

Standard Mandarin Chinese

as an accent

PREFACE

Standard Mandarin (Mandarin), or sometimes referred to as Standard Chinese (Putonghua [pʰu˥˥tʰoŋ˥˥xwɑ˥˥]), literally translated as “common speech”), does not exist natively. While Mandarin serves as the “official language” of the People’s Republic of China, the Republic of China (governing Taiwan), and one of the four “official languages” of Singapore, *Standard Mandarin* is based on the dialect spoken in the Chinese capital of Beijing. With a few exceptions, the phonology of Standard Mandarin is very similar to the Beijing Dialect. Close to a billion people speak Mandarin natively in some dialectal form, for which there exist eight distinct subgroups, each with their own phonological distinctions.

In collecting various audio samples of native Mandarin speakers, it became clear that for the purposes of this study, primary focus needed to be given to native speakers from Beijing.

English instruction often begins in elementary school. However, instruction is focused primarily on grammar and vocabulary for which students are tested. Pronunciation receives little attention, and the attention it does receive is often from teachers who have not mastered the phonology of any specific dialect of English. And while both British and American English have been used to teach English in China, it appears that previous generations of English pronunciation in school tended to be based on British English.

With respect to further cultural and linguistic influences, the following observations of Mandarin-accented English are not definitive and great variances exist among individual speakers.

ORAL POSTURE

Jaw movement tends to be minimal. The corners of lips tend to retract. For lip-rounding sounds, corners come in slightly, and the lower lip appears more active than the upper lip, sometimes protruding for rounding. The tongue blade is frequently active while tongue root activity is minimal. Overall placement tends to be bright and high, with dark sounds like [ɜ] particularly difficult. Speech is rhythmically regular and even without prominent stresses. In articulating English, vowels tend to be more open than necessary.

CHARACTERISTIC SOUNDS

For these observations, I’ve used standard lexical sets as invented by phonetician John Wells in his book *Accents of English*. I used the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) as a means to describe the phonemic qualities I observed, though there are other systems used to describe Mandarin phonology. Descriptions sometimes include the lexical set that I believe is the target sound for the speaker, and sometimes the actual word that I believe is being articulated as well as an example.

Vowels

Standard Mandarin is considered to have six vowels. As a result, subtle high/low and front/back distinctions in the tongue can prove to be difficult to hear and vocalize when speaking English. The following are common observations from listening to native Beijing Mandarin speakers speaking English.

Monophthongs

KIT → [i]. Mandarin has no [ɪ] or equivalent. The tendency is to use a short [i] in its place. “Sheep” and “ship” are sometimes indistinguishable.

- ship [ʃip]

DRESS → [a]. Mandarin speakers tend to lower the [ɛ] to the open front unrounded vowel [a], one of the half-dozen vowels found in Mandarin.

- bet [bat]

NURSE → [ɜ̄]. The sense of r-coloring in [ɜ̄] is emphasized with a distinctly harder sounding [ɹ], a common sound in Mandarin, particularly in the Beijing Dialect.

- her [hɜ̄r]

STRUT → [ɑ]. While maintaining the back placement of [ʌ], Mandarin speakers tend to open the space into [ɑ].

- cup [cɑp]

LOT/CLOTH → [ɑ]. There seems to be a conscious effort to spread the lips and drop the jaw, even more than necessary.

- log [lɑg]

GOOSE → almost [ʊ]. The close back rounded vowel [u] doesn't completely round in the lips. While the sides of the lips move in, the lips don't tend to pucker, creating a less rounded almost [ʊ]. There is sometimes a protrusion of the lower lip as well.

- boot [bʊt]

RHOTICIZED CODAS [ɹ] → [ɹ̄]. Mandarin speakers use this retroflex approximant (common in Standard Mandarin*) in place of the r-coloring heard more frequently in American English. In places where a rhotic coda is found [ɹ], a distinctly harder sounding [ɹ̄] is used.

- better [ˈbat̄ɹ̄]

* *ERHUA* refers to the phenomenon in Beijing and some other Northern varieties of Mandarin Chinese where certain nouns and verbs are pronounced with r-coloring, or where the coda of a syllable is effectively replaced with the retroflex approximant.

Diphthongs

English diphthongs have a tendency to become monophthongs for native Mandarin speakers.

FACE → [ɛ]. While the vowel [ɛ] tends to open into [a], the diphthong [eɪ] edges peculiarly towards [ɛ].

- snake [snək]

PRICE → [a]. The diphthong [aɪ] loses the sense of the second sound and becomes [a].

- five [faf]

CHOICE → [ɔǎ]. The second sound of the falling diphthong centers from [ɔɪ] into [ɔǎ].

- toy [tɔǎ]

GOAT → [o]. The diphthong [oʊ] loses the sense of the second sound and becomes a monophthong [o].

- snow [sno]

Consonants

Interesting to note, Standard Mandarin does not use consonant clusters, thereby creating syllables where consonants are almost always followed by vowels. This can be challenging at times when speaking English when a consonant sound follows another consonant.

Initial Positions

Many English consonants can find a close Mandarin equivalent when spoken in initial positions, making articulation onsets less of a distinguishing characteristic of Mandarin-accented English. There are exceptions, however. Initial fricatives, in particular, can be distinctive.

THIS → [d̥]. With labio-dental fricatives (both voiced and unvoiced), there is a tendency to place the tongue blade behind the front teeth. Instead of allowing vibration to occur in the manner of a fricative, it is articulated as a plosive.

- these [d̥is]

THROUGH → [sɿ]. When preparing for the [θɿ], perhaps the anticipation of articulating an [ɿ] causes the tongue to create a [s] instead of [θ], moving the tongue blade back into a retroflex.

- three [s.ɿ]

VET → [v]. Rather than allowing the bottom lip and top teeth to touch to form the fricative [v], their placement is not close enough to create turbulence. Also, the lower lip protrudes forward creating [v]. It can also sound similar to [w].

- vet [vat]

RED → [ɹ]. Standard Mandarin (especially in the Beijing Dialect) uses the retroflex approximant [ɹ], which can sound like a heavier [ɹ] than native American English speakers. In initial positions, the difference is less prominent than in the medial and final positions, so words that begin with “r” in English aren’t as difficult as stereotypically portrayed for Chinese speakers.

- read [ɹit]

Medial Positions

ALSO / ILL → [ə]. In initial positions, [l] is found within Mandarin and is articulated with little if any difficulty. But in medial and final positions when followed by a vowel, [l] can take on the properties of a vowel, generally as [ə] when unstressed or a form of [ʊ] when stressed.

- also ['æso]
- ill [iʊ]

PLEASE → [ɹ]. In medial positions followed by a consonant, the lateral approximant [l] tends towards a lightly articulated alveolar approximant [ɹ].

- please [pɹis]

Final Positions

In Standard Mandarin phonology, syllables end in vowels. The exception would be the three consonant codas: [n] [ŋ] [ɹ]. In speaking, placing consonant sounds at the end of syllables can be unusual, and can often result in either being very precisely or very imprecisely articulated.

There are several generalizations that can be heard in the English of native Mandarin speakers:

- Voiced consonants tend to become unvoiced in final positions, if pronounced at all.
- Most fricatives lean towards being lightly articulated and unvoiced, if pronounced at all.

VOICED PLOSIVES [b] [d] [g] → [p] [t] [k]. For words that end in a voiced plosive, voicing drops out in the articulation, thus [b] [d] [g] become [p] [t] [k] in syllable endings, respectively. This applies when preceded by either a vowel or consonant.

- lob [lap]
- kid [kit]
- bag [bak]
- band [bant]

When adding an -s to the voiced plosive, the loss of the voices continues to the [s] instead of [z]. Using the above words:

- lobs [laps]
- kids [kits]
- bags [baks]
- bands [bants]

PLOSIVES sometimes add [ə]. There are regular instances when the articulated plosive is followed by an additional vowel [ə].

- andl maybe ['andə 'mɛbi]
- askl him ['askə him]

FRICATIVES [v] [z] → [f] [s]. Voicing stops and [v] and [z] become [f] and [s], respectively.

- give [gif]
- has [has]

FRICATIVE [θ] → [s]. Voice and voiceless labio-dental fricatives [θ] [ð] both become [s] in final positions.

- bath [bas]
- teethe [tis]

RHOTICITY / ALVEOLAR APPROXIMANT [ʂ] → [ɚ]. Standard Mandarin (especially in the Beijing Dialect) uses the retroflex approximant [ɹ], which can sound like a heavier [ɹ] than native American English speakers tend to use in medial and final positions. See the earlier description on *Erhua* in the vowel section.

- art [ɑɚt]
- tier [tiɚ]

ALVEOLAR NASAL [n] → []. When speaking English, the [n] found in medial and final positions often disappear when preceded by a vowel, whereby the vowel becomes the last sound of the syllable. This is particularly common when speaking quickly.

- can > [ka]
- spoons > [spus]
- Wednesday > [wasti]

OTHER ARTICULATION CONSIDERATIONS

ADJACENT UNSTRESSED SYLLABLES tend to elide into single syllables.

- cultural revolution → ['kʌɫ̚ʃʊɔ̃ və'ut̚ʃɿ̃] - (cult'al voution)
- architecture → ['ɑ:ktakt̚ʂə:] - (arch'tecture)
- situation → [sɪt̚ʂ'eʂən]* - (sit'ation)

* *The IPA symbol [ʂ] represents the unvoiced retroflex fricative. Think of it as starting from a [ʃ], but with the tip of the tongue curling slightly back further into a retroflex. Because of the closeness and minor distinction, the English [ʃ] is substituted with a Mandarin's familiar [ʂ] and the English [tʃ] with the Mandarin [tʂ].*

PROSODY

Mandarin is a syllable-based language, where rhythm is determined by the number of syllables and is largely even in stressing. Syllables on the whole don't receive substantial stress differences to communicate. This can sometimes transfer to a native Mandarin speaker's English, where stress and flow are essential to understanding. As a result, the speaker might stress English words evenly, mistakenly removing emphasis that supports understanding, or emphasizing words unessential to meaning. Some Mandarin speakers are found to stress the last word of an English phrase, regardless of its importance.

English's stress-timed rhythm, where stress occurs at regular intervals with an inconsistent and changing number of unstressed syllables occurring in between, is an aspect of English speaking often not taught to native Mandarin speakers.

For beginning English-learners native to Mandarin, the flow in phrasing may be disrupted by the lack of stress/unstress variation, affecting intelligibility.

TONES

There are four distinct tones in Standard Mandarin (five if you count the "neutral tone"), which can sometimes carry over into English. While I am not yet clear how the Mandarin tones are applied to English words, it has been suggested that tones might be applied to English syllables according to the vowel's placement.

A low/open vowel like [a] might instinctively be given the third tone (the lowest tone, which then rises). An English word like "pa" with no corollary tone essential to its meaning (as would be in Mandarin) might be pronounced [pa˨˨˨]. Similarly, a word like "key" which is near/high in the mouth might be given the first tone (the highest tone) and be pronounced [ki˥˥˥].