

Mandarin Tones

Some Mandarin speakers may have problems discerning tones: I know how to say "來" (come) perfectly well, but which tone is it in after all, and is it just me or "不" does sound different in "不對" (not correct) and "不難" (not difficult), for example. If this is the case with you, read the following closely. Some of the most commonly heard tonal changes in speech are discussed here.

Single Tones

[11 - Pitch Contours of Mandarin Tones](#)

[11 - Tone Marks](#)

[11 - Examples](#)

Tones in Combination

[11 - The Neutral Tone](#)

[11 - The Full 3rd Tone and the Half 3rd Tone](#)

[11 - 3rd + non-3rd Combination](#)

[11 - 3rd + 3rd Combination](#)

[11 - A String of 3rd Tones](#)

[11 - 4th + 4th Combination](#)

[11 - "一" \(yī; one\) and "不" \(bù; no/not\)](#)

How to Discern Tones

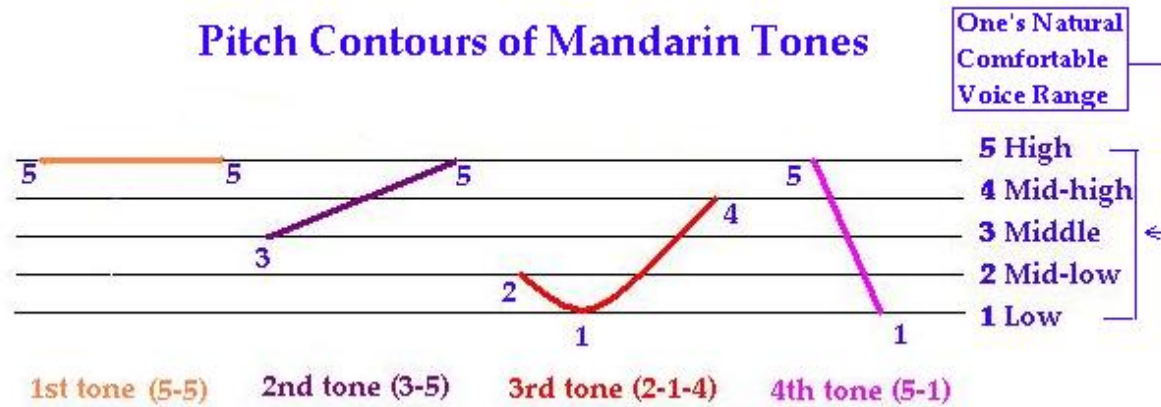
[11 - Compare and contrast](#)

Single Tones

Pitch Contours of Mandarin Tones

Mandarin has **four** basic tones*, the pitch contours of which are shown below.

Pitch Contours of Mandarin Tones



* The Chinese for the four tones are 一聲, 二聲, 三聲, and 四聲. (聲: shēng)

[Back to Top](#)

Tone Marks

Mandarin Tone Marks

1st tone: — 2nd tone: / 3rd tone: ∨ 4th tone: \

dā	dá	dǎ	dà
lōu	lóu	lǒu	lòu
bēi	béi	běi	bèi
mī	mí	mǐ	mì

*Tone marks are put above vowels. (Refer to "Spelling Rules" for details.)

[Back to Top](#)

Examples of Single Tones

Play audios to the right to listen to each row of four tones of the same syllable pronounced one by one from left to right, and play audios at the bottom to listen to each column.

mā	má	mǎ	mà	
dā	dá	dǎ	dà	
bāo	báo	bǎo	bào	
pēng	péng	pěng	pèng	

[Back to Top](#)

Tones in Combination

The Neutral Tone

- The second characters in the word below are all pronounced in the neutral tone -- "輕聲" (qīngshēng) in Chinese.

桌子 (zhuō.zi; desk)	
誰的 (shéi.de; whose)	
耳朵 (ěr.duo; ear)	
記得 (jì.de; remember)	


- The tone mark is usually **omitted** to indicate that a certain syllable has a neutral tone. Many dictionaries and textbooks also put **a dot** before a syllable in the neutral tone -- in

this web site, we will follow this convention.

[Back to Top](#)

The Full 3rd Tone and the Half 3rd Tone

As is shown in the [Chart of Pitch Contours of Mandarin Tones](#), a **full third tone** should begin from mid-low to low and then rise to mid-high pitch. But in spontaneous speech, the third tone is rarely pronounced in full. Say the following phrases/words as naturally as you can.

特別好 (tèbié hǎo) (exceptionally good)	
三百 (sānbǎi) (three hundred years)	
課本 (kèběn) (textbook)	


You will probably find that "hǎo", "bǎi", and "běn" did not rise at all when you said them. Instead, they started **and** stopped low. A third tone pronounced in this fashion is called a **half third tone**, because only the 2-1 part of the [2-1-4](#) full third tone contour is produced. Nevertheless, **the tone mark remains the same in writing**.

[Back to Top](#)

3rd + non-3rd Combination

First, think about the tonal contour of the full third tone, and pronounce "好" (good; hǎo).

Now say the four words below, paying special attention to how you pronounce "好" in these words.

好吃 (3rd + 1st) (tasty; hǎochī)	
-----------------------------------	---

好人 (3rd + 2nd) (nice person; hǎorén)	
好看 (3rd + 4th) (pretty; hǎokàn)	
好吧 (3rd + neutral) (all right; hǎo.ba)	

You will find that in these four words, "好" is pronounced in the half third tone -- there is no rising. Examples like this abound in speech: "每年" (měinián; every year), "老師" (lǎoshī; teacher), "眼睛" (yǎnjīng; eye) ...

Conclusion:

In speech, 3rd + non-3rd => half 3rd + non-3rd.

The tone mark remains the same in writing.

[Back to Top](#)

3rd + 3rd Combination

Now try these:

很好 (hěnhǎo) (very good)	
老虎 (lǎohǔ) (tiger)	

The "很" and "老" are neither pronounced in a full third tone, nor in a half third tone. Instead, their tonal pitch contour is the same as that of a second tone, like "來" (lái; come). And notice that 好 (hǎo) and 虎 (hǔ) are both in the **half third** tone.

Conclusion:

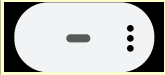
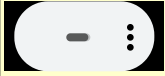
In speech, 3rd + 3rd => 2nd + 3rd.

The tone mark remains the same in writing.

[Back to Top](#)

A String of 3rd Tones

Consider this: 我只有兩本法語書. (**W**ǒ **zh**ǐ **y**ǒu **li**ǎng **b**ěn **F**ǎyǔ shū; I only have two French books.) Which of the following is how you will say the sentence?

<p>Wo (half 3rd) zhi(2) you (half 3rd) liang(2) ben(half 3rd) Fa(2)yu(half 3rd) shū.</p>	
<p>Wo (2) zhi(2) you (half 3rd) liang(2) ben(half 3rd) Fa(2)yu(half 3rd) shū.</p>	


Both are acceptable. Notice how the sentence is divided into color-coded "groups of meaning", and how tones change accordingly.

* Things may seem a bit complex, but don't worry about this as long as you know the actual tone of a character when it is by itself, because you already have the phonologic knowledge.

[Back to Top](#)

4th + 4th Combination

You may have noticed that the two fourth tones in

作業 (zuòyè) (homework)	
漢字 (Hàn zì) (Chinese character)	
做夢 (zuòmèng) (to dream)	

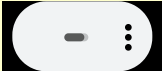

are slightly different -- the second syllable sounds more "emphatic". You are right.

When one 4th tone is followed by another in a word, the first has a 5-3 pitch contour instead of a 5-5 one. Again, the tone mark does not change in writing.

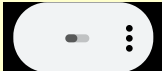
[Back to TOP](#)

"一" (yī; one) and "不" (bù; no/not)

(1) 一/不 + 4th => 2nd yí/bù + 4th

一萬 (yīwàn) (ten thousand)	
一塊 (yíkuài) (one dollar)	
一半 (yíban) (a half)	
不貴 (búguì) (not expensive)	
不對 (búduì) (not correct)	
不慢 (búmàn) (not slow)	

(2) 一/不 + non-4th => 4th yì/bù + non-4th

一天 (yītiān) (a day)	
一生 (yìshēng) (one's whole life)	
不多 (bùduō) (not many/much)	
不吃 (bùchī) (not eat)	

一年 (yīnián) (a year)	
一群 (yíqún) (a group of)	
不難 (bùnán) (not difficult)	
不忙 (bùmáng) (not busy)	
一晚 (yìwǎn) *** (one night)	
一早 (yìzǎo) (early in the morning)	
不晚 (bùwǎn) (not late)	
不早 (bùzǎo) (not early)	

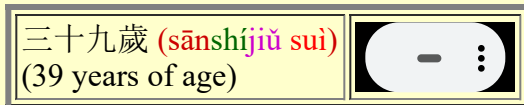
- * "一" is pronounced in the first tone (yī) when it refers to "1", the number.
- ** Both the original first tone of "一" and the actual tone in speech are accepted in writing. The same holds for "不".
- *** 晚 (wǎn) and 早 (zǎo) are pronounced in the half third tone here.

[Back to Top](#)

How to Discern Tones

Compare and Contrast

If you have problems telling the tone of a character, apart from remembering the first tone is high and flat, the second rising, the third low (consider the half third tone), and the fourth falling, the most practical advice is perhaps to memorize four characters representing the four basic Mandarin tones as "model" characters. For example:



And if you are not sure of the tone of a certain character, simply do some comparing and contrasting.

[Back to Top](#)