

University of Macau Linguistics Seminar

Title: “Disyllabic Word Tones in Hong Kong English”

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Date: Wednesday, September 22nd, 2010

Time: 16.00

Venue: HG03

Language: English

Abstract

A number of studies describe pitch patterns in the English spoken in Hong Kong (henceforth HKE) as tones (Luke 2000, Cheung 2008 and Wee 2008). In all these studies, the general observation has been that there is a low tone on the right boundary and that stressed syllables receive high tones. Further, for a majority of speakers, syllables sandwiched between stressed syllables also receive high tones, as illustrated by the data below.

(1) Distribution of tone in HKE (data from Cheung 2008)

- | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| a. ínfórmátìon | b. édúcatìon |
| c. bénéficiàl | d. idéntificátìon |
| e. répréséntatìve | f. íntérmédiàte |

In (1), stressed syllables are in boldface; acute and grave accents indicate high and low tones respectively; unaccented syllables carry mid tones. As can be seen in (1), final syllables consistently receive low tones, while stressed syllables and those sandwiched between them receive high tones. Using pitch tracks, Cheung (2008) was able to show that mid-tone syllables are phonologically toneless, as in the case of unstressed penultimate syllables that receive transitory pitch contours rather than level mid tone (such as (1f)).

The description above raises the question on the relationship between tone and stress. Are tones in HKE in fact manifestations of prosodic stress or is HKE prosody fully tonal and stress plays no role? Given the data in (1), tones appear to piggy-back on stress since their distribution can be calculated on the basis of identifying where the loci of stresses are. This argues for HKE tones as manifestations of prosodic stress. However, this leaves one wanting for an account for the non-perfect alignment of tones and stress since clearly a number of unstressed syllables do not carry high tones. In any case, it is difficult to ascertain where stresses are in HKE as speakers do not appear to have very robust intuitions of stress. On the other hand, if HKE prosody is entirely tonal, then how can one account for the restricted distribution of tones and the lack of minimal pairs involving only tonal contrasts?

This present study of disyllabic words in HKE reveals a hitherto uncovered pattern that might help unravel the relationship between stress and the high tone. It turns out that only three kinds of tone patterns are attested in HKE disyllabic words (across all lexical categories and morphological concatenations), listed in (2).

(2) Tone patterns of HKE disyllabic words

	$\sigma 1$	$\sigma 2$	
a.	high	low	e.g. <i>glórỳ, brífing, clóckwise, gréetèd</i>
b.	high	falling	e.g. <i>sómetímes, óutsèll, ínborn</i>
c.	mid	falling	e.g. <i>créâte, girâffe, befôre, becâme</i>

Prima facie, one would expect other combinations of high, low, mid and falling to be possible, but it turns out that only the three listed in (2a-c) are possible out of 16 logically possible combinations. An important hint to this conundrum comes from the fact that monosyllabic words always have falling tones. This, together with Cheung's (2008) observation of the low boundary tone at the right edge, indicates that the falling tone is possible only at the right edge of a word by combination with a preceding high tonal element.

In this presentation, I will argue that the high tone is in fact the equivalent of stress and that every (prosodic) word carries at least one high tone for that reason. There is no need for any postulation of a mid tone or a low tone beyond the low tone boundary marker. This would generate all and only those tonal patterns found in mono- and disyllabic words, thus effectively explaining why only three of 16 logical possibilities are attested. As for the unstressed syllables that carry high tones, those can be generated by the same rules laid out in Cheung (2008). Following this analysis, tones are simply the phonetic manifestation of prosodic accent (i.e. stress) in HKE.

References

- Luke, K.K. 2000. Phonological re-interpretation: The assignment of Cantonese tones to English words. *ICCL 9*. National University of Singapore.
- Cheung, Winnie H.Y. 2008. Span of high tones in Hong Kong English. *HKBU Papers in Applied Language Studies*, vol.12:19-46.
- Wee, Lian Hee. 2008. Phonological patterns in the Englishes of Singapore and Hong Kong. *World Englishes* vol 27.3/4:480-501.

Acknowledgement

This research is funded by FRG2/08-09/068. The author is grateful to his informants (names withheld for anonymity) for their painstaking efforts and to Monica Cheng and Suki Yiu for being such careful and helpful assistants.