

THE /-r/ SUFFIXATION AND THE PHONOLOGICAL STRUCTURE OF
MANDARIN FINALS

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This paper attempts to show that the /-r/ suffixation in Mandarin Chinese is, in reality, a simple process involving only a single rule with a one-act operation - Terminal Truncation (Terminal = postvocalic glide or nasal) - rather than a "rather complicated" (Chao 1968, 46) phenomenon as has been claimed by many linguists. That is, the /-r/ suffixation in Mandarin always and only causes the loss of the Terminal segment of the underlying base forms of the finals. In order to make clear how our rule works, we present a new analysis of the underlying phonological forms of Mandarin finals. In essence, we have argued for a diphthong (or long) representation of the hitherto believed simple vowels /ɨ, e, a/ - i.e. /ɨh, eh, ah/, with /-h/ standing for a glide of the same quality as the preceding main vowel. We also propose a complex representation (Medial glide + diphthong) for the traditional simple vowels /i, u, y/, namely /jɨh, wiw, yɨh/. The mystery of why certain base forms should end up homophonous after /-r/ suffixation can be accounted for naturally, given our rule and our analysis of the base forms of the finals. Furthermore, with the availability of our rule and our base forms, all the /-r/ form listings like those of Hockett (1947), Chao (1968), and others, would be entirely dispensable, since all the /-r/ forms listed are now not only predictable but can be derived by rule in a simple way. The seeming complexity of the retroflex suffixation in Mandarin is brought to complete regularity.

References

- Chao, Y.R. (1968): A Grammar of Spoken Chinese, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Hockett, C.F. (1947): "Peiping phonology", Journal of the American Oriental Society 67, 253-267.