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## A new approach to *-zhe* in Mandarin Chinese\*

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### 1. Introduction

Among the aspectual suffixes in Mandarin Chinese, the so-called durative/progressive aspect *-zhe* has proven especially elusive, notwithstanding the large amount of literature devoted to it. The present article adopts a new approach and claims that *-zhe* is not on a par with the aspect markers *zài*, *-le* and *-guo*. Unlike the latter, which realize a “high” aspect pertaining to the entire event, *-zhe* is shown to instantiate a “low” aspect (*aktionsart*) (cf. Travis 2010 for the dichotomy high vs low aspect). Importantly, *-zhe* also signals the dependent status of the verbal projection concerned. As a consequence, in contrast to the aspect suffixes *zài*, *-le* and *-guo*, for which we observe constraints when in non-matrix contexts, the opposite holds for *-zhe*: it is severely constrained in matrix contexts, but rather freely occurs in non-matrix contexts.

The article is organized as follows. Section 2 provides data that challenge an analysis of *-zhe* as a high aspect marker on a par with *zài*, *-le* and *-guo*. Section 3 examines cases where different heads can license the non-autonomous verbal projection ‘V-*zhe*’. The fact that the progressive aspectual auxiliary *zài* is one of them further weakens the status of *-zhe* as a high aspect marker. Sections 4 and 5 introduce two constructions where ‘V-*zhe*’ is acceptable in a matrix context, *viz.* locative inversion sentences, on the one hand, and sentences ascribing the event as a property to the subject, on the other. Section 6 concludes the article with a short remark on the historical evolution of ‘V-*zhe*’.

### 2. Cases challenging an analysis of *-zhe* as high aspect

In this section, we show that *-zhe* cannot be analysed as high aspect. Interestingly, much relevant data can be found in the literature, but arguably they have not been taken at face value.

The examples provided in the literature for *-zhe* as an alleged high durative/progressive aspect marker typically involve sentences with ‘V-*zhe*’ in an adjunct clause preceding the matrix verb:

- (1) 他吹着口哨下楼梯。 (Chen Chung-yu 1986: 2; (10a), bracketing added)  
Tā [vP[<sub>adj.clause</sub> *pro* chuī-*zhe* kǒushào] xià lóutī]<sup>1</sup>  
3SG blow-*zhe* whistle descend stair  
‘He walked down the stairs whistling.’

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<sup>1</sup> The following abbreviations are used for glossing the examples: CL classifier; EXP experiential aspect (*-guo*); NEG negation; PERF perfective aspect (*-le*); PL plural (e.g. 3PL = 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural); PROGR progressive aspect (*zài*); SG singular; SUB subordinator.

- (2) 他看着书等火车。  
 Tā [vP<sub>[adj.clause</sub> *pro* kàn-zhe shū] děng huǒchē]  
 3SG read-*zhe* book wait train  
 ‘He waits for the train while reading.’

First, there is no restriction on the aspect of the matrix verb ( $V_2$ ) in the adjunct structure ‘S [vP<sub>[adj.clause</sub> *pro* V1-*zhe* (O)] V<sub>2</sub>P]’. This would be difficult to explain if *-zhe* itself were a high aspect marker on a par with *zài*, *-le* and *-guo*.

- (3) 他抱着书走进了教室。 (Chen Zhong 2009: 86)  
 Tā bào-zhe shū zǒujìn-le jiàoshi  
 3SG hold-*zhe* book enter-PERF classroom  
 ‘He entered the classroom holding a book.’
- (4) 他闭过眼睛躺过一会儿。  
 Tā bì -zhe yǎnjīng tǎng-guo yī huìr  
 3SG close-*zhe* eye lie -EXP one while  
 ‘He had lain down for a while with his eyes closed.’
- (5) [他]皱着眉头想了一想。 (Jaxontov 1988: 125, (47))  
 [Tā] zhòu-zhe méitóu xiǎng-le yī xiǎng  
 3SG knit -*zhe* eye.brow think-PERF one think  
 ‘Knitting his brow he thought a moment.’
- (6) 老王一定会看着你笑。  
 Lǎo Wáng yíding huì kàn-zhe nǐ xiào  
 Lǎo Wáng certainly will see-*zhe* 2SG laugh  
 ‘Lǎo Wáng will certainly laugh when seeing you.’

The matrix verb in (3) and (4) is suffixed by the perfective aspect *-le* and the experiential aspect *-guo*, respectively. (5) is a case of verb repetition ‘V-*le* yī V’ associated with the meaning of ‘doing something for a short while’. (6) finally illustrates the future auxiliary *huì* selecting the vP headed by *xiào* ‘smile’ including the adjunct clause with ‘V-*zhe*’.

Second, in this structure *-zhe* cannot be replaced by *-le* or *-guo*:

- (7) 他站着/\*了/\*过吃饭。  
 Tā [vP<sub>[adj.clause</sub> *pro* zhàn-zhe/\*-le /\*-guo] chī fàn]  
 3SG stand-*zhe*/-PERF/-EXP eat food  
 ‘He eats while standing.’

- (8) 他关着/\*了/\*过窗户睡觉。  
 Tā [vP<sub>[adj.clause</sub> guān-zhe/\*-le /\*-guo chuānghu] shuì jiào]  
 3SG shut-zhe/ -PERF/-EXP window sleep sleep  
 ‘He sleeps with the window closed.’

While (7) with *-le* or *-guo* is simply rejected, (8) becomes acceptable with *-le* when parsed as two successive events: ‘After he had closed the window, he went to sleep’.

Third, if *-zhe* were a high aspect marker, its presence on both the matrix verb and the verb in the adjunct clause would be unexpected, given that the simultaneous presence of high aspect markers on all verbs within a single sentence is prohibited (cf. (11), (12)).

- (9) 他闭着眼睛躺着。 (Jaxontov 1988: 125)  
 Tā [vP<sub>[adj.clause</sub> *pro* bì -zhe yǎnjīng] [matrix vP tǎng-zhe]]  
 3SG close-zhe eye lie -zhe  
 ‘He lies with his eyes closed.’

- (10) 他耷拉着头坐着。 (Jaxontov 1988: 125)  
 Tā dāla -zhe tóu zuò-zhe  
 3SG lower-zhe head sit-zhe  
 ‘He is sitting with his head lowered.’

- (11) \*他闭过眼睛躺过一会儿。  
 \*Tā [vP<sub>[adj.clause</sub> *pro* bì -guo yǎnjīng] [matrix vP tǎng-guo yī huìr]]  
 3SG close-EXP eye lie -EXP one while

- (12) \*他耷拉了头蹲了。  
 \*Tā [vP<sub>[adj.clause</sub> *pro* dāla -le tóu] [matrix vP dūn-le ]]  
 3SG lower-PERF head sit -PERF

While the first verb plus *-zhe* in (9) and (10) is contained in an adjunct clause and represents the canonical case of *-zhe*, the presence of *-zhe* on the second, i.e. the matrix verb, seems at first sight unexpected in our approach, which basically considers *-zhe* as signaling the dependent nature of the verbal projection. This case is discussed in section 5 below.

### 3. Structures licensing ‘V-*zhe*’ as dependent predicate

Under more careful scrutiny, many of the cases where ‘V-*zhe*’ at first sight occurs in a matrix context turn out to involve non-matrix contexts.<sup>2</sup> Again, much relevant data have been cited in the literature.

First, V-*zhe* is selected as complement by the auxiliary *zài* indicating progressive aspect:

- (13) 他\*(在)看着电视。

Tā [AspP[Asp° \*(zài)] kàn-*zhe* diànshì]  
 3SG PROGR watch-*zhe* TV  
 ‘He is watching TV.’

- (14) 他受了伤却仍\*(在)坚持着比赛。 (Chen Zhong 2009: 81)

Tā shòu-le shāng què réng \*(zài) jiānchí-*zhe* bǐsài  
 3SG get -PERF wound but still PROGR persist-*zhe* competition  
 ‘He got hurt, but nevertheless continued the competition.’

The combination of *zài* with ‘V-*zhe*’ in (13) and (14) is well-known from the literature (cf. Chen Chung-yu 1978: 83, Paris 1988: 165, among others). However, not much attention has been paid to the obligatory presence of *zài* in sentences such as (13) and (14). Nor has one seen the contradiction arising from the alleged high aspectual status of -*zhe* and its occurring in the complement selected by another high aspect, i.e. *zài*. In fact, it is not -*zhe* that induces the progressive aspect reading in (13) and (14), but *zài*, as evidenced by the possibility for *zài* to select a verbal projection without -*zhe*.<sup>3</sup>

- (15) 他在看电视/洗衣服。

Tā zài kàn diànshì/xǐ yīfu  
 3SG PROGR watch TV /wash clothing  
 ‘He is watching TV/doing the laundry.’

The status of *zài* as a high aspectual head explains why *zài* cannot take as its complement another high AspP headed by e.g. -*le* or -*guo*. In other words, the

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that the matrix vs. non-matrix dichotomy with respect to -*zhe* is very sharp for Northern Mandarin speakers, whereas this does not seem to be the case for e.g. Taiwanese Mandarin speakers. Accordingly, the present study is based on the judgements of the first group.

<sup>3</sup> An analysis of the semantic differences between ‘V-*zhe*’ and a ‘bare’ VP as complement of *zài* is beyond the scope of this article. Note as a first observation, though, that ‘V-*zhe*’ seems to be incompatible with a habitual interpretation:

(i) Tā zài liàn (\*-*zhe*) pǎo  
 3SG PROGR practice-*zhe* run  
 ‘He is practicing running.’

unacceptability of (16) is not exclusively due to the incompatibility between the inherent semantics of *-le* and *-guo* and that of *zài*:

- (16) \*他受了伤却仍在坚持{了/过}比赛。  
 \*Tā shòu-le shāng què réng  
 3SG get -PERF wound but still  
 [<sub>AspP</sub> zài [<sub>AspP</sub> jiānchí{-le /-guo} bǐsài]  
 PROGR uphold -PERF/-EXP competition

By contrast, *-zhe* as a low (imperfective) aspect is perfectly acceptable in the complement selected by *zài*, thus lending further support to the fundamental difference between *-zhe* and the aspectual suffixes *zài*, *-le* and *-guo*.

Second, ‘V-*zhe*’ can also occur in the complement of a modal auxiliary or in the complement selected by the copula *shì*:

- (17a) 我会想着你。  
 Wǒ [<sub>AuxP</sub> huì [ xiǎng-zhe nǐ ]]  
 1SG will think-*zhe* 2SG  
 ‘I will be thinking of you.’
- (17b) 成功往往是靠着毅力  
 Chénggōng wǎngwǎng [<sub>VP</sub> shì [ kào -zhe yìlì ]]  
 success often be depend-*zhe* perseverance  
 ‘Success often depends on perseverance.’

By contrast, an AspP headed by *-le* or *-guo* is excluded as complement for alethic modals such as *huì* ‘will’ and *néng* ‘can’:

- (18) 下个星期，他会/能去(\*过/\*了)故宫。  
 Xià ge xīngqī tā huì/néng [qù(\*-guo/\*-le) gùgōng]  
 next CL week 3SG will/may go -EXP/-PERF Imperial.Palace  
 (‘By next week, he will/may have gone to the Imperial Palace.’)
- (19) 下个星期，他会/能(\*在)等你。  
 Xià ge xīngqī tā huì/néng [(\*)zài] děng nǐ ]  
 next CL week 3SG will/may PROGR wait 2SG  
 (‘Next week, he will/may be waiting for you.’)

An AspP headed by *-le* or *-guo* is, however, acceptable as complement of epistemic modals such as *yīnggāi* ‘must (be the case), should be’:

- (20) 他现在应该到了机场。  
 Tā xiànzài yīnggāi [ dào -le jīchǎng ]  
 3SG now must arrive-PERF airport  
 ‘He must have arrived at the airport by now.’
- (21) 这件事他应该提过。  
 Zhèjiàn shì , tā yīnggāi tí -guo  
 this CL matter 3SG must mention-EXP  
 ‘This matter, he must have mentioned it.’

These data confirm the fundamental difference between the high aspectual suffixes *zài*, *-le* and *-guo*, on the one hand, and *-zhe*, on the other. The high vs. low aspect distinction also explains why *-zhe* can be selected as complement by *huì* ‘will’, whereas this is excluded for AspPs headed by *zài*, *-le* or *-guo*.

Third, ‘V-*zhe*’ is also acceptable as predicate in a complement clause selected by a higher verb (cf. (22)) as well as in a secondary predicate (23):<sup>4</sup>

- (22) 我刚才看见小李打着游戏机。  
 Wǒ gāngcái kànjiàn [ Xiǎo Lǐdǎ -zhe yóuxìjī ]  
 1SG just see Xiao Li play-*zhe* playstation  
 ‘I saw Xiao Li playing with his playstation just a moment ago.’
- (23) 这里有很多人站着。  
 Zhèlǐ [matrix-VP yǒu hěn duō rén [zhàn-zhe]]  
 here have very much people stand-*zhe*  
 ‘There are a lot of people standing here.’

Last, but not least, the head licensing ‘V-*zhe*’ can also be a functional category, i.e. a complementizer, realized as a sentence-final particle in Chinese and selecting the TP containing ‘V-*zhe*’ as its complement. (For a detailed analysis of the split CP in Mandarin, cf. Paul (2009, to appear):

- (24) 外边下着雨\*(呢) ! (Lü Shuxiang et al. 2000: 666)  
 [CP[TP Wàibiān xià-zhe yǔ ] \*(ne)]  
 outside fall-*zhe* rain COMP  
 ‘Outside the rain is falling.’

<sup>4</sup> For extensive evidence showing that the second VP in existential constructions of the type illustrated in (23) has to be analysed as a secondary predicate, cf. James C.-T. Huang (1987).

- (25) 门开着\*(来着)。 (Zhu Dexi 1982: 209)  
 [CP [TP Mén kāi -zhe] \*(láizhe)]  
 door open-*zhe* COMP  
 ‘(But) the door was open just a moment ago.’
- (26) 我们已經舒舒服服地坐着\*(呢)。  
 [CP [TP Wǒmen yǐjīng shūshufúfude zuò-zhe] \*(ne)]  
 2PL already comfortably sit -*zhe* COMP  
 ‘We are already comfortably seated.’

To summarize, this section has discussed the case where *-zhe* as low aspect is unacceptable as matrix predicate and needs to be licensed by a higher (lexical or functional) head. It thus contrasts with *zài*, *-le* and *-guo* which are higher aspectual heads themselves and accordingly severely constrained in embedded contexts.

#### 4. Locative inversion: ‘PlaceP V-*zhe* NP’

The locative inversion construction is one case where ‘V-*zhe*’ is acceptable in a matrix context. This is due to the semantico-syntactic properties of this construction, which are shown to be compatible with the unbounded nature of the event expressed by ‘V-*zhe*’.

The defining semantic characteristic of the locative inversion construction as a subtype of existential sentences is to be athetic proposition in the sense of Kuroda (1972), i.e. the event and the event participants are introduced and asserted simultaneously. In the syntax of English and Chinese, this is reflected by the fact that a PlaceP obligatorily occupies the subject position, that the agent is absent and the theme argument realized within the verbal projection, i.e. in postverbal position.

- (27) 墙上挂着一幅油画。  
 [Qiángshàng]/\*Ø guà-zhe yī fú yóuhuà  
 wall on hang-*zhe* one CL oil.painting  
 ‘\*(On the wall) hangs an oil painting.’

Importantly in Chinese besides *-zhe*, the perfective aspect suffix *-le* is likewise acceptable in the case of transitive positional verbs,

- (28) 墙上挂了一幅油画。  
 Qiángshàng guà-le yī fú yóuhuà  
 wall on hang-PERF one CL oil.painting  
 ‘On the wall has been hung an oil painting.’



This observation has led to the erroneous assumption of an “alternation” between *-zhe* and *-le* in the locative inversion, which in turn is based on the incorrect analysis of *-zhe* as a high aspect marker.

We will not discuss the various ramifications of the idea that there is a free “alternation” between *-zhe* and *-le* here, but concentrate on demonstrating the fundamental differences between the two and thereby further elucidate the characteristics associated with *-zhe*.

First, in the locative inversion with ‘V-*zhe*’, the agent role is lacking, in contrast to ‘V-*le*’. As a result, (29) and (30) are rejected with *-le* instead of *-zhe*, because this would require the implausible interpretation that the moon is in the sky and the persimmons are in the tree due to some prior human action:<sup>5</sup>

- (29) 树梢上挂着/\*了一轮明月 (Hu Wenzhe 1995: 106, (34))  
 Shùshāo shàng guà -zhe/\*-le yī lùn míng yuè  
 tree.top on hang-*zhe*/ -PERF oneCL bright moon  
 ‘Above the tree top hangs a bright moon.’
- (30) 细细的枝条上挂着/\*了绿色的柿子。 (Jaxontov 1988: 132, (78))  
 Xìxì de zhītiáo shàng guà -zhe/\*-le lǜsè de shìzi  
 thin SUB branch on hang-*zhe*/ -PERF green SUB persimmon  
 ‘Green persimmons hung from thin branches.’ (Jaxontov’s translation)  
 ‘On thin branches hang green persimmons.’ (our translation)

As a consequence, there is no corresponding structure (31) with an explicit agent for ‘V-*zhe*’, while there is one in the case of ‘V-*le*’ (cf. (32)):

- (31) \*墙上他挂着一幅油画。  
 \*Qiáng shàng tā guà -zhe yī fú yóuhuà  
 wall on 3SG hang-*zhe* one CL oil.painting
- (32) 墙上他挂了一幅油画。  
 Qiáng shàng tā guà -le yī fú yóuhuà  
 wall on 3SG hang-*le*-PERF one CL oil.painting  
 ‘On the wall he has hung an oil painting.’

Furthermore, in contrast to *-le*, *-zhe* signals the absence of an end point limiting the event, as witnessed by its incompatibility with temporal adverbs such as *zǎojiù* ‘long since’, *yòu* ‘again’ etc.

<sup>5</sup> This is the reason why, unlike (29), (30) may be accepted under a reading where the persimmons have been put into the tree, as an element of decoration, for example.

- (33) 墙上(\*已经/\*早就/\*又)挂着一幅油画。  
 Qiángshàng (\* yǐjīng / \*zǎojiù / \*yòu) guà -zhe yī fú yóuhuà  
 wall on already/ long.since/ again hang-*zhe* one CL oil.painting  
 ‘On the wall hangs an oil painting.’
- (34) 墙上(已经/早就/又)挂了一幅油画。  
 Qiángshàng (yǐjīng / zǎojiù / yòu) guà -le yī fú yóuhuà  
 wall on already/ long.since/ again hang-PERF one CL oil.painting  
 ‘On the wall has (already/again/long since) been hung an oil painting.’

By contrast, adverbs such as *bìngpái* ‘side by side’ or *yīzhí* ‘always’ which do not imply temporal end points are compatible with ‘V-*zhe*’:

- (35) 墙上並排/一直挂着几幅油画。  
 Qiángshàng bìngpái / yīzhí guà -zhe jǐ fú yóuhuà  
 wall on side.by.side/always hang-*zhe* several CL oil.painting  
 ‘On the wall (always) hang several oil paintings (side by side).’

Last, but not least, the alleged alternation between *-zhe* and *-le* in the locative inversion is restricted to transitive positional verbs and does not hold for intransitive positional verbs such as *zuò* ‘sit’, *tǎng* ‘lie’ where only *-zhe* is possible (cf. C.-T. James Huang 1987: 228 and references therein):

- (36) 沙发上坐着/\*坐了两个小孩儿。  
 Shāfā shàng zuò-zhe/\* zuò-le liang ge xiǎoháir  
 sofa on sit-*zhe*/ sit -PERF two CL child  
 ‘On the sofa sit two children.’

This confirms the fundamental difference between *-le* and *-zhe*, in other words the observed “alternation” is nothing but a surface phenomenon.

To summarize, ‘V-*zhe*’ is acceptable as matrix predicate in locative inversion, because this construction is a type ofthetic proposition, realized here as an unbounded existential construction. Furthermore, in the locative inversion with *-zhe*, no agent role is present, neither overt nor covert. As to be discussed in the following section, the unbounded nature of the event and the lack of an agent likewise allow ‘V-*zhe*’ as a matrix predicate of descriptive sentences.

##### 5. ‘S V-*zhe* (O)’ providing a description (*hic et nunc* or *gnomic*)

We note as a first approximation that *-zhe* has the effect of ascribing the event as a property to the subject, the latter thus being more of a *theme* than an *agent*. Unlike an event, a property is not intrinsically defined in terms of boundedness. This gives

rise to two interpretations for ‘S V-*zhe* (O)’ sentences: a *hic et nunc* interpretation and a *gnomic* interpretation.

### 5.1 *Hic et nunc* interpretation

A description is provided (rather than an activity being reported) and presented as holding at the utterance time:

- (37) 他戴着一顶红帽子。  
 Tā dài -zhe yī dǐng hóng màozi  
 3SG wear-*zhe* one CL red hat  
 ‘He wears a red hat.’

- (38) 人们跳着，唱着。  
 Rénmen tiào -zhe, chàng -zhe  
 people dance-*zhe* sing -*zhe*  
 ‘People dance and sing.’

As already pointed out by Teng Shou-hsin (1973: 21, footnote 6), sentence (37) cannot be interpreted as ‘He is putting on a red hat’; this meaning must be rendered using *zài* as in (39):

- (39) 他在戴一顶红帽子。  
 Tā zài dài yī dǐng hóng màozi  
 3SG PROGR wear one CL red hat  
 ‘He is putting on a red hat.’

More examples of the same type as (37) are given below, which also illustrate the crucial role adverbs may play in strengthening the interpretation in terms of a property ascribed rather than an activity reported:

- (40) 他\*(高高兴兴地)唱着歌。  
 Tā \*(gāogāoxìngxìngde) chàng -zhe gē  
 3SG happily sing -*zhe* song  
 ‘He sings happily.’
- (41) 他不停地在本子上记着什么。  
 Tā bùtíngde zài běnzi shàng jì -zhe shénme  
 3SG constantly at notebook on note-*zhe* anything  
 ‘He is constantly making notes in his notebook.’

5.2. *Gnomic* interpretation

Given a context or adverbs incompatible with a *hic et nunc* interpretation, ‘V-*zhe*’ in a matrix context has the effect of ascribing an event as a generally valid property to the subject (*gnomic* interpretation).

(42) 我永远等着你。

Wǒ yǒngyuǎn děng-zhe nǐ  
3SG forever wait-*zhe* 2SG  
‘I’ll wait for you forever.’

(43) 他通年雇着三个长工。

(Jaxontov 1988: 128)

Tā tōngnián gù -zhe sān ge chánggōng  
3SG all.year hire-*zhe* three CL workman  
‘He keeps three hired hands (farm labourers) the year round.’

(44) 要不然這麼著得了。

Yàobùrán zhème-zhe dé le  
otherwise be.so -*zhe* be.enough SFP  
‘Otherwise, let it be like this and that’s it.’

To summarize, the *hic et nunc* or the *gnomic* interpretations of ‘V-*zhe*’ represent the default interpretations obtained from the fundamentally unbounded nature of the event signaled by *-zhe*.

## 6. Conclusion

We have argued that *-zhe* is a low (imperfective) aspect marker and that moreover it signals the dependent status of the verbal projection concerned. This explains why a significant part of the data provided to illustrate the use of *-zhe* involves embedded contexts (adjunct clauses, complements to a higher head etc.). This fact has not really been considered significant in previous studies, nor has there been any attempt to explicitly incorporate it into the analysis of *-zhe*. Upon reflection, if *-zhe* were really on a par with the high aspect markers *zai*, *-le* and *-guo*, its prominent presence in non-matrix contexts would in fact appear rather incongruous, given the well-known observation that in Chinese aspect markers are often optional in matrix contexts and severely constrained in non-matrix contexts.

When in a matrix clause, ‘V-*zhe*’ has the effect of ascribing the event as a property to the subject. This entails a present, *hic et nunc*, or a *gnomic* interpretation, depending on the temporal and spatial anchoring of the utterance (*in presentia* vs *in absentia*). A property interpretation is also available in the locative inversion where ‘V-*zhe*’ presents an agentless predicate. Last, but not least, from a diachronic point of view it is interesting to note that ‘V-*zhe*’ in the locative

inversion is attested later than ‘V-*zhe*’ in embedded contexts (cf. Djamouri 2010, 2011). In other words, *-zhe* started out as a ‘structural marker’ (结构助词 *jiégòu zhùcí*) of dependency and only subsequently gave rise to the unbounded interpretation observed in locative inversion and in ‘S V-*zhe* O’ sentences.

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