

A Study of Mandarin Chinese Pronouns 汉语代词研究

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Abstract

There is a little misconception about Mandarin Chinese grammar. Some people believe that Mandarin Chinese grammar is difficult while others say it is easy. Some set of people think that Mandarin Chinese has no grammar at all. Mandarin Chinese has a grammar though it has a simple structure with no inflection. With the global popularity of Mandarin Chinese, it is important to pay attention to its grammar. Mandarin Chinese grammar poses a big challenge to many foreigners learning it. Mandarin Chinese words can be divided into two broad categories: content words and function words. Pronoun is one of the content words. Pronouns are words used in place of a noun or noun phrase. In order words, pronouns substitute nouns and noun phrases in a sentence. Since pronoun is used to substitute noun and noun phrase to avoid unnecessary repetition of the same words, their antecedents need to be clear to avoid confusion. The aim of this research is to help students learning Mandarin Chinese, especially foreigners, grasp the knowledge of Mandarin Chinese pronouns.

Keywords: China, Mandarin, Chinese, grammar, pronoun

Introduction

China has become a great nation and world power in the 21st century due to her economic, military and political influences around the world. China's recent growth and development have attracted people from all sectors, like traders, students, tourists, diplomats, etc to visit, live or study Chinese language and culture. There are millions of people studying Chinese language and culture around the world. The establishment of Confucius Institute by the Chinese government in 2004 has facilitated and enhanced the teaching and learning of Chinese language and culture across the world. In agreement, GlobalExam (2020) asserts that the "China's development goes hand in hand with the development of the Chinese language: learning it is becoming an international requirement. The Chinese language is taught in every single country". For example, thousands of students from tertiary, secondary and primary schools in Nigeria are learning Chinese language since the establishment of the first Confucius institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University in 2008 and the second Confucius institute at University of Lagos in 2009.

China has many dialects and languages from her numerous ethnic groups. Hànzú 汉族 is one of the recognized fifty-one (51) ethnic groups in China which is made up of more than ninety percent (90%) population of China. Mandarin Chinese, Pǔtōnghuà 普通话, is the standard variant of the Chinese language which is based on the Beijing dialect. It is spoken by nearly a billion people across the world. According to Boston University (2020), "China

is the most populous nation in the world, with 1.28 billion people and one fifth of the planet speaks Chinese. Mandarin Chinese is the mother tongue of over 873 million people, making it the most widely spoken first language in the world”. Mandarin Chinese is already an international language which is fast gaining popularity around the world. Carruthers (2019) says, “Mandarin Chinese is seen as being of increasing strategic importance, and in recent years there has been a growing number of students taking up the language in schools...”. Mandarin Chinese will continue to be popular and attractive as long as China remains the world’s major market and a global power.

Mandarin Chinese, like most languages in the world, has pronouns. According to Crystal (2003: 376), pronoun is a term used in the grammatical classification of words, referring to the closed set of items which can be used to substitute for a noun phrase or a single noun. There are many types of pronoun, with terminology varying somewhat between grammars. Personal pronouns include I, you, etc., in their variant forms (e.g. *I/me*); in their form *my/mine*, the term possessive pronoun, is often used. Other classes of pronoun regularly recognized include: demonstrative pronouns, e.g. *this/that* (in certain of their uses); interrogative pronouns, e.g. certain uses of *who/which/what*; reflective pronouns, e.g. *myself/yourself*; indefinite pronouns, e.g. *anyone/nobody*; relative pronouns, e.g. *who/whom/that*; and resumptive or shadow pronouns. Richards (2003) defines pronoun as a word which may replace a noun or noun phrase which is classified into: personal pronouns, possessive pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, Interrogative pronouns, Reflexive pronouns, Indefinite pronouns, Relative clause.

Mandarin Chinese Pronouns 汉语代词

Pronouns, according to Lin (2001) are content words, but unlike other content words such as nouns and verbs, pronouns are a closed set. New additions are not expected in the foreseeable future. Further, unlike most content words, Mandarin pronouns can never be reduplicated and cannot normally be modified. For instance, the following phrases are ungrammatical:

1. Lǎo wǒ 老我 - (old I)
2. Shǎ nǐ 傻你 - (silly you)
3. Hóngde zhè 红的这 - (red this)

Pronouns are of various types, just as their antecedents vary in meaning and grammatical function. Generally speaking, Mandarin pronouns can be divided into three classes based on their grammatical meanings: personal pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, and interrogative pronouns. According to Zhang (2018), Chinese pronouns can be divided into several categories: personal pronouns, object pronouns, possessive pronouns, possessive adjectives, reflective pronouns, indefinite pronouns, and demonstrative pronouns.

Personal pronouns

Personal pronouns are pronouns which are used substitute persons or things. According to Dejin & Meizhen (2003), personal pronouns cannot be reduplicated or take words of other parts of speech as pre-positioned modifiers. Some personal pronouns have plural forms. Plural personal pronouns are formed by adding the suffix ‘men 们’ to the singular forms of pronouns. The form of a personal pronoun, whether in the singular or plural, remains unchanged when it is used as a subject or an object. For example:

4. Tā kàn wǒmen. 她看我们。
She looks at us.
5. Wǒmen zhǎo tā. 我们找她。
We find him.

Person is a category used in grammatical description to indicate the number and nature of the participants in situation. Distinctions of person are usually marked in the verb and/or in the associated pronouns (personal pronouns). Usually a three-way contrast is found: first person, in which speakers refer to themselves, or to a group usually including themselves (e.g. I, we); second person, in which speakers typically refer to the person they are addressing (e.g. you); and third person, in which other people, animals, things, etc. are referred to (e.g. he, she, it, they). Other formal distinctions may be made in languages, such as ‘inclusive’ v. ‘exclusive’ we (e.g. speaker, hearer and others v. speaker and others, but not hearer). Other word-classes than personal pronouns may show person distinction, as with the reflexive and possessive pronouns in English (myself, etc., my, etc) (Crystal, 2003).

Person is a grammatical category which determines the choice of pronouns in a sentence according to such principles as: (a) whether the person represents or includes the person or persons actually speaking or writing (“first person”, e.g. I, we); (b) whether the pronoun represents the person or persons being addressed (“second person”, e.g. you); and (c) whether the pronoun represents someone or something other than the speaker/writer or the listener/reader (“third person”, e.g. he, she, it, they) (Richards, J.C. et al (2003)

Table 1: Mandarin Personal pronouns

Person (singular & plural)	Mandarin Chinese (subject & object)	English (subject & object)
First person (singular)	Wǒ 我	I, me
	Zán 咱	I, me (inclusively)
First person (plural)	Wǒmen 我们	We, us
	Zánmen 咱们	We, us (inclusively)
Second person (singular)	Nǐ 你	You, you (singular)
	Nín 您	You, you (polite form)
Second person (plural)	Nǐmen 你们	You, you (plural)
Third person (singular)	Tā 他	He, him (masculine/general)
	Tā 她	She, her (feminine)
	Tā 它	It, it (inanimate)
Third person (plural)	Tāmen 他们	They, them (masculine)
	Tāmen 她们	They, them (feminine)
	Tāmen 它们	They, them (inanimate)

Demonstrative pronouns

Demonstrative pronouns show position in the space and in the time (Ping, (no date)). In Modern Standard Chinese (Mandarin), there are only two sets of demonstrative pronouns in common use (Yip & Rimmington, 2004). According to Sun (2006), the two demonstratives nà 那 (that) and zhè 这 (this) have colloquial counterparts realized as nèi for that and zhèi for this or the rhotacized forms, zhèr 这儿 and nàr 那儿. The plural marker

for the Chinese demonstratives are *xiē* 些, thus, *nàxiē* 那些 (those) and *Zhèxiē* 这些 (these), or the more colloquial *nèixiē* (those) and *zhèixiē* (these). See some demonstrative pronouns in these sentences:

6. **Zhè** shì wǒde. 这是我的。
This is mine.
7. **Nà** shì nǐde. 那是你的。
That is yours.
8. **Nàge** chē shì wǒde. 那个车是我的。
That car is mine.
9. **Zhèxiē** dōu hěn hǎo. 这些都很好。
These are all very good.

Table 2: Mandarin Demonstrative pronouns

Number	Mandarin Chinese	English
Singular	Zhè 这	This (close to the speaker)
	Nà 那	That (far from the speaker)
	Zhèr/zhèlǐ 这儿/这里	Here (close to the speaker)
	Nàr/nàlǐ 哪儿/哪里	There (far from the speaker)
	Zhèhuǐr 这会儿	This moment; now
	Nàhuǐr 那会儿	That moment; then
	Zhème 这么	This way
	Nàme 那么	That way
	Zhèyàng 这样	This way
	Nàyàng 那样	That way
	Zhèmeyàng 这么样	This way
	Nàmeyàng 那么样	That way
Plural	Zhèxiē 这些	These
	Nàxiē 那些	Those

Interrogative pronouns

Dejin & Meizhen, (2003:97) define interrogative pronoun as “a pronoun which is used to indicate interrogation”. Zhenhua (2005:44) classifies and describes interrogative pronouns thus, *shuí* 谁 (who) refers to people, *shénme* 什么 (what) refers to things. *Nǎ* 哪 (which) may be followed by a measure word (*Nàge* 哪个). *Nǎr/nǎlǐ* 哪儿/哪里 (where) refers to place. *Jǐ* 几 (how many) and *Duōshǎo* 多少 (How much/many) refer to quantity. *Duōhuǐr* 多会儿 (when) refers to time. *Zěnmē* 怎么 (how), *Zěnyàng* 怎样 (how), and *Zěnmeyàng* 怎么样 (how) refer to state, degree, manner of action. Interrogative pronouns can indicate general or indefinite expression. For example:

10. **Shuí** yě bié zǒu? 谁也别走?
No one is leaving?
11. Wǒ **shénme** yě bù xiǎng chī. 我什么也不想吃。
I don't want to eat anything.
12. Gěi **duō shǎo** wǒ yě bù yào. 给多少我也不要。
I don't want any.

13. Shuí xiǎng qù shuí qù. 谁想去谁去。
Who wants to go.

Table 3: Mandarin Interrogative pronouns

Mandarin Chinese	English
Shuí 谁	Who
Shénme 什么	What
Nǎ 哪	Which
Nǎr/nǎlǐ 哪儿/哪里	Where
Duōhuìr 多会儿	When
Zěnyàng 怎样	How
Zěnmē 怎么	How
Zěnmeyàng 怎么样	How
Jǐ 几	How many
Duō 多	How much/many
Duōshǎo 多少	How much/many

Possessive pronouns

According to Ross & Ma (2006), there are no possessive pronouns in Mandarin Chinese. However, to indicate possession in Mandarin Chinese, we add the particle ‘的 de’ to the personal pronouns. Yip & Rimmington (2004:60) state “there is no distinction between possessive adjectives and possessive pronouns” in Mandarin Chinese. In agreement, Li & Thompson (1989:136) say “we should mention that the possessive pronouns in Mandarin are composed simply of the pronouns and the genitive particle, -de. In other words, possessive pronouns do not have special independent forms”. For example:

14. (a). Wǒ de pídài. 我的皮带。My belt.
(b). Tāmen de shǒubiǎo. 他们的手表。Their watch.
(c). Nǐ de kùzi. 你的裤子。Your pants/trousers.

Yip & Rimmington (2004:60) state, “there is no distinction between possessive adjectives and possessive pronouns”. For example, the first English meanings like ‘my, our, you’re her and their’ are possessive adjectives while the second English meanings like ‘mine, ours, yours, hers and theirs’ are possessive pronouns.

15. Wǒ de 我的 - my; mine
Zánmen de 咱们的 - our; ours (inclusive)
Nǐ de 你的 - your; yours
Nín de 您的 - your; yours (polite)
Tā de 她的 - her; hers
Tāmen de 他们的 - their; theirs (masculine)

16. (a). Zhè shì nín de chá. 这是您的茶。
This is your tea. (possessive adjective)
(b). Zhè fēng xìn shì nín de. 这封信是您的。
This letter is yours. (possessive pronoun)

Table 4: Mandarin possessive pronouns

Number	Mandarin Chinese	English(Adjective/pronoun)
Singular	Wōde 我的	My, Mine
	Zán de 咱的	My, Mine (inclusively)
	Nǐde 你的	Your, Yours
	Nín de 您的	Your, Yours (polite form)
	Tāde 他的	His, His(masculine/general)
	Tāde 她的	Hers, Hers (feminine)
	Tāde 它的	Its, its (inanimate)
Plural	Wǒmen de 我们的	Our, Ours
	Zánmen de 咱们的	Our, Ours (inclusively)
	Nǐmen de 你们的	Your, Yours
	Tāmen de 他们的	Their, Theirs (masculine/general)
	Tāmen de 她们的	Their, Theirs (feminine)
	Tāmen de 它们的	Their, Theirs (inanimate)

Reflexive pronouns

The Mandarin reflexive morpheme, roughly meaning ‘self’, is *zìjǐ* 自己. It can be used in two ways. First, it can function as a reflexive pronoun. The second way in which *zìjǐ* can be used is in an adverblike capacity (Li & Thompson, 1989). For example, in the first way, it can function as (a) direct object, (b) indirect object, (c) coverb object, and (d) possessor in the possessive phrase.

17. (a). Tā zài zéběi (tā) zìjǐ. 他在责备(他)自己。
He is blaming himself.
- (b). Tā gěi (tā) zìjǐ xiě le yì fēng xìn. 她给(她)自己写了一封信。
She wrote herself a letter.
- (c). Wǒ gēn (wǒ) zìjǐ shēngqì. 我跟(我)自己生气。
I’m angry with myself.
- (d). Wǒ chuān (wǒ) zìjǐ de yīfu. 我穿(我)自己的衣服。
I wear my own clothing.

Mandarin has only one reflexive pronoun, and it is not marked for person or gender. To indicate person, the reflexive may optionally be preceded by the relevant personal pronoun. In Mandarin Chinese, *zìjǐ* 自己 (self) is also used without a person pronoun when it occurs in object position that it is understood to refer to the subject (Ross & Ma, 2006). For example:

18. (a). Nǐ zài Zhōngguó yīdìng děi bǎ zìjǐ zhàogù hǎo. 你在中国一定得把自己照顾好。
When you are in China you certainly should take good care of yourself.
- (b). Méi yǒu rén bù xǐhuan zìjǐ de. 没有人不喜欢自己的。
No one doesn’t like him/herself.

Table 5: Reflexive possessive pronouns

Number	Mandarin Chinese	English
Singular	Wǒ zìjǐ 我自己	Myself
	Nǐ zìjǐ 你自己	Yourself
	Nín zìjǐ 您自己	Yourself (polite form)
	Tā zìjǐ 他自己	Himself (masculine/general)
	Tā zìjǐ 她自己	Herself (feminine)
	Tā zìjǐ 它自己	Itself (inanimate)
Plural	Wǒmen zìjǐ 我们自己	Ourselves
	Nǐmen zìjǐ 你们自己	Yourselves
	Tāmen zìjǐ 他们自己	Themselves (masculine/general)
	Tāmen zìjǐ 她们自己	Themselves (feminine)
	Tā zìjǐ 它自己	Themselves (inanimate)

Indefinite pronouns

Indefinite pronouns do not specify the identity of the person or of the object. According to Yip & Rimmington (2014), indefinite pronouns mean words like ‘everybody’, ‘anybody’, ‘nobody’, ‘everything’, ‘anything’, ‘nothing’, and so on. In Chinese, these pronouns (indefinite pronouns) are created by using the appropriate interrogative word in conjunction with a reference adverb, either *dōu* 都 (all) or *yě* 也 (also).

	Mandarin Chinese	English
Shuí 谁	Shuí dōu 谁都	Everyone
	Shuí yě 谁也	Anyone
Shénme 什么	Shénme dōu 什么都	Everything
	Shénme yě 什么也	Anything
Nǎ 哪	Nǎ dōu 哪都	All
	Nǎ yě 哪也	Any
Nǎr 哪儿	Nǎr dōu 哪儿都	Everywhere
	Nǎr yě 哪儿也	Anywhere

In the table above, the interrogative pronoun becomes indefinite: *shuí* 谁 (who(m)ever), *shénme* 什么 (whatever), *nǎ ge* 哪个 (whichever) and *nǎr* 哪儿 (wherever). They usually occur in the topic position (beginning) of an expository or evaluative sentence. For example:

19. Shuí dōu rènshi tā. 谁都认识他。
Everybody knows him.
20. Shénme dōu xíng. 什么都行。
Anything will do.
21. (Wǒ) nǎ jiàn yě bù mǎi. (我) 哪件也不买。
I am not going to buy any (of these clothes).
22. (Wǒ) nǎr dōu bù qù. (我) 哪儿都不去。
I am not going anywhere.

Table 6: Indefinite pronouns

English	Mandarin Chinese
Everyone	Dàjiā 大家
	Měi gè rén 每个人
	Suǒyǒurén 所有人
Everything	Suǒyǒu shìqíng 所有事情
	Měi gè dōngxī 每个东西
Someone	Mǒu xiē rén 某些人
	Yǒu rén 有人
Something	Yīxiē dōngxī 一些东西
	Yǒuxiē shìqíng 有些事情
Anyone	Rèn hé rén 任何人
Anything	Rèn hé dōngxī 任何东西
	Rèn hé shìqíng 任何事情
No one	Mèiyǒu rén 没有人
Nothing	Mèiyǒu dōngxī 没有东西
	Mèiyǒu shìqíng 没有事情

Features and Functions of Mandarin Pronouns

According to Ross & Ma (2006), Chinese pronouns are not distinguished in terms of grammatical role. The same pronouns are used for subject, object, possession, etc. Chinese pronouns have singular and plural forms. The suffix ‘men 们’ is added to the singular form to make it the plural form. In Mandarin Chinese, gender is not reflected in the spoken language. The written language has distinctions for the second and third person pronouns, though only the third person gender distinction is commonly used. Li & Thompson (1989) state that Mandarin pronouns constitute a special class of noun phrase in two respects. First, a Mandarin pronoun always refers to an entity whose identity is already established at the time the pronoun is used. For instance, the third person pronoun, tā 他/她/它 (he/she/it), refers to an entity whose identity is already established by a regular noun phrase that has occurred earlier. The third person pronoun and the regular noun phrase are said to be coreferential – they refer to the same entity in the world – and the noun phrase always precedes the coreferential pronoun. For example, in the sentence below: **tā 他** (he) is coreferential with **yī ge Fǎguó rén 一个法国人** (a French person).

22. Qù nián lái le **yī ge Fǎguó rén, tā** huì xiě Zhōngguó zì.

去年来了一个法国人，**他**会写中国字。

Last year a French person came. He can write Chinese.

The second respect in which Mandarin pronouns constitute a special class of noun phrases is the fact that pronouns do not allow any modifier, whether the modifier is a classifier/measure phrase, an associative phrase, or a modifying phrase. For example, the following sentences in (b) are ungrammatical.

23. (a). Yī ge rén 一个人 (one person)

(b). yī ge **tā** 一个**他**。

24. (a). xuéshù jiè de rén 学术界的人 (person in academia)
(b). xuéshù jiè de **tā** 学术界的**他**。
25. (a). huài rén 坏人 (bad person)
(b). huài **tā** 坏**他**。

As earlier said, Ross & Ma (2006:23) assert that “pronouns are not distinguished in terms of grammatical role. The same pronouns are used for subject, object, possessive, etc”. In line with the statement, Li & Thompson (1989:134) say “since Mandarin does not have inflection, conjugation, or case markers, the pronominal system is relatively simple.” For example:

26. Wǒ 我 - I/me
Nǐ 你 - you (sg)
Tā 他/她/它 - he/she/it/him/her
Wǒmen 我们 - we/us
Nǐmen 你们 - you (plural)
Tāmen 他们 - they/them

Pronouns serve basically the same function as words which they substitute, (i) as the subject, (ii) the object, (iii) an attributive, (iv) an adverbial adjunct, (v) the predicate, (vi) a complement (Dejin & Meizhen). For example:

27. (i). **tā** shì jìshùyuán **她**是技术员 (She is a technician).
(ii). Tā zài **nàr** **她**在那儿 (There she is).
(iii). Nǐ mǎi **jǐ** píng qìshuǐ? 你买几瓶汽水? (How many bottles of soda do you buy?).
(iv). Wǒ bù gāi **nàyàng** shuō 我不该**那样**说 (I shouldn't have said that).
(v). zhè ge jùchǎng **zěnmeyàng**? 这个剧场**怎么样**? (How about this theatre?).
(vi). Tā xiě de **zěnmeyàng**? 他写的**怎么样**? (How does he write?).

Conclusion

In summary, pronouns are words that replace or substitute nouns or noun phrase in a sentence. Pronouns help speakers and writers to avoid repetition of the use of the same nouns or noun phrases in speech or writing. They are divided into personal pronouns, reflective pronouns, possessive pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, interrogative pronouns, indefinite pronouns, etc. Mandarin Chinese grammar does not have inflection, hence its pronouns have no inflection. That is to say that Mandarin pronouns do not change form whether they are used as subject, object, possessive, etc. Only personal pronouns have plural forms in Mandarin Chinese. The knowledge of pronoun is very important in the learning of any language. Learners of Mandarin Chinese will master the pronouns by a constant use of them in speech and writing. Teachers of Mandarin Chinese should pay more attention to the teaching of pronouns on time.

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