

Verb phrases

Ref Hsk3 Grammar

+ — “hard to ...”

Stick (“difficult”) in front of a verb and you get “**hard to ...**” — (“hard to learn”), (“hard to find”). Its mirror image is (“easy to”: “easy to learn”). With sense verbs, fuses into fixed adjectives: (“bad-tasting”), (“unpleasant to hear”).

Structure: Subject + () + Verb

{zh: |Hàn yǔ|Chinese / |hěn|very / |nán|hard to / |xué|learn / 。 }

Chinese is hard to learn.

{zh: |zhè lǐ|here / |de / |kā fēi|coffee / |hěn|very / |nán hē|bad-tasting / 。 }

The coffee here tastes bad.

Remember: = “hard to,” = “easy to.” Bolt either onto a verb: / (“hard / easy to understand”), (“ugly,” lit. “hard to look at”), (“good-looking”).

Watch out

- With sense verbs it forms set adjectives: , , (“smells bad”), (“ugly”).

+ + — “did ... for (a length of time)”

To say **how long** a finished action lasted, drop the **duration after the verb** — Chinese has no “for” preposition, so the word order does the carrying. If there’s an object too, slip in front of it.

Structure: Subject + Verb + + Duration (+ + Object)

{zh: |tā|he / |xué|studied / |le / |yì nián|a year / |Zhōng wén|Chinese / 。 }

He studied Chinese for a year.

{zh: |wǒ men|we / |zuò|took / |le / |shí wǔ ge|fifteen / |xiǎo shí|hours / |de / |fēi jī|flight / 。 }

We took a fifteen-hour flight.

Remember: no “for” word — the slot does it. Duration goes *after* the verb (, “studied for a year”), and an object hangs off a (, “watched TV all day”).

Watch out

- Contrast (“haven’t studied *in* a year”), where the same duration flips to *before* the verb.

+ + + — “has been ...ing (and still is)”

Tag a **second** onto the very end and the action stretches **up to now and keeps going** — “have been ...ing for X (and still am).” When the verb has an object, you **repeat the verb**.

Structure: Subject + Verb + + Duration + . (with object) Subj + Verb + Obj + Verb + + Duration +

{zh: |tā|he / |zài|in / |Běi jīng|Beijing / |zhù|has lived / |le / |liǎng nián|two years / |le / 。 }

He’s been living in Beijing for two years (and still is).

{zh: |wǒ|I / |xué|learning / |Zhōng wén|Chinese / |xué|have learned / |le / |yì nián|a year / |le / 。 }

I’ve been learning Chinese for a year now.

Remember: one = a finished stretch; two = still going. That trailing means “...and counting.” With an object, double the verb: .

Watch out

- Without the final , reads as “lived there two years (then left)” — the second is the whole “still ongoing” difference.

+ — “no way to, can’t”

is “there’s **no way**.” Standing alone it’s a shrug — “it can’t be helped, what can you do.” In front of a verb it means “have no way to ..., can’t possibly ...”

Structure: Subject + + Verb

{zh: |jīn tiān|today / |tài máng|too busy / |le / , |zhōng wǔ|at noon / |méi bàn fǎ|no way to / |chū qù|go out / |chī fàn|for lunch / 。 }

It’s too busy today — no way to go out for lunch.

{zh: |méi yǒu|without / |mì mǎ|the password / , |wǒ men|we / |méi bàn fǎ|have no way to / |dǎ kāi|open / |zhè ge|this / |wén jiàn|file / 。 }

Without the password, we have no way to open this file.

Remember: = “a way / method,” so = “**no way (to)**” and = “have a way.” Alone, is the all-purpose “what can you do.”

Watch out

- It's stronger and more resigned than — it says the door is simply shut.

+ — softening by reduplication

Double a verb and the action turns **brief, light, “give-it-a-go”** — “have a quick look,” “talk it over.” It warms the tone, perfect for soft suggestions and polite requests.

Structure: Verb + Verb (one-syllable, AA) · ABAB (two-syllable)

{zh: |wǒ|I / |xiǎng|want to / |chū qù|go out / |zǒu zou|for a little walk / 。 }

I'd like to go out for a bit of a walk.

{zh: |zhè jiàn|this / |shì|matter / |wǒ men|we / |shāng liang|discuss / |shāng liang / 。 }

Let's talk this over.

Remember: doubling a verb adds a “**just a little / give it a try**” softness. One-syllable doubles **AA** (), two-syllable doubles **ABAB** () — *not* the adjective's AABB. and past are common variants.

Watch out

- It only fits actions you can do “a bit of” — you wouldn't reduplicate a one-off like or .

+ — feelings take

A small club of **feeling / mental verbs** (, , , , ...) act like adjectives and take — which is exactly why beginners end up saying “very like!”

Structure: Subject + + [feeling verb]

{zh: |wǒ|I / |hěn|really / |xǐ huan|like / |zhè bù|this / |diàn yǐng|film / 。 }

I really like this film.

{zh: |tā|he / |hěn|well / |liǎo jiě|understands / |Zhōng guó|Chinese / |wén huà|culture / 。 }

He understands Chinese culture well.

Remember: feelings behave like adjectives, so they take (,). Action verbs don't — there's no or . If it's an emotion or a state of mind, is welcome.

Watch out

- As with adjectives, this is often just the plain positive form, not a strong “very.”