

Stylized intonation in a tone language – evidence from Northern Ghale (Gorkha district, Nepal)

Even if the call used by parents summoning a child home, as in

John--                  Din--  
ny--                      ner--

(from Ladd 1978: 517), is typically characterized by steady level pitch, Ladd (1978) convincingly shows that this intonation “is not essentially a calling intonation, a warning intonation – or, more metaphorically, a ‘distance’ intonation – but rather a ‘stylized’ intonation whose function is to signal a certain element of predictability or stereotype in the message (Ladd 1978: 520).

So for instance, stylized intonation on a warning such as

Look out for the broken ste--  
ep--

(from Ladd 1978: 520) is only appropriate if it serves as a reminder (e.g. about a step that has been broken for months), but not in emergencies.

Accordingly, stylized intonation in lists such as

- (41) A. Hey, these cookies are good. What's in 'em?  
B. Oh, nothing special, you know

flour--                  sugar--                  butter--  
and                      and                      and, uh...

(from Ladd 1978: 529) implies that “the items enumerated ... are not individually informative, but rather are intended to suggest a loose grouping which the hearer can fill out for himself” – In other words, by marking each item with steady level pitch, the speaker of (41) wants to express that there is really no special ingredient in the cookies.

If the items listed are individually meaningful, as in

- (40)                  m<sup>i</sup>l<sup>k</sup>                  e<sup>g</sup>s                  b<sup>u</sup>t<sup>t</sup>e<sup>r</sup>                  b<sup>r</sup>e<sup>a</sup>d  
I need                  and                  and                  and

(from *ibid.*), stylized intonation is inappropriate.

While I am unaware of any cross-linguistic study of stylized intonation, the phenomenon has been described for various languages including German (Pirker et al. 1998; Dombrowski 2012), Brazilian Portuguese (de Moraes and Rilliard 2018), Hungarian (Varga 1989), and Kammu, an Austroasiatic language spoken mainly in Laos (Karlsson 2018). However, it does not seem to have been described for a tonal language, which is done in the present paper.

Before and after recording more than twenty stories in Kutang last summer, I recorded just as many stories also in the lower Budhi Gandaki valley, where Northern Ghale (e.g. Hammarström et al. 2023) is spoken (both was done with the immensurable help of Tharpa Lama from Bihi). While Kutang and Northern Ghale are very closely related, tone

seems to be contrastive only in the latter variety. In Northern Ghale stories from both Salleri and Uiya, there were moments when I thought that the narrators had just started singing – which is not uncommon in Himalayan languages, of course, that parts of narratives are sung. However, my consultant, a native speaker of Kutang who is perfectly familiar also with Northern Ghale, having lived in that area for more than ten years, did not think that the narrators were singing. Translating the passages for me, it became clear what they were doing instead. In the passage illustrated in Figure 1, the narrator (from Uiya) says that – for some reason – the protagonist suddenly ‘was unable to see, unable to speak, unable to walk, unable to (use) her hand, unable to hear, unable to see, etc.’ The speaker pronounces this with a stylized intonation, keeping the second part of each of the six items of the list at a mid-high pitch level, and stepping on this level either from a higher or a lower pitch level (pitch is indicated also numerically in the third tier of Figure 1), depending on whether the noun in the first part of a phrase had a high (*jur* ‘mouth’, *tup* ‘foot’, and *naa* ‘ear’) or a low tone (*myak* ‘eye’ and *lyak* ‘hand’). Stylized intonation thus involves three pitch levels here, and the higher (H) and the lower level (L) are about a third interval away from the mid-high pitch (M). By means of the stylization, the speaker implies that he could go on listing body parts which the protagonist wasn’t able to use, and hence, that his entire body had ceased to work.

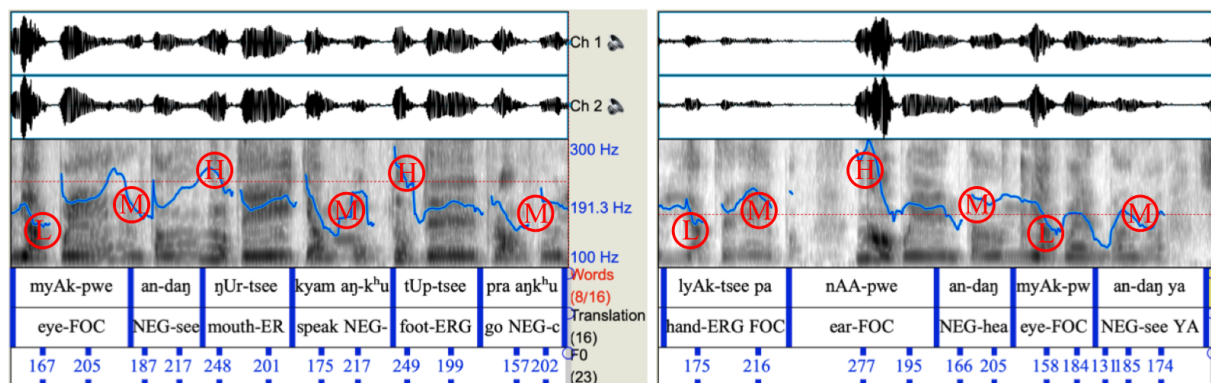


Figure 1: Stylized intonation in a Northern Ghale story from Uiya

Apart from illustrating what stylized intonation may look like in a tone language, these observations suggest that such lists could be of use in determining whether a language has tone or not, and if it has, in assigning tones to the lexical items used in these lists. As many varieties of the Kaiké-Ghale-Tamangic (KGT) family (Hammarström et al. 2023) have been described with and without tones (see Hwang et al. 2019), lists may thus help us investigate the question of whether Proto-KGT had word tone (Mazaudon 1978; Hildebrandt 2003), or whether this feature independently arose in the different varieties due to contact with Tibetic varieties.

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