1 Varieties of language and register

1.1 Introduction

It has been several centuries since non–native speakers around the
world first began systematically learning the Chinese language.
In imperial China, the Jesuit order published Chinese language
textbooks for use by their missionaries. Chinese has been widely
taught in universities and colleges in the West for many decades now,
and the demand for Chinese language instruction has been increasing
steadily, to the point where it is now taught in many secondary and
even primary schools in Europe and North America. If grammar
is considered in the narrower sense of rules for the expression of
differences in case, number, person, tense, and voice, then Chinese
is said by some to have little or very simplistic grammar. As a result,
learning Chinese often has been believed to be a tedious exercise
in rote memorization of words and expressions. However, as a
human language, Chinese definitely has a well–ordered structure and
organization, and therefore has a grammar.

From the learner–user's point of view, Chinese grammar also
needs systematic treatment, so that learning can become a more
logical and orderly process. Once basic grammar has been mastered
in a number of conventional contexts, one must proceed to develop
command of a more extensive vocabulary in a variety of different
situations and contexts in order to truly master it. It is the intention
of *Using Chinese* to address these and a variety of other issues, with
a view towards making the learning of Chinese a more sensible and
pleasant experience. In this book, the target language is modern
standard Chinese, 现代汉语 xiàndài Hànyǔ, also called Mandarin,
the standard spoken form: 普通话 pǔtōnghuà; the standardized
(generally known as the simplified) character form, 简体字 jiǎntǐzì,
is used for the written script; and the Romanization adopted is
the 拼音 pīnyīn system, or more officially: the Scheme for the
Chinese Phonetic Alphabet, which has been officially used in
China since 1958 and has now become the most widely used

Romanization system in textbooks and dictionaries around the world. On January 1, 2001, "The Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Language" went into effect. In this law the above-mentioned spoken, written, and Romanization forms are proclaimed as the standard.

The Chinese language, 中文 Zhōngwén, has a written history that can be traced back to about the middle of the second millennium BCE. It is one of two branches of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages and is used by the Han Chinese, 汉族 Hànzú, who make up 91.59% of China's 1.3 billion people, and by many Chinese who live elsewhere on every inhabited continent and on major islands around the world, estimated at around 30 million. The other 8.41% of the population in China speak one of many minority nationality languages, such as Mongolian, Tibetan, Uyghur, Dai, Naxi, Korean. The Chinese language in its many dialect forms is the native tongue of more people than any other language in the world, English being the second most widely spoken native tongue. Chinese is also one of the six official languages of the United Nations, the others being English, Arabic, French, Russian, and Spanish. Mandarin, 普通话 pǔtōnghuà, the standard language of China, is the native dialect of about 71% of its population, and is also spoken by educated speakers of other dialects. Mandarin is also the official language in Taiwan, and is one of the official languages in Singapore. In its broadest sense the Chinese language refers to all of the Chinese "dialects," so called because although they all read and write the same characters for the same meaning, their pronunciation of the same characters may differ as greatly as the Romance languages of Europe differ in their pronunciation of the same Latin root words, or their pronunciation of the Arabic numerals. The Chinese language, in both its written and spoken aspects, has been evolving for several millennia, but most historical linguistics scholars would say that the "modern Chinese" (Mandarin) era began around the time of the early Qing Dynasty (1644–1911).

There are a number of Chinese terms for the Chinese language: "汉语 Hànyǔ" meaning "Han language" and "中文 Zhōngwén," a more general term meaning "Chinese language" and "中国话 Zhōngguó huà" meaning "Chinese speech." There are also different terms used for what we call "Mandarin": "北方话 běifānghuà" meaning "northern speech"; "普通话 pǔtōnghuà" meaning "common speech" in mainland China; "华语 Huáyǔ" meaning "Chinese language," mostly used by overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, and "国语 guóyǔ" meaning "national language" used mostly in Taiwan.

1.2   The Chinese language and its distribution

1.2.1   Modern Chinese

When we speak of the "modern Chinese language," 现代汉语 xiàndài Hànyǔ, or Mandarin 普通话 pǔtōnghuà, we refer to the

language that is based on the northern dialect, taking Beijing pronunciation as its standard and taking well-known vernacular writings as the standard for its grammar. The origin of the term that we translate as "Mandarin" Chinese appears to be the older term "官话 guānhuà" which literally means "official speech." The English word "mandarin" is traceable to a Sanskrit term "mantrin," meaning "minister." The distinction between "Chinese language" and "Mandarin" is not just an academic one, for you may hear a Cantonese speaker say "Ngóh sik góng Jùngmàhn, ngh-sik góng gwok-yúeh," meaning "I speak Chinese, but not Mandarin." This makes sense when we consider that Mandarin is one of several dialects, all of which are "Chinese." While most urban Chinese today will be able to speak, or at least understand, Mandarin, it is spoken as the native tongue of Chinese in the area north of the Changjiang (Yangtze) River, and west of Hunan and Guangdong provinces.

Apart from Mandarin, other important dialect groups include: Wú (including Shanghainese), spoken in Jiangsu Province and Zhejiang Province; Mǐn (Fukienese), spoken in Fujian Province, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia; Yuè (Cantonese), spoken in Guangdong, Guangxi, Hong Kong, North America, and elsewhere by the Chinese diaspora; and Kèjiā (Hakka), spoken mostly in Guangdong and Jiangxi provinces. Following the growth of more universal education and mass media over the past century, Mandarin is now spoken by most educated Chinese in most cities throughout China.

1.2.2   Regional differences in spoken Chinese – the dialects

Most people living in northern, northeastern, and southwestern China, amounting to about three-quarters of all Chinese, are native speakers of a Mandarin sub-dialect: Beijing Mandarin, Shandong Mandarin, Sichuan Mandarin, etc. As mentioned above, the remaining quarter of the Chinese-speaking population is composed of about seven other major dialects, which mostly are mutually unintelligible. Their differences in pronunciation might be compared to the differences between French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese among the Romance languages.

1.2.3   Regional differences – within Mandarin

Regional differences in pronunciation of Mandarin within China are as great or greater than the varieties of English as spoken in England, Scotland, Ireland, Australia, the United States, and Canada. The difference between a Mandarin sub-dialect and a dialect is that sub-dialect speakers can mostly understand each other's speech, while the different dialects are often mutually unintelligible.

3

1 Varieties of language and register

Major Chinese dialect distribution:

| Dialect	Pop. (%)	Representative place where dialect is spoken	Region where dialect is spoken
普通话 pǔtōnghuà	71	北京 Běijīng	N of the Chángjiāng River 长江 & SW China
吴 Wú	9	上海 Shànghǎi	上海，苏州，杭州 Shànghǎi, Sūzhōu, Hángzhōu
湘 Xiāng	5	长沙 Chángshā	湖南 Húnán
粤 Yuè (Cantonese)	5	广州 Guǎngzhōu	广西，广东 Guǎngxī, Guǎngdōng
闽 Mǐn (Fukienese)	4	North: 福州 Fúzhōu South: 厦门 Xiàmén	福建，台湾，海南 Fújiàn, Táiwān, Hǎinán
客家 Kèjiā (Hakka)	4	梅县 Méixiàn	Mostly in Guǎngdōng, Jiāngxī, and Hakka communities in SE China
赣 Gàn	2	南昌 Nánchāng	江西 Jiāngxī

1.2.4 The spoken language

Spoken Chinese is an analytic, or isolating, language meaning that the vast majority of all morphemes, or syllables, are meaningful units of speech, which may in turn be combined with other meaningful syllables to form new words. There are only around 400 syllables in Modern Standard Chinese. Below are a few examples to illustrate the difference in the "feel" of a language whose words are mostly made up of meaningful syllables.

English	Chinese
crane	起重机 qǐ-zhòng-jī (raise-heavy-machine)
department store	百货公司 bǎi-huò-gōng-sī (100-goods-public-managed)
elevator	电梯 diàn-tī (electric-stairs)
encyclopedia	百科全书 bǎi-kē-quán-shū (100-category-total-book)

4

English	Chinese
escalator	滚梯 gǔn–tī (rolling-stairs)
library	图书馆 tú–shū–guǎn (chart-book-building)
microscope	显微镜 xiǎn–wēi–jìng (reveal-tiny-lens)
ophthalmology	眼科 yǎn–kē (eye department)
pedometer	计步器 jì–bù–qì (count-step-tool)
radio	收音机 shōu–yīn–jī (receive-sound-machine)
surgery	外科 wài–kē (external-department)
university	大学 dà–xué (major-learning)
telescope	望远镜 wàng–yuǎn–jìng (gaze-far-lens)
zebra	斑马 bān–mǎ (striped-horse)

All varieties (i.e. dialects or sub-dialects) of the Chinese language are
tonal. Each Mandarin syllable has four tones, although not all toned
syllables are meaningful syllables in modern Chinese.

The four tones
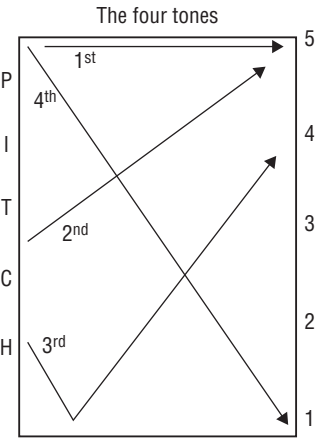
There is also a "neutral" tone, which could be considered as a fifth tone.

First tone (high–level):   mā, "妈, mother"
Second tone (high–rising):   má, "麻, hemp"
Third tone (dip–low–rising):   mǎ, "马, horse"
Fourth tone (falling):   mà, "骂, scold"
Neutral tone ("toneless"):   ma, 吗, verbalized question
                                                 mark

   These tonal distinctions are "built into" each spoken syllable, with
or without reference to the Chinese character that would be used to

5

write each different syllable. For example, the difference between "买
菜 mǎi cài" and "卖菜 mài cài" is significant: the former means "buy
groceries," while the latter means "sell groceries." "妈妈骂马 Māma mà
mǎ" means "Mom scolds the horse," while "马骂妈妈 Mǎ mà Māma"
means "The horse scolds Mom." Actually the meaning of the sample
sentence "Māma mà mǎ," depending upon the context of the utterance,
may be more general or more specific, and either singular or plural:
    "(The) Mom(s) scold(s) (the) horse(s)."
    In the context of speaking about things that happened yesterday,
the utterance "Māma mà mǎ" would mean:
    "(The) Mom(s) scolded (the) horse(s)."
    Verbs are not conjugated in Chinese. If it is not clear whether
we are talking about something in the past, present, or future, we
may add a time expression before the verb or at the beginning of
the utterance: for example, "妈妈昨天骂马 Māma zuótian mà mǎ,"
or "昨天妈妈骂马 Zuótian māma mà mǎ" where "昨天 zuótian,
yesterday" shows it is a past action. Thus there is no need for
verbalized declension to show past, present, and future tense of verbs
in Chinese, since "yesterday" (or "today" or "tomorrow" or "last
year"), which must always be expressed or implied before the verb,
removes the need for the addition of tense markers in verbs.
    Nor is there any need to verbalize distinctions between singular
and plural forms of nouns. If it is necessary to refer specifically to
more than one of a noun, it may be preceded by a specific number,
or by "some," or "a few," or "many." Once you have uttered a
number or a pluralizer like "several," then it is perfectly clear that the
noun which follows has been pluralized, so there is no need to mark
it any further: 书 shū, book or books; 一本书 yìběn shū, one book;
两本书 liǎngběn shū, "two book"; 很多书 hěnduō shū, "many
book"; 几本书 jǐběn shū, "a few book," etc., is every bit as clear as
"one book, two books, many books or a few books."
    One way to turn an indicative sentence into an interrogative
sentence is simply to add the interrogative particle (verbalized
question marker) "吗 ma" at the end of the sentence. Thus, to ask
the question "Does/Do Mom(s) scold(s) (the) horse(s)?" we may
simply say: "妈妈骂马吗？ Māma mà mǎ ma?"

1.2.5   The written language and writing system

When writing their language, Chinese speakers use a non-alphabetical
script called "characters, 字 zì." 中华字海 Zhōnghuá zìhǎi, *Sea of
Chinese Characters* (1994), contains 85,568 characters' entries, 3,500
of which are used the most frequently. In China, urban people are
considered literate if they have mastered 2,000 of the most frequently
used characters. In the countryside, the number is 1,500. However, a
well-educated person should know 5,000 to 7,000 characters.
    Most Chinese characters can be identified as belonging to one of
the following categories:

6

1. Pictograms such as:
    木   mù, tree
    山   shān, mountain
    水   shuǐ, water
    人   rén, person
    日   rì, sun
    月   yuè, moon
    马   mǎ, horse
2. Ideograms such as:
    上   shàng, above
    下   xià, below
    凸   tū, protruding
    凹   āo, concave
    二   èr, two
    三   sān, three
3. Meaningful compounds such as:
    从   cóng, follow (person following a person)
    旦   dàn, dawn (sun above the horizon)
    林   lín, woods (two trees)
    森   sēn, forest (three trees)
    晶   jīng, bright (three suns), also means "crystal"
    众   zhòng, crowd (three people)
4. Ideophonetic compounds such as:
    沐   mù, bathe: has something to do with "water,氵," and
             sounds something like "木 mù, wood" = "mù," "bathe"
    栋   dòng, pillar: has something to do with "wood, 木," and
             sounds something like "东 dōng, east" = "dòng," "pillar"
    晴   qíng, fair: has something to do with "sun,日," and
             sounds something like "青 qīng, blue/green" = "qíng,"
             "fair" (weather)
    清   qīng, clear: has something to do with "water,氵," and
             sounds something like "青 qīng, blue/green" = "qīng,"
             "clear" or "pure"
    请   qǐng, request: has something to do with "words, 讠," and
             sounds something like "青 qīng, blue/green" = "qǐng,"
             "ask," or "invite"

About 94% of all characters used today are either meaningful
compounds or ideophonetic compounds, the latter being the
great majority. The remaining characters are either pictographs or
ideographs. Therefore we may say that most Chinese characters are
neither completely phonetic nor completely ideographic, but rather,
they contain a "semantic hint" and a "phonetic hint."

1.3   Overview of register in Chinese

When linguists speak of "register" in a language, they refer to a
subset of a language used for a particular purpose or in a particular

7

social setting. The famous linguistics scholar M. A. K. Halliday
(1964) identified three broadly defined variables that help us
understand different types of register in a language: field (the subject
matter); tenor (the participants and their relationships); and mode
(the channel of communication – spoken, written, chatroom, etc.).
Martin Joos (1962) describes five styles: frozen (printed, unchanging
phrases, such as canonical quotations); formal (one-way participation,
no interruption, ritualistic); consultative (two-way participation,
interruptions common); casual (in-group friends, ellipsis and slang
common, interruptions common); and intimate (non-public, private
vocabulary). Quirk *et al.* (1985) distinguish five different registers
of formality in English, although they use the term "attitude"
rather than register: very formal, formal, neutral, informal, and
very informal. Such distinctions would seem to be quite helpful to
understand how register works in Chinese.

Native speakers of North American English usually are not so
conscious of the need to switch speech registers when talking with
people of different social distance, different professions, different age
groups, different degrees of closeness, or in different social contexts.
Perhaps the implicit assumptions of equality and individuality among
modern English speakers are not conducive to a focus on relationships,
which is precisely what is required to trigger a switch in speech register.

1.3.1   Illustrations of register

You (normal)	你 nǐ
You (polite)	您 nín
My father (normal)	我父亲 wǒ fùqin
My father (normal, less formal)	我爸爸 wǒ bàba
Your father (more formal)	您父亲 nín fùqin
My mother (normal)	我母亲 wǒ mǔqin
My mother (normal, less formal)	我妈妈 wǒ māma
Your mother (more formal)	您母亲 nín mǔqin
To visit a friend (normal)	看朋友 kàn péngyou
To visit the teacher (more formal)	拜访老师 bàifǎng lǎoshī
To eat at a restaurant (informal)	吃馆子 chī guǎnzi
To eat at a restaurant (more formal)	在饭馆儿吃饭 zài fànguǎnr chīfàn
To go by taxi (informal)	打的去 dǎdī qù
To go by taxi (normal)	坐出租车去 zuò chūzūchē qù
To order drinks (informal)	要喝的 yào hēde
To order beverages (more formal)	点饮料 diǎn yǐnliào
What would you like to drink? (informal)	喝点儿什么？ Hē diǎnr shénme?
What would you like to drink? (more formal)	您喝点儿什么饮料？Nín hē diǎnr shénme yǐnliào?

8

How old are you? (to children)	你几岁了？ Nǐ jǐsuì le?
How old are you? (to adults)	你多大了？ Nǐ duōdà le?
How old are you? (to older people)	您多大岁数了？ Nín duōdà suìshu le?
How old are you? (polite, to older people)	请问，您多大年纪？ Qǐngwèn, nín duōdà niánji?
How old are you? (extremely polite)	请问，您贵庚？ Qǐngwèn, nín guìgēng?
How are you? (informal)	怎么样啊？ Zěnmeyàng a?
How are you? (normal)	好吗？ Hǎo ma?
How are you? (normal)	你好！ Nǐ hǎo!
How are you? (more polite)	您好！ Nín hǎo!
My wife (to familiar people)	我那口子 wǒ nèikǒuzi
My wife (to familiar people)	我老爱 wǒ lǎo'ài
My wife (to familiar people)	我老伴儿 wǒ lǎobànr (also means "my husband")
My wife (to familiar people)	孩子他妈 háizi tā mā
My wife (common in PRC)	我爱人 wǒ àiren
My wife (normal)	我妻子 wǒ qīzi
My wife (normal now)	我太太 wǒ tàitai
My husband (to familiar people)	我那口子 wǒ nèikǒuzi
My husband (to familiar people)	我老爱 wǒ lǎo'ài
My husband (to familiar people)	我老伴儿 wǒ lǎobànr (also means "My wife")
My husband (to familiar people)	孩子他爸 háizi tā bà
My husband (common in PRC)	我爱人 wǒ àiren
My husband (normal)	我丈夫 wǒ zhàngfu
My husband (normal now)	我先生 wǒ xiānsheng
Your wife (normal)	你太太 nǐ tàitai
Your wife (a bit formal)	您太太 nín tàitai
Your wife (formal)	您夫人 nín fūren
Your husband (normal)	你丈夫 nǐ zhàngfu
Your husband (a bit formal)	您丈夫 nín zhàngfu
Your husband (formal)	您先生 nín xiānsheng
Teacher Liu (polite, to a teacher)	刘老师 Liú lǎoshī
Master Liu (polite, to skilled worker)	刘师傅 Liú shīfu
Section Chief Liu (formal)	刘科长 Liú kēzhǎng
Liu (older than speaker, familiar)	老刘 lǎo Liú (old Liu)
Liu (younger than speaker, familiar)	小刘 xiǎo Liú (young Liu)
Mr. Liu (normal, formal)	刘先生 Liú xiānsheng
Come in! (impolite, command)	进来！ Jìnlái!
Come in! (informal)	进来吧。 Jìnlai ba.
Please come in! (formal)	请进。 Qǐng jìn.

9

2 Vocabulary and usage

2.1 Parts of speech

Before they became aware of non-Chinese concepts of "parts
of speech" in the late nineteenth century, Chinese distinguished
primarily between "notional" words, 实词 shící, literally "substantive
words," and "function" words, 虚词 xūcí, literally "empty words."
The first Western-style grammar was that of Mǎ Jiànzhōng 马建忠
(1844–1900), the 1898 马氏文通 Mǎshì wéntōng, *Basic Principles for
Writing*. This very influential work introduced Chinese terminology
for parts of speech based on Latin, and cited classical Chinese
passages extensively to document short statements about syntax. The
book was revolutionary and remains a primary work. Over the last
century Chinese grammatical concepts such as nouns, 名词 míngcí,
literally "name words"; verbs, 动词 dòngcí, literally "motion words";
adjectives, 形容词 xíngróngcí, literally "description words"; adverbs,
副词 fùcí, literally "assisting words"; prepositions, 介词 jiècí, literally
"interface words"; conjunctions, 连词 liáncí, literally "connecting
words," etc., have become standard grammatical terms.

The most commonly used Chinese terms for what we consider to
be parts of speech are:

名词	míngcí	noun: 马 mǎ, horse
专有名词	zhuānyǒu míngcí	proper noun: 马玉婷 Mǎ Yùtíng
动词	dòngcí	verb: 骂 mà, to scold, to curse
代词	dàicí	pronoun: 她 tā, she
形容词	xíngróngcí	adjective: 美 měi, beautiful
副词	fùcí	adverb: 很 hěn, very
能愿动词	néngyuàn dòngcí	modal verb: 可以 kěyǐ, can; may
介词	jiècí	preposition: 替 tì, for
量词	liàngcí	measure word: 个 gè, as in 两个人, two people

10