

- they argue on the basis of Chichewa and English data,
 - (i) inverted subject cannot be the syntactic subject
 - (ii) inverted subject is unaccusative object
 - (iii) locative inversion applies under the following conditions:
 - (a) The argument structure of the verb is: <THEME, LOCATION>.
 - (b) The theme phrase bears a discourse function focus.
- basically, B&K argue for the claim that locative inversion is a clear case of unaccusative diagnostic.

3.2. Pan (1996)

- locative inversion in Chinese case with special reference to the imperfective marker *zhe*
- further elaborates on B&K's proposal and applies it on Chinese case
- claims that there is a *zhe* operation under the following conditions:
 - (a) the verb in question is an accomplishment verb with the argument structure: <AGENT,THEME,LOCATION>
 - (b) the location is predicated of the theme; and
 - (c) the sentence in question is [-stative]

Pan gives a neat account of the behavior of *zhe* in the construction in question. But his account is more of descriptive nature without further looking into the whole locative inversion phenomenon which another aspect marker such as *le* can be used. What happens to this other marker in relation to the whole phenomenon? We will attempt to answer this question here.

3.3. L&RH (1995) - a discourse approach

- proposes the discourse function of locative inversion
- locative inversion functions as a presentational focus
 - “In presentational focus, a scene is set and a referent is introduced on the scene to become the new focus of attention, and the referent as something of which location is predicated - hence, a theme.” (Bresnan 1994)
- verbs in a locative inversion is “informationally light” (i.e. the information conveyed in the verbs can be predicted from the context)
- explain the frequent occurrences of verbs of existence and appearance and rule out transitive verbs as they encode more information.

- L&RH’s account seems to be most plausible of all.
- However, still, there is no discussion on the effect of aspectuality on the construction.

4. Our proposal

4.1 Issues to address

- (i) the use of different aspect markers with different verb types;
- (ii) the incompatibility between agent and *zhe* in the construction;
- (iii) the semantic differences between the use of *le* and that of *zhe* for verbs that can occur with both markers.

4.2. Some background information about the frameworks used

We will adopt Smith (1991)’s Two-Component Theory on aspect and (1979) and Binnick (1991)’s claims on the effect on “grounding” difference between perfective and imperfective aspect to explain the phenomenon.

4.2.1. Smith’s Two-Component Theory

According to Smith’s Two-Component Theory, temporal aspect is divided into situation aspect and viewpoint aspect. *Le* and *guo* are the aspect markers which denote viewpoint aspect. Given the Theory, *le* denotes the perfective viewpoint which includes the endpoints of the event whereas *zhe* denotes the imperfective (resultative) viewpoint which excludes the endpoints of the event. It focuses on the resulting state after the event.

The schemata for these two aspect markers with respect to an event are as follows (a simplified version of Smith 1991):

Diagram (1)

I.....F_____

///// ← *le*: perfective, endpoints visible

Diagram (2)

.....F_____

//// ← *zhe*: resultative durative: endpoint invisible

4.2.2. Hopper (1979) and later Binnick (1991) on Discourse Structure

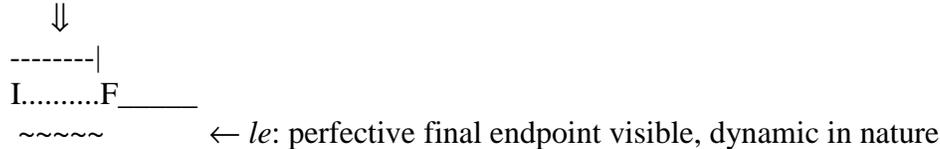
- According to Hopper (1979) and Binnick (1991), there are some “grounding” difference between perfective and imperfective aspects.
- “Perfective and imperfective are associated with foregrounding and background respectively, particularly in narration, the perfective forming the story line, the imperfective supplying “supportive or subsidiary background information, such as description, characterization, and commentary.” (Binnick 1991: 379)

4.3. Our adoption of the theories

- (a) the perfective *le* denotes a viewpoint which has a temporal schema spanning the event including the endpoints. Both the available agent and/or theme can be in focus. We call it “agent/theme-oriented” viewpoint. Since the agent is typically involved, it is dynamic in nature. Modifying diagram (1) above:

Diagram (3)

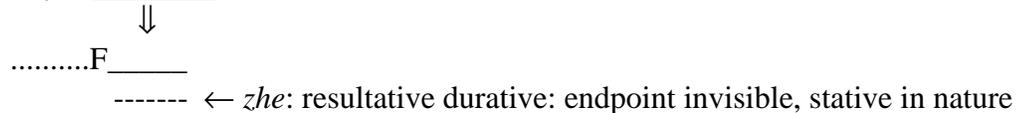
(both agent and theme are involved)



- (b) the durative *zhe* denotes a situation which has the temporal schema spanning after the event. The condition of the affected entity/theme (affected by the action described) is the focus of this situation. In this way, only the theme is in focus. We may call it “theme-only-oriented” viewpoint. Moreover, since the condition of the affect entity is the focus, *zhe* is stative in nature. Modifying diagram (2) above gives rise to:

Diagram (4)

(only the affected theme is involved)



- (c) Taking Hopper (1979) and Binnick (1991)’s claims on aspect and discourse structure, the distinction of dynamicity and stativity between *le* and *zhe* brings about the backgrounding and foregrounding effect.

5. An analysis

5.1. Different markers with different verb types

- *le* is an agent/theme-oriented marker
- it can focus on the entity undergoing an action or the entity affected by the action
- it is compatible with all the verbs that can occur in this construction because either participants in the event can be in focus
- *zhe* is a theme-only-oriented marker
- only the entity affected by an action can be used with *zhe*

- it is not compatible with verbs such as *lai* ‘come’ and *chu-xian* ‘appear’ (in examples (8) and (9)) because the post-verbal NP is not the entity affected by an action; more specifically, *lai* involves an agent but there is no entity affected by the agent (because of its intransitive nature), *chu-xian* ‘appear’ does not involve any agent-initiated action, no affected entity is involved in this sense.
- it is compatible with intransitive verbs such as *zuo* ‘sit’ because (i) the action involved is agent-oriented one; (ii) the entity affected by this action is actually the agent itself (say, from the posture of standing to sitting) (cf. reflexive verbs (Jacobsen 1992))

5.2. Agent in locative inversion

- *le* is an agent/theme-oriented marker. Agent or theme or both can be realized (example 11).
- *zhe* is just a theme(affect-entity)-oriented marker. Agent cannot appear in the appear in the surface
- Special note: even with the occurrence of the agent in the locative inversion construction, this cannot be a passivized transitive construction (cf. English case):

(17) *qiang shang *bei* *john* xie *le* yi ge zi
 wall on by john write PFV one CLS word

(17) shows that locative inversion (with or without an overt agent) cannot be a passivized transitive construction when a transitive verb is involved.

5.3. Aspect markers affecting the nature of the postverbal NP

5.3.1. *le*

- *Le* can bring about the foregrounding effect
- a new entity is more likely to be introduced in the foreground
- indefiniteness of the NP is a way to signal a foregrounding entity
- examples (14), (16)B’

5.3.2. *zhe*

- *zhe* brings about the backgrounding effect
- an old entity is more acceptable with *zhe* because of the backgrounding effect
- examples (15), (16)B

6. Remaining issues/problems and preliminary conclusion

6.1. Nature of the verbs and the status of the NP and PP

L&RH (1995) proposes that the discourse function plays a significant roles in the locative inversion phenomenon. They found out that the verbs that are found in the construction in question are “informationally light” verbs to fulfil its “presentational focus” function. The

more interesting issue is what is the status of the PP and NP surrounding the “informationally light” verbs?

- Two distinct functions of locative inversion construction:
 - (i) To comment on/describe a given landscape
 - (ii) To present something with a given scene (“presentation focus function”)

(i) and (ii) may differ in their ‘focal point’.

Temporal aspect may play a role in distinguishing these two functions in some way.

An interesting case:

(18) zhuo shang fang *le/zhe* shu
 chair on put PFV/DUR books
 ‘On the chair was put some books.’

(19) Zhuo shang *fang-man* *le* shu
 desk on put-full PFV books
 ‘On the chair was put full of books.’ (or in a more English way: ‘The chair is full of books.’)

(20) *Zhuo shang fang-man *zhe* shu
 desk on put-full DUR books

From the above example:

- L&RH’s claim about “informationally light” verbs in the locative inversion may be challenged. *Fang-man* ‘put-full-of’ may not be an ‘informationally light’ verb constellation it gives some extra information about the condition of the scene (‘full of something’ in the given examples)
- *man* ‘full-of’ describes the condition of the location (*zhuo-shang* ‘on the desk’)
- *zhe*, being a theme-oriented marker, put the ‘focal point’ on the *theme* rather than the preverbal locative phrase. This is in conflict with the verb *fang-man* ‘put-full-of’ which places the focal point on the preverbal locative.
- *le*, being a marker not limited to the theme-oriented viewpoint may occur in this construction with *fang-man* ‘put-full-of’.

6.2. Cross-linguistic significance

- locative inversion is a universal phenomenon
- previous studies attempt to show that it is a clear case of unaccusative diagnostics
- the present study exhibits a counterexample to this claim (in support of L&RH’s findings)
- still, Chinese differ from what L&RH characterizes:

- (i) transitive verbs occurring in this construction are not passivized transitives (example (16))
- (ii) verbs that are discussed in L&RH to be able to occur in locative inversion are not all possible in Chinese counterparts. There might be some cross-linguistic differences amongst those many similarities.

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