

DEMYSTIFYING THE TEACHING OF TONES: THE ÌSÈKÌRÌ EXAMPLE

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Abstract

The thrust of this paper is on the challenges faced by teachers/students in the teaching/learning of tones in writing the Ìsèkírì language. Amongst others, these challenges include the non-teaching of tones as an integral part of Ìsèkírì orthography or its deficient teaching. Appropriate representation of these tones in tonic solfa constitute part of these challenges. The inability to overcome these challenges has led to the publication of several texts in Ìsèkírì without the application of tone marks. The implication of this is that many materials written in Ìsèkírì are without tone marks. This has semantic implication, as readers are left without the usual tonic guide for appropriate pronunciation/meaning distinction. This paper, therefore, attempts to proffer steps that will help to tackle and overcome these challenges. It begins with a brief introduction of the enormity of the challenges, and a brief remarks on the classification of the language, highlights the levels of tones in Ìsèkírì and the use of copious examples to illustrate these tones. It concludes with suggested steps to overcome these challenges.

The teaching of the Ìsèkírì language especially its writing, is often impaired by the head-headed challenges posed by its tonal nature. These challenges include the non-teaching of tones as an integral part of Ìsèkírì orthography its deficient teaching. The inability to properly represent these tones in tonic solfa as well as the difficulty faced by teachers and students alike in differentiating between the mid and low tones constitute part of these challenges. These challenges are further aggravated because they characterize teachers and students spanning primary to tertiary institutions. In the wake of this is an avalanche of written materials (corpus) in the language that are either poorly tone-marked or totally devoid of tone marks.

It is against this backdrop that this work is being undertaken. It examines the levels of tones in the language, touched on the semantic significance of tones and uses copious examples as guide to facilitate the teaching.

Classification of the Language

Ìsèkírì is Yoruboid. This simply means that it is similar in quality or character to Yoruba. It was previously classified within the Greenberg's (1963) Kwa branch of the Niger-Congo Languages, but Williamson places the language within the New Benue-Congo family of languages.

Like many Nigeria languages, especially the developing ones, the Ìsèkírì language is faced with a myriad of problems. One of these is the inability of most teachers and students to effectively apply tone-marks in the teaching and learning (i.e writing) of the language. This is so bad that many Ìsèkírì corpus are without tone-marks. This has semantic implication, since tones contribute to meaning distinction in the language.

The Place and Levels of Tones in the Language

Ìsèkírì is a tone language. Tone is used to distinguish meaning in utterances in the language. This makes tone a pivotal part of the Ìsèkírì sound system.

The basic tones of the language are level tones. Three levels of tones do exist in Ìsèkírì. These are as listed and explained below:

The High tone- this is indicated by an acute accent as / *ˊ*/. The tonic solfa used to express this is “mi” —/m/

The mid-tone— This does not bear any mark, and it is expressed with the tonic solfa “re” — /r/

The low tone — This is indicated by a grave accent as / *ˋ*/. The tonic solfa that expresses this is “do” — /d/.

In addition to the aforementioned three phonemic tones are contour tones which can be seen as gliding pitch movement falling and rising. When these occur, they are traceable to and analyzed as sequences of either high-low (HL), i.e / *ˊˋ* / or low-high, (Lh), i.e / *ˋˊ* /, respectively. Tones are borne by the vowels in each syllable, each of which carries a single tone.

Semantic Implication of Tones

As already noted, tone is used to distinguish meanings in Ìsèkírì. In other words, tones contribute to meaning distinction in the language. What this simply implies is that two or three lexical items may be spelt in the same way, but with different meanings. This meaning distinction is only explained via the tones borne by the vowels in such words.

There are also instances where certain words are spelt the same way with the same tone-marks, and yet with different meanings. In such instances, meanings are defined in the context of usage in sentences. This will be exemplified later. What now follows is the exemplification of semantic implication of tones. The following lexical items will be used for this.

1. (a) bò — to ferry across a sea/ river in a boat or canoe.
(b) bó — to untie or loose
2. (a) Gbèn — to plant
(b) Gbén — tear (to tear); carve (to carve any material like wood, etc).
3. (a) Dèn — ripe; fair- complexioned
(b) Dén — to be scarce; to fry (as in oil).
4. (a) àlè — ground; meaning or an explanation (of a word, an action or something).
(b) alé — evening
5. (a) Gbà — take
(b) Gbá — sweep (to sweep); to fry oil to a bleaching state.
6. (a) Gbó — to hear; to be hot
7. (a) Gbè — to rot, become sour, go bad
(b) Gbé — to carry
8. (a) Gbò — to park (i.e a car)
(b) Gbo — to bark (a dog)
(c) Gbó — old (to be old)
9. Kpò — Cheap (i.e not expensive); vomit.
10. (a) Ghò — forbidden
(b) Ghó — curve, bent, not straight.

Demystifying the Teaching of Tones: The Ìsèkírì Example

Notice that in nos. 1-3, 5, 7 and 10 above, the set in each (i.e a and b) have the same spellings, but different tone-marks. While the lexical items in (a) carry the low-tone / \ /, those in (b) are tone-marked with high-tone // /. It is this difference in tones that accounts for the meaning distinction in these lexical items.

As said earlier on, there are instances where the nuances of meaning(s) of certain words are only clearly explained or defined in the context of usage in sentences. Nos. (2^b, 3a, 5b, 4a, 6 and 9 above) exemplify this. We will call them up at this point to use sentences to bring out the meaning distinction of these words.

- 2b. Gbén – (i) tear, (ii) carve
(i) Mǎà gbén èwù wé (Do not tear the dress).
(ii) Gbà ùdàyìbó gba gbén egin wé (carve the wood with a cutlass).
- 3a. Dèn – (i) ripe (ii) fair-complexioned
(i) Òsà wé dèn rén (the orange is now ripe).
(ii) Mú un gbé ọ̀ọ̀keren ti ó dèn wé
(Give it to the fair-complexioned man)
- 4a. Àlè – (i) ground (ii) meaning/ explanation
(i) Sọ ó sí àlè (throw it on the ground)
(ii) Nìkọ̀ ré ẹ̀ ẹ̀ àlè òfò ti wó lò wé: (what is the meaning of the word you used?)
- 5b. Gbá – (i) Sweep (ii) to fry oil to a bleaching state.
(i) Wo gbá abètè wé rén (have you swept the room?)
(ii) Èkpò wé èè tẹ̀ gbá. (the oil is not yet bleached).
9. Gbó – (i) hear (ii) hot
(i) wo gbó mi? (Did you hear me?)
(ii) Omi wé èè gbó (the water is not hot)

No. (8 above) is an example of a word that is spelt in the same way in (a-c), but with different meanings. The differential here is tonal.

Having look at the phonemic tones, we will now turn to explain the contour tones, which occurrence, as said earlier, are traceable to and analyzed as sequence of either high-low (HL) or low-high (LH) respectively.

Examples of MHL and LH are as shown below

- ọ̀kǎà - / Ọ̀kǎà / (Ọ̀kǎà) ‘bitter cola’
atáà - /atáà/ (atáà) ‘plantain’
ọ̀sǎà - /Ọ̀sǎà/ (Ọ̀sǎà) ‘shrine/ deities’

The low-high (LH) does not occur within lexical items but can however be found in phrases and sentences as shown below:

- şòn ọ̀n - / Sọ̀n / Sọ̀n / ‘roast it’
íghàán - /írǎà/ ‘these ones’

The high-low may sometime appear to make significant contrast with the level tone in Ìsèkírì as in:

- a. . ọ̀kǎà - ọ̀kǎà MHL ‘bitter cola’
òkàn - ọ̀kà LL ‘one’
- b. atáà - atáà MHL ‘plantain’
òtàn - òtàn LL ‘sandbank’
- c. ọ̀sǎà - ọ̀sǎà MHL ‘shrine/deities’
òsàn - ọ̀sà LL ‘goodness’

From the examples given above we find that the tones are always borne by vowels in a syllable. Before moving on to explain how the use of tones in *Ìsèkírì* can be grasped by teachers and students alike, note that there are some few lexical items whose tone marks necessarily undergo a change by virtue of the tone borne by the phonemes (segments) preceding them. Some words that clearly display this phenomenon are as shown below:

- Lèghè – Reason cause (to occur or happen); deceive
- Lèfùn – out (as in “come out” or write out clearly or speak out audibly, etc)
- Kèlè – from (as in place of origin or place/point of commencement).
- Bòbò – some
- Bòghò – To pass through a place or to pass (a test or examination)

As lexical items, phonemes in these words are marked by two low tones / \ / - LL, but in the context of sentences, the tone in the first segments of these words undergo a change from low tone to high tones. This change is conditioned by the tone on the phonemes that precede them. The tone on the preceding segment triggers a change. The examples below bring out the point being explained.

- Fa á lèfùn (Pull/drag it out)
- O dé lèfùn (he came/ burst out suddenly)
- Wó lèfùn rén? (Have you come out?)
- Nikó ré léghè é gbà wá (what made/caused him to come why did he come)
- Nesin/nikó ré léghè uwo? (who/ what deceived you?)
- Nikó ré gbé ẹ gbá rín lèfùn? (why are you laughing out?)
- Okéré mó kèlè wá a (I am from Okere)
- Ita ghàán bóbò èè yòn etín (some of these stories are not pleasant to the ears)
- Mèè fé dí iréyè kí iréyè bòghò ní udánghò wé (I don't want any person to pass the test or exam).

Note that the change in the tone on the five words discussed here only occurs where the tone on the preceding phoneme is high. In other words, mid tone (r) and low tone (d) have not been found to trigger this change. This is shown by the examples below:

- Mèè fé dí uwọ lèghè mi – (I do not want you to deceive me)
- Máú kpè orúkò mi lèfùn (do not call out my name- do not call my name audibly)
- Máú lèghè mi (Do not deceive me)
- Okere owan
- O yín ìyèn bóbò gbé mi – he told me some stories
- Ita bóbò ká yòn etín – some stories are pleasant to the ears
- Mo gín dí uwọ bọgò kúrí ọguájú mí – (I said you should get out of my sight).

Demystifying the Teaching of Tones

The teaching/learning of tones as part of *Ìsèkírì* orthography by teachers and students is not as complex and complicated as it is thought. These challenges could be surmounted by the application of the steps listed below.

- The teachers/students should know the level of tones we have in the language;
- Have a firm grasp of the tonic solfa used for these tones;
- Give themselves to the constant and consistent humming/murmuring of the lexical items, noting the tonic solfa produced, as this will naturally bring out the tones that each phoneme (segment) of a word should bear.

➤ Take for example, ẹkun (door) and ọkan (one). When these lexical items are hummed, what will be produced will be “do-do” – /d-d/. Applying these on these words, we will have ẹkùn and ọkàn.

➤ A further step that could help demystify tones is the use of mould or model. How does this work? You memorize some set of words bearing the major/principal tones (i.e the level tones). You carry these sets of words in your subconscious (mind), and these serve as a standard or model with which you try out other lexical items to see where they belong. Laborious this may seem initially, but as you persist, this method of juxtaposing lexical items with words in a mould in your subconscious (mind) will effortlessly play out and become very rewarding. See the example of this approach below: Begin with lexical items with one and two syllables. Move on to three syllable words and above only after you have mastered one and two syllable words.

➤ One syllable word with high tone – “m” / /: mí (breathe), bí (to give birth to), mán (walk or move delicately on the edge of objects), gún (to pound or to stab with a sharp object), bá (to meet with), ré (to spring up), rén (aspectual – has /have/had), etc

➤ One syllable word with low tone – “d” / \/: mà (know), nò (loss), fà (crawl), dòn (pain), fùn (circumcise), kà (confess or count), etc

➤ One syllable word with mid tone – “r” /-/: rẹ (wet), dẹ (to hunt or to walk furtively or stealthily), mọ (to drink), ya (to write), ran (to put or switch on – a light), run (to put or switch off – a light), etc.

Using the afore-mentioned one syllable set of words (with high tones, low tones and mid tones) as a model you try out other one syllable words with them to find out which of these they fit into.

Other examples with two syllable words are as shown below:

➤ Two syllable words with high-tone- “m” / /: mímí, (raw), biri (and /with), néi (able/capable), kókó (since or long ago), etc.

➤ Two syllable words with low-tone- “d” / \/: ọkàn (one), nọkàn (alone), ẹkùn (door), ẹdòn (chest/courage), ẹrẹ (gain/profit), ẹsèn (leg), etc

➤ Two syllable words with mid tone – “r” /-/: omi (water), ẹja (fish), ẹwu (shurt), sisi (such as), ọrọ (rope), etc.

Just like with the one syllable words, you match other two syllable words against these two syllable words that you have as a standard to find out the set they fit into.

This same procedure that applies to one and two syllable words also applies to words with three syllables and above.

Conclusion

Thus far, the thrust of this paper has been on demystifying the teaching of tones in Ìsèkírì. The place, and levels of tones in Ìsèkírì were considered. Tones, as explained in this work, contribute to meaning distinction in Ìsèkírì. The three level tones and the contour tones were copiously explained through several examples. The work concludes with the steps proffered as the way forward to demystifying the challenges posed to teachers and students in the teaching/learning of tones in Ìsèkírì. It is hoped that when these steps are meticulously followed, and teachers/students give themselves to the constant and consistent practice of humming the lexical items in the language for the tonic solfa to play out on the phonemes of these words, that the use and teaching of tones in Ìsèkírì writing will become a thing of joy and pleasure.

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