

# On the Identification of Overseas Chinese Language Corpora through the Function Word “Le” in A Rapid Self-Study of Chinese without a Teacher

Yuxin Zhou \*

Department of Chinese Language and Literature, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, 999077, China

\* Corresponding Author Email: 24458783@life.hkbu.edu.hk

**Abstract.** During the Japanese colonial period, the Korean Peninsula was profoundly influenced by the language education policies of the Japanese colonial authorities, leading to the near collapse of official Chinese language education. Then, a number of privately compiled self-study Chinese textbooks emerged among the populace, many of which were titled with terms such as “self-comprehension” or “independent study”. This study takes a book reflecting the characteristics of Beijing Mandarin, *A Rapid Self-Study of Chinese without a Teacher* (1929), as an object and analyses it textually, it analyzes how “le” is used in conversation, and contrasts it (both synchronically and diachronically) to native Beijing Mandarin material, with a view to testing if the functional uses of “Le” found in this book are indicative for Beijing Mandarin. The present study shows that the conflation of the function word “de” with “le”, as well as the redundant sentence final “le 2” after the negative word “méi”, is indicative of systematic difference between the use of “le” in *Self-Study* and standard Chinese, with the major causes for such deviation being the complexity and variation in Chinese grammar and the negative transfer from the authors’ native language. This suggests that researchers studying 20th-century Northern Mandarin need to carefully select overseas Chinese-language materials.

**Keywords:** Korean Japanese occupation period, Chinese language textbooks, “le”, Beijing Mandarin.

## 1. Introduction

Since ancient times, the Korean Peninsula has attached great importance to Chinese language education, developing a well-established system of Chinese teaching and producing abundant instructional achievements. During the Joseon period, Chinese was regarded as the primary foreign language. From *Laoqida* and *Piaotongshi* of the Yuan-Ming period to nineteenth-century textbooks such as *Qizhe Yipi*, *Huayincuoyao*, and *Ni Ne Guixing*, a wide variety of Chinese-language textbooks with rich content were compiled. These works played an important role in the history of Chinese language education in Korea and faithfully recorded the features of Chinese at different historical stages. As such, they constitute valuable linguistic materials for the study of the history of modern Chinese, especially the history of Northern Mandarin.

After 1910, Korea came under Japanese colonial rule. To strengthen colonial education, the Japanese government successively promulgated four Korean Education Ordinances, making Japanese the official language of Korea. As a result, official Chinese-language education in Korea was almost completely suspended before the 1930s. However, due to the practical needs arising from trade and cultural exchanges with China, there remained a strong demand for learning Chinese among the general population. Consequently, a number of self-compiled, self-study Chinese conversation textbooks emerged, many of which featured terms such as “self-comprehension” or “independent study” in their titles. Wang Weihui noted that this group of Chinese textbooks may represent some of the earliest modern-style Chinese oral textbooks compiled and printed overseas, and that they are “markedly different in appearance” from the Chinese textbooks of the Korean Li Dynasty [1].

Since all this material was distributed amongst the people, it would be very difficult to gather up and compile it together. Therefore, it is only after approximately 2010 when the Korean scholar Park

Jae-yeon, together with A-young Kim collected some parts of this material and released them sequentially in two volumes entitled *Chinese Conversation Textbooks* and *Chinese Conversation Textbooks: Sequel*. In 2018, Peking University officially published the critical edition of *Japanese-colonial-period Korean Chinese textbooks* based on *Chinese Conversation Textbooks*. So far, the research on them, including their physical digging up in China, is still quite new in Chinese studies.

*A Rapid Self-Study of Chinese without a Teacher* (hereafter abbreviated as *Self-Study*) was first published in 1929. Liu Yun has pointed out that “the period of Japanese colonial rule was a crucial transitional stage between the late imperial and modern eras” [2]. Examining the linguistic phenomena in *Self-Study* is therefore of great significance for the study of the evolution of modern Chinese as well as Beijing Mandarin in the twentieth century.

However, as a self-compiled folk textbook, *Self-Study* contains many errors and inaccuracies. Firstly, there are numerous miswritten characters, such as writing “您” as “悠,” “两” as “兩,” and “删” as “刚,” which raises doubts about the reliability of the linguistic data in this book. Fang Yixin argues that when examining overseas Chinese-language materials, attention should be paid to “the colloquial components of Chinese in the materials and the components influenced by the author’s mother tongue” [3]. Yang Xinghong has also questioned the “reliability” of such overseas teaching materials. In *Self-Study*, the author identifies several special uses of “le” that differ from Beijing Mandarin and Modern Chinese, such as the erroneous use of sentence-final “le” in interrogative sentences like “火轮船了么?( huǒ lún chuán le me)”, as well as the misuse of sentence-final “le” caused by the semantic contradiction between the negative word *méi* and the perfective marker *le* in sentences such as “还没卖完了(hái méi mài wán le)”.

The function word “le” plays a special grammatical role in Beijing Mandarin. The 19- and 20-th century was the age of rapid development of “le” in Beijing speech, with both phonetic weakening and expansion of grammatical functions being promising areas of study. The special uses of “le” enumerated above pose a question as to whether these represent true usage at the time, or are error influenced by the author’s native language. This paper concentrates on the special usages of “le” in *Self-Study* to offer some new evidence for studying 20th century Beijing Mandarin and modern transitional Chinese, and, in addition to this problem, that of choosing and testing overseas Chinese language instructional material.

This study takes the usage of “le” in *A Rapid Self-Study of Chinese without a Teacher* as its research object. The first edition of *Self-Study* was published in 1929, authored by Bai Songxi. The version used in this study is the 2018 edition published by Peking University Press as part of the *Collection of Rare Early Beijing Mandarin Texts* [2]. The focus is on the grammatical functions of “le,” including “le1” (dynamic particle) and “le2” (modal particle) in conversational texts, both of which fall within the scope of this study. Usages of “le” in vocabulary and phrases are not examined in this paper.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Research Status of Korean Chinese Textbooks during the Japanese Occupation Period

Since these materials were only recently unearthed, research on them in Chinese academia has just begun. The focus of current studies is, first, to discuss the value of these materials, and second, to examine the phonetic, lexical, and grammatical features reflected in the texts through specialized studies.

Regarding their research value, Wang Weihui was among the first to introduce to Chinese academia the significance of the publication of *Chinese Conversation Book* for the study of modern spoken Chinese, stating that it “may be the earliest batch of modern-style Chinese conversation textbooks printed overseas” [1]. Li Chunhong commented that these materials “possess an irreplaceable continuity in the history of early modern Chinese and Chinese language education” [4]. Li Xiaofeng argued that the Korean Chinese textbooks published during the Japanese occupation

were compiled during a period of change in the Chinese language; from the language used in these textbooks, one can not only observe aspects of overseas Chinese teaching at that time but also supplement linguistic data from the transitional period of Chinese language development [5].

Some scholars have raised doubts about the linguistic value of these materials. For example, Chen Ying, by examining *Huayu Jiaofan* and *Hanyu Dacheng*, pointed out that Korean Chinese textbooks from the Japanese occupation period were heavily influenced by Japanese Chinese teaching materials in terms of corpus features, and the Beijing Mandarin they reflect is not entirely authentic, posing challenges for corpus selection in research [6].

In terms of linguistic research, domestic studies have mainly consisted of these examining these materials in terms of individual books or specific linguistic features. For instance, Wu Siyuan conducted a monographic study on *Zhongyu Daquan*, noting that its phonetic section reflects the neutral tone, retroflex suffix phenomena, and tone sandhi rules in contemporary Beijing Mandarin; its vocabulary contains many colloquial and dialect words exhibiting erhua finals; and its grammar reflects some unique usages of “shi” sentences and “de” phrases [7]. Zhang Xuan statistically analyzed interrogative sentences in the ten Chinese textbooks included in the *Compilation of Chinese Conversation Textbooks from Japanese-Occupied Korea* and found that the syntactic forms of interrogatives show a trend of simplification; the interrogative markers were in a transitional stage of modern Chinese, with transitional features clearly observable in both interrogative particles and interrogative pronouns [8].

## 2.2. Current Research on the Usage of “Le” in Chinese Textbooks from Japanese-Occupied Korea

Hu Xiaodi examined sentence-final “le” in *Rapid Self-Study of Chinese* and identified four usages different from Modern Chinese, including “还没 (hái méi)+verb+了(le)”, “verb+着了(zhe le)”, sentence-final “noun + le”, and sentence-final “verb-object phrase + le” [9]. Zhang Yaxiao studied declarative sentence-final “le” in *Rapid Self-Study of Chinese*, interpreting it as indicating “a change of state” [10]. Feng Xiaoyu examined several errors in the usage of “le” in *Self-Study*, including the simultaneous use of “le” with the frequency adverb “一向(yí xiàng),” and the mutual exclusion between the “是...的(shì...de)” structure and “le” [11].

Overall, domestic research on Chinese textbooks from Japanese-occupied Korea remains limited, and these materials hold higher research value in phonology and grammar than in vocabulary. The use of “le” in grammar has received relatively more attention. A key issue for discussion is whether the special usages of “le” reflected in these materials represent authentic language or are the result of language acquisition errors. Based on the materials available to this study, no specialized research has yet focused on the usage of “le” in *Self-Study*. This paper reexamines the usage of “le” in *Self-Study*, focusing on special phenomena of “le”, and analyzes whether these usages can effectively reflect the features of 20th-century Beijing Mandarin.

## 3. The Usage of “Le” in A Rapid Self-Study of Chinese without a Teacher

According to its grammatical functions, scholars generally distinguish between “Le 1” and “Le 2”: “Le 1” is a dynamic particle that can appear within a sentence or at the end, indicating the completion of an action, while “Le 2” is a modal particle appearing at the sentence-final position.

### 3.1. “Le 1”

From the corpus, it can be seen that the dynamic particle “Le 1” in *Self-Study* mainly indicates the accomplishment of an action and has various tense-aspect values according to contexts. It may refer to something that is already finished in the past, such as “衣裳早已抽打了(yī shang zǎo yǐ chōu dǎ le; The clothes have long been whipped)”, or indicate that an action is going to be finished before some specified time in the future, as in “等一会儿, 我同那些金先生算请了给他车夫(Děng yī huǐr,

wǒ tóng nà xiē Jīn xiān sheng suàn qǐng le, gěi tā chē fū; Hold on, I'll settle it with those Jins and give him a tip for the cabbie)".

This usage is consistent with modern Chinese, demonstrating functional continuity with contemporary usage. The dynamic particle “Le 1” in *Self-Study* can effectively reflect the linguistic features of Chinese.

### 3.2. “Le 2”

As for the use of particle “Le” as a modal particle, there is no general agreement among scholars regarding its grammatical nature. In Wang Li’s view, it expresses a sense of determination; Lv Shuxiang and Zhu Dexi think it means change, indicating “the rise of a new situation”; Peng Xiaochuan and Zhou Shao regard it as being in an affirmative mood. According to the real data in *Self-Study*, this research also discovers that “Le 2” has several uses as well, when situated. Typical uses are that, for example, in a sentence like “昨天天气暖和了 (Zuótiān tiānqì nuǎnhuo le; Yesterday the weather turned warm)”, “Le ” indicates a change of state; and in an imperative sentence like “巧了 (Qiǎo le; What a coincidence)”, “Le ” indicates exclamation. Depending on the conversation context, it could also indicate the speaker’s subjective attitude: In responding sentence like “实在了 (Shízai le; Sure)”, “Le” here confirms or affirms the previous judgment while in “这是很贱了 (Zhè shì hěn jiàn le; This is really cheap)”, “Le” has a “deviative” meaning (there’s something wrong with my expectation of this judgment).

## 4. Special Phenomena of “Le” in A Rapid Self-Study of Chinese without a Teacher

In *Self-Study*, many usages of “Le” also appear that differ from those in modern Chinese.

### 4.1. Confusion between the Function Word “的(De)” and “了(Le)”

#### 4.1.1. “来了(lái le)”

a.(乙)你坐车来了么?

(甲)不是, 坐船来了。아니오. 뱌 타고 왔습니다.

Translation:

(Yǐ) Nǐ zuò chē lái le me? Did you take a car here?

(Jiǎ) Bú shì, zuò chuán lái le. No, I came by boat.

b.(下人)来了。你是那儿来的?

(金)我也奉天来了。나도 봉쳐서 왔쇼.

Translation:

(Xiàrén) Lái le. Nǐ shì nǎr lái de? (Servant) You've arrived. Where have you come from?

(Jīn) Wǒ yě Fèngtiān lái le. (Mr. Jin) I've come from Fengtian.

In modern Chinese, the directional verb “来(lái; come)” indicates movement from another location to the speaker's location, and is the opposite of “去 (qù; to go)”. “来了(láile; came)” is usually preceded by a noun or noun phrase, indicating that the person or object has moved across a spatial distance to reach the speaker's location. It emphasizes the arrival of the subject after the movement, such as “我来了 (Wǒ lái le; I came)” or “班车来了 (Bānchē lái le; The shuttle bus has arrived)”. Here, “le” indicates both an affirmative judgment about the subject's arrival and often suggests the emergence of a new situation.

If the focus is on the manner or starting point of the subject's movement, “来了(láile)” is not used; instead, “来的(láide)” is used. In example a, the usage of “verb-object phrase + 来了” to indicate someone arriving at a place using a certain means of transportation differs from modern Chinese. Modern spoken Chinese usually uses the structure “noun (subject of movement) + verb + noun (means of movement) + 来的” such as “我(是)坐车来的(I came by car)”. In example b, the usage of “place

noun + 来了” to indicate someone coming from a certain place also differs from modern Chinese. Modern spoken Chinese usually adds the preposition“从(cóng; from)” to indicate the starting point of the movement, such as“我(是)从奉天来的(I came from Fengtian)”.

An examination of Beijing dialect corpora, including *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *The Tale of Heroic Sons and Daughters*, also revealed no examples like (a) and (b). This paper argues that the reasons for examples (a) and (b) differing from Beijing dialect and modern Chinese are twofold: firstly, the subtle differences in the grammatical meanings of the Chinese function words “了(le)” and“的(de)” are difficult for second language learners to acquire; and secondly, the differences in grammatical structure between Chinese and Korean lead to learning errors.

Compare the grammatical meanings of “了(le)” and “的(de)”. “了(le)” indicates a change or the emergence of a new situation. “班车来了(The shuttle bus has arrived)” indicates that the shuttle bus had not arrived indicates a change or the emergence of a new situation.“的(de)” gradually formed in the predicative sentence structure “是...的(shì ...de)”, therefore “的(de)” indicates that the situation is inherently so, expressing affirmation and emphasis. In examples a and b of *Self-Study*, the intended meaning of the response sentences, “(It was) by boat” and “(It was) from Fengtian”, both affirm the movement that has already occurred, emphasizing the method or starting point of the movement. In standard Chinese, “的(de)” should be used instead of “了(le)”.

The grammatical differences between the native language and Chinese can also lead to errors in the use of Chinese function words. Observing the Korean translations of examples a and b, “坐船来了” and “我也奉天来了”, we can see the common character “왔”. “왔” is the past tense form of the verb “오다,” meaning “来了(came)”. Both “왔습니다” and “왔쇼” indicate the past tense of “来了(came)” with the former being a more formal, honorific form and the latter a more colloquial expression.

Example a, “비 타고 왔습니다”(I came by boat), has the structure “boat + ride + came.” Example b, “나도 봉쳐서 왔쇼”(I came from Fengtian), has the structure “I + Fengtian + came.” It can be observed that due to the differences in word order structure between Chinese and Korean, the Korean expressions “came by boat” and “came from Fengtian” directly convey the meaning of someone coming by a certain means of transport or from a certain place. The use of “来了” in examples a and b does not reflect the characteristics of Beijing dialect or modern Chinese, but rather a direct translation from Korean, resulting in an error caused by negative transfer in language learning.

#### 4.1.2. “了么(le me)”

c.(甲)你们多咱搬这了么?

로형 언제 이리로 반이하셨습니까?

Translation:

Nimen duózan bān zhè le me?; When did you move here?

d.(乙)你坐车来了么?

형님 차 타고 오셨습니까?

Translation:

Nǐ zuò chē lái le me?; Did you come by car?

e.(乙)火轮船了么?

화륜선이오니까?

Translation:

Huǒlúnchuán le me?; (Did you come) by steamboat?

f.(金)来了, 你是多咱到这儿了么?

왔습니다. 로형은 언제 이리 오셨습니까?

Translation:

Lái le, nǐ shì duózan dào zhèr le me?; You've arrived. When did you get here?

The error of confusing the usage of “的(de)” and “了(le)” also occurs in the interrogative sentences found in *Self-Study*. According to the literature, interrogative sentences formed with “verb/verb-object structure + 了么(le me)” are very common in Beijing dialect corpora, such as “下雪了么?(Has it snowed?)” (*Dream of the Red Chamber*) and “不要银子了么?(Don't you want the silver anymore?)” (*Dream of the Red Chamber*), where the particles “了(le)” and “么(me)” are used together. “Le” indicates a change in weather or transaction, and “me” expresses an interrogative tone. However, the usage in the four examples above is not common in Beijing dialect or modern Chinese, especially example e, where a noun is directly followed by “let me” to form an interrogative sentence, which does not conform to standard Chinese grammar.

Examples c, d, e, and f are actually interrogative sentences with nested “是...的(is...of)” structures. The speaker's purpose is to obtain the respondent's judgment on a specific background information of an action that has already occurred. Examples c and f inquire about the time of the displacement, while examples d and e inquire about the manner of the displacement. This error is actually caused by confusing “le” with the structural particle “de”. The misuse of “de” and “le” remains a common learning error among Korean students studying Chinese to this day [12].

#### 4.2. The Negative Word “没(Mei)” and the Particle “了(Le)” Indicating Completion.

g.(乙)都卖完了没有?

(甲)还没卖完了。hái méi mài wán le

Translation:

(yǐ) Dōu mài wán le méiyǒu? Have they all sold out?

(jiǎ) Hái méi mài wán le. They haven't sold out yet.

In modern Chinese, the negative word “没(méi)” indicates incompleteness, while the particle “了(le)” at the end of a sentence often indicates completion. Such sentences are common in Chinese language textbooks from the Japanese colonial period in Korea, such as “刚才我们在这儿,论起这件事还没办完了(We were here just now, and we haven't finished discussing this matter yet)” (*Self-Study Chinese Guide*). Wang Weihui and Li Chunhong both believe that the redundant use of “了” at the end of sentences is quite common in Korean Chinese language textbooks and is a common problem in learning Chinese in Korea. Even today, adding a superfluous “了” at the end of a sentence with the structure “没 + predicative structure” remains a major problem for international students in the early stages of learning Chinese, and is even considered a “mechanical error” [13].

#### 4.3. “Double le ” in Chineses Sentences

h.(金)你不是伤了风了么?

Translation:

Nǐ bú shì shāng le fēng le me? Aren't you having a cold?

i.(乙)可不是么, 看风水的人们都说那块儿好, 故此才在那儿立了坟了。

Translation:

Kě bú shì me, kàn fēngshuǐ de rénmen dōu shuō nà kuài er hǎo, gùcǐ cái zài nàr lì le fén le.

Exactly. All the feng shui masters said it was a prime location, so that's where we decided to lay the grave.

Beijing Mandarin contains a rich set of “double le” sentences, namely “V-le O-le,” where the first “le” is a verbal suffix and the second is a sentence-final particle. The following examines the relationship between the “double le” sentences in *Self-Study* and those in Beijing Mandarin from three aspects: syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.

From a syntactic perspective, Liu Xunning considers the original standard sentence pattern in Beijing Mandarin to be “V-le O-le” [14]. “Double le” sentences in Beijing Mandarin materials such as *Dream of the Red Chamber* include “小妇养的! 动了兵器了! (You little wretch! You've used weapons!)” and “这不都动了手了么! (Haven't they already come to blows!)” .“伤了风了(Caught

a cold)” and “立了坟了(Erected a tomb)” are also examples of the “V-le O-le” structure. The “double le” sentences in *Self-Study* conform to the syntactic characteristics of Beijing Mandarin “double le” constructions.

In terms of semantics, Chappell points out that the semantic feature of “double le” sentences is “to indicate affirmation of a specific presupposition, which assumes that a certain event has already occurred” [15]. In example h, “你不是伤了风了么(Didn't you catch a cold?)”, the speaker presupposes and affirms that the listener “caught a cold,” and uses the interrogative “double le” construction to seek confirmation from the listener. In example i, “故此才在那儿立了坟了(That's why a tomb was erected there)”, the speaker affirms the assumption in the question, “a tomb was erected in a certain place.” This shows that the double “le” sentences in *Self-Study* conform to the semantic characteristics of double “le” sentences in Beijing Mandarin.

From a pragmatic perspective, researchers generally consider sentences with double “le” to be closer to the usage of the perfective aspect. Several functions that can be confirmed as perfective across languages include resultative perfective, experiential perfective, durative perfective, and perfective functions indicating “present relevance” [16]. Subsequent studies have confirmed that Beijing Mandarin double “le” sentences exhibit resultative, experiential, durative, and prior-time uses. The resultative use indicates that an effect produced in the past continues into the present, and the current state is the result of a past event. In example h, the result of “伤风(catching a cold)” and example i, which describes the result of “立坟(erecting a tombstone)” both illustrate the resultative usage of double “le” sentences.

## 5. Conclusion

This study is concerned with the use of “了(le)” in the Beijing Mandarin textbook, *A Rapid Self-Study of Chinese without a Teacher* from Japanese-occupied Korea. By means of both synchronic as well as diachronic literature comparisons, it compares the grammatical function(s) that “Le1” and “Le2” perform in *Self-Study* with those they have in native Chinese, with particular attention paid to four special uses of “le”. The present work shows that “Le1” and “Le2” of *Self-Study* share a continuity to modern Chinese in expressing aspect and mood, and furthermore the syntactic forms and grammatical functions of “double le” sentences are consistent with those found in contemporary native Beijing Mandarin texts, can reflect many real properties of early 20th century Beijing Mandarin.

Yet some examples in *Self-Study* display systematic differences with native Chinese, for example the overuse of the two function words “的(de)” and “了(le).” This tends to occur when a sentence contains the directional verb “来(lái)” used to express how something is moving, or where it starts moving: where “来的(lái de)” is incorrectly translated to be “来了(lái le).” Similar errors are found in questions concerning when and how something moved, where “的么(de me)” is a misuse of “了么(le me).” In addition, the superfluous sentence-final “le2” after the negative “mei2(me)”, which is typical to Korean Chinese learners, and the underlying complexities and variability of Chinese word classes and grammatical functions as primary causes of such errors in *Self-Study* are, with a mix-ins of negative transfer from the authors’ native language. None of these are representative samples for actual Beijing Mandarin at that time. This implies that when researching the history of Northern Mandarin in the twentieth century, researchers need to choose and study the materials about it in the Chinese textbooks from foreign with caution.

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