TONE OCCURRENCES IN MBUBE

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Abstract
This paper investigates tone occurrences in Mbube, with a view to establishing the tone system. Mbube is one of the phonologically/tonologically unresearched languages (an endangered language), spoken in Ogoja Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria. The study creates awareness of Mbube as a people and as a speech form (language). Through the analysis of tone occurrences in Mbube, the tone system of the language has been established in this study. Tone is a distinctive feature of Mbube phonology. The study reveals that vowel elision/deletion entails tonal elision/deletion in Mbube, contrary to what obtains in some other tone languages, like Ìgbò, where vowel deletion does not entail automatic tonal deletion. The study further reveals that downdrift/automatic downstep affects only the high tones in Mbube, but in Ìgbò, for instance, both high and low tones downdrift.

Conventions
V - Vowel
S - Syllabic
H - High Tone
Ș - High Tone
L - Low Tone
`S - Low Tone
!S - Downstepped High Tone
Š - Low-rising glide tone
Ș - High-falling glide tone
→ - ‘is realized as’
/ / - Phonemic slashes
[ ] - Phonetic brackets
+ - Word boundary
Tone Occurrences in Mbube

[ ~ ] - High Tone
[ - ] - Downstepped High Tone
[ _ ] - Low Tone
V₁ - Final Vowel before word boundary
V₂ - Initial vowel after word boundary
[ / ] - Low Rising glide tone (LR)
[ \ ] - High Falling glide tone (HF)

Background information

Name of Language: Mbube

Dialects: Idum, Ekuntark, Odejie, Igbe, Keruen and Mbeafal

Communities where spoken: Idum, Ekuntark, Odejie, Igbe, Keruen and Mbeafal.

Location: Cross River State, Eastern Nigeria.

Mbube orthographic consonants and vowels as well as their phonemic counterparts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONSONANTS (25)</th>
<th>VOWELS (7)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>orthographic phonemes</td>
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Is Mbube a Tone Language?
According to Pike (1948:3) “a tone language is any language that has lexically significant, contrastive but relative pitch on each syllable”. He explained further that pitch is significant because it distinguishes utterance, and lexical because it distinguishes meaning of words”. Therefore, pitch in any tone language must be contrastive for it to be lexically significant. Drawing from this background information therefore, one can say that Mbube is a tone language since it fits snugly into the above definition, as will be shown in the rest of this work.

Basic Tones in Mbube
Mbube has three basic tones which maintain levels of pitch used to distinguish utterances and words. These tones are:
(a) High tone
(b) Low tone
and
(c) Mid tone

There are also two other tones which are phonetically realized. These are:
(a) High-falling glide, marked ‘^’
and
(b) Low-rising glide, marked ‘\’

Apart from the above given tones, a high tone which occurs after a low tone is realized as a mid tone. Also, in a sequence of H L H L or H L H sequence,
**Tone Occurrences in Mbube**

The second high tone is not as high (i.e., it is always realized as a mid tone) not as high as the first high tone.

**Low Tone**

This is marked with a grave accent `` on the syllable bearing it, and marked graphically [ _ ] in the language. Examples (1a-d) below illustrate the operation of low tones in Mbube.

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<table>
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<tr>
<td>sh</td>
<td>/ʃ /</td>
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<tr>
<td>t</td>
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<td>vb</td>
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<td>y</td>
<td>/j/</td>
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<tr>
<td>z</td>
<td>/z/</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Low Tone in Noun Citation**

1a. /ɪjèlò/  LLL  [ _ _ ] ‘mirror’
1b. /liswàl/  LL  [ _ ] ‘broom’
1c. /kèbɔŋ/  LL  [ _ ] ‘matchet’
1d. /ìbàm/  LL  [ _ ] ‘bag’

**High Tone**

In this language high tone can occur in isolation without contrasting with the low tone nor will the low tone contrast with the high tone as shown in examples (1a-d) above. Below are some examples of the high tone occurrences in Mbube noun citation.
High Tone in Noun Citation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Phoneme</th>
<th>Tone Marking</th>
<th>Word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. /ntán/</td>
<td>H[−]</td>
<td>‘horn’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. /frúé/</td>
<td>HHH[−−−]</td>
<td>‘monkey’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. /ntánkpé/</td>
<td>HH[−−]</td>
<td>‘hawk’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. /múán/</td>
<td>HH[−−]</td>
<td>‘child’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. /ógbúró/</td>
<td>HHH[−−−]</td>
<td>‘elder’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. /mpúél/</td>
<td>HH[−−]</td>
<td>‘sheep’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

High tone is marked with an acute accent ‘´’ on the syllable bearing it, and marked graphically [−] in Mbube, as illustrated in examples (2a-f) above.

Mid Tone

Occurrences of mid tone in Mbube language are shown in examples (3a-c) below:

3a. /bēn/ → M[−] ‘dance’
3b. /jēm/ → M[−] ‘sing’
3c. /k p ō/ → M[−] ‘all’

Mid tone is marked with a hyphen ‘-‘ on the syllable bearing it, and marked graphically [-] in Mbube.

High Tone in Verb Citation

Occurrences of high tone in verb citation in Mbube are as illustrated in examples (4a-e) below:

4a. /sɔ́/ → H[−] ‘laugh’
4b. júó/ → HH[−−] ‘hear’
4c. /bú́́ɔ́b/ → HH[−−] ‘think’
4d. /t ŋ ú/ → H[−] ‘come’
4e. /tá/ → H[−] ‘touch’

Apart from the three level tones in Mbube language, there are also occurrences of glide formation. They are low-rising and high-falling glide tones. Examples of high-falling glide tones:
**Tone Occurrences in Mbube**

### High-Falling Glide Tones

5a. /áṭi tî tî / ➔ [¯_/\] ‘smoke’

b. /kókɔrò/ ➔ [¯_/\] ‘pot’

c. /imálmâl/ ➔ [¯_/\] ‘finish’

### Low-Rising Glide Tones

Examples are:

6a. /mètè/ ➔ [¯_/\] ‘brother/sister father’s relatives’

b. /mènè/ ➔ [¯_/\] ‘brother/sister mother’s relatives’

### Functions of Tones in Mbube

Tones in Mbube language perform lexical and grammatical functions, characteristic of tone languages. These are illustrated below:

#### Lexical Function

Examples are:

7a. /ibùbù / LLL [¯_/\] ‘dust’

b. /ibùbù / HHH [¯_/\] ‘big’

c. /mièl/ LL [¯_/\] ‘female’

d. /mièl/ HH [¯_/\] ‘wife’

e. /itɔ̃/ LL [¯_/\] ‘compound’

f. /itɔ̃/ HH [¯_/\] ‘nest’

In examples (7a-f) above, tone is used to distinguish meanings of segmentally identical words, (a) and (b), (c) and (d), (e) and (f).

#### Grammatical Function

In Mbube, tones help to show the differences between questions and statements. Examples are:

8a. /bèlìé/ HHH [¯_/\] ‘come and eat’ – statement

b. /bèlìé/ LHH [¯_/\] ‘food?’ – question

c. /òtî tî / HHH [¯_/\] ‘True’ – declarative verb
In examples (8a-d) above, tones are used to distinguish questions from statements, (8b) from (8a) and (8d) from (8c).

Tonological Processes

Just like consonants and vowels, tones undergo changes and these changes are called tonological processes. The following tonological processes are observed in Mbube.

Tonal Deletion

Generally, vowels are tone bearing elements in Mbube language and many other languages of the world. We cannot talk of tonal deletion in Mbube without mentioning vowels. This is because when a vowel deletion takes place, the tone it bears automatically also gets deleted in Mbube unlike in some other languages where the tone is not automatically deleted as a result of vowel deletion.

Examples of this in Mbube are:

9a. /rù/ + àfùtù/ → /rùfùtù/

V₁ + V₂ → V₁
take picture
‘take picture’

b. /sé/ + inábúálè/ → /sénábúálè /

V₁ + V₂ → V₁
break coconut
‘break coconut’

c. / lié/ + ìtʃi òŋ / → /liéʃi òŋ /

V₁ + V₂ → V₁
eat yam
‘eat yam’

In each of examples (9a-c) above, V₁ + V₂ → V₁. In V₁ V₂ juxtaposition, V₂ gets deleted together with its tone.

Tone Modification as in Downdrift

Downdrift can be defined as the automatic lowering of a high tone by a low tone. The above definition shows that downdrift is predictable. In some other African languages like Ìgbò, there is also non-automatic downstep, usually
referred to as downstep. This is the lowering of high tones without an intervening low tone. We should note however that they can both the referred to as downstep. The automatic downstep, i.e. downdrift operates in Mbube tonology, as illustrated below:

**Downdrift**

Downdrift as we have defined it above is the successive automatic lowering of high tone after low tone. In Mbube, downdrift operates in non-compound words, compound words and sentences. For clarity sake, the term ‘downstep’ will be used throughout the rest of this analysis, thus marked with a raised exclamation mark ‘!’ and written as DS. Examples will be given from compound words and nouns in (10a-c) below:

10a. / tělòwítìtè / [ tělòwítìtè ] ‘stand up’

H LH L H

HLDS LDS

b. / ìté / [ ìté ] ‘father’

L H

L DS

c. / bětěběɅàn/ [bětěběɅàn] ‘hundred’

L LHL

L L DS L

As shown above in examples (10a-c), the high tones downdrift after low tones as the speech progresses while the low tones stay at a constant pitch. Therefore we can see from the illustrations above that the tone perceived as mid tone after a low tone in Mbube was originally a high tone. Mbube downdrift differs from languages (such as Ìgbò), which operate both automatic and non-automatic downstep. In Ìgbò, both high and low tones downdrift automatically.
Conclusion

In this study, we have been able to establish a tone system for the Mbube language. Mbube has three significant tones, high, mid and low as well as two phonetically realized gliding tones: high-falling and low-rising. Tones perform both lexical and grammatical functions. Vowel deletion entails tonal deletion in Mbube. Furthermore, downdrift affects only the high tones in Mbube.

References


