

Documenting grammatical tone using Toolbox

Stuart McGill, SOAS, 17th August 2006

Tonal languages make up around half of the world's languages. A great number of these languages are found in Africa, where tone can carry a heavy functional load both lexically and grammatically. It is often the case that subtle grammatical distinctions are communicated by a tonal change alone, for example realis mood versus irrealis, or singular versus plural. Therefore it is important that the annotations prepared by language documenters make explicit the contribution of the various tonal patterns to the meaning of each utterance.

Most interlinear annotations are probably produced using SIL's Toolbox or Shoebox programs, which work best for languages which fit the 'Item-and-Arrangement' morphological model well (Hockett 1954). While this is true for the segmental morphology of most sub-Saharan African languages, the same cannot be said for suprasegmental phenomena such as tone. It is by no means obvious how Toolbox should be used to represent and parse tone, and it is perhaps surprising then that this problem has received little attention from linguists involved in language documentation.

Alan Buseman (2006) has suggested two different techniques for handling grammatical tone in Toolbox. In this paper I will introduce these methods and describe some of issues I faced getting them to work when documenting Cicipu, a Benue-Congo language spoken in northwest Nigeria. Cicipu verbs are underlyingly toneless, and so the tones they surface with are entirely dependent on grammatical properties such as mood and finiteness. In contrast, the tones on nouns are determined by an interaction between the underlying lexical pattern and their grammatical context. The likely success of these methods for any given documentation project depends on both the type of transcription required (e.g. phonemic or orthographic) as well as typological properties of the language (e.g. word structure, syllable structure, and the complexity of the tonal system).

References

- Buseman, Alan. 2006. 'Grammatical tone'. Sample Toolbox projects available from <http://www.sil.org/computIng/toolbox/extras.htm> [accessed 17th August 2007].
- Hockett, Charles. 1954. 'Two models of grammatical description'. *Word* 10: 210-231.