

The M.A.K. Halliday Library Functional Linguistics Series

Jing Fang

A Systemic Functional Grammar of Chinese Nominal Groups

A Text-Based Approach

 Springer

The M.A.K. Halliday Library Functional Linguistics Series

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This series focuses on studies concerning the theory and application of Systemic Functional Linguistics. It bears the name of Professor M.A.K. Halliday, as he is generally regarded as the founder of this school of linguistic thought. The series covers studies on language and context, functional grammar, semantic variation, discourse analysis, multimodality, register and genre analysis, educational linguistics and other areas. Systemic Functional Linguistics is a functional model of language inspired by the work of linguists such as Saussure, Hjelmslev, Whorf, and Firth. The theory was initially developed by Professor M.A.K. Halliday and his colleagues in London during the 1960s, and since 1974 it has held an international congress every year at various continents around the world. It is well-known for its application in a variety of fields, including education, translation, computational linguistics, multimodal studies, and healthcare, and scholars are always exploring new areas of application.

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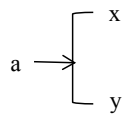
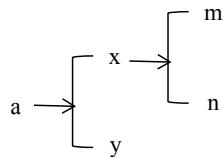
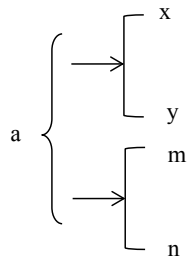
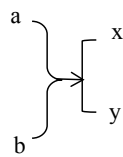
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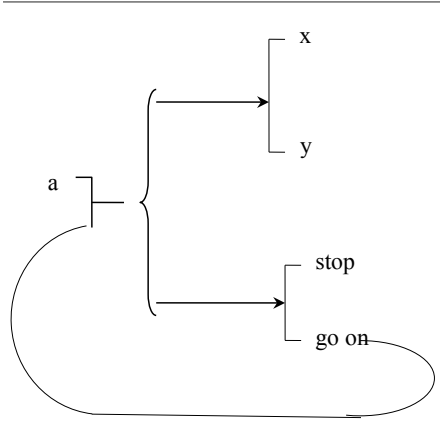
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Symbols, Abbreviations and Systemic Conventions

	System: If ‘a’, then ‘x’ or ‘y’
	Delicacy ordering: If ‘a’, then ‘x’ or ‘y’; if ‘x’, then ‘m’ or ‘n’
	Simultaneity: If ‘a’, then simultaneously ‘x’ or ‘y’, and ‘m’ or ‘n’
	Conjunction in entry condition: If ‘a’ and ‘b’, then ‘x’ or ‘y’

(continued)

(continued)

	Recursive system (logical): If 'a', then 'x' or 'y', and simultaneously option of entering and selecting from the same system again
	Clause boundary
	Group/phrase boundary
[[]]	Embedded clause
[[[[]]]]	Further embedding: an embedded clause within another embedded clause
[]	Embedded group/phrase
↘	Realised by
ϕ	Omission
CONJ	Conjunction
SFL	Systemic functional linguistics
SUB	A subordinate particle (=de in this thesis)
MEA	A measure word in Chinese that has no equivalent in English
*	A problematic/ungrammatical example

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Chapter 1

Introducing Nominal Groups



This chapter will begin with an overview of the research topic: nominal group. The term will be defined through the discussion of both ‘nominal’ and ‘group’, following which a comparison of the term ‘noun phrase’ with ‘nominal group’ will also be presented. In Sect. 1.2, I will give a review of literature focusing on nominal groups in Chinese. However, the review will not include literatures in the systemic functional linguistic field, which will be presented in Chap. 2 instead. In Sect. 1.3, the discussion will focus on the significance of nominal group in contributing to various modes of meanings as a text unfolds. Using a sample text, I will present an example analysis to demonstrate how the use of nominal groups provide resources in achieving different modes of meanings and point out a direction of a delicate text analysis model focusing on nominal groups, which can provide an additional layer of analysis to the currently dominant clause grammar. The discussion in Sect. 1.3 will give the rationale for the exploration of a grammar of nominal group to be presented in the following chapters.

1.1 Defining ‘Nominal Group’

The term ‘nominal group’ is a term full of systemic functional linguistic (SFL) colour, which is rarely used in the literature of other grammatical models, and a corresponding term used in the latter is ‘noun phrase’. Scholars working in models other than SFL conventionally regard ‘nominal group’ as a synonym to ‘noun phrase’ (e.g. Butler et al. 2007). Although by and large, these two terms are very similar in grammatical sense, the difference between the two is more than terminological. In traditional grammar, only the term ‘phrase’ is used to refer to the intermediate grammatical unit between clause and word, whereas in systemic functional grammar, ‘group’ and ‘phrase’ are recognised as two independent terms to stand for different grammatical organisations at the same rank. Therefore, before the definition of ‘nominal group’

is presented, it is necessary to first clarify the meanings of ‘nominal’ and ‘group’, respectively.

1.1.1 On ‘Nominal’

In either SFL or non-SFL models, views about the notion of ‘nominal’ remain similar: to be ‘nominal’, a grammatical unit should be able to function as a noun. However, it is important to avoid confusion with ‘noun’ in its specific sense, as the grammatical quality of being ‘nominal’ can be realised by lexical items of word class other than noun, which is illustrated in the examples below:

Example 1
他们数了数, 总共有 32个。

tāmen	Shǔ le shǔ,	zǒnggòng	yǒu	sānshíèr ge
<u>they</u>	counted	altogether	have	<u>32 MEA</u>
<u>pronoun</u>	verb	adverb	Verb	<u>numeral + measure</u>

They counted, and altogether, there were 32

Example 2
你想吃什么? 辣的还是甜的?

nǐ	xiǎngchī	Shénme?	làde	háishi	Tiánde?
you	want to eat	what	<u>spicy de</u>	or	<u>sweet de</u>
pronoun	verb (group)	pronoun	<u>adjective</u>	conjunctive	<u>adjective</u>

What do you want to eat? Spicy or sweet?

Example 3
这些都是他最喜欢吃的。

zhèxiē	dōushì	tā	zuì xǐhuān chīde
These	all are	<u>he</u>	<u>best like eat de</u>
determiner	verb (group)	pronoun	<u>Down-ranked clause + de</u>

These are all his favourite food.

As shown in the examples above, a pronoun (in Example 1), a numeral + measure structure (in Example 1), an adjective + *de*¹ structure (in Example 2), a determiner (in Example 3) or even a down-ranked clause + *de* structure (in Example 3) can function as the same as a noun in a Chinese sentence and share the same grammatical features, such as being able to take a subject or an object² position, being referential and so on. This illustrates the broader sense of being ‘nominal’, which is adopted by the present study to define a nominal group. In other words, from a grammatical perspective, the assessment of the nominal nature of a lexical item is based on its grammatical potential, or probability, in realising a functional role in a clause which can be congruently assumed by a noun, such as the roles of subject and object in a clause. In the referential space, many nominal items share the same feature of having the potential to be identified as a referent in a given context through deixis, qualification, epithets, classification and naming. In terms of semantic representation, being nominal means that the lexical item in question has the potential to construe a thing (see further in Chap. 4), compared to non-nominal items such as verbs, prepositions and so on.

In general, ‘nominal’ indicates the grammatical potential of a lexicogrammatical item in realising certain functional roles in a clause (e.g. as subject or object), which can be typically fulfilled by a noun.

1.1.2 On ‘Group’

It is important to distinguish ‘group’ from ‘phrase’ first. In Chinese, a *phrase* is called *duǎn yǔ* (短语), which literally means ‘short speech’, whereas a *group* is called *cí zǔ* (词组), which literally means ‘word group’. The terminological difference in Chinese already gives some indication for the difference between the two terms. And, Halliday and Matthiessen present a more straight-forward point of view on the issue:

A phrase is different from a group in that, whereas a group is an expansion of a word, a phrase is a contraction of a clause. Starting from opposite ends, the two achieve roughly the same status on the rank scale... (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014: 362–363)

The difference can be interpreted in this way: although phrase and group are both made up of words, they are viewed from different directions—phrase is viewed from above (thus as a contracted clause), while group is viewed from below (thus as a group of words).

It is important to point out that, although viewed as a group of words in SFL, the term ‘group’ should not be defined merely on the basis of the number of constituents that form a group. Rather, group should be viewed and defined on the rank scale

¹ *de* (的) is a grammatical particle in Chinese, which typically appears after a modifier in a nominal group structure to connect the modifier with the head noun.

² The terms ‘subject’ and ‘object’ in this chapter refer to the concepts in traditional grammar. Discussion about them in SFL will be presented in Chap. 2.

(cf. Halliday 1961). As an important part of the SFL theory, rank scale has been described as a hierarchy of order called constituency, whereby larger units are made up out of smaller ones: a clause is made up of phrases/groups; a group/phrase by words; a word by morphemes (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014).

Viewed on the rank scale, group represents the class below clause and above word. In terms of realisation, a group is made up of either one or more words. If a group is made up of more than one word, the group has a central pivot in its structure, which decides its grammatical nature: with a noun as the head of a group (elliptical or not), the group is nominal; with a verb as the head, the group is verbal; and so on.

Essentially, ‘group’ represents the structural nature of a class, indicating its status on the rank scale, and its constituency potential in lexicogrammar.

1.1.3 General Features of the Nominal Group

So far, I have discussed the notions of ‘group’ and ‘nominal’ in Sects. 1.1.1 and 1.1.2. When it comes to the definition of nominal group, it means that a nominal group should bear the features of both. To put it simply, a nominal group is a group of nominal words, but obviously this definition is not detailed enough to give us any clue about its general features. Therefore, it is important to introduce Halliday and Matthiessen’s five principles of constituency in lexicogrammar (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014), as I will base my description of the general features of a nominal group on these principles. Altogether, they have summarised five principles of constituency in lexicogrammar, which apply to every language (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014: 9–10):

There is a scale of rank in the grammar of every language. This can be typically represented as: clause > phrase/group > word > morpheme³

Each consists of one or more units of the rank next below.

Units of every rank may form complexes: not only clause complexes but also phrase complexes, group complexes, word complexes and even morpheme complexes may be generated by the same grammatical resources.

There is the potential for rank shift, whereby a unit of one rank may be downranked (downgraded) to function in the structure of a unit of its own rank or of a rank below.

Under certain circumstances it is possible for one unit to be enclosed within another; not as a constituent of it, but simply in such a way as to split the other one into two discrete parts.⁴

Based on these five principles, together with the discussions above about ‘nominal’ and ‘group’, the following criteria can be established for identifying a Chinese nominal group:

³ This representation applies to the case of Mandarin Chinese.

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- A nominal group must consist of a nominal head, which could be a noun, a pronoun, a locative⁵ or a determiner. In the case of an elliptic nominal group without a head, this means that a nominal head should be recoverable.
- A nominal group may consist of one or more words.⁶
- A nominal group should be referential. Semantically speaking, this means that it must be able to represent (or refer to) a thing (including human or non-human), concrete or abstract, specific or non-specific. Grammatically, it means that one can add a deictic element before the head to test a group with a doubtful status—but this should not be considered as a rigid grammatical rule as the analysis should always be based on meaning in text rather than on rules.
- A nominal head can be expanded through different types of modification, such as qualifying, classifying, ascribing epithets and so on.
- A nominal group, same as the other types of group or phrase, must be able to play a functional part on a clause structure—for a nominal group, this is typically, but not limited to, referring to the subject or the object position in a clause.
- In terms of semantic representation, a nominal group expresses a being or a thing of any type, either concrete or abstract.

The six criteria presented involve both grammatical and semantic concerns. In this book, the recognition of a nominal group will be strictly based on these criteria listed above. In other words, a grammatical unit should at least satisfy these six criteria to be identified as a nominal group.

Based on the above six criteria, I will discuss an ambiguous case: the rank-shifted ‘act clause’.

Look at the two examples below:

Example 4

这年头，出名不是难事。

zhè niántou	chūmíng	búshì	nánshì
these years	become famous	not is	hard thing

Nowadays, becoming famous is not a hard thing.

Example 5

难的是不被人知道。

nánde	shì	bú bèirén zhīdào
difficult de	is	not be known by others

The hard thing is not to be known by others.

⁵ Discussion about ‘locative’ will be presented in Chap. 4.

⁶ In Chinese, a word may be made up of more than one characters.

The above two clauses (Examples 4 and 5) both contain another clause (shown in bold), which is down-ranked to function as a subject (as in Example 4) or an object (as in Example 5). As Chinese is not an inflectional language, unlike English, this type of down-ranked clauses takes on the same lexical form as a ranking clause, and its rank-shifted status is reflected by its grammatical role in another clause. In English, there is a similar type of clause, named by Halliday and Matthiessen as ‘act’ (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 438) clause. Such a clause represents an action, an event or a phenomenon, and grammatically, it functions in the same way as a nominal group. Some Chinese linguists term them as míngcíxìng jiégòu (名词性结构, *nominal structure*) and treat it at the group/phrase level (cf. Zhu 1982). If one checks against the six criteria presented earlier, this type of ‘act clause’, although nominal in terms of grammatical function, cannot be treated as a nominal group because it does not satisfy all the criteria of being a nominal group: there is no nominal head in the structure, the structure cannot be referred by a deictic item, and it cannot be expanded further through modification.

1.2 Reviewing the Study of Nominal Groups in Chinese

In this section, I will have a review of literature on the research of Chinese nominal groups. However, this review does not cover the studies based on systemic function grammar, which will be discussed in Chap. 2 instead.

The study of the Chinese language can date back to as early as 200 B.C. with focuses on lexicology and epigraphy mainly (cf. Wang 1985; Shao 1990), but the work on nominal groups⁷ happened much later. The reason is that nominal group, as well as the other topics in grammar such as syntax and morphology, was defined and recognised only in the modern linguistic history in China. As pointed out by Wang Li, one of the leading scholars in Chinese linguistics and linguistic history, there was no linguistics but only philology in the ancient Chinese history (Wang 1984). This is closely related to the fact that Chinese, as a logographic non-inflexional language, has virtually no trace of morphology, as a result of which syntactic questions have never been brought to attention (Halliday and McDonald 2004). In fact, the study of grammar was absent in the country’s linguistic history till the late nineteenth century. The publication of Wéntōng (also known as Mǎshì Wéntōng, *Ma’s Grammar*) in 1898 is widely regarded as the first study on Chinese grammar, which also marks the beginning of modern Chinese linguistics (cf. Wang 1984; Shao 1990).

However, the study of nominal groups did not synchronise with the modern linguistic research in Chinese. The historical reviews of Chinese language studies in the twentieth century showed that the grammatical unit of *phrase* was either not recognised or largely ignored by scholars in the first half of the century. During this

⁷ In this section, ‘the study of nominal group’ by and large refers to the work on ‘noun phrase’ (cf. Sect. 1.3).

period, the research was under the heavy influence of Western grammatical traditions and the focus was on exploring specific grammatical rules in Chinese (cf. Shao 1990; Lu 1993). The second half of the twentieth century witnessed tremendous progress in Chinese grammatical studies with the publications of several important works (e.g. Chao 1965; Lü 1979; Zhu 1982). During this period, more and more attention was given on describing the language rather than exploring rules. When it comes to language description, it seems to be unavoidable to define grammatical units from different levels, through which a syntactic structure can be more accessible. In Chao's (1965) description of spoken Chinese grammar, he mainly focused on three levels of grammatical unit: sentence, word and morpheme, though phrase was also recognised as one of the classes. However, phrases were not discussed as a separate class and neither were they categorised as nominal, verbal, adverbial and so on. Instead, Chao described these units from a syntactic structural perspective. He argued that syntax, from the point of view of kinds of units, was not primarily concerned with expressions⁸ in their capacities as lexical items, but with types of constructions into which expressions of various types enter, and a part of speech was a class of words and not of phrase. As a result, in Chao's research, phrase was not investigated as a separate grammatical class, and was classified in terms of syntactical constructions (e.g. coordinate construction and subordinate construction) rather than of functional potential. Chao's categorisation represented the predominant views shared by scholars in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1979, Lü published an important work on Chinese grammar, where he stated that 'it seems to be especially suitable in the case of Chinese to treat *phrase* as an intermediate unit between *word* and *sentence*' (Lü 1979). This was when linguists in Mainland China started to pay more attention to *phrase* (including *noun phrase*). 1980s experienced the rapid development in phrase grammar of various types with Zhu Dexi taking the lead (see Zhu 1980, 1982, 1985). On classifying grammatical units in Chinese, Zhu proposed the following points: (1) there is no simple corresponding relations between words and syntactic components; (2) same syntactic constructing principles apply to both sentence and phrase levels (Zhu 1982). Based on these two points, Zhu believed that the analysis of Chinese grammar should be based at phrase level, and the relations between morpheme and word, and between *word* and *phrase* were both compositional. In other words, it is a relation of parts and whole: a phrase is made up of words, and a word is made up of morphemes. However, the relation between phrase and sentence was different: sentence is realised by phrase, and the two share the same construction principles. Zhu has been regarded as a pioneer in promoting research on phrase-based grammar (see Shao 1990; Lu 1993). According to Zhu's definition, a group should consist of at least two words, otherwise it is not a 'word group' but only a word. This actually creates a problem of consistency because at the other three levels, in contrast, Zhu stated that a word may consist of one morpheme and a sentence may consist of only one group or even one word. So there is a clear-cut boundary between group and

⁸ Chao uses the term 'expression' to cover either words or phrases, but not morphemes (see Chao 1965: 258).

word, but the boundary between group and sentence is in fact very ambiguous—very often the case is that a group equals a sentence. In Zhu's description, group was termed as *jùfǎ jiégòu* (句法结构, *syntactic construction*) and was categorised in terms of the internal structural relations between each part. Altogether, he divided group into six types (Zhu 1982: 14):

- subordinate construction (typically realised by modifier + head)
- verb + object construction
- verb + complement construction
- subject + predicate construction
- coordinate construction (realised by a group of words of the same part of speech)
- verb + verb construction

It is not surprising that, according to Zhu's classification, the boundary between group and sentence is very fuzzy, creating a large overlapping area, since the same constructions, such as subject + predicate construction, can also be considered as a sentence structure. Therefore, it is possible to argue that Zhu's work on groups is still a study of syntax and he tries to interpret syntax at the group level. Strictly speaking, this is not a grammar of phrase/group, as they were only used as a medium to interpret the grammar at the sentence level and the focus was always on the syntactic structure.

From 1980s till very recently, the situation of the group studies has not changed much in the Chinese linguistic field. Although some classifications of groups/phrases tend to consider both the internal construction and the external grammatical function, the dominant way to classify a group unit has been generally the same as Zhu's. In such a context, nominal groups can hardly receive much research attention since it is not often considered as a separate category in group/phrase grammar. Even in the studies with a specific focus on nominal groups, the dominant research focus is still on either the internal syntactic structure or the external roles nominal groups can play on a syntactic structure (e.g. Gu 1985; Li 1986; Liu 2006; Xiong 2008; Wang 2012; Fan 2014), and the classification within nominal groups still follow the framework similar to Zhu's.

In recent years, with the development of computational linguistics, some researchers raised doubts on the construction-based classification of groups after noticing that computers had problems in identifying nominal groups based on such classification (e.g. Zhan and Liu 1997; Zhan 1997; Qian 2010). This kind of doubts actually reflects the problems behind such classification. Firstly, the construction-based classification cannot adequately distinguish a sentence from a group/phrase since both are considered to have the same construction principles, and in practice, the only effective way to distinguish them relies on the use of punctuation marks. This leaves us an impression that, grammatically speaking, there is little difference between group and sentence in Chinese—this is in fact far from the truth. Secondly, under such classification, units of different grammatical potentials fall into the same category, as a result of which their grammatical functions tend to be overshadowed. For example, a complex of nominal groups consisting of two head nouns is put in the same category as a complex of verbal groups consisting of two verbs, simply

because they both have the coordinate structure. Such classification obviously cannot reflect their different grammatical potential. Thirdly and most importantly, such a classification is purely based on form, which makes it impossible to explore any context-based meaning potentials that a group can provide, which will inevitably influence the depth of the research. For instance, some researchers work on those ambiguous constructions which are open for more than one interpretation. In fact, without a context-based perspective, such problems can hardly get resolved.

Before the end of this section, it is important to mention the work of two groups of researchers on Chinese noun phrases. One is Li and Thompson's description of Mandarin Chinese grammar (Li and Thompson 1981). In this study, they used functional terms to describe modern Chinese at all the three levels of word, phrase and sentence. In their account of phrase, noun phrase was investigated as a separate category in terms of modification, referentiality and nominalisation. This is an outstanding work in that the structural properties in the language are discussed in terms of the pragmatic situations with an eye to the context. However, as the authors stated in the preface, the grammar was explicitly designed for students and teachers of Mandarin. Therefore, judging from the linguistic theoretical perspective, many linguistics issues, such as the semantic motivations behind the grammatical choices and the grammatical strategies in realising different pragmatic purposes, remained unaddressed. The other study worth noting is Zhang Min's study of Chinese noun phrase in his book 《认知语言学与汉语名词短语》(*Cognitive linguistics and Chinese noun phrase*). In this book, Zhang described the different structures that a Chinese nominal group could have and explored the semantic and cognitive motives behind the optional use of *de* on the structure (Zhang 1998). Zhang's study can be considered as one of the very limited number of studies on Chinese nominal group which based the description on meaning rather than form. However, as his study mainly focused on *de*, the description of the other parts in a nominal group only served to explain the use of *de*. Therefore, his account of nominal group was not a comprehensive one. It is obvious that more efforts are needed in exploring the Chinese nominal group.

1.3 Nominal Group and Text

As an important unit at the group level, nominal group provides rich resources for meaning making as a text unfolds. I will use a short text (Text 1) as an example to demonstrate the significant contributions that nominal groups can make to the text.

Context⁹

	Text 1: 小蝌蚪找妈妈 ¹⁰ (<i>Little tadpoles looking for mum</i>) Where is our mum?
Field	The socio-semiotic function of this text is both recreating and expounding. The domain is concrete and concerned with the process in which a tadpole turns into a frog. The explanation of the process is unfolded through a narrative depicting a group of tadpoles looking for their mum
Tenor	The institutional roles are an author to the primary school students in grade 1: an adult to young children readers (around 7 years old on average). The evaluation of the experiential domain is neutral to positive
Mode	The text is monologic, written and narrative in children’s language. No technical language is used in the text, and concrete scenarios are presented to demonstrate the physical change of tadpoles as they grow into frogs. The original text is multimodal with a few coloured pictures illustrating the tadpoles at different stages of growth

Text 1

小蝌蚪找妈妈

[1.1] 池塘里有一群小蝌蚪, [1.2] 大大的脑袋, [1.3] 黑灰色的身子, [1.4] 甩着长长的尾巴, [1.5] 快活地游来游去。

[2.1] 小蝌蚪游哇游, [2.2] 过了几天, 长出两条后腿。[3.1] 他们看见 [3.2] 鲤鱼妈妈在教小鲤鱼捕食, [3.3] 就迎上去, [3.4] 问: [3.5] “鲤鱼阿姨, 我们的妈妈在哪里?” [4.1] 鲤鱼妈妈说: [4.2] “你们的妈妈有四条腿, [4.3] 宽嘴巴。[5] 你们到那边去找吧!”

[6.1] 小蝌蚪游哇游, [6.2] 过了几天, 长出两条前腿。[7.1] 他们看见[7.2] 一只乌龟摆动着四条腿在水里游, [7.3] 连忙追上去, [7.4] 叫着: “妈妈, 妈妈!”

[8.1] 乌龟笑着说: [8.2] “我不是你们的妈妈。[9.1] 你们的妈妈头顶上有两只大眼睛, [9.2] 披着绿衣裳。[10] 你们到那边去找吧!”

[11.1] 小蝌蚪游哇游, [11.2] 过了几天, 尾巴变短了。[12.1] 他们游到荷花旁边, [12.2] 看见 [12.3] 荷叶上蹲着一只大青蛙, [12.4] 披着碧绿的衣裳, [12.5] 露着雪白的肚皮, [12.6] 鼓着一对大眼睛。

[13.1] 小蝌蚪游过去, [13.2] 叫着: “妈妈, 妈妈!” [14.1] 青蛙妈妈低头一看, [14.2] 笑着说: [14.3] “好孩子, 你们已经长成青蛙了, [14.4] 快跳上来吧!”

[15.1] 他们后腿一蹬, [15.2] 向前一跳, [15.3] 蹦到了荷叶上。

[16] 不知什么时候, 小青蛙的尾巴已经不见了。[17.1] 他们跟着妈妈, [17.2] 天天去捉害虫。

English Translation

[1.1] In the pond, there were a group of tadpoles, [1.2] (having) big heads, [1.3] (and having) dark grey bodies, [1.4] swinging their long tails [1.5] and swimming happily.

[2] The tadpoles swam and swam. [3] After a few days, they grew two hind legs.

[4.1] When they saw [4.2] Mummy Carp teaching the young carps to hunt, [4.3]

⁹ The terms, Field, Tenor and Mode, will be introduced in Chap. 2.

¹⁰ The text was originally written by Huizhen Fang and Lude Sheng in 1959.