"Verb copying" (VC), a syntactic phenomenon found in Sinitic languages such as Mandarin and Cantonese, is a construction where the verb is pronounced twice in the same clause; the first occurrence is followed by an object, the second by an adverbial. The analysis of this construction raises many questions including the modeling of event structure and the linearization of multiple occurrences of a single lexical item in the phonological output.

The phenomenon – Mandarin has a class of adverbial phrases which occur postverbally, called buyu, including expressions of manner, result (1), duration and iteration (often called frequency)(2). VC arises when a transitive verb (or an unaccusative one) is modified by a buyu adverbial. Without VC, an object cannot appear postverbally with an expression of result or manner (3), though it can with an expression of duration or iteration (4). The first occurrence of V is immediately followed by the object and bears no aspectual morphology (5). The second occurrence, followed by the adverbial, can bear an aspectual marker in the case of expressions of duration and iteration. VC is also asymmetric in that adverbials and objects cannot switch places (6).

Event structure – Li 1990 and Huang 1994 describe VC as resulting from both the object and the adverbial needing to enter into the same licensing relationship with V. For Li, both phrases need to be assigned accusative Case; for Huang, thematic licensing is involved. Since V is not able to license both the adverbial and the object at the same time, it is "copied" to create a second licensing domain. This approach nicely captures the fact that certain adverbials can play an argumental role in the event structure of a proposition, a fact also evidenced by languages like Finnish which have accusative marked adverbials (Tenny 1987).

It has long been noted that adverbials can act like bound objects, insofar as they measure out an activity. However, what Li and Huang's proposals fail to capture is that when both an object and an adverbial are present, only the latter measures the event, as can be seen from the cancelled entailment of completion in (8), compared with (7). My analysis of VC is able to account for this difference by proposing a structure where the element measuring the event isn't licensed by V but rather, following Kratzer 2002 (among others), by a functional head associated with telicity, F_{tel} in (9). In the absence of a measure adverbial, a bound object raises to Spec,F_{tel}P. But when a measure adverbial is merged into Spec,F_{tel}P the object remains in VP. In the VC construction, the object is in VP, only VP has moved to a higher position in the tree. Just how this works is discussed in the next section.

Multiple occurrences – The actual mechanics of the copying process are seldom discussed. The descriptions in Tang 1990 and Paul 2002 are the most explicit, assuming that the same lexical item is selected twice from the numeration (in minimalist terms). But the terms resulting from different applications of Select are seen as distinct by the computational system (Chomsky 1995). Viewed in this way, VC is a highly unusual procedure, (externally) merging two identical verbs (both referring to the same event) into the same vP. I propose that VC is in fact not so exotic. In my analysis there's only one verb, and its different occurrences result from the application of Move. The "copying" aspect of VC falls out of the copy theory of movement (Chomsky 1995). As shown in (9), first the head V copies to adjoin to v; then later, it copies again, but this time as a part of VP, which moves to the edge of vP. Following Nunes 2001, I assume that the pronunciation of multiple copies results when the algorithm that chooses either which copies to pronounce, or which to delete, is not able to apply to every copy of a moved element. Unlike Nunes, who appeals to morphological operations, I propose that purely structural considerations are involved in not allowing the pronunciation of one
occurrence of the verb to block that of the other. Namely, due to the fact that no c-command relation obtains between them, the two occurrences are not recognized as forming a chain and are not subject, relative to one another, to any operation that targets chains and their links. Nunes rules out this situation as a violation of the LCA (Kayne 1994). However, I show that ultimately there is no LCA violation, provided that the grammar is able to realize multiple precedence relations without the introduction of additional stipulations – something that has already been demonstrated for reduplicative morphology in Raimy 2000.

Conclusion – This analysis shows that the aspectual and linear properties of VC are crucially connected through the structure (9). It also derives the asymmetric property observed between (2) and (6) as well as the possibility for an adverbial and an argument to appear together without VC (4) – both these points have previously only been handled by stipulation. Finally, it raises a variety of questions, including the interaction of copy theory and remnant movement, as well as the types of adverbials that can be considered to measure an event (e.g. manner).

(1)  ta chang (zhei ge) ge chang de  hen  haoting / lei.  
     3s sing  this CL song sing DE very good.listen tired  
     'She sings (this song) well/ until she's tired.'

(2)  ta kan zhei ben shu  kan le san ci / xiaoshi.  
     3s read this CL book read PFV three time hour  
     'She read this book three times / for three hours.'

(3)  *ta chang (zhei ge) ge de  hen  haoting.  
     3s sing  this CL song DE very good.listen  
     ('She sings (this song) well. ')

(4)  wo kan le liang ci dianying.  
     1s watch PFV two time film  
     'I watched movies twice.'

(5)  *ta kan le zhei ben shu kan san xiaoshi.  
     3s read PFV this CL book read three hours

(6)  *ta kan san xiaoshi kan le zhei ben shu.  
     3s read three hours read PFV this CL book  
     ('She read this book for three hours.')

(7)  #Ta zuo le yi-ge dangao, keshi mei zuo-wan.  
     he bake- LE one-CL cake  but  not bake-finish  
     'He baked a cake, but did not finish it.'  Soh & Kuo 2001

(8)  Ta zuo yi-ge dangao zuo-le san-ge zhongtou, keshi mei zuo-wan.  
     3s bake one-CL cake  bake-LE three-CL hour  but  not bake-finish  
     'He baked a cake for three hours, but did not finish it.'

(9)  … [vP [VP kan shu] [vP [v kan [v, le] [FP san xiaoshi [FP Ftel [vP kan shu]]]]]