

## TONE CONTRAST IN LANGUAGE: THE IGBO AND TEE EXAMPLES

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### Abstract

This is a contrastive analysis of the tone system of Owere-Igbo and Tee. It sets out to show that certain rules in language such as tone rules, syllable structure rules, etc., which operate in Igbo and Tee are Universal (properties) principles, which differ in the dynamics of their operations in languages. To achieve the aims and objectives of the study, the researchers used their intuition as speakers of Owere-Igbo and employed direct oral interviews of Tee speakers as a method of data collection. The study was descriptively analysed and the following are its findings: the two languages are register tone languages. While Owere-Igbo has two tone levels-low [̀] high [´] tones and a down step [!]; Tee exhibits three tone levels-low [̀], high [´] and a mid-tone [-]. This is in line with the tenets of UG in that both languages share the universal properties of having a tone system; however, based on parameters, the dynamics of observable differences in the way the system operates distinguish them.

**Keywords:** Tone; language; principles; parameters; contrast; Tee; Igbo.

### Introduction

Chomsky (1983) proposes the Universal Grammar (UG), which he describes as ‘a set of linguistic features’. Ndimele (1999, p.2) affirms that ‘what each language does is to choose its specific repertoire from those presented by UG. The non-shared features of particular languages mark the cross-linguistic variation in individual languages. From the known features of particular languages, we abstract the universal properties that they share’. Thus, a contrastive study of the Tone and Vowel Harmony systems of Owere-Igbo and Tee fulfills the goals of Universal Grammar, and this is veritable in explanatory linguistic theory as it enables us to identify the linguistic principles the languages share and the parameterized features that distinguish them.

Tone and Vowel harmony are vital aspects of many world languages. Tone helps in the assignment of lexical and grammatical meanings on linguistic units, while vowel harmony ensures the co-occurrence of sets of vowels in words in a given language. Languages do not operate these systems the same way. Hence, the dynamics and the extent of the operation of these systems, bring to the fore the features that are common to both languages and those that differentiate them.

Information provided by the study will contribute to literature which will not only serve as reference material but may provide hypothetical ground for further studies. The instrument used in data collection includes a wordlist employed to collect data from selected speakers as primary sources; while Nlem (1995), provided the secondary data. The data used in this study were collected from two speakers of Tee, while the authors provided that of Owere-Igbo. Collected data were descriptively analyzed in comparative format, and the areas of study include Owerri Municipal which doubles as the capital of Imo State, and Tee in Tai Local Government Area in Ogoni, Rivers State. Igbo is classified under the West Benue Congo subfamily of the Niger-Congo language family (Williamson and Blench, 2009). On the other hand, Tee has been classified as a member of the Ogonoid group of languages within the Cross-River of Delta branch in the Niger-Congo phylum.

### **Review of Literature**

Three-quarters of the world's languages today majority of which are located in Asia, Africa and the Americas are tonal (cf. Yip 2002, p.1; Crystal 1987 p. 2000). Most of the languages of New Guinea are tonal (Donohue, 1997; Cahil, 2000). Europe also has lexical tone languages, such as the Swedeish-Norwegian dialect continuum, Lithuanian, Serbian, Slovene, the Central Franconia and Limburg dialects of German and Dutch, and Basque, languages of the Caucasus (Van der Hulst 1999). Finally, few languages in the Pacific islands are also tonal (Rivierre 2001). Evidence in the literature on tone indicates that some languages of Africa, Mexico, Southeast Asia and Japan have been described. In contrast, the languages of the Caucasus, the Amazon, and the easter Indonesia archipelago have received little or no attention (cf. Yip 2002 for maps of tonal areas). Pike (1948 p. 3-13) distinguished between languages with level tones and languages with contour tones. He called the first register tone languages and the latter contour tone languages.

Furthermore, Gussenhoven (2004 p.26) says that ‘tone contrast have a paradigmatic dimension, the number of tonal contrasts possible on a given syllable, and a syntagmatic dimension, the number of positions in the word where these contrasts are used. Concerning level tones, Gussenhoven (2004) points out that a large percentage of tonal languages have two-tier contrast (low vs. high). Maddieson (1978) notes that the level tone contrast could reach five. For instance, Yoruba has a three-tier contrast (Laniran, 1990), Mambila has a four-tier contrast (Connell, 2000), Benčnon has a five-tier contrast with a tonal contour (Wedwkind, 1983) and Iau (West Papua), has eight-tier contrast (Bateman, 1990). However, some of the Chinese languages are said to have up to ten-tier contrast (Sagart, 1999). Syntagmatically, tone languages also contrast the number of positions where tone contrast is possible. Gussenhoven (2004) notes that certain languages contrast tone on every syllable; Voorhoeve (1973) calls these languages *unrestricted tone languages*.

Conversely, restricted languages found in major phyla of Africa Niger Congo languages are largely tonal. Many scholars have also described tone language as one which makes use of pitch to differentiate word meaning and utterance (Hyman, 1975 p.2; Emenanjo, 1978; Pike, 1948; Williamson, 1984; Igwe, 1975). According to Hyman 1975, p. 552), tone is one of the prosodies (supra-segmental features) which are observed in tone languages. As prosody, it occurs over a single syllable. Other authors like Clark, Yallop and Fletcher (2007), describe tone “as a feature of the lexicon in terms of prescribed pitch on syllables”. According to Crystal (2008, p. 486), tone refers to the distinctive pitch level of a syllable. All these definitions suggest and emphasize the

importance of tone marks on the syllable to differentiate word meanings and utterances in tone languages. Tone refers to the pitch of the voice which can be high [´] or low [˘]. The difference in the pitch of the voice can be caused by the movement of vocal cords. If the vocal cords are vibrating fast, the pitch is high but if slowly, the pitch is low. In tone language, every syllable bears a tone. The least number of tones we can have in a language is two, i.e. high and low as in Izon.

### Tone System in Owere-Igbo and Tee

A tone language employs the use of tone for meaning distinction at the lexical level, grammatical level or both. Tone is therefore a variation in pitch that enters as a distinctive factor in the lexicon or grammatical constructions of a language. According to Pike (1948), 'A tone language is one in which contrastive pitch levels do not merely form the intonation tune of a sentence but enters as a distinctive factor into the lexical elements of the language'. In other words, tone distinguishes between the meanings of words with otherwise identical composition. Tone constitutes part of a word and distinguishes the meaning of lexical items as well as utterances that may otherwise appear identical in form without tone marks. In other words, tone is manipulated contrastively to realise minimal pairs as shown in the examples from the two languages in 1a-c below:

Ex.1	Owere-Igbo	Tee
a.	ídè 'flood'	bé 'fence'
b.	ídé 'pillar'	bè 'fight'(noun)
c.	ídē 'to write'	bē 'home'

Tone languages fall into two broad groups, register and contour tone language. Owere-Igbo and Tee belong to the group of register tone languages. In a register tone language, tones are recognised on levels. Igbo has two level tones which include; high tone (H) represented with an acute accent [´]; Low tone (L) represented with a grave accent [˘], and a tonal phenomenon down-step (DS) represented with (!). The down-stepped tone is sometimes also called 'step tone'.

Tee also has level tones since it maintains a steady pitch during the syllable production. The language has three distinct tone levels including a high (H) [´], a low (L) [˘] and a mid (M) [-] tone. However, while Tee does not exhibit contour tones, Owere-Igbo has two contour tones; the rising [ˆ] and the falling [ˆ] tones that are not particularly distinct.

Also, while Tee exhibits a discrete tone system that is, there is no automatic down step. Owere-Igbo operates a discrete tone system in which there is an automatic downstep after a high tone. In other words, the down-stepped tone does not immediately follow a low tone. A down step occurs as a result of the reduction of the high tone triggered by a floating low tone. This implies that Igbo has an automatic occurrence of down-step. This is shown in examples in 3. Ex. 3

	H H	H L	H S
a.	[áká] 'hand'	[íke] 'share'	[é!gó] 'money'
b.	[á?á] 'war'	[ádà] 'fall'	[é!lú] 'up'
c.	[áǎá] 'eye'	[áhà] 'huke'	[ó!nú] 'mouth'

Note that example 3 above shows that, in terms of their environments of occurrence, there are no restrictions for the high and low tones. Hence, they can occur in any environment in the world, unlike the down step whose distribution is restricted to before a floating low tone; thus, the down-stepped tone does not immediately follow a low tone. Tone is usually realised on the vowel of the

syllable or any other syllabic element and is marked on all the tone-bearing units (TBUs) (Anagbogu, Mbah & Eme, 2001; Igwe, 1999; Emenanjo, 1978; Williamson, 1984).

Tone plays an essential role in the African languages. The majority of African languages are tone languages in which differences in relative pitch are used to convey lexical and grammatical distinction. The lexical distinction has been exemplified in example 1 above. At the grammatical level, the tone is vital in differentiating relative constructions from declarative constructions in Owere-Igbo. This can be seen in examples 4 and 5 below:

Ex. 4 Owere-Igbo

- a. Àdá màrà m!má                    ‘Ada is beautiful’  
 b. Àdá mārā m!má                    ‘Ada who is beautiful’

- Ex. 5 a. Òbí zùrù òshi! jí                ‘Obi stole yam’  
 b. Òbí zūrū òshi! jí                    ‘Obi who stole yam’

Examples (3b) and (4b) are relativized by the tonal modification of the verbs *mara* and *zuru*. The tone is equally functional in distinguishing between interrogative and declarative constructions. In literature, there are about six grammatical functions of tone, but few of them are exemplified in this paper. Hence in Tee, tone plays an important role in the grammatical distinction between declarative and negative constructions. As seen in the examples in 6:

- Ex. 6 Tee a. À de nu ‘He will eat’ (Declarative)  
 b. A de nu ‘He will not eat’ (Negation)

Note that the difference between 6a and 6b is signaled by the differences in the tone on the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular morpheme ‘a’; and the verb ‘nu’. While the ‘a’ bears a low tone in the declarative construction in 6a, it bears a high tone in the negative construction in 6b. Tone is equally functional in distinguishing between interrogative and declarative constructions in Igbo. Consider the following examples in 7 below:

Ex. 7 Owere-Igbo

- a) Ó zùrù oshí                    égō ‘He stole money’  
 b) Ò zúrú òshí                    égō ?‘Did he steal money?’  
 c) Ó gbàrà ávù                    ‘she danced’  
 d) Ò gbára ávù?                    ‘Did she dance?’

Note that the distinction between the interrogatives and declaratives as exemplified above is signaled by a tonal change in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular ‘O which bears a high tone in the deconstruction of 7a and 7c, but a low tone in its interrogative counterpart in 6b and 6d.

Tee exhibits a discrete tone system as stated earlier, that is, there is no automatic or non-automatic downstep. The examples in 4 below show the unrestricted distribution of Tee tones.

Ex.4 3 level	HH	MM	LL
3 failing	HM	HL	ML
3 rising	MH	LH	LM

The above-unrestricted distributions of tones in Tee reveal nine possible combinations in the language as exemplified in 5 below:

Ex.5 Level:	HH	MM	LL
a.	[ákpó ] 'bone'	[péné ] 'sea'	[májá] 'laugh'
b.	[kára] 'frog'	[dána] 'carry'	[ápá] 'large groom'
Falling:	HM	HL	ML
c.	[sírā] 'sister'	[hw íní] 'monkey'	[ʔòrò ] 'crayfish'
		-8-	
d.	[pólō] 'fish'	[ágà] 'strong'	[kòrò] 'okra'
Rising: MH	LH	LM	
e.	[lōó ] 'story'	[tèèrá] 'run'	[péé ] 'jump'
f.	[dūá] 'weed'	[sùē] 'spear'	

The raised tone (i.e. MH, LH and MH) is common among the Ogoni Language group. Ikoro (1994, p.213), states that in Kana 'the raised tone is always in complementary distribution with the high tone wherever it occurs'. Ngulube (2013 p.206) on the other hand, posited that 'the raised tone is not a distinct level in either Kana or the entire group'. It appears to have been derived from an underlying high-low or high-mid. The same applies to Tee as the examples we have for the raised tone are very minimal when compared to examples for level or falling tones.

In Languages like Efik (Winston 1960) or Yala-Ikom (Armstrong, 1968) that have non-automatic down-step, it is suggested that it is hard to differentiate between a mid-tone (-) and down-stepped high tone (!H). Such difficulties do not arise in Tee, because there is no down-step in Tee as discussed earlier.

However, in Yoruba (cf. Akinlabi, 1985, Pulleyblank, 1986), it is postulated that the mid-tone is not a defacto underlying tone, but rather a default tone, whose presence is determined by rules as in Igbo. Clark (1990), asserts that the high tone is a default tone. From available data, there is no evidence to analyze the high, mid or low tones in Tee as default tones.

## Conclusion

In the foregoing, we have identified different tonal systems in Owere-Igbo and Tee. We established that the two languages are registered tone languages; while the Igbo language has two distinct tone levels [ / ] high and [ \ ] low, with a tonal phenomenon down-step [-] HS, Tee has three distinct tone levels including [ / ] high, [ \ ] low and [-] mid. While down-step is automatic in Owere-Igbo, it is non-automatic in Tee. Our findings reveal that the two languages share the principle features of a tonal system, but differ from each other in the parameterized features of the differences in the operation or application of these principles in/on the languages.

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