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Distribution of lexical tones in Boro

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the morphological and prosodic properties of Boro tones. Tonal alignment in Boro vis-à-vis word formation processes throws light on some distributional properties of tone in the language. Boro has some affixes which have their own tonal specifications. Prefixes determine the tone of the stem and lead to changes in the tonal specification of the stem. The addition of suffixes do not alter the tonal nature of the stems. Suffixes in Boro, irrespective of their lexical tonal status, belong to the recessive category whereas prefixes belong to the dominant group. In terms of prosodic properties, the smallest domain for Boro tonal assignment is a minimal word and maximally it is the prosodic word.

KEYWORDS

Boro, lexical tones, prosodic word, tone and morphology

This is a contribution from *Himalayan Linguistics*, Vol. 17(2): 52–76.

ISSN 1544-7502

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1 Introduction

In this paper we address the problem of tone assignment in Boro and propose that both the minimal word and prosodic word domains are units of tone assignment. We will also discuss how morphological factors play a role in tone assignment. We will see that tonal alignment in Boro shows many variations on the theme of alignment in Boro. Tones can be assigned maximally to a prosodic word domain but not beyond, and this will be instantiated with examples of trisyllables. Furthermore, suffixes and prefixes attest different tonal assignment. Prefixes lower the tone of the root, whereas suffixes undergo alignment based on the tone of the root/stem. Suffixes exhibit a variety of tonal distributional patterns, some like the causative suffix always appear with its own lexically specified tone while others like the Nominative case marker need a disyllabic base to manifest its underlying tone. Apart from these differences, some trisyllables do not attest alignment but rather the nature of the shift seems to be more like spreading.

1.1 Background

Distribution of lexical tones is an important aspect of the description of tonal phonology of a particular tone language. The autosegmental nature of tones (Leben 1973, Goldsmith 1976) provides the theoretical foundation for tonal association to a segment other than the source segments. In spite of there being differences in opinion regarding the number of tones in Boro, most researchers agree that Boro is a tone language (Weidert 1987). Boro uses lexical H and L tones and the L is sometimes seen as a default Mid tone (Sarmah 2004). Boro tones are employed to distinguish lexical meaning of Boro words as in (1) below (Sarmah 2004):

(1a) [gaó] ‘tear or split’

(1b) [gaò] ‘shoot by arrow or gun’

The tone bearing unit (TBU) in Boro is the syllable and its tonal organization is such that in disyllabic words only one TBU can bear the lexically distinct tone. The rightmost TBU is the location for hosting the lexical tone in disyllabic words. In addition to investigating the tonal nature of affixes, this paper also aims at elucidating the nature of tonal alignment in Boro in the presence of inflectional and derivational processes. We will also demonstrate in this paper that while prefixes come with their own lexical specification and delete the tones of roots, suffixes do not delete the