

## On Post-verbal Durative/Frequency Phrases in Mandarin Chinese

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the syntactic and semantic properties of post-verbal durative/frequency phrases in Mandarin Chinese. We have presented several analyses of post-verbal durative/frequency phrases in the generative literature and pointed out that none of them can correctly predict the syntactic distribution which is affected by both aspectual suffixes and the referentiality of objects. Furthermore, we have examined some syntactic and semantic similarities between post-verbal durative and frequency phrases that are ignored in the previous studies. Building on the evidence from ellipsis, semantic scope and parallelism between nominal and verbal domain, this paper provides a unified account that analyzes the post-verbal durative/frequency phrase as the specifier of a functional projection FP between vP and VP. The functional head F contains a [+measure] or [+counting] feature that checks with the specifier. Referential objects occur in the Spec,VP, whereas non-referential objects occur in the complement position of VP.

### Keywords

durative phrase, frequency phrase, referentiality, adjunct, complement

This work aims to propose a unified analysis for the distribution of durative/frequency phrases in Mandarin Chinese. Morphologically, durative/frequency phrases are noun phrases, that is why they are called *zhun binyu* ‘quasi-object’ in the traditional Chinese grammar. Semantically, durative phrases are measure phrases that measure the duration of events described by the main predicates, whereas frequency phrases are counting phrases that count the occurrences of occasions over which take place the events denoted by the main predicates or the occurrences of events *per se*.<sup>1</sup>

This paper is organized as follows. In the first place, we will provide a complete picture of the distribution of post-verbal durative/frequency phrases. In the second place, we will

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<sup>1</sup> There are two types of frequency phrases in Mandarin Chinese from the semantic perspective. One counts occasions, while the other counts events. We will not discuss the difference in this work. For details, please refer to Donazzan (2012) and Donazzan & Tovena (2013).

review the literature and point out the problems that arise from the existing proposals. In the third place, we will discuss the syntactic and semantic properties that durative/frequency phrases display but were ignored in the literature. We will then provide a unified account for the syntactic status of durative/frequency phrases before the conclusion.

### 1. Distribution of durative/frequency phrases

The distribution of durative/frequency phrases is affected by the presence or absence of aspectual suffixes (Zhang, Qiu & Hu 2018) on the one hand, and by the referentiality of objects (Li & Thompson 1981, Huang 1982, 1994) on the other hand.<sup>2</sup>

When aspectual suffixes do not occur, durative/frequency phrases can either follow or precede the object despite the referentiality of the latter, e.g. (1) and (2).<sup>3</sup>

- (1) a. Zhangsan mei tian du (na ben) shu liang ge  
 Zhangsan every day read Dem Clf book two Clf  
**xiaoshi/liang bian.**  
 hour/two time

- b. Zhangsan mei tian du liang ge xiaoshi/liang bian  
 Zhangsan every day read two Clf hour/two time  
 (na ben) shu.  
 Dem Clf book  
 ‘Zhangsan reads that book for two hours/twice every day.’

- (2) a. Zhangsan yijing du (na ben) shu liang ge  
 Zhangsan already read Dem Clf book two Clf  
**xiaoshi/liang bian** le.  
 hour/two time PtcI

- b. Zhangsan yijing du liang ge xiaoshi/liang bian  
 Zhangsan already read two Clf hour/two time  
 (na ben) shu le.  
 Dem Clf book PtcI

‘Zhangsan has already been reading (that book) for two hours./Zhangsan has already read that book twice.’

<sup>2</sup> Zhang, Qiu & Hu (2018) only discussed durative phrases, but their observation can be extended to frequency phrases.

<sup>3</sup> Abbreviations used throughout in the glosses: BA=particle for introducing preposed object; Clf=classifier; Dem=demonstrative; Dur=durative; Exp=experiential; Lnk=linker; Mode=mood; Neg=negation; Pfv=perfective; Pl=plural; Pass=passive; Pro=pronoun; Prog=progressive; PtcI=particle; Sg=singular.

When verbs take an aspectual suffix, the distribution of durative/frequency phrases varies according to whether the object is referential or not, e.g. (3). More precisely, the referential object can either precede or follow the durative/frequency phrase. On the contrary, the non-referential object can only follow the durative phrase in the presence of an aspectual suffix.

- (3) a. Zhangsan du-le \*(na ben) shu liang ge xiaoshi/liang bian.  
Zhangsan read-Pfv Dem Clf book two Clf hour/two time  
'Zhangsan read that book for two hours/twice.'
- b. Zhangsan du-le liang ge xiaoshi/liang bian (na ben) shu.  
Zhangsan read-Pfv two Clf hour/two time Dem Clf book  
'Zhangsan read (that book) for two hours/twice.'

## 2. Previous analyses

There are several analyses in the literature to account for the distribution of post-verbal durative phrases or frequency phrases respectively. Post-verbal durative phrases are treated as either the complements of verbs (Huang 1984, 1994, Li 1987, Cheng et al. 1997) or adjuncts that can adjoin to different projections considering their semantic properties.<sup>4</sup> But frequency phrases are treated as UnitP which is headed by a verbal classifier (Zhang 2017). On the one hand, neither the complement analysis nor the adjunct analysis can correctly cover the distribution of post-verbal durative phrases. On the other hand, the syntactic and semantic similarities between post-verbal durative and frequency phrases are ignored in these analyses. In what follows, we will review each of these analyses and point out the problems.

### 2.1. Complement analysis

Durative/frequency phrases are analyzed as complements of verbs by Huang (1984, 1994), Li (1987) and Cheng et al. (1997) (among others). The syntactic structure in (4) aims to account for example (3a) whereby the durative/frequency phrase cannot follow the non-referential object but can follow the referential object.

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<sup>4</sup> Post-verbal durative phrases can also be analyzed as predicate of a sentential subject, e.g. (i). In (i), the scope of the negation *mei* indicates that the verb *lai* 'come' and the durative phrase *san tian* 'three days' cannot be in the same clause. For more discussion, see Li (1987) and Zhang, Qiu & Hu (2018) (among others).

(i) Ta mei lai xuexiao san tian le.  
he Neg come school three day Ptc  
'It's been three days that he didn't come to school.'

- (4) [<sub>IP</sub> NP [<sub>I'</sub> I [<sub>VP</sub> NP2 [<sub>V'</sub> V NP3 ]]]] (Cheng et al. 1997)

According to Cheng et al. (1997), the non-referential object and the durative/frequency phrase both compete for the complement position NP3. Therefore, a durative/frequency phrase cannot occur after a non-referential object. However, unlike the non-referential object, the referential object is generated in the Spec,VP position NP2, which makes NP3 available for the durative/frequency phrase.

However, the complement approach wrongly rules out cases in which durative/frequency phrases follow a non-referential object, as in (1a) and (2a), and precede a referential one, as in (1b) and (2b).

## 2.2. Adjunct analysis

Lin (2007) provides an account at the syntactic-semantic interface for the distribution of durative phrases. Specifically, he argues that different aspectual verb classes impact the distribution of durative phrases. When verbs belong to the activity class, durative phrases can either follow or precede the object, as in (5). When verbs belong to the achievement class, durative phrases can only follow the object, as in (6).

- (5) a. Wo **kai** jichengche ershi nian le.  
 I drive taxi twenty year PtcI  
 b. Wo **kai** ershi nian jichengche le.  
 I drive twenty year taxi PtcI  
 'I have driven taxi for twenty years.' (adapted from Lin (2007))
- (6) a. Women **dida** zhongdian shi fenzhong le.  
 we reach destination ten minute PtcI  
 'It's been ten minutes since we reached the destination.' (adapted from Lin (2007))  
 b. \*Women **dida** shi fenzhong zhongdian le.  
 we reach ten minute destination PtcI

In the spirit of Ramchand (2008), Lin adopted the theory of first-phase syntax which maps the event structure onto the syntactic structure. According to him, each verb carries some semantic features that need to be checked by a head in the syntax. The agentive predicate checks the agent feature of VoiceP. The event predicate checks the process feature of the head V of VP. The resultative predicate in the representation of a verb checks the result feature of the head R of RP. In addition to these syntactic restrictions, durative phrases must satisfy a semantic constraint, i.e. they only modify atelic predicates.

When a durative phrase occurs with an activity verb, the durative phrase can adjoin to AgroP or VP to satisfy the semantic constraint, e.g. (7). When a durative phrase occurs with an achievement verb, the durative phrase can only adjoin to RP to satisfy the semantic constraint, e.g. (8).

- (7) [AgrsP Wo<sub>K</sub> [VoiceP *t*<sub>k</sub> [Voice' kai<sub>j</sub> [AgrOP ershi nian [AgrOP jichengche<sub>i</sub> [Agro' Agro<sub>j</sub> [VP ershi nian [VP *t*<sub>i</sub> [V' V<sub>j</sub> ]]]]]]]]]] (Lin 2007)
- (8) [AgrsP Women<sub>K</sub> [VoiceP *t*<sub>k</sub> [Voice' dida<sub>j</sub> [AgrOP \*shi fenzhong [AgrOP zhongdian<sub>i</sub> [Agro' Agro<sub>j</sub> [VP \*shi fenzhong [VP *t*<sub>i</sub> [V' V<sub>j</sub> [RP shi fenzhong [RP e<sub>k</sub> [R' *t*<sub>j</sub> *t*<sub>i</sub>]]]]]]]]]]] (Lin 2007)

Lin's proposal is problematic in two aspects. On the one hand, he did not consider the impact of referentiality of objects on the distribution of durative phrases, hence sentence (3a) remains unexplained by Lin's proposal.

On the other hand, Lin proposed that durative phrases must follow objects when verbs are from the achievement class. However, this is not true, given the ungrammaticality of sentence (9a) and grammaticality of sentence (9b).

- (9) a. \*Lisi **shu-le** bisai ershi nian.  
Lisi lose-Pfv game twenty year  
Intended reading: 'Lisi has been losing the competition for twenty years.'
- b. Lisi **shu-le** ershi nian bisai.  
Lisi lose-Pfv twenty year game  
'Lisi has been losing the competition for twenty years.'

### 2.3. Frequency phrases as UnitP

Zhang (2017) treated frequency phrases as combinations of a numeral and a verbal classifier. She proposed a functional projection UnitP, which can be either higher or lower than vP, cf. (10) and (11), to account for all types of preverbal and post-verbal verbal classifiers, such as *kan-le san ci* 'see-Pfv three times' and *da-le san quan* 'punch-Pfv three punches'. The various word orders of frequency phrases and objects depend on whether the vP moves to a higher position. Verbal classifiers such as *san quan* 'three punches' are situated between vP and VP.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> In her analysis, Zhang (2017) considered that sentences with preverbal or post-verbal frequency phrases are derivationally related. However, by looking at the distribution of frequency phrases and the presence/absence of aspectual suffixes, e.g. (i) and (ii), we consider that preverbal and post-verbal frequency phrases should be analyzed separately.

- (10) [<sub>VP</sub> [<sub>UnitP</sub> Numeral [<sub>Unit'</sub> Unit-Clv VP]]] (Zhang 2017)  
 (11) [<sub>UnitP</sub> Numeral [<sub>Unit'</sub> Unit-CLv vP]] (Zhang 2017)

Zhang (2017) argued that verbal classifiers are heads of UnitP and can license VP-ellipsis (see (12)). However, the example should not be analyzed as a case of VP-ellipsis since VP-ellipsis should not be sensitive to island constraint (see (13)).

- (12) Dalin cengjing san ci chidao, Yuru liang ci.  
 Dalin once three time be.late Yuru two time  
 ‘Dalin was late three times, Yuru twice.’ (Zhang 2017)
- (13) \*Dalin cengjing san ci chidao, Yuru liang ci de  
 Dalin once three time be.late Yuru two time Lnk  
 shi rang dajia hen jingya.  
 thing make everyone very surprised  
 Intended meaning: ‘Dalin was late three times. The fact that Yuru (was late) twice surprised everyone.’

Furthermore, post-verbal frequency phrases cannot license such ellipsis under this configuration (see (14)). It follows that the word expressing frequency in the frequency phrase doesn’t behave like a head element.

- (14) a. ???/\*Zhangsan du-le na ben shu liang bian,  
 Zhangsan read-Pfv Dem Clf book two time  
 Lisi san bian.  
 Lisi three time
- b. ???/\*Zhangsan du-le liang bian na ben shu,  
 Zhangsan read-Pfv two time Dem Clf book  
 Lisi san bian.  
 Lisi three time

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- (i) Dalin cengjing chidao-guo san ci.  
 Dalin once be.late-Exp three time  
 ‘Dalin had been late three times.’
- (ii) \*Dalin cengjing san ci chidao-guo.  
 Dalin once three time be.late-Exp

### 3. Discussion

#### 3.1. Further syntactic evidence against complement analysis

Let us come back to structure (4) which suggests that durative/frequency phrases occur in the complement position of the verb. If durative/frequency phrases are indeed verb complements, they should be able to be elided like direct objects in V-stranding VP-ellipsis. For instance, the direct objects *na ben shu* ‘that book’ in (15a) and *guohua* ‘traditional Chinese painting’ in (15a) are elided in V-stranding VP-ellipsis, but they can still be interpreted in the ellipsis clause.

- (15) a. Zhangsan du-le na ben shu liang ge xiaoshi/liang bian,  
Zhangsan read-Pfv Dem Clf book two Clf hour/two time  
Lisi ye du-le liang ge xiaoshi/liang bian.  
Lisi also read-Pfv two Clf hour/two time  
‘Zhangsan read that book for two hours/twice. Lisi also read [that book] for two hours/ twice.’
- b. Zhangsan xue-le liang nian/liang hui guohua,  
Zhangsan study-Pfv two year/two time traditional.Chinese.painting  
Lisi ye xue-le liang nian/liang hui.  
Lisi also study-Pfv two year/two time  
‘Zhangsan studied traditional Chinese painting for two years/twice. Lisi also studied [traditional Chinese painting] for two years/twice.’

On the contrary, (16a)–(16b) suggest that the elided durative/frequency phrases cannot be interpreted in the ellipsis clause, unlike direct objects.

- (16) a. Zhangsan du-le na ben shu liang ge xiaoshi/liang bian,  
Zhangsan read-Pfv Dem Clf book two Clf hour/two time  
#Lisi ye du-le na ben shu.  
Lisi also read-Pfv Dem Clf book  
‘Zhangsan read that book for two hours/twice. #Lisi also read that book for two hours/twice.’
- b. Zhangsan xue-le liang nian/liang hui guohua,  
Zhangsan study-Pfv two year/two time traditional.Chinese.painting  
#Lisi ye xue-le guohua.  
Lisi also study-Pfv traditional.Chinese.painting  
‘Zhangsan studied traditional Chinese painting for two years/twice. #Lisi also studied traditional Chinese painting for two years/twice.’

In addition, if durative phrases are complements, then the construction comprising the direct object and the durative phrase should be analogous to the double object construction in Chinese. However, compare (16a)–(16b) with (17).

- (17) Zhangsan song-le Lisi liang ben shu, \*Wangwu ye song-le Lisi.  
 Zhangsan give-Pfv Lisi two Clf book Wangwu also give-Pfv Lisi

In (16a)–(16b), although the elided durative phrase cannot be interpreted in the target clause, the latter is still grammatical. On the contrary, in (17), the deletion of the direct object renders the ellipsis clause ungrammatical. Therefore, the two elements in question should not be treated as being generated in the same complement position.

### 3.2. Durative phrases have a narrower scope

Lin (2007) assumed that durative phrases can adjoin to any maximal projection provided that what they modify is an atelic predicate. In the following, we will challenge this viewpoint and argue that durative/frequency phrases take a very narrow scope.

Firstly, durative phrases always take a narrow scope with respect to frequency adverbs. Sentence (18a) indicates that the frequency adverb *ou'er* ‘sometimes’ can only scope over the durative phrase, but not in the opposite order. This is different from English *for*-adverbial, which can take scope either over or under the frequency adverb, e.g. (18b).

- (18) a. Lisi ou'er kan shu liang ge xingqi.  
 Lisi sometimes read book two Clf week  
 ‘Sometimes, Lisi reads for two weeks.’  
 b. John sometimes reads for two weeks.  
 i. *For two weeks*, John sometimes reads.  
 ii. Sometimes, John reads *for two weeks*.

Secondly, durative phrases have a narrower scope than some degree adverbs, cf. (19).

- (19) Zhangsan (\*hen/\*shifen) taoyan-le Lisi liang nian.  
 Zhangsan very/extremely hate-Pfv Lisi two year  
 ‘Zhangsan hated Lisi (\*very much/\*extremely) for two years.’

Lastly, durative phrases cannot co-occur with a telic predicate and coerce it into an atelic predicate, unlike English *for*-adverbial that can trigger such a coercion effect (de Swart 1998). Compare (20a) with (20b) and (21a) with (21b).



- (20) a. \*Nongmin ba yi gen muchai tuo-dao liangcang yi ge xiaoshi.  
farmer BA one Clf log drag-arrive barn one Clf hour  
b. The farmer dragged a log into the barn for an hour. (MacDonald 2006)
- (21) a. \*Yuehan zou-dao-le xuexiao shi fenzhong.  
John walk-arrive-Pfv school ten minute  
b. John walked to school for ten minutes. (Smith 1991)

One possible explanation for the unacceptable examples is to assume that durative phrases have a narrower scope than the implicit aspectual operator which transforms a telic predicate into an atelic predicate.

In a nutshell, we have shown that durative phrases have a very narrow scope, thus contra Lin's proposal, we propose that durative phrases have a low syntactic position.

### 3.3. Parallelism between nominal domain and verbal domain

There is a parallelism between the nominal domain and the verbal domain as to the uses of counting phrases and measure phrases.

In the nominal domain, *ge* in (22a) is a counting phrase that counts the number of apples and the linker *de* cannot occur. *Gongjin* 'kilo' in (22b) is a measure phrase that measures the quantity of apples and *de* can occur.<sup>6</sup>

- (22) a. Zhangsan mai-le san ge (\*de) pingguo.  
Zhangsan buy-Pfv three Clf Lnk apple  
'Zhangsan bought three apples.'
- b. Zhangsan mai-le san gongjin (de) pingguo.  
Zhangsan buy-Pfv three kilo Lnk apple  
'Zhangsan bought three kilos of apples.'

By analogy, in the verbal domain, the frequency phrase *bian* as a counting phrase counts the occasions on which takes place the event of reading and *de* is prohibited in (23a). On the contrary, the durative phrase *xiaoshi* 'hour' measures the duration of the reading event and *de* is optional in (23b).

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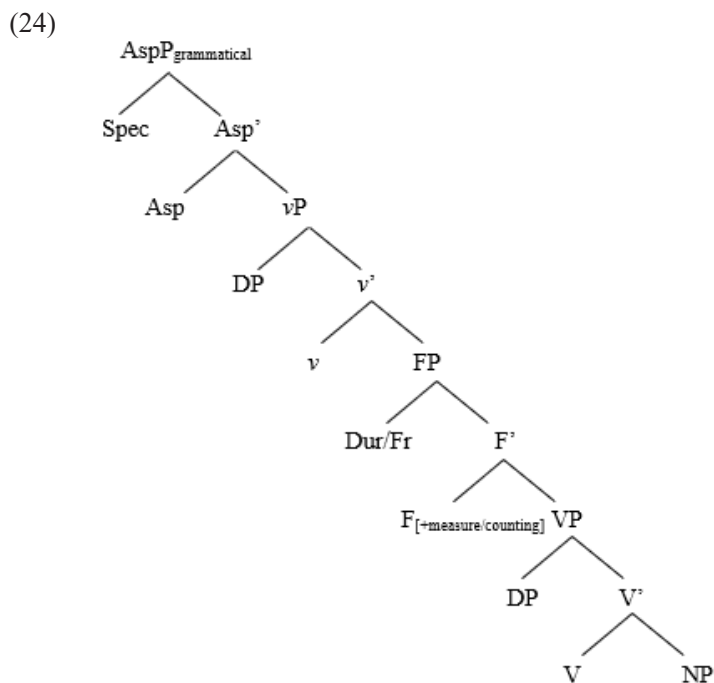
<sup>6</sup> The presence or absence of *de* might be a phonetic issue related to syntactic computation. The optionality of *de* indicates that its presence or absence does not affect the syntactic structure, cf. (22b, 23b). On the other hand, when *de* is prohibited, cf. (22a, 23a), its presence or absence might indicate that the syntactic structure is different. We leave this issue for further study.

- (23) a. Zhangsan du-le liang bian (\*de) shu.  
 Zhangsan read-Pfv two time Lnk book  
 ‘Zhangsan read twice.’
- b. Zhangsan du-le liang ge xiaoshi (de) shu.  
 Zhangsan read-Pfv two Clf hour Lnk book  
 ‘Zhangsan read for two hours.’

#### 4. Our proposal

In light of the distribution of post-verbal durative/frequency phrases and their syntactic and semantic properties, we propose that durative/frequency phrases are generated in the specifier position of a functional projection FP between VP and vP. This projection is headed by a functional head containing [+measure] or [+counting] feature that checks with the specifier. Our analysis is similar to Morzycki (2004)’s proposal of the measure DP phrase in English.

Non-referential objects occur in the complement position of VP, whereas referential objects occur in the specifier of VP. Durative/frequency phrases occur in the specifier of FP and check their [+measure] or [+counting] feature with the head F.



When the referential object precedes the durative/frequency phrase, the referential object can be focused and hence can move to Spec,FocusP in the construction, cf. (25). When the definite object is not focalized, it follows the durative/frequency phrase, cf. (26).

- (25) Zhangsan [<sub>AspP</sub> du-le [<sub>FocP</sub> na ben shu [<sub>vP</sub> ~~du~~ [<sub>FP</sub> liang ge  
Zhangsan read-Pfv Dem Clf book two Clf  
xiaoshi/liang bian F [<sub>vP</sub> ~~na ben shu du~~]]]]] (cf. (3))  
hour/two time
- (26) Zhangsan [<sub>AspP</sub> du-le [<sub>vP</sub> ~~du~~ [<sub>FP</sub> liang ge xiaoshi/liang bian F  
Zhangsan read-Pfv two Clf hour/two time  
[<sub>vP</sub> na ben shu ~~du~~]]]]] (cf. (3))  
Dem Clf book

When the object is non-referential, it cannot be focused, thus the same word order in (25) is disallowed with non-referential objects, as the structures given in (27). It should be noticed that in this case the verb *du* ‘read’ and the non-referential object do not form a compound since only the verb is suffixed by the aspectual marker *-le*.

- (27) a. Zhangsan [<sub>AspP</sub> du-le [<sub>vP</sub> ~~du~~ [<sub>FP</sub> liang ge xiaoshi/liang bian F  
Zhangsan read-Pfv two Clf hour/two time  
[<sub>vP</sub> ~~du~~ shu]]]]  
book
- b. \*Zhangsan [<sub>AspP</sub> du-le [<sub>FocP</sub> shu [<sub>vP</sub> ~~du~~ [<sub>FP</sub> liang ge xiaoshi/liang bian  
Zhangsan read-Pfv book two Clf hour/two time  
F [<sub>vP</sub> ~~du~~ ~~shu~~]]]]]]

When the aspectual suffix is absent, the verb can move to Asp by itself, cf. (28a). The non-referential object and the verb can also form a VO compound in the absence of the aspectual marker, cf. (28b). In this case, the VO compound can be preposed, resulting in the word order in (28b). The same analysis is adequate for sentences in (2), repeated in (29).

- (28) a. Zhangsan [<sub>AspP</sub> mei tian du [<sub>vP</sub> ~~du~~ [<sub>FP</sub> liang ge xiaoshi/liang bian  
Zhangsan every day read two Clf hour/two time  
F [<sub>vP</sub> ~~du~~ shu]]]]
- b. Zhangsan [<sub>AspP</sub> mei tian du-shu [<sub>vP</sub> ~~du-shu~~ [<sub>FP</sub> liang ge xiaoshi/liang bian  
Zhangsan every day read-book two Clf hour/two time  
F [<sub>vP</sub> ~~du-shu~~]]]]

- (29) a. Zhangsan yijing du (na ben) shu **liang ge xiaoshi/liang bian** le.  
 Zhangsan already read Dem Clf book two Clf hour/two time Ptel
- b. Zhangsan yijing du **liang ge xiaoshi/liang bian** (na ben) shu le.  
 Zhangsan already read two Clf hour/two time Dem Clf book Ptel  
 ‘Zhangsan has already been reading (that book) for two hours./Zhangsan has already read that book twice.’

## 5. Conclusion

In this work, we propose a unified account to analyze post-verbal durative/frequency phrases as the specifier of a functional projection FP between *vP* and *VP*. This proposal can account for the parallelism established between verbal domain and nominal domain with regard to the uses of measure and counting expressions as well as their scope. Compared with previous analyses that can only explain a subset of constructions with post-verbal durative/frequency phrases, our analysis can better account for the complex distribution of these post-verbal measure phrases and the syntactic and semantic similarities between post-verbal durative and frequency phrases.

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## 漢語動詞後時量短語和動量短語的再分析

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### 提要

本文討論現代漢語動詞後時量 / 動量短語的句法語義特徵。首先檢討生成語法文獻中對時量 / 動量短語的分析，指出其中存在的理論和經驗問題，然後從省略結構、語義轄域和名詞與動詞域間的並行性幾方面考察，提出用統一分析處理含有動詞後時量 / 動量短語的結構。論文主要觀點為，動詞後時量 / 動量短語生成於功能投射 FP 的指示語位置，與帶有 [+measure] 或 [+counting] 的中心語進行特徵核查。指稱賓語位於 VP 的指示語位置，非指稱賓語位於 VP 的補述語位置。

### 關鍵詞

時量短語，動量短語，指稱性，附加語，補足語

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