

# Raymond's subjective, biased, unfair, and completely wrong characterization of the sounds of several East Asian (and one Southeast Asian) languages

[devblogs.microsoft.com/oldnewthing/20130919-01](http://devblogs.microsoft.com/oldnewthing/20130919-01)

September 19, 2013



Raymond Chen

**Hokkien:** This is the language I learned first, so to me it sounds perfectly normal and is in fact how languages *should* sound. I find it odd that people describe it as one of the more difficult languages to learn. I mean, sure it has a large tone repertoire (eight theoretical, though only seven in practice) and extensive tone sandhi, but that's what makes it beautiful and smooth. And what's so hard about having unvoiced aspirated consonants, unvoiced unaspirated consonants, and voiced consonants? **Mandarin:** Mandarin is the German of East Asian languages: It is harsh and unforgiving. There are only four formal tones (though there are technically more if you include all the different types of neutral tones), and it really likes the s- and sh-sounds. (The sounds z, c, s, j, q, x, zh, ch, and sh, as denoted by Pinyin, all correspond to some variation of s and sh.) To me, Mandarin sounds like dictionaraoke: Syllables strung together with no attempt to make them flow into each other smoothly. (Though as I started to learn the language, the tones stopped bothering me quite so much.)

**Mandarin with Beijing accent:** Beijing accent is Mandarin as spoken by Scooby-Doo. More precisely, pronounce your consonants with your tongue pulled back in R position, and touching the roof of your mouth. For example, instead of saying "chair", you say "chrair". They are also known for a phenomenon known as Erhua ("R-ization") which appends the "R" sound to many words for no apparent reason. The funny thing is that people in Beijing think that the R sound is so awesome that words sound empty without it, so they stick it everywhere they can. On the other hand, everybody else thinks the R sound is ugly and try to avoid it as much as possible.

Phenomenon	English word	Pronunciation	
		Beijing	Non-Beijing
Omitting the R sound	Flower	花兒 huā+R	花 huā

Substituting a synonym	Where	哪兒 nǎ+R	哪裡 nǎli
------------------------	-------	------------	------------

Of course, people outside Beijing look at the table the other way:

Phenomenon	English word	Pronunciation	
		Non-Beijing	Beijing
Inserting a useless R sound	Flower	花 huā	花兒 huā+R
Substituting a synonym that uses the R sound	Where	哪裡 nǎli	哪兒 nǎ+R

Since Beijing is the capital of China, the Beijing accent is the official pronunciation of Mandarin Chinese, even though most people think it's ugly. (Imagine if all schools taught German in Berlin accent!) **Japanese:** Japanese is the Spanish of East Asian languages: It is spoken on fast-forward. One person described the sound of Japanese spoken by a group of schoolgirls as resembling a flock of chirping birds, a poetic description I wholeheartedly endorse. **Korean:** Korea sounds like a flat version of Japanese, with relatively little pitch variation. Basically, if I think something is Japanese, but then listen more closely and realize that it isn't, then it's probably Korean. **Cantonese:** The tones of colloquial Cantonese initially bugged me even more than Mandarin. Cantonese also has seven theoretical tones (or more, if you count clipped tones separately), although one of the tones is dying out, and most books don't bother teaching it any more. As I continue to learn Cantonese, the tones don't bother me quite so much. But what continues to bug me is that, particularly when spoken by women, phrases often end with a final syllable (which usually rhymes with "aah") that is held for a long time, at middle level or high level tone. Here are links to one phrase end (timecode 16s) and another (timecode 28s) and two in a row (timecode 52s). These "sentence final particles" usually carry no formal meaning but rather serve to convey attitude and emotion. For example, they can turn a direct order into a polite request or turn an accusatory question into a curious one. I'm not good with these particles, so my speech tends to come across as brusque. **Vietnamese:** Vietnamese is the language Gilbert Gottfried would have invented, if he were asked to invent an Asian language. Okay, formal Vietnamese isn't so bad, although the tones sound awkward to me. But more conversational Vietnamese sounds more nasal.

I may end up creating an international incident here, heck I may already have created one, but I'm curious what languages sound like to people from neighboring areas. (For example, the Swedes complain, "The Danes would be much easier to understand if they took the potato out of their mouth.") Or go ahead and make fun of American English. Share your thoughts in the comments.

Raymond Chen

**Follow**

