A typological assessment of word prosody in contact

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The language contact literature often suggests that prosody is particularly prone to contact-induced change (e.g. [1], [2], [3], [4], among many others). Yet, a broad picture of the types and prevalence of changes to prosody systems from a typological perspective is still lacking. This paper aims to fill that gap by providing an assessment of contact-induced changes to word prosody systems in languages from all around the globe. Specifically, it focuses on changes to lexical stress and lexical tone systems in which contact alters the complexity of previously existing systems (e.g. development of unpredictable/predictable stress patterns, additions/losses of tone contours, etc.). By using reports from the areal linguistics literature, it further aims to examine the extent to which prosodic phenomena are actually reported in studies of contact, which have been ostensibly driven by morphosyntactic variables.

Method. Languages from all areas of the world were represented in our convenience sample constructed based on geographical location. Our areal groupings derive from the technique described in [5], which employs geographical location as well as genealogical affiliation criteria. Languages were sampled from the following groupings: (a) Africa; (b) Central & South America; (c) North America; (d) Oceania; (e) Europe, South & West Asia; and (f) Southeast Asia.

For each grouping, we searched areal surveys (e.g. [6], [7], [2], [8], [9], [10], [1]) for data on contact-induced changes in the variables of interest. Reference grammars and articles were at times consulted for clarification. The final sample contained 38 languages from five of the six pre-determined areas. No reports on changes to word prosody in languages of Oceania, as classified in [5]'s method, were found. Note that in this classification, Austronesian languages belong with Southeast Asia. Thirteen language families are represented in the current sample.

Results. Changes to lexical tone systems comprise almost half of the sample (18/38, or 47 percent). Of these, changes reported to deal with convergence in the number, contour pattern, or laryngeal features accompanying the tones themselves comprised 72 percent of the reports (13/18). Loss of tone, and tone mergers represent only 27 percent of cases (5/18) of changes to tone systems. Changes to lexical stress systems (20/38, or 53 percent) most often resulted from increases in the complexity of the system (13/20), in which contact either reduced the predictability of stress placement, or gave rise to so-called pitch accent systems. Fixation of stress placement was reported for 35 percent (7/20) of the languages in the current sample.

Discussion. Contact-induced changes to word prosody are reported in all areas of the world, with the exception of Oceania. Changes to lexical tone and lexical stress systems are almost equally represented in the contact literature. Of the changes observed, we interpret the majority as increases in the complexity of word prosody systems of languages under contact. These results seem to contradict findings from the loan phonology literature that contact often leads to simplification of suprasegmental structure ([11]).

Despite the claim that prosodic change is ubiquitous in contact situations, the current study finds that comparatively few studies in the areal linguistics literature actually describe it, most of which are also very short and lacking in detail. These findings may reflect a bias towards morphosyntactic and segmental phonological variables in the literature rather than the absence of an effect of contact on prosody. Likewise, the lack of reports on languages from Oceania may result from a bibliographical bias. Taken as a whole, the current findings suggest the need for more exchange between researchers concerned with prosody and those who work on contact. These methodological issues present a special challenge to prosody research given the close relation between word prosody and intonation (e.g. [12]).

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