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, kěshì jīntiān háo 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 jīnzhāng, suǒyì měiyǒu qù shàngkè. Yesterday, she didn’t feel well, so [she] didn’t go to class.

Lǐbàiwù wǒmen dōu měiyǒu kě. 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? How was he yesterday?
Zuótiān tā bù shūfu, jīntiān háo 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 jīnzhāng. 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’:

zǎoshāng shàngwǔ zhōngwǔ xiǎwǔ wǎnshāng
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 jì: Jì 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: zǎoshāng jiǔ diǎn ‘9 in the morning’; míngtiān xiǎwǔ sān diǎn ‘tomorrow afternoon at 3’.
Xiànzài jì diǎn <zhōng> le? What time is it now?
Shí diǎn. [It’s] 10:00.

Záoshàng jiǔ diǎn dào shí diǎn yòu kè. I have a class from 9 -10 in the morning.

Zhōngwén kè <shì> jiǔ diǎn dào shí diǎn. Chinese class is 9 -10.

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):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Seconds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>jiǔ diǎn shí fēn</td>
<td>9:10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shí’èr diǎn líng sì</td>
<td>12:04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shí wǔ fēn shí wǔ fēn</td>
<td>3:35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

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’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>jiǔ diǎn &lt;guò&gt; yí kè</td>
<td>‘quarter past 9’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chà yí kè shí diǎn</td>
<td>‘quarter to 10’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shí diǎn chà yí kè</td>
<td>‘quarter to 10’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>chà wǔ fēn shí diǎn</td>
<td>‘five to 10’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shí diǎn chà wǔ fēn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chà yí kè si diǎn</td>
<td>‘quarter to 4’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sì diǎn chà yí kè</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Clock time – summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day and segment</th>
<th>to</th>
<th>hour</th>
<th>minutes (to/after)</th>
<th>&lt;o’clock&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>jīntiān</td>
<td></td>
<td>yī diǎn</td>
<td>lǐng wǔ fēn</td>
<td>&lt;zhōng&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zuòtiān</td>
<td></td>
<td>liǎng diǎn</td>
<td>shí fēn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>míngtiān</td>
<td></td>
<td>shí’èr diǎn</td>
<td>shíwǔ fēn ~</td>
<td>&lt;guò&gt; yīkè</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xiàwǔ</td>
<td></td>
<td>…</td>
<td>ěrshíwǔ fēn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wànnshàng</td>
<td></td>
<td>…</td>
<td>sānshí fēn ~ bān</td>
<td>[sān kè]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chà shí fēn</td>
<td></td>
<td>…</td>
<td>chà shí fēn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chà yīkè</td>
<td></td>
<td>…</td>
<td>chà yīkè</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Jǐ diǎn</td>
<td></td>
<td>&lt;zhōng&gt;?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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

Tiānwén kè shì xīngqīsī wànnshàng  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’, bānyè ‘at midnight; late at night’, lǐngchén ‘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.

yingzuò ‘hard-seat’  yingwò ‘hard-berth’
ruānzuò ‘soft-seat’  ruānwò ‘soft-berth’
zhànpiào ‘standing-ticket’

Zhànpiào are sold (often for the same price) when yingzuò are sold out. Berths are 4 (ruānwò) to a cabin, or 6 (yingwò) 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, shòuxūfèi ‘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.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chéngdū</td>
<td>shàngwǔ jiǔ diǎn</td>
<td>ruǎnwò</td>
<td>liàng zhāng</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now practice buying tickets according to the specifications indicated:

1. Xīnín  4:00 this afternoon  hard berth  1
2. Xī’ān  8 tomorrow morning  soft seat  2
3. Hūhèháotè 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. Guílín this afternoon 3:25  hard berth  1
7. Chóngqing 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, diàn ‘snack’ (cognate to yídīàn ‘a little’):

- záofān
- zhōngfān
- wānfān
- záocān
- zhōngcān
- wāncān
- záodiàn
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 mèitiān ‘everyday’ it will be useful to learn the following expressions, all built on cháng ‘often’, that have to do with habitual events:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>cháng ~ chángcháng</th>
<th>píngcháng</th>
<th>jǐngcháng</th>
<th>tōngcháng</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>often</td>
<td>usually</td>
<td>frequently; often; regularly</td>
<td>generally; normally</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Usage

1. Zhōngguó rén píngcháng jī diān chī zāofān?  What time do Chinese usually eat breakfast?
   Dàgài liù dào qī diān ba.  About 6 to 7. How about Mèiguó rén ne?
   Méiguó rén ne, jīngcháng jiù diān shàngbān. Yěxǔ qí diān bān, bā diān chī zāofān. Americans generally start work at 9. So maybe they eat breakfast at 7:30 [or] 8:00.

2. Xuéshēng ne, yīnwèi hěn máng, chángcháng zhī hē kāfēi bù chī zàodiān.  Students, because they are so busy, they often just drink coffee and don’t eat breakfast.
   Tāmen chī shénme?
   Chī xǐfàn, miàntiáo<r>.  What do they eat?
   Rice porridge, noodles.

   Wǒmen chàbuduō shí diān shàngkè shíyī diān xiàkè.  We start class at about 10 and end at 11.

4. Chīguó zāofān le méi?  Have you eaten breakfast?
   Hái méi ne.  Not yet.
Nǐ bù shì jiù diǎn yǒu kè ma? Isn’t is the case that you have class at 9:00?
Zěnme hái méi chī zǎofàn ne? How come you haven’t eaten breakfast yet?

Ai, wǒ bù xiǎng chī, wǒ hě kāfēi jiù xíng le. I don’t feel like [any], I’ll just have 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 bù shi…. ‘isn’t it the case that…’
d) Xiǎng ‘think > feel like’

4.3.4 Business hours

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bàngōng shìjiān</th>
<th>Office hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yíngyè shìjiān</td>
<td>Business hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 shìjiān jǐ diǎn dào jǐ diǎn? What are [your] business hours?
Nǐ jǐ diǎn kāimēn? When do you open (open door)?
Jǐ diǎn guānmēn? 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 hēn lihai. The time lag / jet lag is bad!
Wo háishi hēn lèi – yīnwèi I’m still tired – because of the time lag.
shíchā.
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.
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.

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’:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zhāng xiānshēng de xínglǐ</td>
<td>Mr. Zhang’s luggage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mǎ shīfū de dīdī</td>
<td>Master Ma’s younger brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xuéshēng de zuòyè</td>
<td>students’ homework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jīntiān de bāozhī</td>
<td>today’s newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zhěi ge xīngqītiān de piào</td>
<td>tickets for this Sunday [upcoming]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sān suì de nǚháir</td>
<td>a 3 year old girl (‘female-child’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yīqián de lǎoshī</td>
<td>a former teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shìjiè Bēi de xiǎoxi hěn yǒuyìsi</td>
<td>The news about the World Cup is quite interesting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yǒu shénme Àoyùnghuì de xiǎoxi ma?</td>
<td>Any news on the Olympics?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes
a) Shìjiè Bēi ‘World Cup’; cf. Ōuzhōu Bēi ‘Euro Cup’; Àoyùnghuì ‘Olympics (O[lympic]-sports-meeting)’.
b) Xiǎoxi ‘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) Něi ge ‘shēng’? Which ‘shēng’?
Shēngè de shēng. The sheng of ‘shengri [birthday]’.

ii) Dōngnánxīběi de xī ma? The xī of ‘dongnan-xibei’?
Bù, xiāoxi de xī. No, the xī of ‘xiaoxi’.

iii) Wǒ xìng Lù (路)! My [sur]name’s Lu.
Dàlù de Lù (路) 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
zōulù de lù? ‘lu’ of ‘zoulu’ [to walk]?
Dui, shì zōulù de lù. That’s right, the ‘lu’ of ‘zoulu’.

iv) Zōulù de lù zěnme xiě? How do you write the lu of zoulu?
Shī zhèi yāngr xiě: This way: ；13 strokes in all. Have you
yígòng 13 ge bihù. Lù néi ge yī jīng xuéguo ma? already studied the character for road?
Xuéguo, kěshì wánng 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 xuéshēng de zuòyè ma? > Shì xuéshēng de ma? Are [these] the
xuéshēng de ma? students’?
Nà shì zuótiān de bào. > Nà shì zuótiān de. That’s yesterday’s.
Tā shì IBM de ma? > Bù, tā shì Wēiruān de. Is she from IBM?
Wǒ bù tài qīngchu. I’m not sure.

Xìng Máo de yě shì lǎoshī ma? Is the person named Mao also a teacher?
Wǒ bù tái lǎoshī. I’m not sure.
Xìng Zhào de shì lǎobān, The person named Zhao’s the boss; the
xing 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 Bēijīng ditú ‘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 了不起 requires de, 了二 often omits it. Why? The rule is that pronouns (only!) tend to attach directly to kin terms.

**but**

Zhè shì wǒ de péngyou.  This is my friend.

Zhè shì wǒ diài.  This is my younger brother.

Zhè shì wǒ de láoshī.  This is my teacher.

Zhè shì wǒ de shūshū.  This is my uncle ['father’s y. bro.’]

Zhè shì Chén láoshī de jiějie.  This is Prof. Chen’s older sister.

Zhè shì wǒ de jiějie.  This is her older sister.

c) SVs without modifiers
SV phrases such as 好不容易, 门可羅開, 不相可衣, 名贵, 了可蜂 are generally followed by de when they modify a noun:

bù hāokàn de dìfang   an unattractive place
hěn hāochī de Zhōngguó cái  delicious Chinese food
nàmē yuǎn de dìfang   such a distant place
bù háotīng 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
**but**
hěn hǎo de péngyou    good friends

hǎo cài     good food
**but**
bù hǎochī de cài    food that’s not good

dàyú     big fish
**but**
nàmē 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: 鱼肚 ‘fish stomach’; 马车 ‘horse cart’. Those that are less word-like require –de: 象的鼻子 ‘an elephant’s nose’; 宿舍的门 ‘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 láo shī 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 láo shī The teacher of the husband of my younger sister is my uncle’s wife.
Shì wǒ shūshū de tāitai.

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.