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Definite NPs and telicity in Chinese

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Telicity has played an important role in recent studies of event structure as well as argument structure (Dowty 1991, Verkuyl 1993, Tenny 1994, Pustejovsky 1995, van Hout 1996, Jackendoff 1996, Hay, Kennedy & Levin 1999, among others). One way whereby the telic and atelic distinction is expressed concerns the internal argument of the verb. For example, *eat an apple* or *eat the apple* is telic, while *eat apples* is atelic. For verbs of consumption, then, both definite NPs and quantified NPs give rise to the telic interpretation in English. In this note, I will show that in Chinese, definite NPs behave differently from quantified, numeral NPs with respect to diagnostics of telicity, despite the fact that both types of NPs provide an inherent final point for an event.

The following three aspectual tests consistently distinguish quantified NPs from definite NPs in Chinese; in fact, all three tests group the definite NPs together with bare NPs, the latter being associated with the atelic interpretation.

A. Compatibility with *zai wu fenzhong nei* 'in five minutes'

(1) Lisi neng zai wu fengzhong nei chi   a) sanwan   mian
     Lisi can in five minutes   in eat   three-bowl noodles
                                             b) *nawan   mian
                                                 that-bowl noodles
                                             c) *mian
                                                 noodles

      'Lisi can eat a)   three bowls of noodles   in five minutes.'
                     b)   *that bowl of noodles
                     c)   *noodles

B. Entailment of 'completion' vs. 'termination' when inflected with the perfective marker *–le* (cf. Smith 1994)

(2) Zhangsan chi-le   a) *sanwan   mian,   keshi mei chiwan
     Zhangsan eat-Perf   three-bowl noodles   but   not eat-finish
                             b) nawan   mian
                                 that-bowl noodles
                             c) mian
                                 noodles

'Zhangsan ate   a)   *three bowls of noodles,   but did not finish them.'
                      b)   that bowl of noodles
                      c)   noodles

(2) shows that completion is entailed with the numeral NP *sanwan mian* 'three bowls of noodles', but not with the definite NP *nawan mian* 'that bowl of noodles' or the bare NP *mian* 'noodles'.

C. Compatibility with the progressive marker *zai*

(3)   Zhangsan zai   chi   a)   ? sanwan   mian
      Zhangsan Prog eat   three-bowl noodles
                          b)   nawan   mian
                                that-bowl noodles
                          c)   mian
                                noodles

      'Zhangsan is eating   a)   ?three bowls of noodles.'
                             b)   that bowl of noodles
                             c)   noodles

(3a), if it is acceptable, only has the reading where Zhangsan is eating three bowls of noodles simultaneously, not the reading where he is eating the noodles sequentially, one bowl after another. This indicates that the progress marker *zai* cannot be used to mark an event that does not have the subinterval property (Dowty 1979). This property characterizes Activities. For example, if John walked for three hours, then at any subinterval during those three hours, *John was walking* is true. The sequential reading of *chi sanwan mian* 'eat three bowls or noodles' does not have the subinterval property, hence the incompatibility with *zai*. By contrast, (3b) patterns like (3c), suggesting that *chi nawan mian* 'eat that bowl of noodles' has the subinterval property.

       In short, *chi nawan mian* 'eat that bowl of noodles' does not behave like a telic predicate syntactically, even though semantically the event it describes has a definite inherent end point. This raises the question whether a definite internal argument 'delimits' an event in Chinese.

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