



The Tone - Semantic Concept in Ibibio Revisited

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ABSTRACT

The most popular hypothesis on the correlation between tone and semantic concept, especially as it has to do with ideophones, seems to be that of Noss (1975,1985) on Gbaya and Ekere (1987, 1995) on Ibibio respectively. The hypothesis is that high tone denotes light colour, weight and mood, and low tone denotes heavy weight, mood etc. While a little data seem to show this phono-semantic tendency, the overwhelming data we have unearthed supports no direct co-relation. This paper thinks that though rules may have exceptions, an avalanche of such as in this Ibibio phono-semantic situation necessitates a fundamental reconsideration of the postulation with regard to the relationship between tone and ideophones of weight, colour and intensity, in Ibibio at least. Data for the study were elicited mainly from existing literature, field work and participant observation.

INTRODUCTION

Ekere (1987) has done a groundbreaking study on Ibibio ideophone expressions¹. Though Ideophone has no universally accepted definition, and is not limited to one word class. It is a very useful concept in the languages that utilize it. Ekere's work has not only dispelled earlier misconception on the subject but has also contributed immensely to the field of African linguistics, in general. Most Eurocentric linguists have often seen the ideophone as a phonological irregularity. That this negative view is pervasive in such literature can be seen in the alternate descriptive term, "phonologically aberrant, abnormal, anomalous" (cf. Wescott, 1980; Welmers, 1973, Samarin, 1965; Newman 1980; and, Schaefer, 1984). This notion is also encapsulated in Doke's (1935) analysis of the ideophone as a group of grammatically deviant expressive form in Bantu languages which usually convey sensory impressions. As useful as Ekere's (1987) study is, we

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think that (part of) the postulation in that study which states that the high tone is invariably associated with light objects/colours deserves some discussion, Ekere (1987:211 ff, also cf. 1995). Noss (1985) has made a similar claim with regard to ideophone in Gbaya), “when occurring in high tone, the ideophone refers to a small object; in low tone, it refers to a large object” (p.242); also cf. Noss (1975). While this generalization is circumstantially attestable in a few cases, the overwhelming evidence available is capable of vitiating this hypothesis.

DISCUSSION

First, let us observe a few instances where the high tone and low tone describe accurately light and heavy objects respectively, in Ibibio:

1. (a) kp̄m/t̄m 'the fall of a heavy object' (low tone)
- (b) kp̄m 'a sound with a large/loud volume' (low tone)
- (c) niy□k-niy□k 'movement of a large object' (low tone)
- (d) k̄p-k̄p 'like lightning'(high tone)
- (e) kr̄ák- kr̄ák 'imitative of the sound of gnawing of the teeth' (high tone).

While the examples above seem to match Ekere's hypothesis, there are too many (other) instances which make it difficult to maintain or pursue such a position. Part of such data is culled from Ekere (1987: 142,215), 1995:87):

2. (a), isóbó kààṅ-kààṅ/niyák-niyák ¹ ákǎ úkàṅ èbé áyḥ³
'Crab walked limpingly to her son-in-law'.
- (b) sr̄ák: 'sudden fall of a light object or constant drop of liquid'.
- (c) kpr̄ók: 'emergence of a tiny object'.

(d) ḥkp□-ík□t nyèn-nyèn-nyèn ké ḥkp̄ èsà.
'Soldier ants spread *nyèn-nyèn-nyèn* all over the backyard'.

(e) kp□□p 'falling of ...an object with a light thud' Ekere (1987:271).

In this example (2d), *nyèn-nyèn-nyèn*, which has an obvious low tone describes not only the multitude of ants but also their *lightness* in terms of weight. Similarly, *niyák* and *kààṅ* (2a) describe not only the obvious limping walk of the crab but also the lightness of its legs, as the crab's legs cannot reasonably be heavy; just as *sr̄ák* (2b) and *kpr̄ók* (2c) with low tone denotes light (and not heavy) objects. Though a few ideophones of weight occur in free variation or are dialectal, none of such variable obtains in the culled data. One can observe a similar non-coherence of tone-weight correlation in 2(e), where *kpoop*, with low tone coheres with light rather than heavy object.

Not only do the author's data seem to vitiate the tone: weight hypothesis, other examples in the language do, as we can see below:

3. (a) ṅwr̄ák 'the sound of a dry light object (for example, paper)'.
(b) sr□k 'drop of a tiny object (for example, ball of fofo)'.
(c) fr̄ák-fr̄ák 'descriptive of a light dry object, when touched, dry leaf,' for example (also cf.Ekere, 1987: 268, for instance).

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(d) teeb: ‘gradual drops of liquid (light) substance’.

In addition, data exist in which two ideophones convey the same (degree) meaning of pain intensity (for example) suffered by the patient, but with variable tone patterns (high and low) as in (cf. Ekere, 1995: 87):

4. (a) ándom tinnn: 'bites me' *tinnn* (high tone).

(b) ándom tiib: 'bites me' *tiib* (low tone).

Lastly, we have examples where the same tone (high) denotes different semantic concepts, instead of just light colour or weight (white or light, for example) as in:

5. (a) ébèn ádò á wèn (ábídé) *kpíb*.
'that pear fruit is *pitch dark*'.

(b) àfò? ádò ásáná *tám-tám-tám/fód-fód- fód*.
'that clothe is *immaculate white*'.

Also, let us note some instances of mixed tone levels such as (high, low, falling) denoting both heavy and light objects, as in:

6. (a) àkpán-kpán "sound of a cymbal", Ekere (1987:65); where both low and high tones are utilised to denotice a light sound, unarguably.

(b) kpââp/bââb "sudden lifting of some big object, like a drinking pot", Ekere (1987:266); where a low and falling tones are used to convey some semantic concepts where heavy.

(c) àkép-kép "lightning"; where Ekere's (1987:268) data seems to convict his phono-semantic concept as both a low and a high tone expresses a light concept.

SUMMARY

In many of the instances above, for example, we have seen the consistent alignment of the low tone with light objects (while the hypothesis predicts a high tone). One also observes the correlation of heavy objects with a high tone (while low is predicted), and a combination of low and high tones as well as low and falling tones (in individual words) to express different weight categories and shades of colours, against the standard generalisation, Noah (2011)

We think it is quite normal for rules to have an exception. However, when one rule has three exceptions (for example, exceptions regarding mixed tone, tonal incoherence and the breakdown of the tone-meaning (weight/colour) correspondence; it becomes speculative and one-legged and may prove dangerous to hang on it. We think, therefore, that such an avalanche of counter data necessitates a re-think of Ekere's (1987, 1995) postulation on the phono-semantic relationship in Ibibio. We also believe that the Ibibio data we have provided above could also give Noss (1975, 1985)

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more facts to reassess his phono-semantic theory of the Gbaya ideophone as well⁴.

CONCLUSION

Overall, while we can say that earlier studies on the grammatical function of tone in Ibibio have been quite revealing, we think certain gaps still exist in the aspects of tone semantic concepts, especially, with regard to ideophone expressions. From available data, the correlation between tone and semantic concepts such as weight, colour and mood is largely tenuous, speculative and unscientific. We hope our effort would provoke some thought on the subject, attempt to fill part of the void by complementing what had been accomplished in this area. Finally, we admit that though our analysis is far from definitive and needs further enquiry, the evidence we provide is far from circumstantial.

ENDNOTES

1. Ideophones are common in virtually all Niger-Congo and Nilo-Saharan languages as well as in Chadic Branch of the Afro-Asiatic phylum.
2. A Central Lower Cross language in the Delta Cross Branch of the Benue Congo, Ibibio is Nigeria's fourth largest language, spoken by about 5.5 million people in the Niger Delta Region, (AUU, 1998).
3. In fact, *niyàk-niyàk*, 'movement of light weight object', is the polar counterpart of *niyòk-niyòk*, 'movement of a heavy object', yet both of them are rendered with the same low tone (instead of high and low, respectively).
4. Gbaya is widely spoken in the Western Central African Republic and some parts of Congo and Nigeria, with a combined population of 877,000, according to Lewis (2010). The language comprises part of the Gbaya – Madja - Ngbaka complex of the Eastern Branch of Adamawa – Eastern (or Adamawa – Ubangi) of Niger – Congo.

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