Much research on sociolinguistic variation has focused on segmental phonology (e.g. Labov, 1972). Tonal variation in tone languages has scarcely been looked into. This study investigates Taiwanese tonal variation with focus on the Taiwanese tone sandhi circle. The sandhi circle, involving five tones (high level (H), mid-level (M), low level (L), rising (R), falling (F)), refers to a complex set of tone change rules required in speaking Taiwanese. In Taiwanese, every syllable has a citation tone and a sandhi tone. When a syllable appears alone or is placed in a final position of a phrase, it carries the citation tone. The citation tone on a syllable changes to the sandhi tone if the syllable occurs in a nonfinal position, as exemplified by /tshja/ ‘car’ in (1) (Other tones are not shown).

(1) a. Final position: /o tshja/ ‘black car’
   Citation tone: [H]
   Sandhi tone: /tshja ljan/ ‘car wheel’
   Sandhi tone: [M]

The sandhi tone of a citation tone is determined by the tone circle pattern in (2). For example, a syllable with the citation tone H would undergo this tone circle to derive its sandhi tone M, while a syllable with a citation tone M surfaces as L in a sandhi context, and so on.

(2)

While the tone sandhi circle is fairly stable, our study, which compares L1 Taiwanese dominant speakers with L1 Taiwanese ‘attrited’ speakers who shifted to Mandarin in childhood, indicates a specific change in progress in the tone sandhi circle. Our study includes six older Taiwanese speakers (average age: 61), five younger Taiwanese speakers (age range: 28-40), and ten L1 Taiwanese attrited speakers (age range: 28-40). The non-attribters have shown a variation in the canonical sandhi rule R→M. On the other hand, the attribters still preserve the rule and show much less variation. When encountering the sandhi rule R→M, the non-attribters preferred to use L (account for 66% of the data), instead of the prescribed M tone (33%), as the sandhi tone for R. However, the reverse is true with the attribters’ speech data. The attribters abided by the standard sandhi rule R→M 60% of the time, and sometimes followed R→L (26%). The nonattribters’ usage of two tonal variants with the R→M sandhi rule is indicative of an ongoing language change, which the attribters do not participate in. These results suggest that the attribters’ speech data might resemble how people performed the Taiwanese tone sandhi about 30 years ago, the time when the R→M sandhi rule might have commenced undergoing change and when they stopped using Taiwanese for daily functions. Over these 30 years, the R→M sandhi rule has been gradually shifted to R→L, which the attribters are unaware of due to their paucity of use of Taiwanese. As our data show, in examining language change in progress, attribters’ speech production, as opposed to older speakers’, might provide a picture of what language used to be like before in the past.