Tonal Sandhi in the Yoruba Language

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Abstract

This paper looks at a phonological phenomenon called tonal sandhi which is seen as an interaction among tones especially in register tone languages like Yoruba. The work examines various grammatical constructions where this linguistic feature usually occurs. It is observed that tones do not change or displace one another especially when words appear in isolation. Such interaction which often leads to displacement is noticeable in speech within some grammatical constructions. We equally discover that vowel elision leads to tone movement (since tone operates on a different tier, it does not get elided with vowel). This in turn leads to tone displacement.

Keywords: tones, perturbation of tone or tonal sandhi, tone placement and tone Assimilation, register tone language. tone elision, floating tone.

Introduction

Many languages of the world are adjudged to be tonal. Despite the prevalence of tone as a feature of most languages, especially African and Asian languages, scholars appear skeptical about the precise definition of a tone language. It is somewhat controversial. It is common to linguists to emphasize its lexical significance, that in a tone language, according to Cruttenden (1997), tone is a feature of the lexicon, accounted for in terms of prescribed pitches for syllable or sequences of pitches for morphemes or words. That is, tone distinguishes the meanings of words (see Pike 1948, Katamba 1989). In other words, speakers of tone languages can be expected to regard tone as a significant part of a syllable, or morpheme or word. Because of the foregoing, Clark et al (2007) note that most of the world's languages are in fact tonal including major East Asian languages such as Chinese, Vietnamese, Burmese and Thai, as well as a good number of African and Papua New Guinea languages. Comrie (1987) says in the traditional classification, the African languages would be regarded as register tone languages and the Asian as contour systems.

Tonal organization in grammatical construction in the Yoruba language refers to the use of certain tone to replace another tone in speech. Clarke et al (2007) observe that literature on tone languages suggests that interactions among tones are typical rather than unusual. Examples of such tonal organization are change of tone, tone placement and tone assimilation. In Yoruba, sequences of adjacent tone may influence each other phonetically or phonologically. Such a phenomenon is sometimes called *perturbation of tone* or *tonal sandhi* according to Pike (1948) and Crystal (2003). In this tonal phenomenon, for example, a word which in isolation would have a low tone may be given a higher tone if a high-tone word follows. Tone which appears on a word or a particle when such word is in isolation or when it is written in a metalanguage is called identification tone. For example, lexical tones on the following words are their identification tones: *ilé (house), igi (tree), ìwe (book), ouújẹ (food)* etc. However, in a speech or sentence, we can modify these identification tones by changing them to some other tone as given above. In other words, it often seems to be the case in register tone language like Yoruba that tonal options on individual syllables are constrained by word patterns.

2. Tonal Sandhi in Yoruba
2.1 Tone Organization

These are some of the grammatical constructions where there can be tonal organization in the Yoruba language:

i.   Verb + Noun Object

If a monosyllabic word which has low tone with its identification tone appears before a noun object of the verb, the low tone of the verb must change to mid tone. For example:

nà 'to beat'

      a.   Olu na Dada   'Olu beat Dada'

        fò   'to jump'

      b.   Olu fo koto   'Olu jumped pot-hole'

ii.   Noun Subject + 'n' Verbal Particle

When the first or second person singular pronoun which is the subject of the sentence is appears before 'n' verbal particle, the identification tone of the subject pronoun may change to low tone or remain unchanged.

      a. Mo 'I'

        Mò n´ jó 'I am dancing   or

        Mo n´ jó 'I am dancing'

iii.   Verb + Object Pronoun

A pronoun which is used as object of the verb usually has a high tone if a verb that appears before the object pronoun has a low tone or a mid tone as its identification tone.

      a. Adé tàn wá   'Ade deceived us'

      b. Olú jọ mí   'Olu resembles me'

However, object pronoun usually has a mid tone if a verb preceding it has a high tone as the identification tone.

      a.   Adé bú wa   'Ade insulted us'

      b.   Olu kọ mi   'Olu taught me'

iv.   Noun + Qualifier

When some adjectives qualify nouns, certan tonal changes are noticeable. They are as follow:

- If the qualifier is a noun which starts with consonant or some pronouns, if the last syllable of the noun qualifier does not bear mid tone, we must elongate the vowel in such syllable of the noun qualifier with mid tone.

      Ìwé   'book'

      bàtà a Bọsẹ 'Bose's shoes'

- If the last syllable of the noun qualified by an adjective has a low tone preceded by another low tone, low tone in the last syllable of the noun will become mid-tone.

      a. èdè   'language'

        ède ewì 'poetic language'

      b. àgbà 'elder'

        àgba akin 'fearless elder'

- If the last syllable of the noun qualified by an adjective has a mid tone or if the qualifier is a noun starting with a vowel, we may or may not elongate the vowel of the last syllable of such noun with a mid tone.

      a. àwo 'plate'

        àwo o baba 'father's plate' Or,

        àwo baba   'father's plate'

      b. ilé 'house'

        ilé-ise 'industry'

        ilé e ise 'industry'

- If the last syllable of a noun phrase subject has a mid tone as its identification tone, and if a high tone seems not to precede this mid-tone directly, or if the last syllable of the noun phrase subject has a low

tone, if another low tone precedes the low tone of the noun phrase subject, then we shall change the mid-tone or the low tone of the last syllable of the noun phrase subject to a high tone in some sentences with subject and the topic of the sentence. For instance,

    a.   ẹlému mi 'my palmwine-tapper'
          ẹlému mí ta 'my palmwine-tapper sells '

          ìwọ 'you'
          ìwọ kọ ilé 'you built house'

    v.   Subject pronoun and some particles

If third person plural pronoun in subject position appears directly before certain particles like (ìbáà 'whether', yoo 'will', kì í/kò/ò 'negation'), the high tone of this pronoun will change to a mid tone. For example,

    a. wọn ìbáà lọ 'whether they go'
    b. wọn yóò ra bata 'they will buy a pair of shoes'
    c. wọn kìí/kò/ò pariwo 'they do not make noise'

    vi. Subject pronoun and 'a' particle

If first or second plural pronoun in object position precedes 'a' particle directly, the mid tone of the pronoun in the object position may change to a low tone or remains unchanged. For example,

    a. a 'we' (1st. person plural)
        à á lọ 'we will go'
                or,
        a á lọ 'we will go'

    b. ẹ 'you' (2nd person plural)
        ẹ ẹ ta, 'you will sell'
            or
        ẹ ẹ ta 'you will sell'

2.2 Tone Movement in Yoruba

    The movement of tone from its original position to another position is known as tone movement. Such tone which is moved from its original position has the capacity to displace or delete another tone neighboring to it mostly at the morphemic boundary. Owolabi 1986 asserts that without tone movement consequent upon vowel elision, there can not be tone elision. In other words, both co-occur. The occurrence of tone movement and tone elision may not always co-occur especially in the metamorphosis of nasal consonant to syllabic nasal consonant as we shall see below.

	A			B		C
(i)	gbé àga	'carry chair'	→	gb ´ àga	→	gbága.
(ii)	dá ẹmu	'tap wine'	→	d ´ ẹmu	→	dẹ´mu
(iii)	aya-ki-aya	'bad wife'	→	aya- k ´ -aya	→	ayakáya
(iv)	pa ìgbín	'kill snail'	→	pa ` gbín	→	pàgbín
(v)	ẹni ìkínní	'first person'	→	ẹni ` kínní	→	ẹnìkínní
(vi)	kọ ìwé	'write book'	→	kọ ` wé	→	kọ̀wé
(vii)	wọn wà nílé	'they are at home'	→	wọn wà n ´ lé	→	wọn wà ńlé
(viii)	èmi ni mo lọ	'its me that went'	→	èmi n mo lọ	→	èmi n mo lọ

    In the above examples, (A) shows that the tone to be moved appears on a vowel sound. (B) reveals that we must first delete the vowels whose tone will be moved. This eventually results to floating tone. Since there is no floating tone in speech or words, we must move the floating tone from its original position and dock or re-attach it to the vowel segment that is directly after it across morpheme boundary. A floating tone according to Crystal (2003) is one which has been separated from a syllable following the application of a phonological rule, and now has no association with any particular tone-bearing unit in the representation. The term 'docking' is

sometimes used to refer to the process whereby a floating unit is reattached to a representation. This is shown by step (C) and illustrated by examples (i- iii); or to the last vowel of the word that precedes it as exemplified by (iv-vi). In examples (vii) and (viii) we move the tone to the nasal consonant that has no tone at all. This process (tone movement) eventually makes the said nasal consonant becomes syllabic nasal consonant. Here, as noted above, unless the tone movement applies, there is no tone elision or displacement.

Summary of Findings and Conclusion

It is evident from the foregoing there is no aspect of linguistics that is independent of itself. The work shows the interrelationship between syntax and phonology as it concerns tone perturbation in Yoruba. Tones do not change or displace one another especially when words appear in isolation. Vowel elision leads to tone movement. Besides, the work further lends credence to the claim of Goldsmith (1976) which he calls a multilinear phonological analysis in which different features may be placed on separate tiers showing their independence of the other. Separate tiers are indeed a reflection of the parallel articulatory activities of speech. This accounts for the reason why the elision of vowel segment on the segmental tier does not affect the tonal tier.

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