

A PHONOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF TONE IN SUMI
Full Presentation

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In this presentation, I will provide a preliminary phonological description of tone in Sumi, a Tibeto-Burman language of Nagaland. Previous research has found 3 contrastive level tones: Low (à), Mid (ā) and High (á) (Sreedhar 1980). These have been confirmed by my own phonetic analysis of the language.

Tone languages with 3 phonetic level tones such as Yoruba have been analysed as specifying only /L/ and /H/ tones at the phonological level, with M tone assigned to syllables unspecified for tone (Pulleyblank 1986; Yip 2002). I hope to demonstrate that in the case of Sumi such an analysis where M tone is the default is not feasible. Furthermore, if there is a default, the best candidate would be L tone.

For example, the possessive prefix *pa-* ‘his’ is always realised with M tone while the prefix *i-* ‘my’ is realised with either L or M tone. The same pattern is found with the homophonous object proclitics *pa-* ‘him’ and *i-* ‘me’:

[pā.pù]	‘his-father’	[i.pù]	‘my-father’
[pā.pū]	‘his-water.scoop’	[ī.pū]	‘my-water.scoop’
[pā.pú]	‘his-son’	[i.pú]	‘my-son’
[pā.tsɿ]	‘gave him’	[i.tsɿ]	‘gave me’
[pā.ʒū]	‘saw him’	[ī.ʒū]	‘saw me’
[pā.sɿ]	‘put him’	[i.sɿ]	‘put me’

If we assume that M tone is the default assigned to syllables unspecified for tone and that *pa-* is toneless at the phonological level, then *i-* must be specified for L tone. This is problematic when we consider [ī.pū] and [ī.ʒū] where we then need to account for L tone deletion and a leftward spreading of M tone. I therefore argue, using an autosegmental framework, for an analysis where *i-* is unspecified for tone. Moreover, I argue that the best way to account for the forms [i.pú] and [i.sɿ] would be to posit L tone as the default.

If this analysis proves to be true, Sumi would be typologically unusual for a language with 3 contrastive level tones. This work would consequently add to our knowledge of the tone systems of the Naga languages and also suggest a revisit to the assumption that within the theoretical framework of underspecification, M is the default tone in a 3 tone system.

References:

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Keywords: Tibeto-Burman, tone language, lexical phonology

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