An Introduction to Mandarin Chinese Grammar for ESL Professionals

by

Stephen M. Kraemer
American English Institute
University of Oregon
skraemer@uoregon.edu
• © copyright 2011 Stephen M. Kraemer
Importance of Mandarin

• Number of Mandarin speakers
• Number of ESL learners with Mandarin as L1
Chinese Language (Mandarin)

• Standard Mandarin, based on the dialect of Beijing.
• Romanization: Pinyin
• Tonal language—each syllable has a tone
• Pinyin tone marks
Some Common Grammar areas for the ESL Learner

• Word order
Some Common Grammar areas for the ESL Learner

- Prepositions
- Question words
- Verb tense
- Singular/Plural
- There is/There are
- Subject verb agreement
Prepositions
Zai ("at")

- "Zai" is a "Coverb".

- A Coverb is a transitive verb which comes before the main verb of the sentence and is similar to a preposition in English (John DeFrancis (1976, page 83)).
Zai ("at")

- S + Zai + Place word + V
- S + Zai + Place word + VO
Zai ("at")

- S + Zai + Place word + V

- Wo zai daxue xuexi.
- I at university study.

- I study at the university.

- S + V + Preposition + article + Place word
Zai ("at")

- S + bu + zai + Place word + V

- Wo bu zai daxue xuexi.
- I not at university study.

- I do not study at the university.

- S + do not + V + Preposition + article + Place word
Zai ("at")

- S + Zai + Place word + VO

- Tamen zai zher mai shu.
- They at here sell books.

- They sell books here.
- S + VO + Place word
Zai ("at")

• S + bu + zai + Place word + VO

• Tamen bu zai zher mai shu.
• They not at here sell books.

• They do not sell books here.
• S + do not + VO + Place word
Question Words

- Shenmo (what?)
- Nar (where?)
- Ma (question particle)
shenmo (what?)

• S + Zai + Place word + V + shenmo?

• Tamen zai zher mai shenmo?
• They at here sell what?

• What do they sell here?
• Question Word + auxV + S + V + Place word ?
Nar (where?)

- S + Zai + nar (Place word) + VO?
- Ni zai nar chi fan?
- You at where eat (food)?

Where are you eating?
- Question Word + auxV + S + V?
Ma (question particle)
ma

• S + Zai + Place word + VO + ma?

• Tamen zai zher mai shu ma?
  • They at here sell books (question particle)?

• Do they sell books here?

• Do + S + VO + Place word?
Verb Tense
Verb Tense

- Mandarin uses particles (such as “le” for past) or context, such as time words, to indicate verb tense. There are no separate verb tenses in Mandarin as there are in English.
Xuexi ("study")

- S + Zai + Place word + V
- Wo zai daxue xuexi.
- I at university study.
- I study at the university. I am studying at the university.
- S + V + Preposition + article + Place word
Lai (“come”)

- S + Time word + V + V + O
- Ta mingtian lai mai shu.
- He tomorrow come buy book.
- He will come tomorrow to buy books.
- S + V + Time word + to V + O
You ("have")

- "You" as a verb.
- ("have")
You (“have”)
Singular/Plural

• Most Mandarin nouns do not indicate singular or plural. Number is indicated by context.
You ("have")

- S + V + O
- S + you + O
- Wo you shu.
- I have book.
- I have a book.
- I have books.
- S + V + article + O
- S + V + O + s (plural)
You ("have")

- S + V + number + measure word + O
- S + you + number + measure word + O

- Wo you yi ben shu.

- I have one (measure) book.
- I have one book.
- I have a book.

- S + V + number + O
- S + V + article + O
You ("have")

- $S + V + \text{number} + \text{measure word} + O$
- $S + \text{you} + \text{number} + \text{measure word} + O$

- Wo you san ben shu.

- I have three (measure) book.

- I have three books.

- $S + V + \text{number} + O (s)$
You (“have”/“there is/there are”)

• “You” as a verb.
• (“have”/“there is/there are”)

•

  •

  •
You ("have"/"there is/there are")

- Place word + V + quantifier + N
- Place word + you + quantifier + N

- Zher you hen duo shu.
- Here have many books. (Here there are many books.)

- There are many books here.
- There are quantifier + N(s) + place word
- There V + quantifier + N(s) + place word
You ("have"/"there is/there are")

- Place word + \text{V} + \text{quantifier} + \text{N}
- Place word + \text{you} + \text{quantifier} + \text{N}

- Niu Yue \text{you} hen duo che.

- New York \text{have} (\text{there are}) \text{many vehicle}.

- There are \text{many vehicles} in New York.
- There are \text{quantifier} + \text{N (s)} + \text{prep.} + \text{place word}
- There \text{V} + \text{quantifier} + \text{N (s)} + \text{prep.} + \text{place word}
SV agreement

• There is no subject verb agreement in Mandarin.
You ("have")

- S + V + number + measure word + O
- S + you + number + measure word + O

- Wo you san ben shu.
- Ta you san ben shu

- I have three (measure) book.
- He(She) have three (measure) book.

- I have three books.
- He(She) has three books.

- S + V + number + O (s)
Ta (He/She)

• S + V + number + measure word + O
• S + you + number + measure word + O

• Ta you san ben shu.
• Ta you san ben shu

• He have three (measure) book.
• She have three (measure) book.

• He has three books.
• She has three books.

• 3rdperson S + V(s) + quantifier + N(s)
References