SpeakGoodChinese: Learn to speak the tones of Mandarin Chinese

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http://www.SpeakGoodChinese.org/
Introduction

Mandarin Chinese is the official administrative language of China
Studying Chinese is popular in the West (and elsewhere)

Problems Teaching Mandarin

- Mandarin Chinese is a tone language
- Every syllable in a word has one of 4 (5) tones which determines the meaning of the word
- Using the wrong tone makes a word incomprehensible (cf, English bad and bat, Dutch boot and bot)
- Mastering the production and recognition of tones is a major stumbling block in learning Mandarin Chinese
- Direct interaction with a highly proficient speaker, usually the teacher, is needed to practise tone pronunciation
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Weenink & van Son (IFA, ACLC)
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Consequences of problems with tones

- Classes must be kept small to allow for ample student-teacher interaction
- Teachers are scarce
- Speaking and listening proficiency improves very slowly
- High drop-out rates of demotivated students
- Speaking is neglected in favor of writing
- ⇒ Use speech technology to help students practise
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SpeakGoodChinese

An aid for practising Mandarin tones.

- All mono- and bisyllabic words
- Automatic Tone Recognition
- Graphical Tone Presentation
- A written analysis of tone pronunciation.
- Hummed (TTS) or pre-recorded examples
- Replaying recorded student pronunciation
- Automatic student evaluation (hidden)

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[Image of application interface]

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Pinyin to Tone synthesis as TTS

- Pinyin phonetic transcription system (eg, \textit{ni3hao3})
- Each syllable has a number 1-4 or the neutral tone 0
- Split pinyin word into syllables (on tone number)
- Split pinyin syllable into Unvoiced initial and voiced final
- Tone contour is realized on voiced part only
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Tone models: All tones

SpeakGoodChinese tone models

- Neutral tone, 0, tones 1-4, and garbage model 6
- Tones change in “context”
Tone models: Assimilation of neutral tone

Examples

- Neutral tone continues from previous tone
- Returns to “neutral” position
- Fourth tone seems exception
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Tone synthesis: Initials and finals

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**Durational model**

- Syllable: Optional Initial (zh) + Obligatory Final (ong)
- Tones are realized on the voiced part of the syllable
- Estimate durations of Initial and Final
- Crude model: Fixed duration $+ \delta \cdot$ number of symbols (ia=3)
- Adapt duration to tone: $3 > 1 > 2 \approx 4 \gg 0$
Tone recognition

Tone recognition: Was student correct?

- Extract utterance pitch contour ($F_0$)
- Pinyin-to-Tone synthesis for all tones (correct and incorrect)
- Compare student utterance to all possible tone contours using Dynamic Time Warping
- Pick best matching model ⇒ Recognition
- Construct possible contours from theoretical tone model
- Limited to two syllables (combinatorial explosion)
- Student pitch register must be known
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A good tone has correct pitch height and movements

- If *top pitch* deviates from model, flag an error
- If *pitch range* deviates from model, flag an error
- Students will exaggerate tones, punish exaggerations less
- Flag error if 3 semitones too low or too narrow
- Flag exaggeration if 6 semitones too high or too wide
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Tone recognition: Heuristic rules

Model tones do not model enough variation

- **Duration rules currently very bad**
- Current tone models do not capture variation
- Use “heuristic” rules to capture common confusions
- Eg, tones 2 and 3 merge before another tone 2 or 3
- Eg, tones 2 and 4 often misidentified as tone 0 in DTW but tone 0 would have been flagged by tone height and movement
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Evaluation: Recognizer False \textit{rejects} and \textit{accepts}

Reference speakers and Students

- **Correct Tones**
  - Read Speech: R read aloud 6 words: \textit{cha2, dian4hua4, duo1shao3, gong1zuo4, jie2hun1, shi2jian1}, 83 tokens.
  - Simulated Use: R free word choice, 358 tokens
  - Shadowed Correct Speech: R and S shadowed 6 words, 160 tokens

- **Incorrect tones**
  Shadowed Incorrect Speech: R and S shadowed 6 words, 320 tokens
**Evaluation: Usefulness and grade 1-10**

- **SGC appl.**
  - 7.7
- **Synth. tones**
  - 7.2
- **Graphic displays**
- **Will you use SGC?**

Legend: Not useful/No - Useful - Very useful/Yes

* One subject couldn’t hear the tones clearly
† One subject preferred to practice with family members

**Questionnaire to 14 students**

- Tested RAD Tcl/Tk GUI with functional recognition
- Responses used to design User Interface
Evaluation: Usage data

Does SpeakGoodChinese improve tone pronunciation?

- Single Female student (13)
- Tried out SpeakGoodChinese in 7 sessions of a few hours
- In total she uttered 1531 words
- Each session started and ended with test runs without audio feedback
- Pretest and Posttest ≈ 30 words
- Practise ≈ 83-389 words
- Automatically determined error rate (*p < 0.002, $X^2$)
  - Overall: 28% (including practise)
  - Pretest: 39% *
  - Posttest: 24% *

- Real progress awaits human judgment
Conclusions

Computer Assisted Language Learning of Mandarin tones

- A Free, GPL, CALL applications based on Praat
- Real-time tone recognizer with an estimated 15% error rate
- Recognition can be improved upon
- The method is biased for acceptance of one- and two syllable words
- Besides tone, it can be extended to word pronunciation
- Students seem to like it
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Thank you very much
Any questions?

Acknowledgement

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