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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 fenzhong nei chi
Lisi can in five minutes in eat

a) sanwan mian
   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
Zhangsan eat-Perf

a) *sanwan mian, keshi mei chiwan
   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 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.

References