

Grammar revision 3: Verbs

In classical Chinese, there are verbs in the ordinary sense, that is words designating actions or events. Besides, words semantically close to English adjectives behave in some ways like verbs; they can take objects. They are therefore usually classified as a type of verb called “stative verb”. There are intransitive verbs which usually don’t take an object, and transitive verbs, which usually have a direct object and sometimes also an indirect one. These distinctions, however, are not always clear-cut. In a few cases, different (traditional) readings, which probably reflect ancient morphological differences, are used to distinguish transitive and intransitive meanings: *shí ròu* 食肉 ‘to eat meat’ – *sì kè* 食客 ‘to feed a guest’; *yǐn jiǔ* 飲酒 ‘to drink ale’ – *yìn niú* 飲牛 ‘to water an ox’.

Like nouns, verbs can be coordinated without the use of a conjunction:

行止	to walk and to stop
學習	to study and practise

Sometimes, general terms referring to properties or dimensions are formed by the juxtaposition of two antonymic stative verbs:

大小	size
長短	length
遠近	distance
高卑	altitude
難易	(degree of) difficulty

The simplest type of verbal sentence can be formed by a single intransitive verb:

來	I / you (etc.) come(s).
躍	I / you (etc.) jump(s).

Verbs which are usually intransitive, however, can often take an object and then acquire a causative meaning:

來之	to let so. come
躍之	to make sth. jump (<i>Mengzi</i>)

Transitive and intransitive verbs can be used to modify nouns. As noun modifications, transitive verbs can be translated as gerunds and have an active meaning (note that the first example is a sentence, but the second a noun phrase):

鳥飛	The bird flies.
飛鳥	the flying bird

A transitive verb preceding a noun allows for two interpretations. The noun is either the object of the verb, or the verb modifies the noun and then has a passive meaning:

補衣	to mend clothes / the patched up clothes
破卵	to break an egg / the broken egg
閉門	to close a gate / the closed gate

A transitive verb following a noun forms a passive sentence:

卵破	The egg is broken.
門閉	The gate is closed.

Stative verbs can be used as predicates to form clauses and sentences:

山高	The mountain is high.
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They also have an attributive usage, in which case they are part of a noun phrase:

高山	the high mountain
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A noun following a stative verb, however, can also function as its object. In this case, it takes on a putative meaning (‘to consider sth. to be X’):

高山	to consider the mountain high
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or it assumes a factitive meaning (‘to make sth. X’):

高山	to make the mountain high(er)
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Verbs, stative verbs, nouns and adverbs can be combined in various ways to build attributive phrases, for instance:

[neg. – stat. verb] – subordination particle *zhī* – noun:

不恭之言	irreverent words
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[adv. – verb] – part. *zhī* – noun:

難得之貨	goods that are hard to obtain
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[verb – obj.] – part. *zhī* – noun:

吞舟之魚	a fish that swallows ships
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