



## Common English mistakes made by native Chinese speakers

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### Summary:

This article presents some common mistakes that native Chinese speakers make when speaking or writing in English. I try to explain the possible causes of these grammatical errors by highlighting differences between Chinese and English grammar.

### Gender confusion

In Chinese, there aren't separate gender pronouns (e.g., *he* and *she*, *his* and *her*). Thus, when Chinese speakers learn English, they often forget to use the appropriate gender pronouns. They mostly default to the masculine versions, which can lead to awkwardness when they refer to women using *he* or *his*.

### Singular/plural noun confusion

In Chinese, there aren't separate singular and plural forms for nouns; the context is used to distinguish between singular and plural. For instance, if someone said "*one cat*" in Chinese, *cat* is singular, but if someone said "*many cat*", *cat* is plural. There is no separate plural form *cats* in Chinese. That's why when Chinese people speak or write English, they tend to forget to make nouns plural, resulting in awkward-sounding phrases like "*we have three dog*".

### Subject-verb agreement confusion

In Chinese, there is no such thing as verb conjugation to [match with the corresponding subject](#). In English, we say "*I like cheese*", "*he likes cheese*", and "*they like cheese*". In Chinese, there aren't separate forms for *like* and *likes*, so one would simply say "*he like cheese*", which sounds funny when translated into English.

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## Verb tense confusion

In Chinese, there is no such thing as [verb conjugation to denote tenses](#); the context is used to distinguish between past, present, future, and all the other various tenses. For example, there is a single word in Chinese that means *run*. If you want to use the present tense, you simply say "*I run*". If you want the past tense, you have to say something like "*yesterday I run*", where *yesterday* provides the requisite context. And if you want the future tense, you have to say something like "*tomorrow I run*".

Verb conjugation is one of the most difficult parts of the English language for native Chinese speakers to master, simply because there are so many tenses, and each can only be properly used in select situations. Chinese speakers know not to always use the (default) present tense of English verbs, but oftentimes their attempts at switching up the tenses lead to incorrect and funny-sounding sentences.

## Omitting or inserting articles

In Chinese, there is no need for articles (*a*, *an*, *the*) in front of nouns, so Chinese speakers often forget to place the appropriate article when speaking or writing English. For instance, they might say "*I went to store*" or "*He likes movie*".

Sometimes articles should not be inserted, but Chinese speakers insert them anyways, perhaps because they remember that they should be aware of using articles when speaking or writing English. Thus, we get bloopers like "*the God blessed America*" or "*you gained the weight last month*".

## Confusing prepositions

The correct use of prepositions (e.g., *in*, *at*, *on*, *to*, *into*) is often difficult for non-native English speakers to master. This part-of-speech is especially problematic for Chinese speakers because there isn't such a strong distinction between different prepositions in the Chinese language.

To English speakers, "*he got a job in Microsoft*" sounds a bit off, but "*he got a job at Microsoft*" seems more natural-sounding. However, in Chinese, there is one word (technically, *character*) that sometimes means *in* and other times means *at*, depending on the context.

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## Mixing up first and last names

In Chinese, people's last (family) names are spoken and written before their first names, the exact reverse of English conventions. Thus, when Chinese speakers mention English names, they sometimes say them backwards (e.g., *"Smith Will"*).

## Examples of combining multiple mistakes

Here are some sentences that combine multiple mistakes of the types that I've described in this article.

*"Yesterday I go to market to buy three duck."*

*"Mary like to eat meat; he definitely not vegetarian."*

*"He like to go to mall to shop for the clothing."*

*"Last week he get good job at big city."*

Notice that the meanings of these sentences are still fairly clear despite the incorrect grammar, which makes them sound strange to native English speakers. The context is enough to disambiguate meaning.

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Feel free to send comments, suggestions, questions, or rants to me via email: [philip@pgbovine.net](mailto:philip@pgbovine.net)

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