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A grammatical analysis of the 'induced creaky tone' in Burmese

Abstract

The proposed conference paper investigates the conditions and effects of the 'induced creaky tone', a kind of grammatical tonal alternation in modern standard Burmese. Burmese is well known for its complex tonal system. Recent work (e.g. Gruber 2011) has shown that the five Burmese tones (High *tá*, Low *tà*, Creaky *ta̰*, Checked *taʔ* and Neutral *tə*) are defined along contrasts in several suprasegmental categories, namely pitch, phonation, intensity and duration. My own work addresses a specific tonal alternation phenomenon in modern standard Burmese, the 'induced creaky tone' — the result of a process by which in a noun with personal reference, the last syllable with inherent low or high tone is realized with the creaky tone. This alternation has several grammatical functions, one of them possessor marking:

a. *ŋà*   "I"
b. **ŋa̰** *(jɛ̰)*   *èiŋ*   "my house"
   I   POSS   house

In this example, the tonal change can occur either alternatively or together with another possession marker, *jɛ̰*. The current study, based on production experiments and elicitation with five young native speakers of Burmese from Yangon and Mandalay, demonstrates that there are several conditions of different nature for this kind of tonal alternation.

Some of these conditions are phonological constraints, for example:

• Creaky, Checked and High tones on the penultimate syllable block the 'induced creaky tone' on the ultima.

• Low tone syllables are more likely to change into the 'induced creaky tone' than High tone syllables.

Some grammatical conditions are also found, for example:

• The marker *jɛ̰* lightens the functional load of tonal alternation.

• Tonal alternation occurs only on the last syllable of the last noun in a nominal coordination.

Finally, there are some word and sentence semantic conditions:

• Tonal alternation occurs only on nouns that rank high in the animacy hierarchy.

• Optional tone marking becomes obligatory if the possessor is 'emphasized' in the sentence.

These conditions interact with each other in different ways. A comprehensive account of such conditions provides the basis for a grammatical analysis that explores the theoretical options for representing a tonal morpheme in the morpho-syntactic analysis of a sentence. It provides a direct comparison of segmental morphemes and tonal morphemes with the same function in the same language. It may also shed light on other theoretical issues such as the interfaces between phonology and grammar, and between tonal morphology and tonal syntax.

References

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