

# THE GRAMMATICAL CATEGORY OF ASPECT IN SOUTHERN MIN

## Preverbal coding of aspect in Min-Xiamen

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This paper presents a synchronic description of the aspect system of a little-studied dialect group within the Sinitic or Chinese group of languages.<sup>1</sup> This is the Min dialect group or Min supergroup (cf. Wurm et al. 1988) whose speakers are concentrated in Fujian province, also being found in the eastern parts of both Guangdong province and Hainan island in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and in Taiwan, Republic of China.

First, background information on the Min dialect group is presented, followed by an outline of the phonology of the prestige dialect of the Southern Min group - Min-Xiamen or Amoy Hokkien. The main part of the paper discusses the syntactic strategies used to encode aspect in Min-Xiamen as well as the morphological form and meaning of these markers, contrasting them with the aspect system of Mandarin Chinese and speculating on diachronic relationships.

### 1. Sinitic languages and the Min dialect group

The Sinitic branch of Sino-Tibetan comprises seven major dialect groups:

Northern Chinese	(Mandarin)
Wu	(Shanghainese, Zhejiang province)
Yue	(Cantonese, Guangdong & Guangxi provinces)
Kejia	(Hakka, Guangdong, S. Fujian & S. Jiangxi provinces)
Xiang	(Hunan province)
Gan	(Jiangxi province)
Min	(Hokkien, Fujian & E. Guangdong provinces)

The Mandarin group or Northern Chinese is the largest both in terms of number of speakers and geographical dispersion. About 72% of PR China's population speak a dialect of Mandarin as their first language. Through migration over many centuries, Mandarin has come to be spoken over most of China: from Manchuria in the northeast, south through central China to Sichuan and Yunnan provinces in the southwest.

The area of the greatest dialectal diversity, however, is found in the southeastern corner of China in the provinces of Hunan, Jiangxi, Zhejiang, Fujian, Guangdong and Guangxi, most bordering on or close to the coastline. Here are to be found speakers of the six other major dialect groups of the Sinitic family.

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The Min dialect group is one of the smallest with only 4.1% of speakers of the Chinese languages (Ramsey 1987:87). According to Wurm et al. (1988: Map B-12), there are 52.5 million speakers of Min dialects in China and Taiwan. In Taiwan, 72% of the population speak a variety of Southern Min that is very close to Min-Xiamen (or Amoy) (Kubler 1982) as their first language. Mandarin has been imposed as the official language and medium of education only relatively recently by the Guomindang government which established the Republic of China in Taiwan in 1949. Overseas, large concentrations of Min speakers are also to be found, for example, in Singapore where 56% of the population speak a Min dialect as their first language. (See below for more details on overseas speakers of Hokkien.)

As pointed out above, the Min dialects are found to be spoken largely in the modern day province of Fujian, PRC. Some of the main dialects of this group are listed below:

MANDARIN	ANGLICIZED	MIN-XIAMEN
<i>(pinyin)</i>		<i>(IPA)</i>
Fúzhōu	Foochow	[Hōk'tsiū]
Xiàmén	Amoy	[E.bng]
Quánzhōu		[Tsuán.tsiū]
Zhāngzhōu		[Tsiāng.tsiū]

Through migration southwards in the late Ming dynasty (1368-1644 AD) along the coast of Guangdong province, large groups of Min speakers are, however, also to be found in northeastern Guangdong. Two main dialects of the Min-Chaoshan dialect group belonging to this area are:

Shàntóu	Swatow	[Suǎtáu]
Cháozhōu	Teochiu	[Dió.tsiū]

Similarly, migration by seafaring Min Chinese to Hainan island off the southeast coast of China, has resulted in a population of 4.4 million Min speakers today, found concentrated in the eastern and southern coastal areas of this island.

The Min dialect group is bordered by Wu dialect speakers in the north, Yue dialect speakers in the south and Gan and Hakka speakers in the west. On Hainan island, the Min areas border on non-Sinitic areas inhabited by Li and Yao speakers.<sup>2</sup>

The area where Fujian province is located was one of the last to be colonized and settled by the Han people. It is also one of the most geographically inaccessible areas of China with high mountain ranges and few major rivers (Norman 1988:228). This may partially explain the heterogeneous nature of the Min dialect group. It is reputed to be the most highly divergent group within Sinitic.

As a consequence of this diversity, the Min group has traditionally been further subdivided into northern and southern groups (cf. Yuan 1960). According to Yuan's classification, an example of the northern group would be the dialect of Fuzhou, the modern capital of Fujian province. Xiamen (or Amoy), a city further to the south, is the prestige dialect of Southern Min, a status which it achieved as a centre of culture and commerce for the region.

Hence, although the number of Min speakers within China may be relatively small in comparison with other dialect groups such as Mandarin, this is significantly increased by Min

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<sup>2</sup> Facts and figures in this paragraph come from Wurm et al. 1988.

speakers in both Taiwan and in other countries of Southeast Asia such as Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand (Teochiu dialect) and the Philippines. A large sector of the Chinese population in Singapore, for example, speak a Min dialect as their first language. According to Kuo (1980), in 1957, the Chinese population of Singapore had the following make-up:

<i>Min dialect</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Hokkien	30%
Teochiu	17%
Hainanese	5.2%
Foochow 1	%
<i>Other Chinese dialects</i>	
Yue (Cantonese)	15.1 %
Mandarin	0.1%

This means that 68% of the population of Singapore in 1957 spoke a Chinese dialect, that is, roughly two-thirds, with approximately 78% of these speakers using some form of Min as their first language.

There are also large numbers of Hokkien speakers in both the USA and Australia.

## 2. Min phonology

Min-Xiamen has 7 tones and the following 19 consonants, 6 oral vowels and 3 nasalized vowels. (Consonants in parentheses occur only in syllable-final position. In the case of [m], [n] and [ŋ], these also occur in complementary distribution with the corresponding stops and lateral [b], [l] and [g] in some dialects in syllable-initial position before nasalized vowels - see Brosnahan 1973.)

<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>k</i>	<i>ʔ</i>	<i>i, e, a, u, o,</i>
<i>p'</i>	<i>t'</i>	<i>k'</i>		<i>ĩ, ě, ã</i>
<i>b</i>		<i>g</i>		
	<i>s</i>		<i>h</i>	
	<i>ts</i>			
	<i>ts'</i>			
<i>(m)</i>	<i>(n)</i>	<i>(ng) = [ŋ] (velar nasal)</i>		
	<i>l</i>			
<i>w</i>	<i>j</i>			

A distinctive phonological feature of Min-Xiamen which contrasts to Northern Min dialects such as Min-Fuzhou is the loss of initial nasal consonants: *m* > *b*; *n* > *l*; *ng* > *g* (see Norman 1988, Ramsey 1987:107-109). Some other S. Min dialects retain the initial nasal consonants only before nasalized vowels and nasal syllable-final consonants.

The Min dialects are also noteworthy for complex tone sandhi and for the contrast between colloquial and literary pronunciations of characters. The literary or reading pronunciation is always closer to Mandarin and thus reflects earlier diglossia with Mandarin as the 'High language, although it is really only in terms of written language rather than the spoken language that Mandarin occupies a position of prestige (Sung 1974).

Archaic features preserved in Min are (i) the retention of dental stops *t* and *t'* which palatalized at an early stage in the other main dialect groups, for example, to *ts* and *ts'* in

Mandarin (evidence comes from the literary language of the 7th century AD known as 'Middle Chinese' where these sounds can already be reconstructed as palatals), and (ii) absence of the *f* phoneme of other dialect groups - this first appeared in the Northern dialects in the Tang period (618-907 AD) (Ramsey 1987:108).

### 3. The study of Min dialects

To date, the textbook on Amoy Hokkien (Min-Xiamen) written for the Government Officers Languages School in Kuala Lumpur (Bodman 1955) is the only comprehensive work on a Min dialect. Hence it is true to say that grammars of this dialect group are practically non-existent.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, most of the articles written on Min dialects concentrate on their phonology. At best, a few analyses specifically address the differences in morphology and grammar between Mandarin (or *putonghua* as it is officially called in PR China) and Min (see reference list). The situation is similarly assessed in Wu (1958:84-85) which presents a brief grammatical sketch of distinctive grammatical features of Min-Xiamen.

For historical data, apart from the reconstruction work of proto-Min (see Norman 1973), some vernacular material from the Qing dynasty (1616-1911) is available such as the *Huiyin Miaowu* by Huang Qian from Quanzhou or the *Ya-su Tong Shiwu Yin* by Xie Xiufeng from Zhangzhou.<sup>4</sup> There is an oral tradition kept alive by professional storytellers and also, for example, in regional forms of the performing arts such as Fujian opera. Most of the media use *puvt5nghua%* (Mandarin) in PR China, however. The linguistic situation is clearly diglossic with the local Min dialect being used at home while *pu't5nghud* is used at work or in education. In Taiwan, sanctions against the official use of Southern Min have been in place since the establishment of the Republic of China in 1949 and adoption of Mandarin as the sole official language.<sup>5</sup>

### 4. The aspect system

In this section, we consider a synchronic description of the Xiamen dialect aspect system of Southern Min, with reference to other Min dialects and comparison with Northern Chinese and Yue.

In general, Southern Min uses the strategy of preverbal adverbs and auxiliary verbs to encode aspect rather than the use of suffixes or particles following the verb. The latter strategy is typical of most other Sinitic dialect groups, even for ones as disparate as Northern Chinese and Yue (see Chappell 1989). Thus preverbal marking of aspect can be considered a special characteristic of the Min group, particularly the Xiamen dialect (see also Brosnahan 1972:52). This may be historically significant in terms of the general development of the Sinitic aspect systems. Norman (1973,1988) has already shown that, within the Sinitic family, the Min dialects are phonologically highly divergent. Norman (1988:228) describes Min as having been isolated from mainstream Sinitic at a very early stage.

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<sup>3</sup> A Grammar of Min-Xiamen, written in (mandarin) Chinese, is soon to be published in Taiwan however (Y.C. Li p.c.)

<sup>4</sup> These works are listed in the foreword of the Dictionary of *pūtōnghà* and Minnan dialect (1982:1).

<sup>5</sup> This has happened despite the fact that first language speakers of Southern Min constitute 71% of the population of Taiwan versus 15% for native speakers of Mandarin (figures from Kubler 1982:156). Recently, the first course in Southern Min grammar was taught at National Taiwan University during the summer break of 1989 (Y.C. Li - p.c.).

The main aim of this paper is to point to the possibility that in its grammar, Min also shows evidence of an earlier stage of Sinitic - one where aspect was indicated by the use of preverbal adverbs.<sup>6</sup> In three other main dialect groups: Northern (Mandarin), Wu (Shanghainese) and Yue (Cantonese), if this hypothesis proves correct, these aspectual constructions were replaced by other strategies for encoding aspect, namely postverbal marking by means of enclitics or suffixes.

This strategy was made possible with the rise of resultative verb compounds from serial verb constructions (see Li & Thompson 1974). Resultative verb compounds in Sinitic languages are typically composed of two verbs, the first representing a dynamic action and the second, the state of affairs resulting from this action. A Mandarin example would be *da.-wāi* literally 'knock-crooked', that is, 'knock something crooked'.

In the next stage, postverbal complements of direction and result extended in use to lexical aspectual functions. The third stage of evolutionary development for these compound verbs was for the postverbal complement to lose its tonality, become further desemantised and grammaticalised into exclusive use as an aspect suffix. This is typical in both Yue and Northern Chinese. Hence, from a diachronic point of view, the analysis of one representative dialect of the Min group, the Xiamen dialect of Southern Min - also known as Amoy Hokkien in English, may provide an indication of the form of aspectual constructions at an earlier stage.

In the following sections, data analysis of Min-Xiamen is carried out in terms of two main categories of aspect - bounded and unbounded. 'Bounded' aspect refers to predicates aspectually modified to code events which have or contain a well-defined limit - either a specific beginning or endpoint, such as resultatives, perfectives, inchoatives and perfects of anteriority. In contrast to this, 'unbounded' aspect refers to those markers which code the limitless or ongoing nature of an event such as progressive, iterative and habitual aspects (see also Chappell 1989).

## 4.1 Bounded aspect

### 4.1.1 Perfective

The perfective typically encodes the completion of an event. Mainland Min-Xiamen appears to have no exclusive marker of the perfective aspect. There are however conflicting claims to be found in the sparse literature on this topic.

First, Yuan (1960:276) claims that the Xiamen dialect of Southern Min has only one strategy for encoding the perfective aspect: this is to use an appropriate resultative verb complement. In other words, there is no cognate or counterpart to the Mandarin aspectual suffix *-le* nor to Yue-Guangzhou *-tsɔ2*. Hence, Yuan claims that for the Mandarin expression:

- (1) *Wǒ chī le*  
 I eat PERF  
 'I've eaten.'

the corresponding clause in Min-Xiamen could only be:

- (2) *Guǎ tsiá? pǎ*  
 I eat replete  
 'I've eaten my fill.'

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<sup>6</sup> Verification (or otherwise) of this hypothesis awaits the results of proposed fieldwork in China, 1990.

Gua<sup>1</sup> mai<sup>1</sup> tɕia<sup>1</sup> liəu<sup>1</sup>  
 I food eat PERF  
 'I've eaten.'

- (5) HAINAN ISLAND  
 Thi: Lu<sup>24</sup> tsia<sup>24</sup> mue<sup>4</sup> la<sup>1</sup> bo<sup>1</sup> is Chaozhou (Teochiu) and southern  
 Zhe you eat food PERF NEG alternative of using what appears to  
 be t 'Have you eaten?'<sup>7</sup> complements:<sup>7</sup>

In contradistinction to Yuan (1960), Brosnahan (1972:53-54) and Wu (1958:88) both claim that the use of the Min cognate of Mandarin *-le* or *-liǎo* 'finish' is in fact only one of several possible ways of encoding perfectivity in Min-Xiamen. Note, however, that Brosnahan classifies *liǎo* (*liǎu*) as a resultative complement expressing aspect and not as a pure aspect marker.

I believe, however, that these opposing points of view can be reconciled in terms of language contact, specifically the influence of Mandarin through the education system and its status as the prestige and official language of China. As is shown below, the native Min aspect marker for the experiential is being replaced by the Mandarin form. It could therefore be conjectured that the same is happening with the introduction of the cognate to Mandarin *-le*.

Certainly, for Min dialects spoken in parts of Malaysia, *liǎu* is used for the perfective and note that only Mandarin Chinese is offered in the education system of Malaysia, not any of the other Chinese languages.<sup>8</sup>

- (6) EAST MALAYSIAN MIN  
 Ts'á-mèi uà t'ák-liǎu nǒ bǔn ts'ē  
 last night I read-PERF two CLF book  
 'Last night I read two books.'

- (7) Lù tsiá? -liǎu wèi? Uà tsiá? liǎu.  
 you eat -PERF NEG I eat-PERF  
 'Have you eaten yet?' 'I've eaten.'

Bodman also shows evidence in favour of this view. According to Bodman (1955:272), perfective *-liǎu* can be used in the variety of Amoy Hokkien (Min-Xiamen) spoken in Malaysia. He describes its use particularly in subjectless initial clauses describing a sequence of events, presumably where it functions to code anteriority (see Chappell 1988 on this function of Mandarin *-le*).

- (8) tsiá?-liǎu âu, ī ts'ūt-k'ĩ k'ĩǎ:-k'ĩǎ :  
 eat-PERF after 3sg out-go walk-walk  
 'After finishing his meal, he went out for a walk.'

Brosnahan (1972:52) provides a second approach to aspect in Min-Xiamen by pointing out that the auxiliary verb *û* 'have' in Southern Min (see below) is used to express completion of an action in the same way as *-le* does in Mandarin. This marker is also given by Wu (1958:88) as one of the ways in which the notion of completed action can be encoded in Min-Xiamen in addition to the use of resultative complements. In fact, Yuan has overlooked the use of the auxiliary *u* to encode that an action has taken place in his brief outline of aspect in

<sup>7</sup> Examples (1) to (5) are taken from Yuan (1960:277) - my translation and numbering. The seven tones of Min-Xiamen are as follows: (1) High level V 44 (2) Low level V 22 (3) High falling V 53, (4) Low falling V 21, (5) Mid rising Q 24 and two further tones associated with stop finals which determine their pitch value. See Xiamen (1982) and Brosnahan (1973).

<sup>8</sup> These data were provided by two speakers of Amoy Hokkien from Miri, in Eastern Malaysia: Christina N-C Kong and Adrian Kho, both students at La Trobe University, Melbourne in 1989.

Min, where he states (1960:276) that the use of a resultative complement is ‘the only means of expression in the Xiamen locality’.

This preverbal auxiliary is related to the existential verb *û* ‘have, there is/are’ and is cognate to Mandarin *yǒu* ‘have, there is/are’ (Brosnahan 1972:53). It has two aspectual uses, neither of which find counterpart constructions in Mandarin with *yǒu* ‘have’. First, it forms an aspectual construction remarkably similar to perfect constructions in Indo-European languages, constituted by verbs of having in an ‘auxiliary role’ combined with the past participle form of the verb, for example, in English, German and French:

- (9) *U k'î Pāk'kiã*  
 have go Beijing  
 ‘(They)’ve gone to Beijing.’
- (10) *Guǎ û siǎ tsít t̃iu p'ue hó: ĭ*  
 I have write one CLF letter give 3sg  
 ‘I’ve written a letter to her/him.’

Second, it can also be used in a future context with an affirmative interpretation (Xiamen 1981:948).

- (11) *Biǎlit û k'ui huê*  
 tomorrow have open meeting  
 ‘Tomorrow (we) will hold a meeting.’

This use of Xiamen *û* corresponds to Mandarin *yào* ‘want’ used as a modal verb to indicate futurity:

- (12) *Míngtiān yào ka-i huì*  
 tomorrow want open meeting  
 ‘Tomorrow there’ll be a meeting.’

The use of this construction to encode completed action is a characteristic feature of Taiwanese Mandarin, heavily influenced by Southern Min speakers who comprise more than 70% of the population (cf. Kubler 1982). That is, Taiwanese speakers of Mandarin may use the following type of sentence which would be considered the mark of a non-native speaker of Mandarin to someone from northern China.<sup>9</sup>

- (13) MIN-XIAMEN  
*Lì û k'ua:k̃i: ĭ buê?*      *Guǎ buê k'ua:k̃i: ĭ*  
 you have see 3sg NEG I NEG see 3sg  
 ‘Did you see her? I didn’t see her.’
- (14) TAIWANESE MANDARIN  
*Nǐ yǒu kàndào tā ma?*      *Wǒ méi yǒu kàndào tā*  
 you have see 3sg Q I NEG have see 3sg
- (15) STANDARD MANDARIN (*putonghua*)  
*Nǐ kànjiàn le tā méi -yǒu?*      *Wǒ méi kànjiàn tā*  
 you see PERF 3sg NEG -have I NEG see 3sg

The sentence in (14) is an example of a syntactic calque from Min-Xiamen into standard Mandarin. In standard Mandarin, only the negative form of a sentence referring to a past

<sup>9</sup> Examples are taken from Kubler (1982:162), my numbering.

event may contain the negative marker *méi* in conjunction with the verb *yǒu* ‘have’, both preceding the verb, as in the answer to (14). The positive form of the sentence *wǒ kànjiàn le tā* (I-seePERF-3sg) ‘I’ve seen her’ is coded by the verb form followed by verbal suffix *-le* for perfective. Upon negation, the particle *-le* must be suppressed, as in the answer to (15). Since Min-Xiamen does not have a cognate to perfective *-le*, but uses a preverbal construction with *ll* in both positive and negative sentences (see 13), it is not surprising that we find this being carried over into Taiwanese Mandarin (for details, see Kubler 1982:162). This strategy, typically used by second language speakers of Mandarin whose first language is a Min dialect, has also been described for Singapore (Lock 1988).

#### 4.1.2 Experiential

The experiential aspect expresses knowledge or understanding of a situation denoted by the predicate through past experience of it. This is coded with respect to the grammatical subject of the aspectually marked verb. To express the experiential aspect, Southern Min uses not a suffix to the verb as in Mandarin and Cantonese (*-guo* and *-kwo*<sup>3</sup> respectively), but an adverb, *bǎt* or *bǎk*. According to both Wu (1958:89) and Yuan (1960:277), this adverb has a meaning similar to *céng* in Mandarin of ‘having experienced something before’.<sup>10</sup> Brosnahan (1972:52) also describes the aspect auxiliary *bǎt* as implying ‘completion of action of the verb following it’ with the main emphasis on the action having happened ‘at least once before’.

- (16) *Guǎ bǎt k’i*  
 I EXP go  
 ‘I’ve been (there before).’

Yuan claims that this is the strategy used in other Southern Min dialects as well. However, even in the late 1950s when Yuan collected material for his work on the major dialects groups of Chinese, some of the Southern Min dialects such as Chaozhou were adopting the Northern Chinese strategy of using the cognate form of the verb suffix *-guo* for the experiential, as he points out. The atonal experiential aspect marker in Mandarin is derived from a full verb *guò* which means ‘to cross, pass through’.

- (17) MANDARIN  
*Wǒ qù -guo*  
 I go EXP  
 ‘I’ve been (there before).’

Bodman (1955:269), for example, points out that there are three alternative ways of indicating ‘past experience’ in Amoy Hokkien, as spoken in Malaysia: either by use of the auxiliary *bǎt*, or the suffix *-kè*, or a combination of both: *bǎt* VERB-*kè*. Bodman provides the following example, pointing out that *tsuè-kè* ‘do-EXP’ could be substituted by *bǎt tsuè* ‘EXP do’ or *bǎt tsuè-kè* EXP do- EXP’.

- (18) *Tsīt é sia-n̄sī ĩ.tsiéng tsuè-kè kuā:*  
 this CLF gentleman before do-EXP official  
 ‘This gentleman used to be an official.’

Brosnahan (1972:54) also points out that Min-Xiamen can use *bǎt* together with an optional postverbal *-kè* to express experiential aspect. She, too, is of the view that its occurrence is due

<sup>10</sup> Yuan calls this aspect ‘past completive’ in Chinese: *wanchengti* (1960:277).

to the influence of Mandarin on Min. This is also apparent in the next example where two Hokkien speakers from different parts of Malaysia both use *-kuè* and not *bǎ*:<sup>11</sup>

- |      |                           |  |                            |
|------|---------------------------|--|----------------------------|
| (19) | EAST MALAYSIA             |  | WEST MALAYSIA              |
|      | <i>Uǎ k'ì -kuè ̄-tsiū</i> |  | <i>Guǎ k'è -kuè Aūtsiū</i> |
|      | I go -EXP Australia       |  | I go -EXP Australia        |
|      | ‘I’ve been to Australia.’ |  |                            |

The consultant from W. Malaysia also used suffix *-ke* for some of the elicited data:

- |      |                                    |
|------|------------------------------------|
| (20) | <i>Guǎ ná tuâ-ó? t'á -kè ts'ē?</i> |
|      | I at university read -EXP book     |
|      | ‘I’ve studied at university.’      |

According to Bodman’s description, *-kè* appears to be the cognate of Mandarin *guo*, as both mean ‘to pass through (space)’ in their basic verbal roles. The relation of *-kuè* to both Min *-ke*’ and Mandarin *-guo* [WA *kuo*] remains to be determined, although they would appear to be all phonologically related.

## 4.2 Unbounded Aspect

### 4.2.1 Progressive *tî lé?*

Southern Min uses the structure of adverb + verb in the form of *tî le* or *tî lé?* to express the progressive aspect in contrast once more to Northern Chinese Verb *-zhe* and Yue: Verb *-kan*<sup>2</sup>. Thus in the Xiamen dialect of Southern Min, according to both Bodman (1955:151) and Wu (1958:89), we find the use of both *tî le* and *tā.ā.lē*:

- |      |                             |
|------|-----------------------------|
| (21) | <i>I tî le hák.síp</i>      |
|      | 3sg PROG study              |
|      | ‘S/he’s studying’           |
| (22) | <i>I tū.ā.lē t'ák ts'é?</i> |
|      | 3sg PROG read book          |
|      | ‘S/he’s reading out loud.’  |

The preverbal particle *tî* derives from a verb meaning ‘wait’ or ‘stand around for a long time’ while *lé?* is related to a verb meaning ‘stick to’ or ‘adhere’ (Xiamen 1982). This is close to the structure of progressive sentences in Mandarin or Northern Chinese which use *zài* + Verb, as in (23).

- |      |                        |
|------|------------------------|
| (23) | <i>Wǒmen zài xuéxí</i> |
|      | we PROG study          |
|      | ‘We’re studying.’      |

The aspect marker *zài* is related, however, to a full verb *zài* with the locative meaning ‘be at’.

In Min-Xiamen spoken in Malaysia, constructions formed by either *tî lé?* + VERB or *lé?* ÷ VERB are possible. Bodman (1955:151) distinguishes the two in the following way: ‘Sentences with *teq* [*lé?*] before the verb specifically include the idea that the action is still continuing at the time of speaking ... *Teq* is neutral as to whether the time taken by the action

<sup>11</sup> The speaker consulted from West Malaysia was Marcia S-M Hu from Johore, also a student of La Trobe University, Melbourne.

is relatively short or long.<sup>12</sup> He exemplifies this point with (24), commenting that it could refer to a short period of time or even a whole year:

- (24) *Ī lé? t'ák sĭm-bĭ?*  
 3sg PROG study what  
 'What's s/he studying?'

Consider also example (25):

- (25) *Tsiǎ ták tsĭt lé? ló? hō*  
 here every day PROG fall rain  
 'It rains here every day.'

Without the use of the aspect marker *tē* in (25), the meaning would be a habitual one, as given in (26) which follows. Moreover, the use of *lé?* implies that at the reference time (time of speaking), it was raining. This is not true of (26) which represents a habitual statement:

- (26) *Tsiǎ ták tsĭt ló hō:*  
 here every day fall rain  
 'It rains here every day.'

With the use of *tĭ lé?*+ VERB, Bodman (1955:151) claims that the action is 'going on at the very moment of talking'. It can be translated as 'to be engaged in', or 'to be in the act of'. However, this does not clearly distinguish it from *lé?* used alone. From his examples, it appears to be functioning like Mandarin *zhèng zài* + VERB 'to be doing something right at this moment'. (*Zhèng* is an adverb meaning 'just at this moment, right now' in Mandarin, thus suitable semantically for forming another type of unbounded aspectual construction with *zài*). Compare (23) with (27) which follows:

- (27) *Tsĭt -tsūn tĭ lé? ló? hō:*  
 at: moment PROG fall rain  
 'It's raining at this very moment.'

According to Bodman (1955:152), the progressive can be used with past and present contexts but not with future ones. This is exemplified by (28) for a past context and by (29) for a present one.<sup>13</sup>

- (28) *Tsā-tsĭt lé? t'áktsē?*  
 yesterday PROG read-book  
 'Yesterday I was studying.'
- (30) *Tsĭt-tsūn guǎ iaŭ tĭ lé? t'ák-tsē?*  
 at:moment I again PROG study  
 'At the moment I'm still studying.'

In Mandarin, a similar restriction applies to the use of the continuous aspect suffix *-zhe*. It does not occur in future contexts (q.v. Chappell - in prep).

A striking feature of Min-Xiamen spoken in Malaysia, is that progressive *lé?* may follow the verb as a suffix and encode a continuing state or condition.<sup>14</sup> This looks like the use of *-zhe* in

<sup>12</sup> Note that Bodman (1955) transcribes the phoneme [l] of mainland Min-Xiamen by [ti for Malaysian Min-Xiamen. The alveolar lateral is articulated with plosive-like qualities in mainland Min-Xiamen, according to Brosnahan (1972), which may account for Bodman's choice of this symbol.

<sup>13</sup> Min examples in section 4.2.1 are all taken from Bodman (1955), retranscribed using WA, and glossed.

<sup>14</sup> This detail has not yet been checked for mainland Min-Xiamen. Note that an alternative pronunciation for postverbal *te?* is *tĭt*, according to Bodman.



The examples of verb reduplication in Min-Xiamen given in (38) and (39) show that the idea of tentative action may be considered to be unbounded aspectually. Neither a definite beginning point nor a definite endpoint is placed into focus by such an interpretation of the internal temporal framework of an event.

## **5. Conclusion**

This preliminary analysis of the aspect system in Min-Xiamen has examined the form, meaning and functions of aspect markers in the standard and prestige dialect of the Southern Min group spoken in southern Fujian province, PR China. Comparisons have been made with the Mandarin and Yue aspect systems to highlight the distinctive features of the Min system, particularly in terms of the general grammatical strategy used: Min was shown to use preverbal marking of aspect as opposed to both Mandarin and Yue which on the whole use postverbal marking.

The potential significance of possible historical relationships between the preverbal strategies of Min and postverbal strategies of other dialect groups was outlined, supported by the fact that the Min dialect group exhibits important phonological archaisms that provide evidence of this group having diverged from mainstream Sinitic at an early stage. Further diachronic research and fieldwork need to be carried out to answer the question of whether Min-Xiamen can be shown to be grammatically archaic in some of its features such as aspect.

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