

De-stressed words in Mandarin – a parallel with English

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H A N D - O U T

I. English has **words with weak forms** 弱读式词: cca 50 monosyllabic function words (articles, personal pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions, auxiliary verbs, modal verbs) with **two forms of pronunciation: strong** (stressed, full, unreduced) and **weak** (unstressed, phonetically reduced); the choice between the forms is **constrained**.

examples	part of speech 词类	full (= “strong”) form 强读式	reduced (= “weak”) form 弱读式
<i>of</i>	preposition	[ɒv]	[əv]
<i>to</i>	preposition	[t ^h u:]	[tə]
<i>for</i>	preposition	[fɔːr]	[fə]
<i>and</i>	conjunction	[ænd]	[ən], [ŋ]
<i>him</i>	personal pronoun	[hɪm]	[ɪm]
<i>the</i>	article	[ði:]	[ðə], [ðɪ]
<i>can</i>	modal verb	[k ^h æŋ]	[kən]
<i>are</i>	auxiliary verb	[ɑːr]	[əɹ], [ɹ]

II. Everyday colloquial Mandarin (*putonghua*) has **cliticoids**¹ 类附着词 (newly coined term): cca 50 monosyll. function words *with lexical tone* (!) and two forms of pronunciation: **strong** (stressed) and **weak** (unstressed); the choice between the forms is **constrained**.

- **personal pronouns** 人称代词: wǒ 我, nǐ 你, tā 他, nín 您
- **conjunctions** 连词: hé 和, tóng 同...
- **prepositions** 介词: zài 在, bǎ 把, bǐ 比, gěi 给...
- **postpositions** 后置方位词: shàng 上, xià 下, lǐ 里...
- **classifiers** 个体量词: gè 个, běn 本... plus xiē 些
- **modal verbs** 能愿动词: yào 要, huì 会, xiǎng 想...
- **three “basic” verbs**: (exist.) yǒu 有, zài 在, shì 是
- **semantically “bleached” adverbs** 虚化副词: jiù 就, hěn 很, dōu 都

¹ The new term cliticoid: “something what looks like a clitic, but is not quite like it” (cf. asteroid, humanoid...). The common term clitic 附着词: derived from the Greek verb *klinein* = “to lean on”. Chinese 100% clitics are monosyllabic function words *without* a lexical tone (the particles such as structural particles 的, 得, 地, sentence particles 吗, 呢, and aspect particles 了, 着, 过). They always behave as enclitics.

examples	part of speech 词类	full (= “strong”) form 强读式	reduced (= “weak”) form 弱读式
<i>shì</i> 是	copula verb	[ʃ̌ː] ⁴	[ʃ̌]
<i>xiǎng</i> 想	modal verb	[ɕ̌ʰaŋ] ³	[ɕ̌ʰə]
<i>hě</i> 很	adverb	[xən] ³	[xə]
<i>gè</i> 个	classifier	[kɤ̌] ⁴	[kə]
<i>tā</i> 他	personal pronoun	[t̪ ^h aː] ¹	[tə]
<i>zài</i> 在	preposition	[tsaɪ] ⁴	[tsə]
<i>hé</i> 和	conjunction	[xɤ̌] ²	[xə]

- Correct usage of strong (stressed) and weak (unstressed) forms of **the cliticoids** is **an essential feature of everyday colloquial Mandarin (*putonghua*)**, though not of all dialectal, stylistic etc. varieties of Chinese (e.g. Cantonese dialect, formal speeches, slow speaking rate, Taiwanese *guoyu*)
- “All-strong-form” pronunciation of the cliticoids results in **unnatural, foreign accent** (may even lead to misunderstanding on the side of a listener)
- Speakers who are not familiar with the use of weak forms may **have difficulty understanding** speakers who do use them
- Therefore **the cliticoids** should make **an important chapter in teaching colloquial Mandarin**

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