

# The iterative construction V- *lái* -V- *qù* in Mandarin

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## 1 Introduction

According to the definition given by Bhat (1999), Mandarin Chinese is an aspect-prominent language. It does not have dedicated tense markers, yet it has several aspectual markers, namely two progressive markers (*zài* and *zhe*), one perfective marker (*le*), and one experiential marker (*guo*). There is an enormous body of work on these markers, especially on the perfective marker *le*. Recently, some attention has been given to certain verbs that indicate habitual aspect, such as *ài* ‘love’ (Lammare 2005; Endo & Tao 2009; Fang in press), *huì* ‘will’, *yào* ‘want’ (Lammare 2005), *guànyú* (Fang forthc.), and *xǐhuān* ‘like’ (Endo & Tao 2009). In spite of this, iterative aspect has gone almost unnoticed in the Chinese literature.

According to Kuteva et al. (2019: 29), iterative aspect is defined as “‘do repeatedly’; repetitive; marker indicating that an action is repeated”. Mandarin, however, does not have dedicated iterative markers. The iterative meaning is expressed by certain four-word constructions that involve motion verbs, either in the form of reduplication as in (1a), or as part of the construction V-*lái*-V-*qù* ‘V-come-V-go’ ‘doing something repeatedly’ as in (1b). In (1a), the verbs *lái* ‘come’ and *wǎng* ‘go’ are reduplicated to indicate the repetition of the action ‘coming and going’. In (1b), the four-word expression *mà lái mà qù* is used to indicate that cursing occurs repeatedly and continuously.

(1) a. *hé zhōng línchuán lái lái wǎng wǎng, yī pài fánmáng jǐngxiàng.*  
river middle ship come come go go one CLF  
busy scene  
‘On the river, ships are coming and going repeatedly and in great numbers. A very busy scene.’

b. *tīng tā men mà lái mà qù hěn guòyǐn?*  
listen he PL curse come curse go very satisfying  
‘Is it satisfying to listen to them cursing repeatedly?’

In this squib, I will focus on the iterative construction V-*lái*-V-*qù* ‘doing something repeatedly’; in particular, I will discuss the question of which layer it may pertain to in the layered framework in Functional Discourse Grammar (henceforth FDG, Hengeveld & Mackenzie 2008).

## 2 V- *lái* -V- *qù*

V- *lái* -V- *qù* is a four word construction that contains two verb slots and two fixed motion verbs (namely *lái* ‘come’ and *qù* ‘go’). The presence of the motion verbs and their combination with two other verbal forms, give rise to the iterative aspectual meaning. The two motion verbs are not lexical verbs anymore. They are grammaticalized in the sense that they no longer refer to the physical activity of ‘come’ or ‘go’. ‘Come’ refers to the direction towards the deictic center while ‘go’ refers to the direction away from the deictic center. Their combination in the construction brings about the repetitiveness meaning of the action designated by the other verbs. Thus, in (1b) above, the action expressed by the verb *mà* cannot mean come and go in the physical sense. The reduplicated verb *mà* and the motion verbs are combined to indicate the ongoing and repetitive nature of the verb *mà*. The verb *tīng* ‘listen’ is a predicate of perception that takes States-of-Affairs in its complement; thus *mà lái mà qù* indicates the subevental repetition, that is, the internal repetition of a single event on a single occasion.

The V in the V- *lái* -V- *qù* construction can be the same verb as shown in (1b), or a different verb as in (2).

(2) *liǎng gè nǚ kānhù shì jiàn yī gè chān*  
 two CLF female care.taker COP see one CLF assist.with.hand  
*yī gè, chū lái jìn qù, yī tiān méi zhù jiǎo.*  
 one CLF exit come enter go one day not stop foot  
 ‘The two female caretakers provided their assistance with hand for anyone they saw. They came in and out for the whole day without rest.’

In (2), in the expression *chū lái jìn qù* ‘come in and out repeatedly’ has two different Vs: *chū* ‘exit’ and *jìn* ‘enter’. Unlike expressions with the same verb, which indicates the repetition of the same action, expressions with different verbs signify the repetition of two alternate actions on a single occasion. In (2), the actions ‘exit’ and ‘enter’ occur in turn repeatedly.

The verbs that occupy the V slots in the construction V- *lái* -V- *qù* can be movement verbs such as *zǒu* ‘walk’ and *fēi* ‘fly’, or motion verbs such as *chū* ‘exit’ and *jìn* ‘enter’ as in (2), or psychological verbs, perception verbs, or

saying verbs. In (3), *xiǎng* ‘think’ is a psychological verb. The whole expression means that the subject referent is thinking about something over and over again.

(3) *wǒ xiǎng lái xiǎng qù, suàn lái suàn qù, zhè gōngzī jiù shì bù gòu.*  
 I think come think go calculate come calculate go this salary then COP not enough  
 ‘I think it over and over again, and calculate it over and over again. This salary is simply not enough.’

Presumably, the first verbs that were used in this construction were those that involve actions that can physically ‘come’ and ‘go’, and then, over time, verbs that do not involve physical movement came to be used in the construction. This extension is an indication of grammaticalization, as the verbs ‘come’ and ‘go’ have completely lost their lexical sense, as in (3) above. Clearly, the psychological activity described by the verb *xiǎng* ‘think’ is incompatible with directional movement. Hence, in the construction, the elements ‘come’ and ‘go’ have grammaticalized into elements indicating repetition, i.e. into markers of iterative aspect.

### 3 V- lái -V- qù in FDG

In this section, I apply some of the tests proposed by Gregersen and Hengeveld (forthcoming) to see which layer the construction operates at in the layered hierarchical framework of FDG (for a detailed introduction of the layered framework, cf. Hengeveld & Mackenzie 2008, Hengeveld 2017, 2023, Gregersen & Hengeveld forthcoming). The idea of the tests is to show that there are semantic scope relations between co-occurring expressions or constructions within a sentence. Let us take the complementation test as an example. If a certain expression or construction occurs in complement clauses of a predicate that takes a particular kind of complement, then this shows at which layer the expression or construction operates. Due to limited space, I only illustrate the results of some of the tests. The application of the complementation test shows that the construction V- lái -V- qù can occur in complement clauses of all types.

(4) *mèngjiàn yú zài tiānshàng fēi lái fēi qù.*  
 dream fish in sky fly come fly go  
 ‘(I) dreamt about fish flying around in the sky.’

In (4), the expression *fēi lái fēi qù* occurs in the complement clause of the predicate *mèngjiàn* ‘dream’. Predicates such as ‘dream’ embed a Propositional

Content, so *fēi lái fēi qù* operates at the Propositional Content layer or at any of the lower layers. This possibility of operating at a lower layer is proved by the fact that the V- *lái* -V- *qù* construction can occur in the complement clause of predicates of commentative predicates. *Xǐhuān* ‘like’ in (5) is such a predicate. These predicates embed Episodes, so the V- *lái* -V- *qù* construction could operate at most at the Episode Layer but may be operating at a lower layer.

(5) *wèishéme māomī zài jiā xǐhuān gēn zhe nǐ zǒu lái zǒu qù?*  
 why cat at home like follow PROG you walk come walk go  
 ‘Why do cats like to follow you around the house?’

The V- *lái* -V- *qù* construction can occur in complement clauses at even lower layers. In (6), *kànjiàn* is a predicate of immediate perception. Such predicates embed States-of-Affairs; therefore, the V- *lái* -V- *qù* construction operates at the States-of-Affairs Layer, but may be operating at a lower layer.

(6) *wǒ kànjiàn yī piàn huā cóng zhōng yǒu hǎoduō húdié zài fēi lái fēi qù.*  
 I see one CLF flower cluster middle have many butterfly PROG fly come fly go  
 ‘I saw many butterflies flying to and fro in a field of flowers.’

Predicates of phasal aspect embed a Situational Property. In (7), the expression *duó lái duó qù* occurs in the complement clause of the phasal predicate *kāishǐ* ‘begin’. Hence, the construction can also operate at the Situational Property Layer.

(7) *chénmò liáng jiǔ yǐhòu, mǎ' ēr dì ní zhàn le qǐ lái, kāishǐ duó lái duó qù.*  
 silent good long after Ma er di ni stand PFV up come begin pace come pace down  
 ‘After a long silence, Ma-er-di-ni stood up, and begun to pace up and down.’

This brings to the lowest layer at the Representational Level, the lexical Property. Here we find that the construction can occur within the scope of manner adverbs; it cannot, however, scope over these manner adverbs. This shows that it must operate at the layer of the Lexical Property. In (8), *cóngcóngde* ‘hurriedly’ is a manner adverbial used to indicate the manner in which the action of running is conducted. Thus, it has scope over the

construction *pǎo lái pǎo qù*. Manner adverbials modify the Lexical Property, so we must conclude that the construction *pǎo lái pǎo qù* operates only at the layer of the Lexical Property.

(8) *zhème cóngcóngde pǎo lái pǎo qù yě tài lǎo kū.*  
 like.this hurriedly run come run go also very exhausting  
 ‘Running to and fro hurriedly like this is too exhausting.’

This result is in line with the hypothesis in FDG that iterative aspect operates at the layer of the Lexical Property (Gregersen & Hengeveld forthc.). Semantically, the construction V- *lái* -V- *qù* encodes the internal repetition of a single State-of-Affairs. However, the layer of the Lexical Property may not be the only layer that this construction operates at. For instance, in (2), repeated here as (9), the repetition involves more than one single State-of-Affairs as each of the two caretakers came in and out repeatedly. Then the construction in (9) may operate at the layer of the Episode. This merits further investigation.

(9) *liǎng gè nǚ kānhù shì jiàn yī gè chān*  
 two CLF female care.taker COP see one CLF assist.with.hand  
*yī gè, chū lái jìn qù, yī tiān méi zhù jiǎo*  
 one CLF exit come enter go one day not stop foot  
 ‘The two female caretakers provided their assistance with hand for anyone they saw. They came in and out for the whole day without rest.’

#### 4 Concluding remarks

In this squib, I have briefly discussed the iterative construction V- *lái* -V- *qù* in Mandarin from an FDG perspective. It has been argued that this construction operates at the layer of the Lexical Property, signifying the subevental repetition within a single State-of-Affairs.

As the construction has a certain flexibility for what kind of verbs can be present in it, the application of the tests has its limitations. That is, not every specific construction has been tested. It could be hypothesized, however, that the extension from the occurrence of movement verbs to the occurrence of psychological verbs is a sign of grammaticalization, which might result in subsequent layer climbing in the FDG layered framework. I leave all this to future research.

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