

Secondary H tones in Cypriot Greek: a case study in areal prosody

Mary Baltazani¹, Spyros Armostis², Elinor Payne¹

¹University of Oxford, ²University of Cyprus

This study presents the first quantitative evidence for a previously unreported tonal feature in Cypriot Greek (CYG): a secondary high (H) tone that appears two syllables before the nuclear accent in declaratives. Drawing on (semi-)spontaneous speech from 19 CYG speakers, we show that this tone is a pervasive, albeit optional, prosodic event, whose presence appears to reshape the following f_0 contour and modify the scaling of the nuclear accent. Its presence distinguishes CYG from Athenian Greek (ATG) and brings this aspect of CYG prosody closer to Cypriot Turkish (CYT), suggesting contact-driven prosodic convergence in the geo-linguistic area of Cyprus.

Quantitative modelling of f_0 contours using fourth-order polynomial regression ([1]) shows that the contour shape in the presence of the secondary H tone is significantly different: utterances with it display shallower falls and greater curvature than those without. Scaling analysis shows this secondary tone is on average 4–5 semitones higher than the nuclear accent, while the nuclear peak itself is lower when the secondary H is present, suggesting pitch-range compression and tonal interaction. Alignment analyses reveal that the H tone typically occurs two syllables before stress, occasionally on preceding function words when the nuclear word lacks sufficient pre-stress syllables, but not beyond the prosodic word.

Comparative data show that ATG lacks such an early high tone. In contrast, auditory analysis reveals its presence in CYT, and with a similar configuration: a left-edge H tone followed by a compressed nuclear accent (!H*), previously reported for Turkish declaratives more generally [2]. This similarity, supports the hypothesis that the feature is not a language-internal innovation (contra [3]) but a case of external prosodic transfer, resulting from long-term bilingual contact. Further evidence shows that a comparable H tone even appears in L2 English produced by CYG and CYT speakers, suggesting ongoing pervasiveness of cross-linguistic transfer of this feature, on the island of Cyprus. This closely chimes with other evidence of intonational convergence across multiple Cypriot language varieties ([4, 5]).

We propose this secondary H tone represents a potentially pan-Cypriot prosodic feature, possibly marking the left boundary of the prosodic word and contributing to the distinctive melodic character of Cypriot varieties. Its presence across these typologically distinct languages highlights the role of contact in shaping prosodic structure. Our findings broaden the typology of non-head-associated high tones, previously attested in Maltese ([6]) and Turkish ([2]) and support the interpretation of Cyprus as a prosodic convergence area. More broadly, the study shows how even subtle phonetic features can transfer between languages across typological divides, creating shared prosodic signatures for given geo-linguistic spaces.

References

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