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PREFIXES

SUFFIXES

in chinese



Chinese Prefixes and Suffixes

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Prefixes in Chinese

In Chinese, prefixes are a grammatical element added to the beginning of a word, such as 老, 小, 阿, 第, and 初. These prefixes must be combined with other characters to form a word and can't be used alone.

老 /lǎo/

* Original meaning and use:

As an adjective, 老 means **old or elder** and can be used as a predicate in a sentence or to describe other elements.

e.g.

- 爸爸妈妈老了。 (Bàba māma lǎo le.) *My parents are old.*
- 老人 (lǎo rén) *old man*
- 老奶奶 (lǎo nǎinai) *old woman*

* As a prefix in Chinese:

老 is a dummy prefix. In a word, it either has **no meaning** or indicates **respect**, an **amiable feeling** or **seniority** among a group of people.

Rule:

Goes before animal names, people, monosyllabic family names or numbers.

Structure:

老 + animal name/person/monosyllabic family name/number

i. no meaning		
老虎	(lǎo hǔ)	tiger
老鼠	(lǎo shǔ)	mouse
老鹰	(lǎo yīng)	eagle
ii. respect		
老师	(lǎoshī.)	teacher
老板	(lǎobǎn)	boss; shopkeeper
iii. amiable feeling		
老张啊，好久不见！	(Lǎo zhāng a, hǎo jiǔ bú jiàn!)	Zhang, long time no see!
老公	(lǎogōng)	husband
老婆	(lǎopó)	wife
iv. seniority		
老大	(lǎo dà)	big brother; big cheese
老二	(lǎo'èr)	the second child; ranking second
老三	(lǎo sān)	the third child; ranking third

小 /xiǎo/

* Original meaning and use:

As an adjective, 小 means **young** or **small** and can be used as a predicate in a sentence or to describe other elements.

e.g.

- 这件衣服太小了。 (Zhè jiàn yīfu tài xiǎo le.) This clothes is too small.
- 小朋友 (xiǎo péngyou) little boy or girl
- 小孩子 (xiǎo háizi) little child

* As a prefix in Chinese:

小 is also a dummy prefix. In a word, it either shows **no meaning** or **affection**.

When indicating affection, it is usually used by a senior towards their subordinates or by an elder towards younger people.

Rule:

Goes before people, adjectives or monosyllabic family names.

Structure:

小 + person/monosyllabic family name/other elements

i. no meaning		
小姐	(xiǎo jiě)	Miss
小心	(xiǎo xīn)	to be careful
小丑	(xiǎo chǒu)	Joker; clown
小住	(xiǎo zhù)	to live for a while
小气	(xiǎo qì)	to be mean
ii. affection		
小李，帮我打印一下。	(Xiǎo Lǐ, bāng wǒ dǎyìn yí xià.)	Lee, help me to print it.
小贺啊，回来啦!	(Xiǎo Hè ā, huí lái la!)	He, you're back!

阿 /ā/

* Original meaning and use:

阿 is usually combined with other elements to form a word. By itself, 阿 doesn't mean anything.

* As a prefix in Chinese:

As a very common prefix, 阿 is usually used as a greeting and indicates **affection**.

Rule:

Goes before numbers, monosyllabic family names, nicknames or relative nouns.

Structure:

阿 + number/monosyllabic family name/nickname/relative noun

Affection		
阿四	(ā sì)	the fourth child; ranking fourth
阿王	(ā wáng)	Wang (family name)
阿丽	(ā lì)	Li (nickname)
阿姨	(ā yí)	antie; a calling to other woman with similar age as your mother
阿婆	(ā pó)	grandma; a calling to other elder woman

第 /dì/

* Original meaning and use:

第 is usually combined with other elements to form a word. By itself,

第 doesn't mean anything.

* As a prefix in Chinese:

As a prefix, 第 is usually used to indicate **order**.

Rule:

Goes before an integer.

Structure:

第 + integer

Ordinal		
第一	(dì yī)	the first
第二	(dì èr)	the second
第十	(dì shí)	the tenth

初 /chū/

* Original meaning and use:

初 means **beginning or start**. In modern Chinese, when 初 is used alone, it is usually a part of a fixed expression. Otherwise, it is part of a word.

e.g.

- 初来乍到 (*chū lái zhà dào*) *to be new here*

- 他在学初级汉语。 (*Tā zài xué chūjí hànǔ.*) *He is learning elementary Chinese.*

- 我最初是想去北京的, 最后却来了上海。

(*Wǒ zuì chū shì xiǎng qù Běijīng de, zuì hòu què lái le Shànghǎi.*)

At the beginning, I wanted to go to Beijing, however I came to Shanghai at last.

* As a prefix in Chinese:

As a prefix, 初 is usually used to indicate **sequence in Chinese lunar time**.

Rule:

Goes before numbers less than or equal to ten.

Structure:

初 + number(≤ 10)

Sequence in Chinese lunar time		
初一	(chū yī)	the first day (lunar year)
初二	(chū èr)	the second day (lunar year)
初十	(chū shí)	the tenth day (lunar year)

Suffixes in Chinese

In modern Chinese, there are significantly more suffixes than prefixes, so, in this part, we will go over several important suffixes, such as 子, 儿, 生, 头, 然, 者, 家, and 员, which will help you express a wide variety of ideas. These suffixes either show people's affection, distinguish a group of people, or change the part of speech when added after other elements. So, let's see how they work.

子 /zi/

* Original meaning and use:

In ancient Chinese, 子(zǐ) with third tone is an expression showing **respect to honorable people**.

e.g.

- 孔子 (Kǒng zǐ) Confucius, a Chinese philosopher
- 荀子 (Xún zǐ) Xunzi, a Chinese philosopher
- 老子 (Lǎo zǐ) Laozi, a Chinese philosopher
- 孟子 (Mèng zǐ) Mengzi, a Chinese philosopher

* As a suffix in Chinese:

A very common suffix, 子 (zi) pronounced with neutral tone is only a grammatical particle in modern Chinese. It is always used as a **nominal suffix**, added after another character.

Rule:

Goes after a partial noun, verb, or adjective to make it into a noun

Structure:

Partial noun/verb/adjective + 子

i. noun + 子		
桌子	(zhuō zi)	desk; table
椅子	(yǐ zi)	chair
凳子	(dèng zi)	stool
杯子	(bēi zi)	cup
筷子	(kuài zi)	chopsticks
本子	(běn zi)	notebook
箱子	(xiāng zi)	box
盒子	(hé zi)	case; box
橙子	(chéng zi)	orange
橘子	(jú zi)	tangerine
桃子	(táo zi)	peach
儿子	(ér zi)	son
沙子	(shā zi)	sand
ii. verb + 子		
盖子	(gài zi)	lid
iii. adjective + 子		
傻子	(shǎ zi)	the fool
疯子	(fēng zi)	madman

儿 /ér/

* Original meaning and use:

儿 originally meant **son** in Chinese and can be used alone or combined with other words.

e.g.

- 儿啊，你终于回来了。(Ér a, nǐ zhōngyú huílái le.) Oh my son, you finally back.

- 儿孙自有儿孙福。(Ér sūn zì yǒu ér sūn fú.) The children can take care of themselves when they grow up.

- 儿女双全 (Ér nǚ shuāng quán) with son and daughter

* As a suffix in Chinese:

As a common suffix, 儿 (written as 'r' in pinyin) is only a grammatical particle. It mainly functions as a **nominal suffix** added after other characters.

Rule:

Goes after a partial noun or verb to form a noun.

Structure:

nominal morpheme/verbal morpheme + 儿

i. noun+儿		
花儿	(huā'r)	flower
盆儿	(pén'r)	pot
棍儿	(gùn'r)	stick
车儿	(chē'r)	car
事儿	(shì'r)	thing
女儿	(nǚ'r)	daughter
ii. verb+儿		
画儿	(huà'r)	painting
卷儿	(juǎn'r)	curve
盖儿	(gài'r)	lid

头 /tóu/

* Original meaning and use:

As a noun, 头 (tóu) means **head**. It can be used alone or combined with other words.

e.g.

- 你的头怎么了? (Nǐ de **tóu** zěnmē le?) What's wrong with your head?
- 我头疼。(Wǒ **tóu** téng.) I have a headache.
- 头发 (**tóufa**) hair

* As a suffix in Chinese:

As a suffix, 头(tou) is pronounced with neutral tone. The ancient meaning of head has been obscured. It mainly functions as a **nominal suffix**, added after another character.

Rule:

Goes after a partial noun, verb, or adjective to make it into a noun.

Structure:

Partial noun/verb/adjective + 头

i. noun+头		
木头	(mù tou)	wood
石头	(shí tou)	stone
骨头	(gǔ tou)	bone
ii. verb+头		
看头	(kàn tou)	be worthy of watching
听头	(tīng tou)	be worthy of listening
念头	(niàn tou)	idea; thought
iii. adjective+头		
准头	(zhǔn tou)	accuracy
甜头	(tián tou)	sweet taste; benefit

然 /rán/

* Original meaning and use:

然 originally functioned as an adjective meaning **right** or as a pronoun meaning **such** or **this way**.

e.g.

- 不以为然 (*bù yǐ wéi rán*) *not to regard it as right*
- 当然 (*dāng rán*) *of course*
- 然后 (*rán hòu*) *then*

* As a suffix in Chinese:

When used as a suffix, the original meaning of 然 doesn't matter and it is used to describe **a kind of state**. It's mainly used after another character to form an **adverb, adjective or conjunction**.

Rule:

Goes after a character to form an adverb, adjective or conjunction.

Structure:

a character + 然

i. form an adverb		
忽然	(hū rán)	suddenly
果然	(guǒ rán)	sure enough
恍然	(huǎng rán)	suddenly
ii. form an adjective		
突然	(tū rán)	sudden
显然	(xiǎn rán)	obvious
iii. form a conjunction		
既然	(jì rán)	now that
虽然	(suī rán)	even though

者 /zhě/

* Original meaning and use:

In ancient Chinese, 者 was used to refer to **people** or **things** with a certain feature after another element. It is often used in Chinese poems or idioms.

e.g.

- 逝者如斯夫，不舍昼夜。(Shì **zhě** rú sī fu, bù shě zhòu yè.)

How it flows on, never ceasing, night and day!

- 知人者智，自知者明。(Zhī rén **zhě** zhì, zì zhī **zhě** míng.)

He who knows others is learned, and he who knows himself is wise.

* As a suffix in Chinese:

When used as a suffix, 者 actually keeps the characteristic of referring to **people with a certain feature** to some degree but becomes more ambiguous. It is mainly applied as **a noun suffix** added after another morpheme.

Rule:

Goes after a verb, adjective or part of a noun to make it into a noun.

Structure:

verb/adjective/partial noun + 者

i. verb+者		
读者	(dúzhě)	reader
作者	(zuòzhě)	author
学者	(xuézhě)	scholar
ii. adjective+者		
患者	(huànzhe)	patient
长者	(zhǎngzhě)	eldership
伤者	(shāngzhě)	the wounded
iii. noun+者		
笔者	(bǐzhě)	writer

家 /jiā/

* Original meaning and use:

In modern Chinese, 家 means **family or home**. It can be used alone or combined with other words.

e.g.

这是我家。(Zhè shì wǒ **jiā**.) This is home.

家人 (**jiā rén**) family

家庭 (**jiā tíng**) household

* As a suffix in Chinese:

As a nominal suffix, 家 can be put after activities to indicate **people engaged in that activity**.

Rule:

Goes after an activity.

Structure:

activity + 家

People engaged in some field of activity		
画家	(huàjiā)	painter
科学家	(kēxuéjiā)	scientist
天文学家	(tiānwénxuéjiā)	astronomer
作家	(zuòjiā)	writer
小说家	(xiǎoshuōjiā)	fictionist
数学家	(shùxuéjiā)	mathematician

员 /yuán/

* Original meaning and use:

员 refers to **people** and can be used alone or combined with other words.

e.g.

你是我们队里的一员。 (Nǐ shì wǒmen duì lǐ de yì **yuán**.) You are a member of our team.

人员 (rén **yuán**) personnel

员工 (yuángōng) staff

动员 (dòng**yuán**) call forth

* As a suffix in Chinese:

As a nominal suffix, 员 can be put after an activity or group to indicate people who **do that activity** or are **members of that group**.

Rule:

Goes after a character for an activity or group.

Structure:

activity/group + 员

i. people engaged in activity		
球员	(qiúyuán)	player
演员	(yǎnyuán)	actor
ii. people in a group		
队员	(duìyuán)	teammate
会员	(huìyuán)	member
成员	(chéngyuán)	member
团员	(tuányuán)	group member

们 /men/

* Original meaning and use:

们 usually needs to be combined with other elements to form a word. By itself, 们 doesn't mean anything.

* As a suffix in Chinese:

As a suffix, 们 is mainly put after nouns or pronouns to **indicate pluralization**.

Rule:

Goes after a noun or pronoun to make it plural.

Structure:

noun/pronoun + 们

Indicate plural		
我们	(wǒmen)	we; us
你们	(nǐmen)	you
他们	(tāmen)	they; them
她们	(tāmen)	they; them
它们	(tāmen)	they; them
人们	(rénmen)	people
歌手们	(gēshǒumen)	singers
志愿者们	(zhìyuànzhěmen)	volunteers

边 /biān/

* Original meaning and use:

边 (biān) with first tone refers to the **edge, boundary, border** or **side**.

e.g.

- 边缘 (*biānyuán*) *edge*
- 边疆 (*biānjiāng*) *boundary*
- 边界 (*biānjiāng*) *border*
- 等边三角形 (*děng biān sānjiǎoxíng*) *equilateral triangle*

* As a suffix in Chinese:

边 is a suffix attached to **nouns that indicate location**.

Rule:

Goes after location nouns.

Structure:

location noun+边

i. noun + 子		
上边	(shàngbian)	upper
下边	(xiàbian)	lower
左边	(zuǒbian)	left
右边	(yòubian)	right
外边	(wàibian)	outside
里边	(lǐbian)	inside
前边	(qiánbian)	front
后边	(hòubian)	back
东边	(dōngbian)	east
西边	(xībian)	west
北边	(běibian)	north
南边	(nánbian)	south

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