ABSTRACT

This study investigates the phonetics and phonology of tone in Chokri, an Angami-Pochury language of the Tibeto-Burman family spoken in Nagaland, India. While most languages of Northeast India, particularly Naga languages, are tonal, research on their tonal systems remains scarce. This study aims to examine Chokri's phonetic and phonological system, primarily focusing on tone, its functional roles, and its interaction with phonology and morphology.

Chokri exhibits a register tone system, aligning more closely with African tone systems than with the contour tone systems characteristic of Southeast Asian languages. The study identifies four level tones: extra high, high, mid, and low and one contour tone: Mid-rising. Through experimental phonetic analysis, this research explores the acoustic properties of these tones. The experimental study revealed that the rising tone exhibits a longer duration than level tones. Furthermore, a perception experiment further establishes that Chokri speakers rely exclusively on fundamental frequency (F0) to distinguish tone, with no significant role played by phonation, duration, or intensity, reinforcing its classification as a purely pitch-driven tone language. The longer duration in the contour tone is attributed to the need to accommodate its dynamic nature rather than serving as a primary cue for tonal contrast

One of the most significant contributions of this study is its exploration of Grammatical Tone (GT) in Chokri. The research demonstrates that GT arises through the deletion of functional morphemes, leaving behind a floating tone that attaches to the verbal root. This process allows grammatical distinctions, such as aspect and mood, to be conveyed tonally, ensuring that essential information is preserved despite the loss of segmental material. Crucially, GT does not override the inherent lexical tone of the root but instead concatenates with it, preserving tonal structure while adding a layer of grammatical meaning. GT is subject to strict linguistic constraints, operating under adjacency conditions and syntactic hierarchy rules that govern which morphemes may undergo deletion. Furthermore, this study reveals that GT also plays a role in morphological derivation, particularly in verb-to-noun transformations, demonstrating that tone is not merely a phonological feature but a fully integrated component of Chokri's morphosyntactic system.

Unlike many tonal languages where affixes lack inherent tone and adopt the tone of the root, Chokri affixes possess distinct underlying tonal specifications. Inflectional affixes maintain tonal stability across morphosyntactic constructions. Derivational affixes on the other hand, systematically alter the tone of the root, shifting mid and high tones to extra high or mid-rising, while preserving the original tone in roots that already bear low or extra high tones. These findings indicate that tonal alternations in Chokri are governed by predictable phonological rules rather than arbitrary shifts.

Keywords: Chokri, Tone, Pitch, Grammatical Tone, Inflection, Derivation.