TWO PROGRESSIVE ASPECT MARKERS IN CHINESE

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1. THE USE OF zài

This article sets out to show that there are two progressive aspect markers (PAM) in Chinese which exhibit certain similarities as well as differences in meaning. The two markers are zài 在 and -zhe 着. The meaning of zài will be examined first. Compare the following sentences:

tāmen yǐjīng zài hē tāng le
they already in drink soup (marker of new situation)

'They are already taking their soup.'

tāmen yǐjīng hē le tāng le
they already drink perfect soup (marker of new aspect situation)

'They have already taken their soup.'

'tāmen yǐjīng hēguò tāng le
they already drink (experiential soup (marker of new aspect marker)

'They have already taken their soup.' OR
'They have taken soup before.'
They are already about to take their soup.

These sentences are distinguished from one another in that the action of taking soup is seen to be at different phases of development. In the first sentence, the action is in progress; in the second, it is completed; in the third, it is completed and forms part of the experience of the persons referred to; and in the last, it is imminent or about to take place. Next, compare the following:

'The child is again crying.'

'The child again starts crying.'

In the first sentence, the action is in progress whereas in the second it is inchoative. Then too contrast the meaning of zài, -le (to be distinguished from le, the marker of new situation, which is not bound to a preceding verb and which occurs finally in a clause), -guò, yào and -qìlái in the above sentences and that of -xiàqù in the following sentence:

'Don’t keep on crying.'

Here -xiàqù indicates the continuation of the action of crying from a specific time. When zài is thus seen to be in contrast with yào, -le, -guò, -qìlái and -xiàqù and to form with them (as well as with -zhe which will be discussed later) a closed system of items all indicating phase of development or aspect, there is reason to believe that zài is a grammatical aspect marker on a par with the others. This is further supported by the observation that although zài (as well as yào)
is not morphologically bound to the verb as -le, -guò, -qǐlái and
-xiào (which are generally recognised as grammatical aspect markers
of the language) are, it is never used independently of the verb; on
the contrary it is always tied to it, with or without intervening
adverbial elements. In this light, zài (and yào) may justifiably be
considered an affix, not to the verb itself, but to the verb phrase
(which may consist of the verb alone or the verb plus adverbial
elements). For these two reasons, it is proposed here that zài (as
well as yào) should be recognised as a grammatical aspect marker of
Chinese.

It has been suggested earlier that zài is used to indicate an action
in progress. It is necessary to examine the meaning of this aspect
marker in greater detail. Examples of the use of this marker are useful
for this purpose.

(1)  chēzhàohuo  fāshēng  de  shíhòu, tāmen zài  shuōxiào
      car accident happen (marker of time, they (PAM) joke
      when) (subordination)
      'When the car accident happened, they were joking.'

(2)  dāng wǒ lǐkāi  de  shíhòu, tāmen zài tǎolùn
      when I leave (marker of sub-
      time, they (PAM) discuss
      ordination)
      zhèjiàn  shì
      this (noun classifier)
      'When I left, they were discussing this matter.'

(3)  wǒmen  zhěnggè  xiàwǔ  dōu zài  niàn shū
      we whole (noun afternoon all (PAM) study
      classifier)
      'We were studying the whole afternoon.'

(4)  jiāshǐ  míngtiān  wǒ  huìlái  de  shíhòu  nǐmen
      if tomorrow I return (marker of sub-
      time you
      ordination)
      hái zài dǎ pái, wǒ biàn  kāichù  nǐmen
      still (PAM) play card, I consequently dismiss you
      'If you are still playing cards when I return tomorrow, I will
dismiss you.'
(5) 无论我什么时候回家，他都在看书
    (no matter what time I return home, he is always reading.)

(6) 看! 那只马在吃草
    (Look! that horse is eating grass.)

(7) 外面在下雨
    (It's raining outside.)

(8) 伤口在出血
    (The wound is bleeding.)

In all the above sentences, a specific time is erected to which the action referred to in the sentence is related as being in progress at the time. In sentences (1) to (5), this time is explicitly stated: the time of the car accident, the time of the speaker's departure, a specific afternoon, the time when the speaker returns the next day, and whenever the speaker returns home. In sentence (6), this time juncture is understood to be the time when the speaker points with his finger at the horse and utters the sentence. This time juncture however need not be explicitly referred to in a sentence but may be understood from the context of discourse. The point to be noted is that whenever zài is used (the same applies to other aspect markers), a specific time is either explicitly or implicitly referred to. In sentences (7) and (8), in the absence of evidence pointing to the contrary, the time could be said to be the time of utterance.

Since zài indicates action in progress and since an action can only be said to be in progress if it takes up an appreciable period of time, a corollary to this is that zài carries a certain durative quality. It is this durative quality in zài which probably accounts for the incompatibility between zài and such verbs as dà dào 'arrive',