

## VII: 「了」 AS VERB ASPECT MARKER AND SENTENCE FINAL PARTICLE

1. 了 originates from two different words that have merged and appear to be one in modern Chinese. We must distinguish the verbal aspect 了 from the sentence final particle 了 ("verb 了" and "sentence 了" for short). The two have separate etymologies, have distinct manifestations in some modern dialects, and different meaning in modern Chinese.

2. The concept of "verbal aspect":

Tense in English compared with verbal aspect in Chinese: Tense includes time (past, present, future) and aspect (perfective, progressive, subjunctive), with the "time" part being more prominent than the "aspect" part, i.e. every verb has "time," some also have "aspect." Time in Chinese is stated by adverbs or time words, not embodied in the verb form. Chinese verbs do not state when (past, present, future) something occurs. The speaker has the discretion to decide whether or not to state "when" (by using adverbs or time words). Often, context makes it clear *when* something occurred and therefore need not be stated explicitly (e.g. 他来了。 can mean 他已经来了 or 他快要来了。). Even the aspect can be stated or not at the speaker's discretion. Some foreigners say Chinese has no tense, and no grammar, perhaps because they associate "grammar" with things like verb conjugations, which is perhaps one of the most important aspects of English grammar. In English, verb conjugations follow clear rules, and are not at the discretion of the speaker. Not so with verbal aspects in Chinese.

"Time" in Chinese is not embedded in the verb, reflecting a way of conceptualizing the timing of an event from a "distant" absolute perspective shared by everyone at different times and locations. English verb conjugation reflects a way of conceptualizing the timing of an event from the perspective of the here and now, i.e., relative to the temporal location of the speaker.

Verbal aspects in Chinese: a) Basic, b) completion (了), c) sustained state (着), d) experiential (过). We will deal only with 了 in this lesson, leaving 着 and 过 for next time.

3. Pitfall: Native English speakers have strong inclination to fit Chinese verb aspect onto the English tense system, equating past time with completion aspect (the sentence final 了 confuses the situation further), and the "progressive" (-ing) in English with 着 (sustained state)。
4. The Verb-了 indicates completion aspect: used only with FV (FV implies action, and only action can be completed); the object - if any - follow 了: Subj. V-了 (obj.)

买了三件衣服  
喝了三杯酒。  
看了两次

wrong: 买一辆车了 (object follows 了 when 了 is used to indicate completion of action)  
✓买了一辆车

wrong: 我昨天不在了家。(在 is not FV, and 了 doesn't indicate past tense)

✓我昨天不在家。

wrong: 那首歌，我从前会唱了，现在不会。(会 is not FV, and 了 doesn't indicate past tense)

✓那首歌，我从前会唱，现在不会了。

Verbs that indicate state of mind, which may be used as main verbs or as auxiliary verbs - e.g. 会、喜欢、希望、愿意 - are not functionive verbs, and are not used with the Verb-了 (because the concept of "completion" of a non-functionive act is illogical), but they may be used with the Sentence-了 (to indicate change, etc.). What about 认识 and 知道? In fact, both are ambiguous. 认识 is a FV when it means "to *become* acquainted with" (我在晚会上认识了他。), but not a FV when it means "to be acquainted with" (我从前认识他。).

5. Negative of the Verb-了 is indicated by 没:

没买衣服，就买了书  
吃了饭，可是没喝酒  
没看那个电影

What's wrong with these sentences?

wrong: 这门课用的书，我还没买了。

wrong: 他们都不看了那个电影。

6. Interrogative forms of the Verb-了:

……吗?	她来了吗?	今天你听了录音吗?
V 了没 V?	她来了没来?	今天你听了录音没听?
V 了没有?	她来了没有?	今天你听了录音没有?
V 了没?	她来了没?	今天你听了录音没?
有没有 V?	她有没有来?	今天你有没有听录音?
(this form prevalent in Taiwan)		

7. Various uses of the Sentence-了:

a. Change of status: 当上老师了 没钱了 不抽烟了 已经毕业了

Often used with stative verbs: 她的病好了。 东西都贵了。 电脑越来越便宜了。

What's the function of 了 here? 她一听见这个消息，就着急了。

她一听见这个消息，就不哭了。

a'. Imminent change or event, onset of an activity:

快完了 要走了 飞机快要下降了! 他们快要有孩子了。  
我们家的孩子上学了。(recent past or imminent future) 来，吃饭了!  
快到了(We're almost there now. [spoken with low intonation])

b. Time lapse since a change/event/completion of an action (more under 9.b.) (It's been

*time-span* since...).

结婚三年了，…… 大学毕业五年了

c. Overly..., extremely:

太大了！ 太贵了！ 太棒了！ 太不懂事了！ 太没良心了！  
好极了！ 高兴极了！ 贵极了！ 冷极了！  
难听死了！ 气死了！ 脏死了！ 饿死了！ 乐死了！ 高兴死了！

c'. Excessive: 这个菜得放一点点糖，多了就不好吃。  
十块钱你卖不卖？贵了我就不买。

d. Nuance of temporal movement:

林太太今年八十岁了，身体还很好呢。  
已经七点多了，怎么他还没回来？  
In fact, statements of time ("it's now...") usually carries the sentence-了。  
现在几点了？ （现在）八点了。

d'. "The time has come to...": time-when 了，该…了。 ..., time to...

十一点了，该睡觉了。  
已经三十岁了，该结婚了。  
孩子大了，在家该帮帮父母了。

8. A 了 which happens to come after a verb and is also at end of sentence may be either the Verb-了 or the Sentence-了, or both of them collapsed into one:

她走了。may be interpreted as:  
她在这儿住了三天，今天上午走了。[completion and change]  
她昨天才到，明天就走了。[imminent event]

我看了。may be interpreted as:  
那本书我看了。[completion]  
我从前不看中文书，现在看了。[change]

他们已经离开了。

Are these sentences correct? What is the function of 了 in each of the following occurrences?

我学了开车。 我学开车了。  
我知道了那件事。 我知道那件事了。 (Is 知道 a state of mind or a functive verb?)  
我知道了那件事，就明白了。  
我一知道了那件事，就赶去了。  
我一知道了那件事，就会告诉你。

我明白了。  
你知道了就好了。

9. Using both the Verb-了 and the Sentence-了 in the same sentence:

a. Quantifying the completed portion of an action which is still in progress

学了两年了 vs. 学了两年      吃了两碗饭 vs. 吃了两碗饭了

那本书他已经写了 两百页了，还没写完 (or 不知道什么时候才能写完)。  
(English rendition of …了…了: ……now [spoken with low intonation]).

他学了 四年的中文了，可是还不会看报呢。

你这件衣服穿了三天了，该洗了吧！(What is the function of 了 in 该洗了吧?)

他在大学的时候学了一年中文。现在连一句都说不出来了。  
(what is the function of the Sentence-了?)

那本书他写了 两百页就写不下去了。(what is the function of the Sentence-了?)

b. Time lapse since a change has occurred or since the completion of an action (It's been *time-span* since...).

他们已经生了孩子两年了，可是还没有计划结婚。  
我买了那本书三个月了，可是还没打开来看呢！  
这台电脑坏了三天了，该拿去修了吧？

10. Idiomatic usage:

With a tone of irritated resignation or compromise.

算了(吧)，我不跟你吵了。  
得了！别再说了！  
……罢了！      没什么，我不去就罢了！  
……就是了！      你别管他就是了。

11. 了 *liǎo*, but as the resultative verb ending *liǎo* (cf. Lecture XI)

教美国学生这个工作我干不了，所以已经不干了。(what is the function of the Sentence-了?)

你听我的话，绝对错不了。