ON PITCH ACCENT IN THE MU-NYA LANGUAGE*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mu-nya (or Minyag)木雅, a Tibeto-Burman language of China, is spoken by a part of the Tibetan nationality in southwest Sichuan, around the famous Minya Konka mountain. Presently six works on the Mu-nya language are available: two brief descriptive analyses (SUN 1983 and HUANG 1985), two vocabulary lists (ZMYYC and TBL), one brief phonological analysis (IKEDA 1998), and one short folk tale text (LIN 1998). All these descriptions are of the western dialect of Mu-nya, spoken around the Sade 沙德 district. We have no linguistic information on the eastern dialect spoken in the Shimian 石棉 district, which might be in danger of extinction.

All of these sources recognize that the western dialect of Mu-nya has four different tonemes: high-level [55], high-falling [53], high-rising [35], low-level [33]. (HUANG1985 treats [35] as [24], and recognizes an additional tone [15] which appears in some morphological environments.) But these descriptions do not agree with one another regarding the tones of Mu-nya words and these disagreements are found throughout the lexicon.

While Mu-nya has been assumed to be a tonal language, we question exactly how to characterize the precise nature of its suprasegmental features and the phonological mechanism that drives this system. In this paper, I analyze the tonal features of Mu-nya, and argue that based on my observations and field data the suprasegmental features must constitute a kind of pitch accent rather than tone.

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2. **MU-NYA AS A TONE LANGUAGE**

First let us consider some example words, selected at random:

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<tr>
<td>‘hair (animal)’</td>
<td>mo³⁵</td>
<td>mo³⁵</td>
<td>mo⁵⁵</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘dragon’</td>
<td>ndʒu³⁵</td>
<td>ndʒu⁵³</td>
<td>ndʒu³⁵</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘small’</td>
<td>tsu³³tsæ³⁵</td>
<td>tsæ³³tsæ³³</td>
<td>tsu³³tsæ³⁵</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘wet’</td>
<td>ndʒa³³ndʒa⁵⁵</td>
<td>ndʒa³³ndʒa⁵³</td>
<td>ndʒa³³ndʒa⁵⁵</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now let us tentatively represent the feature high-level [55] as H, high-falling [33] as F, high-rising [35] as R, and low-level [33] as L. The “correspondences” among the descriptions of SUN-HUANG-IKEDA are striking; ‘hair (animal)’: R-R-H, ‘dragon’: R-F-R, ‘small’: R-F-H (the second syllable), ‘wet’: RH-LF-LH. As speakers of Mandarin Chinese—a typical tone language—we know, it is absolutely impossible for one person to pronounce the word *shuǐjiǎo* 水餃 ‘dumpling’ as if it were *shuìjiào* 睡覺 ‘sleep’ and expect to be understood!

Why has this disagreement in the description of tones occurred? The first possibility is recording error. But Professors SUN and HUANG are both excellent linguists with rich field experience, so their data may be taken as reliable. A second possibility is dialectal differences among our informants. However, although we worked with different informants, in some cases from different home villages, there were very few dialectal differences between the speech of my informants and those of SUN and HUANG. Based on my observations, it is impossible to attribute these differences to dialect variation. I have worked with four Mu-nya informants from different villages, and to the best of my knowledge, there were no obvious differences in the suprasegmental features of their speech.

### 2.1 Sun’s Description of Mu-nya Tones

According to the description in SUN 1983, the Mu-nya language has four different tones, with many contrasts between high-rising and high-falling tones, but comparatively very few between high-level and mid-level. Almost of these tonal contrasts appear in disyllabic words. Examples of these four tonal contrasts:
1. High Level [55] \( z\alpha^{55} \) \( \gamma u^{33} \gamma u^{55} \) \( n i^{33} n i^{55} \) ‘to sweat’ ‘heavy’ ‘deep, few’

2. Mid Level [33] \( z\alpha^{33} \) \( \gamma u^{33} \gamma u^{55} \) \( n i^{55} n i^{33} \) ‘bark’ ‘heavy’ ‘red’

3. High Rising [35] \( z\varepsilon^{35} \) \( \gamma u^{35} \) \( n i^{35} \) ‘tongue’ ‘seed’ ‘brain’

4. High Falling [53] \( z\alpha^{53} \) \( \gamma u^{53} \) \( n u^{53} \) ‘times’ ‘ladder’ ‘west’

Although SUN’s explanation is simple and clear, it is difficult to find monosyllabic words which form tonal minimal pairs. This is because there are many disyllabic words in Mu-nya, but very few free monosyllabic words. Almost all of the morphemes of the Mu-nya language are monosyllabic, but are rarely used alone. For example, the word \( z\alpha^{53} \) ‘times’ in SUN’s list must be used in a phrase such as ‘(go) once’. Although the informant might be able to isolate the word for the benefit of the eliciting linguist, be would only ever use it in phrases, and would dislike using it as a free word. Since my informant used another word for ‘times’ (\( k u^{55} \) as in \( t\varepsilon^{33} k u^{55} \) (\( t\alpha^{33} x u^{55} \)) ‘(go) once’), instead of the word \( z\alpha^{53} \), I have not been able to verify the form of that word.

SUN also indicates some vowel features related to the tones: a vowel in the high-rising tone appears slightly longer than other tones, but a vowel in the high-falling tone appears slightly shorter than other tones. According to my observations, these sub-features of vowels related to tone are not fixed on the syllable as invariant features, but are easily changeable according to the situation or the personal style of speech. So it could be at most a tendency.

### 2.2 Huang’s Description of Mu-nya Tones

The description of tone features by HUANG 1985 is as follows:

- high-falling [53]
- mid-rising [24]
- high-level [55]
- mid-level [33]
- low-to-high rising [15]

Monosyllabic words only have [53] or [24] tone; [55] and [33] only appear in polysyllabic words; [15] appears in certain morphological environments. Besides pitch differences, Mu-nya tones have different apparent lengths: [53] and [33] are slightly shorter, [24] and [55] are comparatively longer, and [15] is the longest. [24] In polysyllabic words turns into [35] (either in the first or second syllable). For example:
‘sky, fire’  \( \text{mà} \text{[53]} \)  ‘tail’ \( \text{mà} \text{[24]} \)
‘you pl.) wear (a hat)’ \( \text{tò} \text{[55]} \text{tè} \text{[33]} \)  ‘(you pl.) take out’ \( \text{tò} \text{[33]} \text{tè} \text{[24]} \)
‘few, little’ \( \text{nì} \text{[53]} \text{nì} \text{[53]} \)  ‘make few, little’ \( \text{nì} \text{[33]} \text{nì} \text{[53]} \)
‘you sg.) measure’ \( \text{fìæ} \text{[24]} \text{tè} \text{[53]} \)  ‘Have you (sg.) measured?’ \( \text{fìæ} \text{[15]} \text{tè} \text{[33]} \)

[53] and [24] in the second syllable of disyllabic words are unstable, frequently interchangeable with each other or with [55]. For example:

‘basket with shoulder straps’  \( \text{kò} \text{[33]} \text{lò} \text{[24/53/55]} \)
‘you (sg.) finish up’ \( \text{tò} \text{[33]} \text{dè} \text{[24/55]} \)

The last syllable or the final two syllables of words or phrases consisting of four syllables are often pronounced as [33]. Some function words and prefixes, or verbs and adjectives acting as predicates are also often changed in pronunciation to [33].

‘habit’ \( \text{kò} \text{[33]} \text{mu} \text{[55]} \text{mu} \text{[33]} \)
‘bright red’ \( \text{nì} \text{[55]} \text{zò} \text{[33]} \text{zò} \text{[33]} \)
‘like’ \( \text{gè} \text{[33]} \text{gæ} \text{[53]} \text{nò} \text{[33]} \text{bò} \text{[33]} \)
‘We have power.’ \( \text{nò} \text{[33]} \text{nu} \text{[53]} \text{lè} \text{[33]} \text{(24)} \) \( \text{xù} \text{[53]} \text{k’uì} \text{[33]} \text{(24)} \) \( \text{nò} \text{[33]} \text{(24)} \)\(^1\)

HUANG notes that the longest rising tone [15] only appears in a specific morphological environment. In the course of my research I couldn’t determine the precise environment in which this tone is supposed to appear, so we cannot discuss it here. Seeing only HUANG’s example ‘Have you (sg.) measured?’ \( \text{fìæ} \text{[15]} \text{tè} \text{[33]} \), it remains possible that it is an intonation characteristic of the interrogative verb phrase. The [fì] is a interrogative verb prefix, with a tendency to lengthen when it is emphasized.

Further questions are: If Mu-nya has these four basic tonemes, why do monosyllabic words only have two: the falling and rising tones? On the other hand, why do level tones only appear in polysyllabic words?

In my data [24/35] and [53] basically appear at the end of polysyllabic words or phrases. Let us consider the last example: ‘We have power.’\(^2\)

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\(^1\) The tone in parentheses is the ‘original’ tone.

\(^2\) It may seem as if the [53] tone also appears on the non-final syllable of a polysyllabic word or phrase in this example. A word-level analysis of this sentence shows that this is not the case:

\[ \etaò \text{[33]} \text{nò} \text{[53]} \text{le} \text{[33]} \text{xù} \text{[53]} \text{k’uì} \text{[33]} \text{ήò} \text{[33]} \]

We particle power have particle (locative) (1st person / affirm)

So the [53] tones are appearing at the end of the disyllabic word /nò\text{[33]}nò\text{[53]}/ ‘we’, and on the monosyllabic word /xù\text{[53]}/ ‘power’.