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## Curiouser and curiouser: On Mandarin qí le guài le

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**CURIOUSER AND CURIOUSER**  
**ON MANDARIN QÍ LE GUÀI LE**

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奇了怪了

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## FONTS

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The title “Curiouser and curiouser” is a reference to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s adventures in Wonderland*, originally published in 1865.

The calligraphy on the cover is my own.

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## TECHNICAL CONVENTIONS

### TYPOGRAPHY

*text* Examples of linguistic forms are set in italics. Mandarin forms are transcribed using the Hànyǔ Pīnyīn 汉语拼音 romanisation system (hereafter: Pinyin).

TEXT Text in small caps indicates: (a) in glossed examples, a grammatical element, or (b) in the main text, a technical term where it is defined.

汉字 Mandarin can be written with two types of character script: simplified and traditional. Simplified characters originated between 1956 and 1964 and are the current standard in China and Singapore. Traditional characters are used in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao, and prior to 1956 in all of China. In character quotations, the original script is kept. Otherwise, characters are written in simplified script.

### SYMBOLS

‘text’ Meanings are written between single quotation marks, for example *qíguài* ‘strange’.

[text] Square brackets indicate a phonetic transcription using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA 2020). Tones are transcribed using the tone-letter system devised by Chao (1930), as in e.g. [ɕu˥˥].

/text/ Phonological transcriptions are written between forward slashes, as in *shù* /ʃu˥˥/ ‘tree’.

|text| Vertical bars indicate a feature, either phonological, like |falling|; or semantic, as in |working|.

⟨text⟩ Angled brackets indicate orthographic realities, as in ⟨地⟩.

(1), (2), ... When numbered examples are referred to in the main text, the numbers are written between parentheses.

※	This symbol indicates a translation of a citation that is originally written in a language other than English. The original passage is given in a sidenote.
¶	A pilcrow indicates a new line in a quoted source.
.	A full stop separates words belonging to the same gloss.
+	A + B: A is followed by B
>	A > B: A results in B
<	A < B: A derives from B
:	A : B: form A correlates with meaning B
-	Hyphens indicate where morphemes join each other, e.g. <i>kicked</i> can be distinguished in <i>kick-</i> and <i>-ed</i> .
','	minutes, seconds respectively
-	abrupt break in an utterance
/	A forward slash separates bilingual titles in the references list.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

1, 2, 3	first, second, third person respectively
ADV	adverbialisation, as expressed by the suffix <i>de</i> , written as (地)
EC	expected continuation, as expressed by the suffix <i>ya</i>
EX	existence, in the gloss 'not.EX' for <i>méi</i> 'not to be there'
GRP	group around a person, as expressed by the suffix <i>-men</i>
HES	hesitation
P., pp.	page, pages respectively
PAS	passive mode, as expressed by <i>bèi</i>
pers. comm.	personal communication
PF	perfective aspect, as expressed by the suffix <i>le</i>
PN	proper name, for example in <i>John</i> 'PNJohn', i.e. 'the proper name John'
SG	singular person
SUB	subordination, as expressed by the particle <i>de</i>

#### A NOTE ON TRANSCRIPTION

The examples in this text are transcribed in a way that aims to be true to spoken data. This has several consequences for the spelling of Pinyin transcriptions. I will highlight two aspects: tone neutralisation and rhotacisation.

##### *Tone neutralisation*

Table 1 on the bottom of this page shows the five phonemic tones in Pekingese Mandarin. In my phonological transcriptions, tones are written as numbers, as shown in the first column. These numbers also appear in the common English names of four of the five tones, as used e.g. in Mandarin textbooks: first tone, second tone, third tone, and fourth tone. *Qīngshēng* is also commonly referred to as the neutral tone. The second column indicates the tones' names in Mandarin. In the third column, a phonological description of each tone is given. The fourth column shows a realisation of the tone's citation form, i.e. its pronunciation in isolation and/or careful speech. The fifth column provides a minimal set whose items differ in tone only.

Consider the form *dǔ* 'gamble', which has a *shǎng* tone in its citation form. When *dǔ* 'gamble' is followed by another syllable with a *shǎng* tone, for instance, *běn* 'capital', the contrast between *dǔ* 'gamble' and *dú* 'read' is neutralised. This means that the two forms in (1) are indistinguishable by ear.

- (1) a. *dúběn* 'reader, textbook' < *dú* 'to read' + *běn* 'volume'  
b. *dúběn* 'stake (in a gamble)' < *dǔ* 'to gamble' + *běn* 'capital'

**Table 1:** The five phonemic tones in Pekingese Mandarin

#	NAME	FEATURES	PITCH	EXAMPLES
/0/	<i>qīngshēng</i>	short	[˥]	<i>shì</i> 'to be'
/1/	<i>yīnpíng</i>	long, high, level	[˧˥]	<i>shī</i> 'wet'
/2/	<i>yángpíng</i>	long, high, rising	[˧˦˥]	<i>shí</i> 'ten'
/3/	<i>shǎng</i>	long, low	[˨˩˦]	<i>shǐ</i> 'to cause'
/4/	<i>qù</i>	long, high, falling	[˨˩˦˥]	<i>shì</i> 'matter'

The indicated rise of the *shǎng* tone is optional.

In general, when two *shǎng* tones follow each other in the same sentence, the first *shǎng* tone is realised as a *yángpíng* tone. Based on the identical realisation of (1a) and (1b), I transcribe both forms as *dúběn*, with a *yángpíng* tone.

#### Rhotacisation

Rhotacisation, i.e. the presence of the suffix *-r*, is very common in many dialects of Mandarin. In the majority of forms ending in *-r*, suffixation is involved. In transcriptions that are based on the character script, 牌儿 ‘label’ is written as *páir* < 牌 *pái* + 儿 *-r*, and 盘儿 ‘tray’ as *pánr* < 盘 *pán* + 儿 *-r*. Both words, however, are identically pronounced as [p<sup>h</sup>ɛɿ̯]. To reflect this, I transcribe both as *pár*.

#### INITIAL OBSERVATION

I will be taking a look at a Mandarin expression that I came across in a Chinese television programme. In this programme, a group of city-born celebrities are taken to the rural province of Yúnnán 云南, situated in the south of the People’s Republic of China, to experience life in the countryside. This includes growing their own vegetables on the farmland. While one of the male participants is preparing *wōsǔn*, a vegetable that is marketed in English as ‘asparagus lettuce’, another participant is shocked to discover that he was preparing the leaves and had left the stems on the farmland. She herself, however, is deeply convinced that the stems of the asparagus lettuce should be eaten instead. She exclaims the following at the end of their conversation:

- (2) Wu,      qí              le      guài      le!  
       wow      strange      PF      odd      PF  
       ‘Wow, how strange!’                      (*Hāhā nóngfū* 2019b: 55’49’)

We see that there are two instances of *le* in example (2): one directly after *qí* ‘strange’, the other after *qí le guài*.

The use of two instances of *le* in a single phrase—which will be referred to as **DOUBLE LE**—is well-described as occurring in the following syntactic structure, as presented by Lǚ (1998: 353):

- (3) “动            +    了<sub>1</sub>            +    宾            +    了<sub>2</sub>”  
       dòng            le                      bīn                      le  
       VERB    +    *le*<sub>1</sub>            +    OBJECT    +    *le*<sub>2</sub>

This use of double *le* can be illustrated with the following example (mine, not Lǚ’s):

- (4) Wǒ      jiu      nà      le      mèt      le.  
       1.SG    then    receive    PF    low.spirits    PF  
       ‘I’ve been perplexed by it.’                      (*Nán zuó nǚ yòu* 2018: 11’12’)

Lǚ (1998: 353) writes subscript numbers to indicate that, according to him, the two instances of *le* have distinct meanings. *Le*<sub>1</sub> indicates that the action of the verb has finished, and *le*<sub>2</sub> denotes a change in the situation created by the verb. If we apply his analysis to (4), the action of being perplexed is presented as finished, as denoted by the first *le*, and there is a change of situation, as denoted by the second *le*.

*Nà mèn* ‘be perplexed’ is listed in *ABC* (2010: 806) as a verb–object (VO) compound. *Xiàndài Hànyǔ* (1996: 909) writes two slashes between the two constituents of a VO, which they do for *nà mèn* ‘to be perplexed’, as shown in Figure 1a on the facing page. Based on these dictionary entries, *nà* ‘to receive’ can be analysed as a verb, and *mèn* ‘low spirits’ as its object.

If we now turn to the expression at hand, *qí le guài le* in (2) immediately calls to mind *qíguài*, which is an adjective meaning ‘strange’, as illustrated in sentence (5).

- (5) Eiyō, wǒ jiū juéde hěn qíguài yō.  
oh.my 1.SG just think very strange oh  
‘Oh my, I just thought that was very strange.’

(Lín 2021: 15’26’)

*Qíguài* can also be a transitive verb, i.e. a verb that can take an object, meaning ‘to find strange’ (Lǚ 1998: 438–439). This verbal usage is illustrated in (6):

- (6) 我 奇怪 他 怎么 不 来。  
Wǒ qíguài ta zěme bu lái.  
1.SG find.strange 3 how not come  
‘I wonder why he isn’t coming.’

(Lǚ 1998: 439; my transcription, glosses, and translation)

In this example, the sentence *ta zěme bu lái* ‘why isn’t he coming’ serves as the object of *qíguài* ‘to find strange’.

Given this expression *qíguài* ‘strange; find strange’ and the position of the two *les* in *qí le guài le*, one might expect that *qíguài* is also categorised as VO, i.e. as a verb *qí* followed by an object *guài*. But this is not the case in the dictionaries I have consulted that explicitly label VOs. *ABC* (2010: 840) lists *qíguài* ‘strange’ solely as a “stative verb”, which is a term that refers to the same word class as adjectives (DeFrancis 1978: 10). Also, *Xiàndài Hànyǔ* (1996: 994) does not write two slashes in the middle of *qíguài* ‘strange’, as can be seen in Figure 1b. In short, both dictionaries explicitly label VOs but do not document *qíguài* ‘strange’ as one of them. Thus, what is striking about (2) *qí le guài le*, which I have tentatively translated as ‘how strange’, is that given the syntactic status of *qíguài* as it is documented in dictionaries, one would not expect the first *le* in *qí le guài le* in that position.

Returning to Lǚ (1998: 720–736) once more: in his appendices, he provides tables with detailed information on reduplication and other morphological behaviour. *Qíguài* ‘strange’ is included in this table, but any information on the use of *le* is missing there.

I will investigate the expression *qí le guài le* by asking the following research questions:

- ① What is the meaning of the phrase *qí le guài le*?
- ② What is the semantic contribution of both instances of *le*, separately and/or jointly, in *qí le guài le* ‘how strange’?
- ③ Should *qí* ‘strange’ and *guài* ‘odd’ be analysed as two syntactic elements? If so, what do they mean, and how are they semantically related?

Figure 1: Two lemmas in *Xiàndài Hànyǔ* (1996)

(a) 纳闷 *nà mèn* ‘be perplexed’

【纳闷】*nà // mèn* ① (～儿) 因为疑惑而发闷：他听说有上海来的长途电话找他，一时想不出是谁，心里有些～。② 烦闷（多见于早期白话）。

(b) 奇怪 *qíguài* ‘strange; find strange’

【奇怪】*qíguài* ① 跟平常的不一样：海里有不少～的动植物。② 出乎意料，难以理解：真～，为什么这时候他还不来呢？



## 2.1 THE LINGUISTIC SIGN

Language is understood here as a form of human communication. When humans speak, language is presented to a hearer as sounds that move through the air and can be picked up by a sound recorder. These are called **UTTERANCES**. For example, a speaker of English can say [tɹi:] and refer to a tree in their front garden. [tɹi:] is an example of an utterance, and the tree in the garden is called a **REFERENT**. Both utterances and referents exist in the world outside language, and De Saussure (1916) was the first to stress the scientific relevance of the fact that the connection between an utterance and a referent is not straightforward, but arbitrary.

This becomes evident when one considers the following. A speaker of Mandarin can utter [ʂu˥] and refer to the same tree in that front garden, but this connection only makes sense to a hearer who has a command of Mandarin. It should be clear, then, that language somehow intermediates the connection between utterance and referent.

Confining ourselves to Mandarin for the moment, [ʂu˥] is not the only utterance that can refer to a tree. Another speaker might pronounce the onset consonant slightly more to the front in the mouth, like [ʃu˥]. Or perhaps, the tone starts out a bit lower: [ʂu˨]. Still, these three utterances are all recognised by native speakers of Mandarin as identical enough to mean ‘tree’. This type of abstraction from phonetic details is called **PHONOLOGICAL FORM**, or **FORM** for short. Technically, this form can be written as /ʂu˥/, but for convenience’s sake, in this text, Mandarin forms will be written in Pinyin transcription: *shù*.

Every utterance has features of sound that are crucial for the identification of a form, and others which are of no importance whatsoever. For example, the tone in [ʂu˥] starts out slightly lower than in [ʂu˨], but they are both recognised as the *qù* tone. We can conclude that the *qù* tone does not necessarily have to start out at the highest level of a speaker’s vocal range. But a falling tone that starts out too low would be recognised as a different tone, namely the *shǎng* tone. We can, therefore, identify |high| as a relevant feature for the perception of the *qù* tone. The same is true for |falling|: any tone that is not falling will not be recognised as a *qù* tone. If it is high but rising, for instance, it

A table of the phonemic tones in Mandarin can be found on page 7.

will be perceived as a *yángpíng* tone. For the *qù* tone, [high] and [falling] are examples of features that an utterance must have in order for it to be a manifestation of this particular tonal form. I call such features **DISTINCTIVE** (Ebeling 2006: 29). The definition of (phonological) form can be reworded as a bundle of distinctive phonological features.

With regard to referents and meanings, something very similar happens. Trees come in all shapes, sizes, and colours. One is taller than the other, and depending on the season, they have either green or yellow leaves, or have none at all. All these different trees are perceived as identical enough to correlate with the same mental image. There is, in other words, a representation of different types of trees in the mind of the speaker, which is called the **MEANING**. The study of linguistic meanings is called **SEMANTICS**. In a similar fashion to the form, a meaning is defined here as a bundle of distinctive semantic features. In the case of trees, its woody substance and branching structure, for instance, can be thought of as distinctive features of ‘tree’. Note that meanings are indicated by single quotation marks. Semantic features are—just like phonological features—language-specific. For instance, the semantic difference that English makes between ‘tree’ and ‘shrub’ is no guarantee that the same happens in another language. A referent that can be derived from a certain meaning is called an **APPROPRIATE REFERENT** of that meaning.

A referent of ‘tree’ is visible in the concrete world, but we cannot see a referent of, say, ‘knowledge’ with our own eyes. It rather resides in an imaginary world outside language created in the mind of a language user. In the case of ‘tree’ as well as ‘knowledge’, the meaning is a mental projection of their referents, regardless of the physical or cognitive nature of these referents. In other words, language does not necessarily discriminate between referents in the concrete world and the imaginary world (see also Wiedenhof 1995: 13).

A form and a meaning together make up a dual entity that De Saussure terms the **LINGUISTIC SIGN** (*signe*). A sign that consists of the form *shù* and the meaning ‘tree’ is written as *shù*: ‘tree’, where the colon (:) stands for ‘correlates with’. Whereas the connection between utterances and referents is arbitrary, the two components of a sign, i.e. the form and the meaning, are bound to each other like the two sides of a piece of paper: though they are separate, one cannot exist without the other.

This notion applies to simplex signs like Mandarin *shù*: ‘tree’ as much as it does to complex signs like *Shù gāo*: ‘Trees are tall.’. When complex forms come into the picture, we approach the domain of **SYNTAX**. It follows that in syntactic analyses, both form and meaning need to be involved. This principle contravenes a popular view of syntax as primarily concerning relations between forms. In that view, the meaning has a secondary position in the analysis (for a discussion, see Graffi 2001: 425–485). By contrast, I understand syntax primarily as the study of relations between meanings.

## 2.2 MEANING AND INTERPRETATION

I make a fundamental distinction between meaning and interpretation (adapted from Ebeling 1994: 7–8 and Wiedenhof 1995: 14–15). To understand this distinction, imagine someone walking up to me, holding up a piece of indecipherable handwriting, asking *Do you know what this says?* The meaning of *this* can roughly be formulated as ‘an entity close to the speaker’. The interpretation here is the piece of handwriting, but that does not result from the meaning of *this*. We see that the interpretation can, but does not have to be expressed in language; it can also be understood from the non-linguistic context, in this case the fact that something is being held up for me to see.

The distinction between meaning and interpretation also applies to less transparent cases, as the English examples in (7) illustrate (quoted from Bolinger 1972: 59). In the context of the following sentences, the speaker enquires whether you are aware that your car has a flat tyre.

- (7) a. “Did you know you had a flat?”
- b. “Did you know that you had a flat?”

At first, it might seem that the set of appropriate referents of these forms are equal. It is tempting, then, to conclude that these two sentences are synonymous, that is to say, they have the exact same meaning.

In fact, the sets of appropriate referents of (7a) and (7b) overlap for the most part, but they are not identical. According to Bolinger (1972: 59), (7a) is more appropriate when someone approaches you out of the blue. But if you catch someone staring at your tyre and ask them what they are looking at, (7b) is a more suitable response. If (7a) and

(7b) effectively had the same meaning, they would have been interchangeable in these speaking situations. It is certainly possible that different meanings have the same interpretation, but given that one referent is available for the meaning of one form and not for the other, the different forms must correlate with different meanings.

In line with the idea that different forms correlate with different meanings, I also abide by the complementary principle that the same form correlates with the same meaning. To see this principle at work, consider the following two sentences:

- (8) a. “A fleet of helicopters was flying low.”  
 b. A fleet of helicopters were flying low.

Sentence (8a) is quoted from Fowler (2015: 31, emphasis removed), and (8b) is added here for contrast. In the lemma on agreement, the distinction between sentences (a) and (b) is explained as follows: “the choice of singular or plural verb [*was* or *were*] depends on whether the first, singular noun [*fleet*] or the second, plural noun [*helicopters*] is regarded as the head of the phrase”. Various uses of the term “head” abound in linguistic research, and the editor does not clarify his use of the term. But one way of understanding it is that if *fleet* is the head, the referent is a helicopter-type fleet. If *helicopters* is the head, the referent consists of fleet-type helicopters. This analysis, thus, suggests that *a fleet of helicopters* has different meanings in (a) and (b).

My methodological objection to this analysis is that the only difference in form between (a) and (b) is that between *was* and *were*, whereas the difference in meaning is sought in *a fleet of helicopters*. A description in which the meaning of *a fleet of helicopters* is the same in both sentences, would better reflect the fact that the form is unaltered. I would analyse the referent of *A fleet of helicopters was flying low*. as containing a fleet consisting of helicopters that was flying low, presented as one entity. In the referent of *A fleet of helicopters were flying low*., the fleet of helicopters is still a fleet consisting of helicopters, but one that is presented as consisting of multiple individual helicopters. This principle will be referred to as SAME FORM : SAME MEANING. An exception to this principle will be discussed at the outset of the following section.

### 2.3 FIXED EXPRESSIONS

Finally, Felix Ameka (Leiden University, pers. comm.) has brought to my attention that the phrase *qí le guàì le* ‘how strange’ is or should be categorised as a fixed expression, which might call into question whether a syntactic analysis of this form could be relevant at all. “Fixed expression” is defined by Matthews (2014: 141) as “[a]ny expression which offers a ready-made way of saying something”. The wording “ready-made” is problematic here, because it can easily lead researchers to cast such expressions aside and ignore any internal syntactic structure it might have. This relative negligence in the field of unanalysed “fixed expressions” actually did motivate me to have a closer look at the syntax and meaning of *qí le guàì le*. And given the well-documented status of two *les* in close proximity as a syntactic phenomenon, an investigation of its syntactic structure might just be the only viable way to get to understand its meaning.

We will first look at the meanings of the two instances of *le* in *qí le guài le*. In section 1, we saw that in general, *le* can take two positions in a sentence: (a) directly after the verb; and (b) after both the verb and its object. When it comes to their meanings, Fang (2018: 590) notes the following.

The majority of researchers agree that there are two different kinds of *le*. *Le*<sub>1</sub>, the perfective aspect marker, encodes completion; *le*<sub>2</sub>, the sentence-final particle, is a mood auxiliary that indicates a new situation or change of state. A few other linguists [...] oppose such a distinction as they believe that the two *les* are by nature the same thing with the same functions although they occupy different sentential positions.

The first view, i.e. that the two *les* have two different meanings, is popular in the literature. For instance, Li & Thompson (1981: 185) are clear about their understanding of this distinction: “[a]ny description of the verbal aspect marker *-le* must begin with the caveat that it is important to keep the perfective aspect distinct from the sentence-final particle *le*”. Note the hyphen: although the authors do not explain its use, I infer that they spell *-le* with a hyphen as a suffix attaching to the verb, and that *le* without a hyphen suffixes to the predicate as a whole.

An argument for this dichotomy is often found in etymology. *Le*<sub>1</sub> derives from the verb *liǎo* ‘to finish’, whereas *le*<sub>2</sub> finds its origin in *lái* ‘to come’ (Chao 1968: 246–247, see also Coblin 2000: 548). Fang (2018: 591) even argues that etymology should be considered in the description of *le*: “to categorise *le*<sub>1</sub> and *le*<sub>2</sub> as the same thing simply ignores their evolutionary difference in grammatical functions”. However, since linguistic signs reside in the minds of living speakers, etymology should play a minor role in the synchronous description of a language, which is my purpose here. And since there is presently no phonological difference between *le*<sub>1</sub> and *le*<sub>2</sub>, I will start out from the same form : same meaning principle outlined in the previous section, and assume that both *les* have the same semantic contribution in different sentential positions. And if *le* turns out to have multiple meanings, I will investigate the relation between those meanings, taking the aforementioned positional issues as a starting point.

Different meanings of the same form can be related to each other in different types of ways. If different meanings of the same form are judged by language users as unrelated, for example, for English *mine* ‘belonging to me’ and *mine* ‘site for mineral extraction’, these meanings are said to be HOMONYMOUS. Speakers typically consider the use of the same form for homonymous meanings as coincidental. In this case, the same form : same meaning principle cannot be held onto. On the other hand, the meanings between *cup* ‘small container for beverages’ and *cup* ‘sports trophy’ will easily be taken as related to each other, because a sports trophy that is presented to the winner of a competition is moulded after the shape of a container for beverages. Meanings of the same form that are related to each other are called POLYSEMOUS.

### 3.1 TIME, TENSE, AND ASPECT

When we talk about (concrete or imaginary) entities that reside in the world outside language, we use meanings provided by a language to refer to these. The concept of time is no exception: we can talk about time in the way we talk about any concrete or imaginary entity outside language, in this case by using temporal meanings provided by a language. This section will introduce the semantics of time expressed by English and Mandarin verbs.

#### 3.1.1 *Expression of time in the English verb*

Verbs, like *work*, *talk*, and *write*, refer to actions and events and are thus typically presented as happening in time. To take *work* as an example, its lexical meaning is a bundle of distinctive features of a working activity, like |use effort| and |try to accomplish a goal|.

Now, consider the following phrase:

(8) the workhorse

In this phrase, the form *work* occurs before the form *horse*. This order of the forms *work* and *horse* expresses that to find the appropriate referents of *the workhorse*, one has to select the referents that carry the features of ‘work’ within the set of referents that carry the features of ‘horse’. These ‘horse’ referents carry the features of ‘work’ without dynamics, as if it were a still of a film. Note, thus, that the order of

forms is itself an aspect of form, and consequently correlates with a meaning.

Now, compare (8) to the following sentence:

(9) The horse works.

Just like *the workhorse*, *The horse works.* contains the forms *work* and *horse*. But whereas in *the workhorse*, *work* occurs before *horse*, in *The horse works.*, it is the other way around. The meaning that correlates with the occurrence of *work*—or the stem *work-*, to put it more accurately—after *horse* is a referent that more resembles that of a film: the meaning ‘work’, carried by the ‘horse’, is played out in time, which we can visualise as a timeline running from left to right. I use SITUATION as a semantic term to refer to this occurrence on a timeline (Ebeling 2006: 154).

We see that the situation in which ‘work’ is placed is not a meaning signalled by *work* itself, because then, the meaning of *the workhorse* would have contained a situation as well, which is not the case. The meaning ‘work’ is, as mentioned earlier, limited to features like |use effort| and |try to accomplish a goal|. It is rather the position of *work-* after *horse* in *The horse works.* that correlates with the occurrence of ‘work’ in time.

In *The horse works.*, an *-s* suffix is attached to *work-*. This *-s* suffix indicates that the working event takes place in the present. The present can be visualised as a section of the timeline in which the time of speaking is also situated. On the other hand, in *The horse worked.*, the *-ed* suffix indicates that ‘work’ happened in the past. The past is a section of the timeline prior to the time of speaking. The past and the present are examples of the time when the working action takes place. The time when an action, process, or any other event denoted by the verb takes place—that is, is said to take place—will be called EVENT TIME. In identifying the event time in English, the time of speaking serves as a necessary orientation point. Semantic information on the event time relative to the moment of speaking is called TENSE.

For the sentence *The horse works.*, accordingly, the event time is the time the working event is said to take place. But the sentence, like any sentence, additionally expresses a time which the whole expression is about. This is called narrated time. In this case, the event time and the narrated time are both the present, and thus coincide: the horse is said

to work in the present (event time), and the sentence is also about the present (narrated time).

We thus see that English can divide time into two sections: the past and the present. As mentioned above, the concept of time in general, and the moment of speaking in particular, are both referential in nature, i.e. they reside in the world outside language. On the other hand, the notions past and present are semantic in nature; in other words, they belong to meanings and are thus part of the language. As we saw earlier, the past can be visualised as a section of the timeline prior to the time of speaking. The present can be conceived of as a section of a timeline in which the time of speaking is also situated. This includes moments in the future, as *The horse works on Friday.* can be said to refer to this coming Friday, whereas *The horse worked on Friday.* excludes it.

To recapitulate:

- Time is referential: it exists outside the world of language. English verbal meanings can divide time into two sections: the past and the present, which are both semantic notions. The present is a time section in which the time of speaking is also situated. The past is the time section before the present.
- In *The horse works.*, *work-* follows *horse*, and this order of forms correlates with the presence of a temporal situation. On the other hand, in *the workhorse*, *work-* precedes *horse*, and consequently, the meaning of the whole phrase lacks a situation in time.
- Both *-s* and *-ed* are expressions of tense, which is semantic information on event time relative to the moment of speaking.
- The meaning of any sentence contains both an event time, i.e. the time at which the working event takes place; as well as a narrated time, i.e. the time the whole expression is about. In the case of *The horse works.*, these two coincide.

### 3.1.2 Expression of time in the Mandarin verb

We will now look at the semantics of time in the Mandarin verb, illustrated with the following example:

- (11) Wǒ            gōngzuò.  
1.SG        work

In this sentence, *gōngzuò* ‘work’ appears after *wǒ* ‘I’. The meaning of *gōngzuò* ‘work’ itself is—similar to English *work*, as discussed above—limited to distinctive features like |use effort| and |try to accomplish a goal|. And again, the position of *gōngzuò* ‘work’ following *wǒ* ‘I’ correlates with a situation, i.e. with the working event taking place in time. Unlike in English, however, the Mandarin form *Wǒ gōngzuò.* ‘I work.’ does not specify whether the action takes place in the past, present, or future. In other words, there is no semantic information on tense in *Wǒ gōngzuò.* ‘I work.’

It follows that ‘I work.’ is only one possible interpretation for the meaning of *Wǒ gōngzuò.*, namely, if the listener equates the event time to the present. In that case, as the narrated time coincides with the event time, the narrated time is interpreted as the present, as well. But since the meaning of this sentence does not contain any information on tense, the event time and narrated time can alternatively be interpreted as both taking place in the past, in which case the whole sentence is interpreted as ‘I worked.’. The event time and narrated time can also be interpreted as both occurring in the future, in which case the whole sentence is interpreted as ‘I will work.’. As is clear from these various possible interpretations, the point here is that Mandarin sentences like (11) *Wǒ gōngzuò.* signal that event time and narrated time coincide, but do not offer a link with the time of speaking.

### 3.2 THE MEANING OF *le*

We now turn to the meaning of *le*. As shown before, Fang (2018) claims that one of these meanings is the denotation of “completion”. But what does completion as signalled by *le* mean exactly? Below is my understanding of completion in Mandarin, which is based on an analysis by Wiedenhof (2015: 220–227).

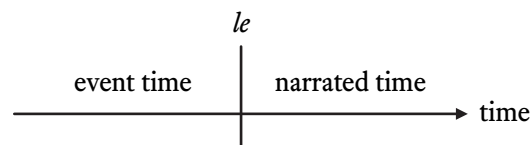
- (12) Wǒ            gōngzuò    le.  
1.SG        work            PF

Like any sentence, the meaning of sentence (12) contains an event time and a narrated time. What *le* does is create a boundary between two consecutive time sections, placing the event time in one section and placing the narrated time in the other. This yields two possible configurations of the event time and the narrated time.



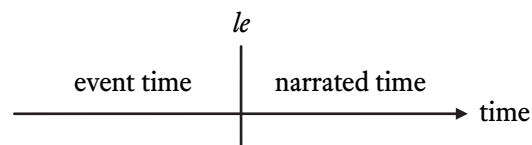
**Figure 2:** Possible interpretations of (12) *Wǒ gōngzuò le*.

Interpretation (a): ‘I worked.’



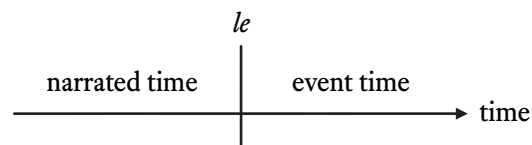
*Interpretation of narrated time: time of speaking*

Interpretation (b): ‘I had worked.’



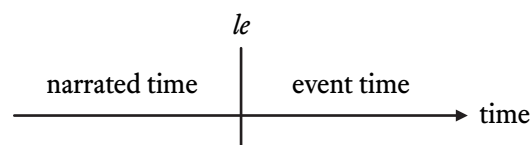
*Interpretation of narrated time: a week ago*

Interpretation (c): ‘I’m getting down to work now.’



*Interpretation of narrated time: time of speaking*

Interpretation (d): ‘I was getting down to work then.’



*Interpretation of narrated time: a week ago*

In the first configuration, the event time occurs before the narrated time. If, for example, the narrated time is the time of speaking, the speaker looks from the present back at the event time in which ‘work’ occurred. This interpretation is illustrated in Figure 2a on the facing page. This happens to be the same interpretation—at least, as far as time is concerned—as English *The horse worked*. In both *The horse worked*. and *Wǒ gōngzuò le*. ‘I worked.’, the speaker looks from the present back at the event time. But in English, the present as the orientation point is part of the meaning of the sentence, whereas in Mandarin, identifying the narrated time as the present is interpretational.

In Mandarin, narrated time is not necessarily the time of speaking: it can also be interpreted as the past, for instance, a week ago. This interpretation is illustrated in Figure 2b. Here, the speaker looks from a moment a week ago back at the event time. Then, the sentence can be translated as ‘I had worked.’

In both interpretations discussed so far, namely ‘I worked.’ and ‘I had worked.’, the event time is placed before the narrated time. This order can be switched around; this is the second configuration of the event time and the narrated time, as shown in Figure 2c. We still have two time sections, but here, narrated time comes first. If the narrated time is interpreted as the time of speaking, the speaker looks from the present forward to the time ‘work’ takes place, which is in this case the future. A possible English translation of this interpretation is ‘I’m getting down to work now.’. This refers to an action that is about to happen, which Fang (2018: 590) termed “new situation or change of state”

Again, the narrated time can alternatively be interpreted to be a week ago. In that case, one possible interpretation is ‘I was getting down to work then.’, illustrated in Figure 2d.

Figure 2 shows that all four interpretations discussed above—‘I worked.’, ‘I had worked.’, ‘I’m getting down to work now.’, and ‘I was getting down to work then.’—have a division in common, viz. that between event time and narrated time. This time division is thus the very meaning of *le*: without *le*, event time and narrated time would coincide. Both (a) the order of these two sections and (b) the identification of the narrated time with past, present, or future, are left to the interpretation of the hearer.

It is also clear that *le* does not express tense, as it does not indicate where the event time is located relative to the moment of speaking.

What it does denote is a separation of event time and narrated time. Semantic information on the manner in which the features of an event occur in time is called ASPECT. The type of boundary denoted by *le* will be called PERFECTIVE ASPECT. The Mandarin perfective aspect thus accommodates both meanings of “completion” and “mood” mentioned by Fang (2018: 590).

### 3.3 LE AND VERB-OBJECT COMPOUNDS

In the same television programme as the one introduced in the first section, in which the participants were challenged to provide for themselves in the countryside, a guest goes to the participants’ residence to stay for a few episodes. As part of the set-up, every guest brings a present upon their arrival. The first guest says (13) to announce that he has brought along some meat.

- (13) Dài ròu le.  
bring meat PF  
‘I brought meat.’ (Hāhā nóngfū 2019a: 44’37’)

The main participants of the show had until then struggled to find any nutritious staple food, like meat or fish. So when one of them comes to learn that the guest has brought meat, she exclaims:

- (14) Dài le ròu.  
bring PF meat  
‘You brought meat.’ (Hāhā nóngfū 2019a: 45’28’)

In both (13) and (14), the verb *dài* ‘bring’ takes the object *ròu* ‘meat’. In (13), *le* follows both the verb *dài* ‘bring’ and its object *ròu* ‘meat’, whereas in (14), *le* directly follows the verb *dài* ‘bring’. In this case, *ròu* ‘meat’ is the direct object of *dài* ‘bring’, i.e. the meat is the entity that is brought along. In the next paragraph, we will see that the form directly following the first *le* does not have to be a direct object.

For *Dài ròu le*, as noted in §3.2, *le* can be interpreted both as completion, ‘I brought meat.’, and as change of situation, ‘I’m going to bring meat.’. In this context, ‘I brought meat.’ is the most straightforward. In contrast, *Dài le ròu*. can only be interpreted as completion: ‘You brought meat.’

The occurrence of *le* directly after the verb *dài* ‘bring’ expresses perfectivity of the action ‘bring’. And the temporal boundary that *le*

signals is more salient, more imaginable, if the hearer is already familiar with the meat in question. As a result, the *ròu* ‘meat’ in *Dài le ròu*. is taken to be definite in some way, i.e. known, or assumed to be known, in the current context. In this example, it refers to ‘the meat that we struggled to obtain’.

On the other hand, by saying *Dài ròu le*., the occurrence of *le* after both *dài* ‘bring’ and *ròu* ‘meat’ expresses perfectivity of the whole activity of ‘bringing meat’. As a result, the guest that brought the meat does not refer to any special relevance of the meat.

The boundary signalled by *le* is also more salient if the object is quantified. This is why, for instance, beginning students of Mandarin are often advised to put *le* directly after the verb if the object contains a numeral. Consider the following example, taken from a beginners’ textbook of Mandarin.

- (15) Jīntiān Māma hē le sān bēi shuǐ.  
today Mum drink PF three glass water  
‘Mum had three glasses of water today.’ (Integrated Chinese 2015: 137, my glosses)

The authors explain that “[w]hen 了 (*le*) is used between the verb and the object, the object is usually preceded by a modifier. The following—numeral + measure word [in this example, *sān bēi* ‘three glasses’]—is the most common type of modifier of the object”. This is because in a similar fashion as above, the boundary signalled by *le* is more salient if the quantity of the object is already known.

In summary, *le* expresses perfectivity of the meaning of the form that precedes it. As a result, if an object occurs after *le*, this object has a definite or quantifiable meaning.

### 3.4 DOUBLE LE

Chappell’s (1986) study discusses sentences with double *le*, which she separates into two types: “those with singular postverbal NPs [= noun phrases] which may be either referential or generic in nature and those with plural postverbal NPs, plurality being overtly expressed through the use of numerals” (p. 227). Sentence (16) is an example of the first type (overleaf):



- (16) Yéye            hē        le        jiǔ        le.  
 grandfather    drink    PF     wine     PF  
 ‘Grandfather has had his drink of wine.’  
 (Chappell 1986: 227, my glosses)

In this sentence, *jiǔ* ‘wine’ does not refer to just any wine but to, for example, his “daily allowed glass—and [he] shouldn’t have any more to drink” (ibid.). Chappell analyses sentences with double *le* of this type as:

not only express[ing ...] the affirmation of the occurrence of the event but also contain[ing] the overall implication of there being no immediate requirement for this event to happen again (informally: “once is enough for the time being”) (ibid.).

She assigns the information that grandpa “shouldn’t have any more to drink” to double *le*. I argue that this information can be analysed as a case where definiteness for the meaning of *jiǔ* ‘wine’ is the result of the boundary signalled by the *le* directly following *hē* ‘drink’. In this context, this definite meaning of *jiǔ* ‘wine’ is something along the lines of ‘the wine that grandpa is allowed to have today’, implying this glass of wine is part of his daily routine. Chappell’s own argumentation also points to this, when she says that “this feature of meaning [i.e. that grandpa shouldn’t have any more to drink] is not present in correlate sentences containing only sentence final *le* [i.e. sentence (17)]” (ibid.).

- (17) Yéye            hē        jiǔ        le.  
 grandfather    drink    wine     PF  
 ‘Grandfather has had a drink of wine.’

My semantic analysis of double *le* in (16) *hē le jiǔ le* ‘has had his drink of wine’ is the following. The first *le* expresses perfectivity of *hē* ‘drink’, creating a division between event time and narrated time. The event time, the time that the drinking action occurs, must in this case precede the narrated time, as *hē le* ‘drank’ is followed by an object, *jiǔ* ‘wine’. The event is therefore presented as a completed action. As an effect of the boundary signalled by this first *le*, the object *jiǔ* ‘wine’ has a definite meaning. The second *le* denotes perfectivity of *hē le jiǔ* ‘have drunk the wine (he’s allowed to have today)’ and creates another division between event time and narrated time. The event time of *hē le jiǔ*

*le* is the time ‘have drunk the wine’ takes place. In the provided interpretation of ‘Grandfather has had his drink of wine.’, the event time of *hē le jiǔ le* ‘have drunk the wine’ precedes the narrated time. The boundary expressed by the first *le* is then embedded in the time section preceding the boundary expressed by the second *le*.

Chappell gives another example, this time one that was found in a spontaneous conversation. The speakers are talking about the use of the Pekingese dialect in *xiàngshēng* ‘comic dialogues’, a type of performance art in Chinese comedy:

- (18) Wǒmen        shuō        de        Běijīng        huà        bú        shì  
 1.GRP        speak    SUB    PNBěijīng    speech    not    be  
 yìbān        Běijīng        huà [...]    Shì        jīngguò        le  
 ordinary    PNBěijīng    speech    be        go.through    PF  
 tīliàn                    le.  
 refinement    PF

‘The Pekingese dialect that we speak isn’t the normal Pekingese dialect. [...] It’s undergone refinement.’

(Liang et al. 1982: 30, my glosses and translation)

According to Chappell (1986: 250), who alters the original transcription slightly, double *le* expresses “what is considered necessary and expected for *xiàngshēng* performers, whose artistry lies in their clever use of words and language”. Whereas she again assigns this meaning to the occurrence of double *le*, it can alternatively be explained by a definite meaning of *tīliàn*: ‘the refinement you need for a good *xiàngshēng* performance’.

The second type that Chappell distinguishes are sentences in which the object contains a numeral. Even though *qí le guài le* does not contain any numeral, I will discuss this second type as well, in view of its clear relevance in the aspectual semantics of Mandarin *le*.

- (19) Xiǎo Méi        zài        Fǎguó        zhù        le        shí nián    le.  
 little    PNMéi    be.at    PNFrance    live    PF    ten    year    PF  
 ‘Xiǎo Méi has been living in France for ten years so far.’

(Chappell 1986: 225, my glosses)

The first *le* denotes perfectivity of *zhù* ‘live’, which in this case must be completion, because it is followed by *shí nián* ‘ten years’. The second *le* denotes perfectivity of the whole expression, creating another divi-

sion between event time and narrated time. The event time in this second division is the time *zhù le shí nián le* ‘have lived ten years’ takes place. And because the two time sections that *le* divides are necessarily consecutive, sentence (19) expresses that Xiǎo Méi’s stay in France has been going on for ten years now and that they are still there. This is reflected in the translation ‘so far’.

The meaning ‘progress so far’ is thus a result of the two-fold expression of perfectivity, denoted by the double occurrence of *le*. Therefore, for the analysis of *qí le guài le*, I will not disregard the possibility that progress so far is involved, even though the phrase does not contain any numerals.

According to Chappell (1986: 228), the double occurrence of *le* additionally indicates that Xiǎo Méi has been away for longer than expected. Yet again, this exceeding of the speaker’s expectation can be derived from the type of definiteness that was discussed earlier: ‘the last ten years that have gone by so fast’.

In short, sentences that contain double *le* denote a two-fold perfectivity. Since the two time sections that *le* separates are always consecutive, they often express progress so far. Chappell assigns to the meaning of double *le* sentences the information that either there is no immediate requirement for the event to happen again, or the speaker’s expectation is exceeded. In my view, both features can effectively be analysed as definiteness of the object that results from the temporal boundary expressed by the first occurring *le*.

### 3.5 DOUBLE *LE* IN *QÍ LE GUÀI LE*

The meaning of the two instances of *le* in *qí le guài le* can now be described as follows. The *le* that directly follows *qí* expresses completion of the meaning of *qí*. As a result of the boundary signalled by this *le*, the meaning of *guài* becomes definite or further specified. The second *le* encodes a change of the situation of *qí le guài* as a whole. To complete the description of the meaning of *qí le guài le*, we need to know what the components *qí* and *guài* in *qí le guài le* mean. I will investigate that in the next paragraph.

## QÍGUÀI AND VALENCES

Section 1 introduced two meanings of *qíguài*, namely ‘to be strange’ and ‘to find strange’. How are these meanings syntactically related to each other and to *qí le guài le*, which I tentatively translated as ‘how strange’?

To see whether similar use cases are discussed in the literature, I looked for other examples of *x le y le*, where *xy* represents a disyllabic adjective. An enquiry into more literature on such expressions, posted on a linguistics page on forum website Reddit, has not attracted any comments. That is why I chose to try to elicit similar *x le y le* expressions from native speakers, but again to no avail. I have thus not been able to find another adjective *xy* that appears in an *x le y le* expression, but Chao (1968: 431–434) does mention a verbal example:

- (20) Qǔ      le      xiāo      le.  
       take   PF   disappear   PF  
       ‘It has been cancelled.’

(Chao 1968: 432, my glosses and translation)

The verb *qǔxiāo* means ‘cancel’. Both *qíguài* ‘strange’ and *qǔxiāo* ‘cancel’ are disyllabic, and they are both non-VO expressions that can be used in an *x le y le* construction. They differ in that *qíguài* as a whole is either an adjective meaning ‘strange’ or a verb meaning ‘find strange’. *Qǔxiāo* ‘cancel’, on the other hand, consists of the verb *qǔ* ‘take’ followed by the verb *xiāo* ‘to disappear’, which expresses the result of the action. Literally, therefore, *qǔxiāo* means ‘to take away so that it disappears’, hence ‘cancel’. This raises the question whether there is any semantic and syntactic relation between *qí-* and *-guài* in *qíguài* ‘strange; to find strange’.

Chao (1968) briefly comments on *qǔ le xiāo le* ‘has been cancelled’, saying that given the use of double *le*, *qǔxiāo* ‘cancel’ is used “as if it were VO” (p. 432), even though “it is quite something else” (p. 431), namely a verb–complement compound. My first objection to this analysis is that the claim that *qǔxiāo* ‘cancel’ “is quite something else” is based on the assumption that only VOs can be used with double *le*. If one were to argue that *qǔxiāo* ‘cancel’ has to be a VO because double *le* cannot be used with anything other than a VO, that suffers from circular reasoning. Second, Chao focuses on the formal behaviour of *qǔxiāo*

‘cancel’, while leaving the semantics largely unexplored. I will take this as an opportunity to look into the syntax and semantics involved.

A related discussion appears in Packard (2000: 229), who quotes Teele Chi’s example of *qiāng le bì* ‘shot to death’, where he glosses *qiāng* as ‘gun’, implying it is a noun, and *bì* as ‘kill’, implying it is a verb. Packard’s analysis of *qiāng le bì* ‘shot to death’ is: “[s]ince the aspect marker *-le* never suffixes to anything other than a verb [...], this is clear evidence that these elements [...] must have been reanalysed as verbs” (original emphasis). The claim that “*-le* never suffixes to anything other than a verb” is problematic, since in *qiāng le bì* ‘shot to death’, it attaches to the noun *qiāng* ‘gun’. Here, Packard argues beforehand that *qiāng* ‘gun’ has to be a verb because *le* cannot attach to anything other than a verb. This analysis suffers from the same circular reasoning as Chao’s.

Additionally, Packard leaves the same question unanswered as Chao, for what does reanalysis as a verb entail for the meaning of the components, in this case *qiāng* and *bì*, and for *qiāng le bì* ‘shot to death’ as a whole?

This section will take a closer look at the syntax and semantics of *qí le guài le*. Recall from §2 (page 15) that syntax is understood here as the study of relations between meanings. I will thus investigate what the relation, if any, is between the meanings of *qí* and *guài*. Considering double *le* also occurs in *qǔ le xiāo le* ‘has been cancelled’, I will examine whether the analysis of *qí le guài le* can be extended to *qǔ le xiāo le* ‘has been cancelled’.

Because of the referent-based approach to semantics in this study, we will start the discussion on *qí le guài le* with a reflection on the notions coreference and convergence. Then, the discussion moves to the semantics of verbal syntax.

#### 4.1 COREFERENCE AND CONVERGENCE

In an English sentence like

(21) She corrected her written assignment.

the referents of *she* and *her* can refer to the same person, for example, a student checking her own work before handing it in. In this interpretation, the referents of *she* and *her* are said to be COREFERENTIAL, i.e. they share a referent.

However, the referents of *she* and *her* are not coreferential in all appropriate referents. For example, sentence (21) can alternatively be interpreted as a situation in which a teacher corrects a student’s assignment. Since in this interpretation, *she* refers to a teacher, and *her* to a student, the referents of *she* and *her* are not coreferential. The meanings of *she* and *her* are interpreted separately. They may be coreferential, but this is not encoded in the meaning of the sentence.

On the other hand, the phrase *written assignment* must refer to an assignment in writing. In other words, all appropriate referents of the meaning of *written assignment* contain an entity that carries the features of ‘assignment’, and in that capacity, those of ‘written’. When meanings unequivocally lead to the same referent, these meanings are said to be CONVERGENT (Ebeling 2006: 34–35). In the case of *written assignment*, convergence is signalled by the fact that the form *written* directly precedes the form *assignment*. Recall from §3.1.1 (page 20) that the order of forms is itself an aspect of form, in this case correlating with a subordinate meaning.

#### 4.2 VALENCES

My understanding of the notion of valence is based on a discussion by Ebeling (2006: 237–244). An application of valences to the description of Mandarin is presented by Wiedenhof (1995: 74–86).

The notion of valences can be illustrated with the following English example:

(22) John kicked the ball.

First of all, the meaning of *kick*- ‘kick’ contains a set of distinctive features that makes an action one of kicking, e.g. |hitting|, |using force|, and |using one’s foot|. Both John and the ball—though they are separate referents—take part in the same kicking action. John is the entity that kicks, while the ball is the entity that is kicked. The participants of this kicking action can be described with variables, and ‘kick’ can be reformulated as ‘*x* hits *y* forcefully with their foot’. *X* and *y* are examples of VALENCES: semantic subdivisions that take part in the same event.

Note that valences are internal to the meaning of the verb. In this example, John is the kicker and the ball is the kicked entity, but the meanings ‘PN*John*’ and ‘ball’ are not themselves part of the meaning

‘kick’. In other words, the meanings ‘PN*John*’ and ‘ball’ are not valences of ‘kick’. Rather, the semantic relation of the *x* valence of ‘kick’ on the one hand and ‘PN*John*’ on the other is one of convergence: the kicking entity and John have a common referent. Likewise, the *y* valence is convergent with ‘ball’, i.e. the two meanings denoting a kicked entity and a ball have a common referent. ‘PN*John*’ and ‘ball’ are both called COMPLEMENTS of ‘kick’, i.e. meanings that are convergent with a valence (Honselaar 1980: 3).

Before we look at this notion of valences in Mandarin, let us first consider the semantic relation between subject and predicate in Mandarin, because it is not the same as in English.

- (23) Wó yǒu yī ge huài xiāoxi.  
 1.SG there.is a item bad news  
 (Bùcūn xiǎo xī 2020: 7’50’)

We saw in the English example *John kicked the ball*. that John has to be the one who kicked the ball. In Mandarin, however, the relation between subject and predicate is different from that in English. A possible interpretation of sentence (23) is ‘I’ve got some bad news.’ In this case, *wǒ* ‘I’ is the one who *yǒu*, which is most readily translatable as ‘has’. The sentence can also be interpreted as ‘There’s some bad news for me.’ In this case, *wǒ* ‘I’ is not the one who ‘has’. The part *yǒu yī ge huài xiāoxi* can then be rendered in English as ‘there is some bad news’.

Now, in line with the principle of same form : same meaning, the meaning of sentence (23) is best understood using the terms topic and comment, as suggested by Chao (1968: 69). *Wǒ* ‘I’ is the TOPIC of the sentence, which expresses what the sentence is about: ‘We are now talking about me ...’. Then, a statement is made about this topic in the rest of the sentence: ‘... there is some news.’ This statement is called the COMMENT. The meaning of (23) can be formulated as ‘As for me, there is some news.’ Hence, ‘I’ve got some news.’ and ‘There’s some bad news for me.’ are two different interpretations accommodated by this meaning. In short, the topic only introduces what the comment talks about, and is not necessarily the agent of the verbal action ‘having’.

Now, the notions of topic and comment will be analysed in terms of valences. Let us for now ascribe the meaning ‘have’ to *yǒu*. Analogous to the English example (22), the meaning of *yǒu* ‘have’ can be described as ‘*x* has *y*’. In every appropriate referent of (23), *yī ge huài*

*xiāoxi* ‘some bad news’ is the entity that is ‘had’. Therefore, the *y* valence is convergent with *yī ge huài xiāoxi* ‘some bad news’.

If the interpretation of (23) is ‘I’ve got some bad news.’, the *x* valence and *wǒ* ‘I’ are coreferential. If the interpretation is ‘There’s some bad news for me.’, I was most likely not aware of the news and therefore am not the one who ‘has’ it. In that case, the *x* valence and *wǒ* ‘I’ are not coreferential. And since *x* and *wǒ* ‘I’ are not coreferential in all appropriate referents, their meanings are not convergent.

A consequence of the notions of topic and comment is a reanalysis of the meaning of *yǒu*, which was tentatively described as ‘*x* has *y*’. The meaning that is convergent with *x* would be expressed in the topic, but I have argued above that the topic is not convergent with *x*, because they are not necessarily coreferential. The topic can therefore not be a complement of *yǒu*. That leads me to redefine the meaning of *yǒu* as ‘to have *y*’ or ‘there is *y*’. To avoid suggesting that *yǒu* must involve possession, I will write its meaning as ‘there is *y*’.

One might argue that every appropriate referent of *yǒu* ‘to be there’ presupposes an entity that has another entity. In that case, the meaning of *yǒu* ‘to be there’ would, in fact, contain an *x* valence that expresses the entity that ‘has’ the *y* valence. But this *x* valence simply does not have to be expressed in a Mandarin sentence.

However, if two entities are coreferential in all appropriate referents, their meanings are only convergent if there is some formal correlate. And the fact that every appropriate referent of *yǒu*, if it meant ‘to have’, contains an entity that ‘has’ some other entity results from the knowledge that, in the real world, there is always some entity that has something in possession. This is not expressed by the topic itself, but it is a conclusion based on knowledge of the world. I would argue, therefore, that the semantic presence of an agent is only part of the lexical content of the meaning of *yǒu* but not its syntactic content. Consequently, this ‘having’ agent is not a valence in the meaning of *yǒu*.

Finally, another attempt to salvage an *x* valence for the meaning of *yǒu* might involve assigning to it an ‘as for’ or ‘situation of existing’ valence, as suggested by Wiedenhof (1995: 87). The meaning of *yǒu* would then be ‘as for *x*, there is *y*’. This would suggest, however, that the topic provides semantic information on the verb, whereas I argue that it functions as a semantic background of the whole comment, i.e. for its situation. Therefore, the meaning ‘there is *y*’ for *yǒu*, without an

$x$  valence, is more in line with the analysis that the Mandarin sentence can be introduced by a sentential topic, rather than a verbal subject.

#### 4.3 THE MEANINGS OF QÍGUÀI

Two meanings of *qíguài* were mentioned earlier: (a) ‘to be strange’ and (b) ‘to find strange’. The first meaning, ‘to be strange’, is illustrated in (24):

- (24) Eiya, zhe ge lóngzhōu hǎo qíguài ya.  
oh.my this item dragon.boat good strange EC  
‘Oh my, this dragon boat is very strange!’  
(Máo 2018: 12’49’)

The part *zhe ge lóngzhōu hǎo qíguài* ‘this dragon boat is very strange’ consists of the topic *zhe ge lóngzhōu* ‘this dragon boat’ followed by the comment *hǎo qíguài* ‘very strange’. The comment, in turn, consists of *qíguài* ‘strange’ modified by *hǎo* ‘very’. The literal meaning of *zhe ge lóngzhōu hǎo qíguài* can thus be formulated as ‘Speaking of this dragon boat, very strange takes place.’. As before (§3.1.2), the final position of *qíguài* ‘strange’, in the comment, is itself an aspect of form, which in this case correlates with the fact that being strange takes place in time.

*Qíguài*, if it means ‘strange’, does not have any valences in its meaning, not even a valence that expresses the carrier of the features of ‘strange’. This is because, again, *zhe ge lóngzhōu* ‘this dragon boat’ is the topic of the sentence and need not be the entity that is strange. An example of such an interpretation is ‘There are strange goings-on in this dragon boat.’.

The second meaning of *qíguài* ‘to find strange’ was illustrated earlier with an example by Lǚ Shūxiāng, which is repeated below:

- (6) 我 奇怪 他 怎么 不 来。  
Wǒ qíguài ta zěme bu lái.  
1.SG find.strange 3 how not come  
‘I wonder why he isn’t coming.’

Here, the topic *wǒ* ‘I’ is followed by the comment *qíguài ta zěme bu lái* ‘wonder why he isn’t coming’. In §1 (page 10), it was said that the sentence *ta zěme bu lái* ‘why isn’t he coming’ serves as the object of *qíguài* ‘to find strange’. Now, we can use the notion of valences to describe this syntactic relation more precisely. In (6), *qíguài* has the meaning ‘to

find  $y$  strange’, and this  $y$  valence is convergent with the meaning of *ta zěme bu lái* ‘why isn’t he coming’.

I conclude that the two meanings of *qíguài* ‘to be strange’ and ‘to find strange’ are not merely two different lexical meanings: they also differ syntactically because the number of valences is different. *Qíguài* ‘to be strange’ has zero valences, whereas *qíguài* ‘to find strange’ has one valence, expressing the referent that is found strange. Again, to be clear, I regard the fact that ‘strange’ and ‘to find strange’ are different syntactically as a *semantic* argument, since valences are part of syntactic meanings. Such a difference in the number of valences makes the two meanings ‘strange’ and ‘to find strange’ syntactically polysemous.

#### 4.4 VALENCE REDUCTION

In the English sentence

- (25) We’re eating bread.

*eat-* has the meaning ‘ $x$  chews and swallows  $y$ ’, where  $y$  is convergent with ‘bread’. The eaten entity, however, does not have to be expressed, as shown in the following example:

- (26) We’re eating.

The meaning of (26) refers to a general activity of eating: ‘We’re engaged in eating.’. In the sentence *We’re eating*. ‘We’re engaging in eating.’, the  $y$  valence is not expressed in the form, but there is still some entity that is eaten in every appropriate referent. That means that a  $y$  valence is present in the meaning ‘eat’, but this valence is not convergent with another meaning. Ebeling (2006: 245–247) refers to this concept as VALENCE REDUCTION.

Now, compare the English sentence (26) *We’re eating*. with the following Mandarin example:

- (27) Wǒmen chī.  
1.GRP eat  
‘We’re eating it.’

In both (26) *We’re eating*. and (27) *Wǒmen chī*. ‘We’re eating it.’, no form follows the verb. And in both cases, there is some entity that is eaten in every appropriate referent. It might seem, thus, like the Man-



darin example is a similar case of valence reduction. Yet, *Wǒmen chī* cannot be interpreted as ‘We’re eating.’ in the sense of ‘We’re engaged in eating.’. Rather, the speaker expresses the expectation that the listener knows what entity is being eaten. The meaning of *Wǒmen chī* is thus closer to ‘We’re eating it.’. If *chī* means ‘to eat *y*’, *y* is convergent with some entity that the speaker expects the listener to derive from context. Wiedenhof (1995: 27–28, 83) transcribes this meaning as ‘IT’, which in this case correlates with the lack of an object in the form. Note that we have no choice here but to assign a meaning to a lack of a form, because the interpretation of ‘We’re engaged in eating.’ is usually unavailable for *Wǒmen chī*. And because object-less *chī* ‘eat’ necessarily includes the complement ‘IT’, we cannot describe *Wǒmen chī* ‘We’re eating IT.’ as a case of valence reduction.

With this at the back of our minds, consider the following example. The speaker talks about an appointment that was cancelled out of the blue.

- (28) Wǒ    jiu–    wó    jiu    hěn    qíguài    ya.  
       1.SG   HES   1.SG   just   very   find.strange   EC  
       ‘I just thought that was weird, so.’            (Chén 2019: 16’06’’)

Here, *qíguài* has the monovalent meaning ‘to find *y* strange’, even though the *y* valence is not formally expressed. Again, *wó jiu hěn qíguài* is not a case of valence reduction, because the sentence does not mean ‘I was engaged in finding strange.’. The meaning that is convergent with the *y* valence in ‘to find *y* strange’ is ‘IT’. The literal meaning of the sentence *wó jiu hěn qíguài* is, thus, ‘As for me, finding it very strange took place.’. The most obvious interpretation for this meaning is ‘I just thought that was weird.’, where ‘IT’ is interpreted as the fact that the speaker was suddenly stood up.

Another interpretation that can be derived from this meaning is ‘I was just found very strange.’ or ‘People just found me very strange.’. In this case, *wǒ* ‘I’ is the one that is coreferential with ‘IT’. Coreferential but not convergent, because *wǒ* ‘I’ is only the topic of the sentence, and the identification of ‘IT’ as the speaker is a matter of interpretation, not meaning. There is also an interpretation for (28) available in which *wǒ* ‘I’ and ‘IT’ are not coreferential: ‘In my case, people found it very strange.’.

In yet another context, sentence (28) *wó jiu hěn qíguài* could also be interpreted as ‘I was just very strange.’. In this case, we do have a

different meaning than the two interpretations mentioned earlier. *Qíguài* now has the meaning ‘to be strange’, whose meaning, as discussed above, has no valence. The carrier of the features of ‘to be strange’, i.e. the entity that is strange, is interpreted as *wǒ* ‘I’.

For this second meaning of *qíguài* ‘to be strange’, *wǒ* ‘I’ need not be the entity that is strange. If it is not, another possible interpretation is ‘In my case, they were very strange.’, referring to, say, a set of Chinese lanterns.

An overview of the meanings and interpretations of (28) *wó jiu hěn qíguài* is given in Table 2 at the bottom of the page. We thus have two different meanings for the same form *wó jiu hěn qíguài*. Given the principle of same form : same meaning, this analysis invites a follow-up question: can the five interpretations in the right column of Table 2 be accommodated by one invariant meaning? We know that *qíguài* ‘to find strange’ has a complement in sentences like Lǚ’s example (6) *Wǒ qíguài ta zěme bu lái*. ‘I wonder why he isn’t coming.’. Thus, if *qíguài* has one invariant meaning, it would also have a valence in the interpretations ‘I was very strange.’ and ‘In my case, they were very strange.’. Any invariant meaning of *qíguài* would therefore have to be one with a valence, expressing ‘what is found strange’. The question thus boils down to: can the interpretations ‘I was very strange.’ and ‘In my case, they were very strange.’ be derived from the meaning ‘As for me, finding IT very strange is taking place.’?

One argument could be that in *Wó jiu hěn qíguài*. ‘I’m just very strange.’, it is the speaker who is of the opinion that they are strange themselves. In that case, ‘IT’, the entity that is found strange, would be identified as the speaker. It would argue, however, that this takes the idea of same form : same meaning too far. Same form : same meaning

MEANINGS	INTERPRETATIONS
	‘I thought it was very strange.’
‘As for me, finding IT very strange was taking place.’	‘People found me very strange.’
	‘In my case, people found it very strange.’
‘As for me, very strange was taking place.’	‘I was very strange.’
	‘In my case, they were very strange’

**Table 2:** Meanings and interpretations of *Wó jiu hěn qíguài*.

is a research principle, rather than a fixed rule. Here, we simply cannot hold onto it because of the mere fact that ‘being found strange’ is not the same as ‘being strange’. Because of this, I conclude that *qíguài* has two meanings: (a) ‘strange’, which has no valence, and (b) ‘to find *y* strange’, which has one valence that expresses ‘what is found strange’.

#### 4.5 QÍ LE GUÀI LE

At this point, we need to make an inventory of what *qí* and *guài* in *qí le guài le* might mean. *ABC* (2010: 832) gives one definition for *qí*: “strange; queer; rare”, though they say it only occurs as a bound form, i.e. attached to other morphemes. It might seem that *qí* in *qí le guài le* is a free form, i.e. not attached to other morphemes, but the facts are more complicated than that. For *nà mèn* ‘receive low spirits’ > ‘be perplexed’, for example, *ABC* (2010: 805) lists the meaning ‘receive’ for *nà* only as a bound form. As a free verb, it means ‘pay’, as in *nà huìfèi* ‘pay the membership fee’. ‘Receive’ is a meaning of *nà* as a bound form in the sense that it needs a complement like *mèn* ‘low spirits’ to acquire that meaning. Therefore, just because in *nà le mèn le* ‘have been perplexed’, *nà* ‘receive’ seems to occur on its own, it is not necessarily a free form. Consequently, the fact that *ABC* lists the meanings ‘strange’, ‘queer’, and ‘rare’ for *qí* as a bound form, does not mean that they are unavailable for *qí* as it appears in *qí le guài le*.

Incidentally, morphological information on boundedness and syntactical information like word classes is essential knowledge for syntactic research. Yet, among modern dictionaries of Mandarin, *ABC* (2010) is one of the few that include both. *Xīnhuá* (2020: 388) does not distinguish bound forms from free forms, but does provide an additional meaning for the character 奇 *qí*: ※“surprised, consider something as 奇 *qí*”. Note that in this definition, the dictionary uses the very character it is defining in the definition of that character.

I have reproduced the lemma for *guài* in *ABC* (2010: 656) below, with all abbreviations written in full and the examples omitted. The lozenge (◆) is used in this dictionary to separate meanings that belong to different syntactic classes (ibid.: 2).

**guài** 怪 **STATIVE VERB** surprising; strange ◆ **VERB** ① find sth. strange ② blame ◆ **ADVERB** 〈colloquial〉 quite; very ◆ **BOUND FORM** monster; evil spirit

Remember that in this dictionary, “stative verb” refers to the class of adjectives. *Xīnhuá* (2020: 165) provide the same meanings for the character 怪 *guài* as *ABC* (2010), except for ‘find something strange’.

Now, to investigate the semantic relation between *qí* and *guài* in *qí le guài le*, I will first discuss several (seemingly) similar expressions. Earlier, I quoted the example *qiāng le bì* ‘shot to death’ that illustrated another non-VO used with *le*. The original sentence is shown in (29).

- (29) Fànrén    bèi    qiāng    le    bì    yǐhòu,    rén    dōu  
criminal   PAS   gun   PF   kill   after   person   all  
zǒu       le.  
go.away   PF  
‘After the criminal was shot, everyone left’  
(Chi 1985: 113, my glosses)

Chi gives this example after a discussion on *yōumò* ‘humour’, which is a loanword from English *humour*. On the basis of sentence (30), he gives his analysis of relexicalisation.

- (30) Zhèi    zhǒng    mò,    nǐ    bù    néng    yōu.  
this    kind   -mour   2.SG   not   can   hu-  
‘As far as this kind of joke goes, you cannot make it.’  
(Chi 1985: 112, my glosses)
- The glosses ‘hu-’ and ‘-mour’ are taken from Packard (2000: 229).

Chi’s analysis is as follows:

It seems that the speakers of Mandarin Chinese have relexicalized *yōu-mò*, making the first syllable a verb and assigning to it the rough meaning of ‘to make a joke’, and making the second syllable a noun and assigning to it the meaning of ‘joke’. After this is done, *yōu* and *mò* can be separated [...].

Chi implies that *yōumò* ‘humour’ > *yōu mò* ‘to be humorous’ has become a VO compound itself. He thus regards this as a relexicalisation of *yōumò*. An analytical problem is one of form: the simple fact that there is no *yōumò* in (30). Not only are the forms *yōu* and *mò* separated, they appear in the reverse order of *yōumò*.

Chi discusses *yōu mò* ‘to humour’ and *qiāng le bì* in tandem, and argues that *qiāngbì* ‘shoot to death’ should be analysed the same. The analysis regarding *qiāngbì* ‘shoot to death’ would then go along the following lines. The first form *qiāng* becomes a verb meaning ‘to shoot’ and the second form *bì* becomes a noun meaning ‘a lethal shot(?)’. [sic]

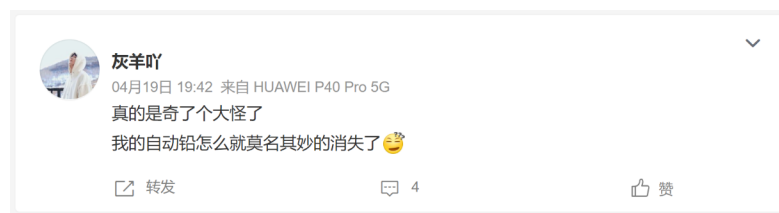


Figure 3: A Wēibó post containing 奇了个大怪了 *qí le ge dà guài le*

Only after this relexicalisation can the two components be separated by *le*. However, as before, there is no *qiāngbì* ‘shoot to death’ in (29). And given that *le* occurs between *qiāng* and *bì* particularly in the expression *qiāng le bì* ‘shot to death’, I prefer the explanation that in this expression, *bì* functions as an object of *qiāng*. In the terminology used in this study, *bì* would be a complement of *qiāng*. By the same token, in *qí le ge dà guài le*, *guài* would be a complement of *qí*.

Whilst doing a search through posts uploaded on the microblogging website 微博 Wēibó for “奇了怪了” *qí le guài le*, I stumbled upon the post shown in Figure 3, which I have glossed in full in (31), leaving the first sentence largely untranslated for now.

- (31) 真 的 是 奇 了 个 大 怪  
 Zhēn de shì qí le ge dà guài  
 real SUB be strange PF item big odd  
 了 我 的 自动 铅 怎么 就  
 le Wǒ de zìdòng qiān zěme jiù  
 PF 1.SG SUB automatic lead how just  
 莫名其妙 的 消失 了  
 mò míng qí miào de xiāoshī le  
 inexplicable SUB disappear PF

‘Really *qí le ge dà guài le*. How did my mechanical pencil lead disappear for no reason?’ (Huīyáng’ā 2022)

At the end of §2 (page 17), I made the argument that a syntactic analysis of the expression *qí le guài le* should not be cast aside simply because it should be categorised as a fixed expression. Example (31) shows that due to the intervening *ge* ‘item’ and *dà* ‘big’, *qí le guài le* is not that fixed an expression after all.

At first glance, it seems that in (31), *guài* is modified by the adjective *dà* ‘big’ and determined by the classifier *ge* ‘item’. Classifiers are

used in Mandarin to categorise entities. The classifier *běi*, for example, is used to define works that appear in volumes, like *shū* ‘book’ and *zázhì* ‘magazine’. And the classifier *ge* presents referents as little more than individual entities. The semantic difference between *zhèi běi shū* ‘this book’ and *zhèi ge shū* ‘this book’ is that *zhèi běi shū* ‘this book’ presents the book as a bound volume, whereas in *zhèi ge shū* ‘this book’, the book is presented merely as an individual item. Because of this, it is able to combine with scores of forms, making it the most frequently used classifier in Mandarin.

As classifiers are used to categorise entities, it is typically used with nouns, like *shū* ‘book’ and *zázhì* ‘magazine’ mentioned above. Thus, for *qí le ge dà guài le*, one possibility is that *guài* has some nominal meaning like ‘oddity’, either in the sense of ‘oddness’ or ‘odd thing, thing that is found odd’. In that case, this meaning is convergent with the *y* valence of *qí* ‘to find *y* strange’, and accordingly denotes the entity that is found strange.

An alternative analysis is that *dà* is used adverbially to mean ‘greatly’. The resulting phrase is reminiscent of expressions like *wèn ge bu tíng* ‘ask questions non-stop’. In this phrase, *ge* ‘item’ is followed by the adverb *bu* ‘not’ that in turn is followed by the verb *tíng* ‘to stop’. The semantic relation between *wèn* ‘ask’ and *bu tíng* ‘not to stop’ is manner: ‘ask in such a way that one doesn’t stop’. In *qí le ge dà guài le*, *ge* ‘item’ is also followed by an adverb, *dà* ‘greatly’, which in turn is followed by, in this case, an adjective *guài* ‘odd’. The resulting meaning of *ge dà guài* is thus ‘in such a way that it is found very odd’.

Now, *qí le ge dà guài le* and *wèn ge bu tíng* ‘ask questions non-stop’ are not exact parallels, since the latter form lacks any occurrence of *le*. According to Lǚ (1998: 222), the verb—in this case, *wèn* ‘ask’—can be followed by *le*: *wèn le ge bu tíng* ‘asked questions non-stop’. But he does not mention whether the whole phrase can also be suffixed by *le*. A native speaker has told me that *wèn le ge bu tíng* ‘asked questions non-stop’ is “maybe better” than *wèn le ge bu tíng le*. Hence, for now, I cannot confirm that *wèn le ge bu tíng le* occurs, but I am not ruling it out, either. I will, therefore, still offer the rest of the analysis as a possible angle.

In a post on the language-learning forum HiNative (2016), a student of Mandarin asks what the difference is between *wèn ge bu tíng* ‘ask questions non-stop’ and *bu tíng de wèn* ‘keep asking it’. One user, a native Mandarin speaker, provides a contrast between the following two example sentences:



- (32) 那 个 人 问 个 不 停,  
 Nèi ge rén wèn ge bu tíng,  
 that item person ask item not stop  
 我 觉得 很 烦。  
 wǒ juéde hěn fán.  
 1.SG think very irritated  
 ‘That person keeps asking questions. I think it’s really  
 annoying.’ (my transcription, glosses, and translation)
- (33) 我 这 个 问题 不 明白,  
 Wǒ zhèi ge wèntí bu míngbai,  
 1.SG this item question not understand  
 就 不 停 地 问 老师。  
 jiù bu tíng de wèn lǎoshī.  
 then not stop ADV ask teacher  
 ‘I don’t understand this question, so I keep asking the teacher.’  
 (my transcription, glosses, and translation)

In (32), the person in question is described as annoying for their tendency to keep asking questions. It has a more impatient tone than (33). The hearer is not expected to know what exactly is being asked; it simply refers to the general activity of ‘asking’. Hence, *wèn* ‘ask’ does not have an ‘IT’ complement. In contrast, in (33), the interlocutor is expected to know what is being asked, which in this example is provided in the first clause: *zhèi ge wèntí* ‘this question’. Here, *wèn* ‘ask’ does have an ‘IT’ complement. In sum, *wèn* ‘ask’ in *wèn ge bù tíng* ‘ask questions non-stop’ is a case of valence reduction: it refers to the general activity of ‘asking’. In *bu tíng de wèn*, *wèn* ‘ask’ does have an ‘IT’ complement, so that the phrase means more literally ‘keep asking about IT’.

If *qí le ge dà guài le* is analysed in a similar way to *wèn ge bu tíng* ‘ask questions non-stop’, *qí* would have the meaning of ‘be surprised, be taken aback’, without an ‘IT’ complement. The relation between *qí* and *dà guài* can be described as something like ‘to be surprised in such a way that it is found very odd’. Note that ‘it’ in this meaning is not printed in small caps, as it does not involve the semantic element ‘IT’. In reality, there is some entity that causes the speaker to be perplexed in every referent. It is this entity that ‘it’ in ‘it is found very odd’ refers to. But this entity is not part of the meaning of *qí le ge dà guài le*. Ac-

cordingly, *qí le ge dà guài le* is uttered to state that one is in a general state of bewilderment.

If we now return to *qí le guài le*, does the meaning of this phrase lack an ‘IT’ meaning, as well? Earlier, I quoted Yuen Ren Chao’s example of *qǐ le xiāo le* ‘It has been cancelled.’. The phrase does not mean ‘Cancellation has taken place.’; the hearer is expected to know the entity that is cancelled. Hence, the sentence rather means ‘The cancellation of IT has taken place.’. Similarly, we can analyse *qí le guài le* as also containing ‘IT’, referring to ‘the thing that is found strange’. And considering that *qí le ge dà guài le* ‘I’ve been very perplexed.’ does not contain ‘IT’, the formal correlate of this ‘IT’ would then be the lack of a modification phrase before *guài* ‘odd’.

In conclusion, we see that in *qí le guài le* and *qí le ge dà guài le*, *qí* and *guài* are separated in the form, and they are also distinct syntactic and semantic elements.

#### 4.6 SYNTHESIS

Having discussed all the elements in *qí le guài le*, we can now go over to a full analysis of its meaning. I will go through the expression form by form, in the order in which they are uttered by the speaker and perceived by the hearer.

*qí*...

The form *qí* means ‘find *y* strange’, in which *y* denotes the entity that is found strange.

*qí le*...

The *le* directly following *qí* ‘find strange’ creates a boundary between event time, i.e. the time ‘finding strange’ took place and the narrated time. Because *le* is followed by a complement of *qí* ‘find strange’, the order of the event time and the narrated time is fixed: the event time precedes the narrated time. *Qí* ‘find strange’ is thus presented as a completed action.

*qí le guài*...

I have offered two possible analyses for the meaning of *guài* in *qí le guài le*. First, *guài* is convergent with the *y* valence of *qí* ‘to find *y* strange’, hence referring to the entity that is found strange. The meaning of *guài*

can then be worded as ‘oddity’. The second possibility is that *guài* expresses manner: ‘in such a way that it is found odd’. In this case, the *y* valence of *qí* ‘find *y* strange’ is convergent with an ‘IT’ meaning. In both analyses, *guài* ‘odd; find odd’ is a complement of *qí* ‘find strange’.

As an effect of the boundary signalled by the first *le*, *guài* ‘oddity; find odd’ becomes definite or further specified in some way, as this makes the boundary more salient. This definiteness might be manifested in *guài* as a further specified degree: ‘such an odd thing; find só odd’. It turns out that the degree of *guài* ‘odd’ can be specified even further by *dà* ‘greatly’ in *qí le ge dà guài le* ‘I’ve been very perplexed.’

*qí le guài le*

The second *le* creates another boundary between event time and narrated time. This time, the event time already contains a division between event time and narrated time itself, which expresses *qí* ‘find strange’ as a completed action. The event time in the scope of the second *le* is thus ‘have found strange’. The separation of this event time from the narrated time expresses progress up to this point: ‘I found it strange when it happened, and I still do.’

We see, thus, that *qí le guài le* expresses the speaker’s intense bewilderment. Interestingly, the speaker expresses this bewilderment by using a phrase in which *le* is reduplicated. Such a case in which the form mirrors its semantic correlate is called **ICONIC**. Sentence (3) *Wǒ jiù nà le mèn le*. ‘I’ve been perplexed.’—which I quoted in §1 (page 9)—can similarly be seen as a case of iconicity: ‘I was perplexed when I found out about this, and I still am.’

In conclusion, the whole expression *qí le guài le* literally means either:

- (a) ‘Finding a great oddity strange has been taking place.’, or
- (b) ‘Finding IT strange has been taking place in such a way that it is found very odd.’

If we want a translation of *qí le guài le* in idiomatic English, the tentative translation of ‘how strange’ that I proposed at the outset of this study needs to be revised. But coming up with a translation such that is true to its Mandarin meaning proves difficult. My best attempt so far is: ‘There was this thing that I’ve been finding really strange!’.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, I hope to have shown that a language description—if it wants to be methodologically sound—cannot escape theoretical discussion. Here, I have taken a semantic approach to syntax, inspired by the idea that language is a system of signs.

This study touches upon many areas of descriptive linguistics, some more surprising than others. Case in point: I discussed definiteness as an effect of a temporal boundary. Having a thorough look at an expression like *qí le guài le* goes to show that language is *un système où tout se tient* ‘a system in which everything is connected’.

Additionally, I want to highlight three discoveries I made in this study.

- ① A topic of a Mandarin sentence is best not to be described as a complement of a main verb. It rather serves as a semantic background for the whole comment. Consequently, the meaning of the verb *yǒu* is ‘there is *y*’ and does not contain an ‘as for’ valence.
- ② A discovery I made by chance is the occurrence of *qí le ge dà guài le* ‘I’ve been very perplexed’. It gave us an insight into the meaning of *qí le guài le*, as it revealed that *guài* ‘odd’ in *qí le guài le* can be analysed as a complement expressing manner. It also showed that any presumption that *qí le guài le* is a fixed expression is unfounded.
- ③ *Qí le guài le* is an interesting case of iconicity, as the speaker uses a phrase with reduplicated *le*, expressing progress up to now, which also communicates great bewilderment: ‘I found it strange when it happened, and I still do.’. This iconicity connects perfectly to the view that language is a system of signs, in which form and meaning are inextricably bound up with each other.

I was a student of sinology before entering a research master’s programme in linguistics. This has brought me to come in contact with people who are interested in a wide variety of languages. This heightened my awareness that compared to certain languages spoken in, say, Africa or secluded regions of South America, Mandarin is a relatively well-described language. Still, it is impossible to consider the description of Mandarin a finished job as long as expressions like the

Though the idea is often attributed to De Saussure, he apparently never committed these exact words to paper (see Koerner 1998).

ones discussed in this study fly under the radar. That is the reason why I am a proponent of observation-driven research. Listening to spontaneous speech of native speakers allows us to make discoveries that are next to impossible to make if we start out from any general theory. Keeping our ears open for novel observations truly makes us linguists curiouser and curiouser. 🐼

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