

China Perspectives

MODERN CHINESE GRAMMAR I

SYNTAX

WANG Li

Translated by **WANG Bo** and **MA Yuanyi**



Modern Chinese Grammar I

Focusing on the fundamental grammatical units and construction in modern Chinese, this title is the first volume of a classic on modern Chinese grammar by WANG Li, one of the most distinguished Chinese linguists.

Based on the corpus of two classic Chinese novels and being part of a four-volume set that describes the various linguistic patterns of modern Chinese grammar, this volume first distinguishes Chinese characters from words, categorizes words into different word classes and discusses the different word classes according to the number of syllables. The complex structures, which include phrases, sentences and various grammatical constructions such as those of optative, causative, disposal, passive, annex and retrenched, are then classified and elaborated on. Drawing on Otto Jespersen's theory, the author applies the notion of rank to construct a new framework for Chinese grammar.

Including a wide variety of examples and analyses, this book is a must-read for Chinese language learners, as well as researchers and students studying Chinese linguistics and modern Chinese grammar.

WANG Li (1900–1986) has been widely recognized as one of the founders of modern linguistics in China. He led extensive research on Chinese linguistics, covering areas such as phonetics, phonology, grammar, lexicography, historical linguistics and dialectal studies.

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Abbreviations

*	incorrect or ungrammatical usage
APART:	adverbial particle
ASP:	aspect marker
AUX:	auxiliary
CLA:	classifier
CON:	connective
CV:	coverb
DE:	“的” (<i>de</i>)
DISP:	voice coverb: dispositive, e.g. object marker “把” (<i>bǎ</i>)
EMPH:	emphatic
FEM:	feminine gender
HON:	honorific
INTJ:	interjection
MADV:	modal adverb
MAS:	masculine gender
MOD:	verbal particle: modal
NEG:	verbal particle: negative, e.g. “不” (<i>bù</i>)
NEUT:	neuter gender
NPART:	nominal particle
ORD:	marker of ordinal number
PART:	particle
PASS:	passive, e.g. passive marker “被” (<i>bèi</i>)
PM:	plural marker, e.g. “们” (<i>mén</i>)
PV:	postverb
SPART:	sentence particle
VADV:	verbal adverb
VPART:	verbal particle

Translators' foreword

Introducing Wang Li

Wang Li (1900–1986) was widely acknowledged as one of the most important Chinese linguists (see e.g. Zhang & Wang 1992; Cen 2008; Wang & Zhang 2008 for biographical accounts of Wang Li). His research area covered a wide range of topics in Chinese linguistics, including grammar of modern Chinese, grammar of ancient Chinese, Chinese phonology, experimental phonetics, history of the Chinese language, Chinese language teaching, dialectology, lexicography, as well as versification of classical Chinese poetry. He produced various seminal and groundbreaking works in the Chinese academia, such as the first grammar of modern Chinese that treated modern Chinese in its own right (see Wang 1943) and the first monograph that documented the history of the development of the Chinese language (Wang 1958). In addition, Wang Li was an important poet, translator and essayist in the Chinese context and wrote various non-academic books.

Wang Li had a profound influence on linguistics in general, and his influence has been worldwide. Michael Halliday (1985: 4), the founder of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), has openly acknowledged the influence of Wang Li on his thinking about language and linguistics: “Wang Li taught me many things, including research methods in dialectology, the semantic basis of grammar, and the history of linguistics in China” (cf. Halliday 2017; see also Wang & Ma 2022). Also, various studies have summarized Wang Li’s influences on linguistics and have highlighted his contributions (e.g. Hu 1991; Peng 2015).

Wang Li and *Modern Chinese Grammar*

Based on his teaching material, Wang Li’s (1943) *Modern Chinese Grammar* describes the various linguistic patterns of modern Chinese and is regarded as a classic on Chinese grammar. It is a book that presents a wonderful summary of modern Chinese grammar, encompassing syntax, lexis and the Western influence on modern Chinese. Different from previous works that choose to consider the language of both modern and ancient Chinese, *Modern Chinese Grammar* selects the modern Beijing dialect as its data. In addition, Wang Li has treated modern

Chinese in its own right rather than foisting English grammar on that of Chinese (cf. Ma Jianzhong [1898], who produced the first book on Chinese grammar in the late Qing Dynasty). Also, Wang Li did not restrict himself to researches by Chinese scholars but also referred to works by foreign scholars, such as Jespersen and Bloomfield.

When Wang Li began to write this book, he had already studied Chinese grammar for 21 years and had experienced four stages in the development of his ideas on grammar (see author's preface in Wang 1943). (1) The first stage is that of **presumptuousness**. When Wang Li was a Chinese teacher at the age of 20, he misunderstood the function of grammar by overemphasizing the use of empty words in his teaching. As a result, he observed a very awkward style in the essays written by his students. (2) The second stage is that of **blindness**. At the age of 24, after being admitted to a private university in Shanghai, Wang Li began to learn English and was interested in English grammar. Later, at the National Research Institute, Tsinghua University, he wrote his thesis titled *Grammar of Ancient Chinese Prose*. As he himself reflected, his mistakes in this period included his focus on word class without acknowledging the unique features of Chinese grammar, as well as his search for the foundation of Chinese grammar only from English grammar rather than from other languages around the world. (3) The third stage is that of **suspicion**. Wang Li continued to be interested in Chinese grammar during this period. However, after realizing that doing research on Chinese grammar would take a very long time, he chose to produce his thesis on experimental phonetics when studying for his PhD degree at the University of Paris (Wang 1932). In 1936, he published a paper titled "An Initial Exploration of Grammatics in China" (中国文法学初探) (Wang 1936), indicating his doubts over previous researches on Chinese grammatics. (4) The fourth stage is that of **enlightenment**, which started from the publication of "Copula in Chinese Grammar" (中国文法中的系词) (Wang 1937). In this period, Wang Li began to summarize patterns of Chinese grammar based on his observation of language and conducted some analyses of the data he collected. He further wrote two books on Chinese grammar, viz. *Modern Chinese Grammar* (中国现代语法) (Wang 1943) and *Theory of Chinese Grammar* (中国语法理论) (Wang 1945), which complemented each other, with one focusing on description of grammatical patterns and the other focusing on theory.

Wang Li's (1943) *Modern Chinese Grammar* is a groundbreaking monograph that marks the period of innovation and maturation in the literature of Chinese grammatics (see e.g. Peverelli 2015). We can summarize the advantages of this book from the following perspectives: (1) It is corpus-based, with the examples being selected from two classic novels in Chinese literature. (2) It provides a unique way of describing Chinese lexis and syntax. (3) It examines the influence of Western languages on Mandarin Chinese and has significance in cultural and historical studies. (4) It offers one of the first attempts in applying the ideas of Jespersen (e.g. 1933) and Bloomfield (e.g. 1935) to the description of modern Chinese grammar. (5) It is a further development of Jespersen's (e.g. 1933) work by classifying rank in modern Chinese into primary, secondary and final.

Despite the significance of this book, it has never been translated into English and introduced to a wider audience outside of China. Therefore, we aim to provide

an English translation of this book with the following purposes: (1) to present Wang Li's description of modern Chinese grammar and to contribute to the area of language description and typology; (2) to provide resources for scholars, including systemic functional linguists, who are interested in Wang Li's theories; (3) to introduce Wang Li's linguistic theories worldwide, thus promoting the classic works by Chinese scholars; (4) to build connections between Wang Li's theories on Chinese linguistics and other linguistic theories abroad.

Conventions in this book

Wang Li adopts a relatively complex system in his classification of the phenomena in Chinese grammar. In our translation, we treat Arabic numerals as a higher rank in the ordering, with capitalized letters and lowercase letters representing lower ranks. The ordering in the coinage of disyllabic words discussed in Chapter 8, Volume IV, is taken here as an example:

- (1) Application of the original disyllabic words
 - (A) The meaning of a word is close to its original meaning
 - (B) The part of speech of a word is changed
 - (C) Incorporation
 - (D) Combination
- (2) Coinage of disyllabic words
 - (A) Synonymous disyllabic words
 - (a) Originally, no Chinese word shares the same meaning with a word in a Western language; hence there is the need for coinage
 - (b) A monosyllabic word is changed to a disyllabic one
 - (B) Compound words
 - (C) Transliteration
 - (a) Complete transliteration
 - (b) A mixture of transliteration and meaningful Chinese characters
 - (c) Transliteration that may have considered the meanings of Chinese characters

In addition, the examples in this book are ordered by capitalized letters, following the order of A), B) and C). If not indicated, the source of the examples will mostly be *A Dream in Red Mansions (Hongloumeng)* (红楼梦) written by Cao Xueqin. We also present the examples with pinyin, interlinear glossing and back translation into English for the convenience of readers who cannot read Chinese characters. In this way, the examples will be of the following style:

Example in Chinese: 他的身体很健康。

Pinyin: tā de shēn tǐ hěn **jiàn kāng**.

Interlinear glossing: his (he-DE) body very **healthy**.

Back translation: He is very healthy.

The back translation is a literal translation of the example. It is added for readers to understand Chinese grammar rather than to appreciate the beauty of the classical novel. Hence, words such as “翠烟桥” (*cui yān qiáo*; green-smoke bridge) is simply translated as “Cuiyan Bridge” rather than “Green Smoke Bridge.” One can also consult the highly acclaimed English translations of *Honglouloumeng*, such as *The Story of the Stone* translated by David Hawkes and John Minford, as well as *A Dream of Red Mansions* translated by Xianyi Yang and Gladys Yang.

In the examples, we often find sentences without subjects. Based on the context provided in *Honglouloumeng*, we have reinstated the omitted subjects in the back translation. In the following sentence, the subject is in fact Sister Feng, who recounts on how she discovered that others were trying to kill her. Thus “I” is added as the subject.

在窗户外头听了一听。(Chapter 44)

zài chuāng hu wài tóu tīng le yì tīng.

be at window outside **listen** ASP **once listen.**

I listened to it for a while outside the window.

As a feature of the Chinese language in the period when *Honglouloumeng* was written, the personal pronoun “他” (*tā*; he) may be either masculine, feminine or neuter. It is only after the Europeanization of modern Chinese that feminine and neuter personal pronouns are coined (see Chapter 1, Volume III and Chapter 13, Volume IV). In our back translation, however, we have differentiated the gender of the pronouns based on the context of the novel. For instance, in the following two examples, the instances of “他” (*tā*; he) refer to a parrot and a lady respectively.

Referring to the parrot:

又将素日所喜的诗词，也教与他念。(Chapter 35)

yòu jiāng sù rì suǒ xǐ de shī cí, yě jiāo yǔ tā niàn.

then DISP ordinary day VPART like DE poem, **also** teach to it read.

She then taught the poems she liked at ordinary times to it to read.

Referring to the lady:

他这么利害，这些人肯依他么？(Chapter 66)

tā zhè me lì hai, zhè xiē rén kěn yī tā me?

she such **formidable (benefit-harm)**, these people willing comply with MOD?

She's so formidable. Would these people be willing to comply with her?

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Introduction

(1) What is language?

Language is a tool for expressing one's thoughts or emotions. Since human beings all have the need to express their thoughts and emotions, they all have their languages. The language of the lowest level is expressed by gesture; at present, when we shake our heads to indicate negation or wave our hands to beckon to others, we are using the vestige of gesture language. For human beings, the most commonly-used language is spoken language, i.e. language in a narrow sense. Despite being convenient, spoken language cannot be transported to a distant place or to a later time, thus civilized or semi-civilized nations have created written language to replace spoken language. Written language is also one kind of language and can also be referred to as literary language.

Language is a product of society, hence each society has its own language. Among nations, further ambiguities will be found, and variations between languages are used to show variations between nations. The language of a nation is called a national language (“族语” [zú yǔ; nationality-language]). Although a national language is often the language used in the country (“国语” [guó yǔ; state-language], i.e. Mandarin), as seen in China, two or more countries can also share one national language, as in the UK and the United States. In linguistics, we use only a national language rather than a language of a country as a unit. In a strict sense, the language of the Chinese country (“中国语” [zhōng guó yǔ; China-language]), which is commonly used, should be the language of the Han nationality (“汉语” [hàn yǔ; Han-language]).

(2) What is grammar?

Grammar is the structural mode of a national language. A language has three basic elements: (1) speech sound, i.e. the set of sound used by people in the nation to express their thoughts and emotion; (2) vocabulary, i.e. the application of certain speech sounds to indicate certain concepts; and (iii) grammar, i.e. the combination of various concepts and the applications of certain methods to indicate the relationships between things. For instance, “白马” (bái mǎ; white horse; white horse) is read as *paima*, which is the speech sound; the application of the speech sound to

2 Introduction

indicate the white horse is known as vocabulary; “白” (*bái*; white) must be placed before “马” (*mǎ*; horse), with a change of meaning being observed by reversing their order, and this is grammar. Compared with speech sound and vocabulary, grammar can be a better characteristic of a national language; thus we can apply the similarities in grammar to show the similarities between nations. For example, by comparing the dialects in north China with those in Wu, Yue (Guangdong), Min and Gan, although sharp contrasts are found in speech sound and vocabulary, few variations occur in grammar; therefore, we can assert that people who follow such a grammar are all Han people.

Grammar is different from written grammar and spoken grammar. Written grammar refers to the structural mode of essays and belongs to written language just discussed, whereas spoken grammar belongs to spoken language. Grammar, however, includes both spoken language and written language. Written grammar and spoken grammar do not evolve simultaneously. Sometimes written grammar evolves to a certain degree, while spoken grammar does not adopt the method right away. For instance, we are allowed to use “素来多病的我” (*sù lái duō bìng de wǒ*; used more sick DE I; I that has been constantly sick) according to the new written grammar, but it has not been used in the common spoken language. Sometimes spoken grammar evolves to a certain stage, but the usage cannot be employed in essays. For instance, “他们没来呢还” (*tā men méi lái ne hái*; they not have come MOD yet; They have not come yet.) is allowed in the grammar of the spoken Beijing dialect, whereas common people will not write in this way. The grammar we deal with in this book includes both spoken grammar and written grammar.¹

(3) What is Chinese grammar?

Let's suppose a British person is learning Chinese grammar with you and you have told him the following words: “马” (*mǎ*; horse) is a noun, “白” (*bái*; white) is an adjective, “跑” (*pǎo*; run) is a verb, etc. Then you go on by saying: In the sentence of “狗咬吕洞宾” (*gǒu yǎo lǚ dòng bīn*; dog bite Lǚ Dongbin [a celestial being]), “狗” (*gǒu*; dog) is the subject, “咬” (*yǎo*; bite) is the verb and “吕洞宾” (*lǚ dòng bīn*; Lǚ Dongbin) is the object, etc. The British person will probably be very disappointed because you have only extracted some terms from English grammar, without telling him about the structural mode of the Chinese language. In the future, had he spent more time in China, he will ask you the following questions: What are the differences between “呢” (*ne*; MOD) and “吗” (*ma*; MOD)? Why can we say “我把他打了一顿” (*wǒ bǎ tā dǎ le yí dùn*; I DISP him beat ASP one CLA; I beat him up.) rather than * “我把他爱” (*wǒ bǎ tā ài*; I DISP him love)? Why can we say “他被我打了一顿” (*tā bèi wǒ dǎ le yí dùn*; he PASS me beat ASP one CLA; He was beaten by me.) rather than * “他被我赏了十块钱” (*tā bèi wǒ shǎng le shí kuài qián*; he PASS me award ASP ten yuan money)? These questions really deal with the structural mode of language. If you cannot answer these questions, you do not really know Chinese grammar but have merely extracted some terms from English grammar.

Grammar is the structure of a national language. When grammar is separated from the structural features of a national language, there will be no grammar. Various terms in grammatics are merely tools that help indicate the features of a national language. If one merely extracts the terms in grammar but does not discuss these features, she has not really discussed the grammar of a national language. Each language has a particular grammar of its own, which will never be the same as the grammars of other national languages. Among nations, the more distant their relationship is, the fewer similarities they share in grammar. It would be indeed impossible to create a universal grammar for the whole world. Also, it would be extremely unnatural and irrational if we were to borrow the grammars of Western languages to be the grammar of the Chinese language. In that way, various trivial differentiations will become superfluous for Chinese, while the major features may not be identifiable by borrowing another grammar. Therefore, the purpose of this book is to indicate the features of Chinese grammar. We will neither impose the differences between Chinese and Western languages on the similarities nor impose the similarities on the differences. We do not balk at contradicting the grammar books of Western languages, which are designed for Western languages and are not suitable to be applied to Chinese. However, this will not be regarded as a weakness of Western grammar. Similarly, our book is written for the Chinese language and cannot be applied to Western languages, and this should not be considered as our weakness.

The Chinese grammar we discuss takes the language in the Chinese nation as the standard; further, the language in the Chinese nation takes the language used by educated people in Beijing as a standard. We cannot deny that the dialects in the different provinces are all qualified to be Chinese. From a linguistic perspective, all dialects are equal. We cannot say either that the Beijing dialect is better than other dialects or that only the Beijing dialect is qualified to be Chinese. However, if we discussed the dialects spoken in different provinces respectively, the book would be a monograph in linguistics, and our everyday readers will then not be interested in it. In addition, we do not have the energy to write such a book because most dialects have not yet been investigated in detail. Therefore, we focus on the standard language rather than discussing dialects simultaneously. This will make our discussions explicit and detailed. We will sometimes add “Contrastive Grammar” at the end of certain chapters to encourage our readers’ general interest in dialects. This approach will also draw the attention of people in non-Mandarin-speaking areas to examine the differences between their grammars and Mandarin grammar, so that they can learn some Mandarin.

(4) What is modern Chinese grammar?

The term “modern” as used here does not mean only the past ten or twenty years. *A Dream in Red Mansions* (红楼梦) was written more than two hundred years ago, but we still regard the grammar in the book as modern because it is more or less the same as the current grammar of the Beijing dialect.

Conversely, Europeanized grammar is not a perfect modern Chinese grammar because it is often only seen in essays written by scholars and has not yet been

adopted in spoken language. Even if it is adopted into spoken language, it will be used by a small number of intellectuals in a limited way. Therefore, Europeanized language is only a specialized language of modern times. Our *Modern Chinese Grammar* focuses on the language of the Chinese people in general rather than on the essays of intellectuals. As a result, this special language is discussed only in Part 2 in Volume IV and is not mentioned in other chapters.

Why do we need a separate chapter for Europeanized grammar? It is because Europeanization is becoming increasingly powerful. Although it is not qualified to be regarded as modern Chinese grammar, it could become the future Chinese grammar. Therefore, we cannot completely ignore such a trend in modern Chinese. It is written in a separate chapter because we hope readers can clearly differentiate indigenous Chinese grammar from Europeanized grammar. This will be necessary from a historical perspective.

There is the difference between classical/ancient writing (“文言文” [wén yán wén]) and modern writing (“白话文” [bái huà wén]). On the surface, classical Chinese is an ancient language, and modern Chinese is a modern language. As a matter of fact, in terms of vocabulary, the boundary has already become blurry. In terms of grammar, when asked to write classical essays, more than 90% of modern Chinese people do not know classical Chinese grammar but merely apply some ancient vocabulary based on modern grammar. Therefore, there is no need for us to differentiate the grammars of ancient writing and modern writing. In future works, such as *Ancient Chinese Grammar* and *A History of Chinese Grammar*, classical grammar will be explored; for the classical essays published in newspapers and magazines, they are mostly based on modern grammar and should not be treated separately. Furthermore, some pronouns (e.g. “其” [qí; he/she/it, his] and “之” [zhī; he/she/it]) and particles (e.g. “于” [yú; VPART] and “所” [suǒ; VPART]) are residues of ancient grammar and have not yet become obsolete in modern grammar; they are thus also discussed in this book.

(5) Why study modern Chinese grammar?

A grammar book will not make one's essay or language more beautiful. It will only make one's essay plausible or congruent to the structure of the national language. In fact, essays that are based on the common spoken language will also be plausible. Therefore, native speakers of the Beijing dialect will read this book only out of their interest in linguistics rather than with a purpose of gaining any knowledge in practicing their spoken language. For a non-native speaker of the Beijing dialect, especially people from Jiangsu, Zhujiang, Fujian, Jiangxi, Guangdong and Guangxi Provinces, their written or spoken Chinese may sometimes not conform to the grammar of Mandarin Chinese. In these cases, this book can help them make their Chinese appropriate.

Even a native speaker of the Beijing dialect can also sometimes write an inappropriate modern essay. This is because they do not understand the grammatical meanings of the ancient vocabulary in modern writings, such as “其” (qí; he/she/it, his), “之” (zhī; he/she/it), “于” (yú; VPART) and “所” (suǒ; VPART), thereby

producing essays that conform neither to common spoken grammar nor to ancient written grammar. Therefore, we have especially elaborated on the usages of words such as “其” (*qí*; he/she/it, his), “之” (*zhī*; he/she/it), “于” (*yú*; VPART) and “所” (*suǒ*; VPART) in detail in this book.

In grammar, there is no right or wrong, but only appropriateness or inappropriateness. We cannot say that an inappropriate essay is wrong because we do not admit the existence of an exemplary grammar. Grammar is merely a habit of using a language; it is something conventionalized, and there is no absolute right or wrong. However, since national language is the product of a society, it should naturally follow the conventions in a society; otherwise, it will be improper and inappropriate. A grammar book falls in the field of linguistics and is not designed for short-term practice; to view it negatively, a grammar book can help people follow the conventions of a language, maintain the relative constancy of a national language, and be geared to practice.

In sum, a grammar book evolves with the national language and should never become a set of unchangeable golden rules. The inappropriate sentences we see today may become grammatical several decades from now when language has evolved to a certain stage. In this respect, a grammar book cannot prevent a national language from evolving. It can only impart the following words to its readers: “Our grammar is currently like this; before the national language evolves, a minor violation by an individual will be regarded as inappropriate, and a major violation will make your words incomprehensible to everyone.” Here lies the usefulness of a grammar book to people in general.

Note

- 1 The spoken language (文 *wén*) and written language (话 *huà*) we discuss here are different from classical Chinese (文言 *wén yán*) and modern Chinese (白话 *bái huà*), which in general belong to different times. The spoken language and written language belong to the same period of time.

1 Character and word

As Chinese people, we write Chinese characters every day. It seems unnecessary to explain what a character is. However, such is not the case. Perhaps you only know that each block in a Chinese book represents one character, but you may not know that each speech sound can also be referred to as a character. For instance, in “他低声说了两个字” (*tā dī shēng shuō le liǎng ge zì*; he low voice say ASP two CLA **character**; He murmured two words.) or “他今天见我，对于那件事，一字不提” (*tā jīn tiān jiàn wǒ, duì yú nà jiàn shì, yí zì bù tí*; he today see me, about that CLA event, one **character** not mention; He saw me today and said nothing about that event.), all these characters are used in spoken language and have nothing to do with written language.

Why would each block in writing and each sound in speech be called words? It is because each square in books represents one sound in spoken language. When we write our speech down as words, we use one character to represent one sound. When we read, we have to read (either aloud or in silence) the sound of each square and then understand its meaning. In this way, the square and the sound are two forms of the same thing; thus they share the same name.

For grammarians, a character has the two of the previously mentioned meanings, whereas in most cases, a character indicates only one speech sound. This is because we attach more importance to speech than to writing in that written language is only a tool for recording a language.

Sometimes, one character can have one meaning, such as “马” (*mǎ*; horse), which is a kind of animal with four feet, and “剑” (*jiàn*; sword), which is a weapon used in ancient times. However, in certain cases, two characters can have one meaning; for example, “葡萄” (*pú tao*; grape) means one kind of fruit, while “葡” (*pú*), one of the two characters, does not have such a meaning. In terms of grammar, the components of language that represent one meaning are referred to as words. Therefore, “马” (*mǎ*; horse) and “剑” (*jiàn*; sword) are words, whereas “葡” (*pú*) and “萄” (*táo*) are merely characters rather than words. Only when “葡” (*pú*) and “萄” (*táo*) are combined as “葡萄” (*pú tao*; grape) can we regard the combination as a word. In this light, some words are formed by one character and are called monosyllabic words; some words are formed by two characters and are called disyllabic words.

How can we identify disyllabic words?¹ Is “糊涂” (*hú tu*; confused) a disyllabic word? Yes, it is. Even though the character “糊” (*hú*; paste) and “涂” (*tú*; blot out) are meaningful when used independently (e.g. “糊 窗户” [*hú chuāng hu*; paste window] and “把这两个字涂掉” [*bǎ zhè liǎng ge zì tú diào*; DISP these two CLA character blot out]), their separate meanings have nothing to do with the combined meaning of “糊涂” (*hú tu*; confused). By saying “糊涂” (*hú tu*; confused), we only mean “confused” rather than “to paste and then blot out.” Reversely, when we mean “confused”, we have to combine the two characters rather than using “糊” (*hú*; paste) or “涂” (*tú*; blot out) independently. Therefore, “糊涂” (*hú tu*; confused) is a disyllabic word.

Is “身体” (*shēn tǐ*; body) a disyllabic word? Yes, it is. If we separate the two characters as “身” (*shēn*; body) and “体” (*tǐ*; body), we will find that they have the same meaning; when combined, they also have one meaning only. When two characters with identical meanings (e.g. “身体” [*shēn tǐ*; body]) or similar meanings (e.g. “保养” [*bǎo yǎng*; take care]) are combined, they are much easier for our addressees to understand. For instance, you can advise your friend to “保养身体” (*bǎo yǎng shēn tǐ*; take care body), which is easier to understand than “养身” (*yǎng shēn*; take care body), despite the fact that “保养身体” (*bǎo yǎng shēn tǐ*; take care body) and “养身” (*yǎng shēn*; take care body) are equivalent. Therefore, both “身体” (*shēn tǐ*; body) and “保养” (*bǎo yǎng*; take care) are disyllabic words.

Is “故意” (*gù yì*; on purpose) a disyllabic word? Yes, it is. Our ancestors would only use “故” (*gù*; on purpose) (e.g. “明知故犯” [*míng zhī gù fàn*; clearly know on purpose commit]). By saying “故意” (*gù yì*; on purpose), its meaning becomes easier to understand. However, the meanings of “故” (*gù*; on purpose) and “意” (*yì*; expect) are neither identical nor similar and are only slightly related. Therefore, “故意” (*gù yì*; on purpose) and “身体” (*shēn tǐ*; body) are different kinds of disyllabic words.

Are “桌子” (*zhuō zi*; table) and “石头” (*shí tou*; stone) disyllabic words? Yes, they are. “桌子” (*zhuō zi*; table) stands for “桌” (*zhuō*; table) rather than the son (i.e. “子” [*zǐ*; son]) of a table; “石头” (*shí tou*; stone) stands for “石” (*shí*; stone) rather than the head (i.e. “头” [*tóu*; head]) of stone. “子” (*zǐ*) and “头” (*tóu*), which are bound to the names of things, are referred to as markers. We will discuss this topic in detail in Chapter 4, Volume II.

Are “这么” (*zhè me*; like this) and “那么” (*nà me*; like that) disyllabic words? Yes, they are. “么” (*me*) is also one kind of marker. However, “这么” (*zhè me*; like this) and “这” (*zhè*; this) have different meanings, so do “那么” (*nà me*; like that) and “那” (*nà*; that). Thus they are of a different category as “桌子” (*zhuō zi*; table) and “石头” (*shí tou*; stone).

Is “芥菜” (*jiè cài*; leaf mustard) a disyllabic word? Yes, it is. “芥” (*jiè*; mustard) is one kind of vegetable (i.e. “菜” [*cài*; vegetable]). “芥” (*jiè*; mustard) represents a narrow category of vegetable, while “菜” (*cài*; vegetable) represents a broad category. Alternatively, we can use “芥” (*jiè*; mustard) to refer to the vegetable, but to help our addressees to understand easily, the name of the broad category is bound

to the name of the narrow category. When the two characters are combined, “芥菜” (*jiè cài*; leaf mustard) has only one meaning and is therefore a disyllabic word.

Are “兄弟” (*xiōng dì*; brother) and “妻子” (*qī zǐ*; wife) disyllabic words? Yes, they are. They were not disyllabic words in ancient times, but are disyllabic words in modern Chinese (also in the Beijing dialect). In *Mencius*, one can find the following sentence: “兄弟妻子离散” (*xiōng dì qī zǐ lǐ sàn*; elder brother little brother wife son scatter; The elder brother, the little brother, the wife and the son were scattered.), in which “兄” (*xiōng*; elder brother) is the elder brother, “弟” (*dì*; little brother) is the little brother, “妻” (*qī*; wife) is the female spouse and “子” (*zǐ*; son) is the son. These four characters are all monosyllabic words. However, in modern Chinese, “兄弟” (*xiōng dì*; brother) merely refers to little brother, and “妻子” (*qī zǐ*; wife) only refers to the female spouse. They have thus become disyllabic words.

Is “先生” (*xiān sheng*; gentleman, teacher) a disyllabic word? It depends. If in “先生者为兄，后生者为弟” (*xiān shēng zhě wéi xiōng, hòu shēng zhě wéi dì*; first born man be elder brother, later born man be little brother), “先生” (*xiān shēng*; first born) is certainly not a disyllabic word because “先” (*xiān*; first) and “生” (*shēng*; born) have their own meanings. However, in “这位先生很会教书” (*zhè wèi xiān sheng hěn huì jiāo shū*; this CLA teacher very good at teaching; This teacher is very good at teaching.), “先生” (*xiān sheng*; teacher) is a disyllabic word because it has only one meaning.

Are “妹妹” (*mèi mei*; little sister) and “慢慢” (*màn màn*; slowly) disyllabic words? Yes, they are. “妹妹” (*mèi mei*; little sister) is equivalent only to “妹” (*mèi*; little sister) and is thus a disyllabic word. Although “慢慢” (*màn màn*; slowly) is not totally equivalent to “慢” (*màn*; slow) (“慢慢” [*màn màn*; slowly] is more emphatic in meaning), it has only one meaning and is thus a disyllabic word. However, we should note that “试试” (*shì shì*; have a try) and “看看” (*kàn kan*; have a look) are not disyllabic words because they are abbreviations of “试一试” (*shì yí shì*; try once try; have a try) and “看一看” (*kàn yí kàn*; look once look; have a look).

The best way to identify disyllabic words is to insert one character between the two original characters. If the word is still comprehensible after inserting one character, it is not considered a disyllabic word. For instance, on the one hand, “说话” (*shuō huà*; say word) is not a disyllabic word because we can insert an additional character, changing it to “说大话” (*shuō dà huà*; say big word) or “说好话” (*shuō hǎo huà*; say good word). On the other hand, take “故意” (*gù yì*; on purpose) – a disyllabic word – for example, we can never insert any character between “故” (*gù*; on purpose) and “意” (*yì*; expect).

A word, be it monosyllabic or polysyllabic (disyllabic, trisyllabic, etc.), has one meaning only. However, one may doubt whether “火车” (*huǒ chē*; train), “轮船” (*lún chuán*; ship), “银行” (*yín háng*; bank) and “图书馆” (*tú shū guǎn*; library) should be regarded as words. Suppose we regard them as words, they have yet two meanings, such as the vehicle powered by fire (“火” + “车”: *huǒ chē*; fire-vehicle), the wheeled boat (“轮” + “船”: *lún chuán*; wheel-boat), the silver-saving firm (“银” + “行”: *yín háng*; silver-firm) and the place for collecting books