

Lexical Aspects: Mandarin Chinese as an Example

We introduce lexical aspects in this text. Lexical aspect (also called *Aktionsart*) is about the inherent temporal structure of a verb or predicate, that is, what kind of event the verb itself describes, independent of tense or (grammatical) aspect.

Events (in a more general sense) can be classified into (at least) four types (i.e., STATE, ACTIVITY, ACCOMPLISHMENT, ACHIEVEMENT) based on three dimensions: punctuality vs. durativity (i.e., $\pm$ DURATIVE), dynamicity vs. stativity (non-dynamicity) (i.e., $\pm$ DYNAMIC), and telicity vs. atelicity (i.e., $\pm$ TELIC). Punctuality and durativity concern whether an event occurs instantaneously or extends over a period of time. Dynamicity (as opposed to stativity/non-dynamicity) relates to whether the event involves change or activity, rather than describing a stable situation. Telicity reflects whether the event has an inherent endpoint that determines its natural termination, while atelicity reflects the absence of such inherent endpoint.

Table 1 is a summary of event types in Mandarin Chinese.

Table 1: Event types in Mandarin Chinese		
Event type	Features	Mandarin example
STATE	[+DURATIVE]	知道这件事 <i>zhīdào zhè jiàn shì</i> ‘know this thing’
	[-DYNAMIC]	怕这只猫 <i>pà zhè zhī māo</i> ‘fear this cat’
	[-TELIC]	爱一个人 <i>ài yí gè rén</i> ‘love someone’
ACTIVITY	[+DURATIVE]	游泳 <i>yóu yǒng</i> ‘swim’
	[+DYNAMIC]	跑步 <i>pǎo bù</i> ‘run’
	[-TELIC]	吃苹果 <i>chī píng guǒ</i> ‘eat an apple/apples’
ACCOMPLISHMENT	[+DURATIVE]	游 300 米的泳 <i>yóu sān bǎi mǐ de yǒng</i> ‘swim 300 meters’
	[+DYNAMIC]	跑一场马拉松 <i>pǎo yí chǎng mǎ lā sōng</i> ‘run a marathon’
	[+TELIC]	吃完一个苹果 <i>chī wán yí gè píng guǒ</i> ‘eat up an apple’
ACHIEVEMENT	[-DURATIVE]	意识到一件事 <i>yì shí dào yí jiàn shì</i> ‘realize a thing’
	[+DYNAMIC]	走进房间 <i>zǒu jìn fáng jiān</i> ‘enter the room by walking’
	[+TELIC]	爱上一个人 <i>ài shàng yí gè rén</i> ‘fall in love with someone’

As shown in the table, event types are not determined by verbs alone, but by predicates, that is, the combination of a verb and its object. In Mandarin (and many other languages), the four types of events can be distinguished in three ways.

First, the PROGRESSIVE aspect requires both [+DURATIVE] and [+DYNAMIC] (i.e., ACTIVITY and ACCOMPLISHMENT). It does not combine well with STATE, and with certain ACHIEVEMENT predicates, it tends to yield a future interpretation, as shown in (1).

- (1) a. ?? 我 正在 知道 这 件 事。(STATE)
 ?? Wǒ zhèngzài zhīdào zhè jiàn shì.
 I PROGRESSIVE know this CLASSIFIER thing
 ‘(Intended) I am getting to know this thing.’
- b. ??? 我 正在 怕 这 只 猫。(STATE)
 ??? Wǒ zhèngzài pà zhè zhī māo.
 I PROGRESSIVE fear this CLASSIFIER cat
 ‘(Intended) I am afraid of this cat.’
- c. 我 正 要 进 房间。(ACHIEVEMENT)
 Wǒ zhèng yào jìn fángjiān.
 I PROGRESSIVE want enter room
 ‘I am entering the room.’

- d. 我 认为 我 正在 爱 上 一 个 人。(ACHIEVEMENT)
 Wǒ rènwéi wǒ zhèngzài ài shàng yí gè rén.
 I think I PROGRESSIVE love up one CLASSIFIER person
 'I think I am falling in love with someone.'

Second, the IMPERATIVE mood, which entails agentivity, requires [+DYNAMIC] (i.e., ACTIVITY, ACCOMPLISHMENT, and ACHIEVEMENT), and it does not combine well with STATE, as shown in (2).

- (2) a. ?? (快) 知道 这 件 事! (STATE)
 ?? (Kuài) zhīdào zhè jiàn shì!
 quick know this CLASSIFIER thing
 'Know this thing!'
- b. ?? (快) 怕 这 只 猫! (STATE)
 ?? (Kuài) pà zhè zhī māo!
 quick fear this CLASSIFIER cat
 'Fear this cat!'
- c. (快) 跑! (ACTIVITY)
 (Kuài) pǎobù!
 quick run
 'Run!'
- d. (快) 吃 完 这 个 苹果! (ACCOMPLISHMENT)
 (Kuài) chī wán zhè gè píngguǒ!
 quick eat finish this CLASSIFIER apple
 'Eat this apple up!'
- e. (快) 进 房间! (ACHIEVEMENT)
 (Kuài) jìn fángjiān!
 quick enter room
 'Enter the room!'

Third, IN-TIME temporal requires [+TELIC] (i.e., ACCOMPLISHMENT and ACHIEVEMENT), and does not combine well with STATE and ACTIVITY, as shown in (3).

- (3) a. ??? 我 能 在 十 分钟 内 怕 这 只 猫。(STATE)
 ??? Wǒ néng zài shí fēnzhōng nèi pà zhè zhī māo.
 I can at ten minute inside fear this CLASSIFIER cat
 'I can fear this cat in ten minutes.'
- b. ??? 我 能 在 十 分钟 内 游泳。(ACTIVITY)
 ??? Wǒ néng zài shí fēnzhōng nèi yóuyóǒng.
 I can at ten minute inside swim
 'I can swim in ten minutes.'
- c. 我 能 在 十 分钟 内 吃 ???(完) 一 个
 Wǒ néng zài shí fēnzhōng nèi chī ???(wán) yí gè
 I can at ten minute inside eat finish one CLASSIFIER
 苹果。(ACCOMPLISHMENT)
 píngguǒ.
 apple
 'I can eat up an apple in ten minutes.'

- d. 我 在 十 分 钟 内 爱 ???(上) 了 一 个
Wǒ zài shí fēnzhōng nèi ài ???(shàng) le yí gè
I at ten minute inside love up PERFECTIVE one CLASSIFIER
人。(ACHIEVEMENT)
rén.
person
'I fell in love with someone in ten minutes.'