

Mandarin Chinese Words and Parts of Speech

A Corpus-based Study

**Chu-Ren Huang, Shu-Kai Hsieh
and Keh-Jiann Chen**

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11 P: Preposition

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11 P: Preposition

Prepositions are a kind of function word. The following three syntactic characteristics are the typical criteria for prepositions:

- (i) A preposition must introduce an argument, and this argument cannot be omitted.¹
- (ii) A preposition cannot serve as the head of a verb.
- (iii) A preposition is not used in any aspect.²

These criteria will be further elaborated below.

11.1 Syntactic Characteristics of Prepositions

The function of a preposition is to introduce an argument. A prepositional phrase (i.e. ‘preposition + argument (+ other elements)’) generally precedes the main verb, as shown in (311a,b). Only a few prepositions can occur after the verb, as in (311b,c).

- (311) (a) 今天 我們 在 三 樓 開會
jin1tian2 wo3men0 zai4 san3 lou2 kai1hui4
today we at third.floor have.a.meeting
‘We will have a meeting on the third floor today.’
- (b) 他 趁 此 機會 大發牢騷
ta1 chen4 ci3 ji1hui4 da4fa1lao2sao1
he take.advantage.of this opportunity grumble
‘He took advantage of this opportunity to grumble.’
- (c) 老師 寫 了 字 在 黑板 上
lao3shi1 xie3 le0 zi4 zai4 hei1ban3 shang4
teacher write ASP character at blackboard on
‘The teacher wrote some words on the blackboard.’
- (d) 這 班 火車 開往 嘉義
zhe4 ban1 huo3che1 kai1wang3 jia1yi4
this CLS train drive to Jiayi
‘This train goes to Jiayi.’

In a sentence, a prepositional phrase can modify the verb or the whole sentence, specifying the time, the place, the tool, and so forth. The prepositional phrases in (311) are all modifiers. A prepositional phrase can also introduce the obligatory argument of a verb.³ Some examples are as follows. The preposition 被 *bei4* in (312a) is an agent marker, while the preposition 把 *ba3* in (312b) is a theme marker.

- (312) (a) 最近 常常 發生 孩童 被
zui4jin4 chang2chang2 fa1sheng1 hai2tong2 bei4
 陌生人 帶走 的 事
mo4sheng1ren2 dai4zou3 de0 shi4
 recently often happen kid BEI stranger take.away DE thing
 ‘Recently many kids have been taken away by strangers.’
- (b) 大人 總是 把 說 過 的 話 忘
da4ren2 zong3shi4 ba3 shuo1 guo4 de0 hua4 wang4
 了。
le0
 adult always BA say ASP DE word forget ASP
 ‘Adults always forget what they said.’

Some prepositions, like 自從 *zi4cong2* in (313), have only one function. However, most prepositions, like 從 *cong2* in (314), are multifunctional. The argument introduced by a multifunctional preposition determines the semantic role of the prepositional phrase (Chen et al. 1989).

- (313) (a) (time)
 學生 自從 四月 底 自動 留校
xue2sheng1 zi4cong2 si4yue4 di3 zi4dong4 liu2xiao4
 複習 功課
fu4xi2 gong1ke4
 student since April end voluntarily stay school review schoolwork
 ‘Since April, the students have been staying at school voluntarily to review their schoolwork.’
- (b) (time)
 臺灣 自從 經濟 起飛 後, 物質
tai2wan1 zi4cong2 jing1ji4 qi3fei1 hou4, wu4zhi2
 生活 已 獲 長足 進步
sheng1huo2 yi3 huo4 chang2zu2 jin4bu4
 Taiwan since economy take.off after material life already get
 considerably progress
 ‘Since the economy in Taiwan took off, (people’s) material life has improved considerably.’

(314) (a) (time)

這 項 法令 已 從 七月 一 日 起
 zhe4 xiang4 fa3ling4 yi3 cong2 qi1yue4 yi1ri4 qi3
 實施
 shi2shi1

this CLS law already since July first from put.into.practice
 ‘This law was already put into practice on July 1.’

(b) (location)

這 架 班機 從 桃園 機場 起飛,
 zhe4 jia4 ban1ji1 cong2 tao2yuan2 ji1chang3 qi3fei1,
 預定 本地 時間 九點 正 到達
 yu4ding4 ben3di4 shi2jian1 jiu3dian3 zheng4 dao4da2
 目的地
 mu4di4di4

this CLS flight from Taoyuan airport take.off schedule local.time
 nine. o'clock on.the.dot arrive destination
 ‘This flight took off from Taoyuan Airport, and it was scheduled to
 arrive at its destination at nine o'clock on the dot.’

(c) (condition)

幼教 人員 從 遊戲 活動 中
 you4jiao4 ren2yuan2 cong2 you2xi4 huo2dong4 zhong1
 啟發 兒童 潛能
 qi3fa1 er2tong2 qian2neng2

preschool personnel from game activity middle develop child
 potential
 ‘Preschool teachers develop children’s potential through games and
 activities.’

(d) (topic)

從 事實 層面 來看, 中 日 美
 cong2 shi4shi2 ceng2mian4 lai2kan4, zhong1 ri4 mei3
 三 國 經濟 相互 依賴
 san1 guo2 jing1ji4 xiang1hu4 yi1lai4

from fact aspect in.term.of China Japan U.S. three country mutually
 depend.
 ‘As far as the facts are concerned, China, Japan, and U.S. mutually
 depend on each other.’

11.2 Principles of Analysis

Because most prepositions in modern Chinese stem from verbs, some of them retain verbal sense. Consider the following sentences: 在 zai4 和 用 yong4

function as verbs in the (315a) and (316a) sentences, while they function as prepositions in the (315b) and (316b) sentences.

- (315) (a) 他 今天 在家
 ta1 jin1tian1 zai4jia1
 he today at.home
 'He is at home today.'
- (b) 他 在 學校 吃飯
 ta3 zai4 xue2xiao4 chi1fan4
 he at school have.a.meal
 'He has a meal at school.'
- (316) (a) 請用茶
 qing3 yong4cha2
 please use.tea
 'Please drink tea.'
- (b) 我 用 刷子 刷出 色彩
 wo3 yong4 shua1zi0 shua1chu1 se4cai3
 I with brush brush.out color
 'I paint colors with a brush.'

Prepositions form a closed class. The following exhaustively lists all the prepositions in Chinese and classifies them according to their syntactic behaviors and semantic roles.

- P01 承 cheng2, 讓 rang4, 蒙 meng2, 承蒙 cheng2meng2, 深為 shen1wei4
 agent
- P02 被 bei4, 受 shou4, 叫 jiao4, 為 wei4, 備受 bei4shou4, 倍受 bei4shou4,
 深受 shen1shou4 agent, causer, experiencer.
- P03 為 wei4 benefactor, reason
- P04 給 gei3 agent, benefactor, causer, goal, imperative, target, theme
- P05 挨 ai1 agent, location, standard
- P06 由 you2, 改由 gai3you2 agent, causer, condition, location, theme, time,
 topic
- P07 把 ba3, 將 jiang1 goal, theme, experiencer
- P08 拿 na2 instrument, manner, theme, topic
- P09 管 guan3, 尤以 you2yi3 theme
- P10 作 zuo4, 做 zuo4 range
- P11 以 yi3 goal, instrument, manner, reason, topic
- P12 自從 zi4cong2 time

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- P13 等 deng3, 正當 zheng4dang1, 逢 feng2, 臨 lin2, 趕 gan3, 趁 (著) chen4(zhe0), 乘 (著) cheng4(zhe0), 臨到 lin2dao4, 臨近 lin2jin4, 每逢 mei3feng2, 值 zhi2, 延至 yan2zhi4, 遲至 chi2zhi4, 截至 jie2zhi4, 待 dai4, 俟 si4, 留待 liu2dai4 time
- P14 有 you3 comparison, range, time
- P15 距離 ju4li2, 離 li2, 距 ju4 condition, location, time
- P16 當 (著) dang1(zhe0) condition, location, time
- P17 打從 da3cong2, 打 da3 location, time
- P18 直到 zhi2dao4, 迄 qi4, 等到 deng3dao4, 比及 bi3ji2, 及至 ji2zhi4, 待到 dai1dao4 condition, location, time
- P19 從 cong2 condition, location, time, topic
- P20 就 jiu4 location, topic
- P21 在 zai4 condition, goal, location, theme, time, topic
- P22 繼 ji4 time
- P23 于 yu2, 於 yu2 comparison, condition, goal, location, source, target, theme, time
- P24 沿 (著) yan2(zhe0) location, standard
- P25 順 (著) shun4(zhe0), 循 (著) xun2(zhe0) location, standard
- P26 經 jing1, 經由 jing1you2, 經過 jing1guo4 condition, instrument, location, manner
- P27 靠 (著) kao(zhe0) instrument, location, theme
- P28 假 jia3, 倚 yi3 instrument, location, manner
- P29 迎 (著) ying2(zhe0), 望 (著) wang4(zhe0), 朝 (著) chao2(zhe0) goal, target
- P30 往 wang3 goal, target
- P31 針對 zhen1dui4, 對 dui4 goal, target, topic
- P32 對於 dui4yu2, 對於 dui4yu2 target, topic
- P33 問 wun4 goal, target
- P34 衝著 chong4zhe0 reason, target
- P35 與 yu3, 同 tong2, 和 han4 companion, comparison, goal, manner, target
- P36 代 dai4 benefactor
- P37 替 ti4, 幫 bang4 benefactor, goal, theme
- P38 藉由 (著) jie4you2(zhe0), 憑依 (著) ping2yi1(zhe0), 憑藉 (著) ping2jie4(zhe0), 憑 (著) ping2(zhe0), 仗 (著) zhang4(zhe0), 藉 (著) jie4(zhe0) instrument, manner
- P39 用 yong4, 透過 tou4guo4 instrument, manner
- P40 基於 ji1yu2, 基于 jiyu2 topic
- P41 至於 zhi4yu2, 至于 zhi4yu2, 關於 guan1yu2, 關於 guan1yu2 goal, theme, topic
- P42 依 (著) yi1(zhe0), 按 (著) an4(zhe0), 照 (著) zhao4(zhe0) standard, topic
- P43 依據 yi1ju4, 依照 yi1zhao4, 按照 an4zhao4, 據 ju4, 根據 gen1ju4, 據以 ju4yi3 standard, topic

- P44 仿照 fang3zhao4, 比照 bi3zhao4, 本著 ben3zhe0, 援 yuan2, 援照 yuan2zhao4, 依循 yi1xun2 standard
- P45 逐 zhu2, 論 lun4 standard
- P46 每隔 mei3ge2, 視 shi4 standard
- P47 如 ru2 apposition, comparison, manner, standard
- P48 似 si4, 有如 you3ru2, 猶如 you2ru2, 如同 ru2tong2, 一如 yi4ru2, 一似 yi2si4, 猶若 you2ruo4, 像似 xiang4si4 comparison, manner
- P49 相對於 xiang1dui4yu2, 相較于 xiang1jiao4yu2, 不及 bu4ji2, 比 bi3, 較 jiao4, 比起 bi3qi3, 較之 jiao4zhi1, 相較於 xiang1jiao4yu2, 相對於 xiang1dui4yu2, 相較 xiang4jiao4 comparison
- P50 除 chu2, 除了 chu2le0, 除去 chu2qu4, 除開 chu2kai1 exclusion
- P51 連 lian2, 連同 lian2tong2 inclusion
- P52 應 ying1 reason
- P53 途經 tu2jing1 location
- P54 比如 bi3ru2, 比如說 bi3ru2shuo1, 譬如 pi4ru2, 譬如說 pi4ru2shuo1, 比方 bi3fang1, 比方說 bi3fang1shuo1, 例如 li4ru2, 例如說 li4ru2shuo1, 諸如 zhu1ru2, 例 li4, 諸如說 zhu1ru2shuo1 apposition
- P55 像 xiang1 apposition, comparison, manner
- P56 秉 (著) bing3(zhe0) manner
- P57 歸 gui1 agent, source
- P58 隨 (著) sui2(zhe0) standard
- P59 自 zi4 condition, location, source, time, topic
- P60 遭 zao1, 遭受 zao1shou4 agent, causer
- P61 至 zhi4, 到 dao4 condition, location, time, goal
- P62 向 (著) xiang4(zhe0) goal, source, target
- P63 跟 gen1 companion, comparison, goal, manner, source, target, theme
- P64 協同 xie2tong2, 隨同 sui2tong2, 偕 xie2, 偕同 xie2tong2 companion
- P65 隔 ge2 location, time
- P66 為 wei4 agent, range, source, causer, theme, goal.

Notes

- 1 An important characteristic in Chinese is that a preposition never occurs without an argument. The preposition 被 bei4, which is used to introduce the agent, is a special case. Sometimes bei4 does not introduce the agent but is immediately followed by the verb. There are two ways to deal with this issue. The first is by sticking to the criteria for prepositions and treating bei4 in 'bei4 + VP' as a passive verbal prefix rather than as a preposition. The second is by treating bei4 in 'bei4 + VP' as an agent-marking preposition. Then bei4, whose argument can be omitted, is the only exception in the category of prepositions. The latter is adopted in the Sinica Corpus.
- 2 Prepositions cannot take aspect markers, such as the perfective marker 了 le0, the experiential marker 過 guo4, and the progressive marker 著 zhe0. Some compound prepositions such as 為了 wei4le0 'in order to' and 衝著 chong4zhe0 'considering' contain an aspect morpheme, but these morphemes do not bear aspectual meanings.
- 3 The role of apposition is different from other semantic roles. Prepositions (e.g. 例如 li4ru2 'such as') taking this role introduce appositives related to the preceding sentence. Here is an example:

(317) 運動 有益 健康, 例如: 打球, 游泳,
yun4dong4 you3yi4 jian4kang1, li4ru2: da3qiu2, yu2yong3,
慢跑 等
man4pao3 deng3

exercise benefit health such.as play.ball swim jog etc.

'Exercising such as playing ball, swimming, jogging, and so on is good for health.'

The three items 打球 da3qiu2, 游泳 you2yong2, 慢跑 man4pao3 are considered to be the appositives of 運動 yun4dong4.