

Building a unified intonational model for South Asian languages: InTraSAL

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While linguistic similarity and convergence across South Asian languages (SALs) has long been accepted within studies of syntax, morphology, and (segmental) phonology, discussions of intonational similarities have arisen only in the last decade, as the models of each individual language's intonation delve deeper into both the phonological structure and phonetic realization. However, a unified model of intonation across SALs, balancing typological similarities and differences, has yet to be proposed.

This talk explores the most current findings and models of a range of SALs, from both my own work and that of several others in the field, in order to identify the common ground underlying a sample of languages of the region. The shared properties at the base of this unified model of intonation proposed for this selection of SALs include: (i) a preference for word-initial stress marked by low tone, (ii) a sequence of repeating rising contours (RRCs) each spanning a roughly word-sized unit, and (iii) greater flexibility within the higher-level boundary tones than within the pitch accent inventory. I argue that this bundle of features characterizes SAL intonation, setting it apart from the intonation of other well-documented language groups.

In proposing this model, tentatively named Intonational Transcription of South Asian Languages (InTraSAL), I take note of important areas of crosslinguistic variation, including (i) the complex and variable role of syllable weight and (ii) the effects of voicing on pitch accent, as well as (iii) the phonetic alignment of what can be argued to be the same basic phonological pattern. I take these findings as an initial exploration into producing a “prosodic map” of South Asia, much like what has been done for Romance languages and varieties of Japanese. I also consider the applicability of the same model not only across languages, but also across speaking styles, and propose directions for further research to expand and test the model with more data.