1. Introduction

The question of how to write tone has been explored in practice in a number of tone languages; a few articles have been written on what people tried and what seemed to be successful. Yet there does not seem to be a general consensus on how tones are best written, indeed, there are still many questions on how tone analysis should best be done. Even the symbols used for writing tone are not standardized. In Africa, for example, many linguists use accent marks to mark tone, while others use punctuation marks. The use of numbers, as in the Americas, does not appear to be used to mark tone in Africa. In these last few years, the body of information on the subject has been growing. Joseph Mfonyam (1990) has written an impressive dissertation about a controlled experiment on how to write tone done in Cameroon. Mr. Mfonyam is a native speaker of the language (Bafut) in which he tested four ways of writing tone. The results of his testing contradicted what had been previously reported on the writing of tone. Whereas the previous assumption was that high tone should be written and low left unmarked, Mfonyam found out that the contrary is true for his language. This principle has since been applied to languages as far away as Liberia with good results. Reports are coming in of languages where tone, written on the basis of marking high tone, were difficult if not impossible to teach—a situation rectified by simply switching to marking low tone as the basic tone and making the necessary adjustments.
Orthography questions have to do with psycholinguistics. In order to write anything, the writer has to have a certain understanding of the units which make up the writing system. If these correspond to what he intuitively knows about his language, they are easily taught and easily brought up to the conscious level that he needs for handling them. This is certainly true of tone orthographies. Two related questions need to be answered: (1) Which tone(s) does the native speaker “hear” most easily? (2) Are there certain general rules which help give direction as we struggle to discover this?

The first step, of course, is to try to understand what the tone system of the language is, that is, how lexical and grammatical tones relate to and influence each other. Methods found helpful in accomplishing this in Africa can be found in Notes on Linguistics, “Tone analysis in African languages” (Wiesemann 1989a). The article suggests, among other things, the places in the grammar where tone changes (grammatical tones) are liable to occur. It also lists the most common phonetic tone changes the author has encountered.

Once the analysis is done, the question still remains: which tone(s) should be written in the orthography? Discounting the purely phonetic tone changes, a tone orthography should be developed which takes into consideration:

a. All the significant tone changes

b. The way the tone is pronounced (rather than the underlying string as analyzed according to the suggestions in the article in Notes on Linguistics)

c. All the tone ambiguities. These are quickly surveyed by examining all the minimal pairs, words, expressions, and clauses (though it is not enough to mark these; see below).

A minimum way of writing tone systematically should be explored. This means that, if possible, only one of the surface tones (counting level and glide tones) should be symbolized. If that does not consistently mark all the constructions in such a way that no (or almost no) ambiguities are left, then a second tone should be added. Only in very rare cases should three tones be marked. This is true even for tone systems with eight or nine different tones, as found in Cameroon. This means that a number of tones are actually left unmarked. The system should, however, be constructed in such a way that no sentences would have to be read twice in order to be understood.

Once the tone (or tones) to be marked is chosen, it should be marked consistently wherever it is pronounced. The orthography should closely accompany the pronunciation; the rules should be sound-grapheme relationship types of rules. All the significant tone changes should be retrievable from the tone orthography if they involve the tone that has been chosen to be marked.

In principle the tone that is less frequent should be marked rather than the most frequent one. In languages with downstep, however, it is best to mark low tone rather than high tone, precisely because of the downstep which has such an effect on the high tones following the downstepped high tone. It becomes quite confusing. Should high tone be marked high even after downstep though, at that point, it sounds like mid? And often the downstep itself needs to be marked if the high tone is chosen, but it can be safely


Page 2.
ignored when low tone is chosen. There might be a rare construction which remains ambiguous by not writing downstep, but this would probably be so rare that it could safely be ignored.

In many tone languages it is the low tone (not the high tone as often supposed) that is the one most easily identified by the native speaker. It is, therefore, the best tone to be marked (and the high tone left unmarked) even when downstep does not make it necessary. In addition, in many languages a tone-marking system based on the low tone gets by with less tone marks than if it is based on the high tone. If it is determined that the language is indeed tonal, the low tone should be marked first and then determine how many tones are needed in order to have the whole language disambiguated. If, on the other hand, the language has melodic stress, where there is only one pertinent tone per word and all other tones can be generated by rules, it is the high tone stress that needs to be marked.

Do not think that it is sufficient to mark only minimal pairs. This is not good for reading and hopeless for writing. Who wants to memorize a list of minimal pairs, that he then must access every time he writes a word, simply to know whether he needs to write that tone or not? As long as an orthography rule is linked to the pronunciation (barring purely phonetic phenomena), it is a simple rule which does not interfere with concentrating on the message one is trying to write. All other rules do interfere and are therefore difficult rules. They should be weeded out of all orthographies, particularly tone orthographies.

As for the symbols to use in tone orthographies, the most common practice in Africa is to use <`> for low tone, <`’> for high, <`> for high-low glides, <`> for low-high glides, and <`”> for mid tone. What is in use in Bafut are <`’>, <`> and <`> (though the language has seven phonetic tones). Those who advertise the use of punctuation marks for tone are quite happy with them. A test run in Liberia indicates that the actual symbols do not matter. They tested the same system, using accent and punctuation marks; the results were the same. The accent marks seem quite adequate and more acceptable than other symbols in that they look more like European writings.

3. Tone pedagogy

[Topics: tone: teaching]

Another question that needs to be addressed is that of tone pedagogy. Out of the various approaches tried the most sensible one seems to be the following.

3.1. Lexical tone

Lexical tone is best introduced before the vowels and consonants are taught. Do it in some preprimer lessons, combining the teaching of the (visual) preprimer techniques with the sight word teaching techniques. Chose minimal pairs which are easily illustrated and introduce them as you would a sight word with its illustration. Underneath each picture-word combination introduce a line which contains both words, from which the learner then has to chose the one identical to the picture-word combination at hand. Next the learner might “read” all the words in the line, which should be simple to do by just paying attention to the marks that distinguish the pair.

Underneath the two picture-word combinations of the minimal pair (plus their exercise line) introduce another set of three lines in which the two words appear in different orders on each of the three lines. Again these can be read.

As an additional exercise, the learner can be presented with a set of words without the distinguishing marks. The learner can then introduce them on some of the words, so that the two words of the pair are again included in the exercise.

The following is an example of a tone lesson from the Fɔŋbe language primer from Benin, West Africa.

The reason why it is good to teach the tone marks first in this manner is that the student gets into the habit of first looking for the tone marks, a very useful reading technique. It will soon become automatic which is the goal. Several minimal pairs are needed to teach this.

Moving into the primer lessons, syllables can be added to and word drills constructed (not in every lesson, but occasionally). Start with the lexical tone drills. Choose several words already introduced with the


Page 4.
same tone pattern. Do not use sight words at this point, just previously constructed words. Put the words under each other, contrasting them with a list of words with one other pattern. This box could be surrounded with a line and marked with a talking drum or any other musical instrument which identifies the box as a tone drill. Some linguists put [dada] syllables underneath with the same tone mark to highlight the marks. If the tone marks have been introduced in the prelessons, this may not be necessary.

3.2. Grammatical tone

As for the grammatical tone, this is best introduced (or rather practiced) in the grammatical drill section. As it appears in the text, a grammatical drill can be constructed much as it would be constructed for any other grammatical feature. The option of whether or not to mark it as a tone drill, using the same symbol that marks the drills of lexical tone series of words, is at the linguist’s discretion.

4. Conclusion

People have found it very helpful to be led through their grammar at the various points at which tone changes occur. This helps them become aware of what is going on in their language, and it goes a long way to reducing the fear of tone marking. Many preconceived ideas about tone must be addressed before people will be willing to write the tone needed for reading their language well! This is more pronounced in the languages that have been written without tone for some time and in countries where official policy discourages writing of tone. The latter situation is the most difficult one because people will never enjoy reading if they have to read every (other) sentence twice, sometimes more often, before they can be sure what it means. Unfortunately, that is the situation in so many tone languages in Africa when little or no tone is written. This is true, even in tone languages that have lexical tone only. So, this whole issue of writing tone is indeed a very important matter for reader comprehension of tonal languages.

References


See also Mfonyam 1982 Bibliography (Literacy) Citations


View document See also Wiesemann 1989a Bibliography (Literacy)