Chapter 2
Nouns

2.1 Introduction

The existence of nouns as an independent category in Mandarin is uncontroversial (Chao 1968; Zhu 1982; Huang et al. 2009: Chap. 1). Just like nouns in the Indo-European languages, nouns in Mandarin form an open class. According to Chao (1968: 505), nouns occupy the major portion of the lexicon of Mandarin and the number of nouns in the language exceeds the number of items in the other categories combined. However, unlike nouns in the Indo-European languages, nouns in Mandarin do not inflect for number, Case or gender, as Mandarin is an isolating language and lacks inflectional morphology. Thus, we need diagnostics other than inflectional morphology to identify nouns in Mandarin.

2.2 Classification of Nouns

Nouns in Mandarin can be broadly divided into two subclasses, namely common nouns and proper names. I first examine the syntactic and interpretational properties of common nouns, followed by the discussion of the classification of common nouns (Sect. 2.2.1). Then, I turn to proper names, and discuss how they are similar to and different from common nouns in terms of syntactic and interpretational properties (Sect. 2.2.2).
2.2.1 Common Nouns

Common nouns are lexical items used to denote concrete or abstract entities, such as people (e.g., rén 人 ‘person’, háizi 孩子 ‘child’), animals (e.g., máo 猫 ‘cat’, gǒu 狗 ‘dog’), things (e.g., shū 书 ‘book’, pǐjiǔ 啤酒 ‘beer’), places (e.g., túshūguăn 图书馆 ‘library’, chéngshì 城市 ‘city’) and intangible concepts (e.g., yìnxìàng 印象 ‘impression’, zhēnlí 真理 ‘truth’).

2.2.1.1 Syntactic Properties of Common Nouns

An important syntactic property that sets common nouns in Mandarin apart from other parts of speech is that they can neither be negated by bù 不 ‘not’ (Chao 1968; Zhu 1982; Huang et al. 2009: Chap. 1) nor be modified by the intensifier hěn 很 ‘very’ (Chao 1968; Zhu 1982), as shown by the ill-formedness of (1a–f) and (2a–f), respectively.1 (Ill-formedness is indicated by ‘*’ throughout.)

1As noted by Huang et al. (2009: 10–11), there are examples such as bù-rén-bù-guì 不人不鬼 ‘not-human-not-ghost’ in Mandarin that seemingly allow a noun to be negated by bù 不. I follow Huang et al. and regard these examples as idiomatic expressions rather than genuine counterexamples.

Another syntactic property distinctive to common nouns in Mandarin is that they can be preceded by a [Numeral + Classifier] sequence (Chao 1968; Zhu 1982), as
shown in (3). In this regard, Mandarin common nouns behave like mass nouns in the Indo-European languages, as they typically require the presence of classifiers when they are enumerated (see Chierchia 1998; Cheng and Sybesma 1999, 2014; Cheng et al. 2008; Cheng 2012; Zhang 2013 for discussion of the availability of the count-mass distinction in Mandarin).  

2.2.1.2 Interpretational Properties of Common Nouns

Unlike Indo-European languages, Mandarin lacks articles (e.g., the, a and an in English). As Cheng and Sybesma (1999, 2014) note, bare common nouns can appear in subject or object position and be interpreted as kind-referring, definite or indefinite, depending on context, as shown in (4) (see also Chierchia 1998; Li 1999; Yang 2001). Specifically, in (4a), gǒu 狗 ‘dog’ is kind-referring because it denotes the dog kind. Typically, a bare common noun has a kind reading when it appears in a generic sentence like (4a). In (4b), shū 書 ‘book’ has an indefinite reading. In (4c), xiǎohái 小孩 ‘child’ has a definite reading. Moreover, since bare common nouns

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2The term “classifier” here is used as a cover term equivalent to “numeral classifier.” As I will discuss in Chap. 8, classifiers can be subdivided into sortal classifiers and measure words.

3Note that the presence of classifiers is optional in some colloquial dialects of Mandarin. As Zhang (2013: 30) points out, the classifier ge 個 is optional after the numeral yi 一 ‘one’ in the colloquial Beijing dialect, as illustrated in (ia–d), taken from Zhang (2013: 30).
are unspecified for number, they can yield a singular or plural reading depending on context.4

(4) a. 狗 有 四條 腿。
gǒu yǒu sì-tiáo tuǐ. ‘Dogs have four legs.’
   (kind)

b. 他 買 書 去 了。
tā mǎi shū qù le. ‘He went to buy a book/some books.’
   (indefinite)

c. 小孩 回來了。
xìăohái huílái-le. ‘The child/children came back.’
   (definite)

2.2.1.3 Classification of Common Nouns

While we have seen in (3a–f) that Mandarin common nouns behave syntactically like mass nouns in the Indo-European languages in requiring the presence of classifiers in the enumeration, the semantic distinction between count and mass nouns exists in Mandarin (see, for instance, Cheng et al. 2008; Cheng 2012). Based on the semantic properties of common nouns and the types of classifiers being used, we can divide the class of common nouns into four subclasses: count nouns, mass nouns, collective nouns and abstract nouns (Zhu 1982; see also Chao 1968).

Count Nouns

Count nouns denote tangible and discrete entities that are countable. Typical examples are kèrèn 客人 ‘guest’, shū 書 ‘book’, shé 蛇 ‘snake’, huā 花 ‘flower’, cānguān 餐館 ‘restaurant’, xuéxiào 學校 ‘school’ and zhuōzi 桌子 ‘table’, among many others. Unlike count nouns in the Indo-European languages, which can be directly combined with a numeral (e.g., one guest, three books), count nouns in Mandarin require the use of sortal classifiers, such as wèi 位, běn 本, tiáo 條, jiā 家 and jiān 間, which encode distinctive features like shape, as illustrated in (5) (Zhu 1982; see also Chao 1968).

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4The opacity of bare common nouns with respect to number is referred to as “transnumerality” by Greenberg (1974: 25), who proposes that it is correlated with the obligatory presence of classifiers in numeral-classifier languages (see Bisang 1998, 1999). In Corbett’s (2000) term, bare common nouns in Mandarin exhibit “general number.”
For instance, the sortal classifier 種 in (5c) classifies for long, cylindrical and flexible objects (Tai and Wang 1990), and thus it can serve as the classifier of 蛇 ‘snake’ and entities with similar characteristics, as shown in (6).

Furthermore, a subset of count nouns designating human beings can be suffixed by the collective marker -men 們 to refer to a group of people that are known to both speakers and hearers (Iljic 1994, 2001; Li 1999; see also Huang et al. 2009: Chap. 8). One piece of evidence supporting that count nouns suffixed with -men 們 can be used to refer to a group of people that are known to both speakers and hearers comes from the fact that they are regularly used as a term of address in gatherings, such as 先生们、女士们 ‘ladies and gentlemen’. Furthermore, as Li (1999) notes, count nouns suffixed with -men 們 are interpreted as definite, as in (7a), in contrast with bare count nouns, which can be interpreted as indefinite or definite, as in (7b).

(5) a. 一位 客人
   yi-wèi kèrén
   one-Cl guest
   ‘one guest’

b. 三本 书
   sān-běn shū
   three-Cl book
   ‘three books’

c. 兩條 蛇
   liǎng-tiáo shé
   two-Cl snake
   ‘two snakes’

d. 十朵 花
   shí-duō huā
   ten-Cl flower
   ‘ten flowers’

c. 四家 餐館
   sì-jiā cānguān
   four-Cl restaurant
   ‘four restaurants’

e. 五間 學校
   wǔ-jiān xuéxiào
   five-Cl school
   ‘five schools’

(6) a. 一條 繩子
   yi-diáo shéngzi
   one-Cl rope
   ‘one rope’

b. 三條 魚
   sān-diáo yú
   three-Cl fish
   ‘three fish’

c. 一條 黃瓜
   yi-diáo huángguā
   one-Cl cucumber
   ‘one cucumber’

d. 一條 腿
   yi-diáo tuǐ
   one-Cl leg
   ‘one leg’

(7) a. 他 会 去 找 孩子们。
   tā huì qù zhǎo háizi-men.
   he will go find child-MEN
   ‘He will go find the children.’
   (definite)

b. 他 会 去 找 孩子。
   tā huì qù zhǎo háizi.
   he will go find child
   i. ‘He will go find a/some child/children.’
   (indefinite)
   ii. ‘He will go find the child/children.’
   (definite)
However, unlike count nouns with genuine plural markers in the Indo-European languages, count nouns suffixed with -men 們 cannot be preceded by a [Numeral + Sortal Classifier] sequence even when the numeral is greater than ‘one’ (Iljic 1994, 2001; Li 1998; see also Cheung 2003, 2004; Hsieh 2008), as the contrast in (8) shows.\(^5\)\(^6\)

(8) a. *他會去找三個孩子們。
   *tā huì qù zhǎo sān-ge háizi-men
   he will go find three-Cl child-MEN
b. 他會去找三個孩子。
   tā huì qù zhǎo sān-ge háizi.
   He will go find three-Cl child

Mass Nouns

In contrast with count nouns, mass nouns denote entities that are not countable. Typical examples are shuǐ 水 ‘water’, jiǔ 酒 ‘wine’, táng 糖 ‘sugar’, qiyóu 汽油 ‘petrol’, bù 布 ‘cloth’ and ròu 肉 ‘meat’, among many others. As noted by Chao (1968), there are four ways of classifying mass nouns. One way is to use a standard measure word such as chǐ 尺 ‘foot’, bāng 磅 ‘pound’, jiālún 加侖 ‘gallon’, jīn 斤 ‘pound’ or gōngjīn 公斤 ‘kilo’, as shown in (9).

(9) a. 一尺 布
   yī-chǐ bù
   ‘one-foot cloth’

b. 三磅 糖
   sān-bàng táng
   ‘three-pound sugar’

c. 兩加侖 汽油
   liǎng-jīālún qiyóu
   ‘two gallons of petrol’

d. 十斤 肉
   shí-jīn ròu
   ‘ten-pound meat’

5As Chao (1968) notes, count nouns suffixed with -men 們 can be preceded by a numeral and a collective classifier. Furthermore, as Hsieh (2008) points out, [Numeral + Collective Classifier + Count Noun + -men 們] can only be interpreted as indefinite, as shown in (i), taken from Hsieh (2008: 142).

(i) 他 在跟一群孩子們玩。
   tā zài gēn yī-qún háizi-men wán.
   He at with one-group child-MEN play

‘He is playing with a group of children.’

6Li (1999) proposes that -men 們 can be analyzed as a collective marker as well as a plural marker. For detailed discussion, see Li (1999).
A second way is to use a container measure word such as 酒 ‘glass’ or 瓶 ‘bottle’ (10a, b) or a temporary measure word such as 身 ‘body’ or 瓦子 ‘room’ that indicates the temporary location of the mass (10c–d).

A third way is to use an indeterminate number/amount measure word such as 一點 ‘a little’ or 一些 ‘some’.

A fourth way is to use a measure word that describes the shape in which the mass can be gathered: for example, 堆 ‘heap’ or 池 ‘pool’.

Collective Nouns

Collective nouns are inherently plural. Some illustrative examples are given in (13) and (14).
The examples in (13) involve juxtaposition of two coordinate terms, whereas the examples in (14) are seemingly composed of a noun and a sortal classifier, as evidenced by the fact that the second element in the collective nouns in (14a–d) can be used as a sortal classifier, as shown in (15). The fact that the second member can be used as a sortal classifier in Modern Chinese is not surprising, as many sortal classifiers have their historical origin as nouns (Wang 1955; Liu 1965, among others).

(15) a. 一張 紙
yi-zhāng zhǐ
one-Cl paper
‘a piece of paper’
b. 三朵 花
sān-duó huā
three-Cl flower
‘three flowers’
c. 兩匹 馬
liǎng-pí mǎ
two-Cl horse
‘two horses’
d. 四本 書
sì-běn shū
four-Cl book
‘four books’

Because collective nouns are inherently plural, they cannot be preceded by a [Numeral + Sortal Classifier] sequence, as the ill-formedness of (16a–d) shows (Chao 1968; Zhu 1982).

(16) a. *兩個 父母
*liǎng-ge fù-mǔ
two-Cl father-mother
Intended: ‘two parents’
b. *三碟 飯菜
*sān-dié fàn-cài
three-Cl rice-vegetable
Intended: ‘three plates of food’
c. *一張 紙張
*yī-zhāng zhǐzhāng
one-Cl paper
Intended: ‘one piece of paper’
d. *四朵 花朵
*sì-duó huāduǒ
four-Cl flower
Intended: ‘four flowers’

Instead, collective nouns can only take measure words concerned with grouping (e.g., duì ‘pair’ and pī ‘batch’), temporary measure words concerned with location (e.g., zhuō 桌 ‘table’) or indeterminate measure words (e.g., yǐxiē 一些 ‘some’).

(17) a. 兩對 父母
liǎng-duì fù-mǔ
two-Cl father-mother
‘two pairs of parents’
b. 一批 紙張
yī-pī zhǐzhāng
one-batch paper
‘a batch of papers’
c. 三桌 飯菜
yī-zhūō fàn-cài
one-table rice-vegetable
‘a table of food’
d. 一些 花朵
yǐxiē huāduǒ
some flower
‘some flowers’
Abstract Nouns

Abstract nouns, as their name implies, do not refer to concrete entities. Rather, they are often used to denote abstract notions, such as complex or sophisticated situations, experiences, processes, qualities or phenomena in diverse areas. Some illustrative examples of abstract nouns are given in (18).

(18) a. 真理
zhēnlǐ
truth
‘truth’
b. 病
bing
sickness
‘sickness’
c. 矛盾
máódùn
contradiction
‘contradiction’
d. 效果
xiàoguǒ
effect
‘effect’

Abstract nouns may be preceded by the general classifier ge 個, measure words indicating type (e.g., zhǒng 种 ‘type, kind, category’) or indeterminate measure words (e.g., yìxiē 一些 ‘some’ and yìdiàn 一点 ‘a little’) (Chao 1968; Zhu 1982).

(19) a. 一個 真理
yī-ge zhēnlǐ
one-Cl truth
‘a truth’
b. 一種 病
yī-zhǒng bìng
one-kind sickness
‘a kind of sickness’
c. 一些 矛盾
yìxiē máódùn
some contradiction
‘some contradictions’
d. 一點 效果
yìdiàn xiàoguǒ
a.little effect
‘a little effect’

2.2.2 Proper Names

Proper names are a type of nouns that is used to denote particular people (e.g., kǒngzǐ 孔子 ‘Confucius’, mǎkèsī 馬克思 ‘Marx’, kèlǐndùn 克林頓 ‘Clinton’), places (e.g., lùndūn 倫敦 ‘London’, zhōngguó 中國 ‘China’, xībānyá 西班牙 ‘Spain’, yàzhōu 亞洲 ‘Asia’) or things (e.g., jiàng qiáo àngxué 剑桥大学 ‘Cambridge University’, mǎkèsīzhǔyì 馬克思主義 ‘Marxism’, jīnāng 金星 ‘Venus’, zhànzhēngyùhēpíng 《戰爭與和平》 ‘War and Peace’). In other words, proper names have unique referents in the universe.

2.2.2.1 Syntactic Properties of Proper Names

Similar to common nouns, proper names can neither be negated by bù 不 ‘not’ nor be modified by the intensifier hěn 很 ‘very’, as shown by the ill-formedness of (20a–d) and (21a–d), respectively.
However, unlike common nouns, proper names typically cannot be preceded by a [Numeral + Classifier] sequence (Chao 1968; Zhu 1982), as shown in (22). The incompatibility of proper names with a preceding [Numeral + Classifier] sequence is expected, since proper names denote unique referents and enumeration of a unique referent will lead to semantic ill-formedness. (Semantic ill-formedness is indicated by “#” throughout.) In this regard, Mandarin proper names parallel those in the Indo-European languages (consider, for instance, #a Confucius and #three Londons in English, which are semantically ill-formed).

(22) a. #一個 孔子  
    #yí-ge kǒngzǐ  
    one-Cl Confucius  
    c. #四所 劍橋 大學  
    #sì-suǒ jiàniāo dàxué  
    four-Cl Cambridge University  

b. #三個 倫敦  
    #sān-ge lúndūn  
    three-Cl London  
    d. #兩個 馬克思主義  
    #liǎng-ge mǎkēzhìzhǔyì  
    two-Cl Marxism

There are apparent exceptions to the non-occurrence of a [Numeral + Classifier] sequence before a proper name, as shown in (i).

(i) 我認識兩個約翰。  
wǒ rènshì liǎng-ge yuēhàn.  
I know two-Cl John  
'I know two people whose name is John.'

As Chao (1968: 514) notes, examples like (i) are not genuine counterexamples, as liǎng-ge yuēhàn 兩個約翰 refers to two different people whose name happens to be John (see also Zhu 1982). Furthermore, according to Huang et al. (2009: Chap. 8), proper names can function as common nouns when they are preceded by a [Numeral + Classifier] sequence as in (i). Following this view, yuēhàn 約翰 ‘John’ in (i) should be analyzed as a common noun rather than a proper name.
2.2.2.2 Interpretational Properties of Proper Names

Like bare common nouns, proper names can appear in subject or object position. For example, the proper name bālī ‘Paris’ functions as the subject in (23a), and it functions as the object in (23b). However, unlike bare common nouns, which can yield a kind, definite or indefinite reading (see (4a–c)), proper names are always interpreted as definite, as they denote unique referents in the universe. For instance, the proper name bālī ‘Paris’ in (23a–b) has a unique referent; that is, it refers to the capital of France.

(23) a. 巴黎是 一個 大 城市。
   bālī shì yī-ge dà chéngshì.
   ‘Paris is a big city.’

b. 他 去過 巴黎。
   tā qù-guo bālī.
   ‘He has been to Paris.’

2.3 Summary

In this chapter, I have illustrated that nouns in Mandarin can be broadly divided into two types: common nouns and proper names. I have further discussed the classification of common nouns into count, mass, collective and abstract nouns. As illustrated here, common nouns and proper names in Mandarin share two important syntactic properties: (i) they cannot be negated by bù ‘not’, and (ii) they cannot be modified by the intensifier hěn ‘very’. The key difference between them is that common nouns unlike proper names, can be preceded by a [Numeral + Classifier] sequence. In terms of interpretational properties, while common nouns can have a kind, definite or indefinite reading, proper names are always interpreted as definite. Readers who are interested in the noun phrase structure of Mandarin and the syntactic status of common nouns versus proper names are referred to Huang et al. (2009: Chap. 8) (see also Tang 1990; Sio 2006, 2008; Hsieh 2008; Cheng and Sybesma 1999, 2005, 2012, 2014).

References


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