

# “Accent” in Linguistics and Musicology

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## Abstract

*Accent* (重音 *zhongyin*) is a word that is often misunderstood in China, although linguists are very much aware of the diversity of meanings of the term *accent*, especially in the sense of language variation (with respect to dialects). Since the word *accent* is widely used in the disciplines of both linguistics and musicology, this study summarizes the meaning of this term in dictionaries, and compares this to its use in the literature of both fields. The results reveal that (1) *accent* is mostly mistranslated as ‘stress realised by loudness’ in common Chinese dictionaries: we argue to revise this slightly by adding the sense of *prominence*, which is partially or wholly caused by loudness, pitch, length and/or quality; (2) in the academic context *accent* generally has three layers of meaning, namely, loudness, prominence and emphasis; and (3) ‘nuclear accent’ might be a term that refers to structural usage in both linguistics and musicology beyond single syllables or notes. These results are aimed to improve our understanding of the use of the word *accent*.

**Keywords:** Accent, prominence, loudness, nuclear accent, linguistics, musicology.

## 1 Introduction

Currently, an increasing amount of research is interdisciplinary, which requires smooth communication between related disciplines. However, some important words have different meanings in different contexts. Such differences impede an accurate understanding not only in academia but also in the public dissemination of knowledge. *Accent* is such a word in Chinese. The most common misapplication is that the English word *accent* is translated as 重音

*zhongyin* – which need to be read louder – although many Chinese linguists are very much aware of the diversity of meanings of *accent* especially in the sense of prominence and language variation (especially in dialectology). In musicology in China, the term *accent* (重音 *zhongyin*) was first applied in the 1920s, and it had three senses: (1) a mark (Feng 1927:107); (2) a relatively strong beat (Huang 1935:41); (3) a sound standing out from other sounds in loudness (Gao 1936:166). Currently, *accent* is widely translated as a sound standing out from the rest because of its loudness. In linguistics in China, *accent* and *stress* are used almost interchangeably, sometimes along with other terms related to prominence such as *pitch*. When *accent* and *stress* are translated into Chinese, except in some phonetic literatures, they are both translated as 重音 *zhongyin*. That is to say, in many Chinese sources 重音 *zhongyin* covers both *stress* and *accent* in English. Thus it can be seen that confusion exists with respect to this term. To clear up this confusion, the present paper will address two questions:

- (1) What are the correct translations of the relevant Chinese and English terms?
- (2) In which contexts are these different meanings used and how are they used in the linguistic and musicological literature?

To answer these questions, this paper first reviews the way common Chinese dictionaries have dealt with this question, and then looks at the use of the words in linguistic and musicological literatures, mostly in Chinese.

## 2 The dictionary senses of *accent*

We investigated the meaning of *accent* in seven popular English dictionaries and eleven bilingual English-Chinese dictionaries. In the English dictionaries, *accent* is mainly defined in four different ways: marking, i.e. a mark on a letter or word to indicate pitch, stress or the quality of a vowel (Thompson 2000); dialectal *accent*, that is, the way someone pronounces the words of a language variety, showing which country or which part of a country they come from (Summers 2003); emphasis, e.g. the *accent* on a particular feature of something, emphasizing it

or giving it special importance (Collins 2006); and prominence. The term *prominence* includes both stress on a syllable or word realised by loudness or pitch, as well as an articulatory effort giving prominence to one syllable over an adjacent syllable. In the bilingual dictionaries, English-Chinese translation results in different meanings. *Accent* and *stress* in the English sense are translated as stress realised by loudness (重音 *zhongyin*). Such matching between accent (also stress) and 重音 *zhongyin* led us to review seven common Chinese dictionaries to judge whether 重音 *zhongyin* is a good Chinese translation for *accent* in English.

We made an overview of the senses of *accent* in our sources in the tables below. The following English dictionaries were consulted:

- E1. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English
- E2. Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary
- E3. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English
- E4. Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner’s English Dictionary
- E5. Oxford American College Dictionary
- E6. Collins Essential English Dictionary
- E7. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary

In Table 1, the frequency of use is presented by a fraction in which the denominator represents the total of dictionaries and the numerator the total of the appearances of the particular sense.

Table 1. The meaning of “accent” in the seven English dictionaries.

	<i>Dictionaries</i>	<i>Various senses of “accent”</i>	<i>Frequency of use</i>
1	All	An (orthographical) mark.	7/7
2	All	The way someone pronounces the words of a language, showing which country or which part of a country (s)he comes from.	7/7
3	Not in E <sub>7</sub>	Special importance.	6/7
4	Only in E <sub>1</sub> & 5	Emphasis on a particular note or chord (in music).	2/7
5	E <sub>1,2,5,7</sub>	Prominence.	4/7
6	Only in E <sub>3</sub>	The part of a word that should be emphasized (stressed).	1/7

Table 1 shows that the term *accent* mainly includes the meanings of (orthographical) mark, dialect, emphasis, and prominence.

It is noteworthy that the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) (Simpson and Weiner 1989) interprets *accent* as a manner of articulation by pointing out its three special usages besides those senses listed in the dictionaries mentioned. The first is literary, as a significant tone or sound. The second is prosodic, as stress at more or less fixed intervals on certain syllables of a line or verse, or the succession of which constitutes its rhythm or meter. The third is musical, as prominence given to a note or chord over adjacent ones, by means of stress, duration or pitch, also: stress recurring at intervals of time which are generally fixed, but which may be varied by syncopation and cross-accentuation.

We now turn to the meaning of *accent* in the English-Chinese dictionaries. These are listed below.

- EC1. *Longman Contemporary English-Chinese Dictionary*
- EC2. *The American Heritage Dictionary for Learners of English*
- EC3. *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture. English-Chinese. New Edition*
- EC4. *A Concise English Dictionary with Chinese Translation and Chinese-English Index*
- EC5. *Longman Exams Dictionary*
- EC6. *Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary*
- EC7. *Concise Oxford English-Chinese Dictionary*
- EC8. *A Primary Dictionary of the English Language with Chinese Translation*
- EC9. *Heinemann Bilingual English-Chinese Dictionary*
- EC10. *Collins Gem English Learner’s Dictionary*
- EC11. *Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary*

The meaning of *accent* in these dictionaries is provided in Table 2. We translated all Chinese dictionary entries into English and stated such translation behind Chinese Pinyin.

Table 2. The meanings of “accent” in eleven bilingual English-Chinese dictionaries.

	Dictionary	Various meanings of accent		Frequency of use
		English	Chinese	
1	EC1 & 2	Importance given to a word or part of a word (vowel or syllable) by pronouncing it with more force or on a different musical note.	重音 <i>zhongyin</i> ‘stress, realised by loudness’	10/11
2	EC8 & 9	The stronger tone or stress of a part of a word or of a musical note, to make it stand out from the rest.		
3	EC3 & 5	The part of a word that is emphasized in pronunciation (see also stress).		
4	EC7 & 10	Emphasis given to a syllable, word, or note in speech or music.		
5	EC4	The stress on a syllable.		
6	EC11	Emphasis given to a syllable or word by means of stress or pitch.		
7	All	The way someone pronounces the words of a language, showing which country or which part of a country they come from.	口音 <i>kouyin</i> ‘dialects’	11/11
8	All	A mark.	重音 <i>zhongyin</i> ‘a mark of stress in loudness parameter’	11/11
9	EC3,4,5,6,7,11	Special emphasis.	着眼点 <i>zhuoyandian</i> ‘starting point’ 或强调 <i>huoqiangdiao-</i> ‘emphasis’	7/11
10	EC8	Stress, importance.		

In Table 2, rows 1-6 and 8 show that the various meanings of *accent* correspond to the Chinese term 重音 *zhongyin*. Rows 7, 9 and 10 show the other meanings of *accent* referring to dialects and emphasis. However, these English-Chinese dictionaries do not use the term *prominence* in the same sense that it is used in the English dictionaries. This is a strange phenomenon that we turn to now. Obviously, if the Chinese word 重音 *zhongyin* would correspond to or contain the meaning of *prominence*, it would match *accent*. To verify this, we also reviewed generally authoritative Chinese dictionaries.

- C1. 现代汉语词典 “The Modern Chinese Dictionary”
- C2. 现代汉语规范词典 “Modern Chinese Standard Dictionary”
- C3. 辞海 “The Chinese Comprehensive Dictionary”
- C4. 现代汉语大词典 “The Great Modern Chinese Dictionary”
- C5. 实用现代汉语规范词典 “Practical Modern Chinese Standard Dictionary”
- C6. 汉语大词典 2.0 版光碟版 “The Chinese Dictionary”
- C7. 语言大典 “Language Encyclopedia”

Table 3. The meanings of 重音 *zhongyin* in seven Chinese dictionaries.

	Dictionaries	Various meanings of 重音 <i>zhongyin</i>	Number of instances
1	All	The part of a word or phrase, or several syllables of a sentence, which need to be read louder.	7/7
2	All	In music: notes being stressed by loudness, which is a main factor to contribute to rhythm.	7/7
3	Only in C7	The way someone pronounces a syllable of a word or a phrase to make it stand out from adjacent syllables, by increasing loudness or changing the pitch.	1/7

Most dictionaries show that 重音 *zhongyin* is usually interpreted as “the louder sound in a word, a phrase, or a sentence” and “the louder sound in rhythm”. The frequency of the interpretation as *loudness* is 7/7, that is to say, all dictionaries mention this meaning.

For 重音 *zhongyin*, only 1 out of 7 Chinese dictionaries mention the connotation of “prominence (strengthening stress or changing pitch)”, a connotation that does not appear in the generally authoritative 现代汉语词典 “The Modern Chinese Dictionary”. We think this is a major problem. The lack of this particular meaning (i.e. pitch, length and/or quality) in the commonly used dictionaries will cause misunderstanding and ignorance because users generally refer to this dictionary or some other very commonly used ones.

After summarizing the meaning of *accent* and related Chinese definitions, two issues should now be clear. First, if the English word *accent* is translated as “stress realised by loudness”, the connotation of *accent* is narrowed, it is necessary to revise the common Chinese dictionaries by adding to the entry of 重音 *zhongyin* the connotation of *prominence* which is partially or wholly caused by loudness, pitch, length and/or quality. We argue that the connotation of *prominence* should be contained in the common dictionaries. However, revisions of the dictionaries are not expected in the coming years. Second, *accent* in the sense of *stress* is more often used in the entries of *accent* in bilingual English-Chinese dictionaries than in English dictionaries.

This raises confusion in the English vs. the Chinese context, which suggests pragmatic study is necessary to fill the gaps in our understanding by looking further at the definitions used in linguistics and in musicology, since both disciplines employ the term *accent* frequently.

### 3 Accent in linguistics

Apart from the senses of ‘dialect’ and ‘orthographical mark’, which will hardly ever be confused with stress, the other representative cases of the way the term *accent* is used in the Chinese linguistic literature are listed below. We should mention that this literature is written in Chinese but we analyse them in English here.

According to the linguistic literature, the term *accent* has two layers of meaning: loudness



and prominence. Accent means loudness 重音 *zhongyin* pronunciation (Wu 1992), the speaker uses more strength to make them louder (Feng 1995:706). Accent means prominence with regard to adjacent syllables (Chen 1986:68); or prominence in a word, a phrase or a sentence (Wang & Yang 2004). Here, prominence refers partly or wholly to a combination of length, loudness and/or pitch.

Accent and stress are used interchangeably in some Chinese works, where they are both translated as 重音 *zhongyin* with the connotation loudness or prominence formed by pitch (Zhao 2006), length and other parameters (Wang 2004). Accent is equal to stress in that they are produced by a larger frequency range or a greater movement (Bloomfield 2009:146); stress is produced by loudness, length, quality and pitch individually or collectively (He 1989:72 in Peng 1998); implementing these four parameters will ensure that stress is perceived (Xu 2008:15).

That is to say, the connotations of the concept 重音 *zhongyin* have been broadened in the Chinese linguistic literatures, although the definition of 重音 *zhongyin* in Chinese dictionaries still is “stress realised by loudness”.

On the other hand, some scholars have tried to keep such terms distinct. Hockett (1986) claims that the terms ‘accent’ and ‘stress’ are not synonyms. In the Chinese translation of his work *A Course of Modern Linguistics*, accent is translated into a new word 量征 *liangzheng* and stress is translated as 重音 *zhongyin* (Hockett, 1986:46), so they should not be confused. Another scholar, Wang Hongjun (2004) argues that ‘stress’ in a narrow sense merely refers to the loudness in intensity, while accent refers to stress in a broad sense, i.e. prominence in rhythm.

From the viewpoint of structural usage, Zhong & Yang (1999) propose that ‘stress’ refers to the prominence of syllables within words, whereas ‘accent’ refers to the prominence of a prosodic word, and nuclear accent refers to the prominence of a clause. This point is similar to the usage of this term in music, to which we turn next.

#### 4 Cases of accent in musicology

The word *accent* is more widely used than *stress* in musicology, both in Chinese and English. Two sources are explicit on the meanings of these two words in musicology. The first argues that accent is caused by highlighting through a change of volume, duration, and pitch, and serves to produce rhythm; in this case, accent and stress can replace each other (Kamien 2005:2). A second source argues that stress refers to ‘the dynamic intensification of a beat, whether accented or unaccented’ (Cooper & Meyer 1960:8). Common Chinese usages were described in the section 1 of this paper; let us now inspect the English usages.

According to the musicological literature, accent has three common layers of meaning: loudness, prominence and emphasis. Accent is loudness, realized in increasing volume (also referred to as dynamic accent) (Thiemel 2001; Cook 2013:167) or an increase in dynamic level on a given time point as an accent mark (Bocanegra 2001). Accent is prominence, realized as lengthening a silence of articulation (agogic accent) (Thiemel 2001) or long durations (Cheryl 2001:17; Cook, 2013:167); realized as pitch inflection of a melodic note (pitch accent) (Thiemel 2001), harmonic change (Cheryl 2001:17) or the approach by leaps in lines (Berry 1976: 338 in Bocanegra 2001:15); also realized as a change to a faster tempo and/or more intense timbre (Berry 1976:338 in Bocanegra 2001:15). Accent is emphasis, realized as a stimulus which is a mark for consciousness in some way (Cooper & Meyer 1960:8 in Bocanegra 2001:16; Cook 2013:167) an event that capture a listener’s attention (Drake & Palmer 1993). This can be realized as the point of initiation (Lester 1986:16 in Bocanegra 2001) or new motive or texture (Cheryl 2001:17) of a musical event.

Besides, the term *accent* is used in a structural way, at the start of a section of a musical piece but alternatively just after the start (Thiemel 2001), caused by the melodic/harmonic points of gravity in a phrase (Lerdahl & Jackendoff 1983:17), most consistently across musical contexts and dominated in case the accentual structures conflict (Drake & Palmer 1993). *Accent* is being used according to structural location where musical performer selects a special connecting way between the preceding and the following sentence, e.g. pianist Katchen played

the last note of a sentence of Brahms’ Op.117 No.1 a little louder but not lower to arouse audience’s feeling of starting the following section in advance (Zhou 2013). In Chinese musical context, rhythmic accent of unequal temporal distribution maybe creates the musical structure together with lyric (Zhou 2015, 2016). These points have similar usage in linguistics as nuclear accent. Nuclear accent refers to a stressed syllable in a sentence. The meaning of the entire sentence is affected by different stress position, that is to say, the stressed point will change with the nuclear accent (Zhong & Yang 1999).

Sometimes, *accent* is used as gesture in English and Chinese sources. John Graziano (1975) refers to the accentual tendencies of melodic intervals (Graziano 1975:23 in Bocanegro 2010:18). This usage of accent is similar to gesture. Analogously, a different word was used to translate ‘accent’, which is 音势 *yinshi*, meaning some notes were stressed and enhanced (Li 1941/1996 in Wang & Yang 1997).

Simply speaking, in musicology, accent is a widely used word with a wide range of meanings—its senses have been broadened to gesture and structural meaning—although sometimes it is confused with simply louder sounds.

## 5 Conclusion

The results reveal that *accent* is mostly mistranslated as ‘stress realised by loudness’ in common Chinese dictionaries. We proposed to revise this by adding the meaning of *prominence*, which is partially or wholly caused by intensity, pitch, length and/or quality. In addition, in academic context, *accent* generally has three layers of meaning, namely, loudness, prominence and emphasis. Finally, ‘nuclear accent’ is be a term that refers to structural usage in both phonetics and musicology beyond single syllables and notes. These results aim to improve our understanding of the use of the word *accent*, aiming at easier interdisciplinary and cross-linguistic communication between different disciplines.

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## Notes

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