

The tones of verbs in Shekua Na (Mosuo) in light of combinations with affixes

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Tone systems are a topical issue in the study of Sino-Tibetan languages of Southwest China (Jacques, 2011), including in some varieties that had initially been reported as non-tonal (Lín, 2012). Specifically, the attention of participants at STLS workshops since 2008 has been brought to the tone systems of languages of the Naic sub-group (Chirkova & Michaud, 2009; Michaud, 2017). The present talk aims to continue the work of Dobbs & La (2016) on the Lataddi variety of Narua (also referred to as Na and Mosuo). Following the hint of Dobbs & La (2016, p. 98), who specifically pointed to the tones of verbs as a topic for further research, we focus on the tones of verbs. Fresh fieldwork was conducted in 2019 in the village of Shekua (Yunnan), home of the second author, a native speaker of Shekua Na.

We use what can by now be considered as a standard approach consisting in assessing the tones of verbs through their realizations in several contexts. Specifically, we used realizations (i) in isolation (“citation forms”), (ii) with the negation prefix and (iii) inside a frame consisting of an ACCOMPLISHED prefix and a PERFECTIVE suffix, as shown in Table 1.

VERB	ISOLATION			NEGATIVE			ACCOMPL. – PERFECTIVE		
	REAL.	SURF.	PHON.	REAL.	SURF.	PHON.	REAL.	SURF.	PHON.
to look	lī	H	H	m̄x̄̄ lī	H.H	H.H	lē lī sē	H.H.HL	H.H.H
to speak	z̄w̄x̄̄	HL	HL	m̄x̄̄ z̄w̄x̄̄	H.L	H.L	lē z̄w̄x̄̄ sē	H.L.L	H.L.L
to eat	dzū	HL	HL	m̄x̄̄ dzū	L.H	L.H	lē dzū sē	L.H.HL	L.H.H
to hit	la/	LH	L	m̄x̄̄ lā	H.L	H.L	lē lā sē	H.L.HL	H.L.H
to walk (FUT)	bi/	LH	L	m̄x̄̄ bī	H.L	H.L	lē bī sē	H.L.L	H.L.L
to draw	t̄ci/	LH	L	m̄x̄̄ t̄cī	L.H	L.H	lē t̄cī sē	L.H.L	L.H.L

Table 1: Six tonal categories for monosyllabic verbs and their realization in 3 different contexts (REAL. = phonetic realization; SURF. = surface tone pattern; PHON. = underlying tone pattern). The plain line separates the High-Tone and Low-Tone categories, and the dashed line separates two sub-categories of H tones.

Based on a collection of 44 monosyllabic verbs, elicited in three different contexts, six tone categories for verbs are identified.

The High-Tone categories (Tones H and HL in isolation: the top three data lines in Table 3) are as numerous as the Low-Tone categories (Tone LH in isolation: the bottom three data lines in Table 3). Verbs with an H citation form exhibit high tone on every morpheme in the contexts studied here. Verbs with an HL citation form need to be split into two subsets, as they have different realizations in combination with affixes. Verbs with an LH citation form (to which we refer as the Low-Tone category) need to be split into no less than three subtypes, hence the total number of six lexical tone categories.

Some tonal patterns observed in Shekua Na are also attested in other languages of the area, such as “the prohibition of all-L tonal domains”, or the existence of contour tones only at the end of a tone group (Chirkova & Michaud, 2009, p. 4; Dobbs & La, 2016, p. 90; Jacques, 2011, p. 8). Remembering that “the devil is in the detail”, we will walk the audience through the analysis of our data. A quick overview of the broader fieldwork dataset under construction will also be provided, presenting questionings on Na morpho-phonology as a part of the language’s grammar.

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