

Grammar

I've heard that Chinese grammar is relatively easy. Is it true?

Yes, it is true. While Chinese sound and writing systems can be challenging for some learners, Chinese grammar is rarely deemed difficult.

Chinese is not an inflectional language, meaning it does not distinguish gender, person, tense, case, number, etc. Its sentence structures are mostly straightforward, and many of them overlap with English grammar. For example, the common English structure 'Subject + Verb + Object' structure, e.g. *I love you*, or *My dog ate my homework*, is also widely used in Chinese.

What are some of the unique characteristics of Chinese grammar?

Adjectives Are Verbs:

Adjectives, or stative verbs, function as verbs, and are usually preceded by an intensifier such as 'hěn' (very), or 'yǒudiǎnr' (a little). Use of shì , verb 'to be' , as is required in the English grammar (He *is* tall), is prohibited.

Some examples:

Zhōngwén hěn róngyì. ('Chinese very easy.') → Chinese is easy.
Yīngwén yǒudiǎnr nán. ('English a little hard.') → English is a little hard.

Note that the intensifier is dropped when a comparison is made:

Zhōngwén róngyì. ('Chinese easy.') → Chinese is easier.
Yīngwén nán. ('English hard.') → English is harder.

Principle of Temporal sequence:

Word order in a Chinese sentence can be very different from that in an English one, where the subject and verb often precede other linguistic units such as prepositions and time word, e.g. 'I went to New York by train with a friend last weekend.' A Chinese sentence, on the other hand, follows a temporal sequence principle in which word order is determined based on the relative sequence. The same sentence given above would look very different in Chinese:

English: 'I went to New York by train with a friend last weekend.'
Chinese: 'I last weekend with my friend(s) by train went to New York.'

In this sentence, 'I' came first, being the subject of the sentence, then came the weekend; at some point over the weekend, 'I' met up with friend(s) then took the train to go to New

York.

Another example:

English: 'Chinese eat with chopsticks, and Americans eat with a fork.'

Chinese: 'Chinese with chopsticks eat; Americans with a fork eat.'

Again, one needs to get his hands on the utensils first before he can start digging in his food, right?

Last example:

English: 'My father walked into my room when I was playing video games online.'

Chinese: 'When I was playing video games online, my father walked into my room.'

The same temporal order applies to abstract concepts as well.

English: 'I'll go if you go.'

Chinese: 'If you go, I will go.'

English: 'Let me know if you have any question.'

Chinese: 'If you have any questions, let me know.'

General to Specific; Large to Small:

Think of older versions of Google Map. When you type in an address, the first thing you see is Google Map trying to locate the state, then it zooms in onto the general area and gradually works its way to the exact street address. That's a very Chinese approach.

English: 333 Brook St., Room 306, Providence, RI 02860

Chinese: RI, Providence, Brook St., 333, Room 306

The same large-to-small principle applies to time as well:

English: It is now 10:10am, September 7, 2011.

Chinese: It is now 2011, September 7, morning, 10 o'clock, 10 minutes