"Weak form words" in *pǔtōnghuà* 普通话里的弱读式词

HAND-OUT

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The languages are believed to display either so called "machine-gun rhythm", i.e. *syllable-timed languages*, or "Morse-code rhythm", i.e. *stress-timed languages* (Pike 1945, Abercombie 1967). **English** is viewed as a typical stress-timed language (stressed syllables: long, full articulation of segments, unstressed syllables: short, tendency to segmental reductions). The linguists generally agree that similar features can be found in *putonghua* (e.g. Chao 1968:35, Lin Tao 1962:302, Shih 1988:93, Shen 1989:59-60, Lin Yen-hwei 2007:222, 99). However, Mandarin Chinese is mostly labelled as a **syllable-timed language** by few linguists concerned with this topic and offering instrumental data (e.g. Lin and Wang 2007, Mok 2009). Obviously there is a contradiction. In my paper I will argue that colloquial *putonghua* (that is spontaneous, ordinary conversational speech) – at least in speech perception – displays strong tendency to **stress-timed rhythm**, showing very similar properties of stressed / unstressed syllables as English has. (I will not make any claims about other varieties of Chinese, such as other *putonghua* speech registers, e.g. formal speeches or speech of media, dialects other than Beijing dialect, e.g. Cantonese, other standard varieties of Chinese such as Taiwan *Guoyu*, etc.) The main topic of the paper are **weak form words** (abbreviated as WFW). English has a group of words (about 40) called *words with weak forms*, or *weak form words* (弱形式词, 弱读式词). The members of this group are high-frequency monosyllabic functional words such as prepositions, conjunctions, auxiliary verbs, pronouns or articles. In most contexts they are pronounced as "weak" unstressed clitics (附着词) with a severly reduced sound form, while "strong", stressed, full pronunciation occurs only under logical stress, sentence finally or in isolation. E.g.:

word	strong form	weak form	example of WF usage
a	[eɪ]	[ə]	*read a book*
and	[ænd]	[ənd], [ən], [n̩]	*you and me*
from	[frɒm]	[frəm], [frm̩]	*I´m home from work.*
can	[kæn]	[kən], [kn̩]	*She can do it.*

I will claim that a very similar group of words can be found in colloquial *putonghua*. I will call them **Cliticoids** 类附着词 (my term), as they mostly behave like clitics, but not always. These are monosyllabic function words with lexical tone, namely:

personal pronouns 人称代词 *wǒ* 我, *nǐ* 你, *nín* 您 *tā* 他
measure words 量词 *gè* 个, *běn* 本, *zhǒng* 种, *xiē* 些
conjunctions 连词 *hé* 和, *tóng* 同…
prepositions 介词 *zài* 在, *gěi* 给, *dào* 到, *bǎ* 把, *bǐ* 比,...
some postpositions 后置词 *shàng* 上, *xià* 下, *lǐ* 里 ...
modal verbs 能源动词 *yào* 要, *huì* 会, *xiǎng* 想…
3 "special" verbs 特殊动词 exist. *yǒu* 有, *zài* 在, *shì* 是
formal adverbs 形式副词 *jiù* 就, *hěn* 很, *dōu* 都

Similarly as English WFW, the Cliticoids display two distinct sound forms in natural rapid speech: unstressed ("weak"), which is regular, and stressed ("strong"), which is less common. E.g.

word PY	word 字	strong form	weak form	example of WF usage
wǒ	我	[wɔ˄]³	[wɔ], [wə]	*Géi wo!*
dào (prep.)	到	[d̥ɑʊ]⁴	[d̥ɔ], [d̥ʌ]	*kāi dao **wàimian***
xiǎng (modal v.)	想	[ɕjaŋ]³	[ɕjã], [ɕjʌ̃]	***Wó** xiang **chū**qu.*

I will point out that 1) the choice between two forms is not arbitratry in most contexts, 2) wrong choice ("all-strong-form" pronunciation) makes speech unnatural and foreign sounding, and may even result in misunderstanding.

Weak forms of the **Cliticoids** (together with the **Clitics** = toneless function words which are always unstressed, such as structural particles 结构助词, aspect particles 动态助词, and sentence particles 语气助词), make up a large portion of the unstressed syllables of connected speech. Consequently they deserve our attention both in research of speech rhythm and in L2 teaching.

I will suggest that proper pronunciation of the Cliticoids (as well as other things such as tone combinations, basic vocabulary or sentence intonation) can be trained with help of **"Minimodules"** 微型模块 (my term): 2-3 syllabic expressions containing all Clitics and Cliticoids, and common 1-2 syllabic words (examples: *hěn hǎo* 很好, *qù ma?* 去吗? *wǒ yào qù* 我要去, *gàosu tā* 告诉他, *zuò huǒchē* 坐火车).

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Rachel´s English: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrAe07KluZY