

A tripartite system of verb classifications in Chinese

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English has a clear division between verbs and adjectives, but the boundary in Chinese is quite blurred, which quite seriously misleads English-speaking learners of Chinese. The error in *Wǒ jīntiān shì máng. ‘I am busy today.’ is a daily observation in Chinese 101! Why is it a common mistake for beginning learners? What do our textbooks and/or teachers do about it, so that the error is discouraged, if not suppressed? Nothing, much! What has not been realized in our profession is that Chinese verb classification is more strongly semantic, rather than more strongly syntactic as in English.

Verbs in Chinese have 3 sub-classes, namely Action Verbs, State Verbs and Process Verbs. Action Verbs are time-sensitive activities (beginning and ending, frozen with a snap-shot, prolonged), are will-controlled (consent or refuse), and usually take human subjects, e.g. ‘chī-eat’, ‘mǎi-buy’ and ‘xué-learn’. State Verbs are non-time-sensitive physical or mental states, inclusive of the all-famous adjectives as a further sub-class, e.g. ‘ài-love’, ‘xīwàng-hope’ and ‘liàng-bright’. Process Verbs refer to instantaneous change from one state to another, ‘sǐ-die’, ‘pò-break, burst’ and ‘wán-finish’.

The new system of parts of speech in Chinese as adopted in this series is built on this very foundation of this tripartite verb classification. Knowing this new system will be immensely helpful in learning quite a few syntactic structures in Chinese that are nicely related to the 3 classes of verbs, as will be illustrated with negation in Chinese in the section below.

The table below presents some of the most important properties of these 3 classes of verbs, as reflected through syntactic behaviour.

	Action Verbs	State Verbs	Process Verbs
Hěn- modification	✗	✓	✗
Le- completive	✓	✗	✓
Zài- progressive	✓	✗	✗
Reduplication	✓ (tentative)	✓ (intensification)	✗
Bù- negation	✓	✓	✗
Méi- negation	✓	✗	✓

Here are more examples of 3 classes of verbs.

Action Verbs: mǎi ‘buy’, zuò ‘sit’, xué ‘learn; imitate’, kàn ‘look’

State Verbs: xǐhuān ‘like’, zhīdào ‘know’, néng ‘can’, guì ‘expensive’

Process Verbs: wànglè ‘forget’, chén ‘sink’, bìyè ‘graduate’, xǐng ‘wake up’

Negation. Negation in Chinese is by means of placing a negative adverb immediately in front of a verb. (Remember that adjectives in Chinese are a type of State verbs!) When an action verb is negated with ‘bu’, the meaning can be either ‘intend not to, refuse to’ or ‘not in a habit of’, e.g.

Nǐ bù mǎi piào; wǒ jiù bú ràng nǐ jìnqù! (If you don’t buy a ticket, I won’t let you in!)

Tā zuótiān zhěng tiān bù jiē diànhuà. (He did not want to answer the phone all day yesterday.)

Dèng lǎoshī bù hē jiǔ. (Mr. Teng does not drink.)

‘Bù’ has the meaning above but is independent of temporal reference. The first sentence above refers to the present moment or a minute later after the utterance, and the second to the past. A habit again is panchronic. But when an action verb is negated with ‘méi(yǒu)’, its time reference must be in the past, meaning ‘something did not come to pass’, e.g.

Tā méi lái shàngbān. (He did not come to work.)

Tā méi dài qián lái. (He did not bring any money.)

A state verb can only be negated with ‘bù’, referring to the non-existence of that state, whether in the past, at present, or in the future, e.g.

Tā bù zhīdào zhèjiàn shì. (He did not/does not know this.)

Tā xiǎng gēn nǐ qù. (He wants/wanted to go with you.)

Niǔyuē zuìjìn bú rè. (New York was/is/will not be hot.)

A process verb can only be negated with ‘méi’, referring to the non-happening of a change from one state to another, usually in the past, e.g.

Yīfu méi pò; nǐ jiù rēng le? (You threw away perfectly good clothes?)

Niǎo hái méi sǐ; nǐ jiù fàng le ba! (The bird is still alive. Why don’t you let it free?)

Tā méi biyè yǐqián, hái děi dǎgōng. (He has to work odd jobs before graduating.)

As can be gathered from the above, negation of verbs in Chinese follows neat patterns, but this is so only after we work with the new system of verb classifications as presented in this series. Here’s one more interesting fact about negation in Chinese before closing this section. When some action verbs refer to some activities that result in something stable, e.g. when you put on clothes, you want the clothes to stay on you, the negation of those verbs can be usually translated in the present tense in English, e.g.

Tā zěme méi chuān yīfu?? (How come he is naked?)

Wǒ jīntiān méi dài qián. (I have no money with me today.)

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