

## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINESE

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The talk delivered under this title consisted of remarks on three topics: Chinese grammar, the system of tones in Chinese, and the Chinese character script. In those notes, the last two topics are omitted. It seemed pointless to describe the tones in print, and the character script might have been difficult to reproduce.

'Chinese' may of course mean many things. These notes concern what is known as putonghua, the language of the great majority of Chinese. Within this language, which is known variously in English as Standard Chinese, Mandarin, or National Language (Kuo-yü), the dialect of Peking is recognised as the standard.

The notation is that of the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet. Tones are not marked.

### Lack of inflection in Chinese.

The lack of inflection in Chinese has led people to ask whether Chinese has a grammar at all. Chinese is one of the extreme examples among isolating languages. That is to say, from the mere form of a word, one cannot, in Chinese, deduce its case, gender, mood, voice, or number. Some of these conceptions and relationships do not apply in Chinese. Such that do, as well as others which do not apply in languages most of us are familiar with, are denoted, where necessary, in one of two ways:

- 1) By the addition to the sentence of an appropriate word or words. 'Word' is rather vague here; at the most it will mean a fully syntactic word, at the least it will mean a syllable 'bound' to another word. In the latter case, such words approximate to, but are not identical with, inflections in languages such as Latin.

E.g. Ta you ma - 'he has some horses' or 'he has a horse' (ma = horse)  
Shu zai nar - 'the books are there' or 'the book is there'  
(shu = book)

Wo chu kan ta - 'I am going (i.e. will go) to see him' or  
'I am going (i.e. am on my way) to see him' or  
'I went etc.' (wo=I, chu=go, kan=see,  
ta=he or him).

If the context does not make clear which of the above meanings is the

right one, some specifying word must be used, e.g. in the first two examples, some such specifying word as 'a', 'some', 'the three' etc. must be used. In the third example, some such word as 'yesterday', 'when I was in Shanghai', 'in the act of', must be used.

- 2) by position in the sentence. From the above examples, for instance, one can deduce, as in their English equivalents, that ta, shu and wo are the subjects of their verbs. In this kind of sentence, the subject will precede its verb, while the object (ma, nar, ta) will follow it. Again, since ma and shu are not otherwise specified, ma is to be taken as indefinite ('a', 'some') because it follows the verb, while shu, because it precedes the verb, is to be taken as definite ('the').

### Parts of speech in Chinese.

It is possible to establish what parts of speech there are in Chinese by utilising the two features described above. From what kind of word a given word "goes with", we can determine the class it belongs to. Let us take the case of a class for which in English we have no equivalent, the class of Measures, or Classifiers:

<u>yi zhang zhi</u>	'a/one sheet of paper'
<u>yi zhi bi</u>	'a/one pen'
<u>san zhi bi</u>	'three pens'
<u>si bei shui</u>	'four glasses of water'
<u>yi ge ren</u>	'a/one person'
<u>yi pi ma</u>	'a/one horse'
<u>san ben shu</u>	'three books'

In the above examples there are three classes of words, Numerals (yi, san, si), Measures (zhang, zhi, bei, ge, pi, and ben), and Nouns (zhi, bi, shui, ren, ma and shu). For each of these classes, one of its principal properties is that it participates in the order Numeral-plus-Measure-plus-Noun. Assuming the existence of a class of Numerals, one could, from a sufficiently large number of examples like the above, establish first a class of Measures, and then a class of Nouns. By using similar criteria, for example by finding what words may be followed by the suffixes le or zhi, or by finding what words may be preceded by the negatives bu or mei, or by the word hen 'very', the various other classes can be established.

### The principal classes, or parts of speech.

Abbreviations: Dem = demonstrative, M = measure, N = noun, V = verb, SV = stative verb or adjective, C = coverb, A = adverb, FA = fixed adverb, MA = movable adverb, VO = verb-plus-object compound, PV = postverb, T = timeword, P = placeword, PN = pronoun, RC = resultative compound, Num = numeral, OP = ordinal prefix.

1. Demonstrative;

E.g. zhe 'this', na 'that'. Participates in order Dem+M+N, e.g. na zhang zhi 'that sheet of paper'. Also in order Dem+Num+M+N, e.g. zhe san zhang zhi 'those three sheets of paper'. May precede shi 'is', as its subject, na shi yi zhang zhi 'that is a sheet of paper'.

2. Ordinal prefix:

E.g. di. OP+Num+M+N, as di yi ge ren 'the first person'.

3. Numeral:

As described above. E.g. Num+M+N, san ben shu etc.

4. Measure:

E.g. zhang, measure for zhuozi 'table', and for zhi 'paper' in sense of a 'sheet'; zhi, measure for bi 'pen' etc.; ben, measure for shu 'book'; ge, measure for the majority of nouns that can be used with numerals; pi, measure for ma 'horse'. Measures may be usefully divided into four groups:

- a) ordinary measures. This is the Measure for which we have no equivalent in English. Ge, the commonest measure, is of this group, and can be used, at a pinch, for almost any of the others. Other measures can be used only with certain nouns, e.g. the measure ba, which conveys the suggestion of 'grip, grasp', and is also a noun meaning a 'handle', is the measure for words like 'scissors', 'knife', and 'chair (with a back)'. The measure zhang 'stretch, sheet, expanse' is the measure for the word which means 'table'. A certain amount of consistency can thus be discerned, but in the last resort, the measure must be learned with its noun.
- b) partitive measures. E.g. zhang in yi zhang zhi 'a sheet of paper', bei in yi bei shui 'a glass of water'.
- c) autonomous measures. These are certain words which in their meaning already imply a division of time or space. They participate in the order Num+M, or Dem+M, or Dem+Num+M. That is, they function as other measures, except that they have no noun following them. E.g. san tian 'three days', si sheng 'four provinces', wu li 'five miles'.
- d) measures which limit the meaning of a verb. Like the measures described under (c), these are not followed by a noun. E.g. shua is the verb 'to brush'; shua yi xia means 'give (it) a brush'. Xia, a word which in other functions means 'to go down', is here a measure. Its effect is to restrict the meaning of the verb in the same way as the verb 'brush' is restricted in 'give it a brush'; e.g. zou is 'to walk', zou yi tang is 'to have a walk, go for a walk'. A reduplicated verb is a special case of this; zou yi zou, literally 'to walk a walk', also means 'to have a walk'.

5. Noun:

Functions in ways described above, e.g. is virtually never found immediately after a numeral or a demonstrative. A measure almost always precedes it in these cases. When otherwise unspecified, as we say above, is taken to be definite when it precedes the verb in its clause, and indefinite when it follows the verb.

6. Adverb:

Of two kinds, monosyllabic and limited to the position immediately before the verb, and polysyllabic and allowed in any position provided it is before the verb. Dou 'all' is an example of a so-called Fixed Adverb, that is, of the former kind; e.g. tamen dou laile 'they have all come' (tamen = they, lai = come, le is a verb suffix). In the sentence xianzai ta bu zai nar 'now he is not there', xianzai 'now' is an example of the latter kind, that is, of a so-called Movable Adverb. In this case it even precedes the subject. Bu 'not' is a Fixed Adverb.

7. Verb:

May be followed by various complements or suffixes, of which the commonest are le, which indicates completed action, and zhi, which indicates continued action. Some other verbs may on occasion function as complements, e.g. wan 'to finish', when used as a complement, means 'finished doing such-and-such'; xie 'to write', xiowanle (xie + wan + le) is 'finished writing'.

A verb is negated by preceding it with one of the negatives bu or mei, which are Fixed Adverbs.

As has been implied above a verb has no special forms for voice or mood. The context will determine whether a verb is to be taken in an active or a passive meaning.

Chinese verbs have no tense. The same form of the verb may imply past, present or future time. When it is necessary to be explicit that something has already happened, the verb suffix le may be used. Similarly if it is necessary to affirm that a certain thing did happen on a previous occasion, or has happened at least once, the verb suffix guo may be used; e.g. ta chuguo Zhong-guo 'he has been to China' (chu = 'go', Zhong-guo = China). These cannot be considered as tense-forms, for they are not invariably used whenever the verb is in the past. They are used only when it is necessary to be explicit about these aspects of tense.

8. Stative Verb:

Corresponds often to the adjective in English. It needs no verb 'to be' however, when used predicatively; e.g. na ben shu hao 'that book is good (better)'. A stative verb may modify a noun or a verb. The modifying relationship is usually shown by the use of the particle de, e.g. yi zhi hen hao de bi 'a very good pen' (hen = very). A stative verb may be followed by the verb suffix le, but in

this case it indicates not completed action, but the onset of the state expressed by the verb's meaning; e.g. bing- 'be ill', but bingle = 'got ill, get ill'.

#### 9. Coverb:

A coverb participates in the order (Subject) plus Coverb plus Coverb's object plus Main verb (plus Main verb's object or complement); e.g. zai zhuozi-shang xie zi (literally, 'be on the table-top write characters') 'write on the table'; zai 'to be in, on, at (a place)', is here a coverb, zhuozi-shang is the object of zai; zi 'character(s)' is the object of the main verb xie 'to write'.

As in the above example, the coverb often translates a preposition in English, e.g. ta yong bi xie zi 'he writes with a pen' (yong= use).

#### 10. Postverb:

A few verbs, called postverbs, follow the main verb, and participate in the order, main verb plus postverb plus postverb's object; e.g. 'gei' is in one function a full verb meaning 'to give'. It may however be used as a postverb after such a verb as jie 'to lend' or 'to borrow'. E.g. jie gei ta 'lend to him'.

#### 11. Verb Object Compound:

Verb object compounds are a compound composed of verb plus generalized object, e.g. chi fan (lit. 'eat food') 'to eat'. They are usually to be translated by a single intransitive verb in English. The object may be modified. Nian shu 'to study' (lit. 'to read books'); 'to study for three years' is nian san nian shu (lit. 'to read three years books').

#### 12. Resultative Compound:

A compound composed of verb plus verbal complement, of which the complement is the result of the action of the verb; e.g. kanjian 'to see' is composed of kan 'to look at' plus jian 'to perceive'. The potential forms of such verbs are formed by inserting bu 'not' or de 'able' between the verb and its complement; kan-de-jian 'able to see', kan-bu-jian 'unable to see'.

#### 13. Timewords and Placewords:

Timewords and placewords are like nouns in that they can be used as subject or object, but unlike nouns, they cannot follow a measure. Their position in the sentence or clause is like that of movable adverbs, they may precede or follow the subject, but they must come somewhere before the main verb; e.g. Ta mingtian lai or Mingtian ta lai 'he is coming tomorrow' (mingtian=tomorrow).

#### 14. Pronouns:

Like nouns, except that they never, of course, follow a measure.

### Subordination in Chinese.

Generally speaking, the modifier precedes the modified in Chinese; e.g. hen hao de shu 'very good book'; Zhong-guo de tochan 'China's special-product, a special product of China'. This applies also to phrases and even clauses; e.g. zuotian lai kan wo de ren (lit. 'the yesterday come see me de man') 'the man who came to see me yesterday'. This relationship is frequently shown by de.

### Word Order in Chinese.

The above notes have mostly concerned the question of word order. It should not be imagined, however, that the order of a Chinese sentence is always Subject-Verb-Object. To take merely one exception, in many cases the object is placed before the subject. It then becomes the topic of the sentence; e.g. na ben shu wo mei kanguo 'I haven't read that book' (that book I have not read).

### The Complex Sentence in Chinese.

The long complex English sentence has no precise equivalent in Chinese. The clauses in a Chinese sentence usually have a less explicit relationship than those in an English sentence.

It has been said that there are no true conjunctions in Chinese. Chinese conjunctions are in form Movable Adverbs and the relationship between clauses is usually shown by means of such words, or pairs of words; e.g. sweiran .... dansh, 'although'; jioush (MA) .... ye (FA), 'even if'; yinwei .... suoyi, 'because'; yaosh, 'if'; jiran, 'since'; etc.