Towards Solving the Problem of Tone in the Learning of Hausa and Yoruba Languages

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Abstract

This paper examines the phonological feature of tone in 'minimal pairs' or what the writer calls 'tonal homographs' in the Hausa and Yoruba languages. This is done with regards to effective pronunciation (geared towards avoiding phonological ambiguity in communication) among learners. The paper is relevant for the strength, empowerment and the survival of Nigerian indigenous languages in an environment where there is a violent dominance of the English language; and for the importance of Hausa and Yoruba languages in Nigeria where the Nigerian Policy on Education (NPE, 1998) states that every child should learn the language of the immediate environment; and that in the interest of National Unity, it is expedient that every child shall be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. The emphasis of NPE is on the mother tongue whereas the process taken by English language is ever evolving and slowly replaces the efficiency and effectiveness of Nigerian languages on a National scale. In view of this, an exposure of tone in Hausa and Yoruba languages will hopefully, facilitate the learning of both languages and consequently increase their number of active speakers.

Keywords: Hausa language, Phonological feature, Tone, Yoruba language,

Introduction

According to Jagger (2001), Hausa is a major world language spoken as a mother tongue by more than thirty (30) million people

in Northern Nigeria and Southern Nigeria; and in urban areas of West Africa, Ghana, Togo and the Blue Nile Province of Sudan. Yoruba is the main language of the Western parts of Nigeria including Lagos. It is also spoken in the present day Republic of Benin. Both Hausa and Yoruba are widely spoken as second language and have extended rapidly as lingua-franca in Nigeria. However, in Nigeria these languages have remained in their domain of what appears to be minorities to the English language in spite of the fact that they are indigenous to Nigeria.

The essence of this paper is to facilitate the learning of the Hausa and Yoruba languages by providing 'short cut' through the minimal pairs available in both languages. This is done in order to increase the number of active speakers of these languages; which hopefully will aid the survival, sustenance, protection and promotion of Nigerian languages in an environment where there is a violent dominance of the English language. Such domineering position of the English language may affect their number of speakers and consequently become a hindrance to the success of the Nigerian Policy on Education (NPE). The NPE states that all children should be taught in the language of the immediate community from the pre-primary stage to primary three. Unfortunately the policy is not implemented in most schools across the country. A situation like this accounts for the preference accorded the English language over the mother tongue. This is further heightened by parents' attitudinal preference for the use of the English language.

Furthermore, we live in the computer age that views the world as a global village. The language spoken is the dominant language- English; which is also the language of computer and technology. (Dagunduro, 2010: 5) This means that the 'Lingua franca' of modernity and technological development is the dominant language (English). In Nigeria, the need to industrialise has turned

the Nigerian indigenous languages into minority languages which has resulted in the abandonment of the Nigerian indigenous languages to imbibe the language of technology. This is done in order to be part of the global village market. This development has brought into Nigeria, a form of English (Standard Nigerian English) that is typically Nigerian –An English that is indigenised and nativised into a blend of Nigerian and British culture (Bamgbose 1995 cited in Polacjelf, 2017). Such trend gradually erodes the efficacy of the Nigerian languages as a medium of technology; and gradually decreases the number of Nigerian speakers of the indigenous languages.

This violent domination of the English language over the Nigerian languages is why Mowarin (2004) cited in Polacjelf (2017) says that the indigenous languages in Nigeria are 'trying to free themselves from the clutches of the concomitant cataclysmic English language and Pidginisation. The English language is a colonial heritage that has a viable function (with a major influence on our linguistic terrain) that makes it a language of power and influence. This way it appears to have surpassed it is boundary. It has grown beyond being a mere vestige of colonialism. In which case it is time to pay attention to Nigerian languages; or at least certain vital aspects that are common characteristics of Nigerian languages (such as the issue of tone in the Hausa and Yoruba languages) that could facilitate the learning of these languages.

This paper examines the phonological feature of tone with regard to second language (L2) learning. It has a direction towards educational strategy. Moreover, it is hoped that the paper will provide strength and empowerment for the survival of these languages (Hausa and Yoruba). This is important because of the relevance of these languages in Nigeria where the Nigerian Policy

on Education (NPE) states that every child should learn the language of the immediate environment and that in the interest of National Unity, it is expedient that every child shall be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

In spite of the efforts of certain scholars at expounding the meaning and theory of tone as it relates to the Hausa and Yoruba languages, learners of these languages still find it difficult to understand their tonal patterns. Learners of these languages often misuse the patterns by combining them awkwardly and making phonological errors and as a consequence, find it difficult to communicate. This paper represents a fresh attempt at dealing with the problems involved.

Tone and Tonal Languages
Tone is a phonological feature and it is concerned with the phonic substance-pronunciation. Within phonology, two specific branches of study are recognised, namely; segmental and supra-segmental. While segmental phonology analyses speech into discrete patterns, such as phonemes, supra-segmental phonology analyses those features which extend over one segment, such as tone, intonation contours, stress, pitch, rhythm etc. Although there are other features of supra-segmental phonology, this paper is primarily concerned with the supra-segmental feature of tone which is a distinct feature of the Hausa and Yoruba languages.

Several languages in the world today are tone languages, in which substituting one distinctive tone for another on a particular syllable can cause a change in the dictionary meaning of that word or morpheme or in some aspects of its grammatical categorisation (Roach 2004). A tonal language can be described as that in which the meaning of a fixed sequence of sounds depends on the pitch with which it is pronounced; thus, different tones identifying different

words. A language that uses tone to differentiate word meanings is called a tone language (Aderibigbe, 2010; Okolo and Ezikeojiaku, 1999 cited in Polacjelf, 2017). Avery (1992) supports the view that about half of the world's languages are tone languages and claims that many of the languages of South-East Asia and Africa are tone languages. He further asserts that these languages use pitch to signal a difference in meaning between words. These pitch variations are an important part of any language, just as stress and proper "word order" are in many languages. Crystal (1991) opines that in tone languages, word meanings or grammatical categories such as tense are dependent on pitch level. Bern and Derek (2000) cited in Polacjelf (2017) also state that in Africa, most of the languages spoken are tone languages. In Nigeria, tone languages are in the majority (Polacjelf, 2017). It becomes important therefore, to examine the place of tone in Nigerian languages; particularly from the perspective of second language learning.

The issue of 'tone' has to do with the way individual words are cited in isolation. This definition has a relation to the focus of this paper, in the sense that tone distinguishes or makes distinctions between homographs. Tone can also mean the pitch (how high or low a sound is) of a syllable in speaking. A tone can be rising, falling, high, low or mid depending on the language. Crystal (1991:353) agrees with this view by defining tone as "a term used in phonology to refer to the distinct pitch level of a syllable. This paper hopes to proffer solution to possible areas of wrong use of tone (syllable by syllable) among second language learners of Hausa and Yoruba. Such a study of the phonological feature of tone in these languages is desirable particularly from the perspective of second language (L2) learning. As earlier mentioned, a study like this becomes necessary in view of the Nigerian Policy on Education

(N.P.E., 1998) that states that every child should learn the language of the immediate environment; and that in the interest of national unity it is expedient that every child shall be required to learn one of the three Nigerian Languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

These languages make extensive use of tone for distinguishing meaning in utterances. Thus, a study on tone in these languages, particularly with reference to second language learners, and its relevance to communication becomes necessary. Problems of communication, especially in a second language can be found in any geographical, cultural and linguistic background. One of the problems second language learners face is in the area of the knowledge of the second Language. Poor or inadequate mastery of the linguistic system of the target language can be a stumbling block, resulting in grave consequences. For example, poor knowledge of how tone functions or the application of tone in a particular language can make a listener in a conversation to misunderstand the original intention of the speaker. In other words, a wrong use of tone may not only fail to convey a meaning but also convey a meaning different from what is intended by the speaker. Thus, fluctuations of pitch have semantic relevance. Insufficient knowledge about the tones available in these languages, and their appropriate application could pose a serious problem in communication, especially to learners of these languages. This is so because if a word is pronounced wrongly, it could hinder effective communication. The issue of tone is particularly relevant to the minimal pairs of tonal languages. Poor knowledge of how tones function in minimal pairs can pose serious problems to communication. Thus, an elaborate study of the phonological feature of tone and how they exist in the homographic words in the two languages become very necessary.

A study this nature will involve taking a critical look at the tones available in Yoruba and Hausa languages. For instance, in the

orthography of the Hausa language, tone and vowel length are not used to differentiate between words of similar phonemic composition (minimal pairs). This is certainly an unfortunate situation for a tonal language; in which the meaning of a word depends on its tone. Mamman (2011) criticises the language structure for its lack of such fundamental feature in the writing system. According to him, such a situation in the writing system of the language could confuse a reader; adding that only the sentence construction may help the reader to understand the meaning of Hausa words or morphology. Therefore, he advises that this important feature of tone marking and vowel length be taught in the academic scene, beginning from primary, secondary and higher institutions of learning. This issue of tone marking and vowel length is important to the pronunciation/application of tone which incidentally is relevant to this paper which is done in order to avoid misuse or wrong use of tone that could lead to misunderstanding and poor communication among second language learners (L2) of Yoruba and Hausa. At this juncture it will be important to examine other relevant studies on inter-language transfer (interference) in phonology for a better understanding of this paper.

Idakwo's (2011) study is on the phonological inter-language variations in the spoken English of Igala undergraduate students of Kogi State University, Ayingba. He states categorically that his study is at the segmental level. Thus, he examines the difference between the Igala and English sounds without reference to any supra-segmental feature. This paper is rather concerned with the phonological feature of tone with regards to second language learners of Yoruba and Hausa languages.

Another relevant study to phonology is the study of Musa (1975), who identified areas of phonological interference of the Fula

language on French learners at the segmental level. He exposes the phonemes in the Fula language which interfere with the learning of French language. This study, like Idakwo's study, is primarily on segmental features of phonology and not on issues of supra-segmental features of phonology which is of vital importance to this paper.

The study of Jenkins (1995) is on variation in phonological error in inter-language talk. It is a discussion on inter-language talk and the problems of intelligibility. She adds that inter-language talk is problematic both inside and outside the classroom setting because of the amount of miscommunication it generates. Her emphasis is on the second language learners who are faced with an additional burden. Jenkins' study is significant because it is both on the segmental and the supra-segmental features of stress. In which case she examines both the segmental transfer errors and their effects and the supra-segmental errors and their effects. Like this paper, her study has a direction towards educational strategy. However, whereas the supra-segmental feature she is concerned with is stress, the supra-segmental feature that this paper is concerned with is tone in the Yoruba and in the Hausa languages.

A quick glance at the studies we have examined will reveal that the different studies have to do with the interference of indigenous languages in Nigeria with international languages like English and French. On the other hand, this paper is on the interference between the indigenous languages in Nigeria, particularly the influence of other indigenous languages upon Yoruba and Hausa languages as second language learners make attempt to learn these languages – therefore the emphasis is on the mother tongue (indigenous languages in Nigeria) In other words, the emphasis here is to give more attention to Nigerian languages in view of the violent domination of the English language in Nigeria.

This paper hopes to encourage and facilitate the learning of these indigenous languages by making it easier for them to do so through the tonal homographs of the Nigerian languages.

Categories of Tone Language

There are basically two categories of tone languages. Pike (1948), cited in Kofoworola (2017), strikes a distinction between contour tone system and register tone system. Yoruba is a register tone language, with three basic tones namely, high, low, mid (unmarked). Although Hausa is a register tone language, it also combines some features of the contour tone system. Mba and Mba (2000) asserts that contour tone languages make use of a lot of glides overlaying words to derive different meanings; and in register tone languages, tones fall on syllables. They also add that register tone comprises of terracing tone languages-languages where tone pitches are unstable. Mba and Mba's (2000) assertion about "several glides in contour tone" and the instability of register tone which can affect pronunciation and consequently meaning differentiation in words among second language learners calls for accurate skill in pronunciation. According to Radford et al (1999), both level tone and contour tones qualify a language as having lexical tones, or in other words, as being a tone language.

Tone in Yoruba

Yoruba is a tonal language. It is a tonal language with three tonemic levels: high, low, and mid. In Yoruba language, every syllable must have at least one tone. A syllable containing a long vowel can have two tones. Nwachukwu (1995) upholds that the mid tone in Yoruba is a lexical tone which occurs freely like the high and the low tones. That is, it could be seen in a syllable or in a word; as we have in the

example, *Ewébè* 'vegetable leaf' with MHL tone pattern, where the three different tones (MHL) can be observed in the pronunciation of the Yoruba word.

Babarinde (2001) says that the high tone is significantly easier to perceive than the mid and the low tones. He further adds that the mid tone is the hardest tone to discern among the Yorubas who have ordered their own perception of the tone, as: high, low and mid. According to Awobuluyi (1998), although the high tone occurs freely at the word initial position, its occurrence is restricted and predictable in nouns. He explains that all the nouns in the Yoruba language start as a mid-tone–bearing front high vowel "i", as in:

1.   Ilekun MLL 'door'
        Ileke MLL 'beads'

However, Babarinde (2001) stresses that not very many nouns in the standard form of the language exhibits this claim but those examples abound in the dialects of Ekiti and Ondo states. He also states that Yoruba tones (high, mid, low) are easily identified in monosyllabic utterances without any help. He further observed that the high tone has the highest intensity and shortest in duration based on its acoustic feature. According to Ikekeonwu (1998), Yoruba verbs predominantly bear the high tone. Babarinde also says that the high tone does not start with the sound sequence of VCV (vowel consonant vowel) which are common to general nouns. He adds that this does not extend to a word with the sequence of CVCV (Consonant Vowel, Consonant Vowel), where the high tone occurs freely at the word initial position. This feature applies to all the borrowed words in the language.

2.   Bileedi HHLL blade
        Tabili HLL table
        Kilaasi HHLL class

Awobuluyi's (1998) view is different. He holds that the high tone does not always start a word whose first syllable is a vowel sound, even in a polysyllabic word. According to him, such words can start with a mid-tone-bearing vowel "i" which however, does not feature much today, as examples in (3) show.

3.   Egugun MHH 'masquerade'
        Arugbo MLL 'old person'
        Itunu   LLH 'comfort'
        Ibadan LLL 'name of a town'
        Olongssbo MHHL 'cat'

Tone in Hausa

Several scholars have made reference to Hausa as a tonal language. Geoffrey (1985) says that Hausa has three tones high, low and falling, which according to him, can be seen as a sequence of two tones, namely high (H) and low (L). Abdumalik (2000) seems to agree with his view, for he also says that the Hausa language consist of the high tone (H), Low tone (L) and the combination of the high and low which is seen as the falling tone (F). The high tone is marked (acute), the low tone is marked (grave) and the falling tone is marked with a (Λ carat). Other scholars who made reference to Hausa as a tone languages are Comwan and Schuh (1976), Aderebigbe (2010), Pike (1948) and Ikekeonwu (1998) cited in Polacjelf (2017). Tones are marked on vowels according to the pitch of the voice on each syllable. Examples are:

4.   High tone (H)   Jinii (blood)   HH
                         Kuuraa (hyena) HH
      Low tone   àbù (thing)   LL

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	àyàbà (banana)	LL
Falling tone	tsâi (height)	F
	Kyâu (beauty)	F

According to Hyman (1975), the Hausa Language has more high tones than the low and falling tones. Ikekeonwu (1998), in her study of *semantic categorisation in tonal assignment*: *An investigation of Igbo*, *Hausa and Yoruba*, observes that the basic tone in the Hausa language is the low tone which could come on the first or second syllable of a word. She adds that in Hausa, the basic verbs take the high tone generally; even when the low tone is involved in the construction, there is invariably a high as well.

Minimal Pair Analysis of Homographs in the Hausa and Yoruba Languages

Crystal (1991: 353) opines that in many languages the tone carried by a word is an essential feature of the meaning of that word. This means that communication can be hindered if tones are misused in speech. For example, in Beijing Mandarin Chinese; the word 'ma' has four different meanings of mother, horse and so on. If mispronounced it could be seen as an abusive utterance, especially for one intending to say 'mother' but says 'horse'. Such words or mihimal pairs with the same phonemic composition are also common in the Hausa and Yoruba languages. Below are some examples from both languages accordingly:

5.   gari - - - - - - town
        ga:ri- - - - - flour
        and,
        òró ---- a place name
        ŌrŌ ---- a kind of tree
        Òro ---- wild mango

        Ōró ---- poison
        ŌrÒ---- a demon

From the above, we observe that in Hausa and Yoruba phonology, tone is a prominent feature. This is so because they are tone languages. Tone languages are languages where placement of tone affects meaning. In which case, each syllable carries tone. This is common with most Nigerian languages including Yoruba and Hausa. In Yoruba language for example, the word 'Oja' could mean two different things when pronounced appropriately as illustrated in (6).

6.   Oja – Market MH
        Oja – a baby hag (a piece of cloth used for holding (fasten)
           firmly ,a baby to the body of the mother.   LH

As we can see above, the word *Oja* without tone is meaningless because Yoruba is a tonal Language. Also, Babarinde (2001) further differentiates word meanings in the Yoruba words below:

7.   Agbõn 'wasp'
        Agbòn 'basket'
        Àgbon 'coconut'
        Àgbòn 'chin'

A good example of such a word in Hausa is *fari* which could either mean white or drought depending on the difference in pitch or the pronunciation of the term. Another example from Hausa is the term daamaa as illustrated below.

8.   daamaa (HL) 'chance'
        daamaa (HL) 'mix
        daamaa (HH) 'right hand'

The examples cited are referred to as "minimal sets". There is no doubt that such "minimal sets" 'minimal pairs' or what the writer calls "tonal homographs" can pose a lot of problems like confusion, ambiguity, misunderstanding and failure in communication among learners (L2) of the languages in question if they are misused. In order to ease these difficulties in learning the Yoruba and Hausa languages, the writer will have to provide a clear description and /or a better understanding of "tonal homographs" in the Yoruba and Hausa languages that will assist learners to overcome such problems.

Babarinde's earlier views about the perception and discernment of tone call for a careful and skilful method of analysing tone. His views and those of Clark, Yallop and Fletcher (2007), have a great influence on this paper. According to Clark, Yallop and Fletcher (2007), ''sound'' is a reminder that speech is intended to be heard or perceived and that it is therefore possible to focus on the way in which a listener analyses or perceives a sound wave. He adds that speech is a purposeful human activity, intended under normal circumstances to convey meaning. The term phonology is often associated with the study of this higher level of speech organisation.

Following Babarinde's (2001) view, it is important to note that the issue of tone involves a lot of skill with regard to proper pronunciation on the part of the speaker prior to realisation. This is so because proper pronunciation is a sensitive means of disseminating information effectively. This means that communication can be hindered if tones are misused in speech. Based on this, the following examples of tonal homographs in Yoruba and Hausa are given one after the other below:

HAUSA

S/n	Word	Tone patterns	Vowel Length	Meaning
1.	gashi	LH	gashi	take
	gashi	HL	gaashi	hair
2.	gado	HH	gado	bed
	gado	LH	gaadoo	inheritance
3.	kara	LL	kara	add
	kara	HL	kaara	sound
4.	zare	HH	zaree	thread
	zare	HL	zaare	remove
5.	baba	LL	baaba	father
	baba	LL	baaBa	mother
6.	zafi	HL	zaafi	hot
	zafi	HH	zafii	pain
7.	rana	LL	raana	sun
	rana	HH	rana	day
8.	rama	LH	rama	A kind of vegetable
	rana	HH	raamaa	Retaliate/revenge
9.	}asa	LL	}asaa	country
	}asa	LH	}asa	land
	zaki	HH	zaaki	lion
10	za}i	HH	zaa}ii	sweet

YORUBA

9 a i.   bata (dodo) (LL) shoe
   ii.   bàtá (domi) (LH) drum
  b i.   orí (remi) (MH) head
   ii.   òrí (domi) (LH) shea butter

c i.   ààlà (dododo) (LLL) boundary
  ii. àlá (domi) (LH) dream
d i.   olóyè (remido) (MHL) chief
  ii. olóye (remire) (MHM) a wise person
e i.   shsùkú (domi) (LH) hairstyle
  ii. shùkù (dodo) (LL) pearl of corn
f i.   abẹ (rere) (MM) blade
  ii. Abẹ́ (remi) (MH) space between the thigh
g i.   ọkàn (redo) (ML) heart
  ii. òkan (dore) (LM) one
h i.   igbá (remi) (MH) calabash
  ii. Igba (rere) (MM) 200
I i.   ẹ̀kọ (dore) (LM) pap
  ii. ẹ̀kọ́ (domi) (LH) education
j i.   àyà (dodo) (LL) chest
  ii. Aya (rere) (MM) wife
k i.   ìka (dore) (LM) finger
       ìkà (dodo) (LL)   a wicked person

The words displayed (listed) above are some examples of 'minimal pairs' (tonal homographs) in which a difference in sound makes a difference in meaning. In spite of the fact that the minimal pairs have the same spellings, they are pronounced in different ways according to the tone (tonal marks or vowel length) assigned to them. Such a pedagogical device or 'short cut' through the 'tonal homographs' in both languages could facilitate the learning of both languages.

Ottenheima (2009) cited in Osisanwo (2012) opines that such minimal pairs can serve as the clearest and easiest way to identify phonemes in a language. He further adds that as a learner of a language, one good strategy is to keep an ear for minimal pairs.

In view of this, facilitating the learning of Hausa and Yoruba languages through the tonal homographs available in both languages will hopefully, promote these languages and make them relevant to every profession (law, medicine, agriculture, computer science, history and so on); and also protect them in an environment of a violent domination of the English language.

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