

**CLAUDIA ROSS, JING-HENG SHENG MA,
PEI-CHIA CHEN, BAOZHANG HE,
AND MENG YEH**

THIRD EDITION

MODERN MANDARIN CHINESE GRAMMAR

A Practical Guide

現代漢語
實用語法

MODERN GRAMMARS



Modern MANDARIN CHINESE Grammar

Modern Mandarin Chinese Grammar: A Practical Guide, third edition, is an innovative reference guide to Mandarin Chinese, combining traditional and function-based grammar in a single volume.

The *Grammar* is divided into two parts. Part A covers traditional grammar points such as phrase order, and the structure of noun phrases and verb phrases. Part B is carefully organized around language functions and situations such as:

- Asking questions
- Communication strategies
- Making comparisons
- Giving orders and making requests
- Expressing apologies, regrets, and sympathy

The two parts of the *Grammar* are closely linked by extensive cross-references, providing a grammatical and functional perspective on many patterns. The *Grammar* is coordinated with the *Workbook*, which provides grammar-focused and situation-focused exercises to facilitate practice and reinforce language use.

All grammar points and functions are richly illustrated with examples presented in simplified and traditional characters and Pinyin romanization, with a strong emphasis on contemporary usage. This third edition includes new sections on character structure, social media, speaker perspective, and more, as well as updated illustrative sentences and an expanded index.

Modern Mandarin Chinese Grammar is ideal for all learners of Mandarin Chinese, from beginner to intermediate and advanced students.

Claudia Ross, Professor Emeritus of Chinese, College of the Holy Cross.

Jing-Heng Sheng Ma, Professor Emeritus of Chinese, Wellesley College.

Pei-Chia Chen, Senior Lecturer and Academic Coordinator of the Chinese language program, University of California San Diego.

Baozhang He, Associate Professor Emeritus of Chinese, College of the Holy Cross.

Meng Yeh, Teaching Professor of Chinese, Rice University.

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Series concept and development – Sarah Butler

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Modern MANDARIN CHINESE Grammar

A Practical Guide

Third Edition

Claudia Ross
Jing-heng Sheng Ma
Pei-Chia Chen
Baozhang He
Meng Yeh

 Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

Cover image: calligraphy by Ma Wei-yi

Third edition published 2024

by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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First edition published by Routledge 2006

Second edition published by Routledge 2014

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ross, Claudia, author. | Ma, Jing-heng Sheng, author. | Chen, Pei-Chia, author. | He, Baozhang, 1955– author. | Ye, Meng, 1950– author.

Title: Modern Mandarin Chinese grammar : a practical guide / Claudia Ross, Jing-heng Sheng Ma, Pei-Chia Chen, Baozhang He, Meng Yeh.

Description: Third edition. | London ; New York : Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2023. |

Series: Routledge modern grammars | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023026285 (print) | LCCN 2023026286 (ebook) | ISBN 9781032370514 (hardback) | ISBN 9781032370507 (paperback) | ISBN 9781003335078 (e-book)

Subjects: LCSH: Chinese language—Grammar. | Mandarin dialects—Grammar. | Mandarin dialects—Self-instruction. | Chinese language—Textbooks for foreign speakers—English. | LCGFT: Textbooks. Classification: LCC PL1107 .R65 2023 (print) | LCC PL1107 (ebook) | DDC 495.1/82421—dc23/eng/20230911

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023026285>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023026286>

ISBN: 978-1-032-37051-4 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-37050-7 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-33507-8 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003335078

Typeset in Times New Roman

by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the many people who have assisted us in the preparation of this third edition of the *Modern Mandarin Chinese Grammar*. We particularly thank the many readers who sent us feedback on the first and second editions, as well as the Routledge editors for their help and patience. Finally, we thank our family members for their encouragement and help as we have written and revised this grammar over the past two decades.

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Claudia Ross, Jing-heng Sheng Ma, Pei-Chia Chen,
Baotang He, and Meng Yeh

Introduction

This book is divided into two sections: ‘Structures’ and ‘Situations and functions.’

Part A ‘Structures’ is a concise grammar of Mandarin Chinese organized in the familiar and traditional way, providing an overview of the Chinese writing system and describing the major features of Mandarin grammar. This section should be used for reference when you want to know something about a form or structure. For example, if you want to review the structure of the noun phrase, or how to form numbers, or the structure of the passive form, you should consult this section.

Part B ‘Situations and functions’ is organized in terms of how to do things with language, and it is the longer of the two sections. For example, if you want to know how to address someone, how to say ‘no,’ how to make comparisons, or how to apologize, you should consult this section.

Often, the same ground is covered in both parts of this book, although the emphasis is different in each section. Related sections are linked by cross-referencing, indicated by arrows in the margin of the page directing you to another section. Related functions are also cross-referenced throughout the book. You should always follow the cross-reference links so that you have a complete picture of the expression that you are exploring and can use it correctly and accurately.

Topics covered in this book are listed in the table of contents and in the index, and you should use them to help you find words and topics quickly and easily. Notice that the index is an alphabetical listing that includes keywords in English and in Pinyin romanization. For example, if you want to know how to indicate that you have had an experience in the past you can look in the index for the English expression ‘experiential aspect’ or for the word **guo** (过/過).

In this book, we use traditional grammatical terms to explain the structures of Mandarin. The terms are presented in the glossary at the beginning of this book. Once you are familiar with the grammatical terms you will find them helpful in understanding the grammar and in expressing yourself accurately.

We hope that you will find this book useful and informative. We look forward to learning how you use the book and to receiving your suggestions on how it can be improved.

Claudia Ross, Jing-heng Sheng Ma,
Pei-Chia Chen, Baozhang He, and Meng Yeh

How to use this book

This book brings together two different types of resources to help you to understand Mandarin Chinese. They are presented in two parts: Part A: ‘Structures’ and Part B: ‘Situations and functions.’

When you want to review some aspect of Mandarin grammar such as how to describe a noun or where to put the prepositional phrase in a sentence, you should consult Part A. On the other hand, when you want to know how to apologize, or how to address someone, or how to emphasize something, you should consult Part B. Some topics are covered in more than one chapter of the book. For example, the verb suffix 过/过 **guo** is included in ‘Structures’ in Chapters 11, 13, and 17, and also in ‘Situations and functions’ in Chapter 37, ‘Indicating completion and talking about the past.’ Arrows in the left-hand margin of each page indicate additional sections of the book in which a topic is discussed. You should follow the cross-references and read everything about the topic that you are exploring in order to get a full picture of its structure and functions.

Some topics can be expressed differently depending upon the level of formality in a specific situation. Where appropriate, we have indicated the level of formality associated with expressions. See, for example, ‘Prepositions and prepositional phrases’ (Chapter 14, section 14.2.8) and ‘Greetings and goodbyes’ (Chapter 24, section 24.3).

This book provides the most common ways of expressing the major structures and functions in Mandarin. Native speakers of Mandarin differ in their use of some expressions, and we have tried to note standard variations. In your study of Mandarin, you will come across structures and expressions that are not included in this book. You should add them to your repertoire as you continue to strengthen your language skills.

To help you to consolidate your overall knowledge of Chinese, we begin this book with a brief overview of Mandarin pronunciation and an introduction to the Chinese writing system. For a more detailed coverage of pronunciation, consult a beginning level Mandarin textbook. For more information about the Chinese writing system, consult the references cited in the Acknowledgments.

Claudia Ross, Jing-heng Sheng Ma,
Pei-Chia Chen, Baozhang He, and Meng Yeh

Glossary of grammatical terms

Adjectives

Adjectives are words that modify or describe a noun by expressing some quality or characteristic of the noun. The quality or characteristic may be ‘gradable’ or ‘non-gradable.’

Gradable adjectives are those that can be expressed in terms of some degree or intensity. For example, the adjective 高 **gāo** ‘tall’ is a gradable adjective as there are different degrees of tallness: 很高 **hěn gāo** ‘very tall,’ 相当高/相當高 **xiāngdāng gāo** ‘somewhat tall,’ 有一点高/有一點高 **yǒu yīdiǎn gāo** ‘a little tall,’ etc.

Non-gradable adjectives express some inherent property of a noun which is generally not expressed in terms of degrees. For example, the words 男 **nán** ‘male,’ 女 **nǚ** ‘female,’ direction words such as 东/東 **dōng** ‘east,’ 南 **nán** ‘south,’ 西 **xī** ‘west,’ 北 **běi** ‘north,’ the words 真 **zhēn** ‘true’ and 假 **jiǎ** ‘false,’ and color terms are non-gradable adjectives.

Both of these types of adjectives can precede and modify nouns (很高的人 **hěn gāo de rén** ‘a tall person,’ 假故事 **jiǎ gùshi** ‘a false story.’ Gradable adjectives can also serve as the predicate of a sentence, and when they do, they do not occur with a ‘helping verb’ such as 是 **shì** ‘be’: 那个人很高/那個人很高 **nàgè rén hěn gāo** ‘That person is tall.’ To help you to use this type of adjective correctly, we refer to them as ‘adjectival verbs.’ See Chapter 10 for a more detailed discussion of adjectives.

Adverbs

Adverbs are words that precede and modify a verb or verb phrase.

他们都很忙。

他們都很忙。

Tāmen dōu hěn máng.

They are *all* very busy.

弟弟已经回家了。

弟弟已經回家了。

Didi yǐjīng huí jiā le.

Younger brother *already* went home.

Sentence adverbs occur at the beginning of a sentence and indicate the relationship of information in a conversation or written text.

孩子小的时候，父母照顾他们。后来，父母老了，该是孩子照顾父母了。

孩子小的時候，父母照顧他們。後來，父母老了，該是孩子照顧父母了。

Háizi xiǎo de shíhou, fùmǔ zhàogù tāmen. Hòulái, fùmǔ lǎo le, gāi shì háizi zhàogù fùmǔ le.

When children are young, parents take care of them. Afterwards, when the parents are old, the children should take care of the parents.

► 15, 31, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 46, 47

Classifiers

Classifiers are words that occur after a number and/or specifier and before a noun. Some grammars refer to classifiers as ‘measure words.’ Classifiers often need not be translated into English.

一杯水

yī bēi shuǐ

one [glass of] water

那本书

那本書

nà běn shū

that [volume of] book

这两个人

這兩個人

zhè liǎng gè rén

these two [classifier] people



8

Clauses

Clauses are dependent sentences, that is, sentences that occur within a larger sentence.

Some verbs take clauses as their objects:

她说她今天很忙。

她說她今天很忙。

Tā shuō tā jīntiān hěn máng.

She said *she is very busy today*.

我知道他没有钱。

我知道他沒有錢。

Wǒ zhīdao tā méi yǒu qián.

I know *he doesn't have any money*.

Clauses may also serve as subjects:

她昨天跟你说话并不表示她愿意当你的女朋友。

她昨天跟你說話並不表示她願意當你的女朋友。

Tā zuótiān gēn nǐ shuō huà bìng bù biǎoshì tā yuànyì dāng nǐ de nǚ péngyou.

(The fact that) *she spoke with you yesterday* does not mean that she is willing to be your girlfriend.

Complements

Some Mandarin grammars distinguish a class of *verb complements*, words or phrases that follow the verb and augment its meaning in some way. Included in the class of verb complements are result complements, potential complements, directional complements, manner complements, and degree complements. These various verb complements participate in different grammatical structures and perform different communication functions, and we therefore do not group them together in this book. Complements of result and direction participate in the same kinds of grammatical structures, and we discuss them in Chapters 18 and 19, along with their potential forms. We also discuss complements of result along with other structures that function to indicate result in Chapter 32. Complements of degree function as intensifiers for adjectival verbs, and we discuss them in Chapter 10. Complements of manner function to indicate the way that actions are performed, and we discuss them in Chapter 31. Here are the sections of this book in which each complement is included.

Result complements

► 18, 32.1

Directional complements

► 19, 48.8

Potential complements

► 18.6, 19.5, 32.2

Degree complements

► 10.4, 32.6

Manner complements

► 31.1

Conjunctions

Conjunctions are words that connect two nouns or noun phrases to form a noun phrase.

妈妈和爸爸都会说中国话。

媽媽和爸爸都會說中國話。

Māma hé bàba dōu huì shuō Zhōngguó huà.

Mom *and* Dad can both speak Chinese.

► 16

Demonstratives see **Specifiers and demonstratives**

Direct objects see **Objects**

Final particles

Final particles are syllables that occur at the end of the sentence and indicate a speech act or speaker perspective.

我们吃饭吧！

我們吃飯吧！

Wǒmen chī fàn ba!

Let's eat! (suggestion)

我得走了。再不走就晚咯。

Wǒ děi zǒu le. Zài bù zǒu jiù wǎn lo.

I'd better go now. If I don't go, I will be late. (obviousness)

► 28.1.1, 28.5, 34.3, 38.1, 56.2

Grammatical particles

Grammatical particles are syllables that convey grammatical meaning, for example 的 **de** (noun modification), 得 **de** (postverbal adverbial modification), 地 **de** (preverbal adverbial modification), 了 **le** (completed action), 着/著 **zhe** (duration).

► 9, 31, 37, 39

Indirect objects see **Objects**

Intensifiers

Intensifiers are words that precede and modify stative verbs, adjectival verbs, and modal verbs.

我很喜欢他。

我很喜歡他。

Wǒ hěn xǐhuan tā.

I like him *a lot*.

那本书太贵了。

那本書太貴了。

Nà běn shū tài guì le.

That book is *too* expensive.

你真会跳舞。

你真會跳舞。

Nǐ zhēn huì tiào wǔ.

You can *really* dance.

► 10.4, 11.2, 12.6.3

Nouns

Nouns are words that can be directly preceded by a specifier and/or number + classifier.

一本书

一本書

yī běn shū

one *book*

那本书

那本書

nà běn shū

that *book*

Noun phrases

Noun phrases are nouns and their modifiers.

► 9

Numbers

Number words.

► 6

Objects

There are two different types of objects, *direct* and *indirect*.

The direct object is generally the noun phrase affected by or created by the action of the verb. The direct object generally follows the verb, though it may also be topicalized (see **Topics**).

我每天在图书馆看书。

我每天在圖書館看書。

Wǒ měitiān zài túshūguǎn kàn shū.

I read *books* in the library every day.

我已经吃晚饭了。

我已經吃晚飯了。

Wǒ yǐjīng chī wǎnfàn le.

I have already eaten *dinner*.

The indirect object refers to the recipient of the object noun phrase. In Mandarin, only a small number of verbs take a direct and indirect object. These include 给/給 **gěi** 'give' and 送 **sòng** 'present as a gift.' In all cases, the indirect object precedes the direct object.

我不要给他钱。

我不要給他錢。

Wǒ bù yào gěi tā qián.

I don't want to give *him* money.

For most verbs, the recipient is expressed as the object of a preposition and not as an indirect object.

我给她写了一封信。

我給她寫了一封信。

Wǒ gěi tā xiě le yī fēng xìn.

I wrote *her* a letter. (I wrote a letter to *her*.)

Predicates

The predicate of a sentence includes a verb and any object(s) or complements of the verb. It may also include negation, adverbs, prepositional phrases, and phrases that indicate time when, duration, or frequency.

Prepositional phrases

Prepositional phrases consist of a preposition and its following noun phrase. In Mandarin, the prepositional phrase typically precedes the verb phrase.

我在家吃饭。

我在家吃飯。

Wǒ zài jiā chī fàn.

I eat *at home*.

我到图书馆去了。

我到圖書館去了。

Wǒ dào túshūguǎn qù le.

I went *to the library*.

Prepositional phrases that indicate where the object winds up as the result of the action generally follow the verb.

他跳到床上。

Tā tiào dào chuáng shàng.

He jumped onto the bed.

Prepositions

Prepositions are words that indicate the relationship of a noun phrase to a verb, for example in **zài** ‘at,’ **到 dào** ‘to,’ **给/給 gěi** ‘to/for,’ **替 tì** ‘for.’

► 14

Pronouns

Pronouns are words that take the place of a noun or noun phrase.

王明是学生。

王明是學生。

Wáng Míng shì xuésheng.

Wang Ming is a student.

他是学生。

他是學生。

Tā shì xuésheng.

He is a student.

我不认识那两个人。

我不認識那兩個人。

Wǒ bù rènshi nà liǎng gè rén.

I don't know *those two people*.

我不认识他们。

我不認識他們。

Wǒ bù rènshi tāmen.

I don't know *them*.

► 5.2

Sentences

Normally, a full sentence includes a subject and a predicate. The sentence may begin with a topic.

topic + subject + predicate

那个孩子，脾气很坏。

那個孩子，脾氣很壞。

Nàge háizi, píqì hěn huài.

That child has a bad temper. (lit. ‘That child, the temper is bad.’)

Specifiers and demonstratives

Specifiers are words that translate as ‘this/these’ or ‘that/those’ and describe a noun.

这本书很有意思。

這本書很有意思。

Zhè běn shū hěn yǒu yìsi.

This book is very interesting.

These same words, when used to ‘point’ to an object, are ‘demonstratives.’

这是中国毛笔。

這是中國毛筆。

Zhè shì Zhōngguó máobǐ.

This is a Chinese writing brush.

► 7

Subjects

The subject is the noun or noun phrase about which information is provided in the predicate. In Mandarin, the subject of a sentence occurs before the verb phrase. It can be omitted if it is

understood from the overall context of the sentence. Typically, a subject is omitted if it is identical in reference to the subject of the preceding sentence.

我看了电影。()九点钟就回家了。

我看了電影。()九點鐘就回家了。

Wǒ kàn le diànyǐng. () jiǔdiǎn zhōng jiù huí jiā le.

I saw a movie. At nine o'clock I returned home.

Topics

Generally speaking, the topic is the noun or noun phrase that the sentence, paragraph, or narrative is about. The topic occurs at the beginning of a sentence, and is often distinct from the subject.

中国菜，我特别喜欢吃家常豆腐。

中國菜，我特別喜歡吃家常豆腐。

Zhōngguó cài, wǒ tèbié xǐhuan chī jiācháng dòufu.

(As for) Chinese food, I especially like to eat homestyle beancurd.

In Mandarin, the object of the verb may sometimes occur in 'topic' position, at the beginning of the sentence, before the subject.

羊肉，我不太喜欢吃。

羊肉，我不太喜歡吃。

Yángròu, wǒ bù tài xǐhuan chī.

Mutton, I don't particularly like to eat (it).

A sentence need not begin with a topic.

Verbs

Verbs are words that can be directly negated, or modified by an adverb, or that can serve as the 'yes' answer to yes-no questions. Verbs are the main word in the predicate, and a Mandarin sentence must include a verb. Verbs that take one or more objects are called transitive, and verbs that do not take an object are called intransitive. Mandarin has the following types of verbs.

Adjectival verbs

Adjectival verbs are words that can be translated as gradable adjectives in English, for example 大 **dà** 'big,' 好 **hǎo** 'good,' 贵/貴 **guì** 'expensive,' and that function as verbs when they occur in the predicate of the sentence. Adjectival verbs are usually intransitive. Note that adjectival verbs do not occur with 是 **shì** 'be.'

Say this

Not this

他很高。

*他是很高。

Tā hěn gāo.

Tā shì hěn gāo.

He is very tall.

► 10

Stative verbs

- (a) Stative verbs are verbs that express states, for example 喜欢/喜歡 **xǐhuan** 'like,' 像 **xiàng** 'resemble.'

我喜欢他。

我喜歡他。

Wǒ xǐhuan tā.

I like him.

- (b) Stative verbs are linking verbs, for example 是 **shì** ‘be,’ 姓 **xìng** ‘be family named,’ 有 **yǒu** ‘have, exist.’

她有很多朋友。
Tā yǒu hěn duō péngyou.
She *has* many friends.

► 11

Modal verbs

Modal verbs are verbs that express ability, permission, or obligation, for example 会/會 **huì** ‘can’ (mentally able), 能 **néng** ‘can’ (physically able), 可以 **kěyǐ** ‘may’ (have permission), 得 **děi** ‘must/have to.’ Modal verbs can serve as the one word answer to yes–no questions, but in complete sentences they are always followed by a verb phrase complement.

► 12

Action verbs

Action verbs are verbs that refer to events. There are two kinds of action verbs:

- Open-ended action verbs express open-ended actions, such as 跑 **pǎo** ‘run,’ 写/寫 **xiě** ‘write,’ and 听/聽 **tīng** ‘listen.’ Most open-ended action verbs in Mandarin are transitive.
- Change-of-state action verbs express actions that refer to a change of state and have no duration, such as 坐 **zuò** ‘sit (down),’ 忘 **wàng** ‘forget,’ and 放 **fàng** ‘put (down), place.’

► 13

Verb complements (see Complements)

Verb phrases

The verb phrase includes the modal verb, the verb, and any objects of the verb. (*See also* Predicates)

他每天看电视。
他每天看電視。
Tā měitiān kàn diànshì.
He *watches television* every day.

爸爸给我钱。
爸爸給我錢。
Bàba gěi wǒ qián.
Dad *gives me* money.

他会开车。
他會開車。
Tā huì kāi chē.
He *can drive (a car).*

我请你吃晚饭。
我請你吃晚飯。
Wǒ qǐng nǐ chī wǎnfàn.
I *invite you to eat* dinner.

A note on grammatical categories and grammatical category shift

In Mandarin, a word may belong to more than one grammatical category. For example, some words may serve as both a verb and a preposition.

		<i>Verb</i>	<i>Preposition</i>
给/給	gěi	give	to/for
到	dào	arrive	to
在	zài	be located	at

GLOSSARY OF GRAMMATICAL TERMS

Out of context, it is not possible to say whether the word 给/給 **gěi** or 到 **dào** or 在 **zài** is a preposition or a verb. However, in the context of a sentence or phrase, the category of the word is clear:

Preposition

我想到中国去。

我想到中國去。

Wǒ xiǎng dào Zhōngguó qù.

I want to China go

I want to go to China.

Verb

你什么时候到？

你甚麼時候到？

Nǐ shénme shíhòu dào?

When are you arriving?

Some textbooks and grammars provide special labels for words that can function as more than one category of word. For example, the label ‘coverb’ is used in many textbooks for words that can be both prepositions and verbs.

► 14.3

A note on Chinese characters

Certain traditional characters have more than one standard form. Here are some examples. This book uses the characters in the first column. An overview of the origin, structure, and systems of Chinese characters is presented in Chapter 3.

裏	裡	lǐ
著	着	zhè
叫	叫	jiào
為	爲	wèi

In addition, the word **zuò** when used as the verb ‘do’ can be written as 做 or 作. This book uses the form 做. In compounds such as 工作 **gōngzuò** ‘work,’ **zuò** is written as 作.

Part A

Structures



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1

Overview of pronunciation and Pinyin romanization

1.1 The Mandarin syllable

The syllable in Mandarin Chinese can be made up of three parts: an initial consonant, a final, and a tone. For example, the syllable **má** 麻 is made up of the initial **m**, the final **a**, and the rising tone [˨˨˨]. Syllables need not have an initial consonant. The syllable **è** 饿/餓 is made up of the final **e** and the falling tone [˥˥]. In addition, a syllable may lack a tone. Syllables that do not have a tone are referred to as having *neutral tone*.

This section presents a brief overview of the initials, finals, and tones of Mandarin. Initials and finals are presented in Pinyin romanization. For a guide to their pronunciation, please consult a beginning level Mandarin textbook.

1.1.1 Initials

The Mandarin initials are presented here in the traditional recitation order:

	Type of sound	Initial				
1	bilabial	b	p	m	f	
2	alveolar	d	t	n	l	
3	velar	g	k		h	
4	palatal	j	q		x	
5	retroflex	zh	ch		sh	r
6	alveolar affricate/fricative	z	c		s	

1.1.2 Finals

Finals are listed by initial vowel.

a finals	a an ang ai ao
o/e finals	o e en eng ei ou ong er
u finals	u ua uo uai ui uan un uang ueng
i finals	i ia iao ie iu ian in iang ing iong
ü finals	ü üe üan ün

1.1.3 Tones

Tone is the pitch contour of the syllable. Mandarin has four contour tones and a neutral tone. In most romanization systems of Mandarin, the tone is indicated by a diacritic over a vowel, or as a number following the syllable.

The following chart illustrates the contour of the four Mandarin tones when a syllable is spoken in *isolation*, that is, when it is neither preceded nor followed by another syllable.

- | | | |
|---|----------------------|---|
| 1 | level pitch | ˉ |
| 2 | rising pitch | ˊ |
| 3 | falling-rising pitch | ˇ |
| 4 | falling pitch | ˋ |

The contour of a tone may change depending upon the following syllable. This is often called *tone sandhi*. Tone change is typically not indicated in the Pinyin spelling of words.

The third tone is the only tone that changes independent of the meaning of the syllable.

When a third tone occurs before another third tone, it is pronounced as a rising (second) tone.

$3 + 3 \rightarrow 2 + 3$

hěnhǎo → **hénhǎo** 很好 very good

When a third tone occurs before any other tone, it is pronounced as a low tone. This low tone is often called a *half third tone*.

mǎishū → **maishū** 买书/買書 buy books

Tone is an inherent part of the Mandarin syllable, and Mandarin uses tones to distinguish meaning in the same way that the choice of a consonant or a vowel distinguishes meaning. Notice how tone determines the meaning of the following syllable.

Tone

1	mā (ma1)	妈/媽	mother
2	má (ma2)	麻	numb
3	mǎ (ma3)	马/馬	horse
4	mà (ma4)	骂/罵	scold
neutral	ma (ma5)	吗/嗎	question particle

► 2.3

1.2 Pinyin romanization

Mandarin is written with Chinese characters, but characters do not provide consistent information about pronunciation. Therefore, Mandarin is typically studied via a transcription. Many transcription systems have been devised for Mandarin Chinese in China and in the West. Most of these are based on the Roman alphabet, and are therefore termed ‘romanization’ systems. In 1958, the People’s Republic of China established *Hanyu Pinyin* (usually referred to as Pinyin) as its standard romanization system. Because of the widespread use of this system of Pinyin in Chinese language teaching around the world, it is used to transcribe the Chinese words in this book.

1.2.1 Placement of tone mark in Pinyin

If a final includes three vowels, or two vowels and a final consonant, the tone mark is written over the second vowel:

kuài huán biān qióng

If a final includes two vowels and no final consonant, the tone mark is placed over the first vowel, unless the first vowel is **i** or **u**:

āi	áo	ěi	òu
	iā	ié	iǔ
uà	ué	uǐ	uò

1.2.2 Some additional Pinyin conventions

- ‘u’ after the initials **j**, **q**, and **x** is pronounced **ü** but is written as **u**.
- When ‘i’ and ‘ü’ begin a syllable, they are written as **yi** and **yu**.
- When ‘u’ begins a syllable, it is written as **wu**.
- In two-syllable words, when the boundary between syllables is not clear from the Pinyin spelling and more than one interpretation of the boundary is possible, an apostrophe is used to separate the syllables. For example, if the second syllable begins with a vowel, an apostrophe is used: **Xī'an** 西安 vs. **xiān** 先.

2

Syllable, meaning, and word

2.1 The special status of the Mandarin syllable

2.1.1 The syllable and meaning

One of the features of Chinese is that each syllable is associated with a meaning. For example, the Mandarin word for bus station/train station or bus stop/train stop is 车站/車站 **chēzhàn**. The syllable 车/車 **chē** means vehicle and the syllable 站 **zhàn** means stand. Occurring together as a word, 车站/車站 **chēzhàn** is very nearly the sum of its parts: vehicle stand.

Some words in English have the kind of structure that Mandarin has, but for most English words, syllables need not have independent meaning. For example, the English word ‘lettuce’ consists of two syllables: ‘let’ and ‘tuce.’ These individual syllables do not have meaning on their own, and it makes no sense to ask about the meaning of ‘let’ or of ‘tuce’ in the word ‘lettuce.’ In contrast, with very few exceptions, the individual syllables of Mandarin words have identifiable meanings, and when learning new words, it makes good sense to note the meanings of the individual syllables.

NOTES

- 1 In Chinese, a small number of syllables are not associated with a meaning. The most common is the noun suffix 子 **zǐ**. See **2.2.1.1**.
- 2 A multi-syllable Mandarin word is not always simply the sum of its parts. For example, the word 故事 **gùshi** ‘story’ is composed of the syllables 故 **gù** ‘former, previous’ and 事 **shì** ‘situation, incident.’

2.1.2 The syllable and Chinese characters

In Chinese, the syllable is associated with a Chinese character as well as a meaning. When a syllable is associated with more than one meaning, it is generally the case that each meaning is written with a different character. For example, Mandarin has a number of meanings associated with the pronunciation **zhàn**. Each meaning is written with a different character:

蘸	zhàn	dip in liquid (like a pen in ink)
占/佔	zhàn	occupy
战/戰	zhàn	fight
栈/棧	zhàn	storehouse
绽/綻	zhàn	split; burst open
站	zhàn	to stand; a stop, a stand

Because of these differences, the status of the syllable is much more important in Chinese than in English. Conversely, the status of the word is less important in Chinese than in English.

2.2

Multi-syllable tendency in Mandarin words

Although Mandarin syllables have meanings, they often combine to form words. Here is a short list of Mandarin syllables and words that they form.

<i>Syllable</i>			<i>Word</i>		
学/學	xué	study, study of	学生/學生	xuésheng	student
生	shēng	give birth to; grow	出生	chūshēng	be born, birth
出	chū	go out, produce	出口	chūkǒu	export; exit
口	kǒu	mouth, opening	出版	chūbǎn	publish
版	bǎn	printing block/printing	学校/學校	xuéxiào	school
校	xiào	school	校长/校長	xiàozhǎng	principal
长/長	zhǎng	head, one in charge	中学/中學	zhōngxué	middle school
中	zhōng	middle			
图/圖	tú	chart	图片/圖片	túpiàn	picture
片	piàn	a slice, a part	地图/地圖	dìtú	map
地	dì	earth			
书/書	shū	book	图书馆/圖書館	túshūguǎn	library
馆/館	guǎn	place (for activities)	饭馆/飯館	fànguǎn	restaurant
饭/飯	fàn	rice			

2.2.1

Strategies that create and maintain the two-syllable word

The most common length of Mandarin words is two syllables, and a number of common word formation strategies exist which help to create and maintain the two-syllable word.

2.2.1.1

The suffix 子 *zǐ*

One-syllable words may be turned into two-syllable words by the addition of the suffix 子 *zǐ*. This suffix adds little or no meaning to the word. It usually occurs in neutral tone (*zi*).

Some nouns occur in contemporary Mandarin only with the 子 *zi* suffix, for example 孩子 *háizi* ‘child,’ 房子 *fángzi* ‘house,’ 屋子 *wūzi* ‘room,’ 本子 *běnzǐ* ‘notebook,’ 袜子/襪子 *wàzi* ‘socks.’

Some words can occur with or without the suffix. These include 车/車 *chē* → 车子/車子 *chēzi* ‘car,’ 鞋 *xié* → 鞋子 *xiézi* ‘shoe,’ 盘/盤 → 盘子/盤子 *pánzi* ‘plate,’ 票 *piào* → 票子 *piàozǐ* ‘ticket.’

NOTE

In the Beijing dialect of Mandarin, the suffix 儿/兒 (*ér*) is routinely added to words in many categories, especially to nouns and classifiers. 儿/兒 *r* suffixation adds a retroflex (*r*) sound but no additional syllable to the word. If a word ends in a final consonant, the 儿/兒 *r* suffix replaces the final consonant: 份 *fèn* → 份儿/份兒 *fènr* ‘a portion,’ 玩 *wán* → 玩儿/玩兒 *wánr* ‘to play,’ 电影/電影 *diànyǐng* → 电影儿/電影兒 *diànyǐnr* ‘movie,’ etc. The suffix may also replace a vowel in the final: 孩 *hái* → 孩儿/孩兒 *háir* ‘child.’

In this book, we write *-r* suffixed words in terms of their changed pronunciation. That is, we write *wánr* and not *wánr* or *wán’er*.

2.2.1.2

Location suffixes

Location words may be suffixed with 头/頭 *tóu*, 面 *miàn*, or 边/邊 *biān* to make them two-syllable words: 下头/下頭 *xiàtóu* ‘below,’ 外面 *wàimian* ‘outside,’ 左边/左邊 *zuǒbiān* ‘left side,’ etc.

In Mandarin spoken in southern China and Taiwan, the specifiers 这/這 *zhè*, 那 *nà*, *nèi* and 哪 *nǎ*, *něi* are suffixed with 里/裏 when they are used as location words: 这里/這裏 *zhèlǐ* ‘here,’ 那里/那裏 *nàlǐ* ‘there,’ and 哪里/哪裏? *nǎlǐ* ‘where?’

► 7.3, 47.1

2.2.1.3 Abbreviation

Words and phrases that are longer than two syllables are often abbreviated to two syllables. The two syllables that form the new, abbreviated word are typically the first syllable of each of the words in the phrase or the first two syllables of the first word in the phrase, though other combinations occur.

超级市场/超級市場	chāojí shìchǎng	supermarket	→	超市 chāoshì
公共汽车/公共汽車	gōnggòng qìchē	public bus	→	公车/公車 gōngchē
飞机场/飛機場	fēijīchǎng	airport	→	机场/機場 jīchǎng

2.3 Word-specific tone changes

In addition to the tone changes mentioned in section 1.1.3 for all third-tone syllables, there are certain tone changes that occur in specific words.

2.3.1 Tone change in the word 不 bù

不 bù changes to bú when it occurs before another fourth-toned syllable in the same word, phrase, or breath group:

	4-4	→	2-4
不对/不對 not correct	bù duì	→	bú duì
不必 need not	bù bì	→	bú bì

2.3.2 Tone change in the numbers — yī ‘1,’ 七 qī ‘7,’ and 八 bā ‘8’

The tone of the numbers — yī ‘1,’ and, less commonly, 七 qī ‘7,’ and 八 bā ‘8’ may change to second tone yí, qí, and bá before a fourth-toned syllable in the same word, phrase, or breath group:

	1-4	→	2-4
一共 altogether	yīgòng	→	yígòng
一定 certainly	yīdìng	→	yídìng
一辈子 a lifetime	yī bèizi	→	yí bèizi
七块钱/七塊錢 seven dollars	qī kuài qián	→	qí kuài qián
八倍 eightfold	bā bèi	→	bá bèi

In addition, — **yī** changes to fourth tone before syllables with first, second, or third tone.

	<i>1-1</i>	→	<i>4-1</i>
一张/一張 one sheet (e.g. of paper)	yī zhāng	→	yì zhāng
	<i>1-2</i>	→	<i>4-2</i>
一条/一條 one thin strip (e.g. of news)	yī tiáo	→	yì tiáo
	<i>1-3</i>	→	<i>4-3</i>
一碗 one bowl	yī wǎn	→	yì wǎn

2.4 Change to neutral tone

In Beijing and northern China, certain syllables lose their original tone and are pronounced as neutral tone. This tone change does not occur in Taiwan, where all syllables retain their original tones.

► 1.1.3

The complete conditions for change to neutral tone are complex, but here are some general rules for the change of a second syllable to neutral tone.

- The second syllable is a repetition of the first syllable:

	<i>tone-tone</i>	→	<i>tone-neutral</i>
太太 Mrs	tàitai	→	tàitai
弟弟 younger brother	dìdì	→	dìdì
谢谢/謝謝 thank you	xièxiè	→	xièxiè
看看 take a look	kànkàn	→	kànkàn

- The second syllable is a suffix that does not contribute a meaning to the word. This includes the suffix 子 **zǐ** and the directional suffixes 头/頭 **tóu**, 面 **miàn**, and 边/邊 **biān**:

	<i>tone-tone</i>	→	<i>tone-neutral</i>
孩子 child	háizǐ	→	háizi
里头/裏頭 inside	lǐtóu	→	lǐtou

- The meaning of the second syllable is the same as or overlaps with the meaning of the first syllable:

	<i>tone-tone</i>	→	<i>tone-neutral</i>
衣服 clothing	yīfú	→	yīfu
衣 yī clothing			
服 fú clothing			
事情 matter/situation	shìqíng	→	shìqíng
事 shì situation			
情 qíng situation			

The second syllable retains its tone when it adds to and expands the meaning of the first syllable. Examples include:

学期/學期	学/學	期
xuéqī	xué	qī
semester	study	interval
作法	作	法
zuófǎ	zuò	fǎ
method of doing	do	method
看完	看	完
kànwán	kàn	wán
finish reading	read	finish

Sometimes, the use of full or neutral tone in the second syllable makes a difference in meaning. Here are two examples:

老子	Lǎo Zǐ	Laozi, the Taoist philosopher
老子	lǎozi	used to refer to one's father, or, humorously, to oneself
孙子	Sūn zǐ	5 th C BC treatise on the art of war
孙子	sūnzi	grandson

2.5 Incorporating foreign words and naming foreign objects

Chinese has not borrowed freely from other languages. However, when it incorporates foreign words into the language, it typically uses the following strategies:

- Adapting the foreign pronunciation to conform to the syllable structure of Chinese.

Names

罗斯福/羅斯福	Luósīfú	Roosevelt
加繆/加繆	Jiāmóu	Camus
丘吉尔/邱吉爾	Qiūjǐ'ěr	Churchill
拿破仑/拿破崙	Nápòlún	Napoleon
莎士比亚/莎士比亞	Shāshìbǐyà	Shakespeare

Objects

比萨/比薩
汉堡包/漢堡包

bǐsà
hànbǎobāo

pizza
hamburger

► 1.1

- Forming new words based on meaning or function.
- When new items enter China, they often lose their foreign pronunciation and get new Chinese names that reflect their meaning or function. Here are some examples:

电视/電視
电脑/電腦
微波炉/微波爐
手机/手機

diànshì
diànnǎo
wēibō lú
shǒujī

television (electric vision)
computer (electric brain)
microwave oven (micro-wave-stove)
cell phone/mobile phone (hand machine)
(lit.) hot dog
satellite (protection star)

热狗/熱狗
卫星/衛星

règǒu
wèixīng

- Forming new words based on meaning while preserving the foreign pronunciation.

万维网/萬維網

wàn wéi wǎng

the World Wide Web (a net of 10,000 connections)

可乐/可樂
拖拉机/拖拉機
摩托车/摩托車

kělè
tuōlājī
mótuō chē

cola (it can make you happy)
tractor (drag pull machine)
motorcycle (a vehicle you touch and support with your hands)
credit card (trust card)
jeep (lucky widely used vehicle)

信用卡
吉普车/吉普車

xìnyòng kǎ
jípúchē

Foreign companies often follow this principle when translating the names of their companies and their products into Chinese.

可口可乐/可口可樂

Kěkǒukělè

Coca Cola [soft drink] (pleasant to drink and it can make you happy)

福特

Fútè

Ford [automobiles] (happiness – exceptional)

汰渍/汰漬

Tàizì

Tide [laundry detergent] (eliminate stains and sludge)

3

The Chinese writing system: an overview

Although transcription systems can be used to write Chinese, Chinese characters are the basis of written communication in China. This chapter presents an overview of Chinese characters.

3.1 Traditional and simplified characters

There are two standard systems of characters in current use: traditional characters and simplified characters. Simplified characters are the official characters used in mainland China and Singapore. Traditional characters are the official characters used in Taiwan and other parts of the Chinese-speaking world.

Most characters in the traditional and simplified systems are identical. However, in the simplified character system, many frequently used characters have been simplified from their traditional, more complex form. Here are some examples.

<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Simplified</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
國	国	guó	country
東	东	dōng	east
車	车	chē	car
買	买	mǎi	buy
寫	写	xiě	write

A simplified way of writing characters has existed for hundreds of years. Simplified characters were used in informal documents and in some forms of calligraphy before they were adopted by mainland China as the official form. Therefore, although the two forms now have some political significance, you may encounter simplified characters in use in Taiwan and traditional characters in use in mainland China.

3.2 The structure of Chinese characters: component parts, radicals, and phonetics

3.2.1 Component parts

Chinese characters consist of one or more component parts, or 部件 **bùjiàn**. These component parts are the building blocks of characters. While there are thousands and thousands of Chinese characters, there are only about 600 or so component parts and fewer than 100 of them are used to form the 3,000 most commonly used characters.¹

¹ 张德劭 Zhang Deshao, 2007.

Some component parts may also serve as independent characters, for example:

女 口 土 也 巴 木 又
female mouth earth also cling to tree again

Some component parts never occur as independent characters but are common components of other characters, for example:

亻, 扌, 讠, 宀, 艹, 彳, 灬

Component parts can also occur with other components to form different characters, for example:

他 她 地 吐 吧 扣 把 杰 友 仅 没

Native speakers of Chinese use component parts when describing characters, for example:

双木“林” 口天“吴” 古月“胡” 木子“李”

Component parts occur in a limited number of spatial configurations; for example, top-bottom, left-right, outside-inside. Some of the most common configurations are illustrated here:

					
top-bottom	left-right	outside-inside	L-shaped	covered on top and left	box open on bottom
李, 家, 百	明, 他, 地	回, 国/國, 四	近, 送, 建	左, 屋, 虎	内, 门/門, 同

Research has found that Chinese-educated, Chinese-speaking children are aware of component parts in characters and the locations in which they may occur in characters. For Chinese as a foreign language learners, paying attention to the component parts of characters and their configuration is one of the most efficient strategies for learning and remembering Chinese characters.

3.2.2 The radical

All Chinese characters contain a *radical*, a recurring component part that functions to broadly categorize the character in terms of meaning.

In the set of traditional characters, there are 214 radicals. In the set of simplified characters, there are 189 radicals. Some radicals may occur as independent characters. Others only occur as part of a character.

Here is a list of some of the most common radicals, including their simplified form if there is one. Every radical is a recurring component part, but not every component part is a radical. Also, a component part may serve as the radical in some characters in which it occurs, but not in others. Whether a component part is the radical in a character depends in part on its position in a character. For example, many component parts are radicals only when they occur on the left side of a character, or on the top, or on the bottom. But position alone does not always identify which component part is the radical in a given character. Sometimes the decision is based on convention.

Traditional radical	Alternate form	Radicals with simplified forms	Meaning
人	亻		person
刀	刂		knife
力			energy
水	氵		water
門		门	door
土			earth
竹	𥵹		bamboo
口			mouth
口			enclosure

Traditional radical	Alternate form	Radicals with simplified forms	Meaning
心	忄		heart
火	灬		fire
木			wood
日			sun
食		饣	eat, food
艸	艹	艹	grass
言		讠	language
金		钅	metal/gold

When a radical is simplified, the simplified form is used in all of the characters in which it occurs. Here are some examples.

Traditional	Simplified	Pronunciation	Meaning
話	话	huà	speech
錢	钱	qián	money
鋼	钢	gāng	steel
飯	饭	fàn	rice
餓	饿	è	hungry

3.2.3 The phonetic

Some characters are radicals by themselves. Examples include:

水	shuǐ	water
木	mù	wood
人	rén	person

However, most characters include a radical and additional components. Often, an additional component provides a hint at the pronunciation of the character. When it does, it is called the *phonetic*.

Here are examples of characters with phonetics. As you can see, the pronunciation of the phonetic may be identical or similar to the pronunciation of the character.

Character	Phonetic: the character sounds like . . .
问/問 wèn to ask	门/門 mén door
间/間 jiān between	
简/簡 jiǎn simple	
们/們 men plural marker	
清 qīng clear	青 qīng blue or green
情 qíng situation, sentiment	
请/請 qǐng to request	

<i>Character</i>	<i>Phonetic: the character sounds like . . .</i>
河 hé river	可 kě approve, can
哥 gē older brother	

Noting phonetic information is a helpful way to remember characters. However, the phonetic rarely provides complete information about the pronunciation of a character and some components that originally served as phonetics no longer provide a phonetic clue to the pronunciation of the character.

3.3

The traditional classification of characters

Chinese characters originated during the early Shang dynasty or the late Xia dynasty, in the seventeenth century BC. One of the earliest Chinese dictionaries, the *Shuowen Jiezi*, compiled in AD 121, established a classification of characters that is still used today. The classification identified the following six categories based on structure and representation of meaning.

3.3.1

Pictographs 象形 *xiàng xíng*

Pictographs originated as pictures of objects. They represent only a small portion of Chinese characters. The modern forms are stylized versions of the ancient forms. Here are comparisons of the Shang Dynasty forms with the modern forms of the same characters.

<i>Shang form</i>	<i>Modern form</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
	水 shuǐ	water
	日 rì	sun
	目 mù	eye

3.3.2

Ideographs 指事 *zhǐ shì*

Ideographs represent abstract meanings, often having to do with spatial orientation. Only a small number of characters are ideographs. Examples are presented here.

<i>Shang form</i>	<i>Modern form</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
二	上 shàng	above
一	下 xià	below
	中 zhōng	middle (picture of a target hit by an arrow)

3.3.3

Associative compounds 会意/會意 *huì yì*

The meaning of these characters is reflected in the meaning of their component parts.

<i>Character</i>	<i>Composed of</i>
好 hǎo good	女 nǚ woman + 子 zǐ child
话/話 huà speech	言 yán language + 舌 shé tongue

3.3.4 Phonetic compounds 形声/形聲 xíngshēng

Phonetic compounds are the most common type of Chinese character and are discussed in 3.2.3 above.

3.3.5 False borrowings 假借 jiǎjiè

False borrowings involve the use of a character to refer to another word with identical pronunciation but different meaning. For example, the word for ‘wheat,’ written as 来/來, a picture of the wheat plant, was ‘borrowed’ to write the abstract concept ‘come,’ which, at the time, had the same pronunciation as the word for wheat. The character for ‘wheat’ was later revised to distinguish it from the character for ‘come.’ In present-day writing, ‘wheat’ is written as 麦/麥 **mài** and ‘come’ is written as 来/來 **lái**. The similarity in the characters can be seen in the traditional form of the characters. Note that the pronunciation of the two words is no longer identical, though they still rhyme.

3.3.6 Semantic derivations 转注/轉注 zhuǎnzhù

Characters are considered 转注/轉注 **zhuǎnzhù** when they are used to represent a meaning that is derived from the original meaning of the character. For example, the character 网/網 **wǎng**, originally a picture of a fishing net, is used to refer to networks in general. It is the character used in one of the Chinese translations of the World Wide Web: 万维网/萬維網 **wàn wéi wǎng**. The simplified character for net, 网, is the older form of the character.

3.4 Character stroke order: 笔顺/筆順 bǐshùn**3.4.1 Basic rules of stroke order**

Each Chinese character contains a precise number of strokes written in a fixed order. Below are the basic rules of stroke order for the writing of Chinese characters.

Rule	Example
1 Horizontal (横 héng) precedes vertical (竖/豎 shù).	十
2 Left falling stroke (撇 piě) precedes right falling stroke (捺 nà).	人
3 First top, then bottom.	三
4 First left, then right.	他
5 First outside, then inside.	月
6 First complete the inside of a box, then seal the box.	日
7 First center, then sides.	小
8 First horizontal (横 héng), then left falling stroke (撇 piě), then right falling stroke (捺 nà).	大

3.4.2 Special stroke order rules

Rule	Example
1 Write the dot (点/點 diǎn) last if it is positioned at the top right corner of a character.	我
2 Write the dot (点/點 diǎn) last if it is positioned inside a character.	太
3 If the character includes the curved left-falling stroke (横折撇/横摺撇 héng zhé piě) and one other component, write the curved left-falling stroke last.	建
4 If the character consists of more than one horizontal stroke (横 héng) and vertical stroke (竖/豎 shù), write the vertical stroke first, and the horizontal stroke at the bottom last.	上
5 If a character has a horizontal stroke (横 héng) in the middle, write the horizontal stroke last.	女

4

Phrase order in the Mandarin sentence

4.1 Basic phrase order

The basic order of the Mandarin sentence is

topic + subject + predicate

A sentence need not have an overt topic. In addition, if the subject is understood from the context of the sentence, it is often omitted from the sentence.

The predicate consists of everything in the sentence except for the topic and subject, including the verb, its objects, negation, adverbial modifiers, prepositional phrases, and aspect particles. The following sections present the order of these constituents.

► 8.1, 15.1, 17, 20.1, 21.1, 39.1, 46.2, 46.3, 57

4.2 The position of direct and indirect objects

In the neutral sentence in which nothing is emphasized, the direct and indirect objects of the verb follow the verb. We refer to the verb and its objects as the *verb phrase*.

If there is an indirect object, it precedes the direct object.

subject + verb + indirect object + direct object

他给我一本书。

他給我一本書。

Tā gěi wǒ yī běn shū.

He gave (gives) me one book.

Most verbs take only a direct object.

subject + verb + direct object

我看了那些书。

我看了那些書。

Wǒ kàn le nà xiē shū.

I read those books.

The object may also occur before the subject for emphasis. In this position it is *topicalized*.

► 57

4.3

The position of prepositional phrases

Prepositional phrases generally occur right before the verb and its objects.

subject + prepositional phrase + verb + direct object

他跟他的女朋友吃晚饭。

他跟他的女朋友吃晚飯。

Tā gēn tā de nǚ péngyou chī wǎnfàn.

He eats dinner with his girlfriend.

► 14

4.4

The position of location phrases

The location phrase, the phrase that indicates where an action occurs, is a type of prepositional phrase. It always occurs before the verb phrase.

subject + location phrase + verb phrase

我在家吃饭。

我在家吃飯。

Wǒ zài jiā chī fàn.

I eat at home.

Within the location phrase, the order of constituents is from the largest to the smallest. Letters are addressed following this principle.

中国北京朝阳区建国门外大街一号

中國北京潮陽區建國門外大街一號

Zhōngguó Běijīng Cháoyáng qū Jiànguó mén wài dà jiē yī hào

China Beijing Chaoyang District Jianguo Gate Outer Road Number 1 → Number 1,
Jianguo Gate Outer Road, Chaoyang District, Beijing, China

► 22.7

4.5

The position of 'time when' phrases

A phrase that indicates the 'time when' a situation takes place occurs at the beginning of the predicate.

subject + time when + predicate

我 每天 喝咖啡。

Wǒ měitiān hē kāfēi.

I drink coffee every day.

他 每天 跟他的女朋友吃晚饭。

他 每天 跟他的女朋友吃晚飯。

Tā měitiān gēn tā de nǚ péngyou chī wǎnfàn.

He eats dinner with his girlfriend every day.

If 'time when' is emphasized or contrasted with another time, it may occur before the subject:

昨天我不太舒服。今天已经没问题了。

昨天我不太舒服。今天已經沒問題了。

Zuótiān wǒ bù tài shūfu. Jīntiān yǐjīng méi wèntí le.

Yesterday I was a bit uncomfortable. Today it is no longer a problem.