A B S T R A C T

Stress can only exist in contrast to non-stress. The paper attempts at viewing Chinese stress from a new perspective, offering a “reversed view” of the issue. It will be argued that non-stress (de-stress) might be more important in Mandarin Chinese than stress.

In NON-TONE LANGUAGES, linguists are mainly concerned with the assignment and acoustic properties of stress. An essential issue is word stress. Similar approach is generally accepted in Chinese. However, in TONE LANGUAGES the situation is complicated by the presence of tones. The paper argues that:

In non-tonal languages it is prosodic enhancement (stress) that fulfills significant linguistic functions (while unstressed forms may be viewed as unmarked, default).

On the other hand, in Mandarin it is prosodic weakening (‘non-stress’, ‘de-stress’) that fulfills significant linguistic functions (while full realization of syllables can be viewed as unmarked, default; cf. Y. R. Chao’s ‘normal stress’).

The reasoning: tonal morphemes generally need to keep their tonal features preserved in order to guarantee the distinctiveness of tones in speech perception. This requires sufficient syllable duration, and sufficient pitch range. Tonal morphemes may give up / reduce their tonal features for the sake of important functions ‘non-stress’ fulfills.

The evidence for the importance of prosodic weakening:
- Existence of lexical neutral tone (e.g. 的, 吗, lexical suffix 子)
- Monosyllabic tonal function words (personal pronouns 我, 你, 他, prepositions, classifiers etc.) are typically unstressed in speech
- Other tonal morphemes become regularly unstressed in certain contexts / functions (e.g. 不 in A-not-A questions: 去不去？)
- Native speakers judgments on stress placement in words/speech are notoriously inconsistent
- No consensus of linguists on word stress in disyllabic words (two patterns? three patterns? word stress does not exist in Chinese? etc.)
- The process of L2 learning: the students first learn isolated syllables/words with full tones, then learn to de-stress (= reduce) particular syllables/morphemes/words in particular contexts

The paper argues that in Chinese, leaving aside emphasis, it is worth searching for a mechanism and rules for NON-STRESS ASSIGNMENT (and phonetic reduction), rather than to search for a mechanism and rules for STRESS ASSIGNMENT (and phonetic enhancement).

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