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Third Tone Patterns in Mandarin Chinese: A New Perspective

Traditionally represented as “3→2/__3”, a categorical tone change from a low-dipping tone (T3) to a high-rising tone (T2), the well-studied phenomenon of Mandarin third tone sandhi (T3S) has been somewhat of a theoretical thorn. Most analyses of T3S are derivational in nature (e.g. Duanmu 2000, Xu 2001), and *non*-derivational accounts, often based on ad-hoc constraints and dubious assumptions regarding T3S domains, quickly run into problems. The current paper establishes basic T3S patterns with the help of pitch track data, shows that T3S domains largely coincide with syntactic structure, and proposes a non-derivational OT account. This account is rooted in a toneme deletion analysis which appeals to well-established principles of tonal markedness and their interaction with the OCP. The paper also highlights and accounts for the widely overlooked fact that T3 does not undergo sandhi in prosodically prominent positions.