Teaching Mandarin Pronunciation: Basic Types of Phonetic Chunks

HAND-OUT

High frequency words are typically:
1. monosyllabic
2. function words

Cf. the frequency dictionary Xiao et al. 2009:20 – top 8 words from the frequency index:

**Frequency index**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency rank</th>
<th>Headword in Simplified Chinese</th>
<th>Headword in Traditional Chinese</th>
<th>Pinyin (Optional HSK Level) Part of speech English gloss</th>
<th>Illustrative example in Simplified Chinese and English translation of the example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0001</td>
<td>的 [的] jī/1 (1) aux [structural particle used after an attribute]</td>
<td>Africa is a very large continent.</td>
<td>236106</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0002</td>
<td>是 [是] zhī/1 (1) v be</td>
<td>Where are you from?</td>
<td>81963</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0003</td>
<td>一 [一] yī/1 (1) num one, a, an</td>
<td>There is a crowd of people in front of the town hall.</td>
<td>69925</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0004</td>
<td>在 [在] zài/1 (1) prep [indicating location or time, etc.] at, in</td>
<td>She sat at the window.</td>
<td>52774</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0005</td>
<td>了 [了] le/1 (1) aux [aspect marker indicating realisation of a situation]</td>
<td>She fell off her horse.</td>
<td>51290</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0006</td>
<td>不 [不] bù/1 (1) adv no, not</td>
<td>You can’t park in this street.</td>
<td>50589</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0007</td>
<td>我 [我] wǒ/1 (1) pron I, me</td>
<td>Coffee and tea stimulate me.</td>
<td>51365</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0008</td>
<td>个 [个] gè/1 (1) clas [generalised measure word used for nouns without a specific measure term]</td>
<td>There is a village beyond the hill.</td>
<td>36412</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Important group of Chinese high frequency words: the Cliticoids lèi fùzhúó cí 类附着词
(newly coined term derived from the common term clitic 附着词)

- monosyllabic personal pronouns: wǒ 我, nǐ 你, tā 他...
- conjunctions: hé 和, tóng 同...
- prepositions: zài 在, bā 把, gěi 给, bǐ 比...
- monosyllabic postpositions: shàng 上, xià 下, lǐ 里
- measure words:  gè 个, zhǒng 种, wèi 位...
- modal verbs: yào 要, huì 会, xiǎng 想...
- three “low-content” stative verbs: shì 是, zài 在, exist. yǒu 有
- three formal adverbs: jiù 就, dōu 都, hěn 很

Shared features of the Cliticoids:
- they are monosyllabic
- they are function words, or semantically bleached content words
- they are have a lexical tone
- they have two pronunciations:
  a) stressed = full, “strong” e.g. 他 [tʰaː]¹
  b) unstressed = reduced, “weak” e.g. 他 [tʰə]
The Cliticoids exhibit similar features as English **Words with weak forms** (i.e. monosyllabic function words with two forms of pronunciation: 1. strong = stressed, 2. weak = unstressed clitic; 2. is more common; cca 50-60 words). Example: the conjunction **and**: *you and me* – *you n’ me*. Most common English WWF are:

- **articles**: `a, an, the`
- **personal pronouns**: `you, he, she, we, he, him...`
- **conjunctions**: `and, as, but, than, that…`
- **prepositions**: `at, for, from, of, to…`
- **modal verbs**: `can, could, may, might, must...`
- **auxiliary verbs**: `am, is, are, have, has, had, do, does, was, shall, will…`

The Cliticoids typically assume an **unstressed form** in connected speech. Short 2-3 syllabic **chunks of speech** (`yǔkuài` 语块), containing such unstressed forms, may be established. I call them **Phonetic Chunks** (`yīnkuài` 音块) (previously called Minimodules); newly coined term. They may have various stress patterns:

- **trochee** /•••/ (`season, na stůl`) /••/ (`nǐ hǎo` 你好)
- **iamb** /•••/ (`delay, Tak co?`) /•••/ (`gēi bàba` 给爸爸)
- **dactyl** /•••••••/ (`flattery, na stromě`) /•••••••/ (`xīhuàn tā` 喜欢他)
- **cretic** /•••••••/ (`Petr Pan, Co to jiš?`) /•••••••/ (`zhè bèn shū` 这本书)
- **amphibrach** /•••••••/ (`remember, jak dávno`) /•••••••/ (`zài Běijīng` 在北京)
- **bacchius** /•••••••/ (`when day breaks, Co shániš?`) /•••••••/ (`xuéxiào lǐ` 学校里)
- **palimbacchius** /•••••••••••/ (`neat organ, dál zíval`) /•••••••••••/ (`mà tā` 骂他)

They may have various grammatical structures:

e.g.: `personal pronoun functioning as a subject + verb: PP is a typical proclitic:

/•••/ `nǐ qù!` 你去！ /•••••••/ `wò zhīdāo` 我知道

verb + personal pronoun functioning as an object: PP is a typical enclitic:

/•••/ `mà tā` 骂他 /•••••••/ `má fān nǐ` 麻烦你

Phonetic Chunks may be efficiently used in L2 teaching, particularly in teaching **tricky pronunciation of the Cliticoids**. The unstressed forms of the Cliticoids are quite difficult to master, displaying more or less drastic reductions (segmental reductions, reduction of syllable duration, and reduction of tone).

**LITERATURE**


