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Is the glass half-full, or half-empty? The reverse concept of Chinese stress
ABSTRACT OF THE TALK

Hana Třísková (廖敏) triskova@orient.cas.cz
Oriental Institute, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Prague

Stress needs contrast, that is, stress cannot exist without non-stress. Western linguistics, examining non-tonal languages, is predominantly concerned with stress (rules for stress assignment, e.g. word stress, acoustic-perceptual correlates of stress, stress clash etc.). Stressed syllables are viewed as marked, while unstressed syllables are unmarked, “normal”. Similar approach is commonly applied to Chinese. One of the much debated issues is lexical stress, 词重音. However, Chinese is a tone language with a specific sound structure. The fact that there is no broadly accepted theory of stress in Chinese implies that there are still unresolved questions.

This paper attempts to examine the issue from a rather different angle, focusing on the tonal character of Chinese. The major thesis is that all tonal morphemes are prone to keep their tones in connected speech, as the tones are distinctive. A syllable commonly strives to have certain minimal duration / pitch range to have its tone perceptible. Thus, the unmarked, standard form is a “**normal syllable**” realized with full tone (“full glass”). However, some or even many tonal syllables may become weakened. This comprises of shortened duration + pitch range compression, resulting in tone weakening, plus segmental reductions. Tone weakening is important event: tonal morpheme must have good reasons (phonological, grammatical, contextual, pragmatic) to have its tone reduced or even deleted in speech. Thus, **phonetic weakening, reduction**, instead of phonetic enhancement, “stress” or “accent”, is viewed as **marked**.

Toneless morphemes (“empty glass”, e.g. 的) are lexicalized cases of tone weakening. They are **always weak**. Besides, there is a set of tonal morphemes / words which become **regularly weakened** in connected speech (though not always). A distinct group is monosyllabic tonal function words, “the cliticoids” 类附着词 (newly coined term), such as the pers. pronoun 我, postposition 上, classifier 个, copula 是, formal adverb 很, preposition 在, conjunction 和. Other cases are 不 in yes-no questions, 不 in potential forms of verbs, or second member in reduplicated monosyll. verbs (看看). This papers suggests that occurrence of the syllables belonging to this category is rule governed, and can be predicted fairly well.

Observing the importance of regularly weakened instances, the paper proposes that in Chinese the issue of **phonetic weakening** (instead of phonetic enhancement) **is a crucial point of interest**. The task is to find *what* becomes weakened, *why* and *in what contexts*, and to find *what functions* the weakening serves. “Stressed syllables” are only those which carry emphasis. Adjacency of “normal syllables” is accepted (phonetic variation may occur here).

The proposed alternative concept is in line with Yuen Ren Chao’s view (*A Grammar of Spoken Chinese*, 1968:35): “There are physically many perceptible degrees of stress, but phonemically we have found it best to set up no more than three degrees of stress: normal, contrastive and weak... All syllables that have neither weak nor contrastive stress are said to have normal stress.” The proposed concept works with four categories (2 for “weak stress”).

Note that the salience of the described phenomenon (i.e. weakening of tonal morphemes) depends on the variety of Mandarin Chinese, its tempo, speech style etc. It particularly occurs in natural-tempo colloquial *putonghua* of Beijing type which is the main concern of the speaker. It is much less common in *guoyu*.

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