

# Analysis and Differentiation of Confusable Words in the Teaching of Chinese as a Foreign Language – Taking “Little,” “Some” “A Bit” as Examples

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**Abstract:** In Chinese, there are many words with similar meanings, but their usage is different. If one does not pay attention to them, one would get confused. Especially for international students that are learning Chinese, these types of words are problematic but important in the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language. This article analyzes “little,” “some,” and “a bit” in terms of their meaning, as a part of speech, usage, etc. and strives to assist teachers and international students to develop ideas or methods to distinguish confusable words.

**Keywords:** Little; Some; A bit; Differentiation

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## 1. Introduction

In modern Chinese vocabulary, there are words that can give someone the impression that they have similar meanings. However, when used in specific situations, it has been found that certain words can be used but some are not suitable; thus, they need to be differentiated and analyzed. For example, “beautiful,” and “good-looking”; “a little bit,” and “some”; “expectation,” and “hope.” These words are known as confusable words, in which they are important but problematic in the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language. They are also an area where foreign students are more likely to make mistakes when they learn Chinese. Further differentiation between these words would help international students to better grasp the usage of these words and in distinguishing confusable words.

## 2. Comparisons of “little” and “some” in Chinese

“Little” and “some” are explained in the *Dictionary of Key and Difficult Words in the Teaching of Chinese as a Foreign Language* (Beijing University Edition):

### 2.1. “Little”

- (1) Used for a small amount of things. For example, “Eat a little.”
- (2) Used for abstract matters related to people’s feelings and thinking. For example, “A little experience.”
- (3) Used for time. For example, “It is still a little short of eight.”

### 2.2. “Some”

- (1) An unquantified quantity used for people or things. Numerals are generally limited to “one.” For

example, some students, some questions, and some friends.

- (2) It is used after adjectives (sometimes with verbs) to explain a situation or shape of things and express some meaning. For example, something, of the same class, and to some extent.

Zhu Dexi, a Chinese linguist, mentioned in *Grammar Lectures* that the commonly used non-quantitative words are “little” and “some.” In addition, only the numeral “one” can be added before these two quantifiers. “Some” is more than “a little,” and the difference is more obvious when “so” and “then” are added at the front.

### 3. Meanings of “little,” “some,” and “a bit”

The *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (Fifth Edition) explains “little,” “some,” and “a bit” as follows:

#### 3.1. Little

- (1) A smaller number that is uncertain. For example, “I only have a little to drink.”
- (2) It means very small or very few. For example, “How big I thought it was, it turned out to be only so ~, is it enough?” and “Few years have passed, and his problem has not changed even a ~.”

#### 3.2. Some

- (1) Indefinite number. For example, “You cannot finish these tasks, so give some to me.”
- (2) (~er) means that the quantity is small. For example, “Is it some less...?”
- (3) It means more than one or one time. For example, “I still have some chance.”
- (4) After the adjective, verb, or verbal phrase, it means “a little.” For example, okay ~; be careful ~; want to open ~.

#### 3.3. A bit

Indicates that the degree is not high; slightly (used for unsatisfactory things). For example, “Today he is ~ unhappy.” This sentence is confusing. (Note: “A bit” is sometimes a combination of verbs and quantifiers, such as “There is still ~ of leftovers in the pot” and “There is ~ of hope.”)

There are several issues in these meanings that should be paid attention to, otherwise they would be used incorrectly. First, the fourth meaning of “some” must be clearly distinguished. “Some” is used after adjectives, verbs, or verbal phrases to indicate the meaning of “slight,” such as be better, be careful, and think more. If the numeral “one” is omitted, the meaning remains the same, and “dot” can be used, in which the meaning still remains the same. Second, the “you” in “there are some leftovers in the pot” is a verb that means “to have” and “exist,” and “you” is the omitted form after “yo.” “A bit” is a verb-object phrase, not a word, and does not belong to the scope of this discussion.

### 4. Usage and differences of “little” and “some”

#### 4.1. Similarities of “little” and “some”

- (1) Both refer to an indeterminate and small degree or quantity.

Example 1: The fruit was ripened and picked, he shared it among the children and the staffs; he shared a little with each while saying, “Grandpa has such power.” (Xinhua News Agency’s 2004 Press Release)

Example 2: The ticket from Hangzhou to Beijing plus the rent and some daily necessities for less than a month requires 200 yuan. (A Record of the Survival of Chinese Northern Drifters)

- (2) Both can be followed by adjectives or verbs. Indicates a light degree, meaning “slightly.”

Example 3: We still have to promote a positive and steady progress rather than overemphasizing the little shortcomings and slowing down the pace. (1994 People’s Daily)

Example 4: Sloths use trees as their home, they are lazy, and they sleep all day long. During the day, they specially choose some leafy treetops to sleep; they can sleep for 15 hours, day and night. (Chinese Children’s Encyclopedia)

- (3) Nouns can be added at the end.

Example 5: The chief just gave the little money that was left over to the staffs around her as a souvenir. (1994 Selected Newspapers)

Example 6: When it is okay, I will drive the car to meet some friends and chat with them in the cafe. (A Record of the Survival of Chinese Northern Drifters)

- (4) All can be used as subject, object, and attributive in a sentence.

Example 7: According to Mr. Li Qi’s statement, this creative technique is “allowing others to imagine a little bit more.” (1994 Selected Newspapers)

Example 8: Most people love him very much, some people do not like him, but no one really hates him. (Yao Ming: My World, My Dream)

## 4.2. Differences between “little” and “some”

- (1) “Some” is mostly used in written language and is usually indifferent whereas “little” is mostly used in spoken language, and it is often childish.

- (2) “Some” mainly refers to a small number of quantities, mostly used for countable people, specific things, or time whereas “little” refers to a very low degree or a very small amount. It has a lighter meaning than “some” and is mostly used for uncountable things. “Little” can also be used for countable people, specific things, or time, but “this, that, then” should be added before it.

Example 9: Some astronomers have analyzed and estimated that there may be an unknown new planet besides Neptune. (Chinese Children’s Encyclopedia)

Example 10: I advise you not to do this business because we do not want you to make so little money. (1994 Selected Newspapers)

- (3) “Some,” in a sentence does not necessarily mean a small amount but “little” means a small amount in a sentence.

Example 11: It is said that he is the art director, but in fact he is only responsible for leading a group of students who have just graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts to draw some posters. (A Record of the Survival of Chinese Northern Drifters)

Example 12: Through his own efforts, he tried to get a little degree of loose tone from the director. (Chinese Farmers Survey)

- (4) “Little” can be used in front of “no” to indicate a complete negation, which means “really, indeed.” Sometimes, in order to emphasize the tone, “little degree” can be inserted between “Yin Er” and “no.” “Some” does not have this usage.

Example 13: Lao Tian did not seem to hear at all, struggling to stab the quicksand blocking the pump tube. (1994 Selected Newspapers)

- (5) “Little” can be used as an adverb after overlapping, but “some” cannot be used in this way.

Example 14: His feet can only move forward little by little now, unable to leave the ground. (1994 Selected Newspapers)

## 5. Usage and differences between “little” and “a bit”

- (1) “Little” is a quantifier; “a bit” is an adverb.

Example 15: I do not know how many roads I ran, or how many mouths I had, but in the end, I did not win at all. (1994 Selected Newspapers)

Example 16: This thing seems a bit weird, and it is very confusing. (Chinese Farmers Survey)

- (2) “A little” can modify or limit nouns, indicating a small and variable number. “A bit” means “slightly” and cannot be used in front of nouns or pronouns.

Example 17: Although the Chinese people have limited understanding of the world and are curious, they still breathe a little fresh air. (1993 People’s Daily)

- (3) “A bit” is commonly used for the ratio sentence, while “a bit” cannot be used for the ratio sentence.

Example 18: Lin Ye’s early years were no better than mine. (1994 People’s Daily)

- (4) Both “little” and “a bit” can be used with mental verbs or adjectives. However, “little” should be used after the mental verb or adjective, and “a bit” should be used before the mental verb or adjective.

Example 19: The development of things is endless. You should restrain your desires. If you take everything you own lightly, the happiness of life will increase a little. (1994 Selected Newspapers)

Example 20: The old man, Li Rusen, is not tall and his skin is a bit dark. When he mentioned kicking the shuttlecock, he appeared excited. (Xinhua News Agency’s 2004 press release)

- (5) Under normal circumstances, only a verb can be preceded by “a bit” to answer the question, and “Yianer” can directly answer the question alone.

Example 21:

A: Do you feel hungry? B: A bit. (Investigation data of Beijing dialect in 1982)

Example 22:

A: Can you cook? B: A little. (Investigation data of Beijing dialect in 1982)

- (6) Most of the adjectives or verbs modified by “little” have negative or derogatory meanings, indicating unsatisfactory meanings. If used in the format of “Dianer+不+形/动,” most of the adjectives or verbs express positive or commendatory meaning. “A bit” does not have this choice or restriction on adjectives or verbs.

Yang Jiamin once pointed out that “a bit” is an adverb, and it also has the form of “number + quantity,” which can be used as an adverbial or a quasi-object <sup>[1]</sup>. The adverb usage mentioned here refers to the example, “He is not making trouble at all.” If not careful, one would think that when “you” is added before “yiner,” “yiner” is an adverb; this idea is wrong.

“Dianer” is usually used as the follow-up component of state verbs or adjectives, forming the format of “form/verb+dianer,” such as “Now that you came out to play, be happy.” As a follow-up component of the form/movement, “a little bit” expresses a concept of “quantity,” supplementing it with a smaller and lower degree. Therefore, state verbs and adjectives are required to be non-quantitative, and those that can be modified by the adverb “very, most” are non-quantitative. The examples of the state verbs include “nervous,” “relaxed,” “happy,” etc. and the adjectives, “big,” “wide,” “far,” “beautiful,” “brave,” and so on. However,

there is a class of state verbs and adjectives that have a very high degree of semantics, which is incompatible with “dianer.” The examples of the state verbs include “to admire,” “eagerly hope,” “love,” etc. and the adjectives, “short,” “bright,” “brand-new,” “universal,” and so on. If “dianer” is used as an adverb, it can only be used in front of the negative word “no.” If the format of “dianer + form/movement” is to be established, the verb “to have” should be added before it, such as “I am a little tired today.” As mentioned above, “you” is not a word, but a verb-object phrase. “Youdianer” is an expression that has not yet been fully lexicalized, which is not the same as the lexicalized adverb “youdianer.” In addition, “dianer” mainly appears in the usage of non-quantitative words, thus “dianer” cannot be said to be an adverb.

## 6. Conclusion

From the above comparative analysis, it can be appreciated that there are big differences between the words “little,” “some,” and “a bit.” Part of speech and usage may also be confused because of one’s own native language (for example, foreign students whose native language is English). Therefore, in the teaching process, teachers should first have a clear thinking and analyze the meaning, part of speech, and usage of these confusable words one by one; secondly, they should follow the principle of easy first and then difficult as well as the principle of intensive teaching and practice, in which examples and exercises would enable students to master the usage of words; finally, through feedbacks from homework, it is possible to further understand the skills that students have not mastered, as well as correct and explain the errors in a targeted manner. Only in this way, students can better grasp the differences and usage of these words.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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