

On Tone and Syntax in two Tibetan Varieties

This talk discusses the interaction between tone and syntax in two varieties of Tibetan: Central Tibetan (CT) as spoken in the area surrounding Lhasa and among members of the Tibetan diaspora, and Gyalsumdo, a small isolated variety spoken in Nepal's Manang district (Hildebrandt and Perry 2011). Both these varieties possess a two tone system where tone is only distinctive in the first syllable of a certain domain, usually identified with the word. Other lexical tones in this domain are neutralised. In fact, as shown in this talk, delimiting this domain is rather more complicated. Not only does the domain in question not always constitute a single word, it frequently fails to form a syntactic constituent. For example, we find instances where subject and object form a single tonal domain. In the CT sentence $\eta\grave{\epsilon}$: *gon-dzo yige tón-gome?* 'I don't send them a letter', for instance, the tone of the pronoun *k^hón-dzo* 'they' is neutralised, showing that it falls within the tonal domain of the subject.

In many ways, this resembles the tonal behaviour of Shanghai Chinese, as discussed by Selkirk and Shen (1991), where we also find the tonal domain crossing syntactic constituent boundaries. Selkirk and Shen argue that this is due to a mapping rule whereby certain edges of lexical heads, but not of functional heads, are mapped to the edges of prosodic constituents. This essentially means that functional heads are not accounted as prosodic structure is constructed. This seems to account for some of the facts of Tibetan – for instance, the fact that pronominal objects are phrased together with what precedes them, since pronouns are generally taken to be instances of the functional category D.

However, there are problems with the simplest version of this analysis – pronouns do not *always* phrase together with what precedes them linearly. For instance, possessive pronominals (which precede their head) remain prosodically independent, even when they are of the same form as the object pronouns mentioned above. Similarly, pronouns remain independent when they follow a subordinate clause. I argue that both these phenomena may be explained by appealing to the notion of a *phase* (Chomsky 2000, 2001). Phases are pieces of syntactic derivation which are mapped to the phonological component separately, rendering their internal structure invisible to later processes (Chomsky's Phase Impenetrability Condition (PIC)). If phonological processes (such as constituent construction) apply at the phase level, then we would expect to find similar impenetrability conditions. There have been various previous analyses along these lines, most notably by Marvin (2002). Something of this sort can explain the exceptions noted above – both CPs (that is, clauses) and DPs (which would contain the possessive pronoun) are commonly taken to be phases. If something like the PIC applies, we should not be able to construct prosodic constituents like the Tibetan tonal domain across phase boundaries, and so a subject and a possessor, separated by a DP phase boundary, should stand in different tonal domains. The same argument can be made for pronouns following a CP boundary.

In brief, adopting an analysis like that of Selkirk and Shen to explain the tonal domain of Tibetan requires something like a phase boundary. If we wish to adopt their explanation, it would seem to provide support for a phase-based analysis of syntax. On the other hand, if we find another syntactic analysis to be preferable, we would be forced to seek an alternative account of the construction of tonal domains. This underlines the need for a continuing dialogue between phonological and syntactic theory when investigating phenomena of this type.