

Information-Stress Principle in Cantonese

Abstract

Cantonese has been regarded as quantity insensitive due to the lack of neutralised syllables widely reported in other Chinese languages. With the exception of the hypocoristic *aa3* morpheme and the negation *m4* morpheme, syllables in Cantonese have approximately the same length. (Cheung, K-H 1986) The lack of syllable length distinction leads to a tempting conclusion that Cantonese is a stress-less language. The idea is conceivable at first glance, as the rich tonal inventory of Cantonese may have used up the tonal space. Yet the stress-less idiosyncrasy of stress-less language needs to be justified.

Lai (1999) attributes the stress-less perception to speakers' suppression of stress contour when instructed to read written texts. A phonetic investigation shows a reduction tendency of classifiers and aspect markers in normal speech, which is explained by a metrical account with an iambic foot structure. However, one should note that iambic is cross-linguistically marked, and most apparent iambic tendency can be analysed as phrase-edge lengthening.

The present study investigates the stress assignment in Cantonese. I suggest that Cantonese has trochaic feet, and attempt to explain abovementioned reduction by an independent process which reduces the syllable length of syntactic heads. The stress reduction pattern in Cantonese is compatible with the *Information-Stress Principle* (Dunamu 2007:144), which states that "A word or phrase that carries more information than its neighbour(s) should be stressed."

Keywords

Information Stress Principle, Hong Kong Cantonese, Stress, Syllable Length, Prosody

Reference

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