Unit I

Introduction

In this unit, we will guide your exploration of the general characteristics of Chinese by introducing some basic facts about Chinese, the special features of Chinese grammar, Chinese sounds, word formation, and Chinese characters. Accordingly, this unit is divided into the following four chapters:

Chapter 1: Chinese and Mandarin
Chapter 2: Chinese grammar
Chapter 3: The sound system
Chapter 4: Words and Chinese characters

1

Chinese and Mandarin

> **LEARNING OBJECTIVES**
>
> ★ To understand the term *Chinese*
> ★ To understand the difference between Mandarin and Chinese dialects

1.1 What is Chinese?

When beginning your study of Chinese, this is probably the first question you have as you may have heard different terms describing the language, such as *Chinese*, *Mandarin*, or perhaps even *Cantonese*. These terms carry different meanings, as explained below:

- **Chinese** has two different meanings. It can be used to refer to a group of different languages, which are often called the *Chinese dialects* (see the section below); or it can refer to the *standard language* in China. The latter meaning of *Chinese*, which is also called *Mandarin (Chinese)*, is used in this book.
- **Mandarin** is also known as the following:
  - 普通话/普通話[1] Pǔtōnghuà (*lit.* common language) or 汉语/漢語 Hànyǔ (*lit.* Han nationality language) on mainland China
  - 国语/國語 Guóyǔ (*lit.* country language) in Taiwan
  - 华语/華語 Huáyǔ (Chinese language) mainly in east Asian countries
  - 中文 Zhōngwén (Chinese language) throughout the world
  - *Chinese* in this book
  - **Cantonese** is one of the Chinese dialects.

1.2 Do Chinese people speak Chinese?

If the term *Chinese* means Mandarin, as is adopted in this book, then about one-third of Chinese people do not speak Chinese; instead, they speak Chinese dialects. There are seven major dialects within the Chinese language family:

i. Northern dialect (北方方言 or 官话方言/官話方言 běifāng fāngyán/guānhuà fāngyán)

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[1] Simplified characters are placed before the traditional characters throughout the book.

  ii. Cantonese (粤语/粤語 Yuèyǔ)
 iii. Wu (吴语/吳語 Wúyǔ)
 iv. Xiang (湘语/湘語 Xiāngyǔ)
  v. Gan (赣语/贛語 Gànyǔ)
 vi. Min (闽语/閩語 Mǐnyǔ)
vii. Hakka (客家语/客家語 Kèjiāyǔ)

The variation between these dialects causes them to be mutually incomprehensible. As such, Mandarin, which is based on the *Northern dialect*, has become increasingly popular in modern China. Nearly all Chinese people who speak different dialects can also understand Mandarin, and some are even able to speak Mandarin with a dialectal accent. This may be because all of the dialects have similar grammatical structures and they all share the same writing system, with logographic forms called *characters*.

1.3 Summary

In this chapter, we have clarified the term ***Chinese***, which can refer to either Mandarin or all Chinese dialects, of which there are seven major ones: Northern dialect, Cantonese, Wu, Xiang, Gan, Min, and Hakka. Since the variation of dialects can be problematic for comprehension in oral communication, Mandarin (*Chinese* in this book), which is based on the Northern dialect, has become the most commonly used in China.

2

Chinese grammar

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

★ To understand the meaning of the term *grammar*
★ To know the basic units of Chinese grammar
★ To learn the distinguishing characteristics of Chinese grammar

2.1 Grammar

What is *grammar*?
The grammar of a language informs how words in that language are combined to form sentences. To elaborate on this point, let's first look at the following Chinese sentences:

(1)a. 学生说中文。
学生說中文。
Xuésheng shuō Zhōngwén.

Students speak Chinese.

b. 中文学生说。
中文學生說。
Zhōngwén xuésheng shuō.

As for Chinese, students [do] speak.

c. *学生中文说[1]
*學生中文說
*xuésheng Zhōngwén shuō

(*lit*. student Chinese speak)

The three words 学生/學生 xuésheng (student), 说/說 shuō (speak), and 中文 Zhōngwén (Chinese) in the above sentences are in different orders, but sentences (1a) and (1b) are grammatically correct, whereas, (1c) is not

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[1] The symbol * indicates that the usage (sentence or word) is incorrect.

5

grammatically correct. Why is this so? It is because sentences (1a) and (1b) follow the rules of Chinese grammar, but (1c) does not. Specifically,

- (1a) follows the Chinese word order of Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) in which the noun 学生/學生 xuésheng (student) serves as the **subject** (S), the verb 说/說 shuō (speak) serves as the **predicate** (V), and the noun 中文 Zhōngwén (Chinese) serves as the **object** (O);
- (1b) is a common topic-comment sentence in Chinese in which the noun 中文 Zhōngwén (Chinese) serves as the **topic**, while the subject-predicate phrase 学生说/學生說 xuésheng shuō (students speak) serves as the **comment**; and
- (1c) is a Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) word order in which the object 中文 Zhōngwén (Chinese) precedes the verb 说/說 shuō (speak). Grammar rules of other languages allow this kind of sentence (e.g., Japanese); however, Chinese grammar rules do not.

From the above analysis, we can see that there are three basic language units:

- **word**: the smallest meaningful unit in a language that can be used freely, such as 学生/學生 xuésheng (student) or 说/說 shuō (speak);
- **phrase**: the combination of words following grammatical rules, such as the verb-object (VO) phrase 说中文/說中文 shuō Zhōngwén (speak Chinese) in (1a) and the subject-predicate phrase 学生说/學生說 xuésheng shuō (student speak) in (1b); and
- **sentence**: the composition of words and phrases such as (1a) and (1b).

We also know that the combination of phrases and the composition of sentences are governed by *rules* and that those *rules* are known as *grammar*. In other words:

Grammar can be understood as the *rules* of making sentences.

Whether we realize it or not, we all follow grammatical rules when we speak a language. Therefore, if one wants to learn to speak a language correctly, the grammar of the language should be learned.

2.2 Ways of learning grammar

How do we study grammar?
While the number of sentences that can be created is limitless, grammar rules carry certain limitations as they are highly abstract compared to concrete sentences. To understand and visualize these more abstract grammar rules, concrete examples should be referenced. As such, let's take Lego, a popular toy, as an example. If one wants to build anything with pieces of Lego, only two things are needed:

i. (enough pieces of) Lego; and
ii. (instructions on) how to put two or more pieces of Lego together.

6

Then one decides on what to build, say, a house, in which case one should:

* interlock individual small pieces of Lego to larger blocks to build walls, windows, doors, roofs, and so on; and
* assemble the blocks (e.g., walls, windows, and roofs) to make a house.

If we compare the construction of a Lego house with sentence composition, we can see similarities between the two in that both need the following:

* **a basic unit**: an individual piece of Lego, which corresponds to a *word*
* **blocks**: interlocked pieces of Lego that:
  (i)   are larger building materials used for a house, which correspond to *phrases* consisting of words; and
  (ii) are formed as the walls, door, and roof of a completed house, which correspond to the *subject*, *predicate*, *object*, and so on, in a sentence.
* **instructions**: rules on how to (or how not to) put two or more Lego pieces together in order to build a certain type of **house**, just like grammar provides the basic *patterns* and grammatical *rules* by which **sentences** are composed.

These similarities are summarized in Table 2.1 for easy comparison.

The comparison in Table 2.1 shows us that various objects can be built by assembling multiple pieces if we follow simple instructions. Likewise, an unlimited number of correct sentences can be made by arranging words according to the

Table 2.1 *Comparison of Lego and grammar*

Names	Lego Example	Grammar
Basic unit	an individual piece of Lego	**words** such as 学生/學生 xuésheng (student), 说/說 shuō (speak), 中文 Zhōngwén (Chinese) in (1)
Blocks	interlocked pieces that function as a wall, roof, etc.	**phrases** such as the subject-predicate phrase: 学生说/學生說 xuésheng shuō (student speak), and the **components** (also known as **elements**) in a sentence such as subject, predicate, and object in (1)
Instructions/ rules	how to put two or more Lego pieces together to build a **house**, or a bridge, etc.	stipulates if and how two (or more) words can be put together and in which order, and provides basic patterns and example **sentences**

rules of grammar. We have also learned from this analogy that if we want to study a language, we should know the following:

+ at the level of the **word**: what a word is and how a phrase is formed with words;
+ at the level of the **sentence**: what the elements are and how they are combined together to make sentences.

We will explore these concepts further in Units II and III respectively.

In order to build a house that is different from other houses, we must follow specific instructions. Similarly, if we want to make a sentence in a certain language, we must follow the grammar rules of that language. This naturally now leads to the question: What are the characteristics of Chinese grammar?

2.3 The characteristics of Chinese grammar

Chinese sentences, like other languages (including English), are made up of words. However, there are two main features of Chinese grammar that differ most noticeably from English.

▶ 2.3.1 Word form

The *word form* does not change. When you see a word ending with *-ful*, or *-ly*, or *-ty* in English, you can easily determine the following:

+ A word with the *-ful* ending is an **adjective**, such as beauti*ful*.
+ A word with the *-ly* ending is an **adverb**, such as beautiful*ly*.
+ A word with the *-ty* ending is a **noun**, such as beau*ty*.

However, in Chinese, regardless of whether 漂亮 piàoliang (beauty/beautiful/ beautifully) is used as a noun serving as the *subject* as in (2a), as an adjective serving as the *predicate* as in (2b), or as an *adverbial* as in (2c), its form remains the same.

(2)a. **漂亮**不等于聪明。
       漂亮不等於聰明。
       Piàoliang bù děngyú cōngming.

       Beauty is not equal to smartness.

   b. 小明的妈妈很**漂亮**。
       小明的媽媽很**漂亮**。
       Xiǎomíng de māma hěn **piàoliang**.

       Xiaoming's mom is **beautiful**.

   c. 小明**漂亮**地回答了老师的问题。
       小明**漂亮**地回答了老師的問題。
       Xiǎomíng **piàoliang** de huídá le lǎoshī de wèntí.

       Xiaoming answered the teacher's question(s) **beautifully**.

Likewise, regardless of whether Chinese **nouns,** such as 桌子 zhuōzi (table), are **singular** as in (3a) or **plural** as in (3b), their form does not change.

(3)a. 老师的办公室里有一张大**桌子**。
老師的辦公室裏有一張大**桌子**。
Lǎoshī de bàngōngshì li yǒu yì zhāng dà **zhuōzi**.

There is one big **table** in the teacher's office.

b. 教室里有十张**桌子**。
教室裏有十張**桌子**。
Jiàoshì li yǒu shí zhāng **zhuōzi**.

There are ten **tables** in the classroom.

Chinese **verbs** also have no form change, regardless of whether the action, such as 学/學 xué (study), is **ongoing** as in (4a), is in **present time** as in (4b), or is in **past time** as in (4c).

(4)a. 小亮正在**学**中文。
小亮正在**學**中文。
Xiǎoliàng zhèngzài **xué** Zhōngwén.

Xiaoliang is **studying** Chinese.

b. 小亮常常**学**中文。
小亮常常**學**中文。
Xiǎoliàng chángcháng **xué** Zhōngwén.

Xiaoliang often **studies** Chinese.

c. 昨天小亮**学**中文了。
昨天小亮**學**中文了。
Zuótiān Xiǎoliàng **xué** Zhōngwén le.

Xiaoliang **studied** Chinese yesterday.

This aspect of Chinese grammar presents both advantages and disadvantages to language learners, especially those whose native language requires word forms to change in different contexts, as English does:

+ **Advantage**: It reduces the burden on memory, as one only needs to memorize the original word form and does not have to change its form from sentence to sentence.
+ **Disadvantage**: One cannot distinguish the part of speech of a word just by looking at the word form; instead, one must analyze its relationship with the other words in the sentences to determine its part of speech.

Let's use the Lego example again as we compare the differences between Chinese and English:

+ The **English** Lego sets assign different colors to different types of Lego pieces according to their features (such as the numbers of studs); that is, all pieces

9

functioning as nouns are red, verbs are yellow, and so on. Thus, one can use the word forms (just like the color of the pieces of Lego) to help sort words into different groups and decide where a word can be put.

◆ The **Chinese** Lego sets have the same color for all different types of pieces, and word forms do not change. Thus, one who sorts the pieces must sort them according to *their relationship with other pieces*, that is, whether a certain piece can be interlocked with other pieces. If some pieces have the same connecting feature, then they belong to the same category. For example, one knows that:
   ◦ 漂亮 piàoliang is a noun (beauty) in (2a) because it is at the beginning of the sentence serving as the subject and connected to a verb;
   ◦ it is an adjective (beautiful) in (2b) because it follows an adverb 很 hěn (very); and
   ◦ it is an adverb (beautifully) in (2c) because it is connected to 地 de (a particle for the adverbial), and together they occur before a verb.

   To elaborate on this point, let's look at a rather popular, jovial saying in Chinese **死**读书/**死**讀書 **sǐ** dú-shū, 读**死**书/讀**死**書 dú **sǐ** shū, 读书**死**/讀書**死**, dú-shū **sǐ**, which moves the placement of the word 死 sǐ (die) to create different meanings. In order to make the saying into a meaningful sentence, we have added several words to it, as can be seen in (5):

(5) (小明就知道)**死**读书，读**死**书；(最后就是)读书**死**。
     (小明就知道)**死**讀書，讀**死**書；(最後就是)讀書**死**。
     (Xiǎomíng jiù zhīdao) **sǐ** dú-shū, dú **sǐ** shū; (zuìhòu jiù shì) dú-shū **sǐ**.

     (Xiaoming only knows to) read books **lifelessly** (mechanically) and read **dead** (useless) books; (eventually, he) reads and **dies** (*implying*: without a future by way of study).

While the above saying is a kind of humorous joke, it reveals that the meaning and the part of speech of a word in Chinese relies heavily on the relationship of the word with other words in a sentence. Taking the word 死 sǐ (die) in (5) as an example:

◆ when the word 死 sǐ precedes the verb 读/讀 dú (read) as in **死**读书/**死**讀書 **sǐ** dú-shū (study mechanically), it is an **adverb** with the meaning *lifelessly*, and it functions as an adverbial modifying the verb;
◆ when it precedes the noun 书/書 shū (book) as in 读**死**书/讀**死**書 dú **sǐ** shū (*lit.* read dead books), it is an **adjective** modifying the noun and the phrase means read useless books; and
◆ when it is after the verb-object construction 读书/讀書 dú-shū (read books; study) as in 读书**死**/讀書**死** dú-shū **sǐ** (die after studying), it is a **verb** meaning *die* (*metaphorically*: no future), and the sentence becomes a series verb construction.

The written form 死 sǐ experiences no change; however, its meanings and parts of speech change depending on its relationship with the other words in the sentence. For example:

◆ if it is "interlocked" with (modifies) the verb, it is an adverb (*lifelessly*);
◆ if it can be connected with (modifies) the noun, it is an adjective (*dead*); or
◆ if it stands alone and is located in a position parallel to another verb phrase 读书/讀書 dú-shū (study), it is a verb (*die*).

Conversely, English displays different writing forms such as *die* (verb), *dead* (adjective), *deadly* (adverb), and *death* (noun) based on the parts of speech of the word.

There are many such amusing expressions in Chinese. An additional example to show this feature of Chinese is seen in (6).

(6)a. 大**好**人 dà **hǎo**rén (very **good** man)
   b. 人**好**大 rén **hǎo** dà (the person is **so** big)
   c. 大人**好** dàrén **hǎo** (adults **are better** [may imply a comparison with children])

Similarly, the writing form 好 hǎo (good) does not change; however, it is,

- ♦ an adjective (*good*) when it modifies a noun 人 rén (human) in (6a);
- ♦ an adverb (*so*) when it modifies an adjective 大 dà (big), which functions as a verb (predicate) in (6b); and
- ♦ an adjective but functions as a verb (predicate) ([*be*] *better*) in (6c).

▶️ 2.3.2 Word order

Word order: in Chinese, the basic word order of a sentence is SVO. This is the same as in English, which makes it easy for English learners to remember. The major differences between Chinese grammar and English grammar that relate to word order are as follows:

- ♦ **The modifier precedes the modified** in Chinese as shown by 很 hěn (very) in (2b), 漂亮地 piàoliang de (beautifully) in (2c), 死 sǐ (die/dead/deadly/death) in (5), and 好 hǎo (good/so/[be] better) in (6a) and (6b). This is also the case in many English sentences; for example, adjectives precede nouns as seen in the translation "**good** man" in (6a), and adverbs precede verbs such as "so" in the translation of (6b); however, in English adverbs can also come after verbs such as "beautifully" in the translation of (2c) and "lifelessly" in (5).
- ♦ **Time words**, such as 昨天 zuótiān (yesterday) in (4c), and **place words,** like 教室里/教室裏 jiàoshì li (in the classroom) as in (3b), can be placed at the beginning of a sentence; however, in English, they are typically placed at the end of a sentence.

Examples (7) and (8) further illustrate the features of word arrangement in Chinese.

(7)   小明在图书馆看书。
      小明在圖書館看書。
      Xiǎomíng zài túshūguǎn kàn-shū.

      Xiaoming is studying in the library.

(8)   小亮用筷子吃饭。
      小亮用筷子吃飯。
      Xiǎoliàng yòng kuàizi chī-fàn.

      Xiaoliang eats with chopsticks.