

1.7 Action verbs

While SVs attribute emotional or physical states to people or things, V_{act} involve deeds such as ‘eating’ or ‘going to class’. V_{act} are often subdivided into ‘transitive’, ie those that generally presuppose an object (‘read > a book’; ‘eat > a meal’); and ‘intransitive’, ie those that do not presuppose an object (‘walk’; ‘kneel’). However, languages differ as to how this distinction is actually realized. In English for example, when the verb ‘eat’ means ‘eat a meal’, English has the option of either not expressing an object (‘When do we eat?’), or using the generic noun ‘meal’ (‘We had a meal earlier’).

Chinese adopts a different strategy. In comparable sentences, rather than not mentioning an object for lack of a particular one, Chinese only has the option of providing a generic object like ‘meal’: Nǐ chīfàn le ma? ‘Have you eaten? (you eat-rice LE Q)’. The core meaning of fàn, as shown in the gloss, is ‘cooked rice’, but in this context, its meaning is extended to ‘food’ or ‘meal’. When a particular kind of food is mentioned, then fàn will be replaced by specific words: chī miàn ‘eat noodles’, chī bāozi ‘eat dumplings’; chī zǎodiǎn ‘eat breakfast’, etc.

Another case in which Chinese provides a generic object where English has either an intransitive verb or one of a number of specific options is xǐzǎo ‘to bathe; take a bath/shower, etc.’ Xǐzǎo is composed of the verb xǐ ‘wash’ and zǎo, an element that no longer has independent status, but which is treated like an object. So while English uses an intransitive verb ‘to bathe’ or a specific object ‘take a bath’, Chinese provides a generic object, zǎo. When a specific object is needed, it substitutes for zǎo: xǐ yīfu ‘wash clothes’; xǐ liǎn ‘wash [one’s] face’, etc.

The following table gives verbs or verb+objects for events that tend to happen in the course of a day. [Polite inquiries about bathing are appropriate in tropical or sub-tropical climates.]

VERB	OBJECT	V-O
zǒu ‘leave’		
qǐlai ‘get up; rise’		
shuì ‘sleep’	jiào <i>bound form</i>	shuìjiào ‘go to bed; sleep’
chī ‘eat’	fàn ‘cooked rice’	chīfàn ‘eat; have a [proper] meal’
xǐ ‘wash’	zǎo <i>bound form</i>	xǐzǎo ‘bathe; take a bath etc.’
kàn ‘look at’	bào ‘newspaper’	kànbào ‘read the paper’
shàng ‘ascend’ xià ‘descend’	kè ‘class’	shàngkè ‘teach a class; attend class’ xiàkè ‘finish class; get out of class’
shàng ‘ascend’ xià ‘descend’	bān ‘job; shift’	shàngbān ‘go to work; start work’ xiàbān ‘get out of work’

1.7.1 Negative statements, with méiyou

With action verbs, the plain negative with bu usually indicates intention:

Wǒ bù zǒu.	I'm not leaving.
Tāmen bù xǐzǎo.	They're not going to bathe.
Tā bù chī le.	He won't eat anymore.

Such declarations, while possible, are in fact more likely to be cast in some less abrupt form, using verbs such as yào 'want' or xiǎng '(think) feel like'. We will get to such verbs quite soon, but at this stage, rather than talking about intentions, we will focus on whether events have happened or not. In such cases, the negation is formed with the negative of the verb yǒu 'have; exist'. This is méiyou, or simply méi. [Yǒu is the one verb in Mandarin whose negative is not formed with bu – the one *irregular* verb, you might say.]

Méi chīfàn.	[We] didn't eat; [we] haven't eaten.
Méiyou xǐzǎo.	[I] didn't bathe; [I] haven't bathed.
Méi shàngbān.	[She] didn't go to work; [she] hasn't started work.

Since the action verbs introduced in this lesson involve events that can be expected to take place regularly over the course of the day, the adverb hái (háishi before other adverbs) 'still; yet' is common in negative answers. Hái<shi> is frequently accompanied by the sentence-final particle, ne, which in general, conveys a tone of immediacy or suspense (as well as being associated with follow up questions, cf. §1.6.2).

Hái méi chīfàn ne.	[We] haven't eaten yet.
Hái méiyou xǐzǎo ne.	[I] haven't bathed yet.
Hái méi shàngbān.	[She] hasn't started work yet.

1.7.2 Positive statements, with le

As noted in §1.5.2, le with SVs signals a newly relevant state: jīntiān hǎo le. With V_{act} , the function of le is more diffuse, or at least it seems so from a learner's perspective. Le with V_{act} , much as it does with SVs, may signal a newly relevant situation – or phase. But with V_{act} what is relevant may be the initiation of the action, or it may be the conclusion of the action.

a) Initiation:

Zǒu le.	[They]'re off.
Chīfàn le	[They]'ve started [eating].
Shàngkè le.	[They]'re starting class.

b) Conclusion:

Zǒu le.	[They]'ve gone; they left.
Chīfàn le.	[We]'ve eaten; we ate.
Shàngkè le.	[They]'ve gone to class; [they] went to class.

‘Conclusion’ may seem like another way of saying ‘past tense’; but there are reasons for avoiding any identification of le with [past] tense. You have already seen that with SVs, it is not the past situation that is marked with le, but the current one: Zuótiān bù shūfu, jīntiān hǎo le. And you will see many other cases where past tense in English does not correspond to the presence of le in Chinese. But more to the point: injecting the notion of past tense into our description of le suggests a static function quite at odds with that other, well-established dynamic function of le, to signal what is newly relevant.

For the time being, then, note that le has two faces: it signals the current relevancy of a new state or situation; and it signals the current relevancy of a completed event. While in the first case, le can appear with the negative, bu (bù lěng le ‘it’s not cold anymore’), in the second, it cannot – it can only be replaced by méi<you>, to form the negative (hái méi chī ne).

Lěng le	[It]’s gotten cold.
Bù lěng le.	[It]’s not cold anymore.
Shàngkè le.	Class is beginning; [they]’ve gone to class.
Bú shàngkè le.	[They]’re not going to class anymore.
Hái méi<you> shàngkè ne.	[They] haven’t gone to class yet.

Confusion about the several senses of le with V_{act} can often be resolved by the addition adverbs, such as yǐjīng ‘already’:

Tāmen yǐjīng zǒu le.	They’ve already left.
Wǒ yǐjīng chīfàn le.	I’ve already eaten.
Yǐjīng xiàbān le.	[He]’s already quit [for the day].

1.7.3 Questions

Actions can be questioned with ma:

Chīfàn le ma?	Have [you] eaten [a meal]?
Xǐzǎo le ma?	Have [you] bathed?
Shàngbān le ma?	Has [she] started work?

Or with the *V-not-V* pattern, with the negative option reduced to méiyóu (or just méi):

Chīfàn le méi<you>?
Xǐzǎo le méi<you>?
Shàngbān le méi<you>?

1.7.4 Summary of le-patterns

positive	negative
Rè le. It's gotten warm.	Bú rè le. It's not warm anymore.
Chī le. Shàngkè le. [We]'ve started. Let's begin.	Wǒ bù chī le. I'm not eating anymore.
<Yǐjing> zǒu le. [He]'s <already>left.	<Hái> méi<you> zǒu <ne>. [She] hasn't left <yet>.
Tāmen <yǐjing> chīfàn le. They've <already> eaten.	Tāmen hái méi<you> chīfàn <ne>. They haven't eaten <yet>.

1.7.5 Mini-conversations

The near synonyms kěshì and dànshì, used in the following two conversations, are both comparable to English 'but'.

A.

Jiǎ: Xǐzǎo le ma?	Have [you] bathed?
Yǐ: Xǐzǎo le, kěshì hái méi chīfàn!	I have, but I haven't eaten yet.
Jiǎ: È ma?	Hungry?
Yǐ: Hěn è, nǐ ne?	Sure am; you?
Jiǎ: O, wǒ – wǒ yǐjing chī le.	Oh, me – I've already eaten.
Yǐ: Xiǎo Bì ne?	And young Bì?
Jiǎ: Yǐjing zǒu le, shàngbān le.	[She]'s gone, [she]'s at work.
Yǐ: O, shàngbān le.	Oh, [she]'s gone to work!

B.

- Jiǎ: Jīntiān hǎn rè! It's hot today.
- Yǐ: Ng, hǎn rè. Nǐ chīfàn le ma? Yeah, sure is. Have you eaten?
- Jiǎ: Hái méi, wǒ bú è. Not yet – I'm not hungry.
- Yǐ: Jǐnzhāng ma? Anxious?
- Jiǎ: Xiànzài hǎo le -- dànshi [I]'m fine now—but I was before!
 yǐqián hǎn jǐnzhāng!
- Yǐ: Chén Bó yǐjīng zǒu le ma? Has Chen Bo already left?
- Jiǎ: Yǐjīng zǒu le, yǐjīng shàngkè le. Yes, he has, he's gone to class.

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