Word-prosodic typology: in search for logical structure

Word-prosodic typology has been the subject of much debate in recent years. Particularly controversial is so-called “pitch-accent” (viz. Hyman 2006, 2007; Hulst 2011). Hyman (in press (a), (b)) argues for the canonical approach to typology promoted by Corbett, when the “definitions are taken to their logical end point, enabling ...to build theoretical spaces of possibilities” (Corbett 2007: 9). Hyman applies this method to word prosody focusing on languages that use pitch as a phonetic cue to prosodic categories. In doing so, I claim that he takes too broad a definition for tone. Hulst in turn, a specialist in stress, does not take into account the data on highly tonal languages. It leads him to suggest that every language has word accent (Goedemans & Hulst 2009). He correctly proposes to distinguish between the analytical functional notions of prosodic units and their phonetic exponents (Hulst 2012). However, he does not expand this idea systematically to tonal systems. Hulst also keeps listing different types of languages (stress-accent, pitch-accent, durational accent etc.) instead of focusing on single properties (as Hyman rightly promotes), and fails to build a logically exhaustive classification. Both Hyman (2006, 2007) and Hulst (2012, in press) mention the languages that prosodically use phonetic cues other than pitch, but do not analyze such systems in depth.

In this paper, I also perform the canonical approach to the word-prosodic typology. Informed by original data collected through extensive field studies both on highly tonal languages (Mande group of the Ivory Coast) and the languages with uncanonical phonetic cues for prosodic units (Estonian, Saami, Ingrian, Udihe, Tuvan), I propose the clarifications to the existing word-prosodic typology. In my typology, the two variables, LOCATION and PHONETIC CUE of abstract prosodic marks, are considered independent from each other and non-binary, and their particular values can be combined in various ways.

To classify the values of the LOCATION variable, the first distinction is made between the prosodic features that are used lexically and those that are not. For the latter, prosody equates to intonation and has only pragmatic function (as in French). For the former, prosody also serves the function of word-building. In the utmost case, prosody would serve only the word-building function, without any pragmatic (intonational) role. There is an ongoing debate as to whether such languages can even be said to exist. If they do, the canon is to be found among the most highly tonal languages. Dan-Gweetaa (South Mande), one of the extremely rare languages that have five distinctive tonal levels, makes for a good candidate. I will discuss Vydrin’s (2008) findings on its intonation. The poles of the LOCATION variable are thus the following: all prosody can be charted on the post-lexical vs. lexical level. The logical value (1.1) to start with is ‘no lexical prosody at all’.

Among the lexical prosody types, the next distinction is made between value (1.2) ‘lexical prosody on some syllables of a word’ and value (1.3) ‘lexical prosody on every syllable of a word’. The canonical case for the value (1.2) would be a typical stress language (like Russian) and for the value (1.3) - a language with a completely unrestricted tonal system (as described in Hyman (in press (a)).

The literature provides many ways to refer to these three types of prosody; I will use the labels (1.1) non-accentual, (1.2) accentual, (1.3) tonal prosody. All the intermediate cases with (pitch-)accents etc. are thus included into (1.2), in compliance with the Hulst’s interpretation and against that of Hyman. Hulst’s “maximization” of the use of accents makes more sense when we start searching for logically non-intersecting values within the LOCATION variable. There are cases that allow to be classified both as (1.1) and (1.2) (Gordon, in press), as well as both as (1.2) and (1.3) (cf. the debate on the pitch accent cited above). However, after due consideration of the pivotal cases, to ascribe the LOCATION value to each phonetic cue prosodically used in the language we inevitably have to choose only one of these three mutually exclusive options. Note though, that in a whole language system these three types of lexical prosody can coexist, only they should be manifest with different phonetic cues.

The second variable is the PHONETIC CUE of an abstract prosodic mark. The debate mostly considers (2.1) pitch, the most widespread but by no means the only possible cue. Also (2.2) intensity, (2.3) duration, (2.4) glottalization, (2.5) pharyngalization, (2.6) palatalization and (2.7) nasalization can be the values.

Among the cases of uncanonical PHONETIC CUE values, I will discuss Estonian, where the primary phonetic cue for word accents is duration. Note that these duration-based morphologized accents make a separate prosodic feature from the rhythmic stress that is based on automatic foot metrics. Estonian is not normally described as tonal, but abstract phonological prosodic marking here functions essentially the same way as in e.g. Serbo-Croatian. I will also consider Udihe (Tungusic) and Tuvan (Turkic). In more conservative varieties of these languages, the abstract prosodic marks are manifest through pharyngalization and laryngalization, while in more innovative varieties exactly the same abstract marks already use pitch. The shift in phonetic cues does not make the functional systems themselves different. Hyman’s classification, which regards the LOCATION and the PHONETIC CUE variables as binary, would treat these innovative varieties, as well as the Serbo-Croatian language, as tonal. At the same time, it will not be able to account for the conservative Udihe and Tuvan varieties and for the Estonian language at all.

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References