

Investigating the intonational phonology of Tamil

Although the segmental phonology of the Dravidian language Tamil is relatively well understood, its prosodic system has received little attention. This paper will present an overview of the current state of knowledge, taking autosegmental-metrical theory as its framework and focussing on the particular challenges of analysing an understudied language.

The basic building block of Tamil intonation is a fall-rise-fall contour, which typically occurs on each content word except for the last in a phrase. This can be analysed in terms of a pitch accent assigned at the phrase level (since pitch plays no part in distinguishing lexical items), but its correct phonological characterization is unclear. The balance of evidence suggests that word-initial syllables in Tamil are lexically accented, so the low turning-point of the fall-rise-fall contour, which is consistently aligned in the first syllable, is most plausibly analysed as an L* tonal target. Experimental work is briefly presented investigating whether the f_0 peak is more closely associated to the preceding low (suggesting an L*H analysis) or a following boundary of some low-level prosodic constituent (suggesting L*H%).

Tamil appears to have a very restricted inventory of pitch accent types: the only alternative to the fall-rise-fall contour in non-phrase-final position is a gradually declining f_0 , i.e. the absence of a pitch accent altogether. This same pattern of gradual decline is the norm for phrase-final constituents in declarative sentences, although a phrase-final rise may be used to signal continuation and in some types of interrogative. Other sentence types may be intonationally differentiated from declaratives, but in ways that are not necessarily straightforwardly captured in a phonological analysis, as a quantitative study of Tamil wh-questions illustrates.

A final section of the paper describes the design of the intonational database on which much of the preceding analysis is based, and the methodological challenges posed by diglossia in Tamil.