

# Tone

A whistle-stop tour of (Bantu) tone and transcription

# Aims

- To be able to transcribe sentences with (surface) tone
- To know how to get around uncertainties in tone marking

# Motivation

Transcribing your data with tone is important because

Tone is morphology – you wouldn't omit any prefixes from your transcription either

Tone is an interesting topic to study by itself

Other linguists may be interested in other aspects of the language than you (including tone!), and will still be able to use your data

## Further reading

(with thanks to Michael Marlo)

- For further materials, see Michael Marlo's slides on tone transcription on Academia.edu:  
[file:///Users/walgjvander/Downloads/Studying\\_Tone\\_1\\_Tonal\\_Transcription.pdf](file:///Users/walgjvander/Downloads/Studying_Tone_1_Tonal_Transcription.pdf)
- Hyman, Larry M. 2014. How To Study a Tone Language, with exemplification from Oku (Grassfields Bantu, Cameroon). *Language Documentation & Conservation* 8. 525-562.
- Odden, David. 2014. Nonlinear representations, Chapter 9. In: *Introducing Phonology*, 2nd Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

# What is tone?

- The use of pitch to distinguish lexical and/or grammatical meaning
- Lexical functional load:
  - i. gʊkúá 'to die'
  - ii. gʊkua 'to carry'
- Grammatical functional load:
  - i. n'áínáǵá 's/he used to sing'
  - ii. n'áínagá 's/he sings'

# How many and which tones?

- Level tones vs. contour tones:
  - level tones remain on the same pitch, HH or LL
  - contour tones change: HL or LH
- Bantu languages generally have a binary opposition: H vs L (or H vs  $\emptyset$ )
- “Contour tones” are thus often simply combinations of H and L
  - this is especially visible when contours can only be present on long syllables:
    - i. máyaáni            H.LH.L ‘leaves’
    - ii. mweéri            L.LH.L ‘month’ < mu-éri

## Exercise 1

- Repeat the words, including the correct tone
- Hum or whistle the word to abstract away from the pronunciation
- Write down in Hs and Ls what tone pattern each word has

For example:

gũtema = L.H.L

Ibabai = L.L.LL

## How to write tones

- We conventionally write high tones with an acute accent [á] and leave low tones unmarked.
- In some cases it may be helpful to also write low tones, with a grave accent [à]
- Contour tones on long syllables can simply be indicated as a combination: [áa] or [aá]
- Contour tones on short syllables can be represented as a circumflex accent: [â] for falling (HL), and [ǎ] for rising (LH)

## Exercise 2

- Write down the words, including their tones
- If necessary, first hum or whistle the word

## Exercise 3

• Which word do you hear? (Gitigania, Nancy Mbaka's student)

A. mwárí 'young female cow'

B. mwári 'door'

A. ngúkú 'great, grand'

B. ngúku 'gulp'

C. ngukú 'chicken'

A. narire 'he ate'

B. naríré 'did he eat?'

A. naúráníré 'he married (today)'

B. naúraníre 'he married (yesterday)'

C. naúráníre 'he married (before yesterday)'

# TBU

(Tone bearing unit)

- What bears a tone is usually the mora, and in some languages the syllable
- That is how two combining vowels, or a long vowel, can each bear their own tone
- And that is also how nasals can sometimes bear tone:

(Makhuwa)

kham'phíya 'he doesn't arrive'

kalápínteéro 'carpenter'

# Downdrift

- High tones that directly follow each other are pronounced at the same pitch level
- But the second high tone after an intervening low will be pronounced at a slightly lower level than the first high.
  - This is an automatic process
  - It is called **downDRIFT**
  - It is caused by the reducing pressure in the lungs

HHLHL = ˉˉ \_ - \_

# Downstep

- A second high tone may also be pronounced at a lower pitch than a directly preceding one, without an obvious low in between.
    - This is called **downSTEP**
    - It is caused by an underlying low tone or a depressor consonant
    - It should not be confused with a mid tone: even if phonetically it comes out at some mid level, phonologically it is still a two-tone system
    - It is indicated by a superscript down arrow or exclamation mark
- HH<sup>!</sup>HL = ˉ ˉ – \_
- ... na Kanywá !ngúkú  
(He gave Peter a mango) 'and Kanywa a chicken'

# Boundary tones

- Reaching the end of a phrase or clause may have consequences for the tone
- Tonal processes may be sensitive to boundaries, e.g. high-tone spread to the penultimate vowel of a phrase
- A boundary tone may be added, e.g. LH to indicate non-finality:  
méémbé                      mangos  
méémbeé...                as for mangos, ...

## Exercise 4

- Form pairs (or small groups) with at least one speaker of a tonal language
- That speaker chooses a word or small phrase, pronounces it, and both/all try to write it down with the correct tones

# Pitfalls

- If you haven't heard the tones correctly, you may ask the speaker to say the utterance again, and perhaps more slowly BUT speaking the words individually will get you their tonal citation form! In connected speech, tones may influence each other. Wherever possible, try to transcribe the surface tone in the actual utterance.
- Or speakers may repeat with a question intonation if they haven't understood.
- Some languages (e.g. Nilotic lgs) may use tone for case marking
- Emotive speech can sometimes appear to be extra high – this does not mean that the language should be analysed as having a third (superhigh) tone, but that emphasis may raise the whole register: still the same H and L, just in a different pitch range.