Counting and Measuring of Eventualities in Chinese and English

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In both the nominal and verbal domain, it is said that “measuring” applies to “unbounded” entities or event, while “counting” applies to telic entities and event. This paper confirms that measure phrases in both Chinese and English can change the event types. Moreover, the distinction between “counting” and “measuring” is sometimes blurred in both languages, making the boundary of “event” ambiguous, or causing a situation shift. An analysis of the Chinese verbal classifier phrases indicate temporary individual classifiers often bring an aspectual feature of [+brevity] and [+continuity] to the predicate verb. Similar aspectual features are sometimes expressed by English light verb constructions. Drawing from the similarities of the two languages, the paper discusses pedagogical implications.

1. Introduction: Quantification in the Nominal Category.
Chinese and English adopt disparate systems in giving quantity information. English makes a clear distinction between count/mass nouns, while Chinese adopts a classifier system.

In English, a mess noun can be “individualized” by measure phrases (Zhang 2002: 5). Therefore, “measure” expressions, if defined by the English language, apply only to mess nouns or unbounded entities. That is, we “measure” water, bread, and soap, but we “count” people, kittens, and flowers. Neither do we measure “cups of water”, or “pieces of bread”, because once mess entities are attached to measure phrases, they are no longer unbounded. Therefore (1d) is ungrammatical.

(1) a. * three chocolate
b. three bars of chocolate
c. three boxes of chocolate
d. * three boxes of three bars of chocolate

It is often said that Chinese nominal classifiers are used to “measure”, and thus the contrast of grammaticality between (2a) and (2b). But (2c) poses a problem. Assuming that the same rule applies to Chinese, i.e. that a “bounded” entity is no longer subject to “measure”, the classifier in (2c) seems to be used for “counting” instead of “measuring”. 
(2) a. *ta mai-le liang yu
   he buy-PFV two fish
   Intended: He bought two fish.
b. ta mai-le liang tiao yu
   he buy-PFV two CL fish
   He bought two fish.
c. ta mai-le liang tiao liang jin de yu
   he buy-PFV two CL two JIN DE fish
   He bought two fish that weigh one-kilogram each.

This paper confirms that measure phrases have unanimous functions in both Chinese and English. In the nominal domain, they can change the [-count] [+count] category of NPs; in the verbal domain, they can change the event types. The paper will also focus on how the line between counting and measuring is sometimes blurred in both languages, making the boundary of "event" ambiguous, or causing a situation shift.

2. Quantification: Distinctions between Counting and Measuring.

2.1. Counting.

Just as Chinese have to use nominal classifiers (thereafter CL) to realize "counting" of entity denoted by nouns, it has to use verbal CL (thereafter VCL) to realize the "counting" the reoccurrences of the event.

(3) wo ma-le ta liang ci
   I criticize-PFV he two CL
   I criticized him twice.

So long as the predicate verb is [+event], counting is possible. In Chinese, it is usually realized by using VCL ci ("times"). In English, the counting is realized by adding "(for) (num)! times". As can be seen from (3), the translations parallel the Chinese CL phrases very well.

In Chinese, verbal classifiers such as ci in (3) are called "permanent individual CLs" by Gao (2004, p.2). Such phrases are also called "repetitive/frequency phrases".1

1 There are other CL phrases that could be called as R/F Phrases. For instance, Gao's (2004) "temporary individual classifiers" fall into this category. (See section III.) Different terminologies have been used to denote those phrases. While Tang (1999) refer to them as "frequency" phrase, Zhang (2002) refers to them as the "repetitive". Personally I find the use of "frequency" misleading, as it could refer to phrases such as "every day", "once a week". Many linguists, including Tang (1999), also analyze "frequency phrases" and "duration phrases" together. In this paper, however, we will distinguish them.

Such VCLs are admittedly few in number. Apart from ci, others include hui, tang, bian, chang. The use of tang, bian, and chang has to be constrained by the context while "hui" is often used in formal language.2 ci can be considered a "general" VCL that can often replace other verbal classifiers in spoken language.

(4) ta qu-le Beijing san tang/ci
   he go-PFV Beijing three CL
   He has been to Beijing three times.

2.2. Measuring: event [-telic] into event [+telic].

2.2.1. Measure by quantity of accomplishment.

"Measuring" refers to (a) the quantification in accomplishment, or (b) the range of space, time that an event encompasses. The first type of "measure phrase" I shall identify here is "noun measure phrase" which functions as the direct object/complement of the verb. Such phrases are in fact quantified and indefinite NPs.

(5) a. I read until I got very tired.
   b. *I read two books until I got very tired.
   c. I read two books in an hour.

In (5b), the quantified NP, “two books”, measures the original event (i.e. activity "read"), making the event telic, thus semantically incompatible with the phrase "until I got very tired". According to Sanz & Bever (2001), "read two books" is “activity + [measure] → accomplishment”.

In Chinese the change of the situation type would be the same.

(6) a. wo zai du shu
   I DUR read book
   I am reading books.
   b. wo zai du liang ben shu
   I DUR read two CL book
   I am reading two books.

(6b) is awkward because the addition of "liang ben shu" changes the original atelic event du ("read") into a telic one, and therefore incompatible with the durative marker zai.

2.2.2. Measure by Time and Space.

2 For a more detailed discussion on the use of "tang", "bian" and "chang", see Zhang (2002).
For the second dimension of the “measurement”, English temporal measure phrases (thereafter T MP) and spatial measure phrases (thereafter S MP) can both add [+measure] to event.

(7) a. I read until he came. (Adjust: I was reading until he came.)
    b. I read for an hour *until he came.
    c. I read for an hour by the time he came.
       (Adjust: I had been reading for an hour by the time he came.)

(8) a. I ran until I reached the top.
    b. *I ran a mile until I reached the top.
    c. I ran a mile by the time I reached the top.
       (Adjust: I had run a mile by the time I reached the top.)

The erroneous constructions in (7b) and (8b) show that either T MP or S MP can make event [+telic] into [+telic]. Notice that (9a) and (9b) is ungrammatical.

(9) a. *I read two books for an hour.
    b. *I ran a mile for an hour.

The ungrammaticalities show that two measure phrases cannot exist in the same event. Just like an unbounded entity is subject to [+measure] only once, as we have previously noted, an unbounded event can only subject to [+measure] once. Once an event is “individualized” (i.e. becomes [+telic]), it is no longer measurable. This principle is true in both English and Chinese.

In Chinese, T MPs functioning as AdvPs are often called durative phrases. Durative phrases are often considered together with other VCI. Phrases (i.e. repetitive phrases. Gao (2004) refers to the VCI used in such durative phrases as “temporary stage classifier”. Member of this category include words like xiaoshi (“hour”), fenzhong (“minute”), yue (“month”), noun denoting time range in English. 

S MPs are not usually analyzed together with other VCI. Phrases. The yingli (“mile”), bu (“step”) and quan (“fist”) in (10a), (10b) and (10c) are often called “degree words” or “degree objects”. 4

(10) a. ta pao-le liang yingli
    he run-PFV two mile
    He ran two miles.

3 They can also act as Nouns in Chinese. --Almost all classifiers derive from words of other lexical categories
4 Many, including Zhang (2002) and Gao (2004), do not recognize these words as VCI.

b. ta zou-le san bu
   he walk-PFV three step
   He walked three steps.

c. ta pao-le liang quan
   he run-PFV two circle
   (Approximation.) He ran in a circle for two times.

Despite the preference in terminology, these “degree words” or classifiers serve the purpose of [+measure], and function in the same way as the VCI. Phrases that we have previously seen. For instance, pao (“run”) is an activity verb denoting an [+telic] event. (11a) is accomplishment or event [+telic] because of the [+measure]. (11b), like (11c), is ungrammatical because there are two measure phrases.

(11) a. ta pao-le liang yingli /shi fenzhong.
    he run-PFV two mile / ten minute (CL)
    He ran for two miles/for ten minutes.

b. *ta pao-le liang yingli /shi fenzhong
   he run-PFV two mile / ten minute (CL)
   He ran for two miles/for ten minutes.

c. *ta kan-le liang ben shu /shi fenzhong.
   he read-PFV two CL / book ten minute (CL)
   He read two books/for ten minutes.

3.1 An Introduction.
Since Nominal CLs are used to give quantity information for nouns, it seems reasonable to suggest that verbs classifiers exist also to quantify events. Gao (2004) categorizes verbal classifiers into the following 4 groups:

1) permanent individual CLs: e.g. ci; tiao;
2) temporary stage CLs: e.g. xiaoshi (“hour”); fenzhong (“minute”);
3) permanent stage CLs: e.g. yi-hui yer (“for a while”);
4) temporary individual CLs: e.g. quan (“fist”); yan (“eye”).

Previous sections in this paper indicates that the first group CLs realize counting of events, while the second group realize measuring within one event. What about the other two groups of CLs?
In Gao’s (2004) definition, “permanent” classifiers refer to those words which primarily function as CLs, while “temporary” classifiers refer to those “borrowed” from other lexical categories (Gao 2004). As we know, CLs often derive from Nouns and Verbs, predictably permanent CLs are highly restricted in number while there is a good
variety of "temporary" ones. With a careful look, it is not difficult to see Gao’s (2004) "stage" CLs are those used in Durative Phrases while "individual" CLs are used in the so-called "Repetitive Phrases". Gao’s (2004) definition of "stage" and "individual", then, is meant to parallel with "measure" and "count", respectively.

Table 1: Quantity information: Traditional Terminologies and Parallellism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quantification</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To measure within one event</td>
<td>Activity + measure of time</td>
<td>Stage CL phrase/ Durative Phrase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Activity + measure of space</td>
<td>Degree Words/Objects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Activity + measure of the object NP</td>
<td>NP [+quantified] [ -def]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To count events</td>
<td>Individual CL phrase/ Repetitive Phrase</td>
<td>AdvP &quot;once&quot;/ &quot;twice&quot;/ &quot;(for)…times&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


As is illustrated above, Gao’s permanent stage CL phrases are identical to Durative Phrases with “permanent”. CLs. Belonging to this category are *yi-hui* ("for a while"), *yi-xia* ("for a moment") 5.

More interesting and complicated are "temporary" / "borrowed" individual CLs. Since they apply to "individuals", such CL Phrases are traditionally examined as Repetitive Phrases. Therefore VCLs used in Repetitive Phrases come in two groups:

a. Permanent VCLs: *ci, hui, tang, bian; xia* as in *yi-xia* (meaning "briefly") 6.

b. Temporary VCLs: *gunzi* ("stick"); *jiao ("foot"); yan ("eye"); *sheng ("voice")

An interesting fact is that most of these "borrowed" CLs come from Nouns denoting the "instrument" of the action in the event. 7

5 The Num "yi" ("one") cannot be changed. "yi-xia" can also be an individual CL, which means "briefly".

6 This is not meant to be an exhaustive listing.

7 See Zhang (2002). There are a few exceptions to this observation. For instance,

e.g.: ta xia-le wo yi tiao
he frightened-PFV I one jump
He frightened me (so much) that I jumped.

e.g.: ta la-le wo yi ba
he pull-PFV I one BA
He pulled me up quickly.

(12) a. ta ti-le wo yi jiao
he kick-PFV I one foot (CL)
He kicked me (with his foot).

b. ta kan-le wo liang yan
he look-PFV I two eye (CL)
He glanced at me.

A few other "borrowed" CLs are often "goal" of the action (of "hitting")

(13) ta da-le wo liang bazhang /ziiba
he hit-PFV I two cheek /mouth
He slapped me twice.

At the same time, a majority of such CLs are instruments of "hitting" ---which means that most of the action/event will be "hitting"8. "Stick", "fist", "knife" can all become VCLs of the "hitting" event.

(14) ta da-le wo san quan.
he hit-PFV I three fist.
He hit me three times with his fist. 9

Recall that we have mentioned early there is a "general" VCL *ci* that can be used to denote repetition of almost any event. The problem now is whether we can use the general classifier and these temporary classifiers interchangeably.

(15) ta da-le wo san ci
he hit-PFV I three CL
He beat me three times.

(14) and (15) are not only different in that *quan* is "borrowed" and *ci* is general; neither are they different only in the sense that (14) specifies the "instrument". Apparently, (14) and (15) are relating to totally different events. In (14), the conflict takes place only once, but in (15), there are three conflicts, which probably happen discontinuously. In other words, the difference between (14) and (15) seems to be the difference between one event versus three events.

In these sentences, the functions of the temporary classifier phrases are similar to "yi-xia".

8 This observation is made upon stimulation of Zhang (2002) and Gao (2004).

9 Note that this English translation might not be ideal. This will be discussed later.
Therefore I believe there are good reasons to analyze such “temporary VCLs” separately from “permanent VCLs” such as ci. The use of such temporary VCLs achieve far more functions than one might assume.

First of all, the temporary VCL refines the ambiguous meaning of da, and such VCL Phrases are not equivalent to VCL Phrases with ci. The English translation given in (14) is not very faithful to the Chinese. A better translation for (14) is given as the following:

(14) ta da-le wo san quan
he hit-PFV I three CL
He punched me three times. Or
He gave me three punches.

Note that the translation for (15) is “He beat me three times”. “Beat” is an activity verb while the “punch” is a semelfactive verb. Further, the classifier phrase san quan also specifies that the “hitting” has to come continuously. Therefore the VCL Phrase in (14) identifies the verb type and attaches an aspect feature [+continuity]] to the event/sentence.

We are then faced with the question of whether sentence (14) indeed refers to three events, or only one. According to Smith (1997), “He was knocking at the door” means “he knocks several times”, and the sentence denotes “multiple events in an activity” (Smith 1997: 180). Generalizing from this explanation, we can conclude that (14) refers to three sub-events in one major event, with “a shift of situation type” (Smith 1997: 180). Smith’s (1997) sentence, however, does differ from (14). In (14), the major event is not an activity. The [+measure] in san quan makes the original activity da into an accomplishment. Therefore there are two ways to interpret (14): san quan could be the “counting” of the sub-event, action [+semelfactive], or it could be the “measuring” of the major event [+telic] (accomplishment).

A closer observation confirms that while ci can replace other VCLs to “count” in “true” repetitive phrases, xia is a better candidate to replace temporary individual CLs like quan.

(16) ta da-le wo san xia
he hit-PFV I three CL
He gave me three punches.

Secondly, relevant to the observation that san quan in (14) brings in the aspectual feature of [+continuity], the numerals before temporary VCLs are often abstract, and might not be relevant to “counting” at all. Recall (12b), repeated below.

(12b) b. ta kan-le wo liang yan
he look-PFV I two eye
He glanced at me.
* He looked at me twice.

It is not sheer coincidence that the numeral in (12b) cannot be translated literally. Numerals such temporary VCL Phrases are often restricted to yi (“one”), liang (“two”), with no or little difference in meaning. Notice that even though “hitting”, “kicking” can still be counted, the numerals we observe in sentences like (14) still hardly refer to definite counting of the reoccurrences. Compared to (14), (17) is more likely to occur and sounds more natural to native speakers.

(17) ta da-le wo liang quan
He hit-PFV I two fist
He punched me.

In fact, the numerals in such VCL Phrases would be taken as “abstract” unless it is contrastively stressed in pronunciation.

This observation confirms our suspicion that VCL Phrases such as san quan are not used for “counting”, but for “measuring” the extent of the matrix event. Such “measuring” does not need to be precise. In fact, the “measuring” can be downgraded into the aspectual feature of [+brevity], as is apparent in the change from “beat” to “punch”.

Another very important feature of such temporary VCLs is their resemblance to verb reduplications with a [+delimitative] aspect as identified by Li & Thompson (1981: 233). According to Gao(2004), such reduplication structures are called “diminutive verbal suffixes” by Dai (1992). (18b) is an example of the verb reduplication or the so-called diminutive verbal suffix.

(18) a. kan (“look”)
   b. kan-yi-kan (“look-one-look”)

(18b) means “look briefly”, or “glance”. The construction of the suffix is “(V)-yi-V” (“(V)-one-V”). According to Li & Thompson (1981: 29, 233), a verb has to be both an activity and a volitional verb in order to be susceptible to such reduplications. And reduplications with yi plus the reduplicated syllable are often restricted to one-morpheme verbs (Li & Thompson 1981: 233).
Such "(V)-yi-V" structure resembles the "V-yi-CL" pseudo Repetitive CL Phrase both syntactically and semantically. Though linguists have used different terms (i.e. reduplication with quantity adverbial, verbal suffixes, VCL phrases) for structures like (19d)\(^{12}\), we can see that the change from (19a) to (19f) is nothing but a continuum.

(19)  a. kan lian yan
     look two eye
  b. kan yi yan
     look one eye
  c. kan yi - xia
     look one CL
  d. kan - yi - kan (V-yi-V: Verb Reduplication/VCL phrase/Verb suffix)
     look one look
  e. kan-kan (VV: one word; meaning "look/watch/read" (delimitative))
     have a look/watch/briefly read

(19a) through (19f) shows a gradual diminishment of the quantification information: 1) The quantity information becomes invisible; 2) The CL loses its uniqueness, changing into general CL and finally transforming into the reduplicated V; 3) The contraction between the words becomes stronger, making what we call classifier phrases changing into morphemes of a word.\(^{13}\) The difference between "kan" and "kan-kan" is the addition of the aspect feature [+delimitative]/[+brevity] in the latter. There is almost no clear contrast between any stages from (19a) to (19f), though these structures may maintain differences in style and implication.

By the same token, from (20a) to (20c), we can see a gradual development of (a) "counting activities" → (b) "counting of the semelfactive" → "indefinite measuring" → (c) "instantaneous activity/event" (that cannot be measured).

(20)  a. ta da-le wo liang ci
          he hit-PFV I two CL.
     He beat me twice.
  b. ta da-le wo liang quan
          he hit-PFV I two fist.
     He hit me two times (with his fist). Or
     He punched me.
  c. ta da-le wo yi-xia.
          he hit-PFV I one CL

He hit me.

In conclusion, with Chinese "pseudo" Repetitive Phrases/temporary VCL Phrases, the "boundary" or "telicity" of the event becomes blurred. But this is not a problem of the classification system. In fact, the classification system helps Chinese speakers to refine the verb types. The observation also proves that VCLS not only agrees with the predicate V, but also brings an aspectual feature of [+continuity] or [+brevity]/[+delimitative] into the sentence.

3.3. Counting and Measuring in English.

English does not have a classifying system, yet the dubious translation we have seen before would arouse suspicion that English also has a fuzzy boundary of "eventuality". For instance, we notice the phrase "for ... times" can sometimes be incorporated into the quantification of the object NP, making the sentence more of a "measuring" than counting.

It is often said that (21a) and (21b) have the same D-structure.\(^{14}\)

(21)  a. He drank.
  b. He had a drink.

With v (have), NP (he) will move up to the upper NP slot, with the Inflection of [+past], forming "He had a drink". With the absence of v (have), N((a) drink) will be incorporated into the V, and NP (He) will move upward to the NP immediately dominated by vP to form (21a). (When N is incorporated into V, the indefinite article a is eliminated.)\(^{15}\)

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\(^{12}\) Gao (2004) considers (19c) to be a VCL phrase.

\(^{13}\) Li (2002b) discusses the transitions and differences between (19d) and (19f).

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14 Hale & Keyser (1993) gives a through examination of argument structures such as this.

15 An alternative to look at this is to assume that the N is extracted from the P for the purpose of being able to quantify or otherwise qualify the event/activity, leaving the light verb behind as expression of action.
Therefore, the following sentences are alternations of each other.

(22)  
a. He drank three times.  
b. He had three drinks.

(23)  
a. He danced four times.  
b. He did four dances.

(24)  
a. He punched me three times.  
b. He gave me three punches.

(22a) is “counting” of the event [-telic] (drink). From the structures of (22b), (23b) and (24b), the events in these sentences are all “activity + [+measure] ⇒ accomplishment”. The alternations from (a) to (b) then changes the atelic into telic, and the “counting” of event repetition into “measuring” of the accomplishment. 

(25a) and (25b) show a slightly different type of alternations.

(25)  
a. He looked at the notebook.  
b. He took a look at the notebook.

As we have seen earlier, (25) looks much like the Chinese construction of (12b). The Numeral, together with the light verb, indicates the [+brevity] aspect of the event. The Numeral cannot be changed into “one”, or “two”. The predicate event also becomes [+telic] after nominalization. Instead of saying that the NP “a look” counts anything, one might as well say it measures the activity and sets the boundary for one event.

With a closer examination, alternations in (22) to (24) and (25) nominalize “drink”, “dance”, and “punch” into [+count] NPs. In (25), however, it is a little unclear whether the nominalization product is countable or not. There are numerous examples of such alternations as in (25).

(26)  
a. Try it! ⇒ Give it a try!  
b. We walked ⇒ We took a walk  
c. They chatted ⇒ They had a chat.  
d. Sip this. ⇒ Take a sip.  

NPs such as “try”, “walk”, “chat” and “sip” here, though capable of taking the indefinite article “a”, cannot be regarded as truly [+count] because the followings are ungrammatical.

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Some native speaker informants suggest that some of these examples are more likely to be British English.

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(27)  
a. *Give two tries at (something).  
b. *We took two walks.  
c. *We had two chats.  

Interestingly, these nominalizations might occur with indefinite quantifications.

(28)  
a. He gave it several tries (before giving up).  
b. We took many long walks together.  
c. We use to have many pleasant chats.

With this observation, I suggest that the indefinite article “a” gives an “intangible” quantification information, just like the pseudo Numeral yi (“one”) in the Chinese VCL Phrases. Note that this “a” cannot be changed into “one”). And the indefinite quantification “many (chats)” works in a strikingly similar way as the Numeral liang (“two”) does in Chinese: It does not count the occurrences of events; instead, it indefinitely measures the matrix event.

The following observations summarize the alternations in (21) through (28).

1. When an activity verb is fully nominalized into a [+count] NP (e.g. “drink”), the nominalization structure might change the event content, thus causing a significant meaning change in the sentence.

2. When a verb denoting instantaneous activity (or semelfactive verb) is nominalized into [+count] NP (e.g. “punch”), the pluralized nominalization causes situation shift to multiple-event activities.

3. When the activity verb is nominalized into [-count] NP (e.g. “look”), the event would change from [-telic] to [+telic] because of the indefinite article or indefinite quantification. Sometimes, as in the case of (25b), an aspectual feature of [+brevity] is added to sentence.

In conclusion, the quantification of eventuality in English is also blurred. In our examples, the distinction between “counting” and “measuring” often becomes unclear when light verb constructions are involved.

We can further conclude that the murky line between “counting” and “measuring” in the two languages are similar in the following ways:

1. In both languages, the verbs are activity verbs (sometimes semelfactive). They are restricted in number and the phrases involved are sometimes considered “idiomatic usages”.

2. In the product of nominalization or adding temporary VCL Phrases, the numerals may be “abstract”.

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16 Some native speaker informants suggest that some of these examples are more likely to be British English.

17 Some examples are adopted from Wierzbicka (1982).
3. In the product of nominalization or adding temporary VCL Phrases, the nouns in the measure phrases are borrowed from other lexical categories. In English, the object NP comes from verb nominalization; in Chinese, the classifiers are “borrowed” from nouns denoting instrument or goal.

4. The process might cause the boundary of eventuality to become unclear, merging the “counting” with the “measuring”, and resulting in situation shifts.

5. Both processes may introduce additional aspectual features to the sentence. A shared aspectual change could be [+definitive] or [+brevity]. Chinese might also add the aspect of [+continuity], when the Numeral in the VCL Phrase is other than “one”.

4. Implications.

The above discussion shows the similarity between the two languages. We have noticed some expressions, even though not directly mirror each other, are astonishingly paralleled:

(29) rang wo kan yi yan
    let me look one eye
    Let me have a look.

(30) ta he-le yi kou shui
    he drink-PFV one mouth(CL) water
    He took a sip of water.

(31) shi-yi-shi
    try one try
    Have a try.

Based on the structural similarity, it might be assumed that Chinese English as a Foreign/Second Language students are not likely to have much difficulty with the above phrases. The correct English translation in (29) through (31) can be formed by retaining the sentence “frame”, and change the Chinese V into an English light verb and change the instrument noun (or CL) into the English V.

Many Chinese activity/semelfactive one-morpheme volitional verbs can take the form of “V-yi-V”. In English, too, light verb construction is powerful and prevalent. There are quite a number of English-Chinese pairs that show almost ideal parallelism, including “have a look”, “have a read”, “have a feel”, and “have a walk”, etc.

A potential problem for Chinese EFL learners, however, is that they might overgeneralize the “rule” for light verb constructions. According to our analysis, one difference between the Chinese and English structures under discussion here is that Chinese can use the classifier to express “instrument” and the aspect at the same time, while English construction can only introduce the aspect (and even aspect is not always present in light verb constructions). In some cases, the instrument does not need to be identified (as it is implicitly clear that the “instrument” of “kicking” should be “foot”, the instrument of “biting/drinking” should be “mouth”, and the “instrument” of “looking” should be “eye”). But things could be quite different for other “activities”.

I asked my informants to translate our sentence (14), repeated below, into English.

(14) ta da-le wo san quan
    he hit-PFV I three fist
    Hit me three times (with his fist).
    He gave me three punches.

Some erroneous answers include “He gave me three fists”, “He gave me a fist for three times”, “He hit me three boxes”, and “His fist hit on me three times”. Apparently the grammatical mistakes were due to the speakers’ attempt to incorporate both the [+instrument] and [+brevity] information in English. These sentences also demonstrate the learners’ confusion with the quantification of event, as they attempted to use the light verb “give” and the repetitive phrase “three times” at the same time.

Sometimes, the Chinese “V-yi-CL/V” phrases may not be directly translatable into the English “have/give a V” phrase, but a little adjustment will make the construction grammatical. Mistakes can also occur in such cases.

(32) xiang-yi-xiang
    think one think
    * Have a think
    Give it a thought.

(33) he yi -kou
    drink one-mouth
    * have a drink
    take a sip

(34) chi yi -kou
    eat one mouth
    * have an eat
    have a bite. 18

18 “Have a think” and “have a drink” are the actual erroneous answers my informants gave for translation.
that because those verbs "carry no significant meanings, it is likely that students will choose the wrong verb-noun collocation unless they have previously learned it as a chunk" (Chi, Wang & Wang 1994: 162). 19

Errors might also arise when the alternation in English would have to use a Preposition Phrase to introduce the original Object.

(35) a. He drank the water.
   b. He took a drink of the water.
(36) a. Look at this.
   b. Have a look at this.

In most cases, the original direct object (i.e. "water") will be introduced by the preposition "of" in light verb constructions. In (36), however, when the original NP ("this") is the indirect object of the verb, it has to be introduced by the same preposition that is used in the original sentence. Chinese students, however, are not likely to analyze that "have a look" comes from "look at sth.", and might use the wrong preposition in such cases. Indeed, some of my informants translated ting-yi-ting ("have a listen to . . .") into "have a listen for", "have a hear of", "have a listen about", showing their difficulty with the prepositions.

Chi, Wong & Wong (1994) also report that their subjects sometimes used the light verb construction when a single verb should be used or preferred. An example is "take an interview with" versus "interview". Many foreign language teachers share the same feeling that Chinese students tend to overuse light verb structures.

As Chi, Wong & Wong (1994: 162) point out, "[t]here seems to be no logical way that may help learners to work out the correct collocations - they either know it, or they do not.". I agree that EFL/ESL teachers should introduce some light verb constructions such as "have a drink" as "set phrases" or "chunks" for students to memorize. This might be the best way to ensure that students use the correct light verb and the correct preposition. But this is not enough. What is important is to help EFL/ESL teachers to distinguish the nuance between "He drank" and "He took a drink" versus "He took a sip," and "He looked at . . ." and "He took a look at . . .". Such differences are apparent in Chinese pairs such as ta he shui vs. ta he-le yi-kou (shui), and ta kan vs. ta kan-le (wo) yi-kan. Once the teachers point out the difference caused by nominalization, and give the Chinese examples, students will easily realize the aspectual information in such English constructions without resorting to abstract rules. 20 Students should be made to realize that the English counterpart for Chinese V-VCI phrases are not always present. For translation purposes, one sometimes uses a light verb, and sometimes omits the [+instrument]. Sometimes the correct equivalent (such as using "punch" for "hit by fist") can be found, and other times one has to use an adverbial phrase such as "a little bit" to indicate the [+delimitative] aspect.

References:
Wierzbicka, Anna. 1982. Why can you have a drink when you can’t *have an eat. Language 58 (4), 753-799.

19 The wrongful use of light verbs is not a problem exclusive to Chinese learners. See Nesselhauf (2004).
20 However, it should be pointed out that the English alternations do not necessarily entail an aspectual difference. Light verb constructions often achieve different functions.