

Speed Up Your Chinese

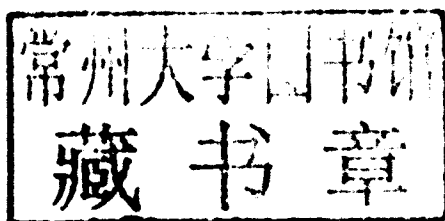
Strategies to avoid common errors

Shin Yong Robson

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Introduction

Speakers of English wish to see Mandarin Chinese grammar organized in a way that sidesteps the pitfalls of literal translation from their native tongue. Accordingly this book's contents focus on specific problems encountered by English-speaking learners.

While many units in this book address mainstream topics, most organize the issues in new combinations. Many subsections, especially in Parts III–V, explore important grammatical details in ways different from most grammar books. Cross-category examination of items is common in these subsections since they present a series of interlocked topics. For instance, after clarification of the difference between the two types of questions and their structures in §§18–19, §20 demonstrates how these different questions maintain their respective structures as the object clause of the cognitive verb 知道 *zhīdào* 'know'. §20 thus addresses a common, yet long-overlooked, grammatical confusion. Users do not need to start this book from §1. Plunge into any of the 58 topics that interest you.

Part I addresses simple sentences with one main verb, while **Part II** explains complex sentences or compound clauses. Part II also includes two major types of questions: yes/no questions and those with interrogative words (§§18–19).

Part III concentrates on temporal expressions, an intractable component of Mandarin for English-speakers, since Mandarin is a language without obvious tense markers. Thus Part III offers numerous close comparisons: the difference between chronological time and durational time (§22); how these different time expressions function in a sentence (§24); how Mandarin, without using an a.m./p.m. system, delineates hours of the day (§23); how this seemingly tenseless language expresses past and future time (§§28–30); and how adverbs contribute to this task (§§31–32).

Part IV discusses the different phrase structures: how location words and relative clauses function as modifiers (§§35–36); how Mandarin, without

equivalents to the English articles *the* and *a(n)*, handles noun references (§37); and how Mandarin verb complements work (§45). Four of the subsections, §§41–44, are devoted to a multifaceted examination of a unique verb structure—the verb-verb compound—which always challenges English speakers.

Part V focuses on subtle differences between similar words and phrases that may in fact belong to different grammatical categories, or derive from different word formations. The topics of Part V directly address typical errors, and the problems that they demonstrate. These topics also explore grammar details cross-categorically, while explaining differences between Mandarin and English.

Each subsection follows these **steps**: a) states a topic and illustrates the grammatical rules; b) provides examples and again illustrates the rules; c) presents a case-analysis of illustrative errors, along with explanatory corrections; and d) ends with a 'points to remember' note that highlights the core of the discussion. In addition to the subsection exercises, each Part concludes with a review section called *Check Your Grammar*, which lists correct English versions of the typical errors used in that Part. You may wish to translate these English sentences back into Chinese, to check your grasp of the relevant grammar points.

The essence of Mandarin grammar is **phrase/sentence patterns**. Because Mandarin lacks certain structures—such as singular and plural, noun-verb agreement, conjugations, and obvious tense markers—that reality paradoxically makes the grammar easier to grasp. This grammar in a sense emulates mathematics: the phrase/sentence patterns are formulae. Understand them, remember them, and follow them to put the right words in the right places. Then the language works. This is the reason that many sections detail the character of these patterns.

The sample errors in this book come directly from a synthesis of classroom practices and students' written exercises. Far from unique, these samples are highly representative because such mistakes echo across generations. These typical errors are a valuable tool in foreign language study because language learners gain much of their grammatical knowledge from the experience of self-corrected errors. You often learn, and refine, grammar points from such slips. This book aims to address and guide you through such linguistic quandaries.

While the ideal audience of this book, because they know more grammar, is learners who have studied the language for two or more semesters, this book also guides beginners. Those with only a few weeks of Chinese will find familiar details in the subsections. Of course utility grows as beginners progress. On the other hand, the user of this book should have some background in the language since this book does not teach all the details of

grammar: it is not a beginning textbook; nor is it comprehensive; rather it serves as a valuable complement to textbooks at all basic levels, and includes only the grammar fundamentally important to your background as an English speaker.

I hope this book provides Chinese language learners with a useful set of tactics for their studies, and I look forward to obtaining feedback from you.

Acknowledgments

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Website

Complementing this book are supplementary exercises for all subsections at the *Speed Up Your Chinese* website www.routledge.com/cw/robson



Glossary of grammatical terms

A-not-A structure One of the ways to form a yes/no question in Mandarin. The 'A' in the structure may be a descriptive adjective or an action verb. The 'not-A' is the negative form of either one, e.g. 今天冷不冷? *jīntiān lěng-bù-lěng* 'Is today cold (or not)?' 你看没看报? *nǐ kàn-méi-kàn bào* 'Have you read the newspaper (or not)?'

action verbs Verbs that express activities.

adjectives Words that modify nouns. (See also **descriptive adjectives**.)

adverbs Words that modify verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs. In distinction from English, the Mandarin adverb only stands before the word it modifies.

adverbial phrase A phrase that modifies a verb or a descriptive adjective, indicating details such as time, location, manner, and degree. In Mandarin the adverbial phrase may appear before or after the word it modifies.

aspect markers Verb suffixes that indicate how an action is viewed: progressing, continuing, or completed. The three major aspect markers in Mandarin are 了 *-le*, 着 *-zhe*, and 过 *-guò*.

auxiliary verbs Modal verbs that are added before a main verb to indicate ability, probability, willingness, requests, obligation, or wishes. The most common ones in Mandarin are 会 *huì* 'can,' 能 *néng* 'be able to,' 可以 *kěyǐ* 'may,' 应该 *yīnggāi* 'should,' and 得 *děi* 'must.'

clause A group of words that contains a subject and a predicate. A clause that can stand alone as a simple sentence is an independent clause, or the main clause. A clause that cannot stand alone is a dependent clause, also called a subordinate clause.

cognitive verbs Verbs that express the act or process of perceiving or knowing. 知道 *zhīdào* 'know' and 认识 *rènshi* 'recognize' are two common cognitive verbs in Mandarin.

complement In Mandarin a verb complement is another verb or descriptive adjective that, following the main action verb, completes its meaning, as 住 *zhù* 'stay' in 记住 *jì-zhù* 'memorize-stay = to remember'; or 大 *dà* 'big' in 长大 *zhǎng-dà* 'grow-big = to grow up.' A phrase complement usually follows a descriptive adjective to indicate its degree, e.g. 贵得多 *guì-deduo* 'much (too) expensive'; or follows an action verb to indicate the manner of the action, e.g. 来得很晚 *lái-de hěnwǎn* 'come very late.'

complex sentence A sentence that consists of one main clause and one or more subordinate clauses, e.g. 你回来以后，一定给我打电话。 *nǐ huílái yǐhòu, yídìng gěi-wǒ dǎ-diànhuà* 'Please make sure to call me after you return.'

compound sentence A sentence that has two or more independent clauses, e.g. 今天虽然下了雪，却不太冷。 *jīntiān suīrán xià-le-xuě, què bú tài lěng* 'Although it snowed today, it is not too cold.'

conjunctions In Mandarin, coordinating conjunctions are those that join nouns or noun phrases (e.g. 和 *hé* or 跟 *gēn* 'and'), whereas correlative conjunctions are used in pairs to link phrases or clauses (e.g. *both . . . and . . .*, *either . . . or . . .*, *not only . . . but also . . .*, *if . . . then . . .*, *although . . . but . . .*).

conjunctive adverb An adverb that introduces a clause showing a consequential or temporal relationship with the previous clause in a compound sentence. The most common one in Mandarin is 就 *jiù* '... then ...'

demonstrative A word that locates a person or thing. In Mandarin it is 这 *zhèi/zhè* 'this' or 那 *nèi/nà* 'that,' preceding or replacing a number before a measure word, e.g. 这一个苹果 *zhèi-yíge-píngguǒ* 'this one apple,' or 那个苹果 *nèi-ge-píngguǒ* 'that apple.'

descriptive adjectives Words that describe a state of being. Monosyllabic descriptive adjectives modify nouns as English adjectives, e.g. 小溪 *xiǎoxī* 'small stream'; and 短途 *duǎntú* 'short distance.' In a simple sentence whose predicate is a descriptive adjective, the verb of being, 是 *shì*, is not used, e.g. 冬天很冷。 *dōngtiān hěn lěng* 'The winter (is) very cold.'

homonyms Words that have the same pronunciation and the same tone, but different meanings or functions.

interrogative words (interrogatives) Words that are used to ask questions. In English these words usually begin with *wh-* (e.g. what, where, who, when) and introduce a question. In Mandarin the interrogative word occupies the same position in the question as the answer does in the response, e.g. 他姓什么? *tā xìng shénme?* 'What is his last name?' 他姓王。 *tā xìng wáng* 'His last name is Wang.'

measure word (measure) A word used between a number or demonstrative and a noun, as *slice* in the English phrase 'a/this slice of pie.' The most

common measure in Mandarin is 个 *ge* (neutral tone). In Mandarin a measure word is also used between 几/多少 *jǐ/duōshǎo* 'how many' (the question word for a number), 哪 *nǎi/nǎ* 'which' (the question word for a demonstrative), or 每 *měi* 'each/every' and a noun.

modifiers Words, phrases, or clauses that describe or qualify the meaning of a word, e.g. 热茶 *rè chá* 'hot tea'; 很大 *hěn dà* 'very large'; 仔细地看 *zìxìde kàn* 'carefully read'; or 刚认识的朋友 *gāng rènshi de péngyou* 'a friend just met.'

noun phrase A phrase that consists of a noun and its modifiers, e.g. 一本中文书 *yì-běn zhōngwén shū* 'a Chinese book.'

nouns with definite/indefinite references A definite reference indicates a particular item (e.g. *the tree* outside my window). The identity of this noun is clear to the reader. An indefinite reference indicates an unspecified noun (e.g. *trees* in the forest). The identity of the noun in this context is not important. Mandarin does not have articles that correspond to *the* and *a(n)* in English. A noun with a definite reference usually gains that specificity from a demonstrative 这 *zhèi/zhè* 'this' or 那 *nèi/nà* 'that'; or is the subject of a sentence, whereas a noun with an indefinite reference is usually not quantified and is the object of a sentence.

objects A direct object is a noun or pronoun that receives the action of a transitive verb. An indirect object is a noun or pronoun that indicates to whom or towards whom the action of a transitive verb is directed, (e.g. The teacher returned *the students* their homework). In Mandarin an indirect object is frequently introduced by the preposition *gěi* in an active-voice sentence, e.g. 我不常给他们打电话, 我给他们发短信。 *wǒ bù cháng gěi tāmen dǎ-diànhuà, wǒ gěi tāmen fā-duǎnxìn* 'I don't often call them. I text them.' As shown here, an object may follow its preposition.

potential form Special form of a verb-verb compound in Mandarin. By adding an infix, 得 *-de-* 'able to' or 不 *-bù-* 'unable to,' between the two verbs of the compound, the potential form indicates the (in)ability to accomplish the action.

predicate The part of a sentence that follows the subject and makes a statement about it. A simple Mandarin predicate contains a descriptive adjective (山高。 *shān gāo* 'The mountain (is) tall.') or an action verb (我去。 *wǒ qù* 'I (will) go.') A complete predicate consists of the descriptive adjective or the action verb plus its modifiers, e.g. 山很高。 *shān hěn gāo* 'The mountain (is) very tall.' or 我马上去。 *wǒ mǎshàng qù* 'I (will) immediately go.'

preposition A word that takes a noun or pronoun as its object to form a prepositional phrase, which in Mandarin functions as an adverbial modifier of the main verb, e.g. the preposition 从 *cóng* 'from' takes 中国 *Zhōngguó* 'China' to form the prepositional phrase 从中国 *cóng-Zhōngguó* 'from China.'

This prepositional phrase serves as an adverbial modifier of the main verb in the sentence 他从中国来。 *tā cóng-Zhōngguó lái* 'He comes from China.'

pronouns Words that are used in place of nouns. Mandarin usually applies this term to personal pronouns: 我 *wǒ* 'I, me,' 我们 *wǒmen* 'we, us,' 你 *nǐ* 'you (sing.),' 你们 *nǐmen* 'you (pl.),' 他 *tā* 'he, him,' 她 *tā* 'she, her,' and 他们 *tāmen* 'they, them.'

quasi-measures Nouns that can serve as measure words for other nouns, and that do not need a measure when quantified by a numeral or preceded by a demonstrative, e.g. 三杯茶 *sān-bēi-chá* 'three cups of tea,' 一年 *yì-nián* 'one year,' and 那天 *nèi-tiān* 'that day.'

question particle The particle 吗 *ma* (neutral tone), which, added to a statement, changes the statement to a yes/no question.

simple sentence A sentence that consists of a subject and a predicate, e.g. 电影 + 非常有趣 *diànyǐng + fēicháng yǒuyìsi* 'the movie is very interesting.'

subject The noun or noun phrase of a clause or a sentence that identifies the topic or the actor responsible for the action.

subjunctive mood A way of expressing conditions and wishes that are hypothetical rather than actual.

subordinate clause A dependent clause that cannot stand alone as a simple sentence, such as 'before sleeping' in 睡觉以前, 我总是喝一点儿牛奶。 *shuì-jào yǐqián, wǒ zǒngshì hē yìdiǎnr niúniǎi* 'Before sleeping, I always drink a little milk.' (See also **clause**.)

transitive and intransitive verbs The former are verbs that require a direct object. The latter are verbs that do not take a direct object.

verb phrase In Mandarin it consists of the main verb and its object, or of the main verb and its complements.



Abbreviations

Adj.	adjective
Adv.	adverb
Aux.	auxiliary
DA	descriptive adjective
Dem	demonstrative
DVC	directional verb complement
lit.	literally
Mea	measure (word)
N	noun
Neg.	negation
NP	noun phrase
Num	number
Obj.	object
pl.	plural
RVC	resultative verb complement
sing.	singular
Subj.	subject
V	verb
VC	verb complement
VP	verb phrase
V-V	verb-verb
*	unacceptable, ill-formed
?	questionable

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1

Simple sentences

§1. Sentences with a descriptive adjective

For a simple sentence whose predicate is a descriptive adjective, such as 'he is hungry' or 'the movie is interesting,' Mandarin uses the structure shown in 1a.

1a Subj. + Adv. + DA

电影_[Subj.]很_[Adv.]有意思_[DA]。

diànyǐng hěn yǒuyìsi

'The movie is very interesting.'

Similar to English adjectives, Mandarin descriptive adjectives describe states of being, such as 好 *hǎo* 'good,' or 新 *xīn* 'new.' Some textbooks therefore refer to them as **stative verbs**. A Mandarin sentence with a descriptive adjective, however, does not use the verb of being, 是 *shì* 'be.' E.g. 1a literally reads 'movie very interesting.'

In sentences with a descriptive adjective, the adjectives are routinely preceded by an adverbial word/phrase, as *hěn* 'very' in 1a, *fēicháng* 'extraordinarily' in 1b, or *yuèlái yuè* 'more and more' in 1c. The suffix ...*jí le* 'extremely' is the only adverbial word that follows a descriptive adjective, as shown in 1d, where it may be combined with another adverb *zhēnshì* 'truly' to form a frame around the DA for an even stronger emphasis on the adverbial force of the DA. Note that *zhēnshì* is the only adverb that may form such a frame with ...*jí le*.

1b 张先生非常忙。

Zhāng xiānsheng fēicháng máng

'Mr. Zhang is extraordinarily busy.'

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- 1c 张先生越来越忙。
Zhāng xiānsheng yuèlái yuè máng
'Mr. Zhang is getting more and more busy.'
- 1d 张先生(真是)忙极了。
Zhāng xiānsheng (zhēnshì) máng jí le
'Mr. Zhang is (truly) extremely busy.'

Negation

The negation, either *bù* 'not,' as in 1e, or *bù zěnme* 'not that ...' as in 1f, also precedes the descriptive adjective. The negation usually replaces the adverbial word/phrase in the statement.



- 1e 张先生不忙。
Zhāng xiānsheng bù máng
'Mr. Zhang is not busy.'
- 1f 张先生不怎么样忙。
Zhāng xiānsheng bù zěnme máng
'Mr. Zhang is not that busy.'

It is necessary to note that an unmodified descriptive adjective, such as *máng* in 1g, implies comparison. Modified by an adverbial word or phrase, on the other hand, sentences such as 1b–f do not have a comparative sense, and merely offer a general statement.

- 1g 张先生忙。
Zhāng xiānsheng máng
'Mr. Zhang (in comparison to someone else) is busy.'



The most common error is to use the verb of being, 是 *shì* 'be,' in an isolated, context-free sentence with a descriptive adjective, as in 1h. Sentences such as 1h could occur in oral conversations among native speakers, but only when they mean to stress the fact that Mr. Zhang is in fact really, truly busy (in response to some people's view that he may not be busy). On the other hand, it is ill-formed with the verb 'be', *shì*, in an isolated comment with a descriptive adjective, such as in 1h. To correct the error, one simply uses an adverb to replace *shì*.

- 1h  张先生*是忙。
Zhāng xiānsheng shì máng
-  张先生很/太忙。
Zhāng xiānsheng hěn/tài máng
'Mr. Zhang is very/too busy.'

Another common error is to use more than one adverb to modify the same descriptive adjective. This mistake usually occurs when suffix . . . *jí le* 'extremely' already attaches to the descriptive adjective, as in error 1i, where another adverb *hěn* 'very' is also used. Remember, the only adverb that can pair with . . . *jí le* is *zhēnshì* 'truly,' as in the correction.

- 1i ✗ 这个问题*很难极了。
 zhèi-ge wèntí hěn nán jí le
 'This question is ?very extremely difficult.'
- ✓ 这个问题真是难极了。
 zhèi-ge wèntí zhēnshì nán jí le
 'This question is truly extremely difficult.'



For a simple sentence with a descriptive adjective, such as 'the movie is interesting,' the structure is: Subj. + Adv. + DA. The verb of being, 是 *shì*, is not used.



For related topics, see §§6, 7, and 47.



Exercises

EXERCISE 1. Translate into Chinese.

- 1 Chinese grammar is very easy.
- 2 All my friends are extremely tired, but I am not.
- 3 The weather is getting colder and colder.
- 4 Milk is not expensive.

§2. Sentences expressing location and existence

Two structures specify location or existence. One uses the location verb 在 *zài* 'be (located) at' in the structure: (specific) Subj. + 在 *zài*-location phrase; and the other uses the existence verb 有 *yǒu* 'there is/are . . .' in the structure: location phrase + 有 *yǒu*.

The subject of the first pattern, where *zài* is the verb, is a specific noun phrase. The term **specific** indicates that the subject noun (phrase) of this pattern possesses a definite reference, such as a particular person, place, or item, e.g. 'my father' and 'the public library' in 2a–b. A non-specific subject, such as 'three fast-food restaurants' in 2c, is unacceptable with this pattern.