

THE TONE MARKING SYSTEM OF THE IGBO LANGUAGE: A DOCUMENTARY OVERVIEW

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Abstract

Tone marking system is a system of using pitch levels to indicate semantic differences in lexical items and pitch patterns of grammatical constructions. This paper examines the efforts made over the years by some scholars to develop the Igbo tone marking system. The method of analysis adopted is purely descriptive. From the study, it is observed that the areas where some endeavours can be confirmed towards developing the Igbo tone marking systems can be divided into two broad groups: the grammar books and the dictionaries of the language. In the grammar books, two tone marking systems could be confirmed: (i) level tones (high tone, low tone and downstep and (ii) level/gliding tones (high tone, low tone, downstepped/mid tone, falling tone, rising tone). The dictionaries, on the other hand, are not so transparent; some are tone-marked, while others are not. The conclusion from the overview is that, in their effort towards tone marking Igbo texts, the present generation needs to retain a 'historical perspective' by not overlooking much of the honesty and faithfulness to the language data as exemplified in the works of the past scholars.

1.0 Introduction

As a tone language, the role of tone in the Igbo language has always been noted by any learner of the language. The point of entrance is usually our well known quartet which is often used to illustrate lexical tones in the Igbo language:

- (1) ákwá 'cry' àkwà 'bridge'
àkwá 'egg' ákwà 'cloth'

Such an illustration is pedagogically useful and beneficial and easily coalesces with the differentiation that can also be made between a statement and a question through tone alone, and also between two grammatical expressions that are identical as in the following examples:

(2) Statement / Question

Ó rìrì jí. ‘He/she ate yam’
 Ò rìrì jí? ‘Did he/she eat yam?’

(3) Statement/ Relative clause

Ófě áhù tòrò ùtó. ‘The soup is delicious’
 Ófě áhū tóró útó... ‘The soup that is delicious...’

These easily accessible illustrations hide the enormity of the past efforts at discovering and documenting the tone system of the Igbo language. While it was at first confusing for the missionaries, their gradual and intense pre-occupation with the phenomenon contributed immensely to and led the foundation for further works on the grammar of the language. The present generation need not forget the past or take it for granted in the course of their enjoyment of the benefits from that past.

The goal of this paper is to survey and document different methods that have been used to mark tone in the Igbo language. This paper goes into the different phases in the tone marking of the Igbo language as follows. The next section presents the efforts at the definition of a tone language and uses it to situate the Igbo language as a tone language. The second section presents the attributes of a tone language. Section 3 presents the efforts to tone mark the language in different Igbo grammar books, while section 4 looks at tone marking in Igbo dictionaries. Section 5 summarizes and concludes the work.

2.0 Attributes of a Tone Language

Over the years, different linguists have tried to explain tone, the different types of tone and the attributes of a tone language. An attempt is made in this section of the paper to review some of these explanations.

“Tone is a lexical factor in Igbo and distinguishes words which, from a phonetic, or segmental point of view are identical” (Green and Igwe 1963:8). According to Pike (1948: 3), “tones have significant, contrastive, but relative pitch on each syllable”. Ward (1936:10) explains that tones “are integral parts of the word, and not to use them correctly constitutes a mistake in pronunciation as important as the use of a wrong

vowel or consonant and leads as inevitably to misunderstanding or lack of meaning”. Ladefoged and Johnson (2011) explain that tones are pitch variations that affect the meaning of a word.

Igbo language is described as a register-tone type of language with a number of level tonemes. But it has also a relatively small number of significant glides which occur not lexically but grammatically (Green and Igwe 1963:6).

A tone language according to Ward (1936:10), is one in which every word in the language has its own individual tone or tone pattern. Emenanjo (1978:11) opines that “Igbo is a tone language, that is, one which makes use of the pitch of the voice to mark a difference in the meaning of the word or utterance”. Igbo language according to Greenberg (1963) is a tone language which belongs to the Niger-Congo language family and Kwa subfamily. The above explanations converge to indicate that tone is vital in the Igbo language.

3.0 Tone Marks in Igbo Grammar Books

There have been various efforts to tone mark the Igbo language. The efforts in different grammar books are divided into two investigation areas according to the types of tones adopted or recognized by the authors: level tones (high tone, low tone and downstepped/mid) and level/gliding tones (high tone, low tone, downstepped/mid tone, falling tone, rising tone).

3.1 *Igbo language as a level tone language*

With regard to level tone, Greenberg (1963) states that Igbo language has three contrastive level tones: high tone (ˊ), mid tone (unmarked), and low tone(ˋ). This is in line with Emenanjo’s(1978:11) explanation that, Igbo has two distinctive tonemes; “high”, which is unmarked, and “low”, marked (ˋ), as well as the tonal phenomenon known as downstep.

Clark (1978:116-117) argues that Igbo language uses three tones when one looks at tone in terms of pitch levels. The three tones are: a high tone, a low tone, and a “downstepped high” tone. Within the dynamic-tone theory, Clark (1978:118) proposes to represent Igbo lexical tone with pitch-change markers: “↓” and “↑”. whereby any syllable which ends on a high tone level or on a low tone level will have a “↓” and “↑” respectively at the end of the syllable.

The table below gives the representations of the Igbo words using the pitch-change markers “↑” and “↓”

H σ↓	HH σ↓σ↓	HHH σ↓σ↓σ↓	LH σ↑σ↓	LHH σ↑σ↓σ↓	HLH σ↓σ↑σ↓	LLH σ↑σ↑σ↓
ji↓	i↓si↓	a↓kwu↓kwo↓	a↑hu↓	η↑ku↓ku↓	a↓ka↑bo↓	a↑ghi↑gha↓
L σ↑	LL σ↑σ↑	LLL σ↑σ↑σ↑	HL σ↓σ↑	HLL σ↓σ↑σ↑	LHL σ↑σ↓σ↑	HHL σ↓σ↓σ↑
na↑	a↑la↑	η↑ga↑ji↑	u↓lo↑	u↓bo↑ci↑	o↑ku↓ko↑	u↓vu↓ne↑

Table 3.1 The Igbo lexical words represented using the pitch markers

In Clark’s rule of Like-Tone-Marker Deletion, she argues that the rule is applied when using a word-final tone marker to indicate the pitch level of a word in Igbo language. The rule deletes the first ↓’s or ↑’s in a word.

- (4) a↓ku↓ko↓ → akuko↓ ‘story’
e↑nwe↑ → enwe↑ ‘monkey’

The table below represents table 3.1 above using the rule of Like-Tone-Marker Deletion.

HH σσ↓	HHH σσσ↓	LHH σ↑σσ↓	LLH σσ↑σ↓
isi↓	akwukwo↓	η↑kuku↓	aghi↑gha↓
LL σσ↑	LLL σσσ↑	HLL σ↓σσ↑	HHL σσ↓σ↑
ala↑	ηgaji↑	u↓boci↑	uvu↓ne↑

Table 3.2: Igbo examples using the rule of Like-Tone-Marker Deletion.

Table 3.2 above deletes the first ↓’s and ↑’s in the words following the rule of Like-Tone-Marker Deletion.

Clark’s rule of Like-Tone-Marker Deletion is not applied when a downstepped tone precedes a high tone.

- (5) e↓go↓ ‘money’ a↑da↓ka↓ ‘chimpanzee’

The underlined pitch markers (↓) in the above examples do not abide by the rule of Like-Tone-Marker Deletion because the first ↓’s are not the same pitch markers with the succeeding ↓’s.

Williamson (1984:42-43) is also of the view that Igbo language has three tones, of which all are level tones: High tone (unmarked), Low tone (ˊ), and Downstep tone(-).

According to Nwachukwu (1995), every syllable (high, step and low) is marked in principle while in practice, only contrasting pitches or tones are marked leaving sameness unmarked. Also in practice, only two symbols high (ˊ) and low (ˋ) are used to indicate the three tone contracts. The macron (-) is not used to indicate the downstep tone because it is a slightly lowered high tone which is always preceded by a high and never by a low tone. Consecutive high tones are always interpreted as high followed by a step.

- | | | | |
|-----|---------|-------|---------------|
| (6) | Égó | H S | ‘money’ |
| | Òléká | L H S | ‘proper name’ |
| | Àchicha | L LL | ‘bread’ |
| | Dínwénú | H S S | ‘Lord’ |

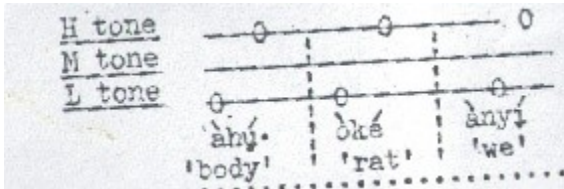
3.2 *Igbo language as a level/gliding tone language*

With regard to Igbo language being analyzed as a level/gliding tone language, Ward (1936:12-13) in her book, “An Introduction to the Ibo Language” says that Igbo makes use of the following tones:

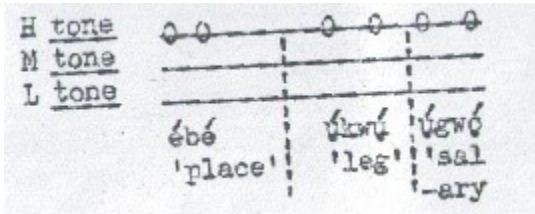
1. High level (ˊ): ji (ˊ) ‘yam’
2. Low level (ˋ): ite (ˋ) ‘pot’
3. Mid level (-): ego (ˊ -) ‘money’
4. Falling Tone (ˋ): nile (ˋ -) ‘all’
5. Rising Tone (ˊ): o téghe aka (ˊ __ - -)

Similarly, Abraham (1967:8-9) states that Igbo has three principal tone-levels: high (ˊ), mid (unmarked) and low (ˋ) tones, and gliding tones: falling and rising tones. He further makes use of abbreviations to mark the tones: H (high), M (mid) and L (low). His use of the abbreviations is in order to avoid confusing the reader. Below are some of his examples:

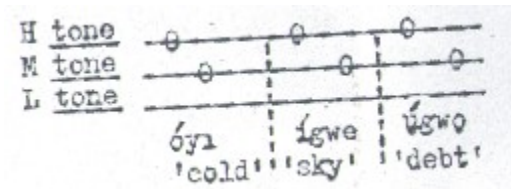
(7) L + H words



(8) H + H words:

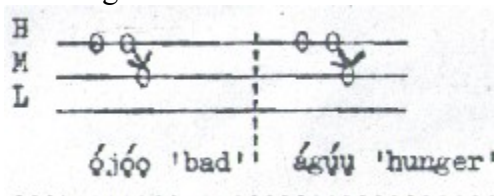


(9) H + M words

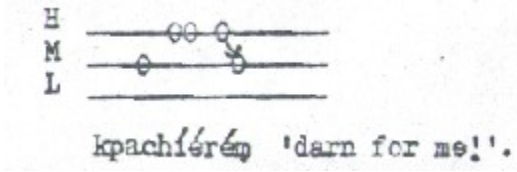


Also, Abraham (1967) states that rising or falling tone arises when a vowel stands next to a syllabic sound (or next to a vowel identical with itself) in a syllable with which such a vowel has some syntactic connection, and when the second element is at a different tone level from such vowel.

(10) Tone falling from H to M in a word's inherent tone:

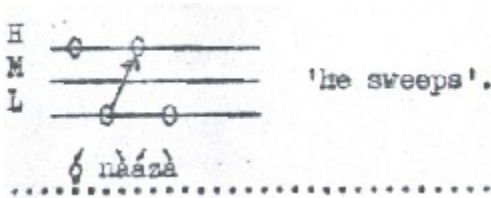


(11) Tone falling from H to M due to suffixing of syllabic –m:

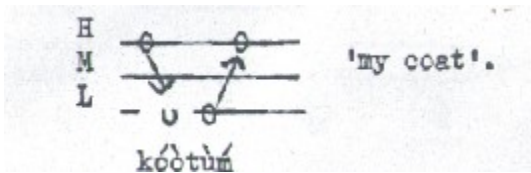


Tone rising from L to H owing to vowels at different pitches:

(a) From: o na-aza, we have:



(b) Two gliding tones in the same word: falling tone then rising tone



Green and Igwe (1963:6) described Igbo language as a register-tone type of language with a number of level tonemes which has also a relatively small number of glides that occur not lexically but grammatically. The authors leave high tone syllables unmarked, except for the “higher than high” tone, which are usually interclausal and are rare. Below is the tone marking notations by Green and Igwe:

- a High tone
- ˊa “Higher than high” tone
- à Low tone
- a Mid tone
- ǎ Low rising to high tone
- â High falling to low tone, or to mid if the syllable it precedes is mid

- ā Mid in relation to the preceding syllable, falling to low or to mid, if the following syllable is mid (Green and Igwe 1963:8).

The authors further state that there are two independent tone levels: high tone, as in *ji* ‘yam’ and low tone, as in *nà* ‘and’. They are of the view that a tone glides from one level to another level in an utterance. This is due to the fact that one vowel follows another on a different tone level with no intervening consonant.

- (11) *Aka à* ‘This hand’
 Yá *àzàala àlà* ‘she has swept the ground’

4.0 **Tone Marks in Igbo dictionaries**

This section highlights the various attempts that have been made over the years towards tone marking Igbo dictionaries. It is confirmed that some of the works are tone marked while others are left unmarked.

In Williamson’s (1972) dictionary, Igbo has three tone levels: high tone (unmarked), step tone (-) and low tone (˘).

- (12) *Àbàchà* ‘cassava’
 abù ‘armpit, song’
 àda ‘eldest daughter’
 agadī ‘old person’
 egō ‘money’

In Echeruo’s (1997) Igbo-English Dictionary, tones are indicated in capital letters within square brackets “[]”.

- (13) *akpati* [HLL] ‘large box’
 akpü [HH] ‘cassava plant or tuber’
 akwara [HHL] ‘root’
 akwü [LH] ‘nest’
 (Echeruo 1997:18-20)

From the above examples, it can be observed that the downstepped tone is not represented/marked; this makes some words in Igbo to be wrongly marked. Such words in Echeruo’s dictionary are:

(14)	igwe	[HH]	‘sky; heaven’ (p. 69)
	ego	[HH]	‘money’ (p. 43)
	adaka	[LHH]	‘chimpanzee’ (p. 6)

The examples above would be rightly tone- marked if represented in Echeruo’s method as follows:

(15)	igwe	[HS]	‘sky; heaven’
	ego	[HS]	‘money’
	adaka	[LHS]	‘chimpanzee’

Like Williamson (1972), Igwe (1999) in his “Igbo-English Dictionary”, left the high tone unmarked while the low and mid tones are marked.

(16)	i.	anwū	‘mosquito’
	ii.	anya	‘eye’
	iii.	anyaàlà	‘lower eyelid’
	iv.	ànyi	pron. first pers., plur.,’
	v.	ànaà	‘how?’
	vi.	anàrà	‘garden-egg’
		(Igwe 1999:66-69)	

In the Bi-Lingual Dictionary of the Igbo and English languages by Akponye (2014), the tone marking system is very ambiguous in the sense that at times, high and low tones are marked and at other times, they are left unmarked. The downstepped tones are never tone marked.

(17)	i.	Ábà	‘Orchard’
	ii.	Ábụ	‘Armpit, poem, song’
	iii.	Ábụ	‘poem, song’
	iv.	Abụọ	‘two’
	v.	Áchàrà	‘do not give way’
	vi.	Àchàrà	‘bamboo, rattan’
	vii.	Áda	‘fall’
	viii.	Àda	‘first daughter, daughter’
	ix.	É silà	‘do not cook’
	x.	Ewu	‘Goat’
		(Akponye 2014:2-4; 52)	

From the examples above, it is observed that the tones of (i), (v) and (vi) are completely marked while the tones of some are not completely marked (ii, iii, vii, viii, ix). The tones of (iv) and (xi) are not represented at all. Thus, the tone marking system of Akponye is ambiguous.

In addition to the above named groups, there are however some scholars who leave their works unmarked. Such scholars include: Mba et al (2013) in their work titled *Igbo-Adi* which involves Igbo head words, followed by Igbo definitions and their English translations.

- (18) **abu** ederede nka e nwere ohere puru iche maka nho okwu, uda ndakorita na atu-‘poem poetry’
- echiche** ngosiputa mbunuche agwa n’enweghi onye ya na ya na-akparima o bu udi nchetu emereme na-adi n’etiti otu agwa na ndi ozo- ‘thought’

Eke (2001), in his *Igbo- English Dictionary (Okowa Okwu)*, gives the English head words and explains them in both Igbo and English.

- (19) **Abstract** nkowa otu ihe siri gaa n’uzo mkpirisi; uzo adighi ogologo. Short account; the chief points of a piece of writing
- Abolish** kwusi; weta na mmechi ma o bu tufue ihe a choghi. Put an end; do away with; e.gwar, slavery, an old custom.

5.0 Conclusion

The paper has described past endeavours to tone-mark the Igbo language. It also, highlighted how sincere the scholars were in attempting to provide a solution to the problem of tone marking in the language. Furthermore, it was observed that some tones of some scholars were not properly marked. Since their effort was genuine, the current scholars are encouraged not to forget the past contributions that had been made but to emulate their seriousness. It is especially this high level of seriousness and attention to details that are the remarkable attributes of the past scholars of the Igbo language.

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