

Unifying the comparative analysis of tonal systems

Proposed workshop at SLE 2025 in Bordeaux

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Call for abstracts: Provisional abstracts (max. 300 words, excluding references) should be sent to Valentin Vydrin (vydrine@gmail.com) not later than November 13.

Background:

The last few decades have seen significant progress in the study of tone. The number of thoroughly described tonal systems of individual languages has increased greatly, and it has become more and more evident that describing a tonal language without marking tonal contrasts in the transcription and without establishing a set of tonal rules is unacceptable. Theoretical insights in tonology have also made a great headway, spurred by advances in Autosegmental Phonology (Goldsmith 1976), Lexical Phonology (Pulleyblank 1986) and Optimality Theory (Prince & Smolensky 1993). Important research areas include relationship between stress and tone (Hyman 2009; Hyman 2012; van der Hulst 2012); grammatical tones (Palancar & Léonard 2016; Konoshenko 2017; Rolle 2018); tonogenesis (Ratliff 2015; Yang & Xu 2019; Dockum 2019; Campbell 2021), to name just a few.

At the same time, the typology of tone, pioneered by (Hyman & Schuh 1974) and (Maddieson 1978), remains a relatively weak point in contemporary tonology. While a number of important results in this subfield have been achieved and some interesting attempts for generalization in this field can be mentioned, e.g. (Gordon 2016; Hyman 2009; Hyman & Leben 2021), typological studies are generally restricted to particular families and/or areas (Cahill 2011; Kirby 2017; DiCanio & Bennett 2020) a.o.) and cross-linguistic comparison often revolves around most basic parameters, such as the number and the types of tones (level or contour). The latter is particularly evident in major typological databases, such as WALS (Maddieson 2013) and LAPSyD (there is at present no information on tonal systems in Grambank).

So, it is not by chance that the editors of a recent special issue on phonological typology had to state that “the study of tone is largely absent in this volume, despite its importance in phonology” (Moran, Easterday & Grossman 2023: 238). This workshop aims to contribute to filling this gap.

Aim:

The main weak point of the current stage of comparative tonology seems to be the question of equatable categories. Tonology is still lacking its basic, universally recognized, emic categories. Do we need a concept of the toneme based on contrastive tonal melodies which can be different from underlying individual tones? If we do, what are its properties and defining criteria? Other than the effect of stress on tone systems, do we need a separate category of (pitch-)accent? (in this relation, see (Hyman 2009)). If we do, how to define it?

A major trend of the modern typological linguistics is the aggregation and systematization of the available information in the database format. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the existing tonological databases? Which further parameters should be added? What should be modified?

How to describe the tonal system of a language assuring a typological comparability?

Is quantitative comparison of tonal systems possible? If it is, which parameters should be compared? What could be the standards for text annotation for the comparative quantitative study of tone?

Problematic of relevance for the workshop

In this workshop we will specifically invite and seek contributions which address the following:

- Equatable concepts in tonology: Cross-linguistically applicable descriptive concepts and units for tonal systems.
- Cross-linguistic datasets in the field of tonology.
- Text annotation standards for tonal and related phenomena.
- Regularities in evolution of tonal systems.
- Typologically aware description of individual tonal systems.
- Typology of tonal processes.
- Correspondence between tonal, prosodic and segmental units.

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Databases:

LAPSYD: <https://lapsyd.huma-num.fr/index.php>

Maslinsky K., Vydrin V., Gerasimov D. ThoT Database. Web resource.
URL: <https://thot.huma-num.fr/db>.