

Abstract

Learning a tonal language is challenging for non-tonal language speakers, but learners would face even more obstacles when tones of the target language shows idiosyncratic variations. Vietnamese is a tonal language, with six different tones: ngang (T1), huyen (T2), sac (T3), nang (T4), hoi (T5), and nga (T6), and has three dialects: Northern, Central, and Southern. Past research confirmed that the Northern dialect follows the six-tone system whereas the Southern dialect converges T5 and T6, following a five-tone system (Brunelle, 2009; Vu, 1982), yet Vietnamese tones embed more diversity. Eighty pronunciation tokens of the word ‘ma’ in six tones were collected from the three dialects and analyzed with reference to three phonetic features: pitch contour, glottalization, and duration. T4 is generally classified as a falling tone, with a word-final glottalization and short duration in Northern dialect (T4a), and a contour tone with falling-rising pattern and longer in duration in Southern dialect (T4b) (Kirby, 2010). The research shows three distinct realizations of T4, two of which conform to past findings, while the third one with a discontinuous tone (T4c) has never been reported before. The deviant case occurs predominantly among Southerners with 50% and 60% of discontinuous tokens from participants aged 13-19 and females, respectively. This research aims (i) to explain this deviancy in terms of interplay between the contour tonal feature and tonal pattern transfer; (ii) to propose that Southerners realize T4 as T4b preconditions the discontinuity. This realization seems to interact with the convergence of T5 and T6, both of which bear a similar contour shape except that T6 is has a mid-glottalization. Interestingly, Southern speakers seem to superimpose this mid-glottalization found in T6 onto T4c, accounting for the discontinuous tokens. The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the linguistic understanding and pedagogical implications of Vietnamese tones.

References

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