

A categorial grammar for Chinese mood and aspect particles

Stephany Qiōuyì Lu

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1 Introduction

Although Chinese and English are both SVO languages, there are a number of key differences between their syntax systems. One of the most notable differences is that Chinese has rich system of mood and aspect but lacks tense; mood and aspect are represented via particles. In this paper, I will propose categories for these particles and show how they integrate with existing categories for Chinese.

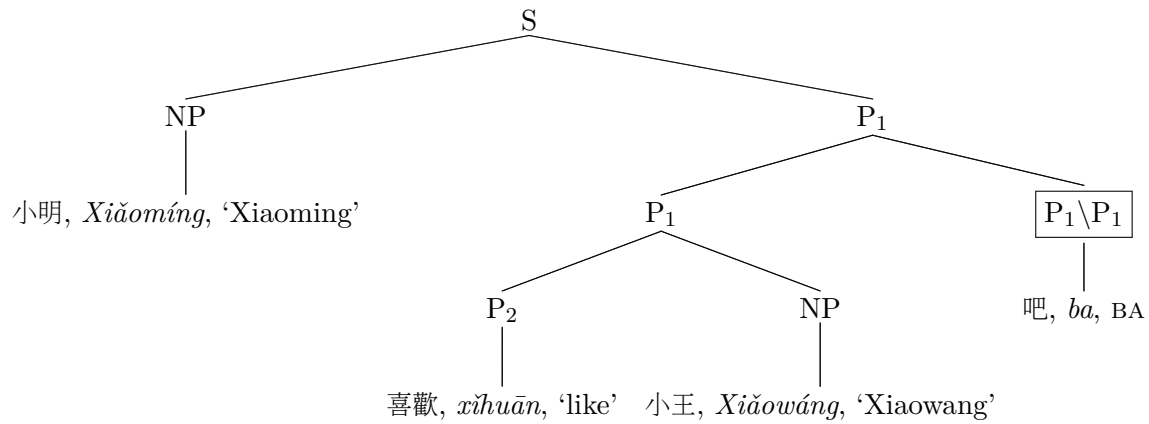
2 Mood

For the purpose of this paper, I will ignore non-phrase final mood particles, such as preverbal 還 *hai* ‘PENDING’. Instead, I will focus on phrase-final mood particles, as the majority of mood particles in Chinese occur in that location. A representative example is 吧 *ba*, which I will gloss as BA; BA expresses that a situation is probable or the likely situation.

There are two possible options for the analysis of phrase-final mood particles. However, as I will show, $S \setminus S$ is the only option that accurately describes the syntactic location of the mood particle.

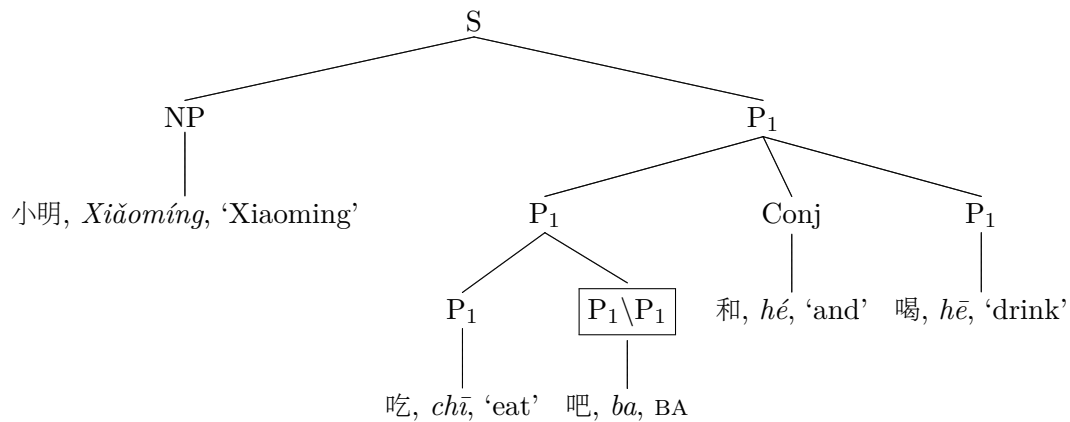
The first option is to analyze the mood particles as a post-verbal particle with the category $P_1 \setminus P_1$. This analysis would give us the following syntactic structures:

(1) ‘Xiaoming probably likes Xiaowang.’



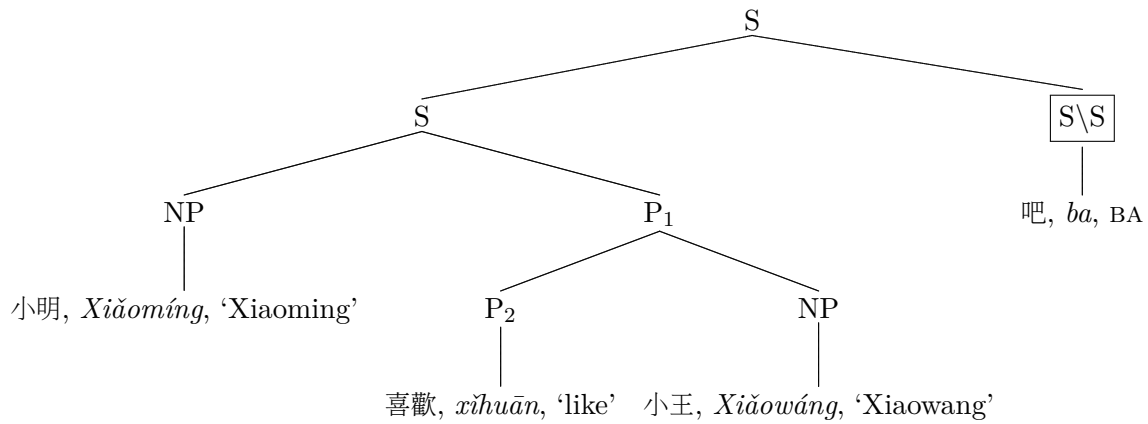
If mood particles are in the P₁\P₁ category, then we would expect conjunctions such as the following to be grammatical:

(2) *‘Xiaoming probably ate and drank.’



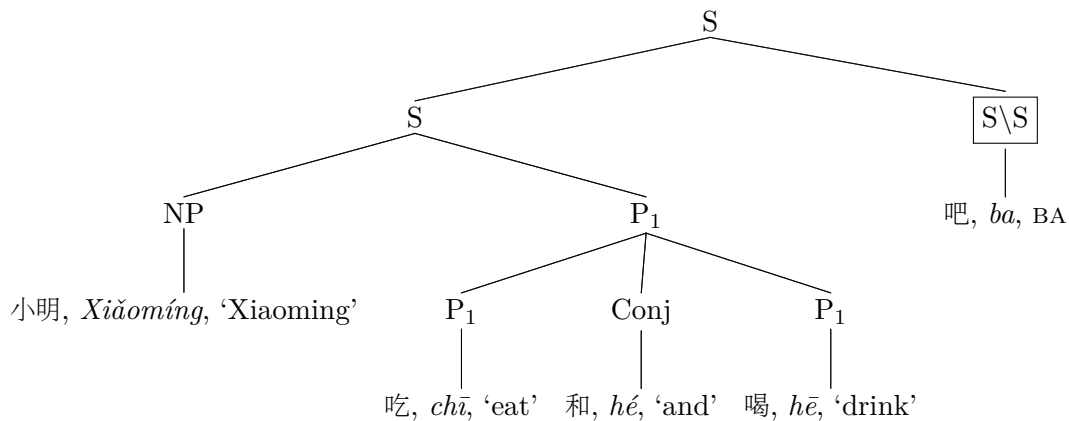
As these mood particles can only occur in a phrase-final position, (2) is ungrammatical. However, S\S categorization of mood particles can circumvent this situation and produce the correct syntactic structure:

(3) ‘Xiaoming probably likes Xiaowang.’



It would be impossible to construct (2) with BA classified as an S\S particle, as the necessary structures do not exist around it in the syntactic tree. Instead, BA would attach at the phrase-final position, which is the only place in the utterance where its arguments are satisfied:

(4) ‘Xiaoming probably ate and drank.’

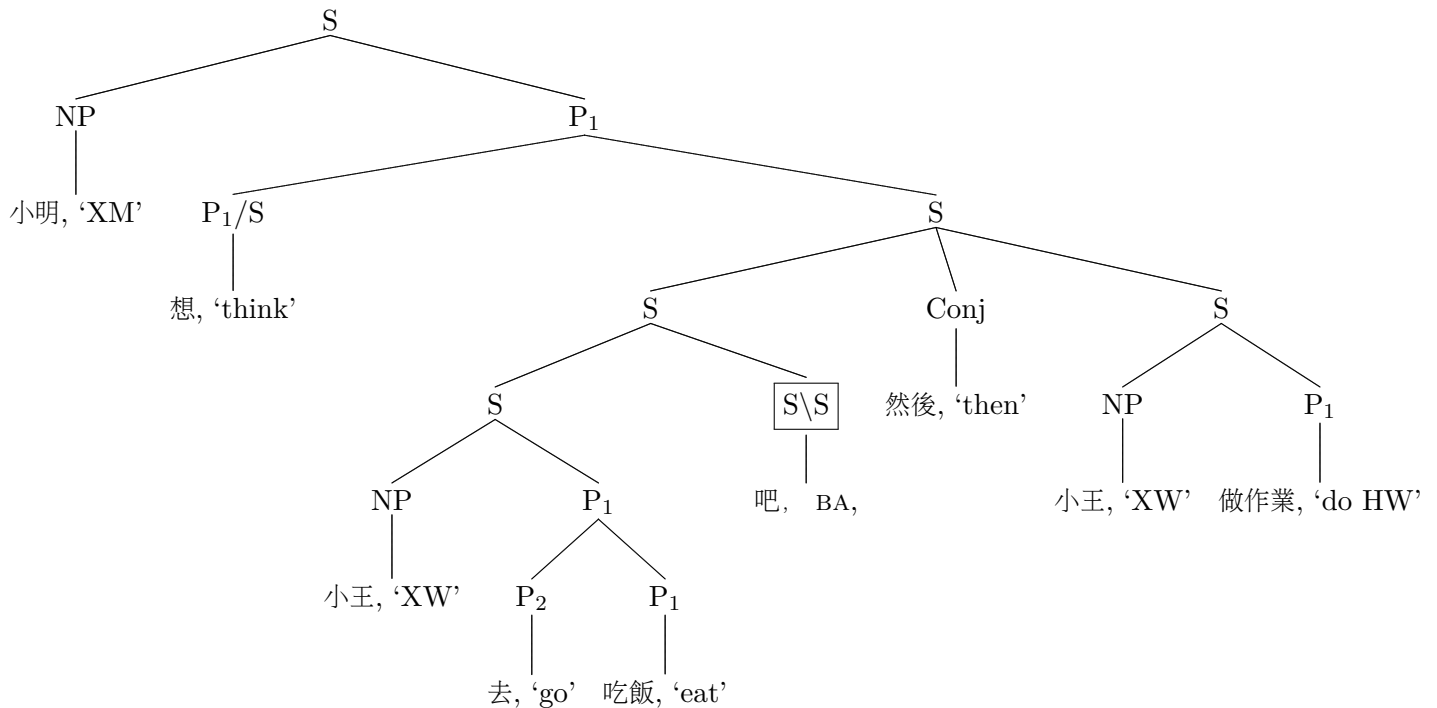


Thus, phrase-final mood particles can only fall into the S\S category. This analysis also supports the observation that phrase-final particles do not have to occur in sentence-final positions, but may be embedded in the middle of a sentence:

(5) 小明想小王去吃飯吧，然後小王做作業。

Xiǎomíng xiǎng Xiǎowáng qù chī fàn ba, ránhòu Xiǎowáng zuò zuòyè.

‘Xiaoming thinks Xiaowang probably eats, and then Xiaoming does homework.’



Other coordinating conjunctions, such as 或者 *huòzhě* ‘or’ and 但是 *dànshì* ‘but’, may also be used to link the two S structures.

3 Aspect

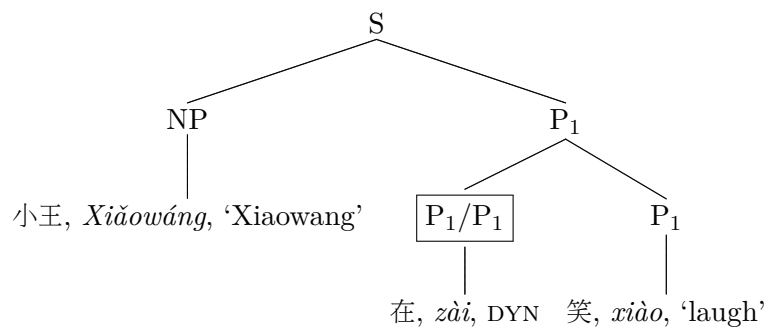
Chinese does not have grammatical tense, but rather makes use of a number of aspect markers. While tense describes an event in terms of its time relation with other events, aspect describes the manner of how an event occurred. Yang & Bateman (2002: 2) describe seventeen simple primary aspect forms, with an additional seven secondary types of aspect. The various aspect particles can come before the verb (preverbal), after the verb (postverbal), or can surround the verb, and have various options for categorization depending on their position as a preverbal or postverbal marker and depending on whether they follow a P₁ or a P₂. In the following discussion, I will focus on four of the more common aspect particles, which are summarized in Table 1 along with the abbreviations I will be using throughout the discussion.

Particle	Pinyin	Description	Abbreviation
了	le	Perfective	PERF
過	guo	Experiential perfective	EXP
着	zhe	Static	STAT
在	zài	Dynamic	DYN

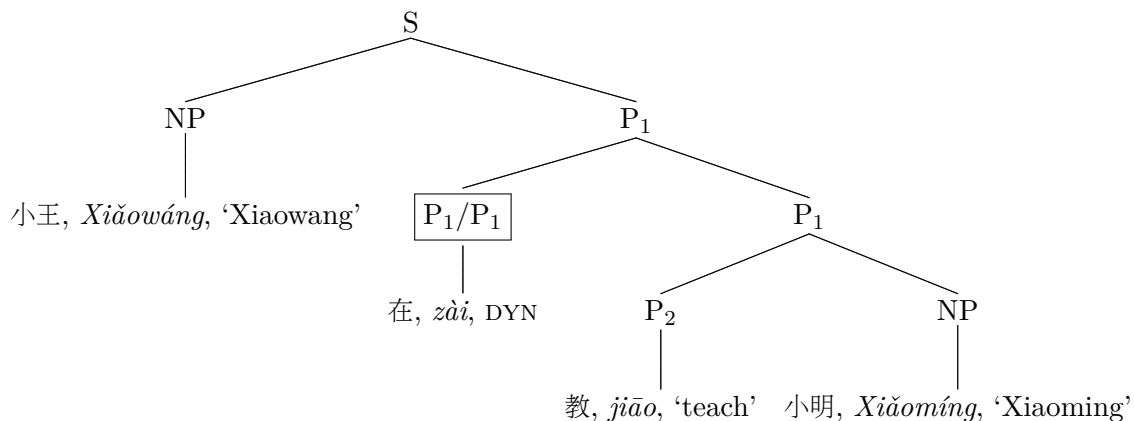
Table 1: Summary of Chinese aspect and adverb particles.

The dynamic marker 在 is an imperfective marker that expresses that an action is ongoing or in progress (Klein et al. 2000: 726); it contrasts with 着, another imperfective marker, in that 着 expresses a situation that is seen to be more static and enduring, i.e. information that would be considered background information (e.g. 他穿着衣服 *Tā chuānzhe yīfu* ‘He is wearing clothes’, is a description of a state that is taken for granted as background information, as in a description of what a person looks like, versus 他在穿衣服 *Tā zài chuān yīfu* ‘He is wearing [putting on] clothes’, which expresses the current action that he is putting on clothing). *Zài* is consistently P_1/P_1 between P_1 and P_2 verbs:

(6) (a) ‘Xiaowang is laughing.’



(b) ‘Xiaowang is teaching Xiaoming.’



The markers 了 *le* and 過 *guò* are both perfective markers; the perfective marker 了 *le* “presents a situation in its entirety” (Klein et al. 2000: 724); a sense of completion may accompany the verb phrase if the verb itself is one that encodes temporal boundaries, such as 撞 *zhuàng* ‘crash, break’; if the verb does not have a clear temporal boundary, such as 游泳 *yóuyǒng* ‘swim’, then *le* indicates termination of a scene rather than completion. Meanwhile, the experiential perfective marker 過 *guò* indicates that the event has been experienced at some point and typically indicates an experience that occurred in the past. The events indicated by 過 *guò* do not bleed into the present timeframe.

Klein et al. (2000) provide the following two contrastive examples to illustrate the differences between 了 *le* and 過 *guò*:

- (7) (a) 利斯打破了一個杯子。

Lìsī dǎpò-le yíge bēizi.

‘Lisi broke a cup [and the pieces are still on the ground].’

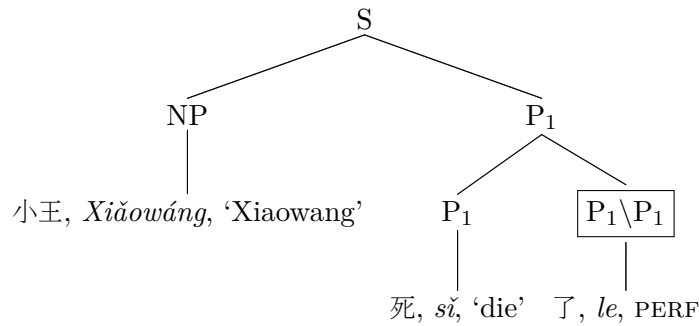
- (b) 利斯打破過一個杯子。

Lìsī dǎpò-guò yíge bēizi.

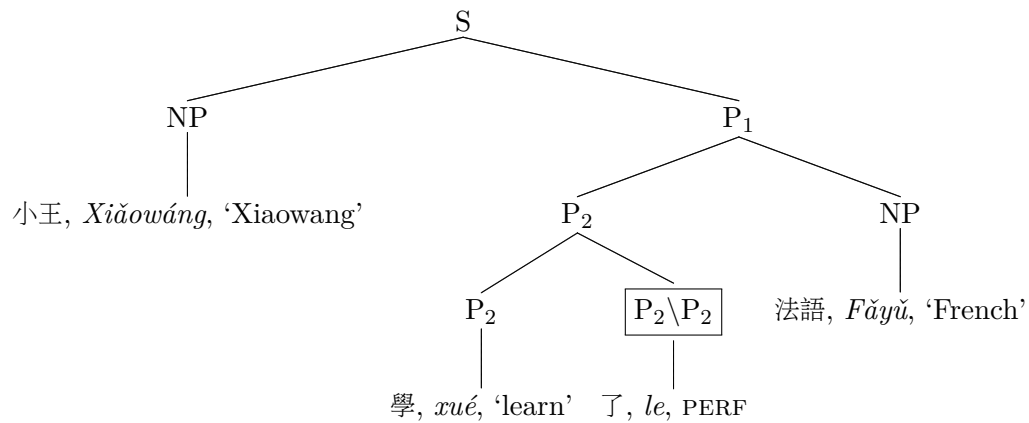
‘Lisi once broke a cup [in the past; there are no broken pieces on the ground].’

The perfective marker 了 *le*, experiential perfective marker 過 *guò*, and static marker 着 *zhe* behave in the same way syntactically. The postverbal aspect particles fall into two categories: $P_1 \setminus P_1$ following a P_1 , and $P_2 \setminus P_2$ following a P_2 .

(8) (a) ‘Xiaowang died.’

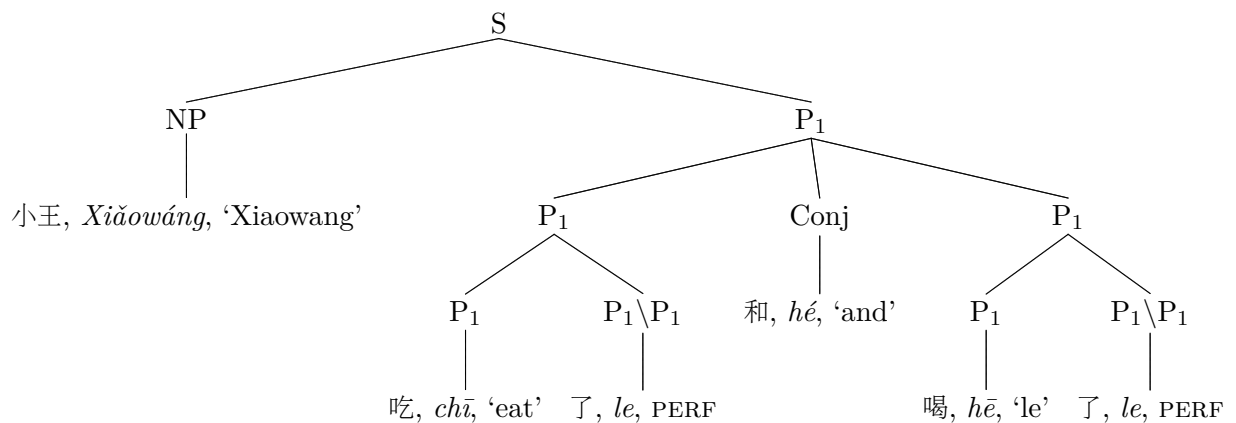


(b) ‘Xiaowang learned French.’



The question then arises as to whether coordination tests can be used on aspect particles as they were with mood particles. The structures can be successfully coordinated, as demonstrated by the following examples:

(9) ‘Xiaowang ate and drank.’



However, aspect particles cannot be coordinated with each other. The fact that they cannot be coordinated with each other may be a semantic or lexical issue rather than a syntactic one—verbs may only occur with one aspect particle and may not have multiple aspect particles attached.

4 Conclusion

I have proposed a number of categories for various particles in Chinese and have provided examples supporting my proposals. Table 2 summarizes these proposals:

Category	Options	Notes	Examples
Mood Particles	$S \setminus S$	phrase-final	吧, 嘛, 啦
Aspect Particles	$P_1 \setminus P_1$ P_1 / P_1	Post-verbal Pre-verbal	了, 過, 着 在

Table 2: Summary of proposed categories.

5 Bibliography

- Klein, Wolfgang, Ping Li & Henriette Hicks. 2000. Aspect and assertion in Mandarin Chinese. *Natural language & linguistic theory* 18: 723–770.
- Shyu, Shu-ing. 1995. *The syntax of focus and topic in Mandarin Chinese* (doctoral dissertation). University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.
- Yang, Guowen and John A. Bateman. 2002. The Chinese aspect system and its semantic interpretation. In *Proceedings of the 19th international conference on Computational linguistics (COLING '02)*, Vol. 1, pp. 1–7. Association for Computational Linguistics, Stroudsburg, PA, USA.