

## 2 Tones

Words in Mandarin are pronounced with a regular tonal contour, or pitch, much like the stress patterns that distinguish the English verb ‘reCORD’ from the noun ‘REcord’. In Mandarin, the word lǎoshī ‘teacher’, for example, is pronounced laoshi (‘low’ followed by ‘high’), which in English terms is like having to say teacher rather than teacher each time you say the word. The presence of tones in Chinese is often cited as another of those lurid features that makes the language unique and difficult to learn; but tones are, in fact, not unique to Chinese and probably no more difficult to learn than stress or intonation is for learners of English.

As noted earlier, there are four basic tones in Mandarin. Regional dialects of Mandarin, such as those spoken in the Tianjin area or in the far southwest (Kunming, for example) may realize the four tones with markedly different pitch contours from those found in standard Mandarin. Moreover, the regional languages have more than four tones. Cantonese, for example, is usually analyzed as having four tones on two levels, for a total of [at least] eight. Mandarin also differs from most of the regional languages in having a predilection for words with [non-initial] toneless syllables: shūshu ‘uncle’; xíngli ‘luggage. In some cases, toneless syllables are virtually swallowed up by the previous syllable; wǒmen ‘we’, for example, is often pronounced ‘wǒm’ in speech.

### 2.1 The 4 tones

It is difficult to learn to produce or even recognize tones from descriptions, though we will use the descriptive terms ‘high (and level), rising, low, falling’ as a way of referring to them. These terms are only suggestive of the actual shape of the tone, but they do underscore the symmetry of the system: a high and a low, a rising and a falling. In modern Mandarin, though the tones have formal names (that can only be rationalized by reference to earlier stages of the language), it is common practice to refer to them numerically by using the numbers 1-4 (yī, èr, sān, sì) and the word for sound, shēng [shuhng]: yīshēng, èrshēng, sānshēng, sìshēng. (Toneless syllables are called qīngshēng ‘light-toned’.) In English we can also refer to the tones as ‘first’, ‘second’, ‘third’ and ‘fourth’. As noted earlier, in pinyin, tones are indicated iconically by marks placed over the ‘main’ vowel letter.

#### TONES

|   |                   |     |           |
|---|-------------------|-----|-----------|
| ā | high              | 1st | yīshēng   |
| á | rising            | 2nd | èrshēng   |
| ǎ | low               | 3rd | sānshēng  |
| à | falling           | 4th | sìshēng   |
| a | context dependent |     | qīngshēng |

## 2.2 Tone concepts

To learn to produce tones, it is useful to conceive of them in particular ways. The first tone, for example, which has a high and level contour, can be thought of as SUNG OUT, because singing a syllable in English usually results in sustained level pitch rather like the high tone. The second tone, which rises from mid-low to high, can be associated with DOUBT: “Did you say Wáng?” “Máo?” The third tone is the subject of the next paragraph, but the fourth tone, which falls from a very high pitch to a low, can usefully be associated with LIST FINAL intonation, or – for many people – CERTAINTY: ‘I said Wèi’ or ‘It’s late!’; or ‘1,2,3 (all rising) and 4!’

## 2.3 The low-tone

You will notice that the pinyin symbol for the low-tone is v-shaped, suggesting a contour that falls, then rises. In isolation, it does indeed fall and rise: hǎo ‘be good’; wǒ ‘I; me’; jiǎng ‘speak; explain’. But in close conjunction with a following syllable (other than one with the same low-tone – as shown below), it tends to have a low, non-rising pitch. If you can find a Chinese speaker to model the following phrases (from Unit 1), you can try listening for relatively low pitch in the low-toned syllable, hěn [huhn] ‘very; quite’, that appear at the beginning of the following phrases:

|          |         |
|----------|---------|
| hěn gāo  | ‘tall’  |
| hěn máng | ‘busy’  |
| hěn lèi  | ‘tired’ |

For *most* speakers, a low-toned syllable in *second* position of a phrase will also stay low, without much of a rise. Again, if you can find a speaker to model the following phrases, see if you agree that the second syllable is primarily low:

|        |                 |
|--------|-----------------|
| shūfǎ  | ‘calligraphy’   |
| tuántǐ | ‘group’         |
| kànfǎ  | ‘point of view’ |

For learners, regarding the third tone as ‘low’, then learning that it rises in certain contexts, seems to produce better results than thinking of it as falling-rising and canceling the final rise in certain contexts. *So the third tone, we will refer to as ‘low’, and to produce it, you aim low and add the final rise only when the syllable is isolated.*

## 2.4 The tone chart

The chart below takes 12 of the most common surnames to illustrate the four tones. (In Chinese, the surname is the first component of the full name, not the last: eg Lǐ in Lǐ Liánjié (Jet Li’s Chinese name). In the chart, the four tones are characterized in terms of their pitch contours (high and level, rising, etc.) as well as by the four heuristic concepts (sung out, doubt, etc.) that help us to produce them correctly.

|                     |                      |                     |                  |                   |
|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| <i>tone:</i>        | 1                    | 2                   | 3                | 4                 |
| <i>egs.</i>         | Zhōu<br>Zhāng<br>Gāo | Wáng<br>Máo<br>Chén | Lǐ<br>Kǒng<br>Mǎ | Wèi<br>Dù<br>Zhào |
| <i>description:</i> | high, level          | rising              | low (with rise)  | falling           |
| <i>concept:</i>     | sung out             | doubt (?)           | low              | finality (!)      |

**Exercise 2.**

The following short sentences consist of a pronoun tā ‘he; she’, the verb xìng (think *syìng*), meaning ‘be surnamed’, and one of the 12 surnames presented above. Keeping your tone concepts in mind, and ideally, with feedback from a Chinese speaker, focus on the different tones of the surnames while pronouncing the sentences.

|                |                          |
|----------------|--------------------------|
| Tā xìng Zhāng. | His/her surname’s Zhang. |
| Tā xìng Máo.   |                          |
| Tā xìng Wèi.   |                          |
| Tā xìng Wáng.  |                          |
| Tā xìng Kǒng.  |                          |
| Tā xìng Zhōu.  |                          |
| Tā xìng Dù.    |                          |
| Tā xìng Gāo.   |                          |
| Tā xìng Mǎ.    |                          |
| Tā xìng Chén.  |                          |
| Tā xìng Zhào.  |                          |
| Tā xìng Lǐ     |                          |

**2.5 On the history of Mandarin tones**

Tone systems as complex, or more complex than that of Mandarin are a feature of dozens of languages spoken in southwest China and adjoining regions of mainland Southeast Asia, including the national languages of Burma, Thailand and Vietnam. While tone may be a more or less permanent feature of the region, within particular languages, tone systems may appear, evolve, or disappear.

The tonal system of Chinese is also known to have evolved over the centuries. Evidence from ancient rhyme tables and other sources indicates that at an earlier stage, prior to the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the ancestor of modern Mandarin also had four tones. They were named píng ‘level’, shǎng ‘rising’, qù ‘going’ and rù ‘entering’ (which are the modern pronunciations of the names given to them then). The last was found only on checked syllables, those ending with stopped consonants such as -k, -t and -p, which as noted earlier, are no longer found in Mandarin.

The earlier names of the tones are suggestive, but we cannot know precisely what the four sounded like. We do know, however, that they were distributed differently from those of modern Mandarin. In fact, the modern names for the four tones of Mandarin reflect their evolution. The modern tones are called, formally, *yīnpíng*, *yángpíng*, *shǎng* and *qù* (tones 1 through 4, respectively). The *rù*-tone has disappeared (along with the consonantal endings), and the words that once had that tone now appear with other tones. As the names suggest, old *píng* toned words are now divided between *yīnpíng* (the level) and *yángpíng* (the rising). It is known that the tonal distinction between level and rising, seen on words such as tīng ‘listen’ versus tíng ‘stop’, emerged from a contrast that was formerly found in the initial consonants. Similar splits in all the original four tones are at the basis of the eight tone systems of regional languages such as Cantonese.

Some linguists have adduced evidence for pre-tonal stages of Chinese, or at least stages when pitch differences were not so prominent. A more detailed discussion of tone in Chinese can be found in books listed at the end of introduction.