

A Comparison of the Operation of Tone in English Language and in Some Nigerian Languages: A Study of Berom, Tarok, Igala, Idoma and Kwalla Languages

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Abstract

It is undoubtedly evident that there is hardly any vocal language that is spoken without the fluctuation of pitch. This is mostly for the purposes of explicitness, clarity and to add significance to that which is spoken. This study examines and compares the manner in which tone is operated in English language and in some Nigerian languages. Despite existing arguments like that of Beach (1924) that recognises English as a tonal language, this paper provides more to the fact that English is not a tonal language but an intonation language since by definition, in tone languages, the meaning of a word changes with the application of tone. It inclines towards the expression of syntactic, discursal, attitudinal, psychological and grammatical functions. Tone marks are often used to indicate tone in words. They could be basically, rise, fall, or mid tones although there are other intermediaries. This research is limited to the application of tone in some Nigerian languages as different from that which is obtainable in English language with copious examples. Languages spoken in three middle belt states of Nigeria namely, Plateau, Benue and Kogi are used in this research.

Introduction

According to katamba (239), all languages use pitch. This in part is the consequence of the fact that any time a voiced sound is produced, the vocal folds vibrate at a certain rate. The rate of vibration corresponds closely to the pitch perceived by the hearer: the higher the rate of vibration, the higher is the perceived pitch. The fact that pitch differences can be observed in the utterances of any language is in itself of no great interest. The ways in which pitch differences are functionally harnessed are the interest of linguists. Pitch differences can be exploited in two ways. Within the domain of the word, the pitch can be used to contrast lexical meaning or to mark grammatical properties. In this case, we speak of tone. On the other hand, the domain of pitch can be an entire utterance, in which case we speak of intonation. Some scholars have argued that it would be wrong to classify languages as either tonal or intonational because all languages have intonation and that includes tone languages.

In linguistics, intonation is variation of spoken pitch that is not used to distinguish words; instead it is used for a range of functions such as indicating the attitudes and emotions of the speaker, signaling the difference between statements and questions and between different types of questions, focusing attention on important elements of the spoken message and also, helping to regulate conversational interaction. It contrasts with tone, in which pitch variation in some languages does distinguish words either lexically or grammatically. Sometimes, people use the terms intonation and tone interchangeably, Some British writers use tone in their descriptions of intonation, but this is to refer to the pitch movement found on the nucleus or tonic syllable in an intonation unit.

Literature Review.

Different authorities in various aspects of linguistics anchor their submissions on the fact that intonation is the contour of the voice which reveals different mood of the speakers. By this, intonation may also be understood as the pitch movements that convey different meanings found at the sentence level. O'Connor & Arnod,1976, Cruttenden, 1986, Ladd, 1996, Wells, 2006.

In his own view Wells (1) defines intonation as “the study of how the pitch of the voice rises and falls, and how speakers use this pitch variation to convey linguistic and pragmatic meaning”. From the meaning of what intonation is, it is obvious that as also noted by Jonathan (132) “ Intonation in English is not just an embellishment of the language. But it often carries additional information beyond the spoken words that introduce shades of meanings in various ways”.

On the other hand tone is another prosodic characteristic, being realized mainly by differences in pitch of voice (e.g high level, mid level, low level, rising or falling). Wells (3) notes that, “some languages use tone lexically.” This implies that, the choice of tone do effect the lexical form of a word. This is in contrast to intonation where the choice of tone does not alter the lexical identity of the word. It is in view of this that Wells further states that, “English does not use tone lexically: in the sense, it is not a tone language. But English does use tone for intonation”. On their part, Ladefoged and Johnson (255) stress that, “Speakers of English often find it hard to consider the tone as an important meaningful part of a word. But for speakers of a tone language, a difference in tones is just as significant as a difference in consonant or vowel quality”.

In their justification of the distinctiveness though not mutually exclusiveness of tone and intonation, Ladefoged and Johnson (255) explain that; “Pitch variations that affect the meaning of a word are called tones. In the majority of languages in the world, the meaning of a word depends on tone. All languages also use intonation, the use of pitch variations, to convey syntactic information”.

As earlier noted in the introduction, all languages use pitch but there also seems to be some universal aspects to the ways in which languages use pitch differences to convey linguistic information. Yadugiri (86) also in his effort to shade more light on pitch, describes it by saying “the overall behavior of the pitch is called the tone and intonation is the study of tones or patterns in the variations of pitch levels”. Therefore for the purpose of the point we intend arriving at, it will not be out of place to classify languages according to tone and intonation. However, tone and intonation are not completely mutually exclusive in language. It is in view of this that Gimson (338) throw a caution in their usage by saying; “ Those English learners whose mother tongue is a TONE language may find the concept of INTONATION functions as they occur in

English and other European languages entirely novel". From our discussion so far, there is need for us to take a closer look at tonal and intonational language and their meeting point if any as we further considered their differences.

Differences Between Tone and Intonation.

Over the years, scholars have widely acknowledged the fact that there is a strong and important relationship between intonation and tone. Yet this relationship has not been clearly defined. Though their linguistic operations has helped in bringing out their distinctions to some extent. Therefore following the generally observed phenomenon of interchanging tone and intonation, it becomes important to clearly distinguish the two. Banjo (1976) says 'the appropriate use of stress and intonation is 'the final hurdle' which the vast majority of speakers of English as a second language 'never manage to cross'. A distinction is here presented.

Crystal (1) says that... 'intonation is not a single system of contours and levels but the product of the interaction of features from different prosodic systems-tone, pitch-range, loudness, rhythmicity and tempo in particular' while Jowitt (2007) regards intonation as 'referring principally to the sequence in continuous speech of fluctuating pitch contours'.

Eka (81) opines that natural languages are never spoken at one level of voice pitch for a considerable length of time. He claims that, when variation in pitch occurs in relation to sentence, clause, phrase or group or to a rankshifted word, then it is at the level of intonation...languages which use pitch in this way are said to be intonational e.g. English, German and Russia are examples of such. The term pitch also varies from tone, Katamba (53) puts it that 'the pitch of an utterance depends on the rate of vibration of the vocal cords, the higher the rate of vibration, the higher the resulting pitch becomes...in a tone language, those pitch differences are used phonemically either to differentiate between word meanings or to convey grammatical distinctions. Eka (81) further states that when variation in pitch relates to words or is at the word level, then it signals tone. Languages which use pitch in this way are tonal. E.g. Chinese, Spanish, Italian and a majority of African and Nigerian languages such as Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Berom, Ibibio are in this category. The study of tone in natural language is called tonetics or tonemics depending on the focus (Eka 81).

S.E Smith (28) defines a tonal language as a language in which pitch is used as a part of speech, changing the meaning of a word'. Katamba (53) says, 'the pitch of an utterance depends on the rate of vibration of the vocal folds, the higher the rate of vibration, the higher the pitch becomes'. In writing tonal languages, the use of diacritical marks become necessary in order to show the point(s) of pitch change. Most languages of sub-saharan Africa are said to be tonal except Swahili in the East and Wolof and Fulani in the West.

Theoretical Framework

The Operation of Tone in English and in some Nigerian Languages

It is worthy of note that, every language operates intonation and can have tone boundaries and tonetic marks to show the stress placement. Affirming this, Katamba (239) says... 'It would be wrong to classify languages as either tonal or intonational because all languages have intonation and that includes tone languages. Nevertheless, languages operate tone differently Pam (1) posit that 'pitch is not used in the same way in all languages, all languages which have sounds have

pitch differences'. In tone languages these pitch differences are used either to differentiate between word meanings or to convey grammatical distinctions. For English, a change in pitch or tone does not correspond to a change in meaning. It could only change the meaning from a pragmatic view point e.g.

- Be reasonable (pragmatically, could mean, don't be stupid but semantically, the meaning is unchanged despite the way it is said)

Tone, in Nigerian languages, bring about a change in lexical meaning while in intonation languages such as English, a change in tone does not change the meaning of lexical items. So, while Berom, Tiv, Tarok, Afizere, Igala, Idoma and Kwalla are tonal languages, English is an intonation language. Crosswhite and Mc Donough affirm this when they said 'Chinese is a tone language while English is an intonation language' (25). Berom and other Nigerian tonal languages assign tone on both lexical and phrasal levels while English assigns an intonation only on phrasal level in order to achieve a change in meaning.

There are specific generally accepted symbols by phoneticians technically called 'tonetic' marks that are used to indicate tonality. Below is the list as adapted from Katamba (53)

- High (/)
- Mid (-)
- Low (\)
- Rising (- /)
- Falling (- \)
- Fall-rise (\ /)

Cruttenden's tones in relation to those of O'Connor and Arnold as cited in Jowitt (68) and Pam (4-5) are as follows;

- High-fall i.e. from high to low pitch (high-drop)
- Low-fall i.e. mid (low drop)
- High-rise i.e. a rise ending high (high bounce)
- Low-rise i.e. a fall ending high (take off, low bounce)
- Fall-rise (switch back, high dive)
- Mid-level (terrace)

Comparing English and Nigerian languages in terms of tonality, we find that both languages use tone in one way or the other and this is because centrally, no vocal language is spoken without the fluctuation of pitch across various levels but the way in which English language uses tone and its resultant effects varies from that obtainable in Nigerian languages and other tonal languages around the world such as Chinese, Mandarin among others.

English is a stress-timed language while most Nigerian languages as shall be revealed in the following examples, are tonal. In English, a change in the tone of a word does one of three functions viz: conveys attitude, changes a statement into a question or changes the grammatical category of the word. See examples below:

- Be reasonable! (shows attitude)

- A- I gave him twenty thousand naira
B- Twenty? (shows attitude)
- A- She went to London (statement)
B- She went to London? (question)
- A- James has built a new house (statement)
B- James has built a new house? (question)
- I will import rice from China (verb)
- A ban has been placed on imports (noun)
- This is to impact knowledge (verb)
- The impact made on the car by the accident (noun)

In contrast to the operation of tone in Nigerian languages, a change in tone nearly always changes the meaning of the word entirely. See examples from some Nigerian languages below:

Berom

Word	Meaning
Nnei	Children
Nneí	Oil
Yóm	to suffer
Yòm	a local guitar
Hwei	child
Hweí	grass
Yòl	to fight
Yól	Bedbugs
Lyéng	Soup
Lyèng	Scorpion
Chun	Hungry rice
Chun	Zebra
Féng	Thank
Fèng	a state of being drunk

Tarok

Word	Meaning
Uchá	Woman
Uchā	to tear
Cé	Clan
Cé	Fuck
Cé	Hole
Tár	to pour
Tár	to enter
Itam	Goat
Itam	Goats

Máhá	Teaching
Maha	to teach (learn)
Maha	to measure

Idoma

Word

Meaning

Ewu	Goat
Ewu	Firewood or War
Awká	Story
Awká	Priestly bangle
Awka	Haughty
ókpa	A Nigerian delicacy made of bambara nuts
ókpa	Sceptre
ókpa	Book or Stream

Igala

Word

Meaning

Okó	Husband
Òkó	farm
Òkò	ship
Oko	Millipede
Okó	Money
Awo	Guinea fowl
Awo	An increase
Awo	A slap
Awo	A Comb

Kwalla

Word

Meaning

Tóhk	soup
Tóhk	Neck
Na'an'	God
Na'an'	Gun
Dèm	Groat
Dém	Like or Love
Yíl	Sand or World
Yíl	Write
Kógom	Wind
Kogom	Promiscuity

Tiv

Word

Meaning

Gá	Not
Gà	Question tag
Nóngó	Group of (people)
Nóngó	to Struggle

Vang̀	Wash
Vang´	Abuse
Kòm	Bambara nut
Kóm	Ear
Gwan	Cocoa yam
Gwan	Groan
Loe	House
Loe	Apply

From the data here presented, this research has found that, in some Nigerian languages, a change in Pitch does not only result in a change in the meaning of the lexical item but a change in its plurality status, the word changes from being singular to its plural form. Berom and Tarok languages are examples of languages that exhibit such characteristics but this is not the case for Idoma where the sound /a/ is often used before the word in order to pluralise it.

Test of Plurality by the addition of tone in Berom and Tarok Languages

Berom		Tarok	
Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
Dyól (goat)	Dyòl (goats)	Itam (Goat)	Itám (goats)
Pyè (a thing)	Pyé (things)		
Yenèng (grain)	Yenéng (grains)		
Rweí (Pot)	nRwei (Pots)		

Another finding of this study is the fact that some Nigerian languages operate tone in such a way that the word in question is spelt the same and the tone is exactly the same but the meaning differs. The question is; what then informs the change in meaning and how should the listener(s) arrive at the intended meaning? See examples below:

Tarok	Kwalla	Idoma
Cé (clan)	Kòhgóm (wind)	Òkpá (Sceptre)
Cé (hole)	Kòhgóm (promiscuity)	Òkpá (book)
Cé (fuck)	Loé (house)	Òkpá (stream)
	Loé (apply)	
	Van´g (wash)	

Van'g (apply)

One way to determine the intended meaning in this case would be by the context of the utterance. The listener may have to understand the context in relation to the co-text in order to arrive at the accurate intention of the speaker. This provides the platform for further research in this direction.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has examined the operation of tone in English language and some Nigerian languages namely: Berom, Tarok, Idoma, Igala, Tiv and Kwalla languages by way of comparison. As its findings, the research has shown that though English as well as Nigerian Languages operate tone, they do that via diverse means. In English language, a change in tone does not change the meaning of the word but the word class and also expresses attitude or question forms while in some Nigerian languages, a change in tone signals a change in meaning and sometimes, a change in plurality status but does not change the word class of the lexical item. Jowitt (2007) supports the claim that 'Nigerian English lacks the attitudinal and discursual functions of native speaker English' since it is not intonational. So, while English is an intonation language, Nigerian languages are tonal. Issues raised in this paper have provided the room for further studies

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