

Tone in South Slavic

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The paper aims to present an up-to-date overview of the current state of affairs concerning tone (pitch accent) in South Slavic languages, i.e. in Slovene and in the Štokavian/Čakavian/Kajkavian complex (or Bosnian/Croatian/Montenegrin/Serbian in standard language terms). The overview will include not only synchronic but also diachronic elements (concerning the reconstruction of Proto-Slavic tone).

Many Western South Slavic dialects have pitch accent. This is either a Proto-Slavic inheritance or an innovation due to retraction related tonogenesis (Neo-Štokavian being the most famous but not the only example). The tone opposition is either two-way (falling : rising/level) or three-way (falling : rising : level) □ in some dialects even in monosyllabic words. Sometimes the tone opposition can be limited to non-final position. The tone opposition (falling : rising) on short vowels occurs not only in a well-known case of Neo-Štokavian but also in Slovene. This tone opposition is a subject of an old debate concerning the exact nature of the Neo-Štokavian rising accents. Some authors have claimed that Neo-Štokavian rising accents are always disyllabic, i.e. that they need a posttonic vowel in order to be differentiated from falling accents (Lehiste & Ivić 1963), which has even led to an extreme analysis of Neo-Štokavian systems as non-tonal. This, however, is a result of a mistaken tendency to present local accentual systems as representative of the whole Neo-Štokavian complex. The exact nature of Neo-Štokavian rising tones differs in different dialects. A real tone opposition is indisputable for at least some Neo-Štokavian dialects. This also includes the short rising tone □ in some dialects, the tone opposition on short vowels is present even in monosyllabic words and final syllables.

The exact phonetics of traditional South Slavic 'accents' differs in other cases as well. For instance, the traditional Štokavian/Čakavian/Kajkavian 'short falling' accent is often neither short nor falling. The question of phonetics is very interesting in the case of the 'neo-acute' tone in Štokavian/Čakavian/Kajkavian, which has been a subject of recent debates. This tone, described as rising (although of a different kind than in the case of the Neo-Štokavian long rising tone) in early dialectological works by Ivšić and Belić and traditionally reconstructed as such for Proto-Slavic, is seen in some newer studies (e.g. Langston 2006, Kapović 2008) as level or slowly falling tone. The exact nature of the 'neo-acute' is not just of synchronic phonetic relevance but may have consequences for historical linguistics and the reconstruction of Proto-Slavic tone as well.

In Croatia, there have recently been some claims that the short rising accent has a tendency to disappear. This conclusion is, however, completely unfounded. All Croatian Neo-Štokavian dialects preserve tonal opposition on short vowels. The tendency is actually vice-versa in Štokavian □ even dialects without an older short rising tone have started developing one through language contact/diffusion (for instance Podravina Old Štokavian dialects □ a similar tendency can be seen in the process of 're-Neo-Štokavization' in the Dubrovnik dialectal area).

The literature on Neo-Štokavian and theoretical analyses of Neo-Štokavian accentual system is still riddled with the artificial rules of the Standard Neo-Štokavian accentuation, i.e. claims of non-existence of non-initial falling tones (and the impossibility of the existence of final Neo-Štokavian rising tones). This kind of normative false interpretation of linguistic reality has to be left out of future descriptive and theoretical studies.

References:

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