The Experiential Aspect *Guo* and Its Intervening Verbal Positions

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Abstract

The Mandarin experiential aspect *guo* has been seen as a verbal aspect marker semantically signaling a happening that has ever been gone through by the subject and such an experience is usually more than once and syntactically attaching to the end of a verb. The single aim of this squib is to investigate whether the verbal aspect *guo* can appear within verbal compounds and its related occurring constraint in syntax. The result of the examination reveals that two conditions are required for the *guo* insertion. First, the first constituent of a compound must be a verb and, second, the compound must have limited separability. Among the investigated compounds, only those verb-object compounds which have limited separability are qualified for the aspect *guo* to intervene.**

Key words: experiential aspect, verbal compounds, limited separability

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0. Introduction

The function word *guo* in Mandarin has been treated differently in grammar: either as a verbal experiential aspect marker (Li and Thompson 1981, Tiee 1990, Li, Cheng, Foster, Ho, Hou, and Yip 1984), an experiential aspect marker semantically evolved from a spatial verb (Wu 2003), a verbal suffix substitute for *ceng* ‘once’ (Norman 1988), or as a complement (Chao 1968). Whatever the status it has been considered, in semantics the Mandarin *guo* usually denotes that an occurrence has ever been experienced by the subject and in syntax the experiential aspect *guo* possesses the following known structural position as shown in (1).

(1) **Subject + Verb + *guo* + (Object)**

a. 我吃過(飯)了
   Wo chi-guo (fan) le
   “I have eaten.”

b. 我們看過他。
   Women kan-guo ta
   “We’ve seen him.”

Example (1) clearly shows that the experiential aspect *guo* immediately follows the verb. In Mandarin grammar since the structure of compounds plays a crucial role both morphologically and syntactically, numerous studies of the subject can be found in the literature. The examples in (2) present some compounds with the attached aspect *guo*, which also exemplify typical verbal compound position for the aspect *guo*.

(2)
a. 選舉過
xuanju-guo “having been an electioneer”

b. 開刀過
kaidao-guo “having been operated on”

c. 結婚過
jiehun-guo “having been married”

d. 滿意過
manyi-guo “having been satisfied with”

The main interest of this work is to ask: What could happen if the aspect guo is moved within a verbal compound? Some examples in (3) display such a possibility.

(3) a. 選過舉
xuan-guo-ju “having been an electioneer”

b. 開過刀
kai-guo-dao “having been operated on”

c. 結過婚
jie-guo-hun “having been married”

d. *滿過意
man-guo-yi
full-asp-sentiment

1 There is no equivalent English translation for this expression since it is uninterpretable.
Semantically and syntactically the grammaticality of examples (3a-c) remains unchanged, whereas (3d) exhibits an ungrammatical result, implying that certain linguistic constraints may be involved.

The aim of this squib is to examine the structural relationship between the verbal compounds and the experiential aspect guo, focusing particularly on such inquiry as whether the aspect guo can be grammatically inserted between the two constituents of a compound and, if so, what intervening conditions could be involved.

1. The Aspect guo and the Various Types of Verbal Compounds

Two or more constituents being combined together to form a single word and single meaning is termed a compound word. According to Li and Thompson (1981), Mandarin has several types of major compounds such as nominal compound, verbal compounds, subject-predicate compounds, verb-object compounds, and antonymous adjectives forming nominal compounds. Since this work is chiefly concerned with the question as to whether there is a landing site available inside a verbal compound for the aspect guo, only those verb-related compounds are examined: verbal compounds, subject-predicate compounds, and verb-object compounds.

1.1 Guo and Verbal Compounds

Verbal compounds here refer mainly to what Li and Thompson described in their 1981 work, including Resultative Verb Compounds (RVCs) and Parallel Verb Compounds. The former refers to a compound form in which the second constituent shows a result of the action or process presented by the first constituent; whereas the latter signifies that the meaning of a compound form is the same as each of its single constituent. In the RVC type compounds four subcategories are further classified: directional, phase, metaphorical, and obligatorily in potential form. No such additional division, however, is
found in the Parallel type. Based on these mentioned structures, examples (4) and (5) exhibit the difference between the suffix attachment of the aspect guo to these verbal compounds and the guo insertion in the middle of the two constituents.2

(4) Resultative Verb Compounds

a. Directional

他們跑出來過。

*他們跑過出來。

tamen pao-chu-lai-guo

they run-exit-come-asp VS

“They’d come running out.”

*他們跑出過來。

*tamen pao-guo-chu-lai

b. Phase

我們唱完過。

*我們唱過完。

women chang-wan-guo VS

we sing-finish-asp

“We’d finished singing.”

*women chang-guo-wan

c. Metaphorical

我氣死過。

*我氣過死。

wo qi-si-guo VS

I anger-death-asp

“I’d angered to death.”

*wo qi-guo-si

2 For the conformity in this work, these verbal examples are mostly chosen from Li and Thompson (1981:45-84).
d. Obligatorily in Potential Form

你買得起過嗎？
ni mai-de-qi-guo ma
you buy-can-afford Q
“Had you ever afforded it?”

*你買過得起嗎？
*ni mai-guo-de-qi ma

(5) Parallel Verb Compounds

a. 我以前購買過。
wo yiqian gou-mai-guo
I before buy-buy-asp
“I had bought it before.”

*我以前購過買。
*wo yiqian gou-guo-mai

b. 我貧窮過。
wo pin-qiong-guo
I poor-poor-asp
“I had been poor.”

*我貧過窮。
*wo pin-guo-qiong

The above comparisons implicitly deny the possibility of the insertion of the aspect *guo* between the two verbal constituents. Next section we will go on to the Subject-Predicate Compounds.

1.2. *Guo* and Subject-Predicate Compounds

A Subject-Predicate compound in Li and Thompson’s definition (1981) denotes that a subject and a verb together constitute a compound, and this type of compounds always functions as a verb. Being a verbal aspect, *guo* is licensed for having a landing site immediately after the verb. Examples in (6), however, will demonstrate if the *guo* can be landed inside the compounds.
(6) Subject-Predicate Compounds

a. 我頭疼過。
   wo tou-teng-guo
   “I had had a headache.”

b. 我眼紅過。
   wo yan-hong-guo
   “I had been covertous.”

c. 我也年輕過。
   wo ye man-qmg-guo
   “I had been young.”

Subject-Predicate compounds appear to act the same as Resultative Verb Compounds and Parallel Verb Compounds: No adding in is allowed.

1.3. Guo and Verb-Object Compounds

A verb-object compound, as the name points out, has a verb and a direct object. Most of these types of compounds are verbs, so they are qualified for the aspect guo attachment. Again, example (7) exhibits the comparisons.
(7) Verb-Object Compounds

a. 我開刀過。
   wo kai-dao-guo
   I open-knife-aspect
   "I had been operated."

b. 我效勞過。
   wo xiao-lao-guo
   I render-effort-aspect
   "I had served."

Though (7b) displays an ungrammatical reading when the aspect guo is inserted between the two constituents, (7a) exhibits an entirely different result from the examples in (5-6). The aspect guo is allowed to be inserted amid the verbal element kai and the direct object dao: kai-guo-dao (開過刀). (7a) is grammatical both in semantics and in syntax. Such a result thus demands further examinations for verb-object compounds. More comparisons of this type (taken from Li and Thompson 1981: 73-81) are thus shown in (8).

(8) Verb-Object Compounds

a. 我照相過。
   wo zhao-xiang-guo
   I reflect-image-aspect
   "I had taken a photograph."

b. 我行禮過。
   wo xing-li-guo
   I perform-salutation-aspect
   "I had saluted."
c. 我結婚過。
wo jie-hun-guo
I tie-marriage-asp
“I had gotten married.”

vs

d. 我開玩笑過。
wo kai-wanxiao-guo
I make-joke-asp
“I had made fun of it.”

vs

e. 我們革命過。
women ge-ming-guo
we remove-life-asp
“We had revolted.”

vs

f. 我們一起睡覺過。
women yiqi-shuijiao-guo
we together-sleep-sleep-asp
“We had slept together.”

vs

g. 我們理髮過。
women li-fa-guo
we arrange-hair-asp
“We had had a haircut.”

vs

h. 我們叩頭過。
women ko-tou-guo
we knock-head-asp
“We had kowtowed.”

vs
Recall that the structure (3d) is ungrammatical: The insertion between the two elements manyi (滿意) is not allowed. The compound manyi happens to be a verb-object structure (Li and Thompson 1981). Consequently a possible hypothesis may be derived from the above examination: Only verb-object compounds allow the insertion of the verbal aspect guo. Nevertheless, if this conclusion can be justified, (3d) and (8e) will require an explanation since both insertions are ungrammatical.

2. A Possible Explanation

Thus far we have examined verbal compounds, subject-predicate compounds, and verb-object compounds, and the results show that only the type of verb-object compounds can accept the insertion of the aspect guo. Why are verb-object compounds qualified to act so, while on the contrary the other two types of compounds are not? Furthermore, certain verb-object compounds are not allowed to be intervened by the aspect guo. Obviously, the type of the verb-object compounds is not the single reason to answer the question. This section, therefore, aims at providing an analysis of the problem and at coming to a possible conclusion.

2.1. Must the First Constituent be a Verb?

Note that our examination shows that only verb-object compounds are able to be added in by the aspect guo without altering their syntactic grammaticality and meanings. Since a verb-object serves as a verb, the successful attachment of guo between a verb and an object may point out that guo can attach to a verb constituent only, either a compound as a whole or a part of a compound. Although this hypothesis may explain why those subject-predicate compounds in (6) fail to be inserted inside the compounds, it may make incorrect predictions to the verbal compounds because most of them have a verb constituent as the first element (see (4)). Two possible explanations may thus be obtained from the above observation: First, this successful attachment is not simply based on whether the attached stem is a verb or not and, Second, the attached stem must be a verb,
but not every verb is qualified to be affixed to. Due to the fact that a verbal aspect marker is inherently used in describing how a verb specifies its duration or temporal activity in grammar, the attachment of *guo to a verb seems to be a requirement to fulfill the condition. The following examples may further justify this point of view.

(9) **Noun + guo**

a. *張三過
   
   zhangsan-guo
   
   Zhangsan-asp

b. *冰箱過

   bingxiang-guo
   
   refrigerator-asp

(10) **Adjective + guo**

a. *貧過

   pin-guo
   
   poor-asp

b. *藍色的過

   lansede-guo
   
   blue-asp
(11) **Adverb + guo**

a. *非常的過*
   feichangde-guo
   very-asp

b. *常常過*
   changchang-guo
   often-asp

Note that, however, since in Mandarin an adjective can have a verbal function serving as
a verb (that is, an adjectival verb), the attachment of *guo* to such an element is
grammatical.

(12) **Adjectival verb + guo**

a. 快樂過
   kuaile-guo
   happy-asp
   “having had been happy”

b. 傷心過
   shangxin-guo
   sad-asp
   “having had been sad”

Evidently only those non-verbal categories fail to be attached to, which in turn further
justifies the verbal attachment behavior of *guo*. The first possible explanation is therefore
excluded. The second possible explanation hypothesizes that the attached stem for the aspect *guo* must be a verb, but not every verb is qualified to be attached to. To see this, let’s review those verbs that fail to be attached to by *guo*, repeated in (13) below.

(13)  
(a) *滿過意*  
man-guo-yi  
full-asp-sentiment

(b) *我們革過命。*  
*women ge-guo-ming*  
we remove-asp-life

c. *他們跑過出來。*  
*tamen pao-guo-chu-lai*  
they run-asp-exit-come

d. *他們跑出過來*  
*tamen pao-chu-guo-lai*  
they run-exit-asp-come

e. *我們唱過完。*  
*women chang-guo-wan*  
we sing-asp-finish

f. *我氣過死。*  
*wo qi-guo-si*  
I anger-asp-death
g. *你買得起嗎?
   *ni mai-guo-de-qi ma
   you buy-asp-can-afford Q

h. *你買得起嗎?
   * ni mai-de-guo-qi ma
   you buy-can-asp-afford Q

i. *我以前買過。
   *wo yiqian gou-guo-mai
   I before buy-asp-buy

j. *我貧過窮。
   *wo pin-guo-qiong
   I poor-asp-poor

The first element pin (貧) in (13j) is an adjective, so the ungrammaticality of the sentence is warranted. In each example of (13a-i) what the aspect guo attached to, however, is a verb, yet such an attachment makes an ungrammatical reading. Examples (13a-b) are verb-object compounds, while (13c-j) all belong to Resultative Verb compounds and Parallel Verb Compounds (i.e. they are all verbal compounds). The ungrammaticality of these verbal compounds may be due to the fact that they are either V+V type of compounds or Adj +V type of compounds. The grammaticality of those verb-object compounds in (8) simply entails that the first condition for the first verb in a verbal compound is that only a verb that is in the V+O structure can take the aspect guo insertion.
2.2. Why Not Verbal Compounds?
Why can only the type of V+O compounds be qualified? Before this question can be answered, we need to first explain why those verbs in verbal compounds are not acceptable. Recall that RVCs are V+V structures, which denote that the second constituent shows a result of the action or process presented by the first constituent; whereas Parallel Verb Compounds, also V+V structures, signify that the meaning of a compound form is the same as each of its single constituent. As mentioned in the beginning of this work, semantically the attachment of *guo* to a verb is to mean that an event has been experienced, an action or process that is usually done for more than once. This fact suggests that the second verb's immediate presence would interfere with the meaning structure: a contradictory structure. This may explain, first, why the structures in (13c-j) are all uninterpretable unless the aspect *guo* is attached to the end of the whole compound, as the comparisons shown in (4) and (5); and second, why only a verb in a V+O structure can be intervened.

2.3. Why V+O Compounds?
Our examination thus far shows that only the first verb in a V+O structure can take the aspect *guo*. If this condition is substantiated and since not every verb in the V+O structure is allowed to take the aspect *guo* (e.g. 13a-b), the second requirement may be related to certain linguistic reason, which demands a linguistic explanation. According to Li and Thompson (1981:73), verb-object compounds have limited separability; that is, a modifying element can be placed before the second constituent, such as the following examples in (14).

\[(14)\ a. \ shang-feng \hspace{1cm} shang-da-feng
\]
\[\hspace{1cm} \text{hurt-wind} \hspace{1cm} \text{hurt-big-wind}
\]
\[\text{VS} \hspace{1cm} \text{VS}
\]
\[\text{"catch a cold"} \hspace{1cm} \text{"catch a bad cold"}
\]
b. 傷風  
  shang-feng
  hurt-wind
  “catch a cold”

This limited separability here refers to the condition that the separation of the two constituents is made possible only for an intervention by an element such as an adjective or a perfective aspect marker le, but not for a movement by the second constituent to the sentence initial position, as shown in (15).

(15) a. 傷大風  
  shang-da-feng
  hurt-big-wind
  “catch a bad cold”

b. 傷了風  
  shang-le-feng
  hurt-asp-wind
  “caught cold”

A hypothesis arose due to this limited separability in verb-object compounds: Only those separable V+O compounds can be intervened by the aspect guo. That is, if a V+O compound can be separated by the perfective aspect le, it can be intervened by the experiential aspect guo too. Take the V+O structures in (3) for instance.
(16) a. 選過舉  
xuan-guo-ju “having been an electioneer”

VS

選了舉  
xuan-le-ju “having been an electioneer”

b. 開過刀  
kai-guo-dao “having been operated on”

VS

開了刀  
kai-le-dao “having been operated on”

c. 結過婚  
jie-guo-hun “having been married”

VS

結了婚  
jie-le-hun “having been married”
d. *滿過意  
man-guo-yi

VS

*滿了意  
man-le-yi  
full-asp-sentiment

By replacing the experiential aspect *guo* with the perfective aspect *le*, examples in (16) appear to be positive evidence for this hypothesis because the grammaticality remains unchanged. An additional test, such as the ungrammatical examples in (7b) and (9a-b), is thus called for.

(17) a. *我效了勞。  
*wo xiao-le-lao  
I render-asp-effort  
“I had served.”

b. *滿了意  
man-le-yi  
full-asp-sentiment

c. *我們革了命。  
*women ge-le-ming  
we remove-asp-life
(17) further justifies the hypothesis that if a V+O compound has limited separability, the insertion of guo is also allowed. Again, this condition will demand that all successful insertions of guo in V+O compounds possess limited separability by the perfective aspect le. (18) answers the question.

(18) a. 我開過刀。
    kai-guo-dao
    I open-asp-knife
    “I had been operated.”
    VS
    kai-le-dao
    I open-asp-knife
    “I had had an operation.”

b. 我照過相。
    wo zhao-guo-xiang
    I reflect-asp-image
    “I had taken a photograph.”
    VS
    wo zhao-le-xiang
    I reflect-asp-image
    “I had taken a photograph.”

c. 我行過禮。
    wo xing-guo-li
    I perform-asp-salutation
    “I had saluted.”
    VS
    wo xing-le-li
    I perform-asp-salutation
    “I had saluted.”

d. 我結過婚。
    wo jie-guo-hun
    I tie-asp-marriage
    “I had gotten married.”
    VS
    wo jie-le-hun
    I tie-asp-marriage
    “I had gotten married.”
### 3. Conclusion

This squib examines the possibility of moving the aspect marker *guo* into a verbal compound and the involved possible syntactic constraint. This work shows that without changing the meaning and the grammaticality the experiential aspect *guo* can be successfully inserted into a V+O type of compounds. In Mandarin grammar *guo* serves functionally as a verbal aspect marker attaching only to the category of verb, which fact indicates that only those verb-related compounds are licensed for the insertion. Based on Li and Thompson’s 1981 work, three types of compounds, which all suit the purpose of
verbs, are examined: verbal compounds, subject-predicate compounds, and verb-object compounds. The result of the examination reveals that although these compounds are all capable of being attached to by the aspect *guo*, the intervening between the two constituents has effect in the verb-object compounds only. Two reasons may explain why such an insertion can only carry out in V+O compounds. First, as mentioned, *guo* serves as a verbal aspect, so it has to attach to a verb stem rather than any other types of grammatical categories, which fact explains why all the three chosen types of compounds can take the aspect *guo*. However, when the *guo* adds in amid the compounds, the first element of the compounds must be a verb so as to be qualified for the insertion. Out of three, only two types of the compounds have the approval: verbal compounds and verb-object compounds since the former has V+V and the latter has V+O structures—their first compound components are verbs. The further examination, however, points out that being a verb in the first element of a compound is not the only condition to guarantee the successful attachment of *guo*; there exists a second requirement. Second, the second condition required for the grammatical moving-in movement is related to what Li and Thompson (1981: 73) described about some properties of the verb-object compounds: limited separability by the perfective aspect *le*. This examination shows that if a verbal compound possesses the limited separability, it seems that it also accommodates *guo* insertion, while those verbal compounds that do not have the limited separability conformably reject the insertion.
References

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中文經驗時貌詞「過」
在複合動詞中間的句構位置檢驗

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摘 要

雖然語言學者對中文經驗時貌詞「過」的文法地位有不同看法，但是多數還是把「過」
視為一種表示經驗的動態時貌功能詞。也就是说，「過」通常必須依附在動詞尾來顯示主
詞曾經有過的經驗。中文的複合動詞也不例外，既是屬於動詞範疇，則「過」也能依附在
詞尾處來表示此複合動詞所指出過去主詞有過的經驗。本短文旨在探討「過」是否有可能
出現在複合動詞中間位置的用法及任何可能的相關句法規律。本研究顯示基於「過」必須
依附在動詞尾的句法特性，組成複合動詞的第一個結構成份只要是動詞，即符合被「過」
依附的第一要件。但由於並非每個第一個結構成份的動詞都允許「過」的依附，本研究找
出了此依附的第二要件：有限的分離性。根據 Li and Thompson (1981)的描述，中文 V+O 結
構的複合動詞具備「有限的分離性」特質。本研究發現此特質也恰巧解釋了「過」在複合
動詞中間位置出現的現象。因此，「過」能否出現在複合動詞中間的位置除了第一個結構
成份必須是動詞外，此複合動詞也必須能夠做句構上有限的分離才行。

關鍵詞：經驗時貌，動詞性時貌，有限的分離性

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