

Tone reduction processes in Sino-Tibetan languages.

Jonathan P. Evans
Institute of Linguistics, Academia Sinica

For many Chinese dialects and other Sino-Tibetan languages, tone sandhi yields a reduction in the number of realizable combinations of tones. In extreme cases, the result is tonal culminativity – the elimination of all but one tone specification per prosodic word or phrase. Examination of tone reduction processes across this vast family of languages reveals two common trends. First, tones that spread across syllables tend to be aligned with the left edge of their prosodic group, and spread rightward. Second, culminative tones that are aligned relative to the right edge of the prosodic group tend not to spread beyond their host syllable. In some languages, both left-edge spreading tones and right-edge “local” tones may be observed. Recently, a number of new phonological descriptions of under-documented Sino-Tibetan languages have been published. In some cases, the newly described languages provide special challenges to the above generalizations. However, the tonal patterns in other languages corroborate the observed trends.