

## **An analysis of the English expression of Chinese “verb + time element”**

### **-- A Survey Based on HIT English-Chinese Parallel Corpus**

Zhou Xiao-feng<sup>1,2</sup>, Xu Dekuan<sup>1\*</sup>

zxf1900@163.com; xudekuan@tom.com

(1. School of Chinese Language and Literature, Ludong University, Yantai 264025, Shandong, China; 2. Institute of Chinese Information Processing, School of Journalism and Literature, Shandong University, Jinan 250100, Shandong, China)

**Abstract:** Verbs in modern Chinese can be classified into different types in accordance with different criteria. A classification system among them is the one that classified by the semantic feature, distribution feature and transformation paradigm of the “verb + time element”: non-durative verb Va, strong durative verb Vb1 and weak durative verb Vb2. For non-durative verb, the time element after the verb refers to the time after the completion of the action, for strong durative verb, the time element after the verb refers to the time of the action and for weak durative verb, the time element after the verb can refer to the time after the completion of the action or the time of the action, thus ambiguity arising.

Verbs in English can be classified into two types: durative verb and non-durative verb according to their lexical meaning. There exist both similarities and differences between the two types of English verbs and those of Chinese.

The paper provides an analysis of the English expression of three Chinese constructions “verb + time element”, “verb + time element + particle 了” and “verb + particle 了” in order to show the similarities and differences of the relevant verbs in Chinese and English and their general features. 1048 sentence pairs of “verb + time element”(C1), “verb + time element particle 了”(C2)

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\* Correspondent author.

and “verb + particle 了 + time element” are selected from HIT (Harbin Institute of Technology) English-Chinese Corpus, which is a comprehensive and diverse corpus of English-Chinese with 100,000 aligned sentence pairs. A contrastive analysis was made on the Chinese constructions and their relevant English expressions for the three constructions containing non-durative verb, strong durative verb and weak durative verb. A tentative discussion is also made on the significance of the findings in language teaching and translation.

### **Introduction**

Verbs in modern Chinese can be classified into different types in accordance with different criteria. A classification system among them is to classify verbs which can appear in three Chinese constructions “verb + time element” (C1), “verb + particle 了 (le) + time element” (C2) and “verb + time element + particle 了” (C3). The verbs are classified by whether they can add a suffix “着” (zhe) : verbs which can't add suffix “着” are called non-durative verb, and marked as Va hereinafter; verbs which can add suffix “着” are called durative verb, and marked as Vb hereinafter. Then according to whether verbs in construction C3 have ambiguous meaning and whether it can add “完” (wan) to transform into “是+T+前+Vb+完+的” construction, we call verbs which don't have ambiguity and can't add “完” strong durative verb, marked Vb1 hereinafter. On the contrary, the rest are called weak durative verb which is marked Vb2 hereinafter. Ma (2005) continues to classify weak durative verb into two types in accordance with whether it can denote a state: the type of “看” (Vb21) and the type of “挂” (Vb22)<sup>[1]</sup>; the former cannot denote a state after the completion of the action expressed by the verb while the latter can.

Verbs in English are classified into two types: durative verb and non-durative verb according to their lexical meaning, which is marked by DV and IV in hereinafter. Non-durative verb in English is also called instant verb or terminative verb. There exist both similarities and differences

between the two types of English verbs and those of Chinese. The paper provides an analysis of English expressions of the three kinds of words in three Chinese constructions (C1—C3) with the paired concordances retrieved from HIT (Harbin Institute of Technology) English-Chinese Corpus and a tentative discussion on the significance of the findings in language teaching and translation.

## **1. Research Methods**

### ***1.1 About the Corpus***

Our analysis is based on HIT English-Chinese Parallel Corpus. HIT is a comprehensive and diverse corpus of English-Chinese with 100,000 aligned sentence pairs, and it was automatically segmented and POS tagged with ICTCLAS\_Win.exe. Then we retrieved the sentences we needed with Paraconc with after manual check.

### ***1.2 Selection of the Concordances***

First, we selected sentences of three Chinese constructions “verb + numerical + classifier”, “verb + particle 了 + numerical + classifier” and “verb + numerical + classifier + particle 了”, and 7194 sentence pairs was find; Secondly, we selected three Chinese constructions “verb + time element” (C1), “verb + particle 了 + time element” (C2) and “verb + time element + particle 了” (C3) from these 7194 sentences, and 1048 sentence pairs are selected from HIT English-Chinese Corpus. Thirdly, we eliminated the sentences which we don't need, for instance, in some sentences the time element is used as the attribute or modifier, but not the object (or complement). Then we get 625 sentences. At last, we classified verbs into three kinds: non-durative verb, strong durative verb and weak durative verb, and analyzed their English expression.

## **2. Result and Discussion**

### ***2.1 Non-durative Verb***

For Chinese non-durative verb (Va) in C1、C2、C3 structure, Va refers to an instant action,

and the time element after the verb always refers to the time after the completion of the action.

Some C1 (Va)、C2 (Va) structure in Chinese can't be used independently, for example, we usually don't say “死三天”, “丢三天” or “她死了三天”, “钢笔丢了三天”, but according to the analysis of the corpus, some can be used independently, for example:

C1 (Va) 超过四天  
 迟到五分钟  
 出海一周  
 出去几分钟  
 从政三十年  
 订婚一年  
 独立三十周年  
 分开几分钟  
 感染五天  
 回避一分钟  
 降级一年  
 结婚25周年  
 来一天  
 离家十年  
 离开一段时间  
 历时五天  
 去世多年  
 少于三天  
 失踪九年

为期三年

误点十五分钟

隐退二十

C2 (Va) 他迟到了10分钟。

她迟到了五分钟。

疾病把她拖倒了几周。

他晚到了5分钟。

我因蔑视法庭被判了5天

停了一周再读这本书有困难。

公寓套房被预定了两周

那婴儿早产了两个月。

Most of the verbs in the above examples are disyllable words, including tendency verbs (such as 去, 出去, 出来), verb-complement structure (verb + complement which refers to result: such as 离开, 分开), and so on.

For the expression of the meaning of C1 (Va) / C2 (Va) / C3 (Va) in English, there are several ways found in the corpus:

2.1.1 To transform the non-durative verb into a durative verb or copular construction, and we got 21 sentences from the corpus, for example:

C1: 订婚一年 我妹妹（或姐姐）已订婚一年多了。

We can't say: My sister has engaged for more than one year.

But we can say: My sister has been engaged for more than one year.

离开一段 他离开一段时间。

He's away for an indefinite period of time.

C2: 迟到了10分钟 我迟到了10分钟，她便当众把我训了一顿。

I was ten minutes late and she told me off in front of everyone.

早产了两个月 那婴儿早产了两个月。

The baby was two months premature.

C3: 去世一年了 现在她已经去世一年了。

She has been dead now for a year.

失业3年了 他失业3年了，没资格享受州政府用于地方公共事业的补助。

He was out of work for three years and did not qualify for state aid.

断了几天了 煤气已断了几天了，这给我们造成许多麻烦。

The gas supply has been gone off for several days, which gives us much trouble.

熄了好几个小时 火熄了好几个小时了。

The fire has been out for hours.

2.1.2 To use the noun form of the non-durative verb, and we searched 11 sentences, for example:

2.1.2.1 T + of's + N or N + of + T ( 7 sentences) , for example:

结婚一年 他们结婚一年后离婚了。

They split up after a year of marriage.

离家十年 她儿子离家十年后回家时她亲切地拥抱儿子。

She embraced her son tenderly when he came home after ten years' absence.

隐退二十年 她隐退二十年后又东山再起。

After a quietus of twenty years she returned.

2.1.2.2 T + (after/of/in) + N/V ( 4 sentences), for example:

分开几分钟 我们分开几分钟后，他追上了我并交给我一封信。

A few minutes later after we parted he came up with me and gave me a letter.

死了10年 玛丽在她丈夫死了10年后仍为他悲伤。

Mary still mourns over her husband ten years after his death.

判刑四年 他判刑四年，服满三年后，因表现良好而提前获释。

He served three years of his four-year sentence and then was released for good behavior.

2.1.3 Preposition (such as *in/within/under/for/after*) adding to time element can also be used, and we searched 8 sentences. For example:

不到半个小时 消息不胫而走，不到半个钟头就传遍了全镇。

The news went around like fire. Within half an hour it was all over the town.

为期两周 她把书借来，为期两周。

She got the book out for a fortnight.

停了一周 停了一周再继续读这本书是有困难的。

It's difficult to pick up the thread of this book after a week.

2.1.4 To transform the time element which is used as adverbial modifier into a definite time, and we got 2 sentences, for example:

去世多年 她走进房间时，我吓昏了，我还以为她已经去世多年。

I had a blue fit when she walked into the room; I thought she had died years ago.

晚到了5分钟 这辆公共汽车晚到了5分钟。

The bus arrived five minutes behind time.

2.1.5 To add negative element to the sentence and form the structure of “*negative component + IV + time element*”. The time element usually refers to the time before the completion of the instant action. We searched only 1 sentences, for example:

保住一年 没有一份工作吉姆能保住一年。

Jim have not hold down a job for more than a year.

2.1.6 Some non-durative verb in English, such as *take/spend/take off/put away/leave/be sentenced to* and so on, can add to time-noun to form Verb-Noun or Verb-Double Noun structure (VN/VNN). We got 3 sentences, and for example:

判刑20年 法官把罪犯关进监狱，判刑20年。

The judge put the criminal away for twenty years.

历时五天 邀请赛历时五天。

The tournament took five days.

2.1.7 Some special non-durative verb in English can directly attach to time element which denote a period of time, and the time element refers to the time after the completion of the instant action. We searched 4sentences, for example:

停下<sup>[2]</sup>一两分钟

救火员停下一两分钟匆匆喝一杯冷水，又返身投入灭火的战斗中去了。

The fireman paused for a couple minutes, gulped down a cup of cold water and returned to the job of fighting the fire.

暂停几分钟 我们把工作暂停几分钟。

Let's break off work for a few minutes.

毕业2年 不，我毕业两年了。

No, I had graduated for 2 years.

2.1.8 Sometimes, C1(Va) / C2(Va) / C3(Va) don't have any obvious corresponding form in English and are translated in a free manner . We searched 10 sentences, for example:

结婚25周年

几天以前是酒店店主结婚25周年纪念日，因此他招待所有的常客免费喝酒。

It was the pub landlord's silver wedding anniversary the other day and he gave all his regular customers a drink on the house.

超过5分钟 每个人发言不得超过5分钟。

Each speaker is limited to five minutes.

超过一分钟 如果这人在水下的时间超过一分钟，就赶快拉他起来。

If the man stops under water for more than a minute, pull him out.

Some Chinese non-durative verbs in verb-complement structure is very agility and have corresponding English expression in one lexical item, for example, 叫醒/awake, 打开/open, 关上/close, and so on, whereas much more of them are expressed in an English phrase, which is usually connect the predicate verb to a relevant adverb or complement (usually a prepositional phrase or an adverb ), for example:

出去几分钟 我想她只是出去几分钟就会回来的。

I'm afraid she's just popped out for a few minutes.

The time element in C3 (Va) structure refers to the time after the completion of the instant action, so present perfect or past perfect is often used in its English expression. And in sentences of present perfect, the non-durative verb need to be transformed into durative verb or copular verb construction.

## ***2.2 Strong Durative Verb***

In Chinese, strong durative verb shows the continuation of the action and the time element after the verb refers to the time of the action. It is also the case in English. Durative verb in English can be followed by adverbial modifier that refers to a period of time.

*2.2.1* Strong durative verb in English can be followed by an adverbial modifier that refers to a

period of time, and we got 157 examples.

Chinese “Vb1 + time element” structure is equal to “durative verb/ copular construction + time element” in English. And the durative verbal element including durative verb and durative phrase or copular construction derived from the instant verb.

2.2.1.1 As is the case in Chinese, time element in English can be added to the verb as an adverbial modifier (DV+T), for example:

持续5天 通常，这种病要持续5天左右。

Normally, the disease last about five days.

活了好几天 她病入膏肓后，只活了好几天就死了。

She lived only a few days after the disease struck in.

2.2.1.2 Durative phrase plus the time element which refers to a period of time (DV phrase +T) , for example:

浪费一分钟 他从不浪费一分钟，即使在身体不好的时候也不。

He never potters away a minute, not even when he is unwell.

坚持了好几个星期 守卫者坚持了好几个星期。

The defenders held out for weeks.

2.2.1.3 The instant verb in a sentence needs to be transformed into a durative verb or phrase, such as copular verb construction, then a time element is added, for example:

雇用一周 他被雇用一周试一试。

He was engaged for a week for trial.

呆了10年 他以前在上海呆了10年。

He had been there for ten year.

闲置了好几个月 这机器已经闲置了好几个月。

The machinery has been standing idle for months.

2.2.2 Just as the non-durative verb, noun forms of durative verb are often used in English to refer to same meanings with this verb. We searched 29 sentences altogether and there are mainly three different forms that we generalized as follows.

2.2.2.1 T + of's + N

护理八天 汤姆突然感染上了过滤性病毒，至少需要连续护理八天。

Tom has acquired a virus that requires at least eight more days of constant care.

休息了几天 她休息了几天，身体很快复元了。

Her health soon picked up after a few days' rest.

2.2.2.2 T+ of's + V-ing

恋爱两年 恋爱两年后，他们终于结婚了。

After two years of dating, they went to church at last.

等了三个小时 我们等了三个小时的火车，最后再也没有耐性了。

After three hours of waiting for the train, our patience is finally exhausted.

2.2.2.3 T + in + N

任职十年 她在政府中任职十年之后，被授予了爵位。

After ten years in the government she was given a peerage.

坐了十年 他坐了十年监狱，又成了自由人。

After ten years in prison, he is a free man again.

2.2.3 There are some special instant verbs in English, such as *take*, *spend*, *add*, *dock* and so on which can be followed by a time-noun to compose Verb-Object structure (VN/VNN) referring to the duration of the action. We searched 39 sentences from the corpus, for example:

花一天 所有这些电线架线要花一天时间安装好。

All this electrical wiring will take a day to set up.

呆了几年          她在医院里呆了几年，不必要的担忧禁锢了她的头脑。

She spent years in the hospital with her mind walled in by needless fear.

费了3个多星期    我费了3个多星期才把这密码解释出来。

The cipher took me three weeks before I hit it.

减少了3天    公司将我们每年的休假时间减少了3天。

The company has docked us of three days of our annual leave.

2.2.4 In English, some durative verbs can be replaced by prepositions to express the meaning of durative action, and we got 15 sentences, for example:

用三分钟          他用三分钟跑完全程。

He lapped the course in three minutes.

用五分钟          她用五分钟就已穿戴整齐了。

She was fully dressed in five minutes.

2.2.5 Besides, there is a special phenomenon in English that some instant verb can be followed by a time element directly which refers to a period of time. For these cases, the instant verb refers to a durative action, and sometimes the time element is regarded as the sentential adverbial of time. We searched 5 sentences for example:

停留20分钟

火车要在下一站停留20分钟，到时候我们可以下车活动一下腿脚，享受一下美好的天气。

The train stops for 20 minutes at the next station, so we shall be able to stretch our legs and enjoy the good weather.

停产一周          这次罢工造成停产一周。

The strike tied up production for a week.

延长几天 你们访问的时间不能延长几天吗？

Can't you extend your visit for a few days?

### 2.3 Weak durative verb

Weak durative verbs (Vb2) in Chinese “verb + time element” can either refer to instant actions or durative action. Ma (2005) further classifies weak durative verb into two types in accordance with whether it can denote a state: the type of “看” (Vb21) and the type of “挂” (Vb22).

#### 2.3.1 The type of “看” (Vb21)

2.3.1.1 When C1(Vb21) and C2(Vb22) structure in Chinese appear independently, it merely denote the duration of the action, and its English expression is the same as Chinese strong durative verb, denoting the duration of the action, for example:

干了三十年 他从小至今已为该商行干了三十年。

He has worked for the firm, man and boy, for thirty years.

2.3.1.2 When C1 (vb21) 、 C2(vb22) structure are used together with a predictive element, they may not only refer to instant action but also refer to durative action. However, they have unambiguous meaning in a given sentence. For example:

干了30年 怀特先生在该公司干了30年，现在却要被解雇了。

Mr. White has worked for the company for 30 years and now they're giving him the chop.

花了几个小时 他们花了几个小时扑灭了这场火。

It took them several hours to put out the fire.

In above examples, “干+了+T” and “花+了+T” only show the time of the durative action, so their English expressions are usually “DV+T” structures or other expressions of strong durative verb in perfect form.

2.3.1.3 Chinese C3(vb21) structure usually has two meanings, but has a specific meaning in a specific sentence. And for example:

干了一天了 他已整整干了一天了，他需要停下来休息一下。

He had been working for a whole day and he needed to rest from his work.

放映10分钟了 我到电影院时电影已放映10分钟了。

The film had been on for ten minutes when I got to the cinema.

In above examples, “干+了+T+了” and “放映+T+了” only show the time of the durative action, so their English expressions are also the same as those of strong durative verb, and are usually in perfect form.

Moreover, some polysemous verbs in Chinese can be classified into different types, such as “打” has four meanings at least: ①break sth into pieces as in 打了一只碗 (Va); ②raise(Vb1) as in 打伞; ③fight(Vb21) as in 打架; ④ shoot, let out(Vb21) as in 打枪, belonging to different classes according to its meaning. And let's look at sentences we searched:

打了两天 那一仗连续打了两天。

The fighting continued for two days.

打了10分钟 他打了10分钟电话，其他的人都等得不耐烦了。

He spent ten minutes at the phone while the others fretted and fumed.

In the above examples, "打" belongs to the type of “看”(Vb21) in weak durative verb, and the time element all refers to time length that the action or behavior lasts. Therefore, similar to strong durative verb (Vb1), its English expression directly use "DV+ T" structure or other forms.

It is thus clear that, the type of "看" in the three kinds of structure only means the lasting of action or behavior, and its English expression is similar to strong durative verb. In the corpus we did not find any examples in which the time element refers to the time after completion of the

action or behavior.

### 2.3.2 The type of “挂”

Verbs of the type of “挂” in Chinese language is more complicated, and when C1(Vb22), C2( Vb22) and C3(Vb22) are used independently, they have three kinds of meanings: the time in which the action or behavior keeps on, the time after completion of the action or behavior and the time in which the state resulted from the action or behavior lasts.

2.3.2.1 In a specific sentence, when the construction indicates the time in which the action or behavior keeps on, it has the same English expression as that of the strong durative verb, such as:

写作多年        在他为电影写作多年之后，转向写剧本。

After writing for the film for many years, he turned to the play.

领了六个月    我已领了六个月的失业救济金。

I've been on the dole for six months.

穿一天    我想这双袜子还可以再穿一天。

I guess I can wear these socks one more day. (“DV+T”)

2.3.2.2 When verbs of the type of “挂” are used to refer to the time after the completion of the action, their English expression can use "IV+ T". For instance:

搁数年

我想把的房子扩建一下，但我的抵押已经全部用完，因此我不得不搁数年再说了。

I would like to build an extension to my house, but I'm up to the hilt on my mortgage so I'll have to leave it a few years. (“IV+T”)

2.3.2.3 When verbs of the type of “挂” in the three structures refer to the time in which the state resulted from the action or behavior lasts, their English expression is similar to strong durative verb, and such as use "DV+ T" structure form and "IV+ T" structure:

C1: 关几天        把店门关几天, 跟我们去, 萨姆。

Shut the shop for a few days, and come with us, Sam.

C2: 关了两个月    由于原料不足, 这家工厂关了两个月的门。

The factory was shut down for two months owing to the shortage of raw material.

C3: 关闭两天了    波士顿机场关闭两天了。

Boston has been socked in for two days.

In the above three sentences, "关+T" all means the time after the completion of action or the state of "close" keep on. However, these sentences use different English expressions, for instance, example 1 use "IV+ T", example 2 and 3 use "IV → DV+ T"(passive type) way。

It is thus clear that, the English expression form of verbs of the type of “挂” is much more complicated, but is usually similar with strong durative verb. When expressed in English, it is advisable to select the main verb which is corresponding with the Chinese verb, then decide the English expression of the whole "Vb22 + T" structure.

#### **2.4 Special Verb Such as“隔、有、达、过” etc.**

In the process of analysis, it is clear that these special verbs such as “隔, (还) 有, 达, 过, 是, 起” is becoming empty verbs. And “every, in, for, on, at” is often used in English to express corresponding verbal meaning. We shall not go further here.

### **3. Conclusion**

According to above analysis and discussion, we summarized English expression in C1-C3 structure of non-durative verb, strong durative verb, weak durative verb as table 1 to 4.

The differences of English expression in C1-C3 structure mainly lie in tense. With the analysis we find that, C1:"V+ T" has indefinite tense in different sentences, C2:"V + particle 了+ T" is usually use past tense or past perfect and C3:"V + ( particle 了) + T+ particle 了" usually use

perfect or past form sometimes.

Table 1: English expression of non-durative verb in C1—C3

Type	English expression		Examples	Percentage
Non-durative verb (Va)	IV→DV/ copular construction +T		die → be dead + T	35%
	Nominal phrase	T + of's + N	a year of marriage	18%
		N + of + T	a quietus of twenty years	
		T + (after/of/in) + N/V	ten years after his death	
	in/within/under/for/after etc. + T →prepositional phrase		for a fortnight	13%
	IV+ time element which refers to a given time		die + years ago	3%
	Negative + IV + T		not + hold down + T	2%
	IV + time noun → VN/VNN		spend + T	5%
	IV+T (special instance)		graduate + T	7%
	Other manners		silver wedding anniversary	17%
Total				100%

Table 2: English expression of strong durative verb in C1—C3

Type	English expression		Examples	Percentage
Strong durative verb (Vb1)	DV/ copular construction +T		last about five days	64%
	Nominal phrase	T + of's + N	a few days' rest	12%
		T + of's + V-ing	three hours of waiting	
		T + in + N	ten years in prison	
	in/within/under/for/after etc. + T →prepositional phrase		in three minutes	6%
	IV+ time noun → VN/VNN		take + T	16%
	IV + T → refers to durative action		stop/break off + T	2%
Total				100%

Table 3: English expression of type of “看” verb in C1—C3

Type	English expression	Examples	Number	Percentage
Type of 看	DV/ copular construction +T	work + for thirty years.	45	44%
	IV→DV/ copular construction +T	be been tinkering with sth. for hours	4	4%
	Nominal phrase	a ten-year sentence	7	7%
	prepositional phrase	in/after + T	5	5%
	IV+ time noun → VN/VNN	take/spend + T	36	35%
	It + was + T+ before/since/until/ + IV	it was a long time before he worked around sth.	1	1%
	IV+T → refers to durative action	shut/leave + T	4	4%
Total			102	100%

Table 4: English expression of type of “挂” verb in C1—C3

Type	English expression	Examples	Number	Percentage
Type of 挂	DV/ copular construction +T	writing (for the film) for many years	7	47%
	IV→DV/ copular construction +T	be on the dole for six months	3	20%
	Nominal phrase	one day's climb	1	6%
	IV+ time noun → VN/VNN	take/spend + T	1	7%
	IV+T → refers to durative action	shut (the shop) for a few days	3	20%
Total			15	100%

#### 4. A Concluding Remark

With the comparison and analysis of the concordances from the corpus, we summarized the English expression of the three types of verb at C1—C3 structure and we hope to make a contribution to language teaching and machine translation.

What should point out is that, "verb+ time element" structure is very common in Chinese language. However, because of the size of the corpus, the examples we searched are not full-fledged and our analysis is not comprehensive. In the future we hope to make further research on this issue.

**Notes:**

<sup>[1]</sup>Ma (2005) classifies verbs by the semantic feature, distribution feature and transformation paradigm of the “verb + time element” (such as “看了三天了”) into three types: non-durative verb Va, strong durative verb Vb1 and weak durative verb Vb2. For non-durative verb, the time element after the verb refers to the time after the completion of the action; for strong durative verb, the time element after the verb refers to the time of the action and for weak durative verb, the time element after the verb can refer to the time after the completion of the action or the time of the action, thus ambiguity arising.

<sup>[2]</sup>Some verbal phrase that include "停" should be classified into different types according to its meaning, such as: 停止(Va); 停下(Va); 暂停(Va); 停留(Vb1); 停放(Vb1); 停产(Vb1).

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