

Variationist Approaches to Tone in Sino-Tibetan Area Linguistics

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Variationist approaches to tone can provide new perspectives on the tonal languages of the Sino-Tibetan area, while also expanding our understanding of language variation and change as a whole. Such studies of tone variation are valuable for language description, documentation, typology, classification, sociolinguistics, and theoretical analyses, especially in complex settings where multiple varieties are in contact. The current paper explores tone variation in the indigenous Sui language of southern China and presents practical techniques for variationist approaches to tone. The Sui results show how studies of tone variation can help analyze linguistically complex village settings and lead to new theoretical insights.

Like many other rural indigenous minority societies, the Sui people practice clan exogamy; spouses must originate in different clans. The wife customarily moves to the husband's village at the time of marriage, resulting in a large amount of dialect contact within villages. For example, in one Sui village of about 150 people, 19 different clans were represented by in-marrying women, and many of those women arrived in the village with the distinctive dialect features of their home villages. Yet despite this linguistic complexity, Sui villages also show patrilineal stability across generations. The dialect features of the local men are transmitted to each new generation of children, even as in-married women are speaking other dialects to the same children in the same households. Linguistic descriptions of such communities will be incomplete (and male-biased) unless these local social conditions and gendered contrasts are considered. Tone is a key tool for uncovering such sociolinguistic patterns.

Sui and other tonal languages therefore have an important role to play in the study of language variation and change. In the paradigm of variationist sociolinguistics, research on phonological variation has predominantly focused on vowels and other segmental features, rather than lexical tone. This is unfortunate since the majority of the world's languages are tonal (Yip 2002; Fromkin 1978). Moreover, many of the classic principles of language variation and change have been largely based on well-known Western languages and dialects (e.g. Labov 1963, 1994, 2001, 2010; Trudgill 1972). Which of those classic principles may need to be reconsidered in light of less commonly studied languages in other parts of the world? Can tone play a significant role in such investigations?

This paper takes a step toward addressing these issues through the use of "socio-tonetics," a cross-pollination of acoustic sociophonetics and tonetics. The paper reports on socio-tonetic results from recordings of Sui women, men, and children, including analyses of clan dialect contact, adult accommodation, child dialect acquisition, and dialect transmission. The paper also addresses the challenge of using tone data from naturalistic speech (cf. the Observer's Paradox, Labov 1972), and explores a new technique for analyzing variationist tone data from free speech recordings.

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