

Linguistics Colloquia Series

Friday, November 17, 2017

3:30 p.m.-5:00 p.m.

513 Lattimore Hall

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SEENKU ARGUMENT-HEAD TONE SANDHI: MORPHOSYNTAX, PHONOLOGY, OR BOTH?

Seenku (Samogo, Northwestern Mande) is spoken by 15,000 people in southwestern Burkina Faso. Heavy segmental reduction has left a Southeast Asian-like phonology, characterized by mostly mono- and sesquisyllabic (Matisoff 1990) vocabulary and highly complex tonology. While grammatical tone and contextual tone changes (sandhi) are not uncommon in African languages, Seenku tone sandhi is also highly reminiscent of Asian systems in that sandhi tones are not simply the result of spreading, polarity, downstep, etc., but are determined based on the exact combination of triggering tone and target tone with often unexpected results. For instance, the input tones /Extra-low High/ have the output [Extra-low Extra-low], while the input tones /Extra-low Extra-low/ show the output [Low Low]. Further, this tone sandhi is limited to argument-head relations, but even then, only in specific morphosyntactic configurations. A final complication arises from the fact that certain heads (inalienable nouns) must obligatorily surface with an argument (a possessor), meaning that the supposed underlying form is never heard on the surface. All of these issues raise the age-old question of whether tone sandhi of this sort should be treated phonologically, morphosyntactically, or as a combination of the two.

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