Grammar – A Basic Course!

Your object is to speak Chinese, or English. To achieve this goal you must understand that words alone communicate ineffectively! Communication is not by words alone but by groups of words formed together into units called sentences. It doesn't do much good to learn a thousand Chinese words (or English words) without first learning how to place these words into word combinations (sentences) that follow each language's norms. This what, where and when is called "grammar." Grammar is the essence of the language and the second hardest thing* about learning to speak Chinese! Why? Because Chinese grammar and English grammar are so flippin' different! And because the syntax is so different, this makes it difficult also for Chinese people to learn English because their system is regimented in set patterns, while our's has many ways to accomplish the same end! Although English grammar does have many different word orders (ways you can make sentences) this does not mean that every way is correct. Many of the Chinese word order methods are incorrect English patterns. This causes problems in both directions. Chinese grammar in many situations is fixed (rigid – having only one way) which necessitates American and English speakers to learn what is correct as well as incorrect; while Chinese speakers learning English must also learn correct and incorrect word patterns. Although English speakers must deal with the hardest facet, learning how to correctly tone words as well as learning the words themselves (and sometimes words can be spelled the same but have entirely different meanings by the way you tone the word … flip to "buy" and "sell" in Chapter 17 for the best example of this), Chinese speakers must deal with the largest vocabulary in the world, approximately 1 million words in the English language, as well as dialectical mispronunciations of the same word and thousands of sounds that sound the same but are spelled differently. So it is not easy either way. Nonetheless, as previously stated, learning a multitude of words is ineffective without learning how to use those words in sentences.

In this regard, when words are kept to a minimum, 1 subject, 1 verb, 1 object, the sentences in both languages are easy and to the point:

SUBJECT	+	VERB	+	OBJECT.
We	+	**buy**	+	**things.**
We	+	buy	+	things.
Wǒmen	+	mǎi	+	dōngxi.
我 们	+	买	+	东 **西** 。

In either Chinese or English, hundreds of such sentences can be made. Yet people generally want more. They want to know what you bought, where you bought it, when you bought it, why you bought it, even how you bought it, etc. It is these whats and wheres and whys that complicate both languages! Phrases and clauses. That's what's hard to blend into the basic pattern of SUBJECT + VERB + OBJECT, your phrases and clauses. Once you start "modifying" the basic SUBJECT + VERB + OBJECT pattern, you need to know what you are doing in order to communicate effectively.

* - Many people think properly "toning" the words is the hardest!

In English, modifiers come before the Object:

SUBJECT	+	VERB	+	MODIFIER	+	OBJECT.
We	+	**bought**	+	**three**	+	**bus tickets.**

after the object:

SUBJECT	+	VERB	+	OBJECT	+	MODIFIER.
We	+	**bought**	+	**bus tickets**	+	**to the zoo**.

or even before and after the object:

SUBJECT	+	VERB	+	MODIFIER	+	OBJECT	+	MODIFIER.
We	+	**bought**	+	**three**	+	**bus tickets**	+	**to the zoo**.

Furthermore, prepositions like "**to**" in "**to the zoo**" oftentimes play important roles in linking these MODIFYING PHRASES to the OBJECT. So important are these prepositions in their roles that they are called "prepositional phrases." In Chinese however, prepositions are not used as often, and sometimes take on other parts of speech roles, as well. Many times prepositions are assumed and not used at all! (Incidentally, when prepositions are used they are usually placed before the verb).

One of the hardest lessons in both languages is prepositions, or the lack of them! In this connection, in Chinese, verbs take on phrase-modifying qualities that come before the Object. In English you say, " **… bus tickets to the zoo**." In Chinese you turn it around, " … to the zoo bus tickets." and add a verb to the front of it as well, " … go to the zoo bus tickets."

Here then is one of the most important Chinese lessons you will learn: Verbal Phrases come before the Object, and are linked with "DE". Consequently lets' call them, Verbal OBJECT Modifying Phrases.

SUBJECT	+	VERB	+	VERBAL OBJECT MODIFYING PHRASE	+	DE	+	OBJECT:
We	+	bought	+	go to (the) zoo	+		+	bus tickets.
Wǒmen	+	mǎi le	+	qù dòngwùyuán	+	de	+	chēpiào.
我 们	+	买 **了**	+	**去** 动 **物 园**	+	**的**	+	车 **票**。

In English the sentence is:
We bought bus tickets to the zoo.

But in Chinese:
We bought go to the zoo DE bus tickets.

How many bus tickets? “Number” comes before objects, and before “Verbal Object Modifying Phrases”:

I	**bought**	**three**		**bus tickets to the zoo.**			
I	bought	three		go to (the)	zoo		bus tickets.
Wǒmen	mǎi le	sān	zhāng	qù	dòngwùyuán	de	chēpiào.
我 们	买 **了**	**三**	张	**去**	动 **物 园**	**的**	车 **票** 。

If you choose to not describe where you are going with the bus fares, the modifier, “Number,” still remains in the same position … that of “modifying” the Object:

We	bought	three		bus tickets.
Wǒmen	mǎile	sān	zhāng	chēpiào.
我 们	买 **了**	**三**	张	车 **票** 。

Notice that the “DE” is not used here because of two reasons. 1: “Numbers” describing “how many” of an item use “Measure Words. “Zhang” is the measure word for bus fares and tickets, etc. And 2, the adjective “sān” (three) is monosyllabic (has only 1 syllable.) 1 syllable adjectives, etc. do not require “DE.” 2 syllables and more, do. “Xīn” (new), for example, has only one syllable, and one syllabic words usually are not followed by “DE”:

Like	**your**	**new**	**car?**	
Like	your	new	car	yes / no?
Xǐhuan	nǐde	xīn	qìchē	ma?
喜 欢	**你 的**	**新**	**汽** 车	吗 ？

But if the word were “piányi” (cheap), because “piányi” has two syllables, you might then use “DE”:

We	**bought**	**cheap**		**bus tickets.**
We	bought	cheap		bus tickets.
Wǒmen	mǎi le	piányi	[de]	chēpiào.
我 们	买 **了**	**便 宜**	**的**	车 **票** 。

In some sentences, however, (as in the above), “DE” is optional.

Like	**your**	**cheap**	**car?**	
Like	your	cheap	car	yes / no?
Xǐhuan	nǐde	piányi	qìchē	ma?
喜 欢	你 的	便 宜	汽 车	吗 ？

There is an exception however to the 1 syllable rule: WHEN the one-syllabic word, such as “xīn” (new) is modified by an adverb, such as “very”, or adverbs, such as “comparatively better”, then the one-syllable adjective DOES require “DE”:

We	bought	(a) very	new		car.
Wǒmen	mǎile	hǎo	xīn	de	qìchē.
我 们	买 了	好	新	的	汽 车 。

Like	**your**	**comparatively**	**better**		**new**	**car?**	
Like	your	comparatively	better		new	car	yes / no?
Xǐhuan	nǐde	bǐjiào	hǎo	de	xīn	qìchē	ma?
喜 欢	你 的	比 较	好	的	新	汽 车	吗？

Time Words:

In Chinese, the time word, such as “Tuesday” or “this week” is usually placed right after the subject (the noun or pronoun, such as “I” or “Timothy”) at the beginning of the sentence. This is usually before the main verb, which is opposite of how it is done in English. Examples:

I will come back the day after tomorrow.

I	day after tomorrow	come back.
Wǒ	hòutiān	huílai.
我	後 天	回 来 。

The restaurant opens at 10 o’clock.

(The) Restaurant	10 o’clock	opens.
Fàndiàn	shí diǎn	kāimén.
饭 店	十 点	开 门 。

This is for specific days and dates, etc. The exception to this rule is when a period of time is referred to. Then the time is placed after the verb, a little more American-style:

I	**lived**	**in**	**China**		**for**	**three**	**years.**
I		in	China	lived		three	years.
Wǒ		zài	Zhōngguó	zhù le		sān	nián.
我		在	中 国	住 了		三	年。

(**Chinese Grammar Note**: *Although most numbers require an appropriate measure word, the words* "nian" *and* "tian" *do not use measure words!*)

Another important aspect is that time words require no prepositions in front of them! In English, a very preposition-dependent language, we place "in" "at" "on" "by" "for", etc. in front of time words such as days, dates, weeks and years, etc.

"I am leaving **on** Wednesday." "I will be back **by** Friday." " … **for** three years."

Both languages are beautiful in their own ways. One of the beauties of Chinese is that you simply state the time without a preposition in front of it:

Where did you go at midnight?

You	midnight	went	where?
Nǐ	bànyè	qù le	nǎr?
你	半 夜	去 了	哪 儿？

My mother is coming to see us on Saturday.

My	mother	Saturday	comes	to see	us.
Wǒ	māma	Xīngqīliù	lái	kàn	wǒmen.
我	妈 妈	星 期 六	来	看	我 们 。

I	**lived**	**in**	**China**		**for**	**three**	**years.**
I		in	China	lived		three	years.
Wǒ		zài	Zhōngguó	zhù le		sān	nián.
我		在	中 国	住 了		三	年 。

Nouns Do Not Change From Singular To Plural:

Nouns in Chinese do not change from singular to plural. There is no plural "s" Hànzi. There are a couple exceptions (which we won't go into) but generally "shū" for "book" is the same word you use for "books" - "shū". In Chinese, the primary way of distinquishing a plural is not by the noun changing, but by adding a number in front of the word:

one book, 1 book	=	yī běn shū	一 本 书
two books, 2 books,	=	liǎng běn shū	两 本 书
a couple of books	=	. . .	. . .
three books, 3 books	=	sān běn shū	两 本 书

Quantifying Nouns Require Measure Words:

In English you simply say "three people." The Chinese language however has developed a system which requires a number or a demonstrative adjective ("this", "those", etc.) to be immediately followed by what is called a Measure Word or a Classifier when that number or demonstrative adjective is in front of a noun. "Three people" written in Chinese as thus, "sān rén ", is therefore incorrect.

NUMBER + NOUN reguires MEASURE WORD.

The correct phrase is: "sān gè rén".

NUMBER + MEASURE WORD + NOUN.

There are hundreds of such measure words, but only fifty or so are commonly used. It is not the number or the demonstrative adjective which determines which Measure Word you use but the noun. For example, the most commonly used measure word is "gè", which is generally used for people, many objects, and time. "Gè" is also recommended for the Chinese newbie to use when he / she is not sure which measure word to use. It is a general all-purpose measure word. Nonetheless, one of the ways Chinese people discern how learned you are in their language is by how well you have mastered using the correct measure word!

Possessive Adjectives And Nouns:

"De" has to be one of the most commonly used words. A few pages ago we mentioned its use in Verbal Object Modifying Phrases. It's most common usage however is when something is possessive of something else:

"friend 's book"
"péngyou de shū"

"San Francisco 's scenery"
"Jiùjīnshān de fēngjǐng"

As you can see, “de” is the Chinese way of writing “ ’s ” – the “apostrophe s” in English.
In this connection, even pronouns, many of which take on possessive characteristics, use “de”:

“Wǒ” (I, me) usually becomes “my” by adding “de” to it: “Wǒde”

“Tā” (he / him) usually becomes “his” by adding “de” to it: “Tāde”

There are exceptions to these pronoun changes. For example, when referring to close family members, such as your father, your mother, your brother, your sister, your wife, your husband, your child, you can drop the “de” and still mean “my”:

“Wǒ bàba”
“My father”

“Wǒ zhàngfu”
“My husband”

But when referring to your girlfriend, who is not a “close family” member, you should use “de”:

“Wǒde nǚpéngyǒu”
“My girlfriend”

Also, when there are too many “de”s and possession is obvious, some “de” s, may be eliminated:

“My	**friend’s**		**book.”**
“Wǒde	péngyǒu	de	shū”

might eliminate the first “de” and become:

“My	**friend’s**		**book.”**
“Wǒ	péngyǒu	de	shū”