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Prosodic Marking of New and Given Information in English and Mandarin by Chinese Speakers

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Abstract

Second-language speakers have been found to face difficulties marking prosodic features of new and given information in English. Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners speak English with a different intonation from L1 speakers, which can lead to misunderstanding. However, there is a dearth of research on the prosodic marking of new and given information by Chinese English speakers and on the extent to which Mandarin might influence the marking of new and given information. To fill this research gap, an empirical study of the prosodic features of English and Mandarin was conducted using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods to investigate the prosodic marking of new and given information in English and Mandarin by Chinese speakers. The results show that the prosodic marking of new and given information in English and Mandarin was similar with new information having a longer duration and a larger pitch range.

Keywords**:** English, Mandarin, new and given information, information structure, prosodic features

1. Introduction

Prosody, as an important part of conveying information, is closely related to information systems. In verbal communication, both parties encode the information they want to convey into a unit of information, which is the information structure that allows given information (GI) and new information (NI) to interact and communicate. There is debate as to whether English as a Foreign Language learners (EFL learners) can clearly distinguish the new information and given information. Some studies showed that second-language speakers have difficulties marking prosodic features of new and given information in English (Gut et al., 2013; O'Brien and Gut, 2010) while other studies have found that EFL learners have the same performance as L1 English speakers (Quafeu, 2010; Ding, 2016). Despite progress in the investigation of information structure related to prosody, there has been some controversy regarding the study of non-native speakers' marking of information status. Up to the present time, few studies on non-native speakers' prosodic marking of new and given information have included Chinese EFL learners.

English and Mandarin exhibit different prosodic features. English is a stress-based language, with both lexical and sentence stress variations in pitch that can reflect different meanings in words (Cutler & Clifton, 1984). Mandarin, on the other hand, is a tone language, and therefore, has its own intonation patterns, and differences in pitch can give different meanings to words made up of the same vowels and consonants. Due to the different intonation systems of the two languages, Chinese EFL learners often speak English with a different intonation from English as L1 speakers, and always perceived as speaking English in an unnatural way. This difference in intonation can lead to a discrepancy between the intended message conveyed by the Chinese speakers of English and that received by the listeners. Therefore, exploring how Chinese speakers of English prosodically mark information status in English and Mandarin respectively, as well as identifying similarities and differences between English and Mandarin, can enhance our understanding of the prosodic marking of new and given information.

2. Prosodic Marking of New and Given Information

Halliday (1967) suggested that new information is not information that has not been mentioned, but information that the speaker wants to present to the listener as new content. Given information is information that can be recovered by instruction or context. Based on Halliday's research, Chafe (1976) believed that there are three different types of information states: given information, which

is information that is already in the listener's consciousness and in an active state; accessible information, where the content of speech changes from a semi-active state to an active state; and new information, where the content of speech changes from an inactive state to an active state.

Several studies of prosodic strategies for marking new and given information across languages have found that Chinese learners of English (Juffs, 1990), Austrian learners of English (Grosser, 2011), and Spanish learners of English (Verdugo, 2006) tend to make both new and given information prominent compared to native speakers of English, rather than highlighting only new information as native speakers do. They are accustomed to using the same markup for all elements and ignore the information status in the discourse structure. As an example, to investigate how non-native speakers use prosody to mark information features, Wennerstrom (1994) explored the pitch of new and given information in L1 and L2 English speakers and found that L1 speakers produced a higher pitch on new information than on given information, while L2 speakers used the same pitch regardless of information status. Verdugo (2006) explored and found that native British English speakers mark information features by changing intonation, with the pitch of new information falling and the pitch of given information rising, whereas native Spanish speakers whose L2 is English do not. On the other hand, Gut and Pillai (2014) found that the prosodic features from their Malay data were very similar to those in the English data generated by Malay L1 speakers.

Chen and Braun (2006) and Ouyang and Kaiser (2015) discovered that native Mandarin speakers consistently allocate more time to new information. Conversely, Wennerstrom (1994) and Gao (2010)found that non-native speakers do not always extensively use duration to distinguish between new and given information. Similarly, Gao (2010) also revealed that Chinese EFL learners do not consistently employ lengthening for new information and shortening for given information to differentiate between information states.

For both English and Mandarin, pitch ranges expand on target syllables carrying new information. However, compared to Mandarin, English has a larger pitch expansion (Tench,1996; Gao, 2010). Chen and Braun (2006) observed that new information had a larger pitch range than given information. Few studies have conducted a parallel comparison of information status between English and Mandarin acoustically, and thus, this is an area that warrants further research. Based on this, the present study aims to investigate the characteristics of Chinese speakers in

marking new and given information in English and Mandarin. Additionally, it seeks to explore potential cross-linguistic influences between the two languages.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study were five EFL learners from China who were pursuing a master's degree in English Language Studies at a public university in Malaysia. Their average age was 23 years. They had been learning English for over ten years and had majored in English during their undergraduate studies in China. Upon enrolment, their IELTS results were above band 6.0, indicating an intermediate level of English proficiency and the ability to read English text fluently. All participants were native Mandarin speakers from the Hebei Province, a coastal region in North China. Their Mandarin proficiency was at least a Putonghua Shuiping Ceshi of 2A which indicates that their pronunciation can be considered as a standard form of Mandarin, with natural intonation and fluent expressions when reading aloud and speaking spontaneously (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2015). Besides, all of them did not have any experience of living in other countries before they came to Malaysia, and they mainly used English as the medium of communication during their postgraduate studies. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic at the time of the research, all the participants had returned to China before travel restrictions were imposed. Thus, the recording process was conducted online throughout the research, with participants recording themselves reading out loud two texts (see Appendices A and B) separately.

3.2 Materials

The two texts in Appendices A and B were based on the same story. Due to the differences in English and Mandarin grammar, the same story had slight variations in each language. The materials were created by the writer and then reviewed by two professional teachers and a professor in the field of languages and linguistics.

> Each text contained eight words which appeared at least twice. When these words first appeared, they were considered as **new information,** while in subsequent sentences, they were categorised as **given informatio**n. For instance, in Example (1), *Amanda* in the first sentence and *Nelson* in the second sentence were the first

occurrences, and thus, they are considered new information, while the same words in the third sentence are classified as given information. Example (1):
Amanda is a smart and attractive young woman. When she went to Lily's house to play, she met **Nelson** by chance. **Amanda** fell in love with **Nelson** immediately.

The English text (see Appendix A) consists of eleven sentences comprising 131 words. Following Gut and Pillai (2014), the stressed syllable of the target words has a short vowel, a sonorant consonant (either a nasal or an /l/) and a neighbouring vowel. The accented syllable is accompanied by one or more unaccented syllables.

The Mandarin text (see Appendix B) consists of ten sentences, totalling 210 Chinese characters. There is still a lot of controversy about the form of stress in Chinese words. The only consensus among scholars (Chao, 1968; Yin, 1982; Xu, 1982) is the 'stress-light' format in neutral-tone words. In this format, words are pronounced with the first syllable being a stressed tone and the second syllable being an unstressed tone. For example, the word "头发 (tóu fa)" which means *hair* follows the 'stress-light' pattern. Based on this pattern, the second Chinese character of the eight target words is a neutral tone. In addition, because Mandarin has four tones, the first syllables of these eight words are equally distributed among these four tones. Furthermore, in ensuring that the target words accurately reflect the pitch and duration of new and given information, their positions in the sentence are identical. For instance, in example (2), the target word "林子 (forest)" for the new information and the one for the given information occupy the same position in the sentence, both appearing at the end of the clause. They are also at the same syntactic position, both being objects in the sentence.

Example (2):
咪咪的爸爸也很喜欢这个女婿，他送给了他们一片**林子**，这是一片收成很好的**林子**，能让咪咪和木匠以后生活无忧。
(*Mimi's father also liked this son-in-law very much. He gifted them a **forest**. It was a **forest** with a good harvest, which would enable Mimi and the carpenter to live a worry-free life in the future.)*

3.3 Data Analysis

A total of eight target syllables were recorded for Mandarin and English respectively. These target syllables were then analysed acoustically using Praat Version 6.1.37 (Boersma & Weenink, 2020). After annotating the syllables, measurements of syllable duration, pitch maximum and pitch minimum were extracted from the target words.

In the English text, the division of syllables was done according to the Maximal Onset Principle (MOP). The stressed syllable, based on the citation form, was measured, resulting in a total of eight extracted syllables for English. In Mandarin, one character equated to one syllable. This meant that extracting the target syllable also meant extracting a character. Eight syllables were extracted for Mandarin.

Table 1 illustrates the target words, while Figure 1 illustrates how the target words were annotated in tiers within Praat. A Praat script to extract 10 equal F0s for the target syllables was then run (CASS, 2021), and the measurements were subsequently used to compare the average F0 value for new information and the given information. Two tailed paired-sample t-tests were carried out to examine if there were significant differences between the English and Mandarin data.

Table 1: Words analysed in the English and Mandarin texts

NI in the English Texts	GI in the English Text	NI in the Mandarin Text	GI in the Mandarin Text
Amanda [əˈmændə]	Amanda	咪咪 (mīmi-Mimi,name)	咪咪
Lily [ˈlɪli]	Lily	妈妈 (māma-mother)	妈妈
Nelson [ˈnelsn]	Nelson	媒人 (méiren-matchmaker)	媒人
Magpies [ˈmæg˛paɪs]	magpies	林子 (línzi-forest)	林子
lipstick [ˈlɪpstɪk]	lipstick	女婿 (nǚxu-son-in-low)	女婿
eleven [ɪˈlevn]	eleven	奶奶 (nǎinai-grandma)	奶奶
mother [ˈmʌðə(r)]	mother	栗子 (lìzi-chestnut)	栗子
delicious [dɪˈlɪʃəs]	delicious	木匠 (mùjiang-carpenter)	木匠

** NI = new information; GI = given information*

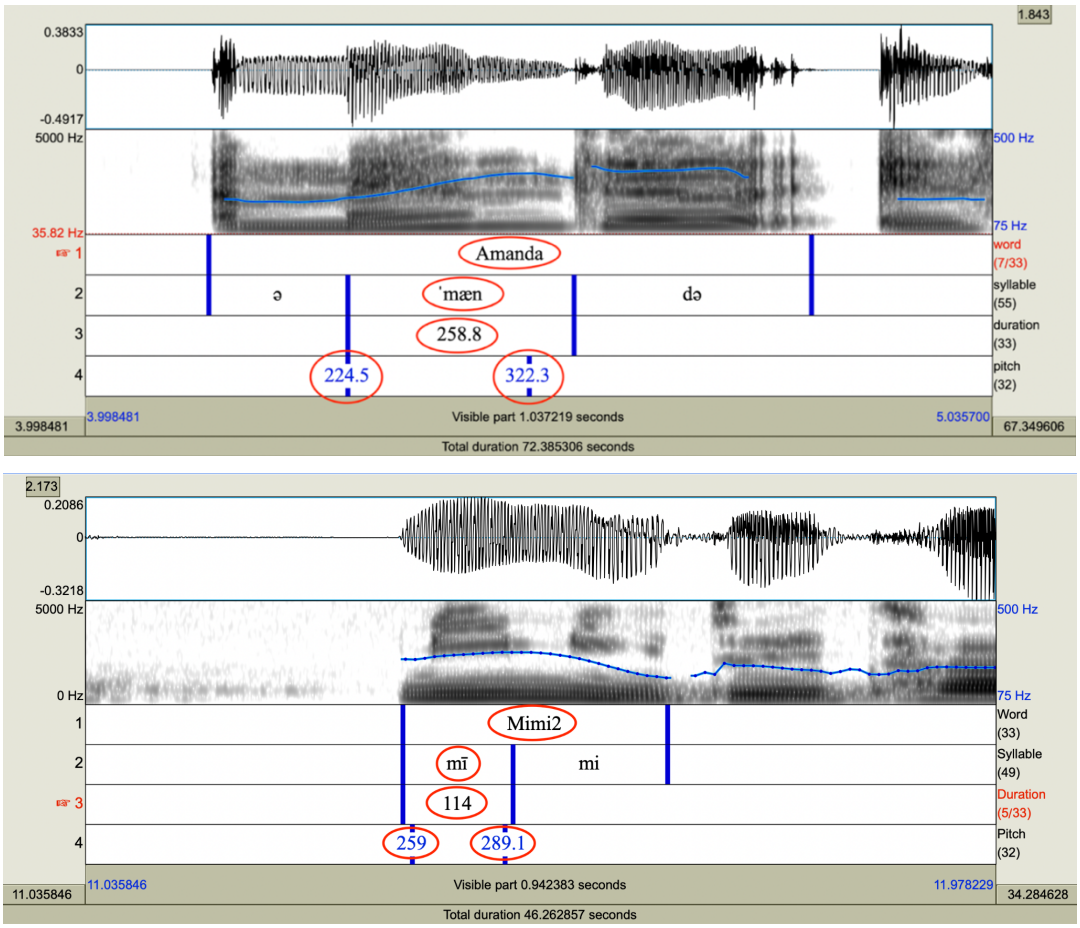

Figure 1: Example of measurements in Praat of the duration and pitch of the target word by an L1 Chinese speaker of English and Mandarin

4. Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate Chinese speakers' performance in English and Mandarin in relation to new and given information. Two pairs of syllables from the English materials and three pairs from the Mandarin materials had to be excluded from the analysis because the participants failed to produce the words clearly. A total of 38 pairs of syllables were assigned to the English group and a total of 37 pairs of syllables were assigned to the Mandarin group.

4.1 New and Given Information in English

As presented in Table 2, new information (M = 217ms, SD = 68) had a higher mean duration than given information (M = 192ms, SD = 47). A paired-samples t-test (two tailed) indicated a

statistically significant difference in the duration of new information and given information for English: $t(37) = 4.059$, $p = .000$. The effect size was small, with a Cohen's d of 0.43.

Table 2: Average duration (in ms) of the target syllables of English new and given information produced by speakers from China

Type of information	aMANda	LIly	NELson	MAGpies	LIPstick	eLEven	MOther	deLIcious	Average
NI	302 (40)	154 (14)	315 (20)	258 (53)	192 (30)	167 (25)	206 (34)	145 (11)	217 (64)
GI	242 (32)	157 (30)	253 (15)	222 (38)	160 (14)	186 (42)	183 (31)	137 (12)	193 (39)
Difference	60	-4	62	36	32	-19	23	8	24

**Note: Standard deviation in parentheses*

In terms of pitch, the mean for new information was 59Hz, with a standard deviation of 45, while the mean for given information was 34Hz, with a standard deviation of 22. A significant difference was found between the average pitch range of new information and given information for English: $t(37) = 3.27$, $p = .002$. The effect size was medium ($d = 0.71$).

Table 3: Average pitch range (in Hz) of the target syllables of English new and given information produced by speakers from China

Type of information	aMANda	LIly	NELson	MAGpies	LIPstick	eLEven	MOther	deLIcious	Average
NI	90 (31)	29 (21)	36 (17)	43 (29)	111 (73)	59 (27)	37 (26)	60 (51)	59 (45)
GI	60 (24)	23 (11)	38 (21)	28 (11)	23 (11)	27 (20)	35 (30)	39 (24)	34 (22)
Difference	30	6	-2	15	88	32	2	21	25

**Note: Standard deviation in parentheses*

4.2 New and Given Information in Mandarin

As shown in Table 4, for Mandarin, new information ($M = 210$ms, $SD = 41$) had a higher mean duration than given information ($M = 182$ms, $SD = 32$). A statistically significant difference was observed in the average durations of new and given information: $t(36) = 5.963$, $p = .000$. The

effect size was medium (d = 0.76). From Table 5 it can be seen that for Mandarin, the mean pitch range for new information was 51Hz (SD = 38), while the mean for given information was 39Hz (SD = 31). The t-statistic was 2.802, with df=36(p= .008). The effect size for the difference between the groups, calculated using Cohen's d, was 0.35, indicating a small effect. The results for Mandarin demonstrate that there was a statistically significant difference in pitch range between new information and given information.

Table 4: Average duration (in ms) of the target syllables of Mandarin new and given information produced by speakers from China

Type of information	**MI mi**	**MA ma**	**MEI ren**	**LIN zi**	**NV xu**	**NAI nai**	**MU jiang**	**LI zi**	**Average**
NI	157 (19)	185 (17)	225 (42)	267 (42)	179 (16)	215 (40)	246 (22)	221 (19)	212 (39)
GI	128 (12)	182 (17)	185 (25)	188 (28)	162 (15)	212 (35)	208 (24)	181 (27)	181 (29)
Difference	29	3	40	79	17	3	38	40	31

**Note: Standard deviation in parentheses*

Table 5: Average pitch range (in Hz) of the target syllables of Mandarin new and given information produced by speakers from China

Type of information	**MI mi**	**MA ma**	**MEI ren**	**LIN zi**	**NV xu**	**NAI nai**	**MU jiang**	**LI zi**	**Average**
NI	24 (9)	31 (13)	33 (15)	60 (25)	26 (16)	26 (15)	81 (28)	121 (19)	51 (38)
GI	16 (11)	26 (17)	36 (17)	34 (32)	23 (9)	36 (11)	45 (44)	93 (25)	39 (31)
Difference	8	5	-3	26	3	-10	36	28	12

**Note: Standard deviation in parentheses*

4.2 Comparison of New and Given Information in English and Mandarin

No significant differences in duration and pitch between new and given information in English and Mandarin were found (see Figure 2). New information in both English and Mandarin exhibits many similarities. The most salient shared feature is the focus on new information as both

languages tend to lengthen the duration and expand the pitch range of the syllables when a word expresses new information, making it more prominent.

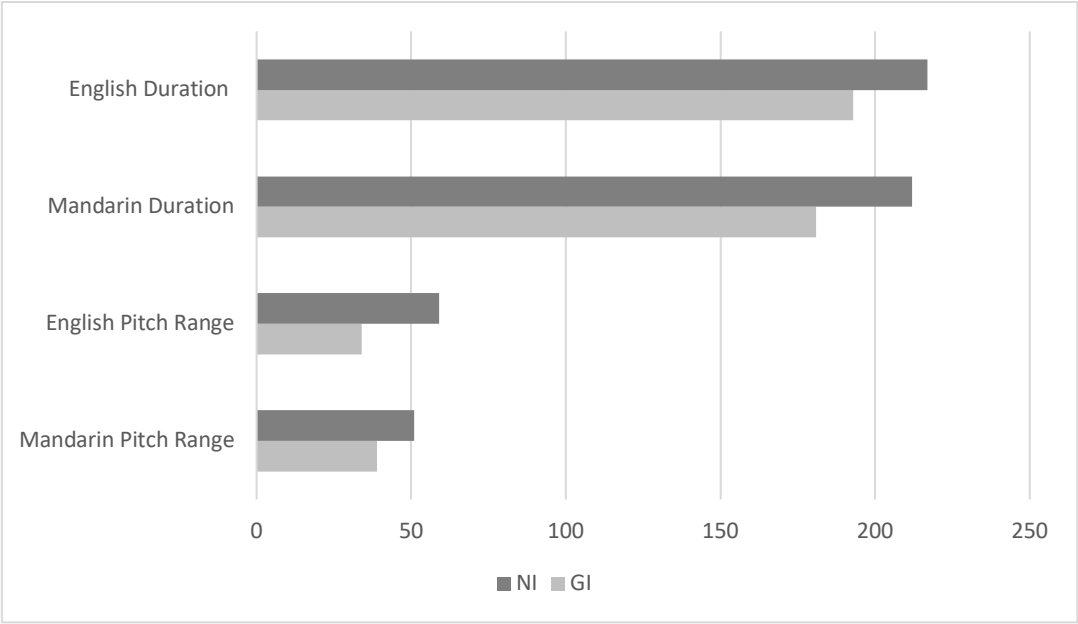

Figure 2: The prosodic marking (duration in ms, pitch in F0) of new and given information in English and Mandarin by Chinese speakers

5. Discussion

With regard to the English spoken by Chinese speakers, the results are consistent with the mainstream research on new information and given information in L1 English speakers. In both cases, there is a longer duration and a wider pitch range on new information compared to given information, making the new information more salient to the listener. Chinese speakers, as L2 English speakers, show a performance similar to that of L1 English speakers, as noted by Halliday (1970), Brown et al. (1983), as well as Fowler and Jonathan (1987), who found that L1 English speakers consistently emphasise new information by lengthening the duration and raising the pitch.

The results for Mandarin are also consistent with previous research by Chen and Braun (2006) and Ouyang and Kaiser (2015), which found that Mandarin speakers consistently exhibit longer durations and a wider pitch range for new information than for given information. Thus, for both English and Mandarin in this study, the average duration of new information is longer than that of given information (see Tables 2 and 4), and there is also an expansion of pitch ranges for new information compared to given information (see Tables 3 and 5). These findings indicate that

Chinese EFL learners are using prosodic features similar to those of native English speakers to mark information structures.

Chinese EFL learners show prosodic features in English that are very similar to those of native English speakers, and this could be attributed to the education background of the participants. As mentioned previously, the participants share similar language backgrounds. They began learning English in year one of primary school, around the age of seven, and have been learning English for almost 15 years. Moreover, their English proficiency was at a relatively high level, as they pursued English majors in both undergraduate and postgraduate studies. English majors often actively engage with a wide range of information from the US or the UK, and prolonged exposure to this educational environment may reshape their pronunciation characteristics, making them more akin to native speakers. The implication from this is that placing a strong emphasis on English pronunciation in the teaching of English as a foreign language can go a long way towards improving the pronunciation skills of second language learners , enabling them to use duration features appropriately to mark new and given information in utterance.

Another reason may be the presence of explicit instruction in phonetics. According to the Teaching Guide for Undergraduate English Majors published in 2000, the English major programmes in China's universities are required to include an English phonetics course. The aim is to introduce students to English phonetics and intonation in a systematic way so that they can learn and practise the pronunciation of English, the patterns of speech flow, the functions of intonation, and effectively use English phonetics and intonation in reading aloud, expressing ideas and communication.

All of the participants in the current research received systematic prosody instruction during their undergraduate years as English majors. This instruction provided them with a clear understanding of English prosody. As a result, they are able to mark new and given information in English in a similar way to L1 English speakers, using prolonged duration and expanded pitch range to emphasise new information.

Nevertheless, the Teaching Guide (2000) stipulates that English majors should undergo only one semester of English phonetics and phonology courses, which is relatively minimal compared to the three academic years dedicated to English reading courses. Additionally, EFL learners' pronunciation habits are formed early in the English learning process, often without

substantial exposure to English prosody during those formative stages. Consequently, they may miss the optimal opportunity to develop good pronunciation patterns.

The English learning patterns of most Chinese students are also heavily influenced by examination requirements, with reading and writing carrying substantial weight in English exams. Hence, both primary and secondary school teachers and students are inclined to focus on the aspects that help them score higher in exams which includereading and writing. In this situation, they often place more emphasis on learning vocabulary and grammar than on spoken English, let alone the prosodic features of English. Consequently, by the time students reach the university level, their English pronunciation habits have been established and it is a huge challenge to revisit English phonetics and phonology to effect significant changes and improvements in their spoken English. Thus, while the higher level of English proficiency among Chinese EFL learners could contribute to their similarity to native English speakers in marking the prosodic features of new and given information, further advanced research would be required to delve deeper into this aspect.

6. Conclusion

The results from the data strongly show that Chinese EFL learners can mark information status systematically using duration and pitch in both English and Mandarin. In both languages, duration and pitch play an important role in the salience of new information. The consistent pattern observed in both English and Mandarin is that new information is reflected through longer duration and expanded pitch range compared to given information. It is suggested that future studies should explore this phenomenon in more detail.

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Appendix A

ENGLISH TEXT (STRESSED SYLLABLE UNDERLINED)

Amanda(NI) is a smart and attractive young woman. When she went to Lily's(NI) house to play, she met Nelson(NI) by chance. Amanda(GI) fell in love with Nelson(GI) immediately. They often met up at Lily's(GI) house. After six months, they decided to get married. Nelson gave Amanda two magpies(NI). Amanda liked the two magpies(GI) very much, and she bought a red lipstick(NI) for herself, which was from a famous lipstick(GI) company. They invited twenty-two guests to the wedding, eleven(NI) of whom were friends of Lily, and eleven(GI) were friends of Nelson. While Amanda's mother(NI) helped a lot with the preparations, Nelson's mother(GI) did not do anything. Amanda's mother cooked a lot of delicious food for the wedding, and the most delicious dish was her chicken curry. Everyone had a memorable day.

Appendix B

CHINESE TEXT (STRESSED SYLLABLE UNDERLINED)

咪咪(NI)是村里农户的女儿，长得亭亭玉立。一天，她去媒人(NI)家里玩，偶然认识了村里的木匠(NI)。他是一位手艺精湛的木匠(GI)。咪咪(GI)对他一见钟情。两人经常去媒人(GI)家里约会，半年后，他们打算成亲。木匠的妈妈(NI)不同意这门亲事，而咪咪的妈妈(GI)非常赞同，她很喜欢这个女婿(NI)。咪咪的爸爸也很喜欢这个女婿(GI)，他送给了他们一片林子(NI)，这是一片收成很好的林子(GI)，能让咪咪和木匠以后生活无忧。咪咪最喜欢吃栗子(NI)，木匠准备了很多栗子(GI)。婚礼当天，木匠的奶奶(NI)为他们做了栗子糕，咪咪的奶奶(GI)为他们做了栗子饼。每个人都度过了快乐的一天。

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Mimi(NI) is the daughter of a farmer in the village and is a good-looking girl. One day, she went to the matchmaker(NI)'s house to play and met the village carpenter(NI) by chance. He was a carpenter(GI) with excellent craftsmanship. Mimi(GI) fell in love with him immediately. The two of them often went on dates at the matchmaker(GI)'s house, and after six months, they decided to get married. The carpenter's mother(NI) disagreed with this marriage, but Mimi's mother(GI) agreed very much. She liked the son-in-law(NI) very much. Mimi's father also liked this son-in-law(GI) very much. He gifted them a forest(NI), it(the forest-GI)) was a forest with a good harvest, which would enable Mimi and the carpenter to live a worry-free life in the future. Mimi likes chestnuts(NI) the most, and the carpenter prepared a lot of chestnuts(GI). On the wedding day, the carpenter's grandma(NI) made chestnut cakes for them, and Mimi's grandma(GI) made chestnut cakes for them. Everyone had a happy day.