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“Functions of de-stress in Mandarin Chinese”

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A B S T R A C T

Stress can only exist in contrast to non-stress. The paper attempts at viewing Chinese stress from a new perspective, offering a “reversed view” of the issue. It will be argued that **non-stress (de-stress) might be more important in Mandarin Chinese than stress.**



In **NON-TONE LANGUAGES**, linguists are mainly concerned with the assignment and acoustic properties of stress. An essential issue is word stress. Similar approach is generally accepted in Chinese. However, in **TONE LANGUAGES** the situation is complicated by the presence of tones. The paper argues that:

In non-tonal languages it is **prosodic enhancement** (stress) that fulfills significant linguistic functions (while unstressed forms may be viewed as unmarked, default).

On the other hand, in Mandarin it is **prosodic weakening** (‘non-stress’, ‘de-stress’) that fulfills significant linguistic functions (while full realization of syllables can be viewed as unmarked, default; cf. Y. R. Chao’s ‘normal stress’).

The reasoning: **tonal morphemes** generally need to **keep their tonal features preserved** in order to guarantee the **distinctiveness of tones** in speech perception. This requires sufficient syllable duration, and sufficient pitch range. Tonal morphemes may give up / reduce their tonal features for the sake of important functions ‘non-stress’ fulfills.

The evidence for the importance of prosodic weakening:

- Existence of **lexical neutral tone** (e.g. 的, 吗, lexical suffix 子)
- **Monosyllabic tonal function words** (personal pronouns 我, 你, 他, prepositions, classifiers etc.) are typically unstressed in speech
- Other **tonal morphemes** become regularly unstressed in certain contexts / functions (e.g. 不 in A-not-A questions: 去不去?)
- **Native speakers judgments** on stress placement in words/speech are notoriously inconsistent
- No consensus of linguists on **word stress in disyllabic words** (two patterns? three patterns? word stress does not exist in Chinese? etc.)
- The process of **L2 learning**: the students first learn isolated syllables/words with full tones, then learn to de-stress (= reduce) particular syllables/morphemes/words in particular contexts

The paper argues that in Chinese, leaving aside emphasis, it is worth searching for a **mechanism and rules for NON-STRESS ASSIGNMENT** (and phonetic reduction), rather than to search for a mechanism and rules for **STRESS ASSIGNMENT** (and phonetic enhancement).

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