A new system of Parts of Speech in Chinese

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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’, kēshí ‘but’)
Det Determiner (zhè ‘this’, nà ‘that’)
M    Measure (ge, tiào; xià, cì)
N    Noun (wǒ ‘I’, yǒngqì ‘courage’)
Part Particle (ma ‘question particle’, le ‘completive verbal particle’)
Prep Preposition (cóng ‘from’, duì ‘regarding’)
V    Action Verb, transitive (mǎi ‘buy’, cì ‘eat’)
Ví   Action Verb, intransitive (kù ‘cry’, zuò ‘sit’)
Vaux Auxiliary Verb (néng ‘can’, xiàng ‘would like to’)
V-sep Separable Verb (jiēhūn ‘get married’, shēngqì ‘get angry’)
Vs   State Verb, intransitive (hǎo ‘good’, guì ‘expensive’)
Vst  State Verb, transitive (xǐhuàn ‘like’, zhīdào ‘know’)
Vs-attr State Verb, attributive (zhǔyào ‘primary’, xiūzhēn ‘mini-’)
Vs-pred State Verb, predicative (gǒu ‘enough’, duō ‘plenty’)
Vp   Process Verb, intransitive (sì ‘die’, wán ‘finish’)
Vpt  Process Verb, transitive (pō (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. zhūyào ‘primary’ is an adjective but it cannot be a predicate, i.e. *Zhētiáolù hén zhūyào. ’*This road is very primary.’ Therefore it is marked Vs-attr, meaning it can only be used attributively, i.e. zhūyào dāolù ‘primary road’. On the other hand, ‘gòu’ ‘enough’ in Chinese can only be used predicatively, not attributively, e.g. ‘Shìjiān gòu’ ‘*Time is enough.’, but not *gòu shìjiān ‘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. *xībùhùān ‘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 shèng 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 pace and these associated elements are inserted in between. More examples are given below.

Wǒ jīn nián yījǐng kǎoguò 20cǐ shì le!! (I’ve taken 20 exams to date this year!)
Wǒ dàoguò qiàn le; tā hái shēngqì! (I apologized, but he’s still mad!)
Fàng sāntiān jià; dājiā dōu zǒu le. (There will be a break of 3 days, and everyone has left.)

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