

# 中文四调及四调的教学

[英] William X. F. Yu<sup>①</sup>

[摘要] 本文旨在探讨如何教母语为英语的初学者学习中文中的声调。声调可以说是以英语为母语的初学者学汉语时的一大难点。在本文中,我们会探讨声调的特点,提出从英语中的语调和重音入手,通过分析比较,帮助学生掌握中文声调。

[关键词] 调群;语调;中文的声调;中文四调的调值;中文中的变调

## Chinese Tones and Tones Teaching

University of London William X. F. Yu

[Abstract] The purpose of the paper is to study how to teach tones in Chinese to English speakers. Tone is a tough issue for English speakers. In this paper, we discuss the properties of the tones, and propose that tones in Chinese can be taught to English speakers with their knowledge of intonation and stress in English.

[Key words] tone group; intonation; Chinese tones; four tones' degree; tone sandi

### I. An Introduction of the Tones in Chinese

As is well known, Chinese is a pictorial language. Each Chinese character looks like a picture that carries a certain meaning and a specific pronunciation with an initial, a final, and a tone, moreover, it may and may not carries a grammatical function. "Initial" and "final" are the terms in Chinese phonetics. Initial includes all consonants in the initial position of a Chinese *pinyin* syllabus. "Final" refers to the vowels and vowel-n such as "an," "en," "ian," "ien," "uan," "uen" or vowel-ng such as "ang," "eng," "ong," "iang," "ieng," "iong" and "uang" and "ueng," or vowel-r compound such as "er." For

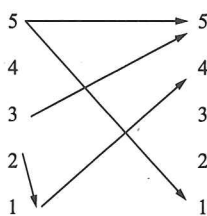
---

① 作者简介: Dr. William X. F. Yu learnt Chinese in Shanghai Teachers' College (now it is Shanghai Teachers' University) from 1960 to 1963; and learnt Chinese in Department of Chinese language and literature of East China Normal University from 1963 to 1968. After 17 years of teaching in China, he went abroad for advanced studies. He obtained an MA degree in Linguistics and a PhD degree in Linguistics from University of London. He was a Lector in the School of Oriental and Africa Studies, University of London from 1996 to 2009. After he was retired from the University in 2009, he is doing researches on comparative grammars.

instance: 花 in Chinese should be read as “huā” in a first tone which means “flower.” 花 “hua” consists of an initial “h,” a final “ua” in a level tone. 火 should be read as “huǒ” including an initial “h” and a final “uo” in a falling-rising tone and it means “fire.” Both 花 “hua” and 火 “huo” can have a grammatical function in a sentence such as a subject or an object in a sentence as 花开了 “huā kāi le” (Flowers are blooming.), 人类什么时候开始用火的呢? “Rén lèi shénme shíhòu kāishǐ yòng huǒ de ne?” (fire!) 朋 “péng” has a “p” as its initial while “eng” as its “final.” “Péng” does have a meaning which is “friend,” but it has no grammatical function at all since unlike classical Chinese, we do not use it alone any long.

There are forty-seven thousand, nine hundred and twenty-three Chinese characters in the Chinese language (but in the biggest dictionary, there are about 60 000 Chinese characters). However, there are only 419 initial-final compounds. You can imagine how many characters one initial-final compound should accommodate. It is easy to find an initial-final compound for a great number of different Chinese characters. For instance, there are 114 Chinese characters sharing a pronunciation of “ji” in the Chinese-English dictionary published by Beijing Foreign Language University 1972 (There may be more in the other Chinese dictionaries). The consequence is that there are a great number of initial-final compounds which would be very ambiguous if there was no tone. For convenience, the four tones are created for us. Therefore, there are 1 241 syllables with different tones.

There are four different tones in Chinese now. The first tone is a higher level tone. The second tone is a rising tone. The third tone is a falling and rising tone. The fourth tone is a strongly falling tone. If we divided the pitch into five different levels, and 5 is the highest level, we may describe them as follows: the first tone is from 5 to 5; the second tone is from 3 to 5; the third tone is from 2 to 1 to 4; the fourth tone is from 5 to 1. I illustrate it as follows:



Apart from these four tones, there is a neutral tone which is lighter and shorter than the others.

Tones are necessary for conveying the meaning of what is being said. For examples, “mǎi” 买 (to buy) has the same initial and final as “mài” 卖 (to sell) but, the former one 买 is in third tone while the later one 卖 is in the fourth tone. “Nǎr” 哪儿 means “where” while “nàr” 那儿 means “there” due to the difference of the tones and characters. For more examples “shuǐjiào” 睡觉 both syllables in fourth tone means “to sleep” but “shuǐjiǎo” 水饺 both syllables in third tone means “dumpling.” “Wènnǐ” 问你 in fourth tone and third tone means “to ask you,” but “wěnnǐ” 吻你 both in third tones means “to kiss you.” To name,

there are a lot. Sometime it may make a hearer confused. Suppose, a man wanted to say “wǒ wènnǐ” 我问你, but he made a mistake by saying “wǒ wěnnǐ” 我吻你, if the girl is very conservative, she might knock out the man's tooth.

Sometimes, different tones may carry different grammatical information. For example, 累 “lèi” has three different tones even though the three has the same initials and finals. 累 “lèi” is an adjective that means “tired”; 累 “léi” in 累 is an adjective meaning “heaps of,” “clusters of”; 累 “lěi” is also a verb meaning accumulate. Due to the differences in tones, we got three different readings in which 累 has different meanings and grammatical functions. “Jiāo” 教 carries a meaning of “to teach” and has an independent grammatical function as a verb, but “jiào” 教 in 教师, 教室 and 任教 has no independent grammatical function even though it may also carry a kind meaning as “teaching.” 得 “děi” has three pronunciations: “děi,” “dé” and “de.” Apart from the first one 得 that differs from the other two in the initial and the final and that is a auxiliary verb means “to have” or “must”; the second one 得 “dé” has the same initial and final with the third 得 “de” in a neutral tone. 得 “dé” is a verb that means “to obtain” and “to get”; but 得 “de” is a particle to introduce a complement to a verb.

Tones may change in a certain way. Tone sandhi means a change of tone due to the influence of neighboring tones. There are two rules for tones sandhi in Chinese.

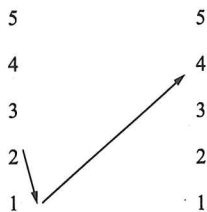
Rule one: An initial-final compound in a third tone is followed by another initial-final compound in the third tone, the first third tone must change into rising tone, the pitch level will be from 1 to 4.

For an example, 你好 “nǐ hǎo” both in third tone, when we read “nǐ hǎo,” “nǐ” should be changed into a rising tone while “hǎo” has no change.

Rule two: An initial-final compound in the third tone is followed by an initial-final compound in the other tone including neutral tone except a third tone, the third tone must change into half falling tone and the pitch level should be from 2 to 1 which is different with the fourth tone indeed.

For an example: 好吃 “hǎochī” and 好吃 “hàochī” are in different tones. Due to the difference of the tones of 好 “hao”, the former word 好吃 (“hǎochī”) means “delicious” while the later word 好吃 (“hàochī”) means “be gluttonous.”

I illustrate them in the diagram as follows:



Apart from that, “bù” 不 (not) and “yī” 一 (one) often change the tones in a certain way.

The rule for the pronunciation of “bu”:

a. “Bù” 不(not) is normally in fourth tone.

b. “Bù” 不(not) must be changed into a rising tone “bú,” when 不 “bù” is followed by an initial-final compound in fourth tone such as “búshì” 不是 (to be not), “búzuò” 不坐 (do not sit) and so on.

The rules for the pronunciation of “yi”

a. “Yī” 一(one) is usually in first tone when it is read individually in listing such as “yī” in “yī, èr, sān...” 一、二、三... (one, two, three...) or at the end of a word such as “wànyī” 万一 (in case), “shǐzhōngrúyī” 始终如一 (constant), and “qiánhòubùyī” 前后不一 (not to keep consistent).

b. When it is followed by an initial-final compound in fourth tone or in a neutral tone which derives from a falling tone, it must be changed into rising tone as “yí gè rén” 一个人 (one person), “yíding” 一定 (definitely), “yíyàng” 一样 (the same) and “yí zuò fángzi” 一座房子 (one house).

c. When “yī” is followed by an initial-final compound in any other tone except fourth tone, it must be changed into fourth tone for instance, “yìqǐ” 一起 (together), “yì qún rén” 一群人 (a group of people), and “yìzhí” 一直 (always; straight).

From the examples above, we can see that tones are quite important for Chinese. Since tones play an important role, Chinese is also known as a tone language.

## II. Problems for English Speakers in Learning Chinese

In English, there is no tone at all. Therefore, some English speakers might be panic at the mention of tones to them. “My god, there is no tone in our language, how can we pronounce it in accordance with the marked tone?”

It is true, when we start to learn *pinyin*, apart from the pronunciation of some initials such as “j, q, x, z, c, s, zh, ch, sh, r,” tone is the biggest problem for English speakers. It takes a long time to master it indeed. Among the four tones, it is easy for English speakers to pronounce fourth tone which is a falling tone. The reason is very simple, in English there are stresses which stress just sound like a falling tone. It is also not difficult to read first tone since every body will produce it. It may take time for English speaker to master the second tone and third tones. Frankly speaking, comparatively it is easier for them to read separately such as reading “mā, má, mǎ, mà,” alone but it is harder to read them in the text. When students read a text, they often mix the words in the second tone with the words in the fourth tone. We have investigated in two classes. There are 12 people in each class. The result is that seventy percent students read the initial-final compound in second tones as forth tones when they read a text. Sometimes students did know that it was a second tone and they should read rising tone but when they pronounce it with a strong strength, they produce a fourth tone indeed.

As we argued in the past section, tones are necessary for conveying the meaning what is being said, the misusing of tone may make the meaning ambiguous. For instance, if one wants to ask a younger girl by saying: “wǒ xiǎng wèn nǐ” 我想问你 (I want to ask you/ may I ask you...), but he pronounces it as “wǒ xiǎng wěn nǐ” 我想吻你 (I want to kiss you), and then it may cause a big argument. It is important for us to correct the students' tones since the very beginning.

### III. Solutions for the Problems

For English speakers, we could approach in a way that differs from the traditional way of teaching by teaching “mā 妈 (mother), má 麻 (hemp), mǎ 马 (horse), mà 骂 (scold),” instead, we teach Chinese tones to English speakers with the knowledge of the intonations and stresses in English.

First of all, we should encourage our students and let students believe that they know tones very well and they can do it indeed. We could start with a demonstration of intonations in English. The intonation of a sentence is the pattern of pitch changes that occurs. The part of a sentence over which a particular pattern extends is called a tone group. Within the tone group there is usually a single syllable that stands out because it carries the major pitch change. A syllable of this kind is called the tonic syllable. Sometimes there are two or more tone groups within a sentence. For an example:

(1) a) She 'sat by the 'window, b) 'reading a 'letter.

As is well-known, there are nine different types of intonations in English. Here we are not going to detail all of them since readers know them very well. We just illustrate three of them for our purpose as follows:

(2) 'Water is 'liquid.

In sentence (2), the intonation may be simply described as falling.

(3) I 'might?

If sentence (3) means “Did you say I might,” one will have a larger rise in pitch.

The combination [+ falling] followed by [+ rising] commonly occurs with a lengthened vowel in a phrase or a sentence expressing doubt, such as

(4) I 'think 'so-o.

Sentence (2) has a falling intonation that is similar with the first tone in Chinese.

Sentence (3) has a rising intonation that is similar with second tone in Chinese; and sentence (4) has a falling-rising intonation that is similar with third tone in Chinese.

Having demonstrated the intonations of sentences, the second step is to demonstrate the intonations in the mono syllabic sentences.

As is well known, there may be some sentence containing only one word with a mono-syllable such as “yes” and “no,” in other words, the word itself is a sentence and a tonic syllable as well, therefore, the possible tones' patterns may all be demonstrated on a single

word, as in (5) below:

Word	tone	meaning
(5) A. Yēs	Level	=“We agree with what you say.”
B. Yēs	high-rising	=“Did you say ‘yes’?”
	low rising	=“Please go on, I’m listening.”
C. Yěs	falling-rising	=“I’m double.”
D. Yès	falling	=“The answer is yes.”

The intonations in the sentences (5) (A—D) are similar to the four tones in Chinese indeed. We may take the words “yes” and “no” as an experiment to practise the four tones in Chinese now.

The experiment shows that it is easier for English speakers to understand the tones in Chinese in this way. In one class, “ma” (Chinese words) is used as an example for teaching of tones in a traditional way while in the other “no” and “yes” are used as an example to teach Chinese tones in English way and then practise Chinese characters. The consequence is that in the former class, only 50% of students can understand it while 100% of the students in the later class can acquire it.

Having learnt the four tones, students may pronounce initial-final compounds in different tones individually. However, when students read a text, you may find that English speakers often read Chinese initial-final compounds in second tone as the one in a fourth tone. Sometime, even though they know that it is a second tone and they are very anxious to make the sound rise with strong strength, but they actually read it as a falling tone. The reason is that in English there are so many stresses in the sentences. For examples, if somebody else says, or if you had even thought that someone else might possibly say: “I<sup>1</sup>John and I<sup>1</sup>Mary should I<sup>1</sup>go.” You might, without any prior context actually spoken, say:

(6) I<sup>1</sup> think I<sup>1</sup>John and I<sup>1</sup>Mary should I<sup>1</sup>go.

From the sentence (6), you can see how many stresses in the sentence. In order to distinguish rising tone from the falling tone, the best way is to practise the number or listing words in English such as follows:

(7) One, two, three.

(8) Coffee and tea.

(9) Left, right.

In (7) sentences, “one” and “two” should be in a rising tone, but “three” is in a falling tone. In sentence (8), “coffee” is in a rising tone, but “tea” should be in a falling tone. In sentence (9), “left” should be in a rising tone while “right” is in a falling tone. Anyway, when one lists things or give an order to the matching troops, one may use a rising tone followed by a falling tone. This practice may help the students to distinguish a rising tone from a falling tone. After students practise the English words, we let them

practise Chinese words such as 不去 “búqù,” 不是 “búshì,” 魂魄 “húnpò” (soul), 和面 “huómian” (knead dough), 活动 “huódòng” (activity). 活命 “Huómìng” (save sb’s life), 平地 “píngdì” (flat ground), and 平静 “píngjìng” (clam, quiet) in which each word contains one character in a second tone and one character in a falling tone. In the class with an new approach, 95% of the students think that it is helpful for them to distinguish second tone from a falling tone.

## IV. Conclusion

Chinese as a tone language has four different tones. Tones are necessary for conveying the meaning of what is being said, therefore, it is important to pronounce characters in different tones correctly. Since in English there are stresses and intonations that are accents of the pitch group. It is the best way to teach Chinese tones in an effective way that is to start teaching with stresses and intonations in English, and then lead students to practise Chinese tones.

### Reference:

- [ 1 ] Liang, L. L., & Tian, J. P. (1994). *A Practise Book for Primary School*. Shanghai: Shanghai Education Publishing House.
- [ 2 ] Wu, J. C. (1992). *A Textbook of Mandarin Chinese*. Beijing: Chinese Language Publishing House.
- [ 3 ] Zhang, Y. J. (1990). *The Approach of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language*. Shanghai: Modern Publishing House.
- [ 4 ] Ladefoged, P. (1982). *A Course in Phonetics*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers.

### Appendix:

#### A Drill of Tones in Chinese

##### Part one Practise four tones

I. Read English mono-syllabic words such as “yes” and “no” in four different tones.

(1) a.        yēs        yés        yěs        yès        b.        nō        nó        nǒ        nò

II. Read Chinese simple vowels in four different tones individually.

(2) a.        ā        á        ǎ        à        b.        ō        ó        ǒ        ò  
       c.        ē        é        ě        è        d.        ī        í        ĭ        ì  
       e.        ū        ú        ǔ        ù        f.        ū        ú        ǔ        ù

III. Read Chinese initial-final compounds in four different tones.

(3) a.        wā        wá        wǎ        wà        b.        mā        má        mǎ        mà  
       c.        wān        wán        wǎn        wàn        d.        wāi        wái        wǎi        wài  
       e.        gēn        gén        gěn        gèn        f.        gū        gú        gǔ        gù  
       g.        jiā        jiá        jiǎ        jià        h.        rāng        ráng        rǎng        ràng

(4) a. Tā gēgē tiāntiān hē kāfēi. (His elder brother drinks coffee everyday.)

- ## Part two Distinguishing the second tone from the fourth tone

(5) a. One, two, three (count)

- II. Read Chinese words as follows.

- Part three Tone sandi

(7) a. suǒyǐ (therefore)

- II. Read the bi-syllables Chinese words in a third tone with another tone except third tone.

(8) a. lǎoshī (teacher)

- 3rd+2nd

- 3rd+4th

- Part four Read the following words or phrases containing “yi” 一 (one) and “bu” 不 (not)

- (13) a. wànyī (in case)

- c. shǐzhōng rú yī (consistent)      d. biǎolǐ rú yī (think & act in the same way)
- (14) a. yíhuìr (a little while)      b. yíkuàir (at the same place)
- b. yílù (all the way)      d. yímiàn (one aspect)



- (15) a. yíxiē (some)  
c. yídiǎnr (a little)

- b. yíjiāzi (one family)  
d. yítóng (together)

Part five Read the following passage

Wǒjiào jiékè. Wǒ shì Yīngguó rén. Wǒ jiā yí gòng yǒu liù ge rén: bàba, māma, jiějie, mèimei, dìdi hé wǒ. Wǒ de bàba shì yīsheng, wǒ de māma yě shì yīshēng. Wǒ de jiějie èrshí qī suì, shì xiǎoxué lǎoshī. Wǒ de mèimei hé dìdi dōu shì zhōngxuéshēng. Wǒ shì dàxuéshēng. Xiànzài wǒ shì Běijīng dàxué de liúxuéshēng.

(My name is Jack. I am from the UK. There are totally six people in my family: my father, my mother, my elder sister, my younger sister, my younger brother and me. My father is a doctor, and my mother is a doctor too. My elder sister is twenty-seven years old, and she is a teacher in a primary school. My younger sister and younger brother both are students in a middle school. I am a student in a university. Now, I am a foreign student at the University of Beijing. )

—Yǔ guǒ