

A new system of Parts of Speech in Chinese

Shou-hsin Teng, Ph.D
Professor of Chinese Linguistics

In the system of parts of speech adopted in this series, there are at the highest level a total of 8 parts of speech, as given below. This system includes the following major properties. First and foremost, it is errors-driven and can address some of the most prevailing errors exhibited by learners of Chinese. This characteristic dictates the depth of sub-categories in a system of grammatical categories. Secondly, it employs the concept of ‘default’. This property greatly simplifies the over-all framework of the new system, so that it reduces the number of categories used, simplifies the labeling of categories, and takes advantage of the learners’ contribution in terms of positive transfer. And lastly, it incorporates both semantic as well as syntactic concepts, so that it bypasses the traditionally problematic category of adjectives by establishing three major semantic types of verbs, viz. action, state and process.

Adv	Adverb (dōu ‘all’, dàgài ‘probably’)
Conj	Conjunction (gēn ‘and’, kěshì ‘but’)
Det	Determiner (zhè ‘this’, nà ‘that’)
M	Measure (ge, tiáo; xià, cì)
N	Noun (wǒ ‘I’, yǒngqì ‘courage’)
Part	Particle (ma ‘question particle’, le ‘completive verbal particle’)
Prep	Preposition (cóng ‘from’, duìyú ‘regarding’)
V	Action Verb, transitive (mǎi ‘buy’, chī ‘eat’)
Vi	Action Verb, intransitive (kū ‘cry’, zuò ‘sit’)
Vaux	Auxiliary Verb (néng ‘can’, xiǎng ‘would like to’)
V-sep	Separable Verb (jiéhūn ‘get married’, shēngqì ‘get angry’)
Vs	State Verb, intransitive (hǎo ‘good’, guì ‘expensive’)
Vst	State Verb, transitive (xǐhuān ‘like’, zhīdào ‘know’)
Vs-attr	State Verb, attributive (zhǔyào ‘primary’, xiùzhēn ‘mini-’)
Vs-pred	State Verb, predicative (gòu ‘enough’, duō ‘plenty’)
Vp	Process Verb, intransitive (sǐ ‘die’, wán ‘finish’)
Vpt	Process Verb, transitive (pò (dòng) ‘lit. break (hole)’, liè (fèng) ‘lit. crack (a crack)’))

Notes:

Default values: When no marking appears under a category, a default reading takes place, which has been built into the system by observing the commonest patterns of the highest frequency. A default value can be loosely understood as the most likely candidate. A default system results in using fewer symbols, which makes it easy on the eyes, reducing the amount of processing. Our default readings are as follows.

Default transitivity. When a verb is not marked, i.e. V, it's an action verb. An unmarked action verb, furthermore, is transitive. A state verb is marked as Vs, but if it's not further marked, it's intransitive. The same holds for process verbs, i.e. Vp is by default intransitive.

Default position of adjectives. Typical adjectives occur as predicates, e.g. 'This is *great!*' Therefore, unmarked Vs are predicative, and adjectives that cannot be predicates will be marked for this feature, e.g. zhǔyào 'primary' is an adjective but it cannot be a predicate, i.e. *Zhètiáolù hěn zhǔyào. '*This road is very primary.' Therefore it is marked Vs-attr, meaning it can only be used attributively, i.e. zhǔyào dàolù 'primary road'. On the other hand, 'gòu' 'enough' in Chinese can only be used predicatively, not attributively, e.g. 'Shíjiān gòu' '*?Time is enough.', but not *gòu shíjiān 'enough time'. Therefore gòu is marked Vs-pred. Employing this new system of parts of speech guarantees good grammar!

Default wordhood. In English, words cannot be torn apart and be used separately, e.g. *mis- not –understand. Likewise in Chinese, e.g. *xǐbùhuān 'do not like'. However, there is a large group of words in Chinese that are exceptions to this probably universal rule and can be separated. They are called 'separable words', marked -sep in our new system of parts of speech. For example, shēngqì 'angry' is a word, but it is fine to say *shēng tā qì* 'angry at him'. Jiéhūn 'get married' is a word but it's fine to say *jiéguòhūn* 'been married before' or *jiéguò sāncì hūn* 'been married 3 times before'. There are at least a couple of hundred separable words in modern Chinese. Even native speakers have to learn that certain words can be separated. Thus, memorizing them is the only way to deal with them by learners, and our new system of parts of speech helps them along nicely. Go over the vocabulary lists in this series and look for the marking –sep.

Now, what motivates this severing of words? Ask Chinese gods, not your teachers! We only know a little about the syntactic circumstances under which they

get separated. First and foremost, separable words are in most cases intransitive verbs, whether action, state or process. When these verbs are further associated with targets (nouns, conceptual objects), frequency (number of times), duration (for how long), occurrence (done, done away with) etc., separation takes place and these associated elements are inserted in between. More examples are given below.

Wǒ jīnnián yǐjīng kǎoguò 20cì shì le!! (I've taken 20 exams to date this year!)

Wǒ dàoquò qiàn le; tā hái shēngqì! (I apologized, but he's still mad!)

Fàng sāntiān jià; dàjiā dōu zǒu le. (There will be a break of 3 days, and everyone has left.)

Shou-hsin Teng, Ph.D

Professor of Chinese Linguistics

University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Mass, USA

(retired)

National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, Taiwan

(retired)

Maa Fa Luang University, Chiang Rai, Thailand

(current)

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