**Intonation**

There are several immediately evident characteristics of a Chinese accent. The most notable is the lack of speech music, or the music intonation of English. This is a problem because, in the English language, *intonation* indicates meaning, new information, contrast, or emotion. Another aspect of speech music is *phrasing*, which tells if it is a statement, a question, a yes/no option, a list of items, or where the speaker is in the sentence (introductory phrase, end of the sentence, etc.). In Chinese, however, a change in tone indicates a different vocabulary word.

In English, Chinese speakers have a tendency to increase the *volume* on stressed words, but otherwise give equal value to each word. This atonal volume-increase will sound aggressive, angry, or abrupt to a native speaker. When this is added to the tendency to lop off the end of each word, and almost no word connections at all, the result ranges from choppy to unintelligible.

In spite of this unpromising beginning, Chinese students have a tremendous advantage. Here is an amazingly effective technique that radically changes how you sound. Given the highly developed tonal qualities of the Chinese language, you are truly a “pitch master.” In order for you to appreciate your strength in this area, try the four ma tones of Mandarin Chinese (Cantonese is a little more difficult since it has eight to twelve tones and people aren’t as familiar with the differentiation.) These four tones sound identical to Americans—*ma, ma, ma, ma.*

Take the sentence *It sounds like* ***rain***and replace *rain* with *ma1*. Say *It sounds like ma1*. This will sound strangely flat, so then try *It sounds like ma2*. This isn’t it either, so go on to *It sounds like ma3* and *It sounds like ma4*. One of the last two will sound pretty good, usually *ma3*. You may need to come up with a combination of *ma3* and *ma4,* but once you have the idea of what to listen for, it’s really easy. When you have that part clear, put *rain* back in the sentence, keeping the tone:

It sounds like *ma3*.

It sounds like *rain3*.

If it sounds a little short (*It sounds like ren),* ***double***the sound:

It sounds like rayeen.

When this exercise is successful, go to the second sentence, *It* ***sounds*** *like rain* and do the same thing:

It *ma3* like rain.

It *sounds3* like rain.

***Sentence Stress***

1. The **dogs** **eat** the **bones**.
2. The **dogs** **ate** the **bones**.
3. The **dogs**’re **eatin**g the **bones**.
4. The **dogs**’ll **eat** the **bones**.
5. The **dogs**’d **eaten** the **bones**.
6. The **dogs**’d’ve **eaten** the **bones**.
7. The **dogs** that’ve **eaten** the **bones**.
8. The **dogs**’ve **eaten** the **bones**.
9. The **dogs**’d **eate**n the **bones**.
10. The **dogs**’ll’ve **eaten** the **bones**.
11. The **dogs** ought to **eat** the **bones**.
12. The **dogs** should **eat** the **bones**.
13. The **dogs** shouldn’t **eat** the **bones**.
14. The **dogs** should’ve **eaten** the **bones**.
15. The **dogs** shouldn’t’ve **eaten** the **bones**.
16. The **dogs** could **eat** the **bones**.
17. The **dogs** couldn’t **eat** the **bones**.
18. The **dogs** could’ve **eaten** the **bones**.
19. The **dogs** couldn’t’ve **eaten** the **bones**.
20. The **dogs** might **eat** the **bones**.
21. The **dogs** might’ve **eaten** the **bones**.
22. The **dogs** must **eat** the **bones**.
23. The **dogs** must’ve **eaten** the **bones**.
24. The **dogs** can **eat** the **bones**.
25. The **dogs** can’t **eat** the **bones**.

***New Information***

This is the starting point of the standard when we say that we need to stress the new information, it's logical to think, "Hmmm, this is the first time I'm saying this sentence, so it's all new information. I'd better stress every word." Well, not quite. In standard English, we consider that the nouns carry the weight of a sentence, when all else is equal. Although the verb carries important information, it does not receive the primary stress of a first-time noun.

**Dogs** eat **bones.**

After the information has been introduced, or is being repeated through the use of pronouns, the intonation shifts over to the verb. Notice how the intonation changes when a sentence changes from nouns to pronouns:

**Dogs** eat **bones.**  
They **eat** bones and **keep** bones as well.

***Contrast***

Once the intonation of new information is established, you'll soon notice that there is a pattern that breaks that flow. When you want to emphasize one thing over another, you reflect this contrast with pitch change. Notice how the intonation indicates contrast:

**Bob** studies **English**.

Bob **studies** English, but he doesn't **use** it.

If a person consistently stresses "contrast words" as opposed to "new information words", he can end up sounding permanently argumentative:

**I** said it is good.  
He **doesn't** like it. Where **are** you going?

Additionally, mixed messages occur when modals or verbs of perception are stressed -- you end up with the opposite meaning!

People **should** exercise more, but . . .

They **would** help us, if . . .

It **looks** like Chanel, but at that price, it's a knock-off.  
He **seems** like a nice guy, but once you get to know him. . .

***Meaning***

A good exercise to demonstrate the variety of meaning through intonation changes is to take a single sentence, try stressing each word in turn, and see the totally different meanings that come out.

1. **I** didn't say he stole the money.  
2. I **didn't** say he stole the money.  
3. I didn't **say** he stole the money.  
4. I didn't say **he** stole the money.  
5. I didn't say he **stole** the money.  
6. I didn't say he stole **the** money.  
7. I didn't say he stole the **money.**

Once you are clear on the intonation changes in the seven sentences, you can add context words to clarify the meaning:

1. **I** didn't say he stole the money, someone **else** said it.  
2. I **didn't** say he stole the money, **that's** not true at **all**.  
3. I didn't **say** he stole the money, I only **suggested** the **possibility**.  
4. I didn't say **he** stole the money, I think someone **else** took it.  
5. I didn't say he **stole** the money, maybe he just **borrowed** it.  
6. I didn't say he stole **the** money, but rather some **other** money.  
7. I didn't say he stole the **money**, he may have taken some **jewellery**.

***Compound Nouns***

One of the first things you learn about intonation is that nouns carry the new information, and consequently, they carry the stress in a sentence.

**Dogs** eat **bones**.

But what if you have an adjective with the noun, or two nouns together -- which word do you stress?

In this case, you have to make a simple decision: Either stress the *first* word or the *second* word (rarely both). How do you know which one to stress? Well, if it is a **description** (with no contrast), skim over the adjective and stress the noun:

a nice **guy**  
a big **house**  
a good **idea**

If you have a two nouns that form a **compound noun**, stress the first word:

a **hot** dog  
a **note**book  
a **picture** frame

This will explain why we say:

He lives in a white **house**.

He lives in the **White** House.

After you have mastered first-word or second-word stress, you can go on the more complex intonation:

It's a **pot**.  
It's **new**.  
It's a new **pot.**It's brand **new**.  
It's a **brand** new **pot**.   
It's a **tea** pot.   
It's a new **tea** pot.   
It's a **brand** new **tea** pot.  
It's a **tea** pot lid.  
It's a new **tea** pot lid.   
It's a **brand** new **tea** pot lid.

***Exercise:*** ***Two-Word Phrases***

*Nouns are “heavier” than adjectives; they carry the weight of the new information. An adjective and a noun combination is called a* ***descriptive phrase****, and in the absence of contrast or other secondary changes, the stress will always fall naturally on the noun. In the absence of a noun, you will stress the adjective, but as soon as a noun appears on the scene, it takes immediate precedence—and should be stressed.*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Adjective**  1. It’s short. 2. It’s chocolate.  3. It’s good. 4. It’s guarded. 5. It’s wide. 6. There’re four. 7. It was small.  8. It’s the best. | **Noun and Adjective**  It’s a short nail.  It’s a chocolate cake.  It’s a good plan.  It’s a guarded gate.  It’s a wide river.  There’re four cards.  It was a small spot.  It’s the best book. | **Adverb Adjective**  It’s really short  It’s dark chocolate.  It’s too hot.  It’s extremely hard.  It’s far back.  There are only four.  It’s laughably small.  It’ amazingly good. |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Adjective**  1. It’s **short.** 2. It’s **chocolate.**  3. It’s **good**. 4. It’s **guarded.** 5. It’s **wide**. 6. There’re **four**. 7. It was **small.**  8. It’s the **best.** | **Noun and Adjective**  It’s a short **nail**.  It’s a chocolate **cake**.  It’s a good **plan.**  It’s a guarded **gate.**  It’s a wide **river**.  There’re four **cards**.  It was a small **spot**.  It’s the best **book**. | **Adverb Adjective**  It’s really **short**  It’s dark **chocolate**.  It’s too **hot**.  It’s extremely **hard**.  It’s far **back**.  There are only **four.**  It’s laughably **small**.  It’ amazingly **good**. |

*When you get the impression that a two-word description could be hyphenated or even made into one word, it is a signal that it could be a set phrase—for example,* ***flash light, flash-light, flashligh****t.*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Noun** 1. It’s a finger.  2. It’s a pan.  3. It’s a tub.  4. It’s a drive.  5. It’s a bone.  6. It’s a card.  7. It’s a spot.  8. It’s a book. | **Noun/Adj.**  It’s a nail.  It’s a cake.  It’s hot.  It’s hard.  It’s in back.  It’s a trick.  It’s a light.  It’s a phone. | **Set Phrase**  It’s a fingernail.  It’s a pancake.  It’s a hot tub.  It’s a hard drive.  It’s the backbone.  It’s a card trick.  It’s a spotlight.  It’s a phone book. |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Noun** 1. It’s a **finger**.  2. It’s a **pan**.  3. It’s a **tub**.  4. It’s a **drive.**  5. It’s a **bone**.  6. It’s a **card**.  7. It’s a **spot.**  8. It’s a **book**. | **Noun/Adj.**  It’s a **nail**.  It’s a **cake**.  It’s **hot**.  It’s **hard**.  It’s in **back**.  It’s a **trick**.  It’s a **light**.  It’s a **phone**. | **Set Phrase**  It’s a **finger**nail.  It’s a **pan**cake.  It’s a **hot** tub.  It’s a **hard** drive.  It’s the **back**bone.  It’s a **card** trick.  It’s a **spot**light.  It’s a **phone** book. |

***Summary of Stress in Two-Word Phrases***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **First Word** | **set phrases**  **streets**  **Co. or Corp.**  **\*nationalities of food**  **\*nationalities of people** | ***light*** *bulb*  ***Main*** *Street*  ***Xerox*** *Corporation*  ***Chinese*** *food*  ***French*** *guy* |
| **Second Word** | **descriptive phrases**  **road designations**  **modified adjectives**  **place names and parks**  **institutions, or Inc.**  **personal names and titles**  **personal pronouns and possessives**  **articles**  **initials and acronyms**  **chemical compounds**  **colors and numbers**  **most compound verbs**  **percent and dollar**  **hyphenated nationalities**  **descriptive nationalities** | *new* ***information***  *Fifth* ***Avenue***  *really* ***big***  *New* ***York****, Central* ***Park***  *Oakland* ***Museum****, Xerox* ***Inc****.*  *Bob* ***Smith,*** *Assistant* ***Manager***  *his* ***car****, Bob’s* ***brother***  *the* ***bus****, a* ***week,*** *an* ***hour***  *U.****S.****, I****Q***  *zinc* ***oxide***  *red* ***orange****, 2****6***  *go* ***away,*** *sit* ***down,*** *fall* ***off***  *10* ***percent****, 50* ***dollars***  *African-****American***  *Mexican* ***restaurant*** |

\**Nationality Intonation Quiz*

1. an American guy
2. an American restaurant
3. American food
4. an American teacher
5. an English teacher

When you first look at it, the stress shifts may seem arbitrary, but let’s examine the logic behind these five examples and use it to go on to the other, similar cases.

1. an **American** guy
2. an American **restaurant**
3. **American** food
4. an **American** teacher
5. an English **teacher**

**Quiz: Contrast of Compound Nouns**

*In the following list of words, underline the element that should be stressed.*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 1. The White House 2. a white house 3. a darkroom 4. a dark room 5. Fifth Avenue 6. Main Street 7. a main street 8. a hot dog 9. a hotdog 10. a baby blanket 11. a baby’s blanket 12. a baby bird 13. a blackbird 14. a black bird 15. a greenhouse 16. a green house 17. a green thumb 18. a parking ticket 19. a one-way ticket 20. an unpaid ticket | 1. convenience store 2. convenient store 3. to pick up 4. a pickup truck 5. six years old 6. a six-year-old 7. six and a half 8. a sugar bowl 9. a wooden bowl 10. a large bowl 11. a mixing bowl 12. a top hat 13. a nice hat 14. a straw hat 15. a chairperson 16. Ph.D 17. IBM 18. MIT 19. USA 20. ASAP | 1. a doorknob 2. a glass door 3. a locked door 4. ice cream 5. I scream 6. elementary 7. a lemon tree 8. Watergate 9. the back gate 10. the final year 11. a year book 12. United States 13. New York 14. Long Beach 15. Central Park 16. a raw deal 17. a deal breaker 18. the bottom line 19. a bottom feeder 20. a new low |

Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. I’m taking American Accent Training. There’s a lot to learn, but I hope to make it as enjoyable as possible. I should pick up on the American intonation pattern pretty easily, although the only way to get it is to practice all of the time. I use the up and down, or peaks and valleys intonation more than I used to. I’ve been paying attention to pitch, too. It’s like walking down a staircase. I’ve been talking to a lot of Americans lately, and they tell me that I’m easier to understand. Anyway, I could go on and on, but the important thing is to listen well and sound good. Well, what do you think? Do I?

**Hello**,**/** my **name** is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.**/** I’m **taking** American **Accent** Training.**/** There’s a **lot** to **learn**,**/** but I **hope** to **make** it**/** as **enjoyable** as **possible**.**/** I should **pick** up on**/** the American **intonation** pattern**/** pretty **easily**,**/** **although/** the only way to **get** it is**/** to **practice** all of the **time**.**/** I **use** the **up** and **down**,**/** or **peaks** and **valleys** **intonation/** **more** than I **used** to.**/** I’ve been paying **attention** to **pitch**,**/** **too**.**/** It’s like **walking** down a **staircase**.**/** I’ve been **talking/** to a lot of **Americans/** **lately**,**/** and they **tell** me**/** that I’m **easier/** to **understand**.**/** **Anyway**,**/** I could go **on** and **on**,**/** but the **important** thing is**/** to **listen** **well/** and **sound** **good**.**/** **Well**,**/** what do you **think**?**/** **Do** I?