**Learn to Hear Tones**

When you were a baby, you could hear the difference between *māma* (mother) and *mà mā* (swear at one’s mother). Or at least you could have, if you had been listening to some extraordinarily impolite person speak Mandarin.  
  
But your brain has long since determined that this isn’t important information. Now, many years later, you need to retrain your brain to think of pitch as an important feature again. But how?  
  
**Capitalize on what you can hear**  
Many people characterize Chinese as sounding “sing-songy.” If you’re one of them, good news: You’re hearing tones!  
The pitch moving up and down from word to word is what gives English speakers this impression. You can hear tones, so now you just have to figure out how to process them.  
  
**Think about how your native language uses pitch**  
You may not be a native speaker of a tone language, but all spoken languages use pitch to distinguish some sort of meaning. If you’re a native English speaker, the pitch of your voice conveys things like whether you’re asking a question or making a statement, as well as how sure you are of what you’re saying, and how you feel about it.  
  
Try this: Say “yes” like you’re absolutely sure you mean it. Now say “Yes?” as if you’re not so sure. Can you hear the difference?  
Now try doing the same thing, but instead of an English word, say it with a syllable like *ma*.  
  
**Listen for aspects of tone besides pitch**  
If you’re having a tough time hearing tone, listen for things besides pitch. Do you hear creaky voice? (That “I just got out of bed and can’t quite get my voice working correctly yet” croaking sort of sound).  Not all speakers have creaky third tones, but they’re pretty common.  
Or try length. Was the syllable long and drawn out? Chances are good that was a third tone.  
Really short? Probably a fourth tone at work. These length differences start to disappear in real speech, but they’re real enough in the “reading a vocabulary list” type of speech you’re likely to hear in a dictation test. Let them work for you.  
Or pretend you’re listening for stress. That neutral tone? Think of it as an unstressed syllable and see whether you can hear it better.  
  
**Practice hearing tones on one syllable, then in combination**  
The first step to practicing your tone listening skills is, of course, to try to hear the four basic tones by themselves. There are numerous recordings available that will let you do this.  
  
Aside from tone tests in class and the odd one-syllable vocabulary word, you won’t often encounter solitary tones. So I recommend that, as soon as possible, you move on to working on hearing tones in longer combinations—at least two syllables long.  
  
Tones sound different in context than they do in isolation. The most dramatic example of this is third tone. Chinese language textbooks universally teach you that third tone is falling-rising. But—and this is really, really important—it’s only like that when you say it all by itself, or maybe at the end of a sentence.  
  
Tone sandhi aside, in normal speech, third tone is more often just a low tone. If you spend too much time training yourself on one-syllable words, you may find yourself having a hard time hearing the difference between second and third tone in context. (I just might be speaking from experience on this one).  
  
You’re not trying to learn to speak to a computer, so don’t learn to listen from a synthesized voice. Even tone-learning apps recorded by real people won’t help you learn what real speech sounds like if they rely on spliced-together syllables.  
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**Listen to different people pronouncing tones**  
Everyone sounds a little different. The more people you practice listening to, the greater your chances are of understanding the next person you hear.