

Lesson on **ne** and **le**

Sentence Pattern 201

SENTENCE = SENTENCE ne

A sentence terminal **ne** indicates that a possible change has not yet occurred, or that the person addressed is expected to complete the thought. In the first kind of sentence, ne frequently coordinates with the adverbial clause hái méi yǒu (still have not).

SENT = SENT ne

example: Wǒ hái méi yǒu bì yè ne.
I still have not graduated.

Wǒ xìng Zhāng. nǐ ne?
I am surnamed Zhang. and you...

Step Two

Sentence Pattern 202

A sentence terminal **le** indicates that a possible change has now occurred. In other words, a sentence that previously was not true has now become true. For instance, the following statement is not true, but someday it might become true: "The first human being has set foot on the planet Mars." When the adverbial expression yǐ jīng is used in a sentence, a sentence terminal le is generally obligatory because saying "already" indicates that some change must have occurred.

SENT = SENT le

example: Wǒ bì yè le.
I have graduated.
Tā bú shì xiǎo háizi le, tā yǐ jīng shì dà rén le.
He is not a child anymore, he has already become an adult.

Step Three

Sentence Pattern 203

A verb final **-zhe** indicates continuing action, i.e., action that is not broken off, and therefore definitely not done with. Emphasis is on the **persistence** of the action, and has nothing to do with when it occurs.

VERB = VERB-zhe

example: Zuótiān Bàba huí láide shí hòu, Mèimei hái kūzhe.
Little sister was still weeping when dad got back yesterday.

Step Four

Sentence Pattern 204

A verb final **-le** indicates that the subject of the sentence did do something. (Such sentences generally can be construed as answers to a question of the form, "Did you do [the expected action]?" For instance a parent might ask the children, "Did you all eat your brussels sprouts yet?")

VERB = VERB-le

example: Nimen chīle bó cài méi yǒu?
Have you eaten your spinach?
Chīle.
[We] did.

Step Five

Sentence Pattern 205

Coordinating the verb ending **-zhe** and the sentence terminal **ne**.
 When someone is persisting in the performance of some action, one may look forward to the eventual completion of that action but note that things have not yet developed to that point.

SENT = N_s VERB-zhe (N_o) ne

Example: Tāmen hái kū-zhe ne.
 They are still weeping.

Step Six

Sentence Pattern 206

Coordinating the verb ending **-le** and the sentence terminal **le**. If the verb is at the end of the sentence, only one **le** is used.

SENT = N_s VERB-le (N_o) le

Example: Wǒmen xiěle xí tǐ le.
 As of now we have written the exercises.
 Huàr, wǒmen yě dōu huà le.
 As for the pictures, we have also painted all of them.

Sentence Pattern 207

The basic rule for **le** is not to use it if nothing has happened. Note carefully, however, that if something is lost or destroyed there has been an event. In those cases, it is appropriate to use the sentence terminal **le** because something has happened. There has been a change.

SENT = N_s negative PRED le

Example: Tāmen bú shì péng yǒu le.
They are no longer friends.
Tā bú zài zhèr le.
He is no longer here.
Tā méi yǒu qián le.
She no longer has any money.

Sentence Pattern 208

In ordinary written and spoken Chinese there is no way to distinguish between a verb-**le** and a sentence terminal **le** because they sound the same and because they are written with the same Chinese character. However, in romanization one convention is to use "-le" for the verb ending, and to use "**le**" preceded by a space for the sentence terminal **le**.

SENT = N_s VERB-le

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SENT = N_s VERB le

Example: Māma lái-le.
Mama has arrived.
Māma bù lái le.
Mama is no longer going to come.
Māma lái le.
Mama has decided to come (after all).

Note:

Chinese rarely has any truly obligatory requirements, whereas English is fairly rigid in requiring the use of grammatical features such as tense. The verb ending **-le** is an essential feature of "trigger event sentences" that work about the same way as English sentences like, "Having knocked open the door, the bandit charged into the room." Some grammarians insist that a sentence that involves a verb-**le** and a simple object must occur together with a sentence terminal **le**. Native speakers, however, frequently leave out one **le** (usually the verb-**le**) because if "as of now the door is open" that means that the opening of the door must have been done.

Social context actually creates the possibility of leaving out verb-**le** in those instances. Similarly, social context determines whether a sentence is actually news to those listening to it. If the sentence is not news, not using **le** is appropriate. A great passage of time is not the determining factor. The relevant factor is who knows and who is being informed about a change for the first time.

Yuán jiāng shì yì jiǔ wǔ yī nián shēngde. Yuan Jiang was born in 1951.
 Guòle jǐge yuè tā jiù chī bái fàn le. A few months later he started eating rice.
 Tā cóng xiǎo jiù chōu yān. (He smoked cigarettes from an early age.)
 Yì zhí dào yì jiǔ jiǔ nián, tā tiān tiān dōu chī fàn. He ate solid food until 1999.
 Nà nián tā huànle zhòng bìng, bù chī fàn le. That year he suffered a serious disease and ceased eating solid food.
 Tā hěn jiǔ dōu bù néng chī fàn. He could not eat solid food for a long time.
 Zuó tiān tā yòu chī fàn le. Yesterday he again commenced eating solid food.

In the second sentence there is no verb-**le** since there would not be any expectation that an individual's first consumption of solid food would involve consuming a whole meal.

In the third sentence there is no indication of a "before" state, so no change can be indicated with a sentence **le**.

In the fourth sentence there is no single, definite event, and no change of habit.

In the fifth sentence there is a definite change, so a sentence **le** is added.

In the sixth sentence there is again a steady state, and no definite meals eaten.

In the final sentence, the situation is much like the situation in his infancy.

So the sentence "Zuó tiān tā chī fàn le," is right, and it does not mean, "Zuó tiān tā chīle fàn le,"