Focal prominence in Chinese languages: comparing effects of tone and focus types

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This study investigates focal prominence in three distinct Chinese language groups, represented by Chengdu Mandarin, Changsha Xiang, and Cantonese. These languages (in this order) have been found to display a decreasing level of prosodic marking (Li et al. 2023). Utilising elicited read speech from 14 speakers in each language, this study further probes the effects of tone types and focus types.

When focusing on a dynamic lexical tone, the high (H) tone is typically scaled higher and the low (L) tone lower (Xu 1999). However, focus may affect only one pitch target. The figure below illustrates two dynamic tones in Chengdu and Changsha, one in the low register and the other in the high register. Focus affects only one f0 extreme, while the other remains stable or shifts in the same direction. This indicates that despite varied conventional descriptions of their shapes and tone values (listed at the top of the figure), these dynamic tones are intrinsically defined by a singular H or L pitch target. Moreover, there is a dynamic tone in the low register in both languages that remains unaffected by focus, suggesting the absence of an inherent pitch target. Thus, focus can elucidate a tone's characteristic feature.

The marking of different focus types varies by language. In Chengdu, contrastive focus is marked with the most pronounced changes in f0 and duration, followed by wh- and even focus. In contrast, Cantonese exhibits the most substantial prosodic effects on even focus, predominantly in duration. Furthermore, broad focus, as elicited by the question 'what happened', often appears to be an omni-focused condition. This implies that lexical tones are fully realised by default, and focus effects are better represented by the extent of tone reduction. Combining the results of tone and focus types, this research advances our understanding of focus realisation in tone languages and provides valuable insights into prosodic typology.



References: • Li, K.K., F. Nolan & B. Post (2023). Variations of focus prominence in three tone languages. *ICPhS 2023.* • Xu, Y. (1999). Effects of tone and focus on the formation and alignment of f0 contours. *J.Phon.* 27(1), 55–105.