

4.3 Time Phrases

4.3.1 Topic--comment

Phrases conveying ‘time when’ (as opposed to duration), like those that convey location of action (as opposed to destination) also generally appear *before* their associated verb:

Tā zuótiān bù shūfu, kěshi jīntiān hǎo le. He wasn’t well yesterday, but he’s okay today.

However, time phrases – but not usually location phrases – may also appear before the subject:

Zuótiān tā zěnmeyàng? How was she yesterday?
 Zuótiān tā bù shūfu, hěn lèi, yě hěn jǐnzhāng, suǒyǐ méiyǒu qù shàngkè. Yesterday, she didn’t feel well, [she] was tired and nervous, so [she] didn’t go to class.

Lǐbàiwǔ wǒmen dōu méiyǒu kè. None of us has class on Fridays.
 Xiètiān-xièdì! Thank heavens!

The difference – position before or after the subject – has to do with what you are talking about. Typically, first position in a Chinese sentence introduces the topic, and what follows is a comment on that topic:

Zuótiān tā zěnmeyàng? [About yesterday:] How was he yesterday?
 Zuótiān tā bù shūfu, jīntiān hǎo le. He wasn’t well yesterday, but he’s fine today.

Tā zuótiān zěnmeyàng? [About him:] How was he yesterday?
 Tā zuótiān juéde bù shūfu, hěn lèi, yě hěn jǐnzhāng. He didn’t feel well yesterday; he was tired, and anxious.

4.3.2 Clock time

a) The hours

Clock times are also ‘time when’ phrases, often appearing in conjunction with jīntiān, zuótiān or with words for divisions of the day like the following, based on roots zǎo ‘early’, wǎn ‘late’, and wǔ ‘noon’:

zǎoshàng	shàngwǔ	zhōngwǔ	xiàwǔ	wǎnshàng
morning	mid-morning	noon	afternoon	evening

Like English, where the term ‘o’clock’ derives from ‘of the clock’, clock time in Chinese is based on the word zhōng ‘clock’ (originally ‘bell’). Zhōng is measured out by diǎn ‘dots; points’ (cf. yìdiǎn ‘a bit’) to form phrases such as jiǔ diǎn zhōng (reduceable to jiǔ diǎn) ‘9 o’clock’. Time is questioned with jǐ: Jǐ diǎn zhōng? ‘What time is [it]?’ In asking or giving clock time, le is often present in final position, suggesting ‘by now’. Complex time phrases in Chinese move, like dates, from large units to small: zǎoshàng jiǔ diǎn ‘9 in the morning’; míngtiān xiàwǔ sān diǎn ‘tomorrow afternoon at 3’.

Xiànzài jǐ diǎn <zhōng> le? What time is it now?
 Shí diǎn. [It's] 10:00.

Zǎoshàng jiǔdiǎn dào shídiǎn I have a class from 9 -10 in the morning.
 yǒu kè.

Zhōngwén kè <shì> jiǔdiǎn dào Chinese class is 9 -10.
 shídiǎn.

b) Details

Fēn, literally 'divide; a part', is used for minutes (as well as cents); seconds are miǎo – both are measure words (so they can be counted directly):

jiǔ diǎn shí fēn 9:10 sān diǎn sānshíwǔ fēn 3:35
 shí'èr diǎn líng sì 12:04 liù diǎn shíwǔ fēn 6:15

The half hour is either 30 minutes (sānshí fēn) or bàn 'half' (after diǎn, the M-word):

Xiànzài jiǔ diǎn bàn le. It's now 9:30.
 Xiànzài jiǔ diǎn sānshí fēn le.

Quarter to and quarter past are expressed with kè, literally 'a cut' (from the notch that marked the measuring stick on old water clocks): yí kè 'quarter'. 'Quarter past' is yí kè (some say guò yí kè) added to the hour; 'quarter to' is chà yí kè 'less by one quarter', placed either before or after the (coming) hour. Older speakers, and people from Taiwan, sometimes use sān kè 'three quarters' for 'quarter to'.

jiǔ diǎn <guò> yí kè 'quarter past 9'
 chà yí kè shí diǎn 'quarter to 10'
 shí diǎn chà yí kè 'quarter to 10'

In general, time past the half hour can be expressed as a lack, using chà + minutes, placed either before or after the hour:

chà wǔ fēn shí diǎn 'five to 10'
 shí diǎn chà wǔ fēn
 chà yí kè sì diǎn 'quarter to 4'
 sì diǎn chà yí kè

Clock time – summary

Day and segment	to	hour	minutes (to/after)	<o'clock>
jīntiān zǎoshàng		yì diǎn	líng wǔ fēn	<zhōng>
zuótiān shàngwǔ		liǎng diǎn	shí fēn	
míngtiān zhōngwǔ		shí'èr diǎn	shíwǔ fēn ~ <guò> yíkè	
xiàwǔ		...	èrshíwǔ fēn	
wǎnshàng		...	sānshí fēn ~ bàn [sān kè]	
	chà shí fēn	...	chà shí fēn	
	chà yíkè	...	chà yíkè	
		Jǐ diǎn		<zhōng>?

In colloquial language, wǎnshàng extends until bedtime, even if it's very late; similarly, zǎoshàng is when you get up, even if it's very early:

Wǒ wǎnshàng liǎng diǎn shuìjiào, zǎoshàng shí diǎn qǐlai,
cóng shàngwǔ shíyī diǎn dào xiàwǔ sì diǎn yǒu kè.

Tiānwén kè shì xīngqīsì wǎnshàng Astronomy ('heaven-inscription') class is
shíyī diǎn dào liǎng diǎn. Thursday evenings, 11 to 2 am.

Where needed, more specialized time words are available, of course, eg: yèlǐ 'in the night', bànyè 'at midnight; late at night', língchén 'very early in the morning; before dawn', qīngzǎo 'early morning'.

Exercise 1.*Buying train tickets*

To buy a train ticket, you need to state the time and destination. Tickets are usually one-way, so that is not a variable. On short-distance express trains, such as the one from Shànghǎi to Nánjīng (stopping at Sūzhōu, Wúxī and Zhènjiāng), there is an option between soft seat (first class) and hard seat. But on long distance inter-city trains, there are commonly four types of ticket, plus a standing ticket.

yìngzuò 'hard-seat' yìngwò 'hard-berth'
ruǎnzuò 'soft-seat' ruǎnwò 'soft-berth'
zhànpiào 'standing-ticket'

Zhànpiào are sold (often for the same price) when yìngzuò are sold out. Berths are 4 (ruǎnwò) to a cabin, or 6 (yìngwò) to a section, with egress to toilets and washrooms as well as dining car by way of a corridor along the station side of the carriage. A team of service staff (fúwùyuán) keep the cabins clean, make beds, sell snacks and reading matter, and on some lines, even rent out portable TVs and other electronic equipment for the duration of the journey.

It is possible to buy tickets through hotels up to three days in advance, and most travelers do that (paying a service fee, shǒuxùfèi ‘procedure-fee’). Buying at the station is more difficult. There, you generally have to work your way up to a small ticket window and state your needs succinctly, along the lines indicated below. Tickets are counted with zhāng, the measure for flat things (tables, maps, photographs, etc.)

<i>Place</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Number</i>
Chéngdū	shàngwǔ jiǔ diǎn	ruǎnwò	liǎng zhāng

Now practice buying tickets according to the specifications indicated:

1.	Xīníng	4:00 this afternoon	hard berth	1
2.	Xī’ān	8 tomorrow morning	soft seat	2
3.	Hūhéhàotè	7 this evening	soft berth	3
4.	Lánzhōu	2:30 this afternoon	hard seat	1
5.	Hā’ěrbīn	tomorrow morn. 7	soft seat	2
6.	Guìlín	this afternoon 3:25	hard berth	1
7.	Chóngqìng	July 7, 7:00 pm	soft berth	4



Yìngwò, nǐ juéde shūfu ma? [JKW 2003]

4.3.3 Time of events (meals)

Meals are named by time of day added to roots such as fàn ‘rice; food; meals’, cān [tsān!] ‘meal’, or in the case of breakfast, diǎn ‘snack’ (cognate to yìdiǎn ‘a little’):

zǎofàn	zhōngfàn	wǎnfàn
zǎocān	zhōngcān	wǎncān
zǎodiǎn		

Recall that it is possible to express some uncertainty about time with the adverb dàgài ‘approximately; probably’. Other ‘hedging’ words include yěxǔ ‘maybe; probably; possibly’ and chàbuduō ‘approximately (less-not-much)’.

For now, it will only be possible to ask generic questions, such as ‘at what time do you eat breakfast’; questions about the past introduce a number of complications that will be dealt with later. So in addition to měitiān ‘everyday’ it will be useful to learn the following expressions, all built on cháng ‘often’, that have to do with habitual events:

cháng ~ chángcháng	often
píngcháng	usually
jīngcháng	frequently; often; regularly
tōngcháng	generally; normally

Usage

- Zhōngguó rén píngcháng jǐ diǎn chī zǎofàn?
What time do Chinese usually eat breakfast?

Dàgài liù dào qī diǎn ba. Měiguó rén ne?
About 6 to 7. How about Americans?

Měiguó rén ne, jīngcháng jiǔ diǎn shàngbān. Yěxǔ qī diǎn bàn, bā diǎn chī zǎofàn.
Americans generally start work at 9. So maybe they eat breakfast at 7:30 [or] 8:00.
- Xuéshēng ne, yīnwèi hěn máng, chángcháng zhǐ hē kāfēi bù chī zǎodiǎn.
Students, because they are so busy, they often just drink coffee and don’t eat breakfast.

Zhōngguó xuéshēng hěn shǎo shì zhèi yàngr. Zhōngguó xuéshēng tōngcháng chī zǎodiǎn.
Chinese students are rarely like that. Chinese students regularly eat breakfast.

Tāmen chī shénme?
Chī xīfàn, miàntiáo<r>.
What do they eat?
Rice porridge, noodles.
- Jǐdiǎn shàngkè? Jǐdiǎn xiàkè?
What time does class start? What time do [you] get out of class?

Wǒmen chàbuduō shí diǎn shàngkè shíyī diǎn xiàkè.
We start class at about 10 and end at 11.
- Chīguo zǎofàn le méi?
Have you eaten breakfast?

Hái méi ne.
Not yet.

Nǐ bú shì jiǔ diǎn yǒu kè ma? Isn't it the case that you have class at 9:00?
 Zěnmé hái méi chī zǎofàn ne? How come you haven't eaten breakfast yet?

Ai, wǒ bù xiǎng chī, wǒ hē *I don't feel like [any], I'll just have*
kāfēi jiù xíng le. *coffee [and that'll be fine].*

Notes

- a) Xīfàn ‘watery-rice’, a kind of gruel, to which pickles, preserved meats, vegetables and other items are added; similar to what is often called zhōu in some parts of the country.
- b) Miàntiáo ‘wheat[flour]-lengths’, generic for noodles.
- c) Nǐ bú shì... ‘isn't it the case that...’
- d) Xiǎng ‘think > feel like’

4.3.4 Business hours

bàngōng shíjiān	office hours
yíngyè shíjiān	business hours

Most urban communities in China have long operated on international business hours, often with adjustment for a longer lunch hour than most English speaking countries. Business hours (banks, offices) vary with region, but typically they are M-F, 8:30 – 5:30. Shops often keep much longer hours, and stay open on the weekend. Lunch breaks can run from 12 – 1:30 or even 2:00. Any sort of official meeting begins punctually. Here, more for reference at this point, are some basic queries about business hours:

Yíngyè shíjiān jǐ diǎn dào jǐ diǎn?	What are [your] business hours?
Nǐ jǐ diǎn kāimén?	When do you open (open door)?
Jǐ diǎn guānmén?	When do you close (close door)?

4.3.5 Time zones (shíqū)

It comes as a surprise for many people to find out that China operates on a single time zone, eight hours in advance of Greenwich Meantime (and conveniently, 12 hours in advance of the Eastern time zone of the US). Chinese lands far to the west are sparsely populated, so this system causes minimal disruption. For a period beginning in 1986, there was a daylight-savings shift (xiàshízhì ‘summer-time-system’), but this was found impracticable and was abandoned a few years ago (as of 2003). The word shíchā literally ‘time difference’, also means ‘jetlag’. (The noun form, chā, with level tone, is related to the verb form chà ‘to lack’, with falling tone.)

Shíchā hěn lihai.	The time lag / jet lag is bad!
Wo háishi hěn lèi – yīnwèi shíchā.	I'm still tired – because of the time lag.

Exercise 2.

Ask or explain:

1. What time do you bathe?
 2. I generally bathe in the morning at 6 or 7.
 3. I don't eat any breakfast, I just have some tea.
 4. But I usually eat lunch and dinner. Lunch at noon, dinner at 7.
 5. We start class at about 2 and end at 3.
 6. I have two classes today, one at 10 and one at 2.
 7. The lecture is at 9, the section at 10.
 8. From 2:00 to 4:00 this afternoon, we have a Chinese test.
 9. I've already bathed, but I haven't eaten yet.
 10. Do you always eat a breakfast? / Not necessarily.
 11. What time do you close, please?
 12. Have you ever been to Xichang? It's in Sichuan, about 400 kms from Chongqing.
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4.4 DE revisited

As noted in §2.4.2, the addition of *de* turns a noun into an attribute of another noun, serving a function similar to the apostrophe-s of written English, or to prepositions such as 'on' or 'of':

Zhāng xiānshēng de xíngli	Mr. Zhang's luggage
Mǎ shīfu de dìdì	Master Ma's younger brother
xuésheng de zuòyè	students' homework
jīntiān de bàozhǐ	today's newspaper
zhèi ge xīngqītiān de piào	tickets for this Sunday [upcoming]
sān suì de nǚhái	a 3 year old girl ('female-child')
yǐqián de lǎoshī	a former teacher
Shìjiè Bēi de xiāoxi hěn yǒuyìsi.	The news about the World Cup is quite interesting.
Yǒu shénme Àoyùnhuì de xiāoxi ma?	Any news on the Olympics?

Notes

- a) Shìjiè Bēi 'World Cup'; cf. Ōuzhōu Bēi 'Euro Cup'; Àoyùnhuì 'Olympics (Olympic-sports-meeting)'.
- b) Xiāoxi 'report; news'.

Defining or disambiguating words, or identifying the character associated with a particular syllable, often involves DE in its function of linking attributes to nouns:

- i) Nǐ ge ‘shēng’? Which ‘sheng’?
Shēngrì de shēng. The sheng of ‘shengri [birthday]’.
- ii) Dōngnánxībēi de xī ma? The xi of ‘dongnan-xibei’?
Bù, xiāoxi de xī No, the xi of ‘xiaoxi’.
- iii) Wǒ xìng Lù (路)! My [sur]name’s Lu.
Dàlù de Lù (陆) ma? The Lu of ‘mainland’?
Bù, mǎlù de Lù (路). No, the Lu of ‘mainroad’.
Mǎlù de lù shì bu shì Is the ‘lu’ of ‘malu’ [main road] the
zǒulù de lù? ‘lu’ of ‘zoulu’ [to walk]?
Dùì, shì zǒulù de lù. That’s right, the ‘lu’ of ‘zoulu’.
- iv) Zǒulù de lù zěnmē xiě? How do you write the lu of zoulu?
Shì zhèi yàngxiě: 路; This way: 路; 13 strokes in all. Have you
yìgòng 13 ge bǐhuà. Lù nèi already studied the character for road?
ge zì nǐ yǐjīng xuéguo ma?
Xuéguo, kěshi wàng le. [We]’ve studied [it], but [we]’ve forgotten [it].

4.4.1 Where the noun head is omitted

In many cases, the noun following de is implied, in which case it can be glossed as ‘the one/thing associated with’; in some cases, the form without the head noun is more natural.

- Zhè shì tā de xíngli. > Zhè shì tā de. These are his.
Shì xuésheng de zuóyè ma? > Shì xuésheng de ma? Are [these] the students’?
Nà shì zuótiān de bào. > Nà shì zuótiān de. That’s yesterday’s.
- Tā shì IBM de ma? Is she from IBM?
Bù, tā shì Wēiruǎn de. No, she’s from MS.
- Xìng Máo de yě shì lǎoshī ma? Is the person named Mao also a teacher?
Wǒ bú tài qīngchu. I’m not sure.
- Xìng Zhào de shì lǎobǎn, The person named Zhao’s the boss; the
xìng Lǐ de shì tā qīzi. one named Li is his wife.

4.4.2 Where de does not appear

a) Country names

Expressions like Zhōngguó rén, Zhōngwén lǎoshī, or Běijīng dìtú ‘map of Beijing’ do not usually require an intervening de. The rule is that country names (and language names) may be directly attributed to following nouns.

b) Pronouns with kin terms

While tā de lǎoshī requires de, tā dìdi often omits it. Why? The rule is that pronouns (only!) tend to attach directly to kin terms.

	Zhè shì wǒ de péngyou.	This is my friend.
<i>but</i>	Zhè shì wǒ dìdi.	This is my younger brother.
	Zhè shì wǒ de lǎoshī.	This is my teacher.
<i>but</i>	Zhè shì wǒ shūshu.	This is my uncle ['father's y. bro.']
	Zhè shì Chén lǎoshī de jiějie.	This is Prof. Chen's older sister.
<i>but</i>	Zhè shì tā jiějie.	This is her older sister.

c) SVs without modifiers

SV phrases such as hěn hǎo, hěn hǎokàn, bù hǎochī, nàme guì, hěn hǎotīng are generally followed by de when they modify a noun:

bù hǎokàn de difang	an unattractive place
hěn hǎochī de Zhōngguó cài	delicious Chinese food
nàme yuǎn de difang	such a distant place
bù hǎotīng de yīnyuè	horrible sounding music

But bare (unmodified) SVs (especially single-syllable ones) may be so closely associated with a following noun that de does not intercede – or at least, is not required. Such combinations verge on becoming compound words. Compare the following:

lǎo péngyou	old friends
<i>but</i>	
hěn hǎo de péngyou	good friends
hǎo cài	good food
<i>but</i>	
bù hǎochī de cài	food that's not good
dà yú	big fish
<i>but</i>	
nàme dà de yú	such a big fish

A similar distinction is possible with some combinations of nouns. Those that combine as compound words do not require an intervening de: yúdǔ 'fish stomach'; mǎchē 'horse cart'. Those that are less word-like require de: xiàng de bízi 'an elephant's nose'; sùshè de dāmén 'the main door of the dormitory'.

d) *Duō* (and *shǎo*) as attributes

As noted in §3.8.1, *duō* (and *shǎo*) are exceptional as SV attributes in (i) requiring a modifying adverb, such as *hěn*, and (b) *not* requiring a connecting *de*:

Tā yǒu hěn duō Zhōngguó péngyou. He has lots of Chinese friends.

Zhèi ge dìfang wèishénme yǒu nàme duō rén? How come this place has so many people?

Nǐ yǒu zhème duō xíngli! You have such a lot of luggage!

e) *Several de's in the same phrase*

Finally, where several *de*'s might appear in the same phrase, the first is often omitted:

wǒ <de> péngyou de lǎoshī my friend's teacher

But sometimes, having several *de*'s in the same phrase is unavoidable. The presence of several *de*'s in the following sentence is just as awkward and unavoidable as the several *of's* in the English equivalent:

Wǒ mèimei de xiānshēng de lǎoshī shi wǒ shūshu de tàitai. The teacher of the husband of my younger sister is my uncle's wife.

Exercise 3.

1. Explain that big ones aren't necessarily tasty, and small ones aren't all bad. [tomatoes]
 2. Introduce your good friend, Liú Shíjiǔ.
 3. Ask her if the keys belong to her.
 4. Explain that your bags aren't here; they're still on the plane.
 5. Explain that he's not your brother; that you don't have any brothers.
 6. Explain that she's the boss's wife.
 7. Explain that his older brother's wife is your Chinese teacher.
 8. Announce that there's a report on the Olympics in yesterday's paper.
 9. Ask how he (the addressee) feels about present day music [*yīnyuè*]?
 10. Explain that you don't usually drink coffee in the morning.
 11. Ask how to say 'tomato' in Chinese; then ask how it's written.
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