An Analytical Dissection of 'le'

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Introduction

Cantonese, Shanghainese, and Mandarin are but only three examples of the many dialects existing within the Chinese language.¹ The relationships among the variety of dialects are so complex that linguists are often puzzled as to whether to treat them as pure dialects or distinct languages. This question arises from several observations that not all the native speakers of the different dialects are “mutually intelligible” (Bauer 1997). In other words, there are dialects that are so closely related that they can understand each other without much difficulty, while there are also dialects that are so different that people have problems communicating with one another. Despite the fact that some of the dialects might be mutually incomprehensible, it is important to realize that all Chinese dialects share a common ancestor of which “the written system has an unbroken history of over three thousand years” (Bauer 1997: xxxv). Moreover, based on the many common phonological, syntactic, and lexical features these dialects share, Chao (1968) claims that there is essentially one universal Chinese grammar that applies for all the dialects within the language (Chao 1968:13).

Mandarin, a northern dialect spoken in Beijing, has almost always been the main focus in most Chinese linguistics research and studies. Mandarin is not only the official dialect spoken in China and Taiwan, it is also the most widely taught Chinese dialect throughout the world. In fact, due to its popularity, most Chinese linguistics theory relies mainly on the Mandarin dialect, which has sparked one of the hottest debates in the linguistics field, revolving around the lexical item *le*. Although a debate surrounding a single word may seem simplistic, the matter is so complicated that it has puzzled linguists for over thirty years. Is there a way to determine the number of *le’s* existing in the Chinese language?
The ambiguity of how many le’s there are in the Chinese language originates from the seemingly different functions le possesses in Mandarin. Le looks as if it has two separate jobs, depending on its syntactic position in the sentence. Explicitly, the le that occurs in the immediate post-verbal position seems to act as a perfective aspect suffix, while it will act as an inchoative marker/particle when situated in the sentence-final position. It is due to the possibility of a homophonous nature of the perfective aspect suffix and the inchoative marker that gives rise to the huge discussion.\(^2\) Linguists have been experiencing great difficulty in settling whether the two le’s should be treated as different entities, or if they are actually performing the same function at a deeper level, and therefore conclude that there is only one le in the Chinese grammar.

If Chao’s (1968) claim about the presence of one universal Chinese grammar is sustained, it will seem logical to deduce that the lexical item le should behave similarly in other dialects. Since southern Chinese dialects are known to have preserved more features from classical Chinese than do northern dialects (Bauer 1997: xxxiv), perhaps this le mystery might be able to be solved with the assistance of some southern dialect data. On the other hand, there also lies the possibility that different dialects have undergone divergent evolutionary changes throughout the long period of time after their separation from classical Chinese. In other words, the alternative suggests that le might have passed through different historical/transformational stages in the various dialects. These changes might involve the conversion of the two original distinct functions that le embraces into one lexical item in Mandarin, while southern dialects, such as Cantonese, simply preserves the classical features that le has been carrying in the Chinese language before splitting into dialects.\(^3\)
Due to the many uncertainties and doubts about the dialectal evolution of the Chinese language, this essay will not attempt to take Chao's claim to apply one specific theory to all the different dialectal phenomena. Instead, we are going to perform an analytical dissection of Cantonese, a southern Chinese dialect that is also the official dialect in Hong Kong, to explore the behaviour of le in the dialect. Hopefully, any new findings in this study can illuminate insights about the behaviour of le in the Mandarin dialect, or in the Chinese language itself.

In order to see whether the le's in Cantonese behave according to the one-le theory or the two-le theory, it is necessary to explore each theory in detail first. Since both theories have been constructed upon Mandarin data, sections I and II will be devoted to introducing the two main analyses of the le argument, Chao (1968), Li and Thompson's (1981) two-le theory and Shi Ziqiang's (1990) one-le theory respectively. Section III then explores the Cantonese usage of the lexical item le. Due to the fact that the Cantonese data seems to further support the two-le theory, section IV is dedicated to exploring the suggested flaws and ambiguities that Shi (1990) has suggested for the two-le theory, while attempting to fix the problems and strengthen the theory by the use of extra Mandarin and Cantonese data. Section V summarizes all the newly dissected Cantonese factors that might be useful for determining whether Mandarin contains one le or two.

I. The Two-le Theory

Due to the simplicity of the theory, linguists like Chao (1968), Li and Thompson (1981) often take the more traditional and more widely accepted approach when analyzing le in the Chinese syntax, namely the two-le theory. They claim that le has two distinctive functions in the
language, and that the Chinese grammar should include two separate homophonous *le*
morphemes, the verbal aspect suffix -*le* and the sentence-final *le* (Li and Thompson 1981), as
shown in (1) and (2) respectively.

(1) [Ta he *le* cha.]
S/he drink LE tea
'S/he drank tea.'

(2) [Ta he cha *le*.]
S/he drink tea LE
'S/he now drinks tea.' (which s/he didn't use to drink tea before)

(1) and (2) are minimal pairs illustrating how the syntactic position of *le* can change the
overall meaning of a sentence. In other words, sentence (1) is showing how the verbal aspect
suffix -*le* provides the perfective aspect by occupying the immediate post-verbal position, while
the presence of *le* in the sentence-final position, shown in (2), gives rise to the inchoative
reading.

In addition to the syntactic positional factor, negation particles also seem to support the
notion of having two distinctive *le*’s in the Chinese grammar. Chao (1968: 439) has noted that
mei or meiyou is the complementary negative particle that replaces the perfective -*le* suffix in the
pre-verbal position, whereas (Shi 1990:97) the sentence-final *le* is negated by the co-presence of
*bu* in the sentence. The negations for (1) and (2) are shown below as (3) and (4):

(3) [Ta mei/meiyou he cha.]
S/he not drink tea
'S/he didn’t drink tea.'

(3') *[Ta mei/meiyou he *le* cha.]
S/he not drink LE tea
'She didn’t drink tea.'
Sentences (3) and (3’) illustrate the replacement of mei/meiyou for the perfective le to negate (1), while (4) displays the negation of the inchoative le by the addition of bu before the verb. In other words, the way how the two readings of le are negated by two distinct negation particles further proves that the existence of two homophonous le’s in the language.

One of the stronger pieces of evidence that further strengthens the two-le theory is the possibility of the co-occurrence of the two le’s in the same sentence, as shown in (5):

(5) [Ta yijing chi le fan le.] (Shi 1990:97:4)  
S/he already eat LE meal LE  
‘He already ate. He has (had) already eaten.’

If le were to have only one function, there should not be a need to have more than one le within the same sentence. The fact that there can be more than one le in the same sentence reveals the multifunctional characteristic of le in the language. In this case, the first le in the sentence provides the verb phrase [chi fan] the perfective aspect, while the second le inchoates the whole perfective clause, indicating that the state of he having eaten has begun. In other words, the second le is emphasizing the fact that he has eaten already, because the other speaker might not have expected this to have happened.

Moreover, results from historical-linguistic fieldwork by Sun (1996) also seem to provide proof for the theory. He has conducted research on the origins of the two le’s to ascertain that the two le’s have different ancestors. Sun suggests that the perfective aspect suffix -le “was grammaticalized from the verb liao (meaning ‘to complete’),” while the sentence-final le “was grammaticalized from the verb lai (meaning ‘to come’).” He traces the origin of the two le’s through the examination of Middle Chinese and claims that the grammaticalization of the two le’s involves phonological reduction and paradigmatic variability. The phonological reductions for the two le’s from liao and lai, both involve the change of a diphthong vowel into a schwa.
By “paradigmatic variability”, Sun refers to how the various lexical possibilities in Middle Chinese that provide the perfective aspect and the inchoative readings are replaced by the two le’s. In other words, he claims that the process of grammaticalization only allows the minimal set to survive, i.e. the suffix -le taking place of jing, bi, qi and yi to mark the perfective aspect, while the sentence-final le substituting the lai and ye in place for marking inchoativity.⁸

II. The One-le Theory

Ziqiang Shi (1990) agrees that le does provide two readings to sentences, i.e. the perfective aspectual and the inchoative readings, but he also argues firmly that these two readings originate from the same le, which he renames as the “relative anteriority marker”. In his one-le theory, Shi further decomposes the perfectivity and inchoativity into the boundedness of the situations, with le signaling their relatively anteriority status. Specifically, he claims that when le is marking a bounded situation as relatively anterior, the sentence will have a perfective reading, and the inchoative reading arises when le is marking an unbounded situation as relatively anterior.

In order to understand Shi’s one-le theory, it is important to comprehend how Shi interprets “boundedness”. Essentially, Shi assumes that all situations have initial boundaries, because everything has a beginning, and the “boundedness” of situations depends on the “presence or absence of a terminal boundary.” In other words, the presence of a terminal boundary causes a situation to be “bounded”, whereas an “unbounded” situation results from the absence of a terminal boundary (Shi 1990: 104). The two types of situations are illustrated in the following diagrams, (6a) and (6b), respectively (1990:106:22a & b):
(6a) Bounded situations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial boundary</th>
<th>Terminal boundary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time axis</td>
<td>Relative anteriority marker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(6b) Unbounded situations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial boundary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time axis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to digest Shi's argument, understanding the above diagrams alone is not sufficient; it is necessary to realize what constitutes a terminal boundary. Shi (1990) adopted his definition for "boundedness" from Dahl (1985:20). Dahl claims that a situation is bounded "if and only if it is an essential condition on the members of the class or an essential part of the characterization that a certain limit or end-state is attained." As Dooley (1998) notes, although the notion of "boundedness" is a rather intuitive concept, Shi attempts to explain what frames the limit or end-state of bounded situations by the following schemata:

i. Quantification/definiteness of the NP argument(s) of the verb
ii. Quantification of the verb itself, e.g. accomplishment verbs

In other words, the following le sentences, (7) and (8), containing bounded situations should both have perfective readings:

(7) [Ta he le liang bei cha.]
S/he drink LE two classifier(CL) tea
'S/he drank two cups of tea.'

(8) [Ta si le]
S/he die LE
'S/he died.'
The perfectivity of the sentences are the results of the [liang bei cha] acting as the quantified/definite NP argument of the verb he “drink” in (7), whereas for (8), the verb si “die” that is quantifying the verb itself to provide the boundedness of the sentences.

In contrast, the lack of quantification/definiteness in the verb, and the NP argument of the verb in the following le sentences, (9) and (10), is responsible for the relative anteriority status of the unbounded situations, i.e. the inchoative readings:

(9) [Wo shui le.]  
    I sleep LE  
    ‘I am going to sleep now.’

(10) [Ta chi rou le.]  
    S/he eat meat LE  
    ‘S/he now eats meat.’ (S/he might have been a vegetarian before.)

Sentence (9) is not bounded because the verb shui “sleep” is not quantified. As for sentence (10), it is unbounded because the verb chi “eat” is not quantified, and that the NP of the verb does not have any definiteness/quantification to provide the terminal boundary before the relative anteriority marker le.

III. Analysis of Cantonese le

“Language does not occur in a vacuum, it always occurs within a specific context.” This sociolinguistic and/or anthropological claim provides Shi (1990) with very strong support for his one-le theory. Shi attempts to use his relative anteriority theory to explain how le can provide two meanings in the same sentence, which is analogous to the result of how the minimal pair are different only in the context. In other words, since the minimal pair differentiates in their contextual information, Shi’s theory is only the explanation of how the contexts differ to the extent of creating two distinct readings. In fact, I think that providing an “on/off explanation”
might be a more easily understood account to describe for the phenomenon. This hypothesis explains that the Mandarin le contains two qualities, “perfectivity” and “inchoativity”, that are at default in a perfective “on”, while inchoative “off” mode. The result of different readings ultimately comes from the context, the responsible element that switches the default stage of each quality. In Shi’s terms, the default for this hypothesis would be le marking the terminal boundary as relatively anterior.

Cantonese data do not require such help from the claim above, i.e. being context based, to show the function le embraces. Amazingly, it does not oppose Shi’s one-le theory either, because Shi’s new theory does not reject the two readings that le can provide, but simply tries to combine the two under a schema at a deeper level. A dissection of Cantonese data, from phonological properties to the process of language acquisition, is able to provide extremely obvious and precise evidence to demonstrate the two le nature in the dialect, i.e. being a perfective aspect suffix and an inchoative marker. In other words, Cantonese data do not only seem to be able to strengthen the two-le theory, but more importantly, it is not violating Shi’s one-le theory either. The following study explores this remarkable observation in detail.

The strongest piece of evidence that supports the theory of Cantonese as a two-le based dialect is its usage of two distinct lexical items for the two Mandarin le’s. Instead of having two le’s, Cantonese employs the phonological representation “dzaw” for the Mandarin perfective le, while utilizing le as the inchoative marker. The factor that supports the two-le theory in this piece of evidence is how the homophonous feature of the two le’s in Mandarin is erased. In other words, this erasing job is disambiguating the unclear role le plays in certain Mandarin sentences. Sentences (11)-(12) illustrate how the lack of context does not create ambiguity for
the minimal pair Cantonese sentences, while affecting the Mandarin readings (shown in sentence (13)):

(11) [Køy sik *dgaw*.
    s/he eat LE
    ‘S/he ate.’

(12) [Køy sik *le*.
    s/he eat LE
    ‘S/he now eats (whereas he didn’t use to eat)’

(13) [Ta chi *le*.
    s/he eat LE
    ‘S/he ate.’ or ‘S/he now eats.’

Sentences (15) and (16) illustrate the common usage of the two Cantonese *le* equivalents along with their objects:

(14) [Køy sik *nawjok*.
    s/he eat beef
    ‘S/he eats beef.’

(15) [Køy sik *dgaw* *nawjok*.
    s/he eat LE beef
    ‘S/he ate beef.’

(16) [Køy sik *nawjok* *le*.
    s/he eat beef LE
    ‘S/he now eats beef (where he didn’t use to eat beef)’

The additional *dgaw* in (15), comparing to (14), acts as the perfective aspect suffix for the verb phrase [sik *nawjok*], while the *le* in (16) signals the “change of state” of how this person is eating beef. It is also important to notice the position of *dgaw* as immediately post-verbal, with the inchoative *le* being sentence-final, because their positions fit perfectly with the syntactic claim of the two-*le* theory. In fact, the strictness of their syntactic positions can be shown more clearly in sentences where the two co-occur, as in (17)-(19):
(17) [Kɔy sik dəw ȵawjok le]
  s/he eat LE beef LE
  'S/he has eaten beef already.'

(18) [Kɔy sik dəw le]
  s/he eat LE LE
  'S/he has eaten already.'

(19) *[Kɔy sik le dəw]
  s/he eat LE LE
  'S/he has eaten already.'

Sentence (17) resembles closely to the Mandarin double le sentences like (5), with an object in between the two le's. But when we examine (18) closely, we find that because of the non-homophonous nature of the two markers in Cantonese, they can co-occur even without an object in between. Most importantly, the ungrammaticality of (19) further displays the strict syntactic positions of the le's to support the two-le theory. In fact, none of the Cantonese speakers could come up with instances where you can reverse the two le's position. In other words, dəw can only appear at the immediately post-verbal position, and not the sentence-final position. In the same fashion, le cannot occur anywhere else except for the sentence-final position. Some sentences like (12) might suggests that the le is occupying the immediately post-verbal position, but in fact, from (19), it is inarguable to say that le does not only have to be placed after the VP, but also it has to follow everything else, such as dəw, in order for a sentence to be grammatical. Indeed, going back to the description (cf. p.4) will confirm that this strict syntactic order and/or position of the two markers provides firm evidence for the two-le theory.

By having two distinct lexical items for the two le's in the Cantonese dialect, the ambiguity of the sentence-final le in the Mandarin sentence (20) is eliminated in its Cantonese
equivalents (20a)-(20b):

(20) [Ta he le]
    s/he drink LE
    ‘S/he now drinks.’ / ‘S/he drank.’

(20a) [Köy jum dpaw.]
    s/he drink LE
    ‘S/he drank.’

(20b) [Köy jum le.]
    s/he drink LE
    ‘S/he now drinks.’

The Mandarin sentence (20) is ambiguous mainly because of the difficulty in determining the syntactic position of le. The absence of an object in the VP takes away the clue to show whether the le is immediately post verbal, or is purely sentence-final. (20a) and (20b) evidently show where the ambiguous readings (perfective VS inchoative) are derived from, and have smoothly separated the two translations by means of the two distinct Cantonese representations of le.

An analysis of the two lexical items indicates that both dpaw and le are bound morphemes. Specifically, dpaw is always attached to the heads of the VPs and APs in the suffix position, while le seems to be able to attach itself at the end of any kind of clauses, including after the perfective aspect marker dpaw, as in (18). In fact, one of the most impressive finding from the Cantonese data is how the semantic properties of the two bounded morphemes overlap at the point where they both mention a change having occurred. The perfective suffix dpaw denotes a sense of completion, i.e. providing boundedness to the event, while the inchoative marker le signifies the beginning of a situational state that has already taken place:

(21a) [Köy dũi dpaw.]
    s/he drunk LE
    ‘S/he is drunk (and is done with this drinking session).’
From the translation of (21a), it is obvious that  صغ و  adds a terminal boundary to the sentence because it has signaled the completion of the drinking session. On the other hand, the  لو  in (21b) signifies the beginning of this person's becoming drunk, with an implication that s/he does not have the intention to stop drinking yet. Without paying much attention to the implication of whether the drinking is over, the two sentences still seem to fit Shi's one-  لو  theory. The analysis becomes complicated once this implication enters the analysis. One can argue that the sentences still perfectly with Shi's theory because the  لو  in (21b) simply marks the initial boundary (i.e. becoming drunk) as relatively anterior, giving the inchoative reading that s/he has started becoming drunk. Due to the  صغ و  marking the terminal boundary that it provides to the sentence as relatively anterior, it also grants a completion reading (i.e. perfective aspect) for the drinking session, which is what Shi's theory predicts. Could this observation mean that the one-  لو  theory works in Cantonese as well?

An examination of some Cantonese versions of double-  لو  sentences might lead to some new analytical results concerning the relationship between  صغ و  and  لو  with respect to the one-  لو  theory. Sentence such as (22) seems to be a good example to strengthen this proposal of the Cantonese data correlates to Shi's one-  لو  theory:

(22) [Køy slik  صغ و  jøk  لو ]
s/he eat  لو  medicine  لو 
'S/he has taken the medicine already.'
The post-verbal *dyaw* in (22) gives the VP [sik jok] a perfective aspect, while the inchoative sentence-final *le* emphasizes the fact that s/he has taken the medicine. Shi can easily explain this emphasis of the “alreadyness” by using his one-*le* theory to say that the sentence-final *le* is simply marking the terminal boundary, that *dyaw* has added to the sentence, as an initial boundary that is relatively anterior. In other words, the “change of state” meaning still applies to the sentence in the sense that the expectation for him/her not to have taken the medicine has come to an end because s/he has *already* taken the medicine.

If the illustration of the relationship between one-*le* theory with the above “natural and simple” sentences is not satisfying enough, a study can further be performed on duration sentences, such as (23):

(23) [Køy tsa *dyaw* tsei lõng lîn *le*.]  
s/he drive LE car 2 years LE  
’S/he has been driving for 2 years.’

Similar to the other *dyaw-le* sentences, the first *dyaw* marks the terminal boundary provided by the quantifier [lõng lîn] “two years” as relative anterior. This indicates that the two years of driving have already been completed. At the same time, the sentence-final *le* marks this situation, that can be interpreted as an initial boundary, as relatively anterior. This relative anteriority status gives a sense that the two years of driving was not done five years ago, but from the point when the two people are having the conversation. It also give the inchoative reading saying that this event has not ended, but just started two years ago. In other words, Shi’s relative anteriority theory seems to be working appropriately with the Cantonese data.

Cantonese *dyaw-le* sentences alone might not be convincing enough to show the strong
relationship that Cantonese might have with the one-le theory, therefore, extra sentences are necessary to demonstrate the correlation. For example, if Shi’s theory works with Cantonese data, the Cantonese version of excessive sentences like (24’) should behave the same way as the Mandarin equivalent (24):

(24) [Tang (tai) xian le.]  (Shi 1990:112:32)
   soup (too) salty LE
   'The soup is too salty.

(24’) [Tong tai ham le.]
   soup too salty LE
   'The soup is too salty.

The Mandarin “excessive” le, as Shi puts it, indicates that the fact that “this soup is too salty” is something the speakers did not expect. It is difficult to call this le an inchoative le if we use the older definition for the marker because the soup being too salty is not a new situation or a change of state, but a mere fact. Shi argues that the le here is marking the initial boundary of a deviation of “expectation” as relative anterior, i.e. signaling a change from expectation of the soup having the “normal saltiness” into being too salty. Cantonese seems to behave identically, with the only difference being the "optionality" of tai “too” in Mandarin. It uses the sentence-final le to signal a mismatch from the expectation of having a “normal taste” into the reality of being overly salty.

One new piece of valuable evidence that can be used to support the two-le theory for the Cantonese data comes from the observation of how Cantonese children learn the two morphemes during their different language acquisition stages (Yee 1999). Cantonese children included in this study all showed a consistency of learning the two morphemes separately:
Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Age when using $d_jllw$ alone (days)</th>
<th>Age when using $d_jllw$ with objects (days)</th>
<th>Age when using $le$ alone (days)</th>
<th>Age when using $d_jllw$ &amp; $le$ (days)</th>
<th>Age when using $d_jllw$ &amp; $le$ with objects (days)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>673</td>
<td>770</td>
<td>777</td>
<td>860</td>
<td>918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>696</td>
<td>703</td>
<td>724</td>
<td>797</td>
<td>811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>695</td>
<td>722</td>
<td>739</td>
<td>837</td>
<td>880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>653</td>
<td>675</td>
<td>701</td>
<td>761</td>
<td>816</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As table 1 shows, the children all started learning the perfective aspect suffix $d_jllw$ when they were about two years old. They first learned the bound morpheme with an absence of the object of the VPs, and an “obligation presence” of sentence-final particles other than $le$. After they have grasped fully the usual usage of the perfective suffix, they then learned how to add objects into the sentences with the $d_jllw$ they have just learned. They headed off to understand the inchoative usage of $le$, while combining the two in the double-$le$ sentences after having mastering the two separate morphemes.

By paying attention to Cantonese speakers’ everyday conversations, the numerous usage of the double $d_jllw$ and $le$ sentences is very apparent, indeed it is remarkable how they rarely use the perfective aspect marker alone. In fact, Cantonese speakers feel the sentences are incomplete when these sentences were presented without the sentence-final particle. Although the sentences are still comprehensible without these sentence-final particles, one reason why native speakers feel uncomfortable dropping the $le$ might relate to how most of the instances when they use $d_jllw$ require that extra “change of expectation” meaning that only $le$ can provide. This frequent usage of double $d_jllw$ and $le$ sentences provide further support for the two-$le$ theory, not only because of the emphasis of the existence on such sentences, but also in that the $le$ actually
conveys an extra meaning that single *d Gaw* sentences cannot capture.

The analytical dissection of the Cantonese *le* and *d Gaw* seems to be able to provide proofs for both the two-*le* and Shi's one-*le* theories, which are both Mandarin based. It is quite peculiar how this would happen, because if the two theories are arguing against each other based on the Mandarin data, how can they both be sustained in another dialect, like Cantonese? Perhaps the two theories are talking about the same lexical items, while not noticing that they were looking from different angles.

IVa. Possible Weakness of the Two-*le* Theory

The reason why Shi (1990) is proposing a new theory concerning the distribution of *le* is not that he has difficulty accepting the two readings of *le*, but rather that he disagrees with the supporting evidence that Chao (1968), Li and Thompson (1981) present for the theory. Due to the great support that Cantonese data has for the two-*le* theory, while not violating any part of Shi's one-*le* theory, this section attempts to protect the two-*le* theory from the flaws that Shi has observed. The three main aspects that Shi questions are i) the negative particles for the two *le*'s, ii) the scope of the sentence-final *le*, and iii) the syntactic positions of the two *le*'s.

According to the two-*le* theory, there are two different negation particles for the two *le*'s. More specifically, *mei* or *meiyou* negates the perfective *le*, while *bu* negates the sentence-final *le* (shown in sentences (3) and (4), respectively). The syntactic structures seem to be almost flawless, but Shi raises a question about the semantics of the negative sentences with their affirmative counterparts. According to the two-*le* theory, sentence (26) should be the negative of the inchoative *le* sentence (25):
Shi argues that (26) is not semantically the negative of (25), because the correct negating sentence should bear the meaning “s/he is still not eating beef” (or “It is not true that s/he now eats beef”) in order to negate (25). He proposes that (27) should be the negative of (25) in that the translation is more semantically correct, i.e. “He still does not eat beef” (shown in (27)).

Although he might not have explained the phenomenon in (27) or presented any general conclusion concerning the matter, Shi nevertheless notices that the combination of [haishi bu] is behaving as the inchoativity negation “compound” in this sentence. In other words, sentence (27) is showing how haishi and bu combine together to form a “compound” for negating the inchoative sentence-final le.

Furthermore, Shi has observed instances where the sentential-final le can be negated by either mei or bu (as shown in his examples (28) – (30)):
(30) [Ta bu qu niuyue le.] (Shi 1990:98:8c)
S/he not go New York LE
’S/he’s not going to New York anymore.’
* ‘S/he didn’t go to New York.’

Here, Shi claims that both the mei in (29) and the bu in (30) are negating the sentence-final le in (38). To make his claim even more complete, he also notices cases where only bu may be used to negate the verbal le (sentences (31) – (33)):

(31) [Wo yijing zhidao le zheijian shir de xiangqing.] (Shi 1990:98:9a)
I already know le this matter’s detail
‘I now know about the details of this matter.’

(32) [Wo haishi bu zhidao zheijian shir de xiangqing.] (Shi 1990:98:9b)
I still not know this matter’s detail
‘I still don’t know about the details of this matter.’

(33) *[Wo haishi mei zhidao zheijian shir de xiangqing.] (Shi 1990:98:9c)
I still not know this matter’s detail

According to Shi, (33) shows that the negation particle mei cannot negate the verbal le grammatically, and is replaced by bu, as in (32).

As a summary of this sub-section, Shi expresses his opposition to the two-le theory claim that the inchoative and perfective le’s have their own specific negations through a series of examples. Throughout his argument, Shi presents and utilizes various sentences to illustrate his proposed arbitrary relationships between the inchoative le and bu, and that between the perfective le and mei. In other words, he is trying to prove that there is only one le in the Chinese grammar, and that it does not have a definite negation particle.

The second aspect that Shi questions is the scope of the sentential le. He provides evidence to prove that the sentential le does not behave in the same fashion as the other sentence-final particles. He claims that the sentential le has a clausal scope rather than the sentential scope that other sentence-final particles embrace (shown in (34a) to (35b)):
Sentences (34a) and (34b) illustrate how the sentential scope that *ba*, a typical sentence-final particle, bears is not allowing the sentence to act as a clause in (34b). Shi claims that, in contrast, due to the clausal scope that it holds, *le* does not have the analogous restriction, as depicted by the grammaticality of (35b).

The last point that Shi challenges the two-*le* theory demands an explanation for the phenomenon in the following sentences:

(36a) [Tamen ba wo jiao le qilai.] (Shi 1990:100:13a)
They BA I call LE up
‘They called me out of bed.’

(36b) [Tamen ba wo jiao qilai le.] (Shi 1990:100:13b)
They BA I call up LE
‘They called me out of bed.’

Sentences (36a) and (36b) are almost identical, with the only difference lying in the position of *le*. This poses a problem for the two-*le* theory because despite the difference of the syntactic position of the *le*, the two sentences have exactly the same meaning.
IVb. Protecting the Two-le Theory

Shi (1990) attempts to disprove the two-le theory by using two different sets of examples to show the arbitrary relationship between the two le’s, their negation counterparts and their syntactic positions, while using a third set to contrast the behaviour of the inchoative le with the other sentence-final particles. He first uses a semantics approach to show how bu is not negating the sentence-final le, and that [haishi bu] is the actual combination that performs the job (c.f. Pg. 18). He is very accurate in making the conclusion that bu does not have much to do with the inchoative le, but he fails to notice the function of bu as the negation of the whole verb phrase (VP) in the sentence. If we look at (25) and (26) again, it becomes very obvious from the translation that the sentence-final le has scope over everything in the sentence including the bu, whereas bu only has scope over [chi niurou], hence the negation of the VP only:

(25) [Ta chi niurou le.] (Shi 1990:97:6a)
S/he eat beef LE
‘S/he now eats beef.’

(26) [Ta bu chi niurou le.] (Shi 1990:97:6b)
S/he not eat beef LE
‘He doesn’t eat beef anymore.’

(27) [Ta haishi bu chi niurou.] (Shi 1990:97)
S/he still not eat beef
‘He still doesn’t eat beef.’

In addition, the [haishi] in (27) has exactly the same scope as the sentence-final le in (25), while bu continues to have scope only over the verb phrase. We can even further use the combination [haishi bu] to negate the inchoative sentence (26) to truly visualize the negation nature that it has over the inchoative le, with the deep and surface structures shown in (37) and (38), respectively:

(37) [Ta haishi bu bu chi niurou.]
S/he still not not eat beef
‘S/he still eats beef.’
(38) [Ta haishi chi niurou.]
    S/he still eat beef
    'S/he still eats beef.'

The invisibility of the *bu*'s in the surface structure is a direct result of the logic rule “two
negatives always give a positive”. The rule depicts that the redundancy of the existence of the
double *bu*'s to provide the affirmative reading can simply be economically substituted by the
simple affirmative equivalent, which is the same as deleting the two *bu*'s.

Although *bu* might not be supporting the two-*le* theory, it is very important to realize how
[haishi *bu*] is acting as the complementary distributed negation element for the inchoative *le*. As
a matter of fact, [haishi *bu*] bears the meaning of “still not doing” something, i.e. a continuation
of an old action, which is the perfect opposite of the inchoative *le*, which is the signal for new
situation, i.e. “starting to do” something. This finding of the [haishi *bu*] as the negation of the
inchoative *le* not only does it not pose a threat to the two-*le* theory, in fact, it puts the theory back
to its original stable position, with only a switch from *bu* into [haishi *bu*] in the analysis.

The real “negation” challenges come into play when Shi (1990) detects the seemingly
reverse roles that *bu* and *mei* show in sentences (28)-(33). Upon this discovery, he questions
why there are instances where *bu* negates the verbal *le*, whereas *mei* negates the sentence-final
*le*. Shi’s suggestion for the sentence-final *le* being able to be negated by both *bu* and *mei* in (28)-(30)
is partially not justified as we re-examine the sentences:

(28) [Ta qu niuyue *le*.] (Shi 1990:98:8a)
    S/he go New York *LE*
    ‘S/he went to New York.’

(29) [Ta *mei* qu niuyue.] (Shi 1990:98:8b)
    S/he not go New York.
    ‘S/he didn’t go to New York.’
(30) [Ta bu qu niuyue le.] (Shi 1990:98:8c)
S/he not go New York LE
'S/he's not going to New York anymore.'
* 'S/he didn’t go to New York.'

By taking the semantics approach, as Shi has done to the earlier sentences, the only legitimate negation of (28) is (29), with the le in (28) being the perfective suffix. Shi’s contradiction comes into play when he is trying to claim that the bu in (30) is negating the sentence-final le, when it is clearly negating the VP [qu niuyue], because he has claimed that the real negation element should be [haishi bu] for the sentential le. The reason why this confusion arises is due to the ambiguous nature of the sentence itself, i.e. (28), because the sentence can have either the perfective or inchoative readings, due to the ambiguity this le embraces. This ambiguity can be easily uncovered through the Cantonese versions (28a) and (28b), with their respective negative sentences (29a) and (29b):

(28a) [Køy hoy ñjaw NY.]
S/he go LE New York
'S/he went to New York.'

(28b) [Køy hoy NY le.]
S/he go New York LE
'S/he now goes to New York.'

(29a) [Køy mou Hoy NY.]
S/he not go New York.
'S/he didn’t go to New York.'

(29b) [Køy jijin ń hoy NY.]
S/he still not go New York.
'S/he is still not going to New York.'

As the gloss and English translation of the sentences have suggested, ñjaw is the perfective le in Cantonese, le is the inchoative le, mou being the Cantonese version of mei, while ń is equivalent to the Mandarin bu. It is very clear, from the above Cantonese data, that the two different
negations can only correspond to their specific affirmative equivalent. Analogously, the two negative sentences in Mandarin, namely (28') and (29), are negating their specific affirmative equivalents that are embraced within the ambiguous sentence (28). In other words, sentences (28)-(30) do not disprove the two-\textit{le} theory at all, but instead they represent another set of examples to support the negation claim that the theory has proposed.

Shi does not only argue against the \textit{bu} and the negation of sentential \textit{le}, he has also observed sentences where \textit{mei} is not behaving the way the two-\textit{le} theory has predicted, namely sentences (31)-(33):

\begin{enumerate}
\item[(31)] [Wo yijing zhidao \textit{le} zheijian shir de xiangqing.] (Shi 1990:98:9a)
I already know \textit{LE} this matter 's detail
'I now know about the details of this matter.'

\item[(32)] [Wo haishi \textit{bu} zhidao zheijian shir de xiangqing.] (Shi 1990:99:9b)
I still not know this matter 's detail
'I still don't know about the details of this matter.'

\item[(33)] *[Wo haishi \textit{mei} zhidao zheijian shir de xiangqing.] (Shi 1990:99:9c)
I still not know this matter 's detail
\end{enumerate}

Once again, from the negation in (32) and the translation of the sentences, we can surely say that, disregarding the syntactic position, the \textit{le} involved is depicting inchoativity, and not perfectivity. In other words, this piece of evidence does not function as counterexamples against the two \textit{le}'s not having a fixed negation particle, as Shi has intended to do in his article, but to show the insignificant role of \textit{le}'s syntactic position in the differentiation of the perfective suffix and the inchoativity marker, as many linguists might have in mind.

Shi's negation-related data might have shown the arbitrary relationship between syntactic positions of \textit{le} and the two different readings, but it accidentally strengthens the two-\textit{le} theory by showing the tight bonds the distinctive \textit{le}'s have with their negation particles. Nonetheless, one
remarkable conclusion that Shi’s observations have led concerns the usage of the different
negation particles, which should be able to facilitate non-native speakers in mastering the
language. It is very important to remember that all Shi’s sentences support how i) *mei* negates
the perfective suffix -le, ii) *bu* negates the actions that a verb embodies, and iii) [*haishi bu*]
egates the inchoative *le*.

Shi’s (1990) examples in (36a)-(36b) to prove the arbitrary relationship between the
syntactic positions and the two-*le* readings are not as convincing as those he has indirectly shown
through his study of negation particles:

(36a) [Tamen ba wo jiao *le* qilai.] (Shi 1990:100:13a)
They BA I call LE up
‘They called me out of bed.’

(36b) [Tamen ba wo jiao qilai *le*.] (Shi 1990:100:13b)
They BA I call up LE
‘They called me out of bed.’

Every single native Mandarin speaker included in my study of *le* is able to detect the difference
between the two sentences. Specifically, (36a) has a connotation of “they” are not supposed to
wake “me” up, while (36b) has the exact opposite, i.e. “they” are supposed to wake “me” up, and
have completed the task. Although these two examples are not as strong as the previous ones,
one should not forget the existence of this contrast in interpretation that is posed by the syntactic
positions of the two *le*’s.16

Shi’s disagreement concerning the scope of sentential *le* is very dubious. He has claimed
that the sentential *le* does not embrace the same scope as other sentence-final particles through
the following sentences:

(34a) [Chi fan *ba*.] (Shi 1990:99:10a)
eat rice BA
‘Let’s eat.’
In fact, according to the results from my interviews with a number of native Mandarin speakers, no one could accept (35b) as grammatical. They all agree on how in order for (35b) to become grammatical, the only possible reading is “The person/people who has/have eaten”, and the sentence structure has to be changed into (35c):

(35c) [Chi le fan de ren.] 
eat LE rice DE person 
‘The person/people who has/have eaten...’

In other words, for the le in (35b) to have a clausal scope, it has to bear the perfective reading, with the change of its syntactic position at the same time. Moreover, it is due to the sentential scope of the unchangeable inchoative status of the le in (35b) that made the sentence ungrammatical to all native speakers. The explanation might be clearer when we compare these sentences with their Cantonese pairs (35a’)- (35c’):

(35a’) [Sik fan le.] 
eat rice LE 
‘(He/She/They etc.) eat now (but didn’t used to before).’

(35b’) *[Sik fan le go jun.] 
eat rice LE Ga person 
‘The person who eats now (but didn’t used to)....’
The doubtless ungrammaticality of (35b') that all my native Cantonese speakers has agreed on demonstrates that this sentence-final inchoative le in (35a') and (35b') does behave as a sentence-final particle by having a sentential scope. The grammaticality of (35c') further confirms the native Mandarin speakers' suggestion of the le in (35c) as the perfective suffix le bearing a clausal scope and that it can never have the inchoative reading. Based on both the Mandarin and Cantonese speakers' intuitive information, Shi's argument for the inchoative le having a clausal scope and differing from other sentence-final particles does not seem to be justified.

V. A Conclusion of the Behaviour of le in the Two Dialects

While the debate of whether Mandarin has one or two le's is still in progress, results from the mini-dissection (section III) of the Cantonese equivalents of the Mandarin le's seem to be agreeing with both the two-le and the one-le theories. As predicted from its distinct lexical items for the two le's, Cantonese provides a wide range of evidence to support the two-le theory. Remarkably, Cantonese data also behave grammatically under Shi's one-le theory. This leads to a plausible explanation of the two theories complementing one another.

The distinct Cantonese phonological representations, i.e. dgaw and le, for the two functions of the Mandarin le has removed the homophonous nature of the two particles. In addition, the two lexical items, standing for two divergent bounded morphemes occupy specific syntactic positions in a sentence. Most importantly, from the evident language acquisition data...
that show how Cantonese children learn the two items at different stages, one can claim indisputably that the Cantonese dialect is following the two-\textit{le} theory.

Although Mandarin and Cantonese might not have followed the same evolutionary path throughout their history, it is worth noticing how Cantonese has preserved more two-\textit{le} features. It is also crucial to realize the fact that Cantonese never violates Shi's one-\textit{le} theory either, and that in contrast, it carries sentences that can strengthen the one-\textit{le} theory. In fact, everything related to the two-\textit{le} claims seems to be based upon the surface structures of the sentences, while Shi's (1990) one-\textit{le} theory concentrates more on the underlying deep structures beneath them. Shi's theory attempts to unify the two apparent \textit{le}'s on the surface structures into one entity that performs one job that is able to give multiple results.

In order to apply both theories to the different \textit{le} phenomena in the Chinese dialects, it is necessary to solve any oppositional questions against them. Section IV attempts to rescue the validity of the two-\textit{le} theory, that Shi doubted, by using a comparative study of the two dialects. This can also indirectly indicate the possibility that Mandarin could at least once in the past contain two \textit{le}'s in the language. In other words, Shi's one-\textit{le} theory is well taken as a plausible theory, while his argumentation for the failure of the two-\textit{le} theory is not as well presented, and convincing. After this analytical dissection of \textit{le} and the rescuing process of the two-\textit{le} theory, it is apparent that both the two-\textit{le} and one-\textit{le} theories should be credited. They both benefit the linguistics field by accounting for various \textit{le} phenomena within different dialects at different level. In conclusion, there is no need for deleting either one of the theories to explain \textit{le}, because they are both describing the same issues, but at different levels. In fact, they should be combined whenever linguists are trying to explain what \textit{le} is in Chinese.
Notes:

1.) I would like to thank Professor Fernald and Professor Huang for all the time they have spent to provide me with great comments and advice on this material. I would also like to thank Rosebud Buruku, Geraldine Chan, Anthony Fleg, Kandice Gu, Shigeyuki Ito, Richard Jiao, Raymond Kong, Natasha Lai, S.K. Leung, Susan Poon, Tom Stenson, Cody Walsh, Lynsey Wolter, K.K. Wong, Sherry Yang, Nicholas Yee, Michael Yu, Chunbai Zhang for all their support and patience. I am the only person responsible for all the errors that remain.

2.) Another reason why this discussion has been around for over thirty years is that le seems to be preventing foreign speakers to truly master Chinese as their second language. In other words, if linguists can come up with a thorough description of the usage of le, Chinese would no longer seem to be as difficult a language as most people think it is.

3.) This possibility was first raised by Professor Fernald, and was strengthened by Nicholas Yee’s interesting findings in the Childes (The Child Language Data Exchange System) program for his Language Acquisition class. Yee found that Cantonese children learn the two le’s separately, more specifically the perfective aspect before the inchoative marker, while Mandarin children seem to be learning both at the same time, without the usage of object to provide the syntactic distinction.

4.) The reason why I chose Cantonese as the southern dialect for the comparison is because I am a native Cantonese speaker myself, and that I have connections to obtain more accurate data from various resources.

5.) I will be using “sentence-final le” and “inchoative le” interchangeably throughout the essay.

6.) All Mandarin data is given in pinyin, the romanization form that most native speakers are able to read.

7.) For a more detailed explanation of mei/meiyou being the negation particle for the perfective suffix -le, see Wang (1965), who argues that le is acting like a variant of the lexical item you. Thus if le is the variant of you, it will then explain the complementary distribution of mei(you) and the perfective suffix -le.

8.) This Study will not go into further detail about the historical origin of the two le’s, a subject which requires extensive knowledge of Classical Chinese.

9.) This “on/off explanation” is only a hypothesis that serves to attempt explaining Shi’s one-le theory. It is important to note that this is only a hypothetical explanation.

10.) The reason why I am proposing the default mode having perfectivity “on”, and inchoativity “off” is due to the fact how native speakers all give the ambiguous le a perfective reading when it is presented at the sentence-final position and can be interpreted as either one or the other reading, depending on the context.

11.) A special thank to Nicholas Yee, who is kind enough to share his findings and data on the subject from the Childes Program.

12.) This obligation presence comes from the observation of how none of the children was using the perfective aspect suffix without the presence of any kind of sentence-final particle.

13.) de is a relative classifier marker in Chinese, and it is used here to show the scope difference between ba and le.

14.) Note that using [haishi bu] in the sentence to negate (28) is grammatical, as shown below as (28’)

(28’) [Ta haishi bu qu niuyue.] 
S/he still not go New York 
"S/he is still not going to New York."

15.) All the native Mandarin speakers with whom I have interviewed agree on the ambiguous reading (28) carries.
16.) The reason why Cantonese data is not used here is that the equivalent of *ba* in Cantonese, namely *cheung*, is not used as often as in Mandarin. In addition, most of my native Cantonese speakers feel uncomfortable in using the *cheung* construction for Shi's sentences (36a) and (36b).
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