Written for beginning learners of the language, this concise introduction to Chinese grammar assumes only a basic knowledge of Chinese, and no knowledge of grammatical terminology or practices. Comparing Chinese grammar patterns and rules with those of English, and illustrated with a wealth of real-life examples, it allows learners to understand the similarities and differences between the two languages. Using engaging and accessible language, it examines the Chinese sound system, writing system, word formation rules, parts of speech, and simple and complex sentences, as well as explaining special constructions that are typically challenging to second language learners. Each chapter begins with clear learning goals and ends with a useful summary highlighting the chapter’s main points. To call attention to specific issues, sidebars are interspersed throughout the text, and exercises within the book and online answer keys help students to reinforce learned material and assist with self-study.

**Yongping Zhu** is Associate Professor and Department Chair (2014–2021) at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, as well as President of the Chinese Language Teachers Association, USA (2021–2022). Notable publications include *Linguistic Analysis of Meaning and Syntactic Change in the Grammaticalization of Chinese Prepositions* (2010) and *A Teacher’s Manual for the Instruction of Chinese* (co-authored, 2018).

**Chu-Ren Huang** is Chair Professor of the Department of Chinese and Bilingual Studies at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. He is fascinated by what language can tell us about human cognition and our collective reactions to natural and social environments. Related publications include *A Reference Grammar of Chinese* (2016), *Mandarin Chinese Words and Parts of Speech* (2017), *The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Applied Linguistics* (2019), and *The Cambridge Handbook of Chinese Linguistics* (2022).
A Student Grammar of Chinese

YONGPING ZHU
University of Notre Dame, Indiana

CHU-REN HUANG
Hong Kong Polytechnic University
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Preface

Mandarin Chinese is one of the two most spoken native languages in the world and is fast becoming a global language. Chinese is the only language in the world that has more than three thousand years of continuous written documentation. It is widely borrowed from in what is called the Sinosphere, and its influence, especially in terms of loan words and writing systems, can be easily detected in Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese. There are many fascinating stories about Chinese to share; however, since you have picked up this book, we assume that you do not need convincing and are already interested in learning more about the Chinese language and Chinese culture. It is important to note that, contrary to popular misconceptions, Chinese does have grammar, just like every other language in the world. Chinese grammar is neither simpler nor more complicated than other grammar systems, it is just a bit different.

The development of this book began with a concerted effort to present Chinese grammar in an easily accessible way by focusing on the detection of patterns as well as the differences and similarities between Chinese grammar and the English grammar that the reader is already familiar with. The features of this grammar book, which are designed to ensure easy navigation and accessibility, are as follows:

**Content:**
- plain language without theoretical jargon;
- comprehensive coverage of the Chinese sound and writing systems;
- a glossary at the beginning of the book to introduce basic terms;
- a comprehensive index at the end of the book to provide easy access to specific grammar points and keywords;
- exercises at the end of chapters that allow students to apply what they have learned and verify their knowledge of the chapters, as well as reinforce learning outcomes;
- online answer keys to the exercises and additional appendixes to assist students’ self-study at www.cambridge.org/ZhuHuang.

**Format:**
- clear learning goals at the beginning and a brief summary at the end of each chapter to help readers quickly grasp the main points of the chapter;
- *Tip*, NOTE, Attention, and *Alert!* boxes are provided to emphasize common errors as well as to provide guidance for understanding challenging grammatical points;
PREFACE

- succinct tables for improving comprehension and providing an overall picture;
- both simplified and traditional characters are provided for examples, with the format of the traditional characters following the simplified characters (簡/繁).

Only one form will be provided when the same character is used for both simplified and traditional character sets. This provides ease of access to readers by providing the writing system that they are more comfortable with, while also giving interested readers the ability to explore the differences between the two writing systems.

To create a friendly reading environment, we have invited two “bright” fellow students to accompany you on your journey of learning grammar. You will get to know more about Xiaoming (小明) (lit. “little bright”) and Xiaoliang (小亮) (lit. “little light”) through reading example sentences in the book. We think that you will find them to be engaging, although not always diligent. There are also some examples with interesting and easy-to-read sentences that are made of common words and some fun tongue twisters in the exercises. We hope that all of these features will help you to find both fun and fulfillment in learning Chinese grammar.

Most of all, do bear in mind that the best way to learn grammar is to speak more! Please make sure that you practice making sentences with the grammar you have learned and talk to your classmates or teacher. If you are self-studying, try to construct a dialogue with Xiaoming or Xiaoliang based on what they say in the book.

This grammar book can supplement any textbook used in Chinese language classes, or it can stand alone as a textbook for a class on Chinese grammar. It can also serve as a reference book for beginner- to higher-level students, as well as Chinese language instructors teaching at those levels. The structure of this book allows students some flexibility to tailor and self-pace their study plan, including heritage learners who may have already mastered some grammatical points. As a student grammar book, the grammatical discussion in this volume is limited in scope and depth by design. For students and teachers who need more comprehensive coverage, we recommend A Reference Grammar of Chinese (Huang and Shi, 2016).

Dr. Yongping Zhu began drafting this book in 2008 with students’ needs in mind and Dr. Chu-Ren Huang joined the effort around 2014. Our long-distance collaboration led to rendezvous at various places in China and the US, but was also constantly delayed by duties at our home institutions. During this long process, in addition to remaining focused on providing comprehensive coverage of linguistic facts with concise and transparent explanations, we have also had the advantage of receiving feedback from different sources. Students from our targeted readership (i.e., those who have studied Chinese for one to five years) have helped us to draw a clear roadmap for readers to navigate with ease. Experienced Chinese instructors have helped us to hone our writing more concisely. For content development, we have drawn on our experience of teaching Chinese as a second language and conducting linguistic research for the past 30 years, as well as the accumulated knowledge of the field. We hope that our readers find this book to be the key required to unlock boundless knowledge of the Chinese language.
Acknowledgments

This book is greatly indebted to many sources, some of which are listed in the Bibliography of this book. The final form of this book has benefited greatly from the existing research and studies on Chinese grammar.

First of all, we would like to thank Ms. Helen Barton of Cambridge University Press for her encouragement, guidance, patience, and above all, unfailing confidence in us throughout this long journey. We would also like to offer our sincerest gratitude to Ms. Isabel Collins of Cambridge University Press for her valuable advice and assistance in preparing the final draft for production. We are greatly indebted to colleagues and students who have provided helpful input at various stages of this book and provided support in many other ways. In particular, we would like to thank Professor Kathleen Ahrens, Dr. Bo Peng, and graduate students Jing Chen, Yanlin Li, and Siyu Lei from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University; Professor Li-ping Chang from National Taiwan University; undergraduate students Yue Chong, Christopher Hayden, Ann Hermann, Kaylan Knott, Andrew Meisenbacher, Hayden Ousley, Erin Reilly, Joseph Sierotko, Sophie Spartz, Alejandro Mujica Vierci, and Emily Vincent from the University of Notre Dame; and Richard Zhu.

We would like to take this opportunity to express our sincere gratitude to Ms. Katie Hazell, Professor Jin Zhang, and Dr. Yin Zhong for their careful reading and editing of the final draft, as well as the anonymous reviewers who provided invaluable feedback, which improved this book in ways too numerous to mention. Needless to say, any remaining errors are ours.

Work on this book has been partially funded by the financial support of the University of Notre Dame and the Hong Kong Polytechnic University-Peking University Research Centre on Chinese Linguistics.

Yongping Zhu, South Bend, Indiana, USA
Chu-Ren Huang, Hong Kong
# Glossary of grammatical terms and abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ADJECTIVE</strong></td>
<td>adj</td>
<td>A word that describes a noun and functions as the predicate of a sentence in Chinese, e.g., 高山 gāoshān (tall mountain), and 她/他很高 tā/hé tén gāo (she/he is tall) (Chapter 12).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ADVERB</strong></td>
<td>adv</td>
<td>A word whose function is to modify a verb or an adjective, e.g., 刚到/gāng dào (just arrived), and 很好/hěnhào (very good) (Chapter 13).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AGENT (DOER)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>A doer who performs an action, often represented by a noun or a noun phrase, e.g., 她/他吃苹果 tā/he chi pingguó (she/he eats apples) (Chapters 22 and 23).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ASPECT</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>A particle attached to a verb signifying information on the relative time of the event (§10.4 and §16.2).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfective</td>
<td></td>
<td>An aspect that indicates the completion of an event, such as 了 le, e.g., 她/他去了中国 tā/qí le Zhōngguó (she/he has gone to China).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durative</td>
<td></td>
<td>An aspect that indicates the continuation of an event, such as 着 zhe, e.g., 她/他拿着一本书 tā/ná zhe yī běn shū (she/he is holding a book).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiential</td>
<td></td>
<td>An aspect that indicates a highly relevant event that happened before, such as 过 guò, e.g., 她/他去过中国 tā/qí guò Zhōngguó (she/he has been to China [before]).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHARACTER</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>The basic writing unit of Chinese (§4.4 and §4.5).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**xíngróngcí 形容词** 形容词

**fùcí 副词** 副词

**Hànzi 汉字** 汉字
GLOSSARY OF GRAMMATICAL TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

(cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Associative         | huìyì
<pre><code>                  | o/gō    | A character formed by two or more pictograms or ideograms, e.g., 明亮 (bright); also known as a joined-meanings character. |
</code></pre>
<p>| Ideographic         | zhìshì        |       | A character formed by an indicative symbol, e.g., 一 (one), 二 (two), 三 (three). |
| Pictographic        | xiàngxíng    |       | A character formed by a single pictogram, i.e., a visual representation of the meaning, e.g., 山 (mountain). |
| Pictophonetic       | xíngshēng    |       | A character formed by joining a semantic and a phonetic component, e.g., 妈妈 (mother) in which the semantic part is 女 (nǚ, female) and the phonetic part is 马 (ma, horse); also known as a phonetic-semantic compound. |
| Radical             | bùshòu       |       | A semantic component of a character indicating its broad category and relatedness, e.g., the radical 女 (nǚ, female) from the character 妈妈 (mother). Most characters have radicals. |
| CLAUSE              |              |       | A sentence-like unit within a sentence, containing a subject and predicate, e.g., 我希望你高兴 (wǒ xīwàng nǐ gāoxìng) (I hope you are happy) (§18.1.2). |
| Main                |              |       | A clause carrying the core idea in a complex sentence, e.g., 她/他病了, 所以没去上课/她/他病了, 所以没去上课 (tā bìng le, suǒyì méi qù shàng-kè) (she/he was sick; thus, she/he did not go to class) (Chapter 29). |
| Relative            |              |       | A gapped clause modifying a noun and linked to the noun with the gap, e.g., 她/他买的书很新/她/他买的书很新 (the book that she/he bought is new), the object is missing and linked to the noun (§16.1.1). |
| Subordinate         |              |       | A clause that is dependent on, and typically precedes, the main clause to express a supplementary meaning of a complex sentence, e.g., 她/他病了, 所以没去上课/她/他病了, 所以没去上课 (tā bìng le, suǒyì méi qù shàng-kè) (she/he was sick; thus, he did not go to class) (Chapter 29). |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CONJUNCTION</td>
<td>conj.</td>
<td>A word linking two linguistic units (words, phrases, clauses, or sentences), e.g., 我会说中文 and 英文。I can speak Chinese and English (Chapter 15).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRAMMAR</td>
<td></td>
<td>The rules for constructing sentences and meanings (Chapter 2).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEASURE WORD</td>
<td>MW</td>
<td>A word that serves as a counting unit for nouns and expresses some properties of the noun, e.g., 三本 and 三个. Also known as a classifier (Chapter 8).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOUN</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>A word that serves as a name for an entity, concept, or event, e.g., 我是学生 (I am a student) (Chapter 6).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUMBER</td>
<td></td>
<td>A word that stands for a number, e.g., 一 (one), 二 (two), 十 (ten) (§7.1).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordinal</td>
<td></td>
<td>A word that indicates the order of things, e.g., 第一 (the first), 第三 (the third) (§7.2).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARTICLE</td>
<td>part</td>
<td>A word that marks sentence types, such as stance or modality. It is typically monosyllabic and atonal (Chapter 16).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspectual</td>
<td></td>
<td>A particle attached to a verb, e.g., 了 for an interrogative sentence: 你是学生吗? (Are you a student?); for a new situation or a state change: 我是大学生了 (I am a college student now); for a follow-up question: 我周末看电影, 你呢? (I watch a movie on the weekend, how about you?); for the introduction/affirmation of new information: 我看书呢? (I am reading a book).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Glossary of Grammatical Terms and Abbreviations (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>studying now)</td>
<td>wba</td>
<td>for a non-assertive question: 你会说中文吧? (you can speak Chinese, right?), or for concessive consent: 好吧 (all right) (§16.3).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural</td>
<td></td>
<td>A particle that marks the relation of the components that it links in a sentence, e.g., 的 (attribute) and the head noun (modified) as in 我的书/我的书/wò de shū (my book); 地 (manner) and a verb as in 她/他很高兴地唱歌/她/他很高興地唱歌 tā/hēn gāoxìng de chǎng-gē (she/he sang happily); and 得 (complement) as in 她/他说得很快/她/他說得很快 tā/shuō de hěn kuài (she/he speaks fast) (§16.1).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PATIENT (RECEIVER)</td>
<td></td>
<td>An undergoer at the receiving end of an action, e.g., 她/他吃苹果/她/他吃苹果 tā/chī píngguó (she/he eats apples) (Chapter 22).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHRASE</td>
<td></td>
<td>A linguistic unit formed by the combination of words, which can then be combined to form a sentence following grammatical rules (Chapter 2).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noun</td>
<td>NP</td>
<td>A phrase with a noun/pronoun as its head (italicized) that performs the grammatical function of a sentence element, e.g., 很多学生在图书馆努力地学习中文/hěn duō xuésheng zài tǔshūguǎn nǔlì de xuéxí Zhōngwén (many students study Chinese diligently at the library).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb</td>
<td>VP</td>
<td>A phrase with a verb as its dependents, such as the object, complement, or other modifiers. It functions as the main predicate in a sentence, e.g., 小明喜欢学习中文/小明喜歡學習中文 Xiǎomíng xiǎnhuān xuéxí Zhōngwén (Xiaoming enjoys studying Chinese).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Glossary of Grammatical Terms and Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prepositional PP</td>
<td>A phrase contains a preposition and a noun phrase as its object, e.g., 在图书馆 (at the library) in the NP example sentence above.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PREFIX</td>
<td>A syllable attached to the front of a word/stem to form a new word, e.g., 小明 (young/little Ming) (§6.5).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PREPOSITION</td>
<td>The word in a prepositional phrase that indicates the relation between the object of a noun phrase and the event described by the verb, such as time, place, reason, instrument, or object. For example, 从外国来 (from a foreign country) (Chapter 14).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRONOUN pr</td>
<td>A word that functions as a noun phrase and represents a previously used word, e.g., 我 (I), 他 (he), 如何 (how) (Chapter 9).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrative</td>
<td>A word to “point” to what is referred to in context, e.g., 这 (this) and 那 (that); time 这会儿 (now), 那会儿 (then); place 这儿 (here), 那儿 (there); manner/degree 这样 (this way), 那样 (that way), 这样 (like this), 那样 (like that) (§9.2).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interrogative</td>
<td>A question word, e.g., 谁 (who), 什么/如何 (what/where), 怎么 (how) (§9.3).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>A word standing for a noun, e.g., 我 (I), 你 (you), 他 (he), 她 (she), 它 (it), 大家 (everyone, all) (§9.1).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SENTENCE ELEMENT</td>
<td>A linguistic unit that plays a grammatical role in a sentence, also known as component (Chapters 2 and 17).</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Adverbial</td>
<td>zhuàngyú</td>
<td>An element that modifies and restricts the predicate, e.g., 我们都是学生 (we all are students) (§21.2).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attributive</td>
<td>dìngyú</td>
<td>An element that modifies and restricts a noun phrase or a noun, e.g., 新学生喜欢这所学校 (new students like this school) (§21.1).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complement</td>
<td>búyú</td>
<td>An element that provides additional information on the manner, result, or state of the predicate and occurs after the predicate. The five types of complements are: Resultative, 她/他/她他听懂了 (she/he understood by listening); Manner, 她/他说得很好 (she/he speaks very well); Potential, 她/他说得很好 (she/he can speak well); Directional, 她/他进来了 (she/he came in); Quantitative, 她/他说了两遍 (she/he spoke twice) (Chapter 20).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object</td>
<td>bín yú</td>
<td>An element that undergoes the activity described by the predicate, e.g., 她/他吃苹果 (she/he eat apples) (Chapter 19). Some verbs can take two objects. The one that directly undergoes the activity or change is the Direct Object. The one affected by the full event of [Predicate + Direct Object] is the Indirect Object, which is typically considered to be the recipient of a transfer. For example, 老师教我们中文 (the teacher teaches us Chinese); 中文 Zhōngwén (Chinese) is the direct object, the content being taught; and 我们/我们 wǒmen (us) is the indirect object (§19.3).</td>
</tr>
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| **Predicate**
vedi yú 谓语/ 谓语 | P | The core element of the sentence that defines the event that other elements, such as the subject, are involved in, e.g., 她/他 學中文/ 她/他 學中文 tā xué Zhòngwén (she/he studies Chinese) (§18.2). |
| **Subject**
zhú yǔ 主语/ 主語 | S/subj | An element central to the event that the predicate describes, e.g., 我是学生/我是學生 wǒ shì xuéshēng (I am a student) (§18.1). |
| **Suffix** | | A syllable that is attached to the end of a word, e.g., the personal plural 们/門 men in 学生们/學生们 xuéshēngmen (students) (§6.5). |
| **Syllable** | | The basic phonological unit corresponding to a character that contains a vowel sound, e.g., 她/他 tā (she/he) (§3.2). |
| **Initial**
shèngmù 声母/ 聲母 | | The consonant at the beginning of a syllable, such as m in mā (妈/媽 mother). |
| **Final**
yùnmù 韵母/ 韻母 | | The non-initial part of the syllable, which contains at least one vowel and possibly an ending nasal consonant, e.g., an in nán (男 male). |
| **Tone**
shèngdiào 声调/ 聲調 | | The lexical pitch of a syllable. There are four tones in Mandarin Chinese, e.g., the first tone (high level tone) such as mā (妈/媽 mother), second tone (rising tone) such as mǔ (麻木 numb; hemp), third tone (contour tone) such as mǎ (馬/馬 horse), and fourth tone (falling tone) such as mà (骂/罵 scold) (§3.3). |
| **VERB**
dòngcí 动词/動詞 | V | A word that represents an action or a state, and is the main part of the predicate of a sentence, e.g., 学/學 xué (study) in 我 學中文/我學中文 wǒ xué Zhòngwén (I study Chinese) (Chapter 10). |
<p>| <strong>Intransitive</strong> | vi | A verb that takes no object, e.g., 哭 kū (cry) in 她/他 哭了 tā kū le (she/he cried) (§10.2). |</p>
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<tr>
<td>Modal</td>
<td></td>
<td>A verb, also known as an Auxiliary Verb, that occurs before another verb to express the moods of a sentence, such as willingness, ability, possibility, permission, necessity, or obligation, e.g., 可以 kěyì (may) in 小亮 xiǎoliàng 可以 qǐng jià (possibly ask for leave) (Chapter 11).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitive</td>
<td>vt</td>
<td>A verb that takes one or two objects, e.g., 看 kàn (look; watch) in 看电影 kàn diànyǐng (watch movie). A few verbs can take two objects, e.g., 教 jiāo (teach), 给 gěi (give), and 问 wèn (ask) (§10.1).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VERB-OBJECT COMPOUND</td>
<td>V-O/VO</td>
<td>A compound word formed with a verb and its object (noun). Many V-O compounds can be separated in a sentence, but they usually function as intransitive verbs when they are not separated, e.g., 看书 kànshū (lit. look-book; to study/read) in 她/他在图书馆 看书 tā/zì tǔshūguān kànshū (she/he studies at the library); the same compound can be separated to form a VP, e.g., 她/他在图书馆 看中文书 tā/zì tǔshūguān Zhōngwénshū (she/he reads Chinese books at the library) (§10.3).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VERB-COMPLEMENT</td>
<td>V-C/VC</td>
<td>A compound word formed with a verb and its complement (Chapter 20). The form VC specifically refers to a verb and its resultative complement. The VC construction is inseparable and should be considered as a single unit (resultative complement is italicized below), e.g., 听懂 tīngdòng (to understand [on hearing]) in 我 听懂 le (I listened and understood) (§20.1).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORD</td>
<td></td>
<td>A minimal meaningful free unit in a language (Chapter 2 and §4.1).</td>
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</table>
**GLOSSARY OF GRAMMATICAL TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

(continue...)

<table>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WORD ORDER</td>
<td></td>
<td>The sequential order of words in a sentence; a pattern that results from the grammatical rules of a language, e.g., the basic word order in Chinese is Subject-Verb-Object, and the modifier typically precedes the modified, i.e., the head noun comes last in a noun phrase, and the adverbial precedes the predicate in a sentence (§2.3 and Chapter 21).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SVO</td>
<td></td>
<td>An abbreviation for subject-verb-object word order.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SVC</td>
<td></td>
<td>An abbreviation for the subject-verb-complement word order</td>
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</tbody>
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¹Keywords are in bold.
## Special symbols

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<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>Indicates that a word or sentence is questionable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*</td>
<td>Indicates that the sentence is unacceptable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(V).(C)</td>
<td>A dot . between a verb and a resultative complement in a verb-complement construction indicates that the construction is inseparable and should be used as one unit, e.g., 听懂/聽懂  tīng dōng (understand by listening)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(V)-(O)</td>
<td>A hyphen – between a verb and an object in a V-O construction indicates that the construction is separable, e.g., 说话/說話 shuō-huà (lit. speak-word, speak) vs. 说 中国话/說 中国話 shuō Zhōngguó huà (speak Chinese)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>