

Lexicogrammar in Mandarin Chinese: the case of *guo* and *le*

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During the past fifty years of linguistic studies on the Mandarin Chinese language, *guo* (過/过) and *le* (了) have proven to be two of the most closely related and most puzzling linguistic items for linguists to describe and L2 learners to master. In large part, this is due to the fact that they both are highly polysemous in nature. Moreover, while each has a distinct set of lexical senses and grammatical functions associated with it, several of the senses/functions of *guo* and *le* are very similar or even overlap; there exist situations in which *guo* and *le* are apparently interchangeable, which adds to the complexity of *guo* and *le*. Previous studies have made important findings on the functions of *guo* and *le* (e.g., Chao, 1968; Lü, 1980; Li & Thompson, 1981; Huang & Davis, 1989; Smith, 1997). However, most previous studies followed the traditional approach and treated *guo* and *le* as arbitrary grammatical forms behaving under abstract principles yet with many exceptions and unaccountable interchangeable situations. Moreover, the inter-lexical polysemy (Evans, 2015), i.e., the seemingly interchangeable, but subtly different uses of *guo* and *le*, has not been addressed in a systematic fashion in the literature.

This study seeks to fill these gaps through exploring two research questions: First, what is the relationship between the lexical senses and grammatical functions of *guo* and *le*? Second, can this relationship be used to address the grammatical “exceptions” and the inter-lexical polysemy of *guo* and *le*? By adopting the methodology of Principled Polysemy (Tyler & Evans, 2003), this study begins the exploration from the discussion of the historically earliest attested senses of *guo* and *le*. The data employed in the present study involve eleven books and a corpus – the Corpus of the Center for Chinese Linguistics of Peking University (Modern Chinese Section), covering a history of 3,000 years from the early Western Zhou (1046-771 BCE) to modern times. 1877 tokens of *guo* and 1026 tokens of *le* were examined, and over 40 senses/functions associated with *guo* and over 30 senses/functions associated with *le* were identified. This diachronic corpus study provides strong evidence of the semantic developments and grammaticalization paths (Bybee et al., 1994) of *guo* and *le*.

The findings show how the Chinese *guo* and *le* have systematically evolved from their earliest attested lexical senses to today’s various senses and functions. Furthermore, this study establishes semantic networks for *guo* and *le*, which not only represent the diachronic grammaticalization paths of the two words, but also the synchronic relationship among the senses and functions. Overall, this study demonstrates that a more accurate explanation of any particular grammatical function associated with *guo* or *le*, including the “exceptions” and inter-lexical polysemy, involves a comprehension of the function within the larger semantic network and the communicative context.

References

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