

THE LEXICAL TONES OF VIETNAMESE METROPOLES

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KAROLINUM

**The lexical tones
of Vietnamese metropolises**

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CONTENTS

List of Abbreviations	7
Preface	9
1. RATIONALE	11
2. INTONATION, TONES AND PITCH IN LANGUAGES AND SPEECH	17
2.1 Tones in languages	18
2.2 Pitch production	20
2.3 Physiological aspects affecting pitch perception	21
2.4 Tonogenesis	23
2.5 Tone marking	26
2.6 Autosegmental representation of tones	27
2.7 Contour tones	28
2.8 Consonant types, vowel quality and phonation	29
2.9 Intonation and tone	30
2.9.1 Intonation in non-tone languages	32
2.9.2 Complement to intonation functions in tone languages	32
2.9.3 Tone languages, stress languages and accent languages	33
2.9.4 Stress	34
2.10 Tone perception	34
2.11 Tone identification	36
2.12 Tone language acquisition	37
3. THE VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE	41
3.1 Brief introduction into Vietnamese	42
3.2 Dialects in Vietnam	44
3.3 Hanoian dialect	46
3.3.1 Consonants	47
3.3.2 Vowels	50
3.3.3 Syllable	50
3.3.4 Tones	52
3.3.5 Tones in lexical reduplication and borrowing	58
3.3.6 Tonal coarticulation	61
3.3.7 Sentence intonation	61
3.3.8 Stress	62
3.4 Saigonese dialect	63
3.4.1 Vowels and consonants	65
3.4.2 Syllable and stress	66
3.4.3 Tones	66
3.4.4 Coarticulation	68

3.5	Tonal development in Vietnamese	68
3.6	Tonal interference into other languages	69
4.	METHOD	71
4.1	Speaker selection generally	73
4.2	Speakers in more detail	73
4.3	Spoken texts	75
4.4	Material recording	76
4.4.1	Isolated words, continuous text and semi-spontaneous speech	77
4.4.2	Perception test	78
4.5	Material processing	79
4.5.1	Processing of syllables	79
4.5.2	Processing of reading and semi-spontaneous speech	80
4.5.3	Perception test preparation	81
4.6	Data extraction	81
4.6.1	Fo data	82
4.6.2	Duration and glottal features	83
4.7	Perception test administration	83
5.	DATA ANALYSIS	85
5.1	Typical contour shapes	86
5.1.1	Hypotheses	86
5.1.2	Results	87
5.1.3	Discussion	94
5.2	The effect of gender	95
5.3	Tonal coarticulation	96
5.4	Tones in read-out and semi-spontaneous speech	101
5.4.1	Hypotheses	101
5.4.2	Results	101
5.4.3	Discussion	104
5.5	Tones with various degrees of prominence	104
5.5.1	Hypotheses	105
5.5.2	Results	105
5.5.3	Discussion	108
5.6	Perception test	109
5.6.1	Hypotheses	110
5.6.2	Results	110
5.6.3	Discussion	117
6.	GENERAL DISCUSSION	121
	References	125
	Appendix 1	131
	Appendix 2	132
	Appendix 3	133
	Lexikální tóny vietnamských metropolí (Resumé)	134
	Les tons à valeur lexicale du vietnamien des métropoles (Résumé)	135
	Der Wortton im Vietnamesischen (Sprache der beiden Metropolen) (Zusammenfassung)	136

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

C	consonant
dB	decibel
DL	difference limen
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
F_0	fundamental frequency of voice
H	high pitch, high tonal target
HCMC	Ho Chi Minh City
HN	Hanoi
Hz	Hertz
JND	just noticeable difference
L	low pitch, low tonal target
M	medium pitch, medium tonal target
ms	millisecond
PT	pitch tier (a descriptive object for F_0 analysis and inspection)
SG	Saigon
ST	semitone
T	tone
TBU	tone bearing unit
TG	text grid (a tagging object for speech analysis)
V	vowel
Vc	vocalic core
VN	Vietnam

PREFACE

This monograph is dedicated to the Vietnamese lexical tone – a melodic phenomenon that is not very well understood by most speakers of European languages. The background knowledge for the chief topic is built in two domains. First, it is the general use of pitch in languages with special focus on lexical tone principles. Second, the essential segmental, syllabic and prosodic features of the Vietnamese language are introduced. The core of the monograph comprises studies of lexical tone production and perception that contrast Hanoian and Saigonese tone systems. Thousands of individual instances of tones in various speech styles are analysed to uncover commonalities and differences between the two dialect. The unprecedented extent of the material should provide a solid basis for further experimenting with Vietnamese tones, whether in the area of cognition, language structure or acoustics. The deeper purpose of this book is to enrich the current insight into the nature of the language as the most significant instrument of human interaction. We wrote this text with the belief that greater appreciation of principles of language use can gradually make our lives less erratic and our actions more gratifying.

1. RATIONALE

To most speakers of Indo-European languages, the concept of a *word* stands for a meaningful language unit that serves as a building block of utterances and, with regard to its own composition, it is a string of elementary sounds that can be somehow represented by letters. In Czech, for instance, assembling elementary sounds represented by letters *v – o – d – a* will produce the word *voda* /voda/, which means *water*. Yet, for thousands of languages outside Europe (and a few in Europe itself), putting together a string of elementary sounds is just not enough. A word in these languages must have a particular melodic specification to be complete and unambiguous. Such a melodic specification is termed the *tone*¹ and it is an essential component of the word – without it the word is unfinished or at least ill-formed. Thus, the meaning of the Vietnamese syllable *ma* without a tone is unclear and can refer to, among other things, *a ghost, horse, tomb or mother*. Languages whose words require a tone to be properly formed are called *tone languages* (but *cf.* Section 2.1, p. 18).

Given the geographical location of the Czech Republic, tone languages might seem quite exotic and countries in which they are spoken may appear distant and irrelevant to everyday lives of ordinary citizens. Such assumption is, in fact, rather detached from reality. Although the local population of speakers of the best documented tone languages such as Mandarin, Cantonese or Thai is relatively small, there is one ethnicity of tone language speakers in the Czech Republic that is substantially large. The official number of Vietnamese people living in the country was 59 534 individuals as of September 2017² (www.czso.cz), which means that they constitute the third most numerous ethnic minority after the Slovaks and the Ukrainians, and the largest non-European minority in the Czech Republic.

The Vietnamese were granted the status of a national minority by law in 2013. This status entitles them, for instance, to be represented in the Government Council for National Minorities, to request funds from the Czech Ministry of Culture for propagation of the Vietnamese culture, or to obtain free counselling services in Vietnamese for the purpose of official procedures. The children are entitled to elective courses of Vietnamese language at elementary schools. As a minority the Vietnamese are generally respected as peaceful and hardworking

1 The full term is the *lexical tone*. In the context of this book, we will often use just *tone* for short.

2 Unofficially the number is even higher. For comparison, only 3 000 Vietnamese are estimated to live in the Slovak Republic and about the same number in Hungary, while 14 000 allegedly live in Russia. On the other hand, it is estimated that over 2,000,000 Vietnamese live in the United States of America.

people. However, successful and mutually enriching coexistence of any ethnic minority with the national majority must address the issue of the language barrier.

Although this proposition sounds very logical, the way it is tackled in the current world is not always particularly effective. The lack of true understanding of how human languages work and how they are acquired prevents teachers and educators from taking efficient steps towards multilingual societies. Current teaching methods seem to be quite cumbersome and we argue that the main obstacle to their improvement is the superficial and sometimes even incorrect insight into the nature of the language. One of the modest objectives of this book is to contribute to the field of linguistics for the sake of greater appreciation of the essence of languages.

In the Czech academic environment only one monograph relevant to our topic has been produced to the best of our knowledge. It is *Vietnamese Phonetics* authored by Slavická (2008) and, commendably, it follows didactic goals. It is undeniably a valuable source and a useful tool for the process of acquisition of Vietnamese as a second language, although it does not address the topic of tonality in much detail. We argue that research in the Vietnamese language and its phonetic features in particular is crucial for the reasons outlined above, but also for better understanding of how the Vietnamese acquire the Czech language, be it as a second language learnt in later stages of their lives or as a mother tongue in the case of the rising numbers of bilingual Vietnamese children growing up in the Czech cultural environment.

It has to be mentioned at this point, however, that the Czechoslovak interest in modern Asian studies dates back to the pre-WWII era. An important event happened in 1932 when Jaroslav Průšek was granted a research scholarship at the university in Beijing. Subsequently, Průšek became the head of the newly established department³ of Chinese studies at Charles University in Prague in 1945. The department of Vietnamese studies was established in 1960 thanks to the political aspirations of the government officials to form closer diplomatic and economic links with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV).

Throughout the history of the two organizational units (i.e., Chinese and Vietnamese), many academic works were produced, but not many dealt with linguistic issues. This trend was most probably caused by the general motivation of the students and the scope of interest on the part of the researchers. Judging from the prevailing topics of discussion panels at Asian studies conferences of the era, majority of people were making their decision to engage in Asian studies because of their interest in Asian history, literature or politics. Understandably, these topics could be satisfactorily accessed and reasonably researched even with lower linguistic proficiency in the local language than when the language itself stood for the research object.

Intriguingly, various aspects of Vietnamese phonetics in general and of Vietnamese tones in particular have been given more attention in the international academic community than in Vietnam itself. The reason for this has to be sought in the social conditions throughout the last centuries in Vietnam. Be that as it may, one of the common features of canonical works on Vietnamese phonetics (e.g., Thompson, 1965; Đoàn, 1977; Vū, 1982; Gordina & Bystrov,

3 Originally, it was only a departmental section called 'seminar' and it became a legitimate department in the full sense of the word in 1950.