

# Syllable-tone, Word-tone and Melody-tone: Towards a Typology of Tone Languages of China

Category: oral

At least 85% of languages spoken in mainland China have a fully-developed tone system. Little is known about the typology of their tone system, however. From sketchy descriptions of tone systems in Chinese sources (e.g. Sun *et al.* 2007), the general statement on them one may attempt can only be made with reference to the number of tonemes. Even a simple typological statement in terms of register-tone and contour-tone would not be possible, since nearly all of them possess a contour tone.

It is inconceivable that all tone languages of China (over 100 in minimum), belonging to a variety of families – Sinitic, Tibeto-Burman, Tai-Kadai and Hmong-mien, share a similar tone system of no typological significance. This unusual underdifferentiated situation is in large part attributed to the lack of an appropriate framework for studying tone systems. Under the classical philological tradition in China as well as the general approach taken by western linguists (e.g. Christaller 1875 and Pike 1948), the syllable has been regarded to be the sole fundamental domain for lexical tone (cf. Fox 2000). Since tone sandhi, by definition, cannot occur on a single tone by itself, the enlarged domain associated with it is necessarily assumed to be relevant to the post-lexical level (cf. Chen 2000), leaving the tone system at the lexical level simple and plain.

This paper proposes that three prototypes of tone systems be recognized on the basis of different domains employed in organizing tone system in the lexicon: with the syllable as the basic domain for the syllable-tone system, the word as the basic domain for the word-tone system, and an underlying domain independent of the syllable and the word for the melody-tone system. The final one refers to the kind of tone system found in Japanese (cf. Ding 2006). These three types of tone system are attested among languages of China. The proposed approach is not intended to classify tone languages into three discrete categories. However, it has the advantage of explaining some regular tone sandhi without using the notion of stress in a highly abstract sense (as in Yip 1995 or Duanmu 2007). More importantly, the framework could serve as a descriptive tool for analyzing tone languages and it might be instrumental in appreciating the diversity of tone languages in China.

The paper will provide a definition for tone languages and address different tone systems found in the following: Mandarin, Wu, Min, Cantonese (Sinitic); Tibetan, Yi, Prinmi (Tibeto-Burman); Zhuang, Dong (Tai-Kadai); and Miao, Yao (Hmong-mien).

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