An Event-based Account of Durative Phrases in Chinese and its Implications
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This paper investigates the interaction between lexical structure of verbs and adverbial modification with a special focus on Chinese durative phrases, which may measure either the duration of a process as in (1a) or the duration of a result state as in (1b) depending upon the (a)telicity of the situation. When a durative phrase modifies an atelic process with a transitive verb, the order between the durative phrase and the object NP may be Object-Durative or Durative-Object as is shown in (2). In contrast, when a durative phrase modifies a telic situation, the durative phrase can only follow the object as is shown in (3). Interestingly, when a durative phrase modifies an incremental theme sentence and occurs after the object NP, the sentence is ambiguous between a process-modifying or a result-modifying reading. But when the durative phrase appears before the object NP, only the process-modifying reading will survive. This is illustrated in (4a) and (4b).

Examples like those in (1)-(4) raise very interesting questions about the syntax and semantics of Chinese durative phrases. Are they lexically ambiguous as durative phrases in Spanish, French and German do (DINI & BERTINETTO (1995))? Why do process-modifying durative phrases allow both the Durative-Object order and the Object-Durative order, whereas result-modifying durative phrases only allow the Object-Durative order? How should incremental theme verbs be analyzed? The above questions will be the main focus of this paper. The answers to the above questions that I will defend will be the following. Lexical meanings of verbs should be decomposed in a way like what von Stechow (1995, 1996) and Ramchand (2003) have proposed and such decomposition is reflected in overt syntactic structures. Durative phrases are subject to a requirement to the effect that they modify only homogeneous propositions and their syntactic distribution all follows from this requirement. More precisely, durative phrases can be adjoined to every possible (maximal) projection, provided we can interpret them there without violating the homogeneity requirement. The decompositional analysis predicts that a durative phrase modifying a result state must be adjoined to the most deeply embedded result XP projection. (If it is attached to a higher projection, the homogeneity requirement will be violated.) Consequently, result-modifying durative phrases must follow the object NP. As for durative phrases modifying a process, the issue of homogeneity violation will not arise. Thus, both the durative-object and object-durative order are allowed. In fact, process-modifying durative phrase may even occur in a preverbal position though some additional requirement is needed. As for incremental theme sentences, I will argue that a now somewhat popular analysis that incremental theme verbs are not inherently telic as in
Kratzer (2003) is not able to account for the distribution of Chinese durative phrases. Instead, I return to the more traditional assumption that Incremental Theme verbs are inherently telic, arguing that the atelic reading of an incremental sentence is the consequence of a partitivity operator associated only with incremental theme verbs. It follows from this assumption that on the telic reading, incremental sentences only allow the object-durative order, but not the durative-object order, parallel to sentences with an achievement verb or a resultative compound verb. In addition to the above issues, I will also compare the distribution of German weider ‘again’, which motivates von Stechow’s original decompositional analysis of events with that of Chinese you ‘again’, which doesn’t seem to support a decompositional analysis (Chinese you ‘again’ is always in a preverbal position). I will argue that the difference between German and Chinese again is a consequence of different availability of syntactic access and semantic access of adverbial modification.

(1) a. Tamen yijing chi-le yi ge xiaoshi le
    ‘They have been eating for an hour.’
    b. Ta yijing jiehun san nian le
    ‘It has been three years since he got married.’
(2) a. Wo yijing mai choutoufu sanshi nian le
    ‘I have already been selling stinky Toufu for thirty years.’
    b. Wo yijing mai-le sanshi nian choutoufu le
    ‘I have already been selling stinky Toufu for thirty years.’
(3) a. Women yijing dida zhongdian shi fengzhong le
    ‘It’s already been ten minutes since we reached the destination.’
    b. *Women yijing dida shi fengzhong zhongdian le
    ‘It’s already been ten minutes since we reached the destination.’
(4) a. Ta (yijing) xie-le na-feng xin san tian le
    (i) ‘He has been writing that letter for three days.’
    (ii) ‘It has been three days since he finished writing that letter.’
    b. Ta xie-le san tian na-feng xin le
    "he write-Asp three day that-Cl letter Par"
‘He has already been writing that letter for three days.’