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English, a Tonal Language?

Pam, Keziah Jonah

Department of English,

University of Jos, Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria

E-mail: keziapam11@yahoo.com; kepam@unijos.edu.ng

+2348035531964

Abstract

Pitch or intonation as it is often called is used in all languages to add special significance to what is said. When a person speaks, the pitch of his voice keeps altering. Sometimes it is high, and sometimes it is low. If the pitch does not change in this manner, the spoken utterance will sound monotonous and the speech will be deprived of an important means of expression. This paper seeks to answer the question as to whether English, is a tonal language. Does it behave like other tonal languages around the globe? Tone is associated with lexical meaning, distinguishing one word from another. Diacritical marks are used for indicating tone to eliminate confusion. The general conclusion is English, is not a tonal language. English is an intonation language which expresses syntactic, discourse, grammatical and attitudinal functions. English has also been referred to as a stress language where a change in stress changes the grammatical category of the word and not the meaning as seen in the case of tonal languages. Regardless of the fact that English is not a tonal language, sometimes Nigerian English assigns tone which relies heavily on a pragmatic implication to arrive at meaning.

Introduction

Pitch is not used in the same way in all languages. Many African languages are tone languages and use differences of intonation to distinguish words which are alike in every other respect. All languages which have sounds have pitch differences. In tone languages, those pitch differences are used either to differentiate between word meaning or to convey grammatical distinctions. Physically changing the pitch of a sound can occur in two ways. The first is the stretching and tensing of the vocal folds: the tenser they are, the higher the pitch. The second is changing the pressure below the vocal folds, the sub glottal pressure: the more pressure, the higher the pitch (Catford, 182). The pitch of an utterance depends on the rate of vibration of the vocal folds, the higher the rate of vibration, the higher the resulting pitch becomes (Katamba, 53). In languages where pitch plays a role, some sequence of segments may have different meanings if uttered at different relative pitches. Pitch variations used in this way are called tones.

Tonal Languages around the Globe

A tonal language is a language that uses tone to distinguish words. Tone is a phonological trait common to many languages around the world (though rare in Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, and the Pacific. Chinese is perhaps the well known of such languages (Dediu, D. & Ladd D. R. 2007). A tonal language has also been viewed by Smith, S. E. (2008) as a language in which pitch is used as a part of speech changing the meaning of a word. When a tonal language is written, typical diacritical markings are used to indicate tone, to eliminate confusion.

In addition to Chinese, many East Asian languages like Thai, Veitnamese, Lao and Burmese are tonal. In Tibet, which is riven by harsh geography, the Central and Eastern dialects of Tibetan (including that of the capital Lhasa) are tonal, while the dialects of the West are not. In Europe, Norwegian, Swedish, Bosnian, some dialects of Slovenian and, in some cases, French and Romanian possess elements of tonality, but this is in most cases better understood as a pitch accent. Another Indo-European tonal language, spoken in the Indian subcontinent, is Punjabi.

Some of the native language of North and South America possess tonality, especially the Na-Dene languages of Alaska and the American Southwest (including Navajo), and the OtoManguean languages of Mexico. Among the Mayan languages, which are mostly non-tonal, Yucatec (with the largest

number of speakers), Uspantek and one dialect of Tzotzil, have developed tones.

Most languages of sub-Saharan Africa (except Swahili in the East, and Wolof and Fulani in the West) are tonal. Hausa is tonal, although it is a distant relative of the Semitic languages, which are not.

Is English really a Tonal Language?

A tonal analysis of English is not only possible but has long been recognised. “Beach (1924) is reported to have defined tone so broadly as to make a language like English tonal because of the contrastive function of pitch in English intonation” (Fromkin, 3). Recent studies of English intonation in America have viewed English as being a tone language. Goldsmith (1976, 1978) proposed the accented syllable as a neutral intonation contour for English. Goldsmith’s definition of tone further classifies English as a tone language. He says:

The term *tone language* has traditionally been used to refer to those languages which use the feature of tone to distinguish between lexical items. Most of the languages of the world which are tone languages by this definition use tone in a systematic way to express grammatical distinction as well, and it would be just as appropriate, tradition notwithstanding, to cast the net a bit wider, and accept under the rubric of tone language all languages which use tone in a systematic fashion to express either lexical or grammatical distinctions (453).

Goldsmith’s definition includes English as well as other languages, as this definition, captures grammatical distinctions. This has been elaborated by Leben (1976) who, like Goldsmith, works within the autosegmental framework. The underlying assumption of the autosegmental hypothesis is that tones are independent of segments but are associated with them. Evidence from tone languages, suggests that tones depend for their realization on segments but their existence is more a property of the word or utterance as a whole than of particular segments (Jibril, 283).

Intonation is often called the melody of language. It refers to the pattern of pitch changes used in speech. It can be likened to a chain of pitches strung that carry a message in their pattern. Some variations of pitch are related to relatively large grammatical units like the sentence. Pitch variations used in

this way are called intonations. “An intonation contour in a stress language does not change the meaning, but changes a statement to a question, and emphasizes different words, pragmatic tones...” (Catford, 183). An intonation contour in a tonal language can change the meaning sometimes, and can also be used as it is in stress languages.

Individual tones used in speech are represented by a series of symbols. These symbols are used when representing the way in which an individual word is pronounced. They are a sort of notations which are recognised by phonetic experts around the world.

Table 1- (Katamba, 53)

Common Tone Features

high [/]

mid [-]

low [\]

rising [- /]

falling [- \]

Fall-rise [\ /]

Table 2- (Jowitt, 68)

Cruttenden’s tones and their associated marks, and his correlation of these with the O’Connor and Arnold mnemonic categories, 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)	
Rise-fall		(long jump, jack knife)	
Mid-level		(terrace)	

English is a stress language. Tonal languages differ from stress or non tonal languages like English where pitch does not have those same functions

(Katamba, 186). In a stress language, tone can only be used to convey an attitude or change a statement into a question (e.g. He did that to you. He did that to you?), but tone alone does not change the meaning of individual words. Also, a change in stress can only change the grammatical category of the word (e.g. *transport* can be used as a noun and as a verb with a change in stress).

Let us transport these goods to China. (Verb)

We need transport fare to go to China. (Noun)

The function of tone is different in tonal languages. By using a different tone for one word, the meaning of that word can be dramatically changed. For example, in Igala, a Nigerian tonal language, the three letter *awo* can have many meanings depending on the tones used in its production.

Igala

Word	Meaning
awo	guinea fowl
awo	an increase
awo	a slap
awo	a comb

Mandarin Chinese is probably the most widely studied tonal language. It has four contrasting tones which are used to distinguish among normally stressed syllables that are otherwise identical.

Mandarin Tone Use (Catford, 183)

Word	Intonation	Meaning
ba	[/]	to uproot
ba	[--]	eight
ba	[\ /]	to hold
ba	[\]	a harrow

Chinese is a tone language, while English is an intonation language (Crosswhite and McDonough, 25). That is to say, if Chinese has both tone and intonation, then Chinese assigns tonal targets on a lexical as well as phrasal level, while English only assigns an intonation tone on a phrasal level. Thus, in Chinese, the dual usage of tone leads to a more complicated picture than is found in English, making it more difficult to separate lexical tone from intonation. Moreover, it is not clear how a native speaker of a tone

language would deal with tone in English, since English uses intonation but makes no specifications for lexical tone. Below are more examples found in Nigerian languages: Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Nupe, Berom, Ngas, Tiv and Kulere.

Hausa		Yoruba	
Word	Meaning	Word	Meaning
bábá	father	éwá	beans
bábà	grandmother	éwà	beauty
fàdà	to tell		
fádà	to fight		
Igbo		Ngas	
Word	Meaning	Word	Meaning
ákwá	clothes	néndír	God with
ákwà	egg	nèndír	God repairs
Berom		Nupe	
Word	Meaning	Word	Meaning
Fèng	to be drunk with alcohol	bá	to cut
Féng	to thank	bà	to count
Chín	fly (insect)	bā	to be sour
Chìn	to dig		
Tiv		Kulere	
Word	Meaning	Word	Meaning
Nóngó	group of (people)	fát	God
Nóngò	to struggle	fàt	sun

Tonality in Nigerian English

There have been arguments involving the existence or non-existence of a distinct variety of English known as “Nigerian English”. Several linguists (e.g. Salami 1968; Adekunle 1974, 1985; Adetugbo 1979; Balogun 1980; Kujore 1985; Adegbija 1989; Kachru 1986, 1992a, 1992b, etc; Jowitt 1991; Atoye 1991; Bamiro 1991, 1994; Goke-pariola 1993; to mention just a few) have either written about, or made passing references to the variety of Nigerian English. Bambose (1982) buttresses his argument with the fact that the existence of different Englishes has a wide acceptance among linguist

internationally. He identifies three different approaches to usages in Nigerian English as the interference, the deviation and creativity approaches” (Pam, 67). We cannot ignore the normal processes of language development such as semantic extension and the creation of new expressions and idioms, which cut across all L1 (mother tongue) backgrounds.

Nigeria English has not left tonality out in its deviation. For instance the word, *uncle* (the brother of your mother or father; the husband of your aunt) with stress placed on the second syllable, is used to refer to a girl’s elderly lover or ‘sugar-daddy’ another Nigerian usage. Likewise the word, *aunty* (the sister of your father or mother; the wife of your uncle) is used to refer to a boy’s elderly lover or ‘sugar-mummy’ also another Nigerian usage. For both words, the stress is on the first syllable but it is however placed on the second syllable in this usage. The words are also pronounced with a prolonged final vowel i.e. uncle and aunty. Another feature worth noting is meaning in this usage is realized by deriving at implicature. The interpretation goes beyond the linguistic item to include the context of situation.

Conclusion

As has been shown, there is tremendous diversity in the way different languages around the world are spoken. Using the same speech features, the languages are each able to create their own unique way of communication. Nigerian English is not left out of this. In conclusion, intonation in English does not mean a change in lexical meaning but just the denotation of the word. Tone is associated with lexical meaning, distinguishing one word from another as seen above. English however, is an intonation language which expresses syntactic, grammatical, discourse and attitudinal functions. English has also been referred to as a stress language where a change in stress changes the grammatical category of the word and not it’s meaning as seen in the case of tonal languages.

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