

Pronunciation

The tones – The most daunting thing about speaking Mandarin is that it is a tonal language. Tones are not only foreign to most people, but they also add one or two more items to remember about each word. The traditional way that the tones are explained and denoted in writing is as follows:

First tone: High pitched (ā)

Second tone: Rising (á)

Third tone: Falling, then rising (ǎ)

Fourth tone: Falling (à)

A more sensible approach to learning and using the tones is to understand that European languages are already tonal. Instead of indicating word meaning, European languages use tones to show emotional context. We prefer (and find ourselves more easily understood) to think about tones as follows:

First tone: Is similar to showing surprise: “Ah (ā), what a nice bouquet of flowers.”

Second tone: Is similar to asking a question: “Where are you going today (á)?”

Third tone: Is similar to: “Whoa (ǎ), that’s amazing.”

Fourth tone: Is similar to speaking sharply: “Damn (à)!”

Pinyin - Pinyin is the standard romanized writing form of Mandarin. You will need to familiarize yourself with the pronunciation norms of pinyin in order to make yourself understood. Even though many of the pronunciation characteristics of pinyin don’t make sense, it is the standard methodology used for street signs.

A – “ah” as in a sheep goes “bah”

C – “tz” as in “tsunami”

E – “eh” as in “test”

I – “ee” as in “been”

J – “tch” as in “itch”

O – “oh” as in “load”

Q – “ch” as in “chop”

U – “oo” as in “clue”

X – represents a light “zz” sound as in “xylophone”

Z – represents a sharp “z” as in “Mozart”

ZH – represents a mix between a “j” sound and a “z” sound

Note that the letters “i” and “e” are often followed by a soft “r” and the “i” and “e” are often pronounced more closely to an “uh” sound (this is why a more intuitive pronunciation guide is also available).

Usage

Although “Mandarin” in Mandarin translates as “Modern Standard Chinese”, the language’s usage is anything but. As you travel through China, you will find that the pronunciation of consonants, vowels and tones varies by region. Without exception, each person you meet will insist that they are speaking “Modern Standard Chinese”. Your efforts to explain that your pronunciation follows the actual “Modern Standard” Beijing accent (and that is why you are not being understood) will be futile. The best you can do is note the regional differences and adapt as you travel. The disparities in pronunciation are one reason that we are posting audio files, so at least you have a correct base to work with.

Mandarin is a highly contextual language, so words may have more than ten definitions. Add on top of this your spotty pronunciation and you can see why a Chinese listener will have trouble understanding you. Try to frame your conversation in a context and this will make it much more likely that you are understood.

A final word on usage. Throw yourself into the tones and pronunciation – make it a point to say them with gusto. Mandarin speakers are used to hearing expressive cadences, so if you read a word here and there from the language guide with shallow, nervous emphasis on the tones it is not likely that you will be understood. Gather up the words that you want to use first and then run through what you would like to say.