



第一步 Dì yī bù: Beginners' Chinese

Tonal language

Interviewer: When people say they're learning Mandarin what I notice is that, you know, people often greet them with this sort of mixture of sort of astonishment and admiration because Mandarin seems to someone like me a very difficult language to try and you know, contend with, not only because of the writing, you know, the script, but actually just to get your tongue around the pronunciation, and then, over and above that, it seems that the language has different tones, which have different meanings associated with them. Tell us a little bit about that.

Qian: OK so it's one of the most challenging aspects in learning Mandarin Chinese, but you may be surprised to know that in Cantonese there are nine tones, so in Mandarin we only have four tones.

Interviewer: So we should be grateful for small mercies, should we?

Qian: Yes. OK, let me give you an example: the syllable 'tang' has got four tones: The 1st tone, pronounced 'tāng 汤' means 'soup'; the second tone pronounced 'táng 糖' it means 'sugar'; the 3rd tone pronounced 'tǎng 躺' is a verb, it means 'to lie down'; and the 4th tone 'tàng 烫' is an adjective, it means 'burning hot'. So different tones does give different meanings. And there are some other examples, for example the verbs 'to buy/to sell'. 'To buy' has got the 3rd tone, it sounds like this: 买 mǎi; and 'to sell' has got the 4th tone and is pronounced: 卖 mài. So you have 买 mǎi (to buy) and 卖 mài (to sell).

Interviewer: So the same word could mean *buy* or *sell*, depending upon the tone you use.

Qian: But the thing is you do not have to worry too much about it. Of course, when people who are not used to tonal language, it is a challenge. But when you communicate with other people you have other clues, you have the context, you have the facial expressions... so for example if you go to a market to buy a silk tie, and even if you use the wrong tone to say *to sell*, nobody would think that you are trying to sell them a silk tie. So I really don't think beginners should get too worried about tones because as the time goes and you use more and more language, people talk and it will finally sort of... you'll get better.

Interviewer: That's actually very reassuring, but, you know, what about... it's fine if you're out there and you're exposed to native speakers around you. But for a beginner, who, you know, may not have the luxury of, you know, going abroad to China to get their ear tuned in, what can they do to help them get round tones?

Qian: There are various software, audio CDs one can use. And these days you could even find a speaking partner on Skype, and recently some of our students have discovered that they found Chinese people in China who want to practice English, then they practice Chinese with them. And also there are various kinds of software to help you practice tones. For example, there's one software which, sort of, allows you to hear a model pronunciation and then you record your own, and then on the screen the tone is represented in a graphic form, so you can see what has gone wrong, whether you produced the first tone or the second tone. And once you sort of start speaking and listening and talking to people and continuously practising you will notice that you can distinguish the tones and will be, you know, better at producing them as well.