A Corpus-Based Study of Time Functions and Translations of Chinese Particles Le and Its Pedagogic Implications

Furong Kou[1,*]

[1]Research Institute of Foreign Language Education, School of English Education, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, China
Corresponding author. Email: 591815212@qq.com

ABSTRACT
The study is undertaken to find out the time functions and translation of Chinese particle le whose functions of the particle are analyzed from the perspectives of Cognitive Linguistics and Systemic-Functional Linguistics, and its translation methods are explored within the framework of Nida's theory of "dynamic equivalence". The present study is based on an online-corpus and conducts a comprehensive analysis of Chinese particle le. The main findings of the study are that the choice of translation methods of particle le largely depends on its specific functional analysis. This study is of significance to Chinese-English translation (especially that of particles) and teaching Chinese as a foreign language as well.

Keywords: le, dynamic particle, dynamic equivalence

I. INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the functions and translation methods of Chinese particle le based on some relevant theories of Cognitive Linguistics and Systemic Functional Linguistics and within the framework of Nida's theory of "dynamic equivalence". Not only can particle le indicate time but also mood. Except for that, particle le sometimes serves special uses, such as the linking function. Its focal point is that the translation of particle le (dynamic especially) is such a tough task that it requires researchers to generalize its translation methods according to its specific functions and meanings in the context. Over the decades, there have been some ontological, theoretical and translational studies on particle le, such as its history [1], its distribution and usages [2] [3] [4], its functions [5] [6] [7], its features [8], its principles [9], and its semantic variations [10]. And research on the translation of particle le is scanty [11], monolingually-oriented contrasts [2] [12] [7] [4] [10] [1], or based in the frame

of English-Chinese [5] [6], However, its translation strategies are rarely discussed.

According to two Chinese Dictionaries [13] [14], Chinese character le can be used as a particle (dynamic or modal). This study will address the following question: from the perspective of time, what are its functions, meanings, and representations in translation mainly in time function? The present study elicits examples from the online corpus of Hong Lou Meng and its two English versions translated by Hawks and Yang Xianyi. The data in the thesis is chosen from an online corpus by meeting some conditions: key words, sentence types and text distribution.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Much ontological research on particle le regards it as a dynamic particle or modal particle, mainly conducted to explore its classification, functions, and grammatical meanings. In Practical Modern Chinese Grammar [15], le as a dynamic particle indicates the happening of an action and the appearance of a state. Dynamic particle le has been studied in monolingual contexts, particularly in the area of TCSL (Teaching Chinese as a Second Language). Some scholars focused on its distribution and usage[2] [3] [4]. Others analyzed le as a dynamic particle from the perspective of time [5] [7] [8]. They all show that time is a linear category rather than a still state [16].

Every language has the function to express or indicate time. Chinese language is not excluded, but without the concept of tense like English. Tense in English language usually can be shown both by variations of verbs and vocabularies. Just as [17] has it, "The tense of a verb is the form which shows whether you are referring to the past, the present or the future". In many dictionaries, tense has almost the same definitions. To be specific, tense especially refers to the verb forms in English language.

But Chinese language only uses the lexical method to indicate time. Though without "tense", Chinese has the category of "aspect", namely, the present, the progressive and the past, represented by three dynamic verbs "了" (le), "着" (zhe), and "过" (guo) respectively [18].

Researchers usually like to connect time with movements conveyed by verbs in front of particle le. Then, the function of particle le can be analyzed from the perspective of time. Actually, the cognitive concept of "time" is one of the most important ones closely related to space. It is generally believed that time is derived from the conceptualization of space. Thus, people usually employ spatial words to understand and talk about time, such as "(before) 前, (after)后". The following diagram explains the relationship between space and language, that is, spatial forms in the objective world can be perceived by human beings (the cognitive space) [19]
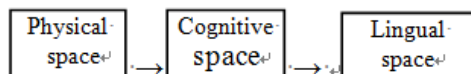

Fig. 1. The relationship among the physical, the cognitive and the language world.

It can be inferred that the physical time, the cognitive time and the linguistic time form a continuum. In Cognitive Linguistics, "time" is studied from the metaphorical perspective. Time is a special metaphor, with time as its target domain, and space as its original domain [20]. Things have gone are the "the past". Things we will encounter are the "the future", and the existing things are the "present".

Taylor [16] explained metaphor with many examples, like "So the future is ahead, the past is behind". It can be seen that no matter what the specific day is, listeners all want to "move" time, either to the past or the future. In a way, time and space are closely related and "TIME IS SPACE". Time and space are always related but not always apparent, sometimes implied.

Time and space concepts share something in common: both refer to a continuum of time/space, or a specific point of time/space. To some extent, time and space are very similar. In English, time is usually shown by adverbial phrases and prepositional phrases while space is usually manifested by verbs and some prepositional phrases, tightly interwoven with each other. The following table shows the space-time parallelism of some English prepositions.

TABLE I.   SPACE-TIME PARALLELISM OF ENGLISH PREPOSITIONS

Space	Time
She's at the corner.	She arrives at 1:30.
Her book is on the table.	Her birthday is on Monday.
Her coat is in the closet.	She left in the morning.
She planted flowers between the tree and the bush.	She likes to run between 4:00 and 5:00.

a. (Quoted from[21]

As for the translation of particle le, there are few academic discoveries, in which many were made from the monolingual perspective [2] [12] [3] [7] [4] [10] [1]. Though there are some translation studies on particle le, they are mainly in the English-Chinese direction, such as [9] [5] [14], and [6]. Only one of them deals with the Chinese-English translation but restricted to dynamic particle le [11]. Up to date, there has been little systematic research on the translation of Chinese particle le.

III.   REALIZATION OF THE TIME FUNCTION OF LE

In functional terms, dynamic particle le serves as a time marker and sometimes as a linking device. The dynamic particle le in this study is analyzed, in terms of tense and aspect. The present research attempts to study particle le from the bilingual perspective, by comparing English and Chinese languages, based on an on-line corpus, known as Hongloumeng Parallel Corpus, from which the two English versions of Hawks' and the Yangs' are selected for observation and analysis.

This corpus totally contains 360 Chinese and English passages freely available to the researchers, with the original 120 chapters of classical Chinese work Hong Lou Meng written by Cao Xueqin, 120 translated passages by the Yangs, and 120 translated passages by Hawks. There are approximately 849,000 Chinese characters in the original text. And the translated passages contain 1,478,000 English words. The following chart provides a clear contrast between the translated versions of Hawks and the Yangs in terms of the number of words.

TABLE II.   THE NUMBERS OF CHINESE CHARACTERS AND CORRESPONDING ENGLISH WORDS

No. of characters (the original text)	No. of English words (translated texts)	
	Hawks	The Yangs
736913	848545	629271
±	+111632	−107642

From the above chart, it is clear that Hawks, as a foreign translator, uses more English words than the Yangs', perhaps the Yangs' way of expression is more concise while Hawks intending to explain in detail, thus using more words.

Theoretically, Chinese dynamic particle le in actual language use can indicate time. Grammatically, tense is one of the ways to show the shades of difference in time. English tense usually can be reflected by various forms of verbs, tense, aspect, auxiliaries and modals. In Chinese, dynamic particle le, is usually attached to the verb. So the focus on translation strategies of le in English should be the appropriate verb forms, namely, tense, aspect plus auxiliaries and modals.

A.   Time

1) Past time: Dynamic particle le follows a verb, and usually means the completion of an action expressed by the verb. Chinese dynamic particle le can be translated by English tense, and example sentences are listed below with some explanations. The series of numbers ranging from 001 to 120 before each sentence refers to the specific chapter. Cao refers to the author of the original text (Cao Xueqin), which represents the original text. The translators refer to Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, and Hawks. The words in bold face in English sentences can be regarded as the equivalents of Chinese dynamic particle le. What's more, character "了" in the original text is also presented in bold face to draw attention.

001 Cao 看看一月,士隐先就得了一病。

Hawks: In tears every day and most of the night, they almost lost the will to go on living, and after about a month like this first Shi - yin and then his wife fell ill, so that doctors and diviners were in daily attendance on them.

Yangs: After a month's grief Shiyin fell ill; and then his wife. Every day they sent for doctors.

In this example, "得…… 病" is expressed as "fall ill", "得" together with "了", i.e. "得了" is expressed as "fell ill". That is to say, "了" here is only used to indicate the completion of "fall ill"; thus, the translators both use "the past tense" to indicate the time function of dynamic particle le.

001Cao 仍叫奴才拿回來了。

Hawks: and he made me bring it back.

Yangs: So I've brought it back.

In the above example, Hawks uses the past tense, while the Yangs use the perfect aspect to indicate time. Though they adopt different methods, they both mean that the action is done.

2) Present time: Particle le also has the function to refer to the present time, which can be shown through the present tense. The following is one example.

001 Cao 你携了这蠢物,意欲何往？

Hawks: Where do you intend to take that thing you are carrying ?

Yangs: Where do you mean to take that stupid object ?

In this example, particle le is used to indicate that the movement "携" is in motion, or not completed yet. So Hawks and the Yangs use the present tense, for they both have noticed the meaning expressed by particle le.

3) Future time: Particle le can refer to the present time and a future time marker.

011 Cao 好生养着罢,我过园子里去了。

Hawks: So do try and get better! I must go over to the garden now.

Yangs: Mind you rest well. I'm off now to the garden."

The above example uses "must + verb in the original form" and "be + now" to indicate that the action will be done in the near future. That is because the present tense can mean the future tense in English grammar.

108 Cao 你快去回老太太去,不必说不在家,只说喝了酒不大受用,不吃饭了,略躺一躺再来,请老太太、太太们吃饭罢。

Hawks: You'd better hurry back and report to Her Old Ladyship. Don't say we can't find him, just say the wine didn't agree with him and he won't be having any dinner. Say he'll be over when he's had a little lie - down. Ask Her Old Ladyship and Their Ladyships to start without him.

Yangs: The young maid ran meekly off to give this message to Zhenzhu, who reported it to the Lady Dowager.

In this example, "不吃饭了" is translated as "he won't be having any dinner",. Because "不…了" in Chinese language can refer to the fact that action is not done now and will not be done in the future. And "/要…了" can mean the action will be done in the future, for example, 下 个 礼 拜 三 我 就 要 离 开 日 本 了 。 (Next Wednesday, I will have been away from Japan.).

B. Translation methods

According to the analysis of the above examples, it can be concluded that, the time function of dynamic particle le are frequently realized through tense and aspect. Except for that, there are still some other translation methods, such as use of adverbials of time, prepositional phrases, and cohesive devices.

1) Tense and aspect: Generally speaking, dynamic particle le functions as a time marker, to be specific, reflected by tense and aspect. But the relationship between dynamic particle le and tense and aspect in English is not completely a one-to-one correspondence, for it can refer to the completion of an action most of the time, do something sometimes, and do something occasionally. In terms of aspect, not only can it refer to the progressive aspect, but the perfect as well. Tense and aspect do not usually appear alone, but often with each other. Then there are the simple past, the perfect past, the simple present, the present perfect, the simple future and the perfect future. As for the translation of dynamic particle le, the grammatical approach is usually adopted.

The following are some examples of the past tense.

001Cao 又見奶母正抱了英蓮走來。

Hawks: And there he was sitting in his study, the contents of his dream already half forgotten, with the sun still blazing on the ever - rustling plantains outside, and the wet - nurse at the door with his little daughter Ying - lian in her arms.

Yangs: The nurse came up then with Yinglian in her arms, and it struck Shiyin that his daughter was growing prettier and more lovable every day. He picked her up and played with her for a while, then took her to the gate to watch a religious procession pass by.

In this sample, it seems that Hawks uses proposition "in" to convert the meaning of "抱" into English, emphasizing its outcome while the Yangs still use the verb "took" to refer to both "抱" and "了". Actually, either of their translations is acceptable since Chinese language prefers to use verbs, but English language prefers to use propositions. Sometimes, propositions can take the place of some corresponding verbs in meaning. That is the reason why there is no verb for "抱" in Hawks' version. Generally speaking, Hawks has realized the point mentioned just above and tends to express "抱" in English appropriately, through a preposition instead of the English tense. As a matter of fact, the Yangs still use "took" to emphasize the completion of action of "抱", i.e., "了", probably due to the strong influence of Yang Xianyi's native language.

In the above example, the translators both noticed that particle le in this sentence is used to indicate the occurrence of the action "抱", but they translated from different angles of view. Hawks used the preposition "in" to emphasize the result of the action. The Yangs adopted the past tense of the verb "took" to emphasize the process of the action. The two distinct translation methods attribute to their angles of views.

2) Adverbials of time: Except for tense and aspect, particle le also can be shown through other means, such as adverbials of time. Therefore, "when, after, before" are frequently used especially when dynamic le appears with another action, indicating the relationship between the two actions. The following examples may suffice to explain the point.

In the following sentences, le indicates the completion of the action. The English translation does not use different verb forms, but an adverbial of time, which is closer to the English language. English prepositions can be translated into verbs in English-Chinese translation. Then it is natural that Chinese dynamic particle le sometimes can be translated into English prepositions or adverbials of time.

046 Cao 邢夫人无计,吃了饭回家,晚间告訴了贾赦。

Hawks: Resourceless, now that her plan had misfired, Lady Xing returned home as soon as she had eaten dinner and in the evening informed Jia She of what had happened.

Yangs: As there was nothing more Lady Xing could do, she went home after dinner and told her husband that evening what had happened.

055Cao 你吃了饭快來。

Hawks: Come back again as soon as you have finished your lunch, while Miss Bao is still here, and the four of us can discuss it together; then, when we've worked out all the details, we can ask your mistress whether to go forward with it or not.

Yangs: Come back straight after your meal, will you?

It can be seen that the above two sentences both have two kinds of translation. One uses "as soon as…"; the other uses "after" but with the same function to indicate the completion of the action mentioned in the sentence.

IV. CONCLUSION

Several findings of the study are outlined against the backdrop of Chinese-English translation. Then the significance of the present study comes out subsequently. Due to limitations on the present study, some suggestions for further study will also be made at the end of this chapter.

There are several findings on the two functions and translation methods of Chinese particle le, based on the analysis of the data obtained from the online corpus.

First, this study proves that the time function of particle le can be perceived from the perspective of Cognitive Linguistics, especially based on the understanding of time and space. As is shown in some of the above examples, particle le sometimes can indicate space as well as time due to their inherent relationship. This proves that the spatial-temporal relationship in Cognitive Linguistics is particularly insightful for understanding the functions of particle le and its translation into English.

Third, in the translating process, particle le is sometimes invisible in the translated versions due to the fact that occasionally translators may adopt free translation to deal with Chinese particle le. Here the word "invisible" means that the meaning of particle le is conveyed in the translation, but possible English equivalents cannot be found literally. The practice provides us with a broad space for carrying out translating processes. Particle le needs to be first put in a small context, and then a bigger one, even in a passage. Only this way can translators have a more general and clearer understanding of the particle and possibly translate the meaning appropriately. As for modal particle le, its meaning is flexible; consequently, its translation is also flexible. The translator should not pay too much attention to the literal meaning of the sentences, but to the implied meaning or intention. Therefore, in the actual translating process, dynamic equivalence can be achieved by means of the translator's analysis of its functions.

Pedagogical implications are: first, a corpus-based study, both qualitative and quantitative methods can be adopted in studying translation problems; second, in teaching practice, teachers can make use of corpus to illustrate some translation phenomena to help students to find out the usage of the items such as the different parts of speech, time and modal features etc.

For further study, first, additional research is needed to find why le assumes two functions, unlike other Chinese particles such as "过" and "着", and how we can understand and make use of it in language teaching? The second suggestion is related to the discourse-organizing function of particle le as mentioned in the third chapter, which can be further discussed in other research programs of a similar nature. Despite its imperfections, it is hoped that the present study will offer a new perspective into the understanding and translation of Chinese particles.

References

[1] Wang, W. The review of particle Le at the end of sentence. Social Science Lines.2009, (10):271-272.

[2] Jin, L. The limitations of Semantic First in modern Chinese. Chinese Study.1999, (5):1-5.

[3] Chen, Z. The implicit rules and causations of le. Chinese study, 2002,(1): 22-27.

[4] Chen, C. The atypical usage of particle le. Language and words, 2005,(2): 117-119.

[5] Shen, L. time order in sentence and E-Ctranslation. Sichuan Foreign Language Studies university journal, 2001, (6): 93-95.

[6] Pan, W, time and aspect in Chinese from particle le. Journal of the East China Normal University.2003, (4): 62-69.

[7] Chen, Q. The future time development of le at the end of sentence. Language Teaching and Research. 2005, (1): 66-73.

[8] Chen. Z. The study of time structure in Chinese. Beijing: World Book Publishing Company. 2009.

[9] Tian, L. The usage of Chinese particles in English-Chinese translation. Foreign language Teaching,1997, (3): 80-82.

[10] Wang, W. One variation and grammar forms of particle le. Chinese Study. 2004, (4): 35-38.

[11] Zhao, H. The translation of Chinese dynamic particle le: based on E-C and C-E parallel corpus contrastive study. Sino-America English Teaching. 2009, (6): 47-53.

[12] Xu, J. The summary of Chinese moods expressions and its system. Beijing University journal. 2000, (3): 136-141.

[13] Contemporary Chinese Dictionary. Shanghai: Commercial Press. 2008.

[14] Ancient and Present Chinese Dictionary. Shanghai: Commercial Press. 2006.

[15] Practical Modern Chinese Grammar. Beijing: Foreign language Teaching and Reseaqrch Press. 2004.

[16] Taylor. J. Ten Lectures on Applied Cognitive Linguistics by John Taylor. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. 2007, xxi,181-198.

[17] Collins Cobuild Essential English Dictionary. Beijing: China Translation & Publishing Corporation. 2002, 826.

[18] Halliday, M. A. K. Studies in Chinese Language. Beijing: Beijing University Press. 2007.

[19] Levinson, S. C. Space in Language and Cognition-Explorations in Cognitive Diversity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2008. D11.

[20] Zhang, J.& Ding, Z. The contrastive study of time metaphors between Chinese and English vocabularies. Foreign Language Teaching, 2003, (9): 31-34.

[21] Kemmerer, D. The spatial and temporal meaning of English prepositions can be independently impaired. Neuropsychologia,2005, 43, 797-806.