

#### IV: NUMBERS AND UNITS

1. The 二 / 两 distinction. Knowing when to use 二 and when to use 两 seems easy enough, but some idiomatic conventions make the situation a bit complicated. The rule of thumb is that 两 is used *only before a measure word* and only when it is the *cardinal* number 2 (i.e., not part of a larger number like 102, 20, 12, etc., and not the *ordinal* number "second"), and 二 is used in all other contexts.

一、二、三、四…… 电话：六三二八--七二九二

第二课 (二 is an ordinal number in this context)

两个人 两天 (天 is a measure word) 两、三天 两块钱

十二块钱 二十年 (块 and 年 are measure words, but 二 is part of a larger number)

However, because numerical units above 百 can be conceived of as either *numerical measures* or as *numbers*, either 两 or 二 may be used with them, but 二 is a bit more formal than 两.

两千两百块      二千二百块

两千二百块      二千两百块 (mixing 二 and 两 in the one expression is only marginally acceptable)

Other quantifying measure words like monetary units (毛 and 分) and units of length/weight/distance may occur with either 二 or 两, though some are by convention more acceptable than others. Finally, there are a few idiomatic usages that fall outside of grammatical rules. It takes a bit of immersion for the student to develop his "intuition" for the idiomatic or conventional usages.

二米八      两米八 (marginal)

二公里      两公里      两英寸      二英寸

二公斤      两公斤      两磅      but not: 二磅 (native speakers don't say this)

两个人

二位 (polite, used in direct address only, like "贵姓", the noun 人 is usually omitted in this context, but 先生 may be added)

but not: 二个人 (using 二 in front of a M is unacceptable)

二人 (idiomatic; as an exception with the noun 人, the M may be omitted)

("二人同心，黄土变金" is an aphorism from classical Chinese, where classifier measure words do not exist.)

两人 (marginally acceptable with the noun 人, omission of M unacceptable with other nouns)

In 两家人 and 两国人民，家 and 国 are measure words.

2. Special problem with 万、亿. A simple rule to follow is to add one zero to "thousand" for 万 (hence "*ten* thousand," and two zeros to "million" for 亿 (hence "*hundred* million"). The next mega-unit above 亿 is 兆 (add three zeros to "billion," hence "trillion"), but it is not used much.

3. The 几/多少 distinction. Both are question words. 几 clearly means "how many," 多少

can mean "how much" as well as "how many." Generally, 几 applies to countable entities (normally under 10), and 多少 applies to non-countable entities (non-countable entities are sometimes called "mass nouns," which are quantified by units of measure that apply to the particular entities, e.g. 一堆垃圾、一包糖). But 多少 can also apply to countable entities when the number is *not conveniently counted* (anything over 10), such as number of students in a school, or soldiers in a military unit.

你有几个孩子？ 这个学校有多少学生？

几 is always followed by a measure word: 几位客人、第几行、几张照片

多少 is followed by a measure word when it means "how many," and by a noun when it means "how much":

How much? 多少钱？ 五毛 五块钱 五块五

How many? 多少块钱？ 三十五块 二十几块 (五毛 is not a proper answer)

How much? 多少时间？ 一个星期 四十个小时 两个半小时 三分钟

How many? 多少个小时？ 十几个小时 四十个小时

When 多少 is used in the sense of "how much," the logical noun that follows it may be omitted because it is either understood or something unspecified, e.g.

你要多少 (糖、钱)？ 一天能学会多少？

The question "多少 M N" assumes that the same unit of measure will be used in the answer, whereas "多少 N" (without the M) does not assume a particular unit of measure and therefore may be answered by more than one M:

How "much"? 多少学生？ 三十个 三班学生

How many? 多少个学生？ 三十个 (三班学生 is not a proper answer)

How much? 多少苹果？ 三斤 十几个 一箩 一大袋

How many? 多少个苹果？ (of the 4 answers above, only 十几个 is a proper answer)

How much? 多少纸？ 两叠 两包 两百张 一箱

How many? 多少张纸？ (of the 4 answers above, only 两百张 is a proper answer)

Additional note: 多少 (and 多多少少) can also be used as adv., meaning "more or less, to some extent":

中国的大学生多多少少都会一点儿英语。

父母和孩子之间多少会有一点儿代沟 (generation gap)。

4. Indefinite quantities : Aside from the definite quantities expressed by the pattern Nu-M-N, and the common terms for indefinite quantities like 一些、一点儿、很多, it behooves an educated speaker to acquire some additional vocabulary expressing indefinite quantities: 不少, 若干, 少许, 大量的
5. Units within units (addresses, dates and times, organizational units, personal names): Larger units always precede smaller units, which is the opposite word order from English. English word order in this regard reflects a vision of the world from the near (here and now, speaker as reference) and extending outward. In this mode, the individual precedes the

whole. Chinese word order reflects an "objective" vision from a distant point, and "peeling" from the outside inward, from the larger to the smaller units.

出生日期：1975 年 4 月 9 日

地址：中国 云南省 昆明市 翠湖东路 58 巷 32 号 502 室

姓名：李国安 (family is a larger unit than the individual)

清华国际汉语培训项目                      not: 国际汉语培训项目在清华

他是北大外语系的教授。                      not: 他是外语系北大的教授。

6. Dates (last week/next week, day before yesterday/day after tomorrow, etc.): Here again, the Chinese vocabulary in this regard reflects a "distant objective" point of view, and does not use the here and now or the speaker himself as the point of reference.

大前天	前天	昨天	今天	明天	后天	大后天
大前年	前年	去年	今年	明年	后年	大后年
	上上个星期	上个星期	这个星期	下个星期	下下个星期	
	上上个月	上个月	这个月	下个月	下下个月	

If you are prone to mix up words like 「前天」 and 「后天」, you should memorize the following sentences:

别忘了，「前天」就是两天以前，「后天」就是两天以后。真不明白为什么有些老外常把这两个词弄混。

她儿子是去年才上大学的，所以应该后年才大学毕业。

算时间跟看旧的中文书一样，总是从上往下，也就是说，先是「上」，然后才是「下」。所以「上个月」就是这个月以前的那个月，「下个星期」就是这个星期以后的那个星期。

我们是上上个星期开学的。

7. A whole number followed by "...and a half" (半) and "...and some" (...多): The Chinese word order follows the pattern of "a pound and a half" rather than "one and a half pounds." I.e., the 半 or 多 follows the measure word and not tagged onto the end of the whole number, e.g. 一点半了，三天半的时间，两块多钱，三斤多的苹果。

这个孩子才九个多月，已经会走路了。

not: 九多个月

两岁半的孩子应该能说几句话了吧？

not: 两半岁

电影票去年只要两块多，今年就要三块半了。

not: 三半块

我在这儿等了一个多钟头了。

not: 一多个钟头

The absolute amount of the "portion" (多) or "half" (半) is always relative to the measure that immediately precedes it. Numerical units like 十、百、千 also function as measure words, and therefore can be followed by 多 to mean some portion of the numerical unit. E.g. the 多 that follows 块(钱) is some portion of one 元, whereas the 多 that follows 千 is some portion of 1000. When the numerical unit is 十, the "...and some" can be expressed by 几 (3-9) as well as 多。

她看上去只有四十多岁。 她看上去只有四十几岁。  
 租这样的房子一个月大概要三千多块。  
 我在这儿等了十几分钟了。 我在这儿等了十多分钟了。(less common than 十几分)

8. "Approximately" expressed by 左右 and the more colloquial 来:

"Approximately" can be expressed by 差不多, which precedes the number (cf. Lesson I).  
 E.g. 差不多三十个。

左右, used in the sense of "approximately," is usually - but not necessarily - used with round numbers, and it follows the M (when there is no proper M, it may follow a Nu-M).

三十个左右                      三个左右                      but not: 左右三十个  
 你们中心有几个学生?      三十个左右              三十左右              but not: 三十左右个

A more colloquial word for "approximately" is 来:

来 is used after round numbers. Unlike 左右, 来 follows the Nu and not the M.

我们中心有三十来个学生。      not: 我们中心有三十个来学生。  
 他已经病了十来天了!              not: 他已经病了十天来了!

来 has another very different function in quantifying time. When 来 follows a *time period*, it means "in the past...," and is synonymous with "以来..."。 The time-span expression may end in either a N or a M (when the time span is just a Nu-M without a N, then the 来 follows the M):

三十天来 (for the past 30 days)                      三十来天 (approximately 30 days)  
 这两个星期来, 我的汉语进步了很多。 not: 这两个来星期 nor 这两来个星期  
 Why is 十来个星期 correct, but not 两来个星期?  
 What does 十来个星期 mean? And 十个星期来?

9. Use of the word 倍 (number of times). There are two basic patterns, the first one below involves the 比 pattern, which is covered in Lesson XIV.

a) A 比 B SV Nu 倍 (SV: 大、快、高、贵, etc.)                      b) A 是 B 的 Nu 倍

这个比那个贵一倍。也就是说, 这个是那个的两倍。  
 在过去十年中工资长了好几倍。

我的女儿二十七岁, 我五十四岁。  
 我的岁数是她的几倍? \_\_\_\_\_。  
 我比她大几倍? \_\_\_\_\_。

倍 also functions like a M, and the usage of 半 and 多 (cf. #7 above) and be applied to it.

中国现在的人口是五十年前的两倍多。(not 两多倍)

我的女儿二十三岁，我五十岁。  
 我的岁数是她的几倍？ \_\_\_\_\_。  
 我比她大几倍？ \_\_\_\_\_。  
 我的女儿二十岁，我五十岁。  
 我的岁数是她的几倍？ \_\_\_\_\_。  
 我比她大几倍？ \_\_\_\_\_。

Pitfall: An equivalent of the "A 是 B 的 Nu 倍" is commonly used in English, but not the "A 比 B SV Nu 倍" pattern, so native English speakers tend to eschew the "A 比 B SV Nu 倍" pattern, or figure the wrong Nu in that pattern.

#### 10. Fractions and percentages. One pattern applies to both:

Fraction: denominator Nu 分之 numerator Nu      Percentage: 百分之 numerator Nu

四分之三          十二分之七          二分之一 (not 两分之一)  
 十分之七就是百分之七十。  
 这一个月来，五分之四的新闻都是关于经济改革的。  
 在一个社会里，失业率超过百分之六就相当严重了。  
 我们可以把十五分之三简化为五分之一或百分之二十。

Pitfall: Reversing the word order of the numerator and denominator (as in English word order)

There are two word orders for "fraction/percentage *of a certain thing*":

- a) fraction/percentage 的 N    b) N 的 fraction/percentage (slightly less common than a)

在这所大学，三分之一的学生是外国人。    在这所大学，学生的三分之一是外国人。

As an alternative, the topic-comment pattern may also be used. This pattern is in fact preferred when the topic is a noun phrase of some complexity.

Topic (noun phrase), fraction/percentage    predicate

美国的成人人口，（有）百分之六不识字。  
 上星期去长城玩儿的同学，三分之一在长城上过了夜。

Just for fun, try translating the following:

Compared with last year, the number of students increased by 50%.  
 In other words, the number of students this year is one and a half times that of last year.

Answer: 比起去年，今年的学生人数多了百分之五十。  
 也就是说，今年的学生人数是去年的一倍半。