

# Revisiting Accomplishments in Chinese

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## Introduction

# What is an Accomplishment?

- A verb type (Vendler 1957) or a situation type (Smith 1991) defined based on its « **internal temporal properties** »
- Apart from its dynamic feature, an Accomplishment is distinguished from other verb/situation types by its **durative and telic** (heterogeneous) nature.

Verb/Situation type	Dynamic	Durative	Telic/Heterogeneous
State	-	+	-
Activity	+	+	-
Accomplishment	+	+	+
Achievement	+	-	+
Semelfactive	+	-	-

## Part 1.

# Are there Accomplishments in Mandarin Chinese?

Some consider there are no equivalents to (English) Accomplishments in Chinese:

- Tai (1984) bases his arguments against the existence of Accomplishments in Chinese on resultative verb complements (RVCs). For Tai, RVCs have not duration, they only encode "results"
  - RVCs are not compatible with progressive *zài* 在
  - RVCs are not ambiguous when in the scope of negation or adverbs such as *jīhū* 几乎 'almost': such adverbs scope over the result only (not the preceding process)

Some consider there are Accomplishments in Chinese (the type being universal), but that they have their own characteristics:

- Smith (1990) notes that, although incompatible with progressive *zài* 在, RVCs are compatible with certain constructions indicating duration, such as those involving the verb *huā* 花 'to spend' (N *huā* x *shíjiān* V 'X spent x time V-ing' or V *huā-le* N x *shíjiān* 'V-ing took N x time')

## Part 1.

# Are there Accomplishments in Mandarin Chinese?

Some propose to extend the range of internal temporal features used for classifying verb types, in order to better define Accomplishments (as opposed to other verb types)

- Smith (1990:316) describes “telic events” in Chinese as having “**completion, duration and nondetachability**”
  - Xiao & McEnery (2004) refine the notion of telicity, splitting Smith’s original feature into 3 distinct features
    - Boundedness (presence of a final **temporal** endpoint)
    - Telicity (presence of a final **spatial** endpoint)
    - Result (entailment of a **result** being attained)
- They define Accomplishments as being [+bnd], [+telic] but [-result], so that Accomplishments differ from Achievements not only in terms of duration, but mainly in terms of result. (X&ME 2004:55-56)
- Basciano (2019) also considers Accomplishments to **lack a result layer** in their internal structure, contrary to Achievements.
  - Peck et al. (2013) add a [±scale] feature to the Vendlerian features in order to account for verbs of degree achievement, thus refining the definition of Accomplishments. Accomplishments are renamed **Multipoint closed scale changes**, and are [+scalar], [+telic] and [-punctual].

## Part 1.

# Morphological status of Accomplishment verbs in Chinese

- While Tai (1984) and Smith (1990, 1991/1997) limit their discussion of Accomplishments to RVCs, others point to the fact that:
  - RVCs do not represent a single verb type: Peck et al. (2013), Basciano (2019) recognize 3 distinct verb types among RVCs (with differences in their analyses), among which Accomplishments and Achievements;
  - Accomplishments need not all be RVCs, as Peck et al. also identify a few monomorphemic Accomplishments (过 回 买 卖 租). Being dynamic and **durative** (or [-punctual]), they are compatible with the **progressive viewpoint**:

(1) 我            在            过            大桥。(Peck et al. 2013:690, ex. (34)a)  
wǒ            zài            guò        dàqiáo  
1SG            PROG        cross      bridge  
I am crossing the bridge.

## Part 1.

# Defining semantic properties of Accomplishments

- When it comes to describing this verb class in Chinese by its defining properties, the Accomplishment class seems to become quite elusive.
- In the following (Part 2), we explore issues of **telicity** and **durativity**
- Finally (Part 3), we focus on the interpretation of **duration complements**

## Part 2.

# How is telicity tested?

- For some authors, telicity of a verb makes it incompatible with progressive *zài* 在 (Teng 1975; Basciano 2019:25, 30). However, Guo (1993) presents tests that clearly diverge on this point.
- Guo (1993:413) uses tests to ascertain whether a verb has an initial or a final boundary: since Guo adopts a gradual approach with cumulative tests, the more conclusive telicity (final endpoint) tests are
  - the verb's compatibility with sentence-final *le* 了 and
  - the verb's compatibility with a **duration** complement (时量补语).
- Xiao & McEnery (2004:46-47) adapt Vendler's (1957) *for-* and *in-* adverbials test, replacing the English adverbials with a Chinese equivalent:
  - [-telic] situations are compatible with **duration complements** (补语) such as *yī ge xiǎoshí* (ex. 守候一个小时 'wait for one hour')
  - [+telic] situations are compatible with **duration adverbials** (壮语) such as (*zài*) *yī ge xiǎoshí nèi* (ex. 在一个小时内到达 'arrive in one hour')

## Part 2.

# How is durativity tested?

- Of course progressive *zài* 在 is a good durativity marker, but since it is deemed incompatible with telicity, it does not allow to discriminate between Accomplishments ([+durative]) and other telic verbs.
- As mentioned earlier, Smith (1990) mentions the verb *huā* 花 ‘to spend’ in complex sentences as an indication of duration (N *huā* x *shíjiān* V ‘X spent x time V-ing’ or V *huā-le* N x *shíjiān* ‘V-ing took N x time’). She mentions its incompatibility with « change-of-state » RVCs (or Achievements).
- Xiao & McEnery (2004:44) also signal that with durative situations, punctual time references either confer the situation an inceptive meaning, or are unacceptable.
- Our focus in this talk will be the **duration complements** just mentioned. They consist of simple expressions of duration in the post-verbal (and post-object) position, as in:

(2)      我            坐            公车        坐了        二十        分钟。  
wǒ           zuò           gōngchē   zuò-le      èrshi       fēnzhōng  
1SG          sit           bus          sit-PFV     twenty     minute

I sat in the bus for twenty minutes.



### Part 3.

# The scope ambiguity of duration complements

– Chen (1988), Guo (1993), Peck et al. (2013) all signal **the ambiguity of duration complements** in sentences with sentence-final particle *le* 了 when associated to **Accomplishments**, and their univocity with Achievements.

- With non-durational telic verbs (Achievements), “the time period can only be understood as the time during which the **result state** holds” (Peck et al. 2013:691)

(3)	这	辆	车	修好	好久	了。
	Zhè	liàng	chē	xiū-hǎo	hǎojiǔ	le
	DEM	CL	car	repair-good	long_ago	SFP

This car was repaired long ago.

- With durational telic verbs (**Accomplishments**) however, “the *for*-adverbial has ambiguous interpretations between a **process reading** and a **result state reading**” (*Ibid.*)

(4)	张三	过	大桥	过了	三十	分钟	了。
	Zhāngsān	guò	dàqiáo	guò-le	sānshí	fēnzhōng	le
	Zhangsan	cross	bridge	cross-PFV	thirty	minute	SFP

Zhangsan has been crossing the bridge for 30 minutes. (*duration of the situation itself*)

Zhangsan crossed the bridge thirty minutes ago. (*duration since the culminating point of the situation*)

### Part 3.

# The scope ambiguity of duration complements

- The ambiguity of duration complements cannot be linked to the telicity feature of the verb, since Achievements and Accomplishments are both telic.
- Two other internal temporal features differentiate Achievements from Accomplishments (see Part 1)
  - The **[result] feature**: following Basciano (2019), Achievements have a result phrase/layer in their internal structure but Accomplishments don't;
  - The **[durative] feature**: Accomplishments are durative, as opposed to Achievements.
- Another factor to consider is the **morphological status** of the verb: whereas *guò (qiáo)* 过 (桥) 'to cross (a bridge)' is a mono-morphemic Accomplishment, the ambiguity is simply not present with Accomplishment RVCs where the final boundary is explicitly stated:

(5) 他 盖好了 那栋 房子 很 多 年 了。 (Paris 2006: 301)  
tā gài-hǎo-le nà-dòng fángzi hěn duō nián le  
3SG build-finish-PFV that-CL house very many year SFP  
It has been many years since he built that house.

## Part 3.

# Duration complements: when does scope ambiguity arise?

– We thus face three cases

- With durative atelic verbs (Activities), only the “process reading” is accessible (see ex. 2) because there is only a durative phase to be measured.
- With punctual telic verbs (Achievements) and durative telic RVCs (Accomplishment RVCs), only the “result state reading” is accessible (see ex. 3 and 5 respectively)
- With monomorphemic durative telic verbs (monomorphemic Accomplishments), both readings are accessible (see ex. 4)

– We thus formulate a tentative generalization:

Scope ambiguity of duration complements arises when a verb is both durative and telic, and its telicity is not lexically/morphologically expressed

### Part 3.

## Duration complements: when does scope ambiguity arise?

- However, some attention should be paid to the object of the accomplishment verb. **Unquantified objects** give rise to a repetitive/habitual reading of the situation, thus favoring the “process reading:

(6) 他 盖 房子 盖了 很 多 年 了。 (Paris 2006: 302)

ta gai fangzi gai-le hen duo nian le

3SG build house build-PRF very many year SFP

He has been building houses for many years. (=He started building houses many years ago)

(7) 他 盖 房子 (已经) 很 多 年 了。 (*ibid.* 303)

ta gai-∅ fangzi (yijing) hen duo nian le

3SG build-∅ house already very many year SFP

He has been building houses for many years (already).

### Part 3.

## Duration complements: when does scope ambiguity arise?

- On the contrary, **quantified objects**, especially when they are incremental themes, point to the final boundary of the situation.
- e.g. Basciano (2019:3) contrasts 吃苹果 ‘eat apples’ which has an unbounded object with 吃两个苹果 ‘eat two apples’ which has an incremental theme. While the former is compatible with progressive *zài* 在, the latter isn’t:

(8) 我 在 吃 苹果。 (Basciano 2019:4, ex. 2a)  
wǒ zài chī píngguǒ  
1SG PROG eat apple  
I am eating apples.

(9) \*我 在 吃 两 个 苹果。 (Basciano 2019:4, ex. 2b)  
\*wǒ zài chī liǎng ge píngguǒ  
1SG PROG eat two CL apple

### Part 3.

## Duration complements: when does scope ambiguity arise?

- This contrast has bearings on the reading of duration complements:

(10) 我 吃 苹果 吃了 二十 分钟 了。

wǒ chī píngguǒ chī-le èrshí fēnzhōng le

1SG eat apple eat-PFV twenty minute SFP

I have been eating apples for 20 minutes. (process reading)

(11) 我 吃 两 个 苹果 吃了 二十 分钟 了。

wǒ chī liǎng ge píngguǒ chī-le èrshí fēnzhōng le

1SG eat two CL apple eat-PFV twenty minute SFP

a. It took me twenty minutes to eat two apples. (process reading)

b. I ate two apples twenty minutes ago. (result state reading)

### Part 3.

# Duration complements: when does scope ambiguity arise?

– A new tentative generalization could thus read:

Scope ambiguity of duration complements arises when a verb is both durative and telic, has a bounded object NP, and its telicity is not lexically/morphologically expressed

the hypothesis being that *the boundedness of the object makes the final boundary more salient.*

### Part 3.

# Duration complements: when does scope ambiguity arise?

- However, despite these observations, some unexpected cases arise :

(12) 苏珊 修 车 修了 很 长 时间 了。  
Sūshān xiū chē xiū-le hěh cháng shíjiān le  
Susan repair car repair- PFV very long time SFP  
a. Susan has been repairing cars/the car/her car for a long time. (process reading)  
b. It's been a long time since Susan repaired the car/her car. (result state reading)

- In this example, the repetitive/generalizing meaning ‘to repair cars’ is possible and is associated with the “process reading”.
- However, a specific meaning of the object N (‘the/one’s car’) is also possible, and subject to ambiguity of duration reading; only a specific reading of the object N is able to trigger the possibility of there being a final endpoint equivalent to a result.
- Moreover, the “result state reading” seems to be favored when the object is topicalized:

(13) 车, 苏珊 修了 很 长 时间 了。  
chē, Sūshān xiū-le hěh cháng shíjiān le  
Susan repair car repair- PFV very long time SFP  
As for the car, Susan repaired it long ago. (favored result state reading)



### Part 3.

## Duration complements: when does scope ambiguity arise?

- Let us stress that the ambiguity we described is not available for all V+N (with non-quantized N) phrases.

(14) 我 坐 公车 坐了 二十 分钟 了。  
wǒ zuò gōngchē zuò-le èrshí fēnzhōng le  
1SG sit bus sit-PFV twenty minute SFP

I have been sitting in the bus for twenty minutes. (duration reading)

(15) 莉莉 教书 教了 三十 年 了。  
lìlì jiāoshū jiāo-le sānshí nián le  
Lily teach-book teach-PFV thirty year SFP

Lily has been teaching for thirty years. (duration reading)

## Conclusion

# Proposed generalization for duration scope ambiguity

Scope ambiguity of duration complements arises when a verb

- (a) is both **durative** and **telic**
- (b) has a **specific** object NP that represents an **incremental theme** or an **affected patient**,
- (c) and its telicity is **not lexically/morphologically expressed**

## Conclusion

# Accomplishments revisited

- The preceding discussion shows that it is very difficult to postulate a single « Accomplishment » verb/situation type in Mandarin Chinese.
- A first division is necessary between the small set of verbs described as « monomorphemic Accomplishments » and RVC Accomplishments, the latter not being subject to scope ambiguity of duration complements.
- The syntactic and semantic properties of object NPs also come into play, so that « situations » seem to offer a more contrasting picture than verbs alone
- These observations suggest the necessity to distinguish between different degrees of « telicity » of situations. Similar proposals have been made on various grounds
  - Guo (1993) proposes a gradation of the strength of final endpoints based on cumulative tests (at the 'verb' level)
  - Xiao & McEnery's (2004:50-51) distinction between boundedness and telicity acknowledges the specific contribution of incremental themes or paths (following Tenny 1994) to spatial boundedness of situations...

Our characterization of the conditions under which duration complements ambiguity arises provides another argument for a finer-grained distinction among durative-telic processes.

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## Appendix

# Discussion on the telic nature of 修 (车)

- Guo 1993 classifies 修 ‘repair’ as a Vc-5 verb, one that has both duration and a strong final boundary (the other examples he gives of this class of verbs are: 搬, 撤, 吃, 逮捕, 掉, 看, 改革, 回答, 砍, 生产, 添, 烧, 设计, 生, 撕, 买, 卖, 移动, 写, 洗, 摘, 修改)
- Based on the verb’s English translation, one could be tempted to argue that *xiū* 修 ‘repair’ is in fact a monomorphemic accomplishment. However, the verb does not imply the attainment of a culminating point, contrary to its RVC counterpart:

(i)	苏珊	修	车	修了	很	长	时间,	一直	没	修成。
	Sūshān	xiū	chē	xiū-le	hěn	cháng	shíjiān	yīzhí	méi	xiūchéng
	Susan	repair	car	repair- PFV	very	long	time	always	NEG.PFV	repair-succeed
	Susan has been working at cars/the car/her car for a long time, but she never got it repaired.									
(ii)	* 苏珊	修好	车.	修好了	很	长	时间,	一直	没	修成。
	*Sūshān	xiūhǎo	chē.	xiūhǎo-le	hěn	cháng	shíjiān	yīzhí	méi	xiūchéng
	Susan	repair-good	car.	repair-good-PFV	very	long	time	always	NEG.PFV	repair-succeed

- Authors such as Smith (1991/1997) considered it an Activity.