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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Comparative Analysis: Interactions between the English Past Tense and the Chinese “le” with Aspect and Modality**

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**| ABSTRACT**

The study of tense, aspect and modality has always played a very important role in language learning, so a deep understanding of the three is helpful for language learners to see the essence of language better. The author observes that most of the existing studies are from tense, voice and modality, respectively and analyze them from different angles, but there are few articles that can combine the three for interactive analysis. Therefore, this paper takes CCL as the main source of corpus, takes the past tense, one of the important tenses in English and the common auxiliary word “le” in Chinese as the main line of research, making a comparative analysis of their interaction with aspect and modality in the past tense expression. It is found that the interaction between the past tense and the aspect in English is mainly realized through the inflection of verbs and the combination of auxiliary verbs, which has a fixed grammatical structure. However, the interaction between Chinese “le” and aspect is relatively flexible, usually with the help of context or time adverbials. In terms of modality, the past tense can be combined with modal verbs to form a fixed expression so that the modality has a direct influence on the expression of the past tense. On the contrary, the modal expression of “le” in Chinese usually relies on modal auxiliary words and adverbs, causing a weak influence on the past tense expression of “le”. This study not only reveals the differences and similarities between English and Chinese time-system expressions, but also provides new insights into language teaching and translation practice.

**| KEYWORDS**

English Past Tense; Chinese “le”; Aspect; Modality; Contrastive Analysis

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**1. Introduction**

This chapter will provide related background information on this study, aiming to bring an overall review for readers. It's classified into three parts. The first part is the research background. The second part explains the objectives and significance of the study. The last part outlines the overall structure of this thesis.

**1.1 Research Background**

English and Chinese come from different language families, thus having significant differences in grammatical structures, expressions and so on. For many years, the contrastive study of English and Chinese has been the focus of many scholars, who have conducted in-depth contrastive analysis of the two languages from different aspects. However, in the aspect of tense contrast between English and Chinese, the previous studies mainly focused on the macro comparison of the tense system, with relatively little analysis on the micro level.

Among the tense system, English past tense and the Chinese auxiliary word “le”, as two important tense markers, play a very key role in learning the essential connotation of language. The authors note that there are few studies on the interaction of these

two forms in expressing the past time, especially in terms of aspect and modality. Aspect and modality, as two important factors affecting the expression of tense, not only enrich the meaning of tense, but also reflect the speaker's subjective position. An in-depth study of the interaction between the English past tense and the Chinese auxiliary word "le" in the expression of the past time, particularly with the aspect and modality, will help to clarify the similarities and differences in the use of the two and fill in the gaps in the current research. In addition, this study can also provide valuable reference for cross-language learners, making important practical contributions to translation practice and related fields.

## 1.2 Objectives and Significance of the Research

This study aims to conduct an in-depth and systematic comparative analysis of the interaction between the English past tense and the Chinese "le" with aspect and modality in the expression of past time. Specifically, it will analyze in detail the grammatical forms and semantic functions when the English past tense and the Chinese "le" combine with aspect and modality in their respective language systems. Through comparative research above, the commonalities and differences of aspect and modality in the construction of the past-time expressions of English and Chinese will be accurately revealed.

From a theoretical point of view, this study will help to fill the current research gap in this field by deeply exploring the interaction between the English past tense and the Chinese "le" with aspect and modality in the expression of past time, broaden the breadth and depth of the research in the three fields of tense, body and modality and further enrich the theoretical system of comparative study between English and Chinese. Practically, for English learners, this research enables them to understand the differences in the interaction between the English past tense and the Chinese "le" in terms of aspect and modality, which can effectively avoid the influence of negative mother-tongue transfer and improve the efficiency and accuracy of English learning. Meanwhile, it provides theoretical support for English teachers to design more targeted teaching methods and teaching content in the teaching process, thus enhancing the quality of teaching.

## 1.3 Outline of the Research

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The first chapter briefly introduces the background, purpose, significance and overall structure of this study. The second chapter reviews related research on past tense in English and the Chinese particle "le" at home and abroad. The third chapter constructs the theoretical framework of analyzing aspect and modalities. Chapter Four elaborates on the research methods, including research questions, data collection methods and research steps. In Chapter 5, the co-occurrence patterns and semantic functions of the past tense and the Chinese particle "le" in terms of aspect and modality are systematically discussed. The last chapter summarizes the results of the study, points out the limitations of the study and puts forward relevant suggestions for future research.

## 2. Literature review

Prior to conducting the analysis of the English past tense, Chinese past tense of "le" and their interaction with aspect and modality, this section undertakes a comprehensive literature review on the research of the past tense in English and Chinese "le".

### 2.1 Past Tense in English and Relevant Studies

The expression of past time is a universal phenomenon in human languages, but different languages have their own unique ways of expressing it. English primarily relies on the inflectional changes of verbs to indicate past time, while Chinese mainly employs function words such as "le" to achieve this.

Abroad, the study of the English past tense in traditional grammar has a long history. Early grammarians such as Sweet (1891) and Jespersen (1924), through the observation and induction of a large number of language examples, systematically described the forms and basic usages of the English past tense. They clearly pointed out that the English past tense is usually formed by adding "-ed" to the base form of the verb for regular changes, while for some irregular verbs, there are their specific past tense forms. Traditional grammar emphasizes the basic function of the past tense in expressing past time. For example, in "He walked to school yesterday", the past tense "walked" clearly indicates that the action took place in the past. This definition of the form of the past tense and its basic time reference laid the foundation for subsequent research. With the rise of generative grammar theory, Chomsky's transformational-generative grammar has provided a brand-new perspective for the study of the English past tense. Generative grammar holds that language is generated by a set of rule systems, and the generation of the past tense also follows specific grammatical rules. Researches start from the internal generation mechanism of language and deeply explores the status and function of the past tense in the grammatical system, which is quite different from the traditional grammar that only describes the surface forms and usages. In addition, many scholars have pointed out that the English past tense is not merely a tense marker but is also closely related to aspect. Comrie (1976) argues that the English past tense can denote the perfective aspect in which the action is regarded as a whole. Smith (1997), on the other hand, proposed the "two-part tense" theory, suggesting that the English past tense can express both tense and aspect simultaneously.

Research on the English past tense in China has, to a large extent, drawn on foreign linguistic theories. In the early days,

domestic scholars mainly dedicated themselves to introducing advanced foreign linguistic theories such as traditional grammar and generative grammar into China, and applied these theories to analyze and explain the English past tense. They fully considered the impact of the Chinese mother-tongue background on the learning of the English past tense and carried out a series of targeted studies. For example, Gui (1985) pointed out in his research that Chinese native-language learners tend to overlook the use of the English past tense when expressing past time, or wrongly substitute the Chinese way of expressing time for the English past tense. Besides, many scholars associate the English past tense with second language acquisition. Wang (2023) concludes in her research that compared with spoken language, learners use the past tense more frequently in written language and their output is more diverse. In addition, regardless of the language style, with the improvement of the level of learners, the diversity of English past tense production increases and it is closer to the use of native English speakers.

However, although both domestic and foreign research have made great progress in their respective research directions, there are still some shortcomings in the current research. For example, there are relatively few cases in which the past tense is linked to aspect and modality for interactive studies. Therefore, the lack of relevant research provides new ideas for the research of this paper.

## **2.2 Chinese “le” and Relevant Studies**

The Chinese particle “le” is a function word with an extremely high frequency of use and its grammatical functions and semantic interpretations have always been hotspots and difficulties in the study of Chinese grammar.

Domestic scholars have conducted relatively comprehensive research on “le”. In China, early research on “le” mainly focused on the field of traditional grammar. Lv (1942) comprehensively summarized the usage of “le” in *A Grammar of Chinese*. He highlighted that “le” serves two primary functions: signaling the completion of an action and denoting the realization of a change. Zhu (1982) categorizes “le” from the perspective of traditional grammar into “le” that follows a verb, referred to as the word-final “le” or “le1” and “le” that occurs at the end of a sentence, referred to as the sentence-final “le” or “le2.” He believed that “le1” indicates the completion of an action and is closely related to the lexical meaning of the verb, while “le2” indicates a change in the state of affairs. It is used at the end of a sentence and has an impact on the meaning of the entire sentence. These early traditional grammar studies have laid a solid foundation for a comprehensive understanding of the grammatical functions of “le”. About mixed research, Zhang (2022) conducted research about the effects of the Chinese aspect marker “le” on English simple past and she found that the influence of “le” on English simple past tense is related to EFL learners’ proficiency. Besides, Liu (1988) analyzed the grammatical meaning of “le” from the perspective of semantic orientation, believing that the semantic orientation of “le” can be the verb, the object, or the entire sentence. Ma (1981) explored the collocation rules between “le” and verbs from the perspective of the semantic features of verbs. In recent years, some scholars have started to study “le” from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. For example, Shen (2003) believed that the use of “le” is closely related to the speaker’s subjective perspective and cognitive mode. For example, although both “我吃了饭了” and “我吃饭了” indicate the completion of the action of eating, the former emphasizes the impact of the action on the present, while the latter emphasizes the action itself.

In conclusion, according to the review above, there is a gap in the research field of the interaction between tense, aspect and modality using the past tense as an example, which offers a new angle for this study.

## **3.Theoretical Framework**

### **3.1 Aspect System**

Aspect is an important concept in grammar, used to describe the manifestation mode and internal structure of an action or state in the course of time. It focuses not on the time point when an action or state occurs, but on its progression on the time axis, such as whether the action is in progress, has been completed, or is in a continuous state. Different languages use their unique grammatical means to represent aspect, which can be word-form changes, auxiliary words, function words, etc. For example, in English, the progressive aspect is represented by “be + the -ing form of the verb”. For instance, in “I am reading a book”, “am reading” indicates that the action of “reading a book” is ongoing at the moment. The perfective aspect is expressed by “have/has + the past participle of the verb”. For example, in “I have finished my homework”, “have finished” shows that the action of “finishing the homework” was completed before the present. In Chinese, the dynamic particles “着”, “了”, and “过” represent different aspects respectively. “着” indicates the continuous progress of an action, as in “他吃着饭”. “了” indicates the completion of an action, such as “我吃了饭”. “过” indicates that one has had a certain experience in the past, like “我吃过北京烤鸭”.

Aspects can be classified according to their semantic features and expressive functions. Common aspect types include the progressive aspect, the perfective aspect, the durative aspect, the inchoative aspect, and the terminative aspect. Different aspect types have their own unique semantic connotations and pragmatic functions. The progressive aspect mainly emphasizes that an action is in progress at a specific point or during a specific period in time and has not been completed. It is characterized by continuity and temporariness. For example, in the sentence “The students are listening to the teacher”, “are listening” depicts that

at the moment of speaking, the action of “listening to the teacher” by the students is ongoing, highlighting the state of the action in progress. The perfective aspect focuses on expressing that an action was completed at a certain point in the past and has had an impact or result on the present. Take “He has visited the Great Wall” as an example. “Has visited” indicates that the action of “visiting the Great Wall” ended in the past, and as a result, he now has the experience of visiting the Great Wall. The durative aspect emphasizes that an action or state persists over a period of time, featuring stability and continuity. For instance, “For years, she has been working on this project”. “Has been working” reflects that the action of her engaging in this project started in the past, has continued until now, and may continue in the future. The inchoative aspect indicates the beginning of an action. For example, “The rain started to fall”. “Started to fall” shows that the action of “rain falling” has just begun. The terminative aspect represents the end of an action. For example, “He finally finished his long-term research”. “Finished” marks the end of the action of “conducting the research”.

### 3.2 Modality System

Modality is a complex yet significant linguistic concept that reflects the speaker’s attitudes, viewpoints, judgments, as well as their cognition regarding the possibility, necessity, etc., of a proposition or an event. The types of modality are diverse, and different scholars and theories have classified modality from various perspectives. Among them, epistemic modality and deontic modality are the two most common and widely recognized types. Epistemic modality mainly pertains to the speaker’s judgment and the degree of cognition regarding the truth of a proposition. It reflects the speaker’s views on the possibility or necessity of an event based on their own knowledge, experience, reasoning, etc. For example, in the sentence “It must be raining outside”, “must” expresses a strong inference made by the speaker based on certain clues, such as hearing the sound of rain or seeing the wet ground, indicating that the proposition “it is raining outside” has a very high probability and is almost certain. In “She might come to the party”, “might” suggests that the speaker has a low level of certainty about the possibility of “her coming to the party” and it is merely a speculation. Deontic modality focuses on expressing the speaker’s deontic attitudes towards an action, such as requirements, permissions, and obligations. For instance, in “You should study hard”, “should” reflects the speaker’s expectation and requirement for the listener to “study hard”, considering it moral responsibility. In “You can use my computer”, “can” here indicates that the speaker gives the listener permission to “use the computer”. Apart from epistemic and deontic modality, there is also dynamic modality, which mainly expresses the subject’s own abilities, willingness, etc. For example, “I can speak English” shows that the subject “I” has the ability to speak English, and “He will go to the park” reflects the subject “He”’s willingness to go to the park.

## 4. Methodology

*Chapter Four focuses on outlining the research methodology used in this study, which includes the research questions, data collection methods and the research procedure.*

### 4.1 Research question

Under the guidance of the tense and aspect theory mentioned above, this paper undertakes an analysis of sentences containing English past tense and Chinese “le”. The core objective is to unearth the interaction between the two and aspect and modality. To this end, two research questions are formulated:

- (1) How do the English past tense and the Chinese “le” interact with aspect and modality when expressing past time?
- (2) What are the similarities and differences in their interaction mechanisms?

### 4.2 Data collection

The data of this study are collected from CCL, which includes a large number of spoken or written data in various fields. Owing to the limit of this study, only some representative examples are shown in the following chapter.

### 4.3 Research procedure

This study mainly employs the qualitative research method to comprehensively analyze the collected sentences. First of all, the interactive mechanism between the English past tense and the Chinese “le” with aspect and modality in expressing past time is explained by a thorough analysis of these examples. And then similarities and differences between the two are summarized.

## 5. Results and Discussion

This chapter constitutes the core section of the thesis. Employing the qualitative analytical methods, the study first examines and selects the data collected from CCL corpora and then analyses them according to the procedure above.

## **5.1 The Interaction of English Past Tense with Aspect and Modality**

### **5.1.1 The Interaction of English Past Tense with Aspect**

The aspect system of English is relatively simple, mainly including the simple aspect, the progressive aspect, and the perfect aspect. The following will discuss the interactions between the past tense and the simple aspect, the progressive aspect, and the perfect aspect respectively, and analyze the impacts they have on the expression of the past tense.

#### **5.1.1.1 The Interaction of English Past Tense with Simple Aspect**

The simple past tense is the basic tense for expressing past time in English. It indicates an action that took place or a state that existed in the past, without emphasizing the progress or completion of the action. It simply locates the event on the past time axis. For example, in the sentence “I visited my grandparents last weekend”, the past-tense form “visited” shows that the action of “visiting my grandparents” occurred during the “last weekend” in the past. The simple past tense is usually used in conjunction with time adverbials indicating the past, such as “yesterday”, “last week”, “two days ago”, “in 1998”, etc. These time adverbials clearly define the past time when the action took place. For instance, in the sentence “He went to school yesterday”, “yesterday” clearly indicates the time when the action “went” occurred. The simple past tense is frequently employed to recount a sequence of events that took place in the past, only outlining past actions in the order they happened.

#### **5.1.1.2 The Interaction of English Past Tense with Progressive Aspect**

In English, the past continuous tense is formed by the structure “was/were + doing” and is mainly used to express an action that was in progress at a specific point or during a specific period in the past. Notably, in the sentence “He was reading a book at 8 o’clock last night”, “was reading” indicates that the action of “reading a book” was ongoing at the specific time point of “8 o’clock last night” in the past, emphasizing the incompleteness and continuity of the action at that time. The past continuous tense is often used in conjunction with adverbial clauses of time introduced by “when” or “while” to further clarify the time background of the action. For instance, in “I was having dinner when she called me”, “when she called me” represents a past time point, and “was having dinner” emphasizes that “I was in the process of having dinner” at that time. When “while” introduces an adverbial clause of time, the actions in both the clause and the main clause are usually ongoing. For example, in “While I was watching TV, my sister was doing her homework”, both “was watching TV” and “was doing her homework” were ongoing simultaneously during a certain period in the past. There are obvious differences between the past continuous tense and the simple past tense in terms of semantics and pragmatics. The past continuous tense is used to set the scene or to describe simultaneous secondary actions, such as “The birds were singing as the sun rose”, which enhances the picture by using the past continuous tense. The simple past tense, however, focuses more on narrating the occurrence of main events to advance the plot of the story, as in “He opened the door and entered the room.” He opens the door and then enters the room.

#### **5.1.1.3 The Interaction of English Past Tense with Perfect Aspect**

The past perfect tense is structured as “had + done”. It is used to denote an action that was completed before a certain point in the past, emphasizing “the past before the past”. As the sentence “She had finished her homework before she went to bed.”, the past perfect form “had finished” indicates that the action of “finishing the homework” was completed before the past action of “going to bed”. The past perfect tense is often used in conjunction with time adverbials introduced by “by”, “before” etc., to clarify the sequence of actions. For instance, in “By the time I arrived at the station, the train had already left.”, “By the time I arrived at the station” represents a past time point, and “had already left” shows that the train had left before this past time point of “my arrival at the station”. There are both connections and differences between the past perfect tense and the present perfect tense in terms of semantics and usage. Both tenses emphasize the completion of an action. However, the present perfect tense emphasizes the influence or result of a past action on the present, and the time-span of the action can extend from the past up to the present. For example, “I have lost my key. I can’t open the door.” The present perfect “have lost” indicates that the action of “losing the key” occurred in the past and has an impact on the present situation of “I can’t open the door”. On the other hand, the past perfect tense is based on a certain past time point, emphasizing that the action was completed before that time point. Here, “had lost” in “He told me that he had lost his key the day before” is the past perfect tense. Taking the past time of “told” as a reference, it shows that “losing the key” happened before “told”. In terms of usage, the present perfect tense is often used with adverbs such as “already”, “yet”, “just”, “ever”, “never”, etc. The past perfect tense is more commonly used with time adverbials introduced by “by”, “before” or in an object clause when the main clause is in the simple past tense and the action in the subordinate clause occurred before the action in the main clause.

### **5.1.2 The Interaction of English Past Tense with Modality**

Modalities come in a wide variety. Different scholars and theories have classified modalities from diverse perspectives. Among them, epistemic modality and deontic modality are the two most common and widely-recognized types. The following will discuss the interactions between the past tense and epistemic modality as well as deontic modality respectively, and analyze the impacts they have on the expression of the past tense.

### 5.1.2.1 The Interaction of English Past Tense with Epistemic Modality

In English, structures such as “could/might/must have done” are typical manifestations of the interaction between the past tense and epistemic modality, which are mainly used for speculating about past events. “Could have done” indicates that something might have happened in the past, but it is uncertain whether it actually did, and the probability of this speculation is relatively low. Taking “He could have missed the train” as an example, the speaker believes that “he might have missed the train”, but it is just a guess without solid evidence. “Might have done” is also used for speculating about past situations. It has a more euphemistic tone and a lower probability compared to “could have done”. For instance, “She might have forgotten about our meeting.” means that it is possible that she forgot our meeting, and the certainty of this speculation is not high. “Must have done” expresses that the speaker makes very definite speculation about a past event based on certain facts or logic, and almost confirms the occurrence of the event. For example, “The ground is wet. It must have rained last night.” From the fact that “the ground is wet”, the speaker infers that it definitely rained last night. This interaction between the past tense and epistemic modality has unique functions in terms of semantics and pragmatics. Semantically, it enriches the levels of describing past events, enabling the speaker to choose an appropriate way of expression to convey information according to their degree of cognition and certainty about the event. In the sentence “He could have missed the train.”, the “could have done” structure conveys uncertainty, making the listener understand that it is just a possible speculation. In contrast, in “It must have rained last night.”, “must have done” expresses strong certainty, making the listener believe the reliability of the speculation that “it rained last night”. Pragmatically, this interaction helps the speaker to flexibly express their opinions and attitudes according to different communication scenarios and purposes. When discussing past events, if the speaker wants to make a cautious speculation and avoid making an absolute judgment, they can use the “could/might have done” structure. When the speaker has sufficient evidence or strong confidence, they will choose “must have done” to emphasize their speculation.

### 5.1.2.2 The Interaction of English Past Tense with Deontic Modality

Structures such as “should/ought to have done” are common forms of the interaction between the past tense and deontic modality in English. They are mainly used to express things that should have been done in the past but were not, carrying a tone of blame, regret or remorse. Notably, the speaker in “You should have told me the truth earlier” believes that the other party had an obligation to tell the truth earlier in the past, but in fact they didn’t. This reflects the speaker’s sense of blame. “Ought to have done” has a similar meaning to “should have done” and also expresses that something should have been done in the past but was not. Pragmatically, it is often used to express evaluations and reflections on past actions. In interpersonal communication, when we are dissatisfied or regretful about others’ or our own past actions, we use this structure to express our attitudes. When criticizing others, using this structure can, while expressing dissatisfaction, make the other party understand that their actions violated certain moral principles. When reflecting on our own actions, it can also help us recognize our past mistakes and thus make improvements in the future.

## 5.2 The Interaction of Chinese “le” in Past Tense with Aspect and Modality

### 5.2.1 The Interaction of Chinese “le” in Past Tense with Aspect

Common aspect types in Chinese include the perfective aspect, the durative aspect, the inchoative aspect and the experiential aspect. Following analysis will exclusively talk about them.

#### 5.2.1.1 The Interaction of Chinese “le” in Past Tense with Perfective Aspect

Many scholars believe that the Chinese auxiliary word “le” is closely related to the perfect form. The word “le” following a verb is often used to indicate the completion of an action, emphasizing that the action ended at a specific point in the past. For example, in the sentence “他背完了所有单词”, “le” follows the verb “背完”, clearly indicating that the action of “背单词” has been completed in the past and has reached a complete state. The semantic function of “le” as a mark of perfection has been vividly reflected in various contexts. When narrating a series of past events, “le” effectively illustrates the sequence of actions, while also highlighting the state of completion of each action. For example, the use of “le” in the sentence “他回到家, 打开了门, 放下了书包, 然后开始写作业”, indicates that these actions “打开了门” and “放下了书包” were done one by one in the past, making the overall narrative of events more coherent and clear. When describing a one-time action, “了” emphasizes the integrity and completion of the action. In the sentence “他昨天买了一本书”, “了” highlights that the action of “buying a book” was completed yesterday, emphasizing the end of the action.

#### 5.2.1.2 The Interaction of Chinese “le” in Past Tense with Durative Aspect

In some sentences, “了” can also interact with the durative aspect to express the continuous state of an action in the past. For example, in the sentence “他等了很久”, “了” is used after the verb “等”, indicating that the action of “waiting” lasted for a relatively long time in the past, thus reflecting the continuity of the action. Another example is “雨下了一整夜”. Here, “了” emphasizes that the action of “raining” started at a certain point in the past and continued until the past time point referred to by the speaker, lasting the whole night. When “了” is used in combination with the durative aspect, it is often used together with words indicating

a time period to clarify the duration of the action. In addition to “很久” and “一整夜” in the above examples, such words can also be “三天” and “两个小时” etc. In the sentence “她学了三年汉语”, “三年” specifies the length of time that the action of “learning Chinese” lasted in the past, while “了” emphasizes this continuous process. In some contexts, the combination of “了” and the durative aspect can also convey the continuation of a state. In the sentence “他病了很长时间, 身体一直很虚弱”, “病了很长时间” not only indicates the continuation of the action of “being ill”, but also implies that the state of physical weakness caused by the illness also persisted in the past.

### **5.2.1.3 The Interaction of Chinese “le” in Past Tense with Other Aspects**

The particle “了” also has a certain connection with the inchoative aspect. In some contexts, “了” can indicate the beginning of an action, carrying the meaning of the inchoative aspect. For example, in the sentence “他笑了起来”, “了” here reflects the start of the action of “laughing”, indicating that from a certain point in time, he entered the state of “laughing”. In the sentence “火车开了”, “了” emphasizes that the train started moving from a stationary state, expressing the beginning of the action.

There are also cases where “了” combines with the experiential aspect. “过” is often used to express the experiential aspect, and “了” can also, to some extent, convey a similar meaning of experience. For example, in the sentence “我去了北京三次”, the combination of “了” and “三次” indicates that the action of “going to Beijing” has occurred three times in the past, which is semantically similar to “我去过北京三次”.

## **5.2.2 The Interaction of Chinese “le” in Past Tense with Modality**

As discussed above, the following will discuss the interactions between the Chinese “le” in the past tense and epistemic modality as well as deontic modality respectively, and analyze the impacts they have on the expression of the past tense.

### **5.2.2.1 The Interaction of Chinese “le” in Past Tense with Epistemic Modality**

In Chinese, the interaction between “了” and epistemic modality is mainly manifested in some structures expressing speculation and judgment, such as “可能 / 也许……了”, “大概……了” etc. In the sentence “他可能已经走了”, “可能” expresses the speaker’s uncertain speculation about the event of “him leaving”. “了” further emphasizes the connection between this speculation and the present, implying that based on the current situation (e.g., not seeing him or knowing his plan to leave), the speaker speculates that he left at some point in the past. The combination of “可能” and “了” not only expresses uncertainty but also highlights the connection with the present, allowing the listener to understand that this is a speculation about a past event based on the current situation. Pragmatically, this structure is often used in discussions of unknown situations in communication. By using the combination of “了” and epistemic modality words, the speaker can euphemistically express their opinions, avoid making absolute statements, and at the same time leave room for further communication and discussion.

### **5.2.2.2 The Interaction of Chinese “le” in Past Tense with Deontic Modality**

The combination of “了” with deontic modality is commonly found in structures such as “应该/应当……了” and “必须……了”. These two constructions are used to express that something should have happened in the past or that someone had to do something to convey an expectation or requirement of the speaker’s past behavior. For example, the sentence “马上就要开学了, 你应该开始为新学期做准备了” mainly expresses the speaker’s urging and requirements to the listener, and enhances the tone through the interaction of deontic modality and “le”, making the discourse more authoritative and persuasive. In interpersonal interactions, when one party is dissatisfied with the other’s behavior, as in the sentence “你应该早点告诉我这件事了”, it conveys reproach and a negative evaluation of the other party’s past actions.

## **5.3 The Similarities and Differences in Interaction Mechanisms above**

### **5.3.1 The Similarities in Interaction Mechanisms above**

As far as “aspect” is concerned, both English and Chinese have their own fixed ways of expressing perfective aspect. In English, the past perfect is formed by “had + past participle”, which indicates an effect or result on a point in the past of an action that occurred or was completed some time ago. Used to refer to an event that has been completed before another past action. In Chinese, when a verb is followed by “le”, the sentence expresses a state in which an action has been completed. When it comes to expressing the progressive aspect, English uses the past progressive tense “was/were + doing” to emphasize that an action was in progress at a specific point or during a specific period in the past. Although Chinese does not have a strict grammatical form for the progressive tense, the combination of “着” and “了” can, to some extent, express the continuous progress of an action in the past. Through their respective grammatical means, speakers can clearly convey whether an action is in the perfective or progressive. When describing a series of past events, both languages can show the sequence and continuity of events through aspectual expressions.

About modality, both English and Chinese convey the speaker's speculation and judgment about past events through certain lexical or grammatical forms when expressing epistemic modality. In English, structures such as "could/might/must have done" are used to speculate about past situations. "Could have done" and "might have done" indicate that something might have happened in the past, but the degrees of possibility are different. "Could have done" implies a slightly higher possibility, while "might have done" is more euphemistic and indicates a lower possibility. In Chinese, structures like "可能/也许.....了" and "大概.....了" are used to express speculation about past events. In the sentence "他可能已经走了", "可能" expresses speculation, and "了" emphasizes the connection with the present, indicating that the speaker speculates based on the current situation that he left at some point in the past. When it comes to expressing deontic modality, both English and Chinese have corresponding ways to express responsibilities, obligations and evaluations of past actions. In English, the "should/ought to have done" structure is used to express things that should have been done in the past but were not, carrying a tone of blame or regret. In Chinese, structures such as "应该/应当.....了" and "必须.....了" also express similar deontic modality.

### 5.3.2 The Differences in Interaction Mechanisms above

Through the inflectional changes of verbs and the collocation with auxiliary verbs, English can clearly express a variety of aspects. However, Chinese does not have a grammatical form like English that uses verb inflection to indicate tenses. Its aspectual expression relies more on auxiliary words, time adverbials, such as "很久", "一整夜", "三天", etc. and the context. The aspectual expression in Chinese is relatively flexible and highly dependent on context. The same sentence may have different aspectual interpretations in different contexts.

English modal verbs, such as can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, would, etc. have relatively fixed grammatical forms and semantic features and their usage is restricted by certain grammatical rules. Each modal verb has its basic semantic category. For example, "can" mainly expresses ability, permission, etc., while "must" expresses necessity, speculation, etc. The negative forms of modal verbs also have specific change rules. For instance, the negative of "can" is "can't", and the negative of "must" is "mustn't" or "needn't". When forming questions, modal verbs are usually directly placed at the beginning. For example, "Can you help me?" and "Must I finish the work today?" The expression of modality in Chinese is more flexible and diverse. In addition to using modal words, such as 能, 可以, 应该, 必须, etc., it often relies on modal particles, such as "呢", "吧", "啊", etc., adverbs, such as "也许", "大概", "肯定", etc. to express modality. The semantics and usage of Chinese modal words are relatively broad, and the same modal word may express multiple modal meanings in different contexts. For example, "能" can express ability, as in "我能跑 1000 米", and it can also express permission, as in "你能走了". Modal particles in Chinese play a unique role in modal expression, which can enhance or change the modal color of a sentence. In the sentence "你应该吃饭了吧", "吧" makes the tone more euphemistic, with a sense of inquiry and negotiation. In "你必须去啊", "啊" strengthens the tone and emphasizes the necessity.

## 6. Conclusion

This chapter provides a concise summary of the principal findings, some limitations of this study, and furthermore, suggestions for future research endeavors.

### 6.1 Research Findings

This study conducts an in-depth analysis of the interactions between the English past tense and the Chinese particle "了" with aspects and modalities in the expression of past time, revealing the characteristics, similarities, and differences of the two at the semantic, grammatical, and pragmatic levels. About the similarities, in aspectual expression, both languages have corresponding means to represent the perfective and progressive aspects and both pay attention to the state changes of actions in the course of time, being able to show the sequence of events and the continuity of actions through aspectual expressions. In modal expression, both have ways to express speculation about past events and responsibilities, obligations and evaluations of past actions. However, there are also many differences between the two. In aspectual expression, English clearly expresses various aspects through verb inflection and collocation with auxiliary verbs. Chinese, on the other hand, relies on auxiliary words, time adverbials and the context, with relatively flexible aspectual expression and a high degree of dependence on context. In modal expression, English modal verbs have relatively fixed grammatical forms and semantic features, and their usage is restricted by grammatical rules. Chinese modal expression is more flexible and diverse, with broad semantics of modal words and often relying on modal particles and adverbs to express modality.

### 6.2 Limitations

This study aims to explore the interactions between the English past tense and the Chinese particle "了" with aspects and modalities in the expression of past time. However, due to the influence of external factors, this thesis has its own limitations. Firstly, with regard to the selection of corpora of this thesis, this thesis only focuses on the part of data, which is limited. Secondly, this study is conducted with the aid of personal classification. The results are subjective, although repeat operations are made.



Thirdly, due to the limitation of the length of this thesis, only some representative clauses are selected through careful selection to analyze rather than all.

### **6.3 Suggestions for Further Studies**

Confronted with its own limitations, this thesis puts forward some corresponding useful suggestions. Firstly, if time permits, more resources of the data should be collected to ensure its research results are more convincing. Secondly, with the advancement of technology, different corpus analysis tools should be used in combination in order to strengthen the objectivity of this study. Thirdly, if the length of this thesis is not limited, more examples should be included to make a more exhaustive analysis.

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