

1.3 Word Classes 詞類

Chinese has all the same basic word classes (詞類 *cí-lèi*) as European languages: nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbials, and conjunctions. However, unlike European languages, few lexical forms are associated with particular grammatical categories. In English, for example, “-al” and “-ous” indicate that the word is an adjective; “-tion” and “-ality” indicate that the word that they end is a noun; “-ly” indicates an adverb. In Chinese, such part-of-speech markers are very few: Some nouns, as cited above, are marked by special prefixes or suffixes (老 *lǎo*, 子 *zi*, 兒 *er*); some adverbs are marked by a final 然 *rán*). However, in general absence of lexical marking of word classes is the rule.

The distinction between word classes is not always clear-cut. In Chinese, the distinction is particularly blurred between verbs and prepositions. Chinese prepositions are mostly derived from verbs and can serve as verbs. 到北京 *dào Běi-jīng* can be a verb-object phrase meaning “arrive in Beijing”; it can also be used as a prepositional phrase meaning “to Beijing,” as in 到北京去 *dào Běi-jīng qù*, “to go to Beijing.” Sometimes, the adverbial resembles a verb phrase more, so that 她在客廳看電視 *tā zài kè-tīng kàn diàn-shì*, for example, could be interpreted either as “he is watching TV in the living room” or “he is in the living room watching TV.”

The following brief descriptions of Chinese word classes the content and the order of the discussion of Chinese grammar in the rest of this book.

Nominals (Nouns, Noun Phrases, and Pronouns) 名詞性詞 (2)

Nouns (名詞 *míng-cí*) form the subjects and objects of action. Often, they appear not alone, but in phrases (e.g., 這兩棟大房子 *zhè liǎng dòng dà fáng-zi**, “these two big houses”), which we refer to as *noun phrases* (名詞組 *míng-cí-zǔ*). Nouns and noun phrases can be replaced by pronouns (which are *noun equivalents*). Nouns, noun phrases, and pronouns are known collectively as *nominals* (名詞語詞 *míng-cí-yǔ-cí*).

Chinese nouns may be derived from other forms of speech. Adjectives and verbs, especially those of more than one syllable, can act as nouns, e.g., 隔熱 *gé-rè*, means “insulate (against heat),” “(heat) insulation”; 溫暖 *wēn-nuǎn*, “warm”/“warmth.”

Whole clauses and sentences, too, can act as nouns, so that for example, 我去北京 *wǒ qù Běi-jīng*, “I go to Beijing” can also be used to mean “my going to Beijing.”

Chinese nominals do not vary in form depending whether they are the subject or object of a sentence (there are no such distinctions as between “I” and “me” in English or “der Mann,” “den Mann,” and “dem Manne” as in German). Nouns themselves are not inflected according to number, as they are in English, although a noun phrase may include indications of number (e.g., specific numbers like “one,” “two,” “three”... or an indefinite number expression, such as “some,” “many”).

Chinese has no definite article like the English “the,” which marks a specific item as identified or easily identifiable. The definiteness, or specificity, is sometimes indicated by the addition of demonstratives (words like the English “this/that” and “these/those”), where in English we might use the definite article. Importantly, definiteness can be indicated by the position of the agent in the sentence; for instance, subjects of verbs are always definite, while objects may be definite or indefinite. Nevertheless, no word has the primary function of indicating definiteness as “the” in English or its equivalents in other European languages.

Pronouns: Pronouns are words that can replace a noun or a noun phrase. In modern Chinese, they are marked for singular and plural, but take the same form whether serving as subject or the object of the sentence. In writing, distinction is made between male, female, and inanimate third-person pronouns, but the pronunciation is the same for each.

- 我 *wǒ*, I/me
- 你/妳 *nǐ*, you; 您 *nín* (polite)
- 他/她/它 *tā*, he/him, she/her, it
- 我們 *wǒ-men*, we/us
- 你們 *nǐ-men*, you
- 他/她/它們 *tā-men*, they/them

Qualifiers: Nouns are often qualified by possessive qualifiers, descriptive, or quantitative adjectives, determiners, numerals, or qualifying phrases involving verbs (the latter corresponding to English relative clauses). Qualifiers appear before the noun. When they include demonstratives or numbers, they need a classifier (see ahead).

Possessive qualifiers: Noun phrases may involve two or more nouns standing in a relationship of belonging, which Chinese expresses with the *possessive particle* 的 *de* (also called a *subordinating particle*).

- 淑惠的畫 *Shú-huì de huà*, Shuhui’s picture(s)
- 馬政府的政策 *Mǎ zhèng-fǔ de zhèng-cè*, the Ma Administration’s policy
- 房子的門 *fáng-zi* de mén*, the door of the house

Possessive pronouns are formed from pronouns by the addition of the possessive particle 的 *de*, e.g., 我的書 *wǒ de shū*, my book.

Adjectives: Chinese adjectives can be used to modify nouns. In this capacity, they appear before the noun. They particle 的 *de* is often placed immediately after the adjective to mark the attributive use.

- 小的瓶子 *xiǎo de píng-zi**, small bottle(s)
- 大的變化 *dà de biàn-huà*, big (major) change(s)

‘Adjective + Noun’ phrases that form fixed compounds usually have no 的 *de*, and in Pinyin transliteration, the are often hyphenated.

- 紅酒 *hóng-jiǔ*, red wine
- 小狗 *xiǎo-gǒu*, puppy
- 黑白電視 *hēi-bái-diàn-shì*, black and white TV

Determiners: These include the demonstratives 這 *zhè*, “this,” and 那 *nà/nèi*, “that.” They also include 各 *gè*, “all/every,” 每 *měi*, each/every. When qualifying a noun denoting a single thing or being, a determiner must be followed by a classifier (see ahead). When qualifying a noun denoting more than one thing/being, demonstratives (but not other determiners) are usually followed by 些 *xiē*.

Classifiers: Chinese classifiers (or measure words) are similar to English measure words, such as “cup” in a “glass” in “glass of water” or “flock” in “a flock of sheep.” Chinese use uses classifiers are used more widely.

English distinguishes between *mass nouns* (i.e., nouns denoting things that cannot be counted such as “water,” “metal,” “mud”) and *countable nouns*, (i.e., nouns denoting things that can be counted like “sheep,” “pan,” “book”). It uses measure words when stipulating the quantities of things denoted by mass nouns (e.g., “a cup of tea”), and the number of units when speaking of groups of things/beings denoted by countable nouns (e.g., “a crowd of people,” “a flock of sheep”), but does not need measure words when talking about the individual things/beings represented by countable nouns (e.g., “two pens,” “a person”).

Chinese classifiers differ in that they are used not only to indicate the quantity of uncountable things and groups of countable things/beings, but also to indicate the number of individual countable things/beings. So, while in English we can simply say “three pens,” in Chinese we have to say “three CLASSIFIER pen.” In the case of pens, the classifier is 枝 *zhī*, meaning “stick,” so what the Chinese is say is something like a “three stick of pen.”

Classifiers normally have to be included in any Chinese noun phrase including a number, a demonstrative, or certain determiners.

The most common classifier is 個 *ge*, which can be applied to a large variety of objects. Other classifiers have more limited uses, only being used for objects of a certain nature. 張 *zhāng* is used for thin things or considerable extension bed sheets and paper (a verb, 張 *zhāng* means “spread”); he classifier 枝 *zhī*, which used for sticklike objects, is in origin a noun meaning “branch” or “twig.” 台 *tái* is used for machines. There are well over a hundred classifiers all told.

- 一個人 *yī ge rén*, a person
- 那個瓶子 *nèi ge píng-zi**, that bottle
- 一個小的袋子 *yī ge xiǎo de dài-zi**, one/a small bag
- 這張紙 *zhè zhāng zhǐ*, this sheet of paper
- 一枝筆 *yī zhī bǐ*, a pen
- 三台電腦 *liǎng tái diàn-nǎo*, three computers
- 每一隻豬 *měi yī zhī zhū*, every pig