

Depressor consonants and the tones of Tɔ̀nùgbé

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Abstract

This paper is a first introduction to the tone system of Tɔ̀nùgbé, a dialect of Ewe. Depressor consonants are known to play an important role in the tonal realizations of Ewe; our main goal is to determine if it is also the case in Tɔ̀nùgbé. The first part of the paper is a brief survey of the tone system of Ewe, examining the role depressor consonants play there within. A brief presentation of the tone system of verbs in Tɔ̀nùgbé follows, indicating that voiced obstruents can operate as depressors in the dialect. Then, a detailed description of the surface tones of root nouns is provided, with an emphasis on their acoustic correlates. In comparison to other Ewe dialects, Tɔ̀nùgbé adds a superhigh tone, and a contrast in duration between mid-toned and low-toned nouns. Most importantly, it is shown that depressor consonants seem not to have significant effects on the tones of root nouns in Tɔ̀nùgbé. In its final part, the paper discusses the possible implications of this latter observation on the differences between the tone system of Tɔ̀nùgbé and those of other Ewe dialects, Aɲlɔ̀gbe and Evedomegbe.

Index Terms: Ewe, Tone, Tɔ̀nùgbé, depressor consonants.

1. Introduction

This paper is a first introduction to the tone system of Tɔ̀nùgbé, a dialect of Ewe spoken in southeastern Ghana. The dialect itself is subdivided in various local varieties, such as Agavégbé, Mafigbé or Mefégbé. The variant that is the subject of the current study refers to the varieties that are spoken on the Western side of the Volta River, in Mefé, Battor Aveyime, Devime and Dově. Although Tɔ̀nùgbé displays some peculiarities (mostly phonetic), the properties of the dialect have been claimed in the literature to be similar in nature to those of the other coastal dialects (i.e. Aɲlɔ̀gbe) ([1], [2]).

This paper has three main objectives. The first one is to offer a first insight into the tone system of Tɔ̀nùgbé, which to our knowledge has never been described before. The second objective is to investigate the role of depressor consonants in the tone system of this dialect, and in Ewe in general.

Depressor consonants are segments that have a lowering effect on a following tone, such as downstepping or deleting its high tone, or preventing it from being the target of a high tone shift or a high tone spread. Depressor consonants are common in various areas and/or language families (e.g. Southern Bantu, Wu dialects of Chinese, etc. – see a.o. [3], [4]), one of them being the Gbe family that includes Tɔ̀nùgbé (see [5], [6] on Ewé, [7] on Wemegbe).

The paper is based on recordings of one of the authors, a male native speaker of Tɔ̀nùgbé (28 years old), which were

carried out over a period of three months. The recordings were submitted for evaluation to two other speakers of Tɔ̀nùgbé.

Section 2 is a short presentation of the tone system of Ewe, focusing on the role of depressor consonants. Section 3 briefly discusses tones as they emerge in the verbs of Tɔ̀nùgbé and the role that depressor consonants play in their realizations. The surface tones of Tɔ̀nùgbé root nouns are presented in detail in Section 4, showing their relative immunity to depressor consonant effects. Finally, a brief discussion follows in Section 5.

2. The tone system of Ewe

Every syllable in Ewe bears a tone, i.e. the tone bearing unit (TBU) is the syllable. There are two underlying tones: the *high* toneme and the *non-high* toneme [5]. In root nouns, the *high* toneme can occur as a high tone or a mid tone (in Aɲlɔ̀gbe, but as a mid-rising tone in Evedomegbe) depending on the onset of the syllable (1). When the onset is a voiceless obstruent or a sonorant, the *high* toneme emerges as a high tone. However, when the onset is a voiced obstruent, the tone is a mid or a rising tone [8]. (N.B. the extra-short vowel in the beginning of nouns is described in Section 4.1)

Verbs		Nouns	(1)
tá	‘draw’	˦tá	‘thigh’
kpó	‘meet’	˦kpó	‘stone’
yá	‘unwholesome’	˦yá	‘air’
má	‘share’	˦má	‘cassava dough’
gbó	‘refuse’	˦gbə/˦gbǎ	‘grass’
zá	‘use’	˦zə/˦zǎ	‘feast’

The *non-high* toneme, in root nouns, occurs as a low tone when the onset of the noun is a voiced obstruent, and as a mid when the onset of the noun is a voiceless obstruent or a sonorant (2).

˦dzə	‘salt’	˦tə	‘yam’	(2)
˦dà	‘snake’	˦nyi	‘cow’	
˦tsi	‘water’	˦mə	‘person’	

In verbs, the *high* toneme surfaces as a high tone. The *non-high* toneme on the other hand occurs as either a low tone, when the word that follows the verb begins with an obstruent (3a-b), or a mid tone, when the following word begins with a sonorant (3c) [9:141]. (N.B. abbreviations are listed in Section 7)

5. Discussion

Research on the tone system of Tɔ̀nùgbé is in its infancy, and it is thus difficult, if possible, to evaluate the role depressor consonants played in the development of tones in Tɔ̀nùgbé. However, a comparison of Tɔ̀nùgbé with other dialects of Ewe may help us to elaborate some hypotheses. This is the purpose of this final section.

Ewe dialects are grouped into two groups: coastal dialects and inland dialects [1]. As for coastal dialects, we will consider Aɲlɔ̀gbé (our data). As for inland dialects, we will consider the Peki/Kpando dialect (a local variation of Evedomegbe); data are extracted from [8] and [9].

Tones of verbs in Tɔ̀nùgbé, at least when produced in isolation, do not demonstrate variability in relation to tones of verbs in the other dialects. We will thus focus on root nouns.

The tones of the root nouns of Tɔ̀nùgbé correlate differently to the tones of Aɲlɔ̀gbé. Root nouns with high tones in Tɔ̀nùgbé also are realized with a high in Aɲlɔ̀gbé (13).

	<i>Tɔ̀nùgbé</i>	<i>Aɲlɔ̀gbé</i>	(13)
‘head’	ʔtá	tá	
‘air’	ʔyá	yá	

Nouns that have a low tone in Tɔ̀nùgbé correlate to two different categories in Aɲlɔ̀gbé: mid tones, when the root involves a voiceless obstruent or a sonorant (14a), and low tones, when the consonant is a voiced obstruent (14b).

	<i>Tɔ̀nùgbé</i>	<i>Aɲlɔ̀gbé</i>	(14)
a. ‘yam’	ʔtè	te	
‘taboo’	ʔkɔ̀	kɔ̀	
‘water’	ʔtɕi	tsi	
b. ‘two’	ʔvɛ̀	evɛ̀	
‘beared’	ʔgɛ̀	gɛ̀	

Nouns that are realized with a mid in Tɔ̀nùgbé also correlate to two tones in Aɲlɔ̀gbé: the high tone when the onset is a voiceless obstruent or a sonorant (15a), and the mid when the onset is a voiced obstruent (15b).

	<i>Tɔ̀nùgbé</i>	<i>Aɲlɔ̀gbé</i>	(15)
a. ‘thanks’	ʔkɔ̀pɔ̀	ʔkɔ̀pɔ̀	
‘house’	ʔfɔ̀	ʔfɔ̀	
‘bee’	ʔnyí	ʔnyí	
‘flatulence’	ʔɲɔ̀	ʔɲɔ̀	
b. ‘work’	ʔdɔ̀	dɔ̀	
‘scrotum’	ʔvɔ̀	vo	
‘child’	ʔvi	vi	
‘bowl’	ʔgbá	ʔgbá	

Finally, root nouns with a rising tone in Tɔ̀nùgbé correlate to nouns with high tones in Aɲlɔ̀gbé (16).

	<i>Tɔ̀nùgbé</i>	<i>Aɲlɔ̀gbé</i>	(16)
‘cough’	ʔkɔ̀pɔ̀	kɔ̀pɔ̀	
‘mountain’	ʔtɔ̀	tɔ̀	
‘faeces’	ʔmí	mí	
‘cutlass’	ʔyí	yí	

Table 1 is a summary of the correspondences.

Table 1: *Summary of the correspondences. ‘t’ stands for a voiceless obstruent and ‘d’ for a voiced obstruent (A. is Aɲlɔ̀gbé and T. is Tɔ̀nùgbé).*

A	high			non-high	
	H (t_)			M (d_)	M (t_) L (d_)
T.	H	R	M	M	L

The same correlations exist between Tɔ̀nùgbé and Evedomegbe except for one instance: when the underlying tone is a high tone and the onset of the noun is a voiced obstruent. In this latter instance, the tone of the noun is a rising tone in Evedomegbe.

	<i>Tɔ̀nùgbé</i>	<i>Evedomegbe</i>	(17)
‘grass’	ʔgbɛ̀	ʔgbɛ̀	
‘arm’	ʔbɔ̀	ʔbɔ̀	
‘dog’	ʔvū	ʔvū	

On the basis of Table (1), various hypotheses can be made. The low tone of Tɔ̀nùgbé may for instance result from the fusion of previous M and L tones, or reflect a conservative state. In the latter case, it can be considered that no split, such as the one that characterizes the non-high in the other dialects, would have occurred. This may explain why depressor consonants do not have the same impact on low tones in Tɔ̀nùgbé as they do in the other dialects.

The mid tone of Tɔ̀nùgbé can result from the partial fusion of older categories (high and mid), but it is also possible that some of the actual mid tones of Tɔ̀nùgbé (i.e. those that are preceded by a voiceless obstruent) result from the fission of H. An argument supporting this hypothesis is the distribution of vowels in the two categories: high-toned nouns in Tɔ̀nùgbé mostly involve [ɛ] or [o], while mid-toned nouns have [e], [ɔ] or high vowels (but both the categories involve [a]). Again, such a process of fission may have blundered the effect of depressors in Tɔ̀nùgbé. A similar process may be at the basis of the emergence of the rising tones of Tɔ̀nùgbé.

Further research is required in order to explore these issues.

6. List of abbreviations

DEF = definite, PL = plural, PRO = pronoun, PST = past.

7. References

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