



The TAME multifunctionality of the Chinese particle *le* and its English correspondences: A grounding approach

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1. Introduction

Research object: Chinese particle *le*

□ Two-morpheme analysis

Traditional view distinguishes two types of *le* according to their syntactic positions: **aspect marker *le1*** and **modal particle *le2***, each associated with distinct functions (Li & Thompson, 1981; Zhu, 1982; Liu, 1990; Fan, 2024).

However, treating *le* as two distinct morphemes may lead to analytical problems, such as difficulties in accounting for their functional overlap. Consider the following examples.

- (1)a. 他 买 了₁ 一 本 书。
3SG buy **LE** one-CL book
'He has bought a book.'
- b. 书, 他 买到 了₂。
Book 3SG buy-RES **LE**
'He has bought the book.'

Example (1a-b):
temporal-aspectual
function

1. Introduction

□ One-morpheme analysis

Challenging the two-morpheme analysis, some scholars have argued that *le* should be unified under a single grammatical category (Zhang, 2010; Shen, 2021; Jing-Schmidt et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023).

①le1 vs. le2: variants in different syntactic positions

②TAME functions ?

Example (2a-b):
evidential function
of *le*

- (2) a. 叔惠 向 他 端 相 了 一 下, 道: “你 瘦 倒 不 瘦,
Shuhui toward 3SG examine LE a-little say 2SG thin actually not thin
好象 太 脏 了₁ 一点。” *perceptual evidentiality*
seem too dirty LE a-bit
‘Shuhui looked him over carefully. “Well, you might not be thin, but you **are** dirty.”’
- b. 已经 这 个 时 候, 今 天 不 会 来 了₂。 (Lü, 1942: 261)
Already this CL time today not will come LE
‘At this hour, **I think** he will not come today.’ *inference*

1. Introduction

□ One-morpheme analysis

Challenging the two-morpheme analysis, some scholars have argued that *le* should be unified under a single grammatical category (Zhang, 2010; Shen, 2021; Jing-Schmidt et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023).

① *le*₁ vs. *le*₂: variants in different syntactic positions

② TAME functions ?

Example (2a-b):
evidential function
of *le*

Previous studies have generally approached the evidential function of *le* within the broader domain of modality (Lü, 1942; Shi, 2000; Wang, 2016), without isolating evidentiality as a distinct category. **Modality** primarily concerns the speaker's subjective evaluation, whereas **evidentiality** focuses on the source and reliability of information (Langacker, 2017).

1. Introduction

paradigm

data

method

theory

a usage-based approach + a Chinese-English parallel corpus + a multifactorial method + a grounding theory



to examine the TAME multifunctionality of *le*

□ **Grounding** refers to the anchoring of a **profiled entity** in relation to the **ground**, i.e., the interlocutors, the speech event, and their location in time, space, reality and discourse status (Langacker, 1991, 2002). On this basis, the study **proposes a unified account** of Mandarin *le* and explores how it evokes different aspects of the ground, thereby accounting for the **inherent interconnection** underlying its TAME multifunctionality.

2.1 Chinese particle *le* and its relationship to TAME

2.1.1 *Le* and TA (temporality/aspectuality)

(3) 他 有 一 个 月 不 吃 清 晨 这 顿 饭 了₂。

He have one-CL-month not eat morning this CL meal **LE**

‘It **had been** a month since he last had a morning meal.’

2.1.2 *Le* and M (modality)

(4) 待 两 天 你 就 知 道 了₂。

Stay two-day 2SG then know **LE**

‘You’ll hear about in a few days.’

2.1.3 *Le* and E (evidentiality)

(5) a. 鸿 渐 ， 我 看 你 醉 了₂ ， 眼 睛 都 红 了₂。

Hongjian, 1SG see 2SG drunk **LE** eyes all red **LE**

‘Hongjian, **I think** you’ve had too much to drink. Your eyes **are** all red.’

2.1 Chinese particle *le* and its relationship to TAME

2.1.4 Towards a unified account of *le* from a grounding perspective

Le can signal:

(i) event completion, (ii) change of state, (iii) the emergence of a new situation, (iv) updating of the speaker's knowledge, (v) interaction, and (vi) joint attention, etc.

That is, *le* not only describes an event, but also the speaker-oriented assessment or intersubjective alignment.

Research Hypothesis

The present study assumes that *le* denotes TAME interpretations, and seeks a unitary view of Mandarin *le* from the grounding perspective. The current study hypothesizes that *le* functions as a grounding marker that establishes epistemic control over a proposition, whereby different TAME interpretations emerge from evoking different facets of the ground.

2.2 Theoretical background

2.2.1 Clausal grounding

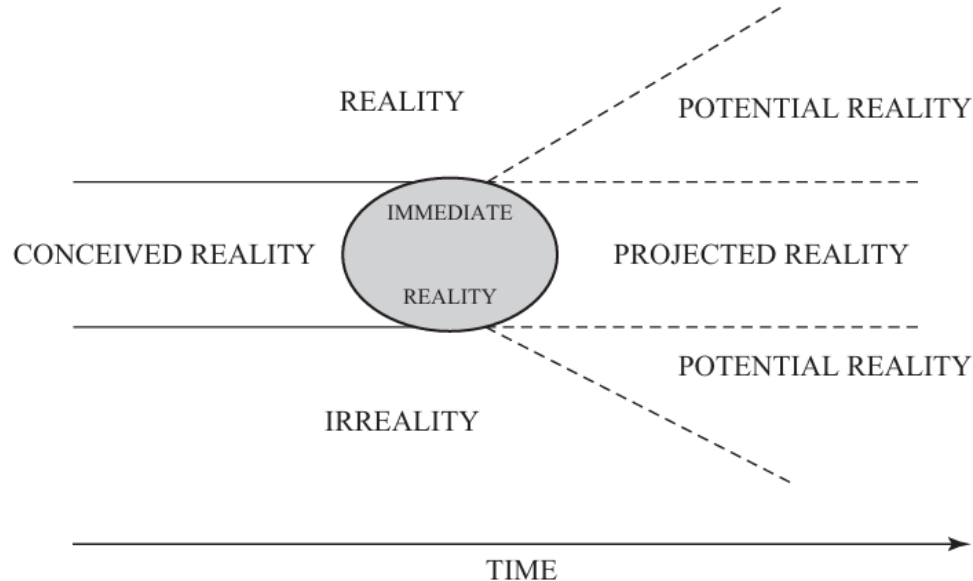


Fig. 1. Dynamic evolutionary model
(Langacker, 1991, 2008)

Clausal grounding is an inherently egocentric, immediacy-centered system that enables language users to achieve epistemic control, i.e. knowledge of the real or mentally constructed world (Langacker, 2017).

Tense and modals: basic clausal grounding elements (Langacker, 2008).

- **Tense:** Taking the speech moment (S) as the reference point (R), it locates the relative distance of the event time (E).
- **Modals:** indicate speaker's current conception of reality and varying degrees of epistemic control over the profiled process.

Evidentials: a higher-level clausal grounding elements (Langacker, 2017).

It takes the speaker's immediate experience as its deictic center

Speaker-addressee interaction

2.2 Theoretical background

2.2.2 Interface between aspect and grounding

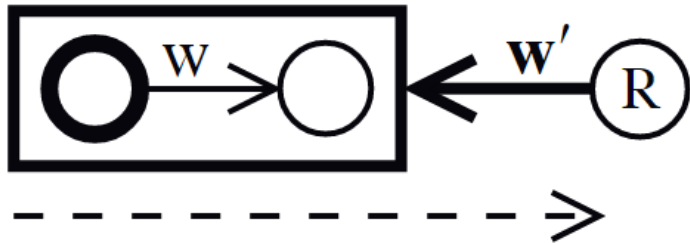


Fig. 2. Perfect participle *have watched*
(Langacker, 2026: 25)

Aspect & Grounding

Unlike tense, modal and evidential, aspect does not itself anchor a situation to the speech event in terms of time or reality status. Rather, it encodes the internal temporal structure of a situation (Comrie, 1976).

2.2 Theoretical background

2.2.2 Interface between aspect and grounding

Aspect & Boundedness

- aspect *le* does not encode temporal grounding directly, but contributes to temporal interpretation by constraining aspectual boundedness, which in turn interacts with reference-point to yield temporal grounding.
- Boundedness is realized by: lexical aspect (e.g., telic predicates that inherently encode endpoints), resultative complements, object quantification and definiteness, temporal adverbials, and discourse-level contextual cues (Smith, 2007; Cao & Xu, 2019).

Cross-linguistically,

- 1) As a tenseless language, the role of aspect is as important as a tense marker in English;
- 2) Context is always the key in Chinese to determining its specific interpretation.

Research questions:

1. **[multivariate]** What usage patterns characterize the TAME functions of *le*?
2. **[cross-linguistic]** How are the particle *le* represented in English correspondences?
3. **[grounding perspective]** Based on questions (1) and (2), what grounding features of *le* emerge?

Data sources:

- ❑ written corpus in English-Chinese Parallel Concordancer (ECPC)¹
- ❑ a random sample of 10,000 occurrences containing the particle *le* was extracted from the parallel corpus
- ❑ 500 sentence pairs containing *le* were randomly selected from the remaining valid corpus.

¹ <https://corpus.eduhk.hk/paraconc>.

Table 1. Independent variables of the corpus study

Variables		Levels
Independent variables	<i>Le</i> -related variables	position of <i>le</i> le1 / le2
	Predicate-related variables	predicate type activity / existential / mental / verbal adjective / copula / nominal
		complement type quantitative / degree / resultative / directional / no complement
	NP-related variables	animate (1st, 2nd, 3rd person) / inanimate / subjectless
		object NP type definite / quantitative / modificational / bare / none
	Clause-related variables	clausal adverbial type clause polarity time, modal, degree, absence positive / negative

Grounding perspective:
aspects of the ground (i.e.,
speaker and hearer, time, etc.)

Research Method:

A corpus-based multifactorial analysis, i.e., Random Forest (RF) & Conditional Inference Tree (CIT).

Data annotation:

- ❑ Data manually annotated based on the variables identified in Section 3.2 and analyzed in R
- ❑ Independent coding by two linguists, reliability: $\kappa = 0.85$ (20% double-coded, professor-reviewed)
- ❑ Disagreements resolved via consensus discussion

4.1 A predicative modelling for TAME multifunctionality of Chinese particle *le*

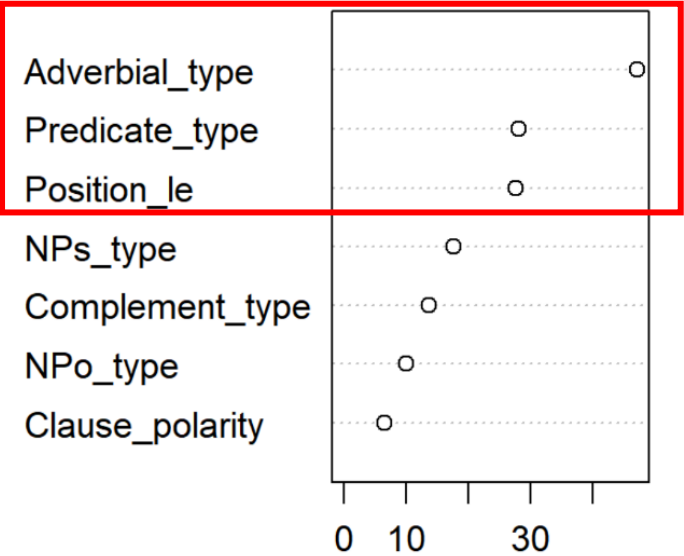
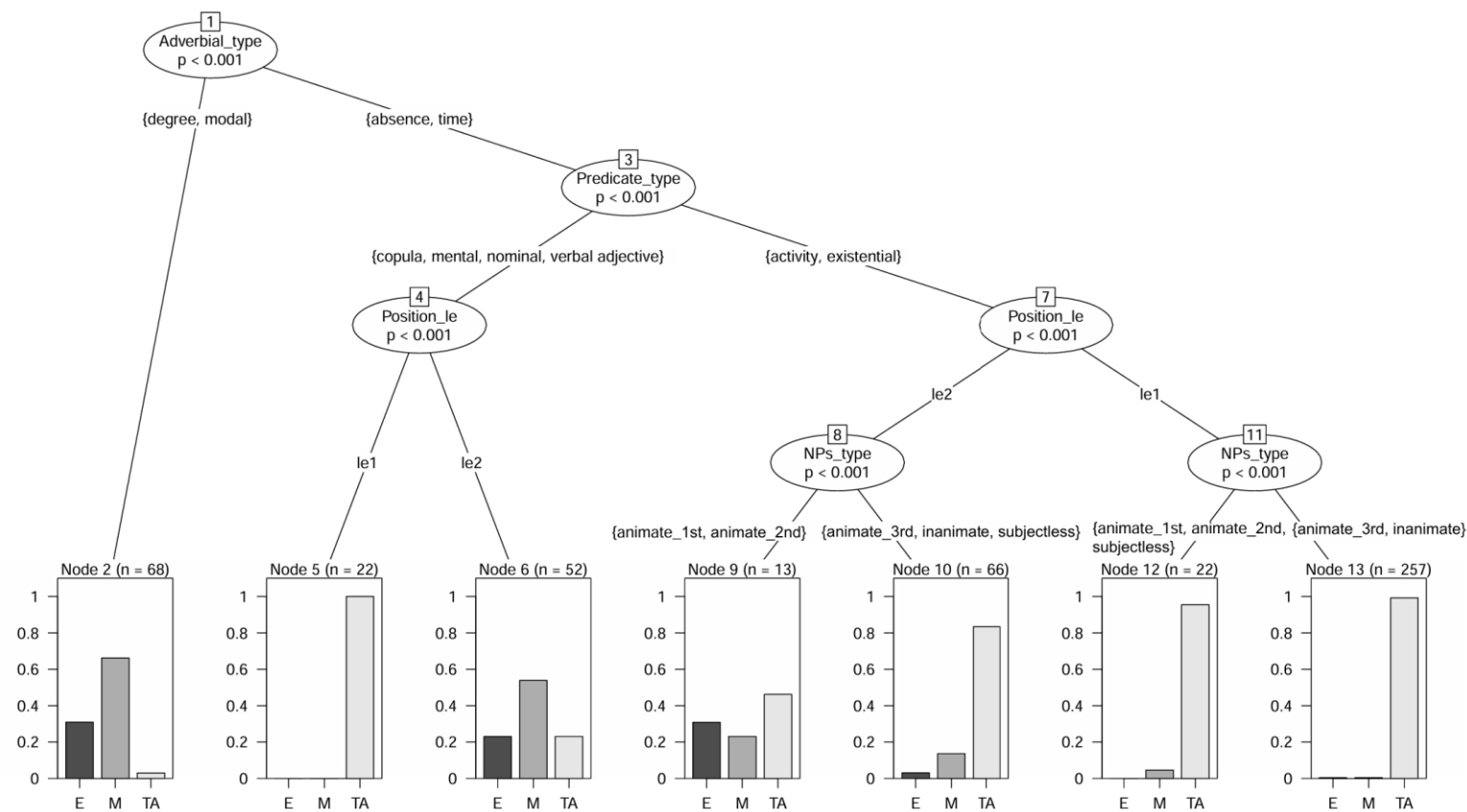


Fig. 3. Conditional variable importance in predicting the TAME multifunctionality of Chinese particle *le*

The importance of variables is as follows:
Adverbial_type > **Position_le** / **Predicate_type** >
NPs_type > Complement_type > NPo_type >
Clause_polarity

Model performance: C = 0.858 (very good) (Hosmer et al., 2013)

4.1 A predicative modelling for TAME multifunctionality of Chinese particle *le*



Preliminary conclusion

The tree in Fig. 4 shows the TA (temporal-aspectual) functions are distributed between *le1* and *le2*, whereas M (modal) and E (evidential) functions are mainly associated with different usage patterns of *le2*.

Fig. 4. Conditional inference tree for predicting the TAME multifunctionality of Chinese particle *le*

4.1.1 Modal and evidential function of Chinese particle *le*

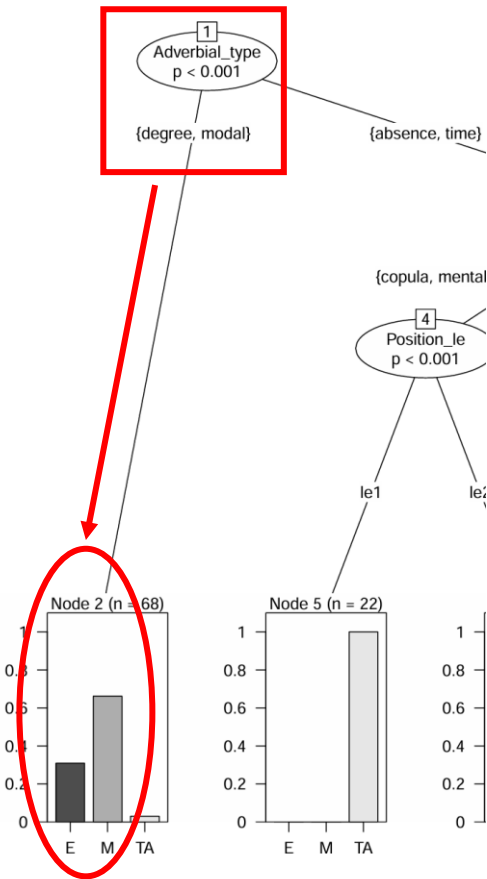


Fig. 4. CIT plot

Pattern 1 (Node 1---Node 2): degree / modal adverbs + *le*2 (28.42%)

reflects the speaker’s subjective evaluation regarding the likelihood of an event or intersubjective alignment with the addressee.

This pattern primarily serves a modal function.

- (6) a. 糖糖 还 有 一 年 多 该 去 幼 儿 园 了₂。
3SG still have one-year more should go kindergarten LE
‘Tangtang is going to be old enough for kindergarten in a year.’
- b. 学 得 这 样 周 到 ， 女 人 用 的 东 西 都 会 买 了₂。
Learn DE so thoughtful woman use DE thing all can buy LE
‘It takes going abroad to learn such thoughtfulness. He even knows how to buy things for women.’
- c. 周 经 理 也 高 兴 ， 只 说 平 成 这 地 方 太 僻 远 了₂。
Manager-Zhou also happy, only say Pingcheng this place too remote LE
‘Mr Chou was pleased, his only reservation being that Ping-cheng was too remote.’

4.1.1 Modal and evidential function of Chinese particle *le*

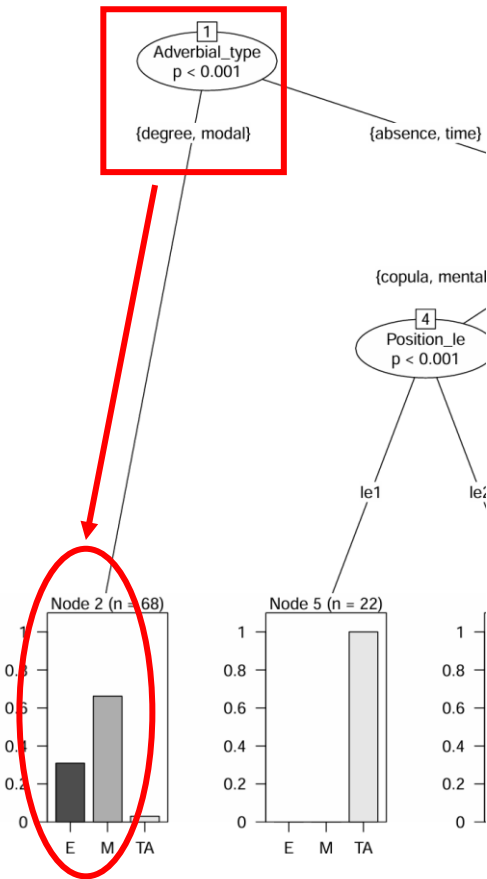


Fig. 4. CIT plot

le1 may denote evidential/modal function (4.42%)

(9)叔惠 向 他 端 相 了 一 下, *direct evidentiality*

Shuhui toward 3SG look-over-LE one-CL

道:“你 瘦 倒 不 瘦, 好 象 太 脏 了₁ 一 点。”

say 2SG thin CONTR NEG thin seem too dirty LE a-little

‘Shuhui looked him over carefully. “Well, you might not be thin, but you **are** dirty.”’

4.1.1 Modal and evidential function of Chinese particle *le*

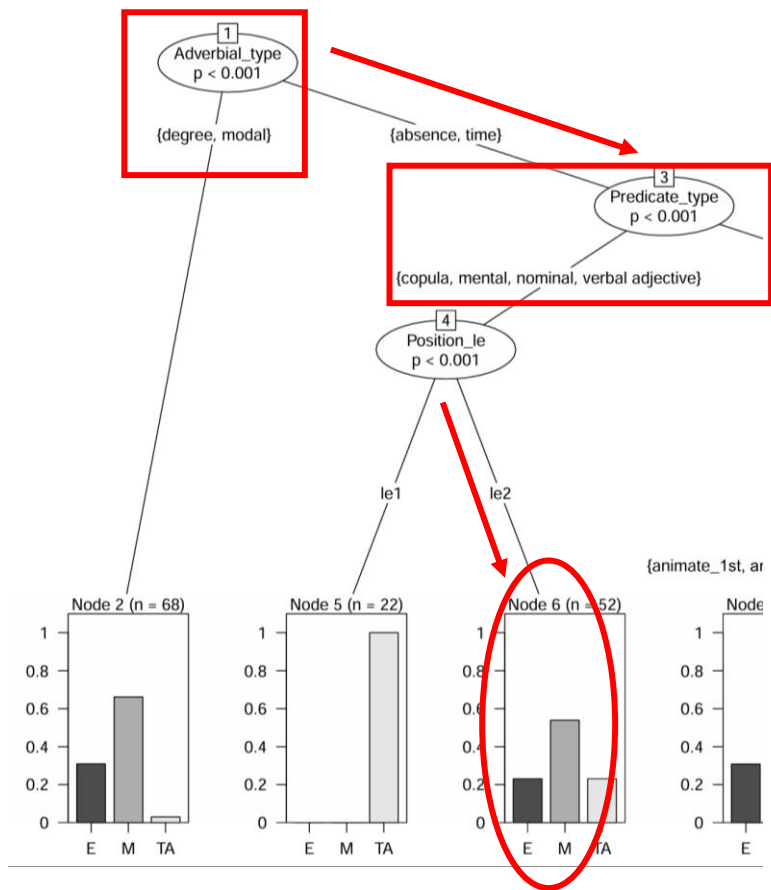


Fig. 4. CIT plot

Pattern 2 (Node 1---Node 6): copular, mental, nominal, verbal adjective predicates + *le*2 This pattern primarily serves a modal function.

In such cases, *le*2 operates at the level of speaker stance, signaling the speaker’s epistemic position toward the proposition.

(7) a.我们 是 老古董了₂， 总算 这次 学 个 新鲜。modal

1PL COP old-fossil-LE finally this-time learn CL fresh

‘We **are** already antiques. At least we’ve learned something new this time.’

b.现在，裕泰 茶馆 的 样子 可 不像 前幕 那么 体面了₂。modal

Now Yutai teahouse DE appearance EMPH not-like previous so decent LE

‘The Yutai Teahouse is no longer the dignified establishment of earlier times.’

c.他 已经 上了 年纪，对事 懒散 倦怠 了₂。inference

3SG already rise-LE age for matters lazy apathetic LE

‘He **was** old enough to feel lazy and tired of everything.’

4.1.1 Modal and evidential function of Chinese particle *le*

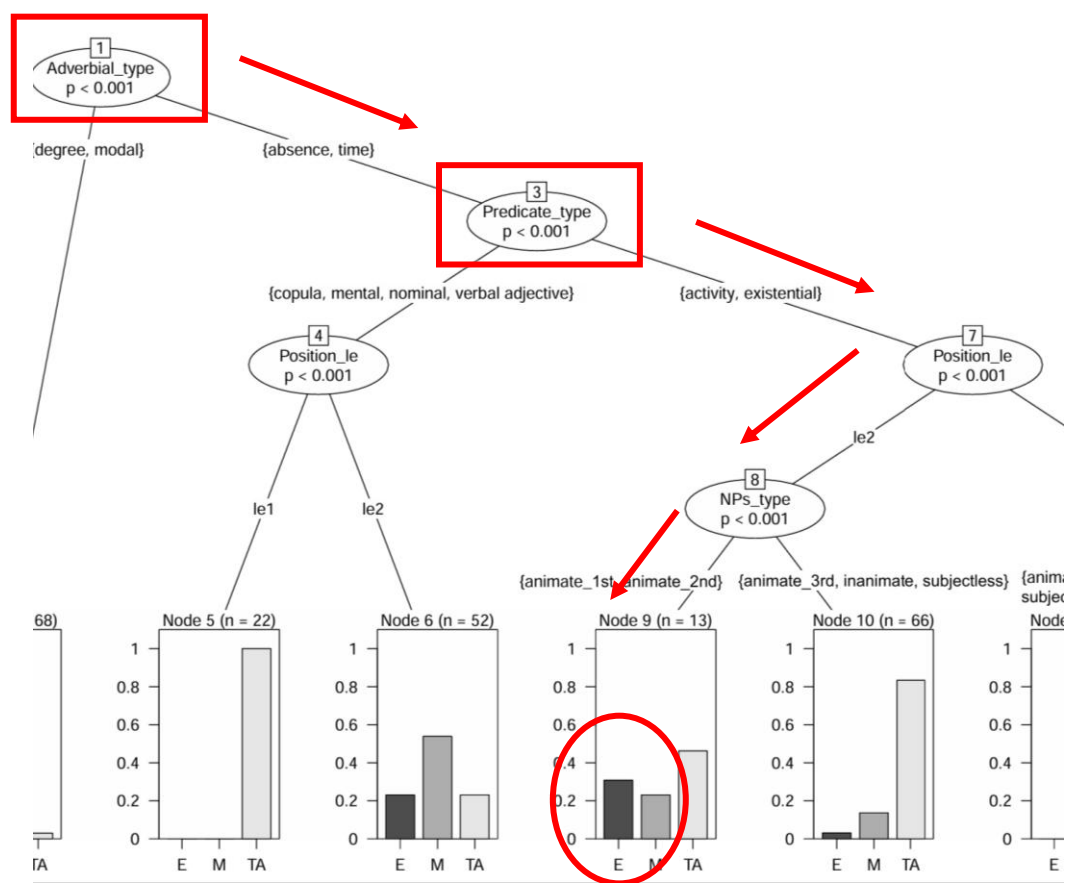


Fig. 4. CIT plot

Pattern 3 (Node 1---Node 9): first-/second-person NPs + activity / existential predicates + *le2*

marks a change of state, an immediate interaction with the addressee or a direct observation.

(8) a. “我觉得冷，先 下去 了₂。” *speaker-addressee interaction*

1SG feel cold first descend-go LE

“I feel cold. **I think I will** go on down.”

b.我..... 我 把 他们全杀 了₂! *modal*

1SG 1SG BA 3PL all kill LE

‘I... I’ll kill them first!’

4.1.2 TA function of Chinese particle *le*

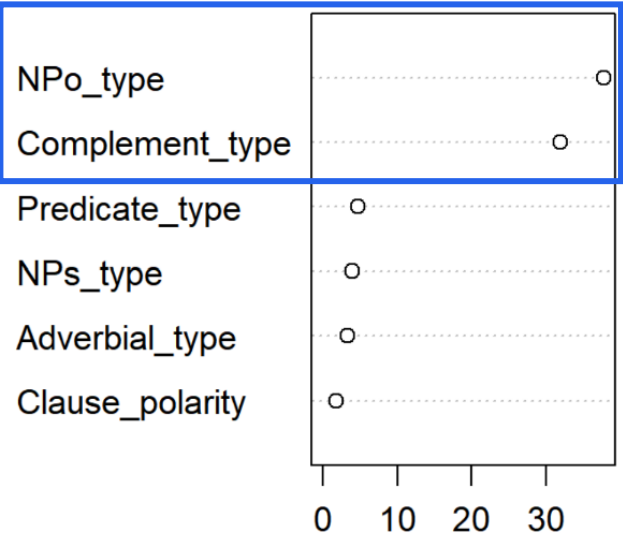


Fig. 5. Conditional variable importance in predicting the TA function of Chinese particle *le*

Model performance: C = 0.868 (very good)
(Hosmer et al., 2013)

Dependent variable: the position of *le* (*le1* vs. *le2*)
(The TA functions are distributed between *le1* and *le2*.)

The Random Forest shows that the factors influencing TA function of *le* are, in descending order of importance: **object noun phrase type (NPo_type) > complement type (Complement_type) > predicate type (Predicate_type) > subject noun phrase type (NPs_type) > adverbial type (Adverbial_type) > clause polarity (Clause_polarity).**

4.1.2 TA function of Chinese particle *le*

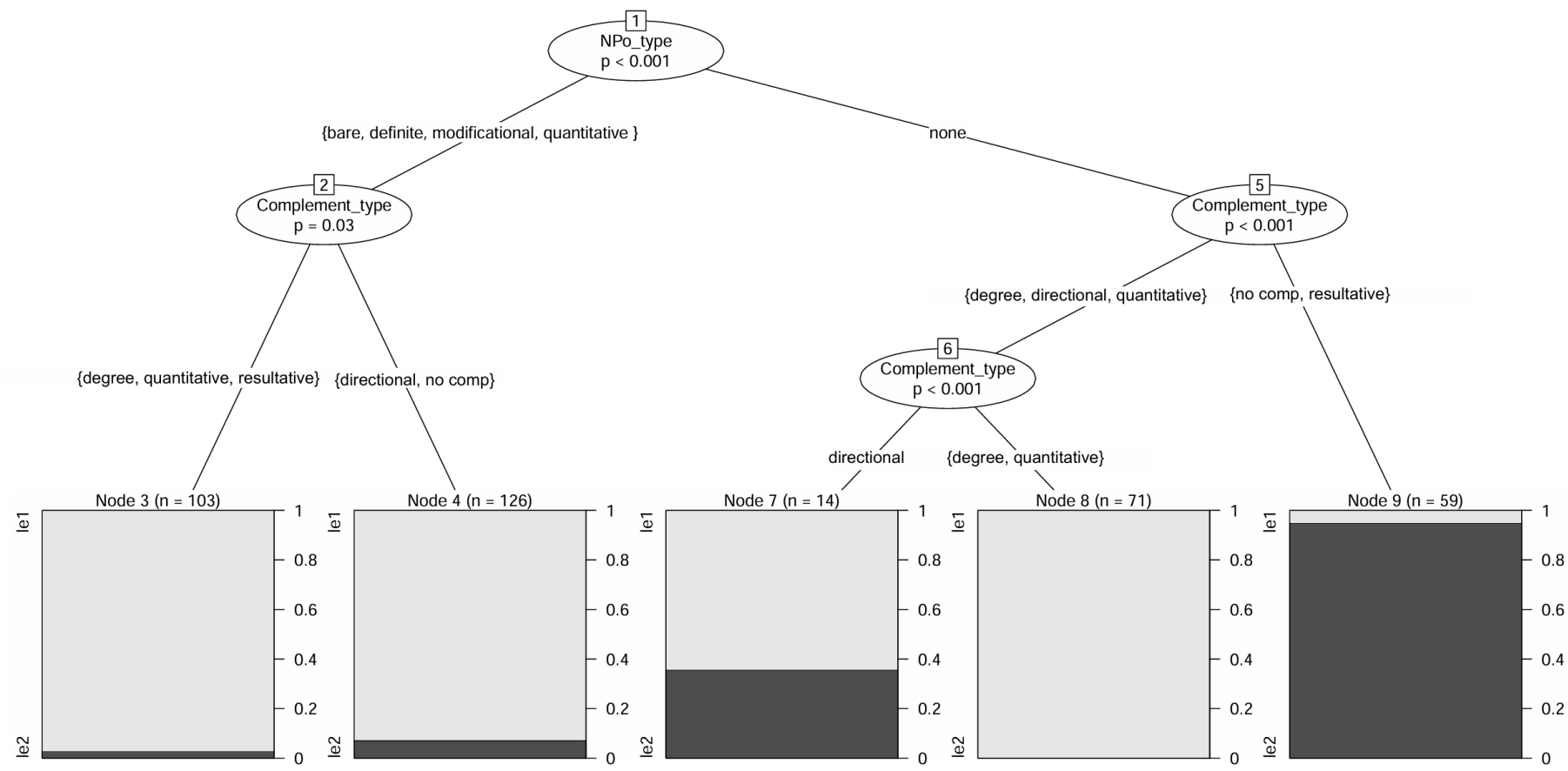


Fig. 6. Conditional inference tree for predicting the TA function of Chinese particle *le*

4.1.2 TA function of Chinese particle *le*

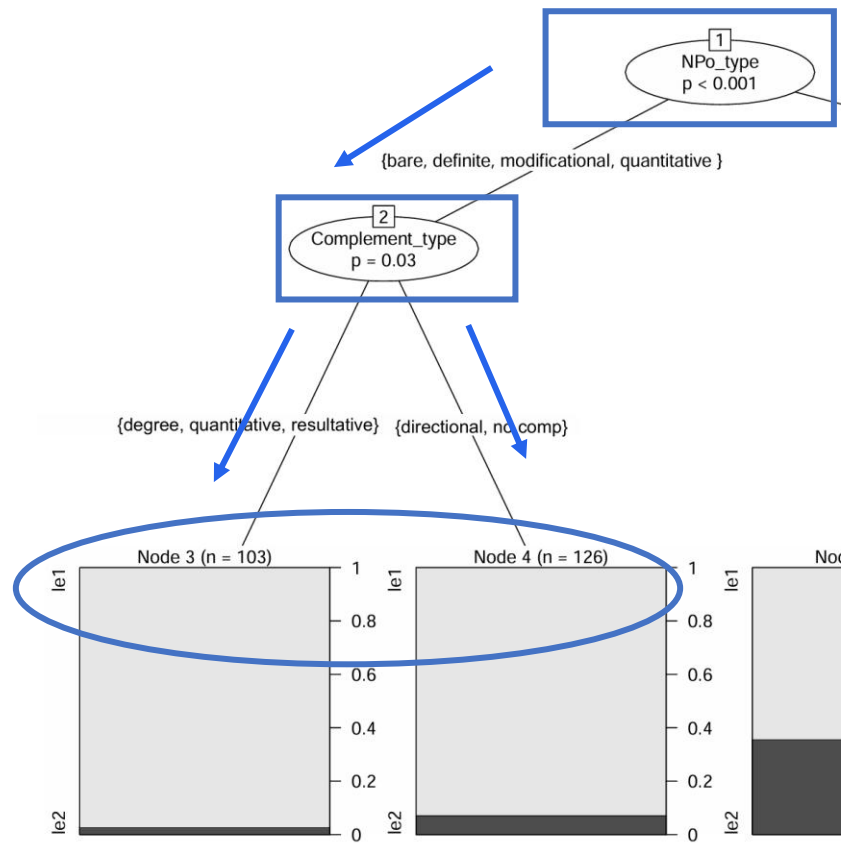


Fig. 6. CIT plot

1. *Le1* takes the TA function

When there are object NP types, i.e., definite, quantitative, and modificational NPs, the temporal-aspectual function tends to be realized by *le1*.

(10) 大家 一片 乡心, 正 愁 无处 寄托,
Everyone one-CL homesickness just worry nowhere place
不知 哪里 忽 来了, 两副 麻将牌。 Quantitative NPs
not-know where suddenly come-LE two-CL mahjong-tiles
'Homesickness welled up in everyone's heart and yearned for release.
Then suddenly from heaven knows where **appeared** two sets of mahjong.'

4.1.2 TA function of Chinese particle *le*

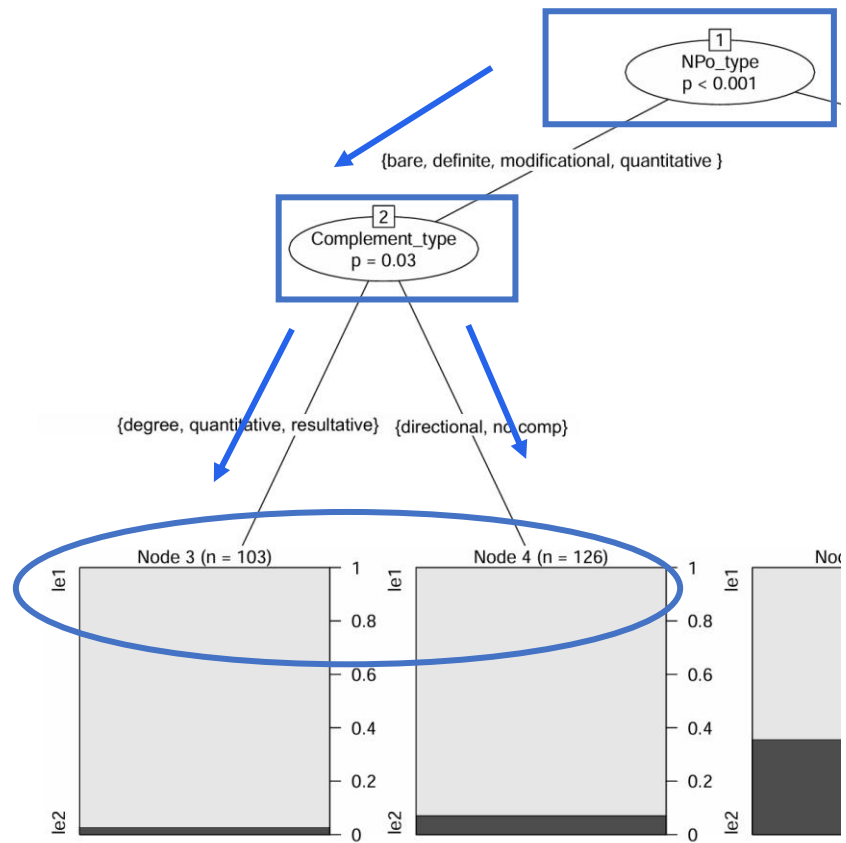


Fig. 6. CIT plot

1. *Le1* takes the TA function

The effect of **bare NPs** requires a different explanation.

The corpus data show that bare NPs are: (i) spatial nouns denoting bounded locations; (ii) objects derived from separable verb-object compounds; and (iii) abstract mass nouns, which weakens the sense of boundaries.

(11) 蒜薹 全部 卖光, 蒜头 也 成辫成串地

Garlic-scapes all sell-out garlic-bulbs also become-braid-become-string-ADV

挂在了₁ 房檐 下。 *spatial noun*

hang-exist-LE eaves under

4.1.2 TA function of Chinese particle *le*

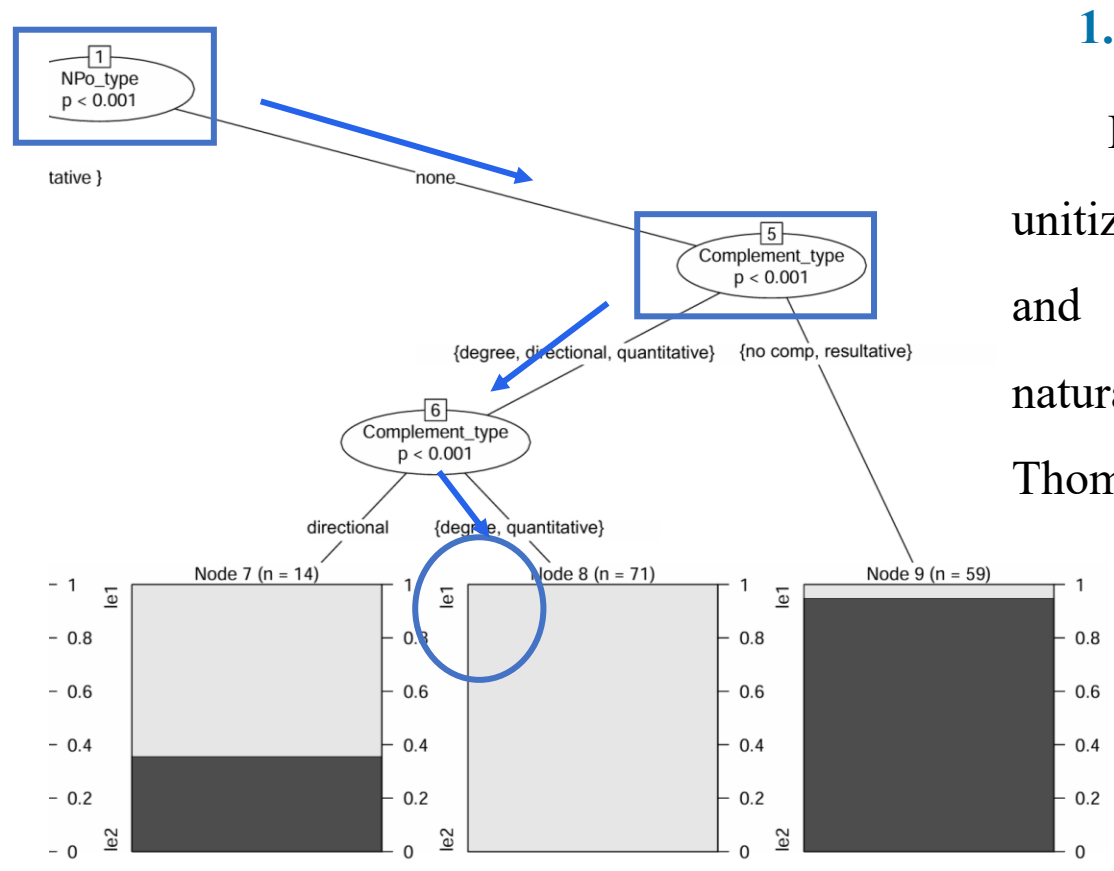


Fig. 6. CIT plot

1. *Le1* takes the TA function

Degree and quantitative complements impose explicit event unitization and internal delimitation, thereby strengthening telicity and facilitating the construction of a bounded event, which naturally licenses the perfective reading associated with *le1* (Li & Thompson, 1981; Shen, 1995), as shown in (12a).

quantitative complement

- (12) a. 她们 跑到 母亲 身边, 疲倦地 哭了, 几声,
They run-ARRIVE mother side tiredly cry-LE several-CL
便 歪歪斜斜地 倒下去。
then staggeringly-ADV fall-down-go
'They ran to Mother and wept weakly before crumpling to the floor.'

4.1.2 TA function of Chinese particle *le*

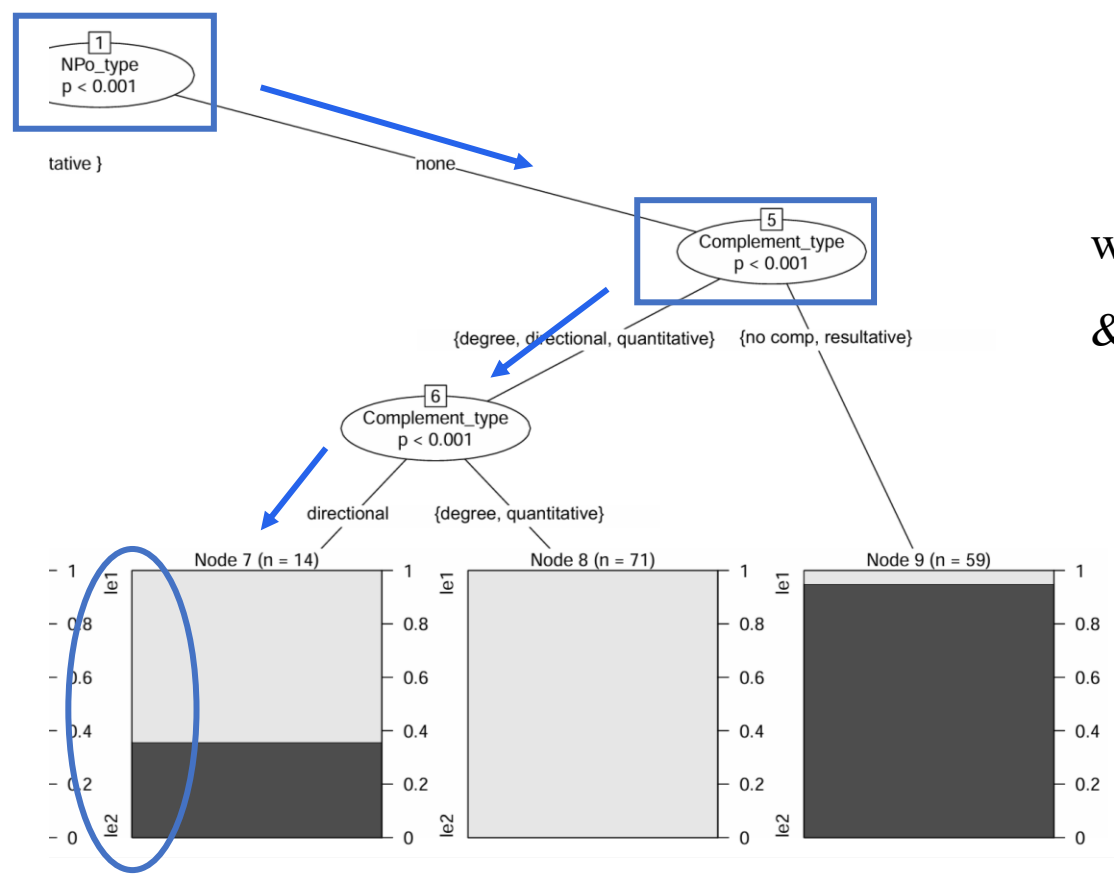


Fig. 6. CIT plot

2. Both *le1* and *le2* take the TA function

In such cases, *le1* highlights holistic event completion (12b), whereas *le2* foregrounds the emergence of a resultant state (12c) (Li & Thompson, 1981; Jing-Schmidt et al., 2022).

- (12)b. 她把我抱了₁起来，鸡啄米般地亲吻着我。
She BA 1SG hold-LE-up pecking-rice-like-ADV kiss-PRG 1SG
‘She **picked** me up and kissed me, like a hen-pecking rice.’
- c. 妻子的号叫声也从院子里传₂来了。
Wife GEN scream-sound also from yard inside transmit come LE
‘His wife’s tormented screams from the yard **pounded** in his ears.’

directional complements

4.1.2 TA function of Chinese particle *le*

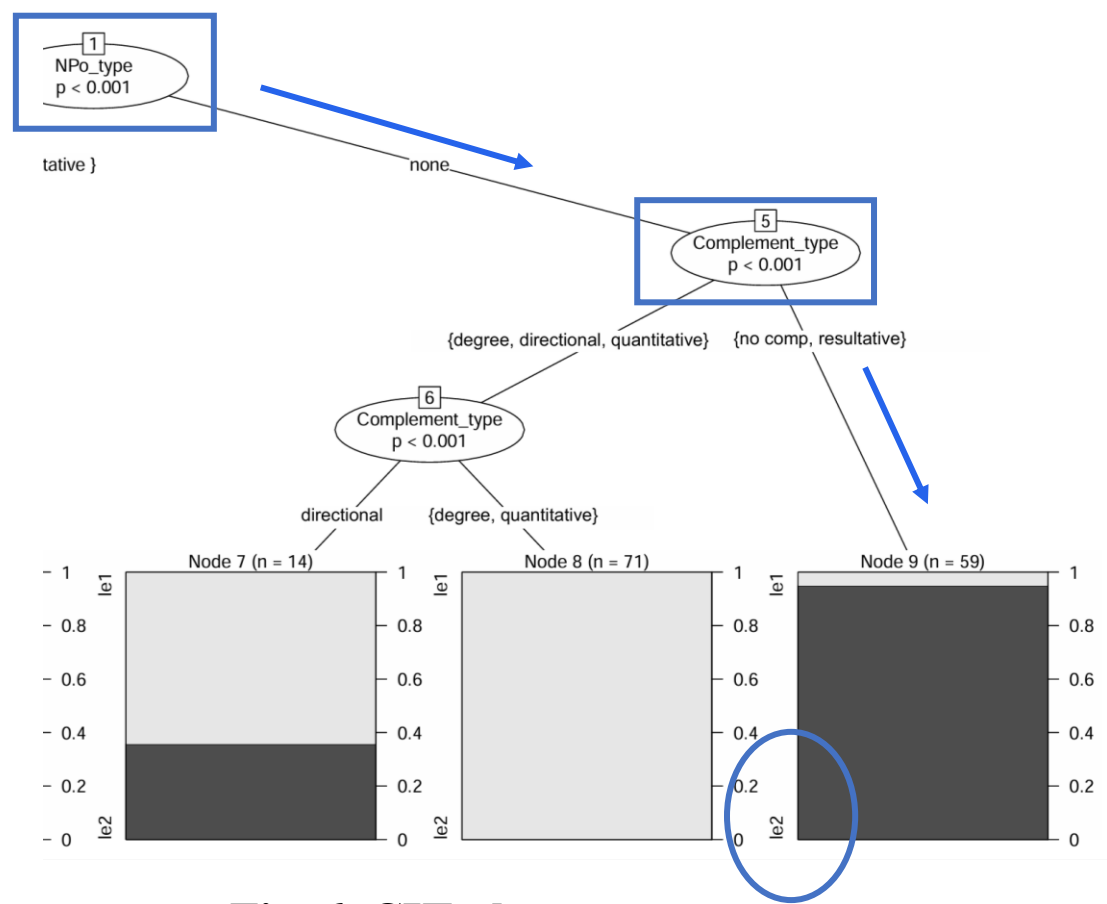


Fig. 6. CIT plot

3. *Le2* takes the TA function

When there is no complement but a time adverbial, as shown in (13a), the time adverbial and *le2* collaborate to signal the completion of the described event and stress the change of state, thereby yielding a tense-aspect function.

- (13) a. 这种 大茶馆 现在已经 不 见了₂。 no complement
This-CL big-teahouse now already NEG exist LE
'One **doesn't** find large teahouses like this anymore.'

4.1.2 TA function of Chinese particle *le*

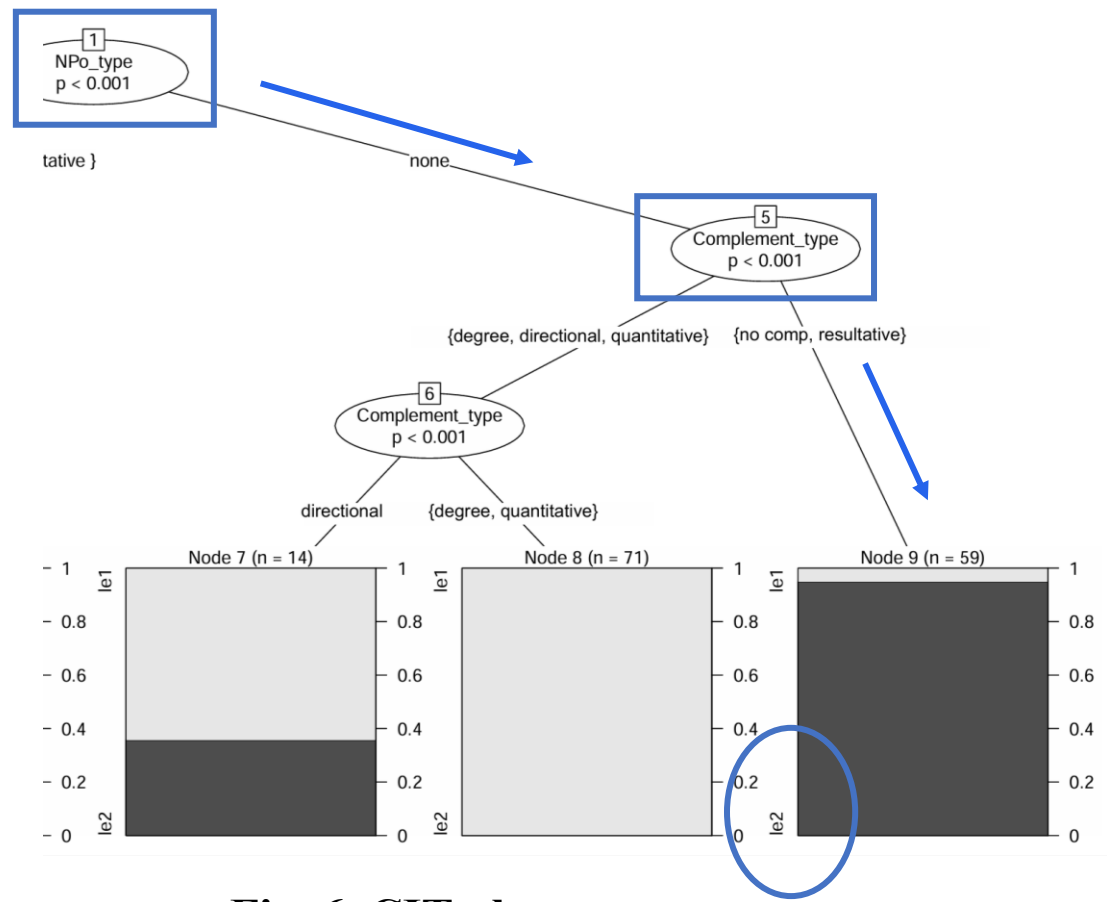


Fig. 6. CIT plot

Le2 takes the TA function

When there is a resultative complement, as shown in (13b), the resultative complement encodes a change of state, and *le2* achieves a tense-aspect function by confirming the factual realization of this change.

- (13) b. 彭蠡 愣住了₂。resultative complement
- Pengli stunned-RES LE
- ‘Peng Li was stunned.’

4.2 English correspondences of TAME functions of Chinese Particle *le*

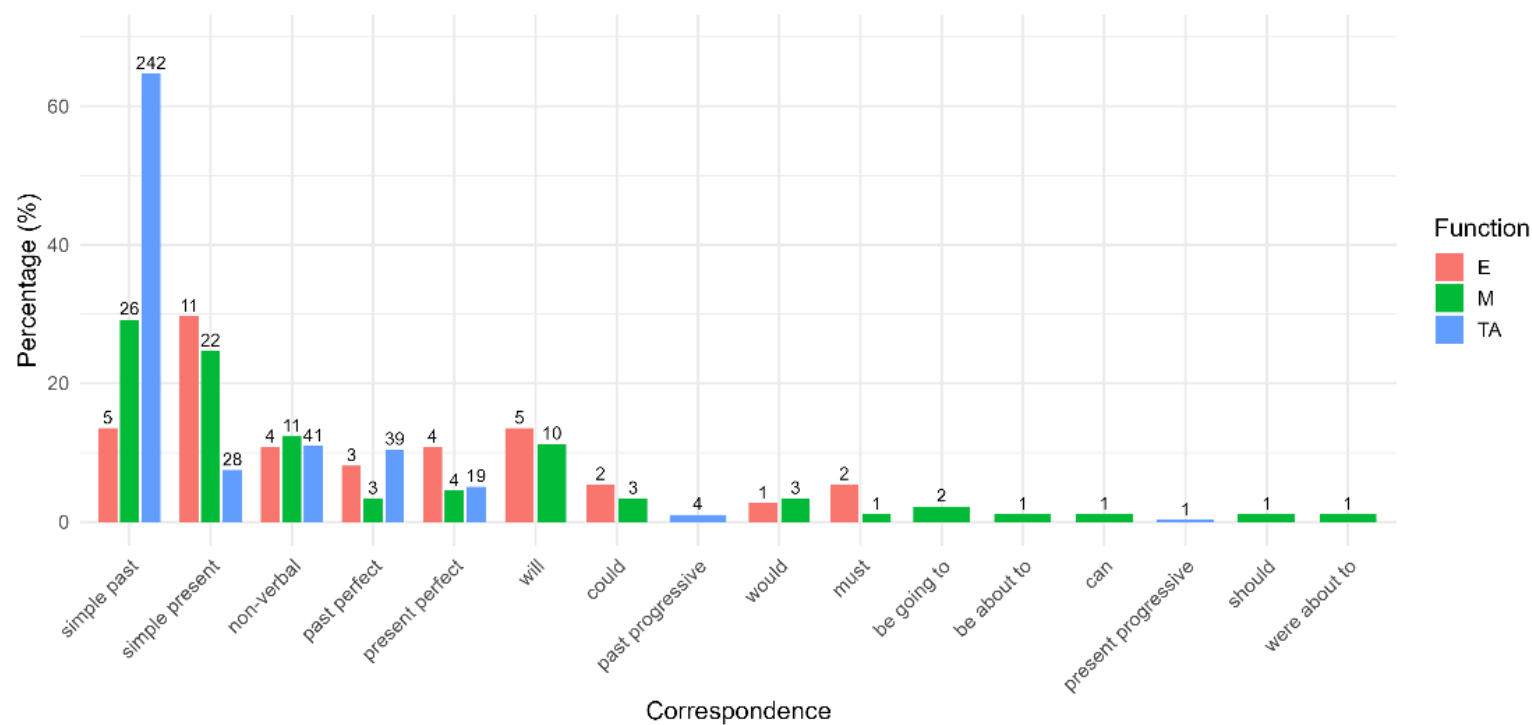


Fig. 7. English correspondences of TAME functions of Chinese Particle *le*

TA function of *le*:

simple past (64.88%), past perfect (10.46%), simple present (7.51%), etc.

Modal function of *le*:

modal expressions (26.44%), simple past (29.89%), simple present (24.14%), etc.

Evidential function of *le*:

simple present (27.5%), present perfect (12.5%), simple past (12.5%), will (12.5%), past perfect (10%), must (5%), could (5%), would (2.5%), etc.

4.2 English correspondences of TAME functions of Chinese Particle *le*

TA function of *le*:

Simple past (64.88%): The overwhelming preference for the simple past confirms previous findings that the English simple past is the closest functional equivalent of Chinese *le* (Zhao & Shen, 1984; Chu, 2012). This correspondence reveals Chinese *le* primarily marks the realization of a bounded event (Zhang, 2010) and the event time is located in the past, whose function is similar to the simple past (Chu, 2012)

Past perfect (10.46%): The past perfect, the second most frequent correspondence, is used when the completed event marked by *le* precedes another past event in the discourse.

Simple present (7.51%): The simple present typically occurs when the focus shifts from the completed event to the resultant state, expressing the state as a present fact.

4.2 English correspondences of TAME functions of Chinese Particle *le*

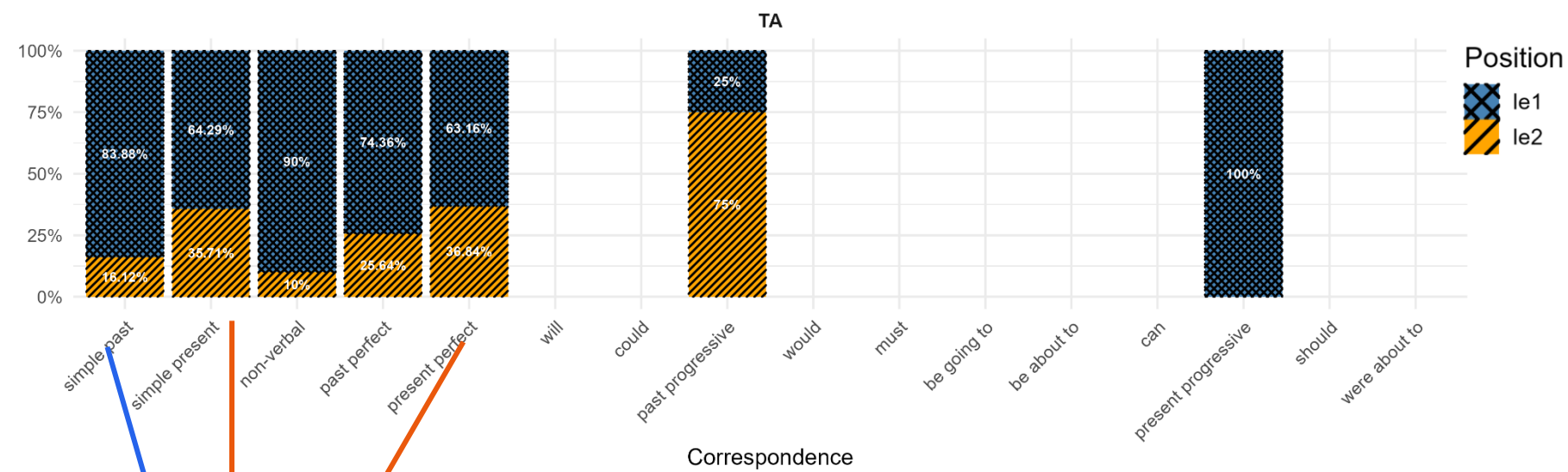


Fig. 8. *le1* vs. *le2* contribution of TA function

le1 is primarily aligned with past bounded event realization (cf.(11a-b));
le2 is more strongly associated with present relevance and resultant state interpretation (Li & Thompson, 1981), as shown in Examples (12b) and (13a-b).

4.2 English correspondences of TAME functions of Chinese Particle *le*

Modal function of *le*:

English lacks an equivalent grammatical category and consequently decomposes the modal function of *le* into tense-aspect forms and modal expressions (26.44%);

Simple past (29.89%) & simple present (24.14%): Narrative texts in English tend to foreground an objective, report-like structure in which events are presented as relatively detached from the speaker's subjective engagement (Xia & Wang, 2026).

4.2 English correspondences of TAME functions of Chinese Particle *le*

Evidential function of *le*:

English distributes the evidential meaning of *le* rather than encoding it with a dedicated marker: simple present (27.5%), present perfect (12.5%), simple past (12.5%), will (12.5%), past perfect (10%), must (5%), could (5%), would (2.5%), etc.

The predominance of the **simple present** and **present perfect** reflects the interactive nature of *le*, especially *le*₂, which marks the speaker's immediate awareness based on direct evidence and directs the hearer's attention to a newly established situation. This accords with previous accounts that *le*₂ indexes the speaker's subjective presence in a shared discourse space and serves to update the hearer's knowledge state (Wang et al., 2009; Liu, 2016; Xu, 2016).

By contrast, correspondences such as the simple past, past perfect, *will*, and epistemic modals (*must*, *could*, and *would*) mainly occur when *le* expresses inferential evidence.

5. Discussion: Grounding features of Chinese particle *le*

The multifunctionality of grammatical forms arises from the differential profiling of grounding elements within a unified grounding configuration (Kratochvílová, 2019).

The Chinese particle *le* can take tense-aspect-modality-evidentiality (TAME) functions, and then ground the propositions in time reality, epistemic reality and evidential reality.

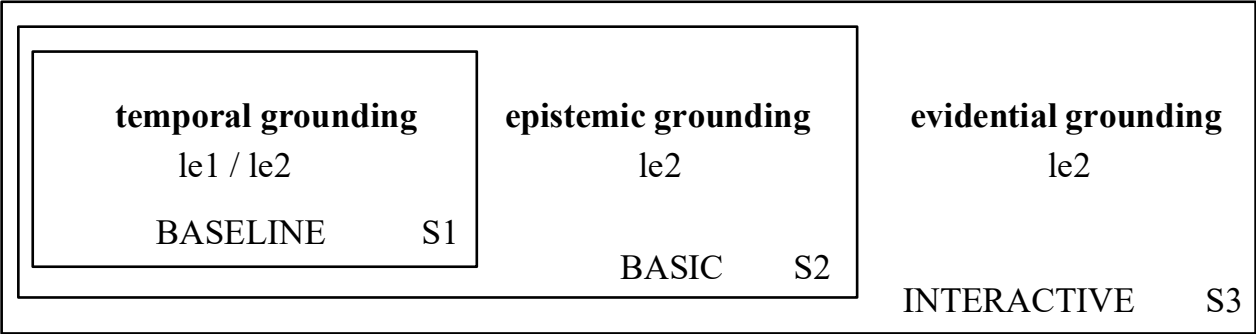


Fig. 9. The grounding function of Chinese Particle *le*

5. Discussion

In **temporal grounding**, the speech moment serves as the deictic center for temporal reference and typically points to a past event, while temporal adverbials, telicity of predicates, and other contextual information contribute to establishing the reference time against which events are construed as bounded or completed.

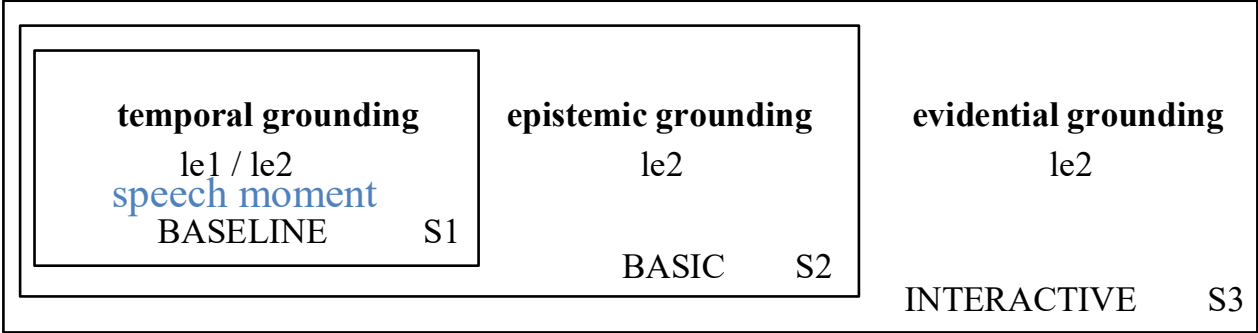


Fig. 9. The grounding function of Chinese Particle *le*

5. Discussion

When *le* expresses **modal meanings**, its grounding shifts from temporal reality to epistemic reality. In this case, the proposition is no longer primarily located through temporal reference, but is instead evaluated by the speaker in the current communication situation, yielding a speaker-oriented anchor.

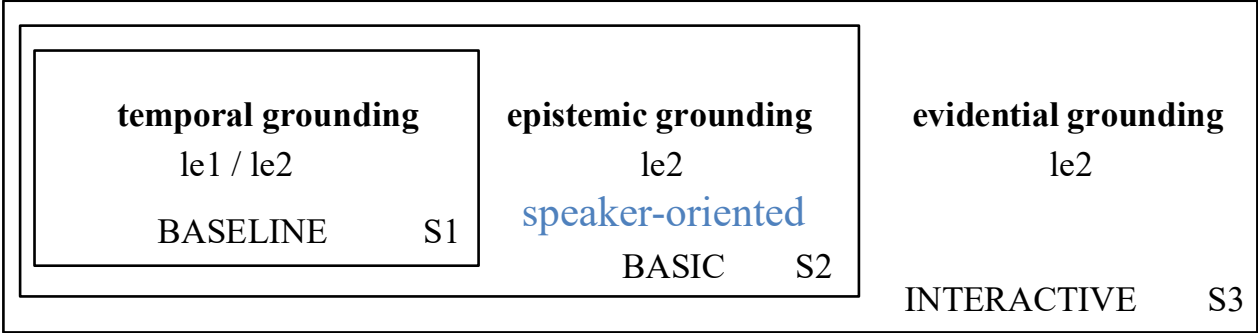


Fig. 9. The grounding function of Chinese Particle *le*

5. Discussion

When *le* takes **evidential function**, it represents a higher level of interactive grounding. At this level, *le* is no longer centered on events or speaker’s judgement, but on the evidential basis of the proposition, which is derived from evidence available in the immediate communication situation and negotiated as shared knowledge, yielding an interaction-oriented anchor.

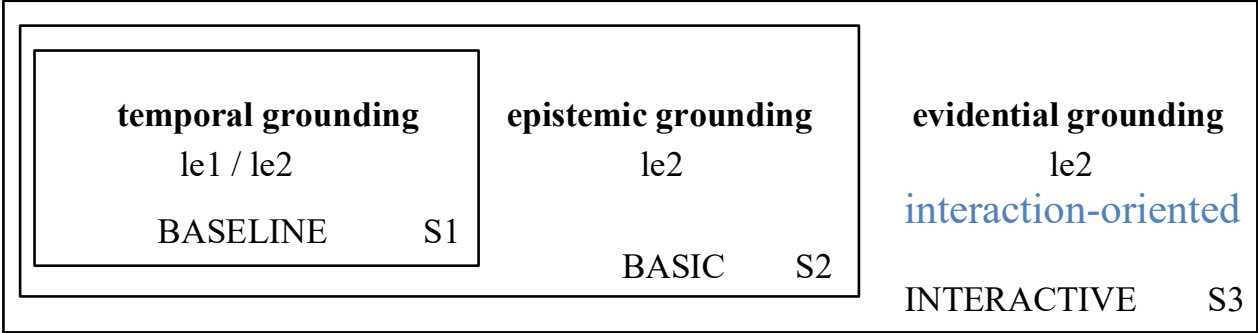


Fig. 9. The grounding function of Chinese Particle *le*

5. Discussion

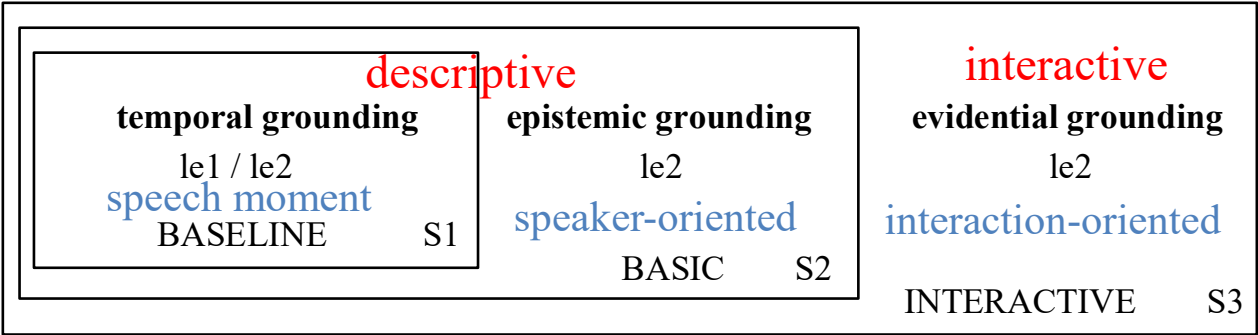


Fig. 9. The grounding function of Chinese Particle *le*

The TAME functions of the Chinese particle *le* are evoked by different aspects of ground, thus anchoring the propositions into different domains of reality. Accordingly, *le* exhibits both descriptive grounding and interactive grounding.

Findings

First, Chinese particle *le* denotes TAME functions. Among these, temporal-aspectual function is distributed between the *le1* and *le2* positions, whereas modal and evidential functions are mainly realized through the different usage patterns of *le2*.

Second, in English correspondences, *le* is rendered by tense-aspect forms and modal expressions. It proves that Chinese integrates TAME within the single marker *le*. English, by contrast, tends to maintain a clearer separation between the objective representation of the event and the speaker's epistemic evaluation.

Third, *le* displays both descriptive and interactive grounding features, with the speaker or the speaker-addressee interaction at speech moment serving as the anchor.

Contribution

These findings support a unitary account of *le* as a multifunctional grounding element whose descriptive and interactive functions jointly contribute to successful communication. More broadly, the study illustrates how parallel corpus evidence and multivariate analysis can advance usage-based explanations of grammatical multifunctionality.

Limitation / Future studies

However, several limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged. First, while CIT modeling identifies key predictors of governing the TAME functions of *le*, it cannot account for all pragmatic, sociolinguistic, or discourse-level factors. Second, the analysis relies on textual data, which may not fully capture actual usage of *le* in spoken contexts.

Glossary

1PL = first person plural

1SG = first person singular

2SG = second person singular

2SG.HON = second person singular
honorific

3SG = third person singular

ADV = adverbial

BA =bǎ (把)

CLF = classifier

COMP = complement

DE = de (的/得)

EMPH = emphatic marker

EXP = experiential

FOC = focal marker

GEI = gěi (给)

GEN = genitive

LOC = locative marker

NEG = negative

PRG = progressive

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THANKS!

Any questions or suggestions are welcome.

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