



EXPLORING THE BEAUTY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF TONE IN YORÙBÁ LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract

Tone is a fundamental feature of the Yorùbá language, playing vital linguistic, communicative, and aesthetic roles in meaning-making and cultural expression. This study explores the beauty and significance of tone in Yorùbá language teaching, focusing on its phonological structure, communicative functions, and cultural relevance in oral traditions such as poetry, proverbs, music, and songs. Despite its importance, tone is often inadequately emphasized in formal language instruction, resulting in ambiguity, misinterpretation, and poor communicative competence among learners. The study is grounded in three theoretical frameworks: Autosegmental Theory, Sociolinguistic Theory, and Language Pedagogy Theory. Autosegmental Theory provides the phonological foundation by explaining tone as an independent suprasegmental feature that interacts systematically with other phonological elements in Yorùbá. Sociolinguistic Theory is adopted to explain the role of tone in social interaction, cultural identity, and oral traditions, while Language Pedagogy Theory provides the instructional basis for examining effective methods of teaching and preserving tonal accuracy. These theories are considered suitable because they collectively address the structural, cultural, and educational dimensions of tone in Yorùbá language teaching. Using a descriptive and analytical approach, data were drawn from classroom interactions, instructional materials, and Yorùbá oral texts. Findings reveal that tone functions both as a meaning-bearing linguistic feature and as an artistic device that enhances rhythm and cultural depth. The study recommends systematic tone instruction through auditory training, visual tone marking, and the integration of oral literature to improve learners' proficiency and preserve the richness of the Yorùbá language.

Keywords: Yorùbá language, Tone, Phonology, Language pedagogy, Oral literature

1.1 Introduction

The motivation for this study arises from my classroom experience in teaching Yorùbá phonology to both NCE and undergraduate students. Over time, I have observed a noticeable and concerning lack of interest among students in the proper use of tone, particularly in written communication. This attitude persists despite the well-established fact that Yorùbá is a tonal language. Tone is not merely an optional feature of the Yorùbá language; rather, it is a central and defining component that plays a crucial role in meaning-making and effective communication (Adébáyò, 2023). Incorrect or neglected tone marking often leads to ambiguity, misinterpretation, and loss of intended meaning. These challenges highlight the need for a more focused pedagogical approach to the teaching and learning of tone in Yorùbá.

As a tonal language, Yorùbá relies on pitch variation to distinguish lexical items and grammatical structures. The three basic tones, high, mid, and low are not merely phonetic ornaments but functional elements that determine semantic interpretation. A change in tone can result in a complete shift in meaning, even when the segmental structure of a word remains constant (Yusuf, 2007). This makes tone indispensable to accurate pronunciation, comprehension, and overall communicative competence. Beyond its linguistic function, tone also carries aesthetic significance, contributing to the rhythm, musicality, and expressive depth of Yorùbá oral traditions such as proverbs, poetry, and songs.

From a theoretical standpoint, tone is studied within Phonology as a suprasegmental feature that operates systematically within the sound structure of the language. In Yorùbá, tonal patterns are governed by well-defined phonological rules and processes, making them essential to both linguistic analysis and practical language use (Adéníyì, Jayéṣà, 2020). Consequently, any meaningful approach to teaching Yorùbá must give adequate attention to tone as a core component of language proficiency.

Despite its importance, tone remains significantly underrepresented in the teaching of Yorùbá, particularly in formal educational settings. Instructional practices often prioritize vocabulary acquisition and grammatical structures, while tonal accuracy is either insufficiently emphasized or treated superficially. This neglect has led to persistent challenges among learners, including mispronunciation, ambiguity in speech, and reduced listening comprehension. Many

learners, especially those whose first languages are non-tonal, struggle to perceive and reproduce tonal distinctions without explicit and systematic instruction.

The underrepresentation of tone in Yorùbá pedagogy can be attributed to several factors, including limited teacher training in tonal instruction, inadequate teaching materials, and a lack of practical methodologies for integrating tone into classroom practice. In some cases, tone marking is inconsistently applied or entirely omitted in written texts, further complicating the learning process. As a result, learners may acquire only partial competence in the language, lacking the tonal sensitivity required for effective communication.

In view of the foregoing discussion, this paper seeks to provide answers to several fundamental questions relating to the importance and aesthetic values of tone in the Yorùbá language. Specifically, the study examines the major tonal patterns in Yorùbá and their interaction with other phonological elements, investigates how tonal variation influences meaning and communication, and explores the aesthetic and communicative functions of tone in Yorùbá music, poetry, and oral traditions. The paper also analyses how tone contributes to the beauty, rhythm, and expressive quality of the language, identifies the challenges learners encounter in mastering tonal accuracy, and evaluates effective teaching strategies for improving the learning and preservation of tone in Yorùbá language education. Ultimately, the study seeks to establish why tone should be foregrounded as a fundamental aspect of teaching and learning the Yorùbá language.

2.1 Conceptual Clarification

2.1.1 Yorùbá Language

The Yorùbá language is a major language of the Niger-Congo family, predominantly spoken in southwestern Nigeria and parts of Benin and Togo (Aládésanmi, Akíntóyè 2005). It is a tonal language with a rich linguistic structure characterized by three level tones, high, mid, and low, which play a crucial role in distinguishing meaning (Adéníyì, 2020). Yorùbá is not only a medium of communication but also a repository of cultural heritage, expressed through oral traditions, religious practices, and artistic forms.

Scholars have emphasized its dialectal variation and resilience despite increasing pressure from globalization and dominant languages such as English. In educational contexts, Yorùbá serves as both a subject of study and a medium of instruction in early schooling. However, challenges such as inadequate teaching resources and declining usage among younger generations have raised concerns about its sustainability. This underscores the need for effective pedagogical strategies, particularly in teaching complex features like tone.

2.1.2 Tone

Tone is a defining feature of tonal languages like Yorùbá, where pitch variation is used to differentiate lexical and grammatical meaning. In Yorùbá, the three basic tones, high (´), mid (unmarked), and low (`) can produce entirely different meanings from identical segmental structures (Adéníyì, 2021). For instance, tonal variation can distinguish between words that are otherwise phonemically identical.

Beyond its phonemic function, tone also carries aesthetic and expressive value, particularly in oral genres such as poetry and music. It contributes to rhythm, melody, and emotional nuance. However, tone presents significant learning challenges, especially for speakers of non-tonal languages, often leading to miscommunication. This highlights the necessity of explicit and systematic tone instruction in language teaching.

2.1.3 Phonology

Phonology is the branch of linguistics that examines how sounds function within a particular language or across languages. In the context of Yorùbá, phonology is essential for understanding the organization and behavior of tones as integral components of meaning. Yorùbá phonology encompasses both segmental features (such as vowels and consonants) and suprasegmental features (such as tone and intonation) (Oyèbádé, 2008).

2.1.4 Language Pedagogy

Language Pedagogy refers to the theories, methods, and practices involved in teaching and learning languages. In Yorùbá language education, pedagogy plays a crucial role in determining how effectively learners acquire tonal competence and communicative proficiency. Traditional

teaching methods have often focused more on grammar and vocabulary, with insufficient attention to tone, leading to gaps in learners' oral skills (White, 2023)

2.1.5 Oral Literature

Oral literature constitutes a vital component of Yorùbá cultural expression, encompassing genres such as proverbs, folktales, praise poetry, chants, and songs. These forms are transmitted orally across generations and are deeply embedded in the social and cultural life of the people (Ọlátúnjí, 1984).

Tone plays a central role in Yorùbá oral literature, shaping meaning, rhythm, and aesthetic appeal. For example, in poetry and chants, tonal variation contributes to musicality and emotional resonance, while in proverbs, it ensures clarity and precision of meaning. Oral literature therefore provides an authentic and engaging context for teaching tone, enabling learners to experience its functional and artistic dimensions simultaneously. Incorporating oral literature into language pedagogy not only enhances learners' tonal competence but also fosters cultural appreciation and identity. It bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-life language use, making learning more holistic and meaningful.

3.1 The Yorùbá Tone System

The tone system of the Yorùbá language is one of its most distinctive linguistic features, forming the basis of meaning differentiation and effective communication. As a tonal language, Yorùbá uses variations in pitch rather than stress or intonation alone to distinguish between words and grammatical functions. These pitch variations are organized into three level tones: High, Mid, and Low. The study of these tonal patterns falls within Phonology, particularly under suprasegmental features (Owólabí, 1989).

3.1.1 High Tone (')

The High tone is produced with a relatively raised pitch level and is typically marked with an acute accent (') in standard Yorùbá orthography. It is often perceived as sharp or elevated in comparison to other tones.

Functionally, the High tone plays a crucial role in distinguishing lexical items. For example, a syllable pronounced with a High tone may convey an entirely different meaning from the same syllable pronounced with a Low or Mid tone. In connected speech, High tones may also participate in tonal

processes such as assimilation and downstep, especially when occurring in sequence with other tones.

3.1.2 Mid Tone (unmarked)

The Mid tone occupies an intermediate pitch level between the High and Low tones. Unlike the other two tones, it is usually unmarked in standard writing, making it less visually prominent but equally important linguistically.

Despite its lack of orthographic marking, the Mid tone is not neutral or insignificant; it functions as a distinct phonemic category. It contributes to meaning differentiation and can appear in contrast with High and Low tones within the same lexical or grammatical structure. In some contexts, the Mid tone serves as a tonal baseline against which the High and Low tones are perceived.

From a phonological perspective, the Mid tone is particularly important in understanding tonal patterns and processes in Yorùbá. It often interacts with adjacent tones, influencing pitch realization in continuous speech.

3.1.3 Low Tone (´)

The Low tone is produced with a lowered pitch and is marked with a grave accent (´) in Yorùbá orthography. It is typically perceived as deeper or more subdued than the High and Mid tones. Like the High tone, the Low tone is phonemically contrastive and essential for distinguishing meaning. Words that are identical in their segmental composition may differ entirely in meaning when pronounced with a Low tone instead of a High or Mid tone.

3.2 Tone in other related Tone Languages

Most African languages are tonal languages, just like the Yorùbá language. Nigeria, being a heterogeneous society with numerous indigenous languages, officially recognizes three major languages: Yorùbá, Haúsá, and Igbo. Like Yorùbá, both Haúsá and Igbo are tonal languages because variations in tone contribute to differences in meaning.

3.2.1 Tonal Patterns in Hausa

Haúsá has three major contrastive tones:

High tone

Low tone

Falling tone

Although tones are usually not marked in everyday Haúsá orthography, native speakers naturally recognize and apply them during speech (Muhammed, Suliman, Sadik 2024). In Haúsá, tone is phonemic; that is, a change in tone can alter the meaning of a word as reflect in the examples below:

1a. dàgà “from”

b. dágà “to lift”

These examples show that tonal variation plays an important role in distinguishing meaning in Haúsá, just as it does in Yorùbá. However, unlike Yorùbá where tones are often written, Haúsá writing generally leaves tones unmarked, and listeners depend largely on context to interpret meaning correctly.

3.2.2 Tonal Patterns in Igbo

Igbo is also a tonal language. The language mainly makes use of:

High tone

Low tone

Sometimes a downstepped high tone or contour tones in connected speech (BrightAjoku, Chibunma, Okumo 2020).

Tone is highly important in Igbo grammar and vocabulary because it helps differentiate meanings between words that are otherwise spelled alike.

2a. ísí “head”

b. ìsì “smell” or “odor”

This demonstrates that, just like Yorùbá, Igbo relies heavily on tonal distinctions to convey meaning effectively.

The Yorùbá, Haúsá, and Igbo languages are all tonal languages, though they differ in how tones are represented in writing and speech. In all three languages, tone is an essential linguistic feature because it helps distinguish meanings, supports grammatical structure, and aids effective communication.

4.1 Theoretical framework

A suitable theoretical framework for this study is anchored primarily in phonological theory, while drawing complementary insights from sociolinguistic theory and language pedagogy. The integration of these frameworks provides a comprehensive basis for analyzing tone in the Yorùbá language by explaining its structural organization, communicative relevance, and pedagogical implications. The theories were adopted because they collectively address the linguistic, social, and instructional dimensions of tone, thereby offering a balanced approach to the study.

From a phonological perspective, the study adopts the theory of Autosegmental Phonology as propounded by (Goldsmith 1976). This theory is particularly suitable for the analysis of tone in Yorùbá because it explains tone as an independent suprasegmental feature that exists on a separate tier from segmental sounds. The theory is relevant to this study because Yorùbá is a tonal language in which meaning depends largely on tonal distinctions such as high, mid, and low tones. Through Autosegmental Phonology, the study is able to analyze how tones are linked to syllables and how tonal processes such as tone spreading, assimilation, contour formation, and downstep occur in natural speech. The rationale for adopting this theory lies in its effectiveness in explaining the phonemic and grammatical functions of tone in Yorùbá, especially in distinguishing lexical meanings and sentence interpretations. The framework therefore provides the structural foundation for examining tonal patterns and their role in communication.

In addition, the study draws from Sociolinguistics to explain how tone functions within social and cultural contexts. This framework is relevant because tone in Yorùbá extends beyond phonological structure to serve communicative, aesthetic, and cultural purposes. In everyday interaction, as well as in oral traditions such as proverbs, chants, poetry, and songs, tonal accuracy contributes significantly to meaning and interpretation (Ogúnlade, 2024). The sociolinguistic perspective therefore enables the study to examine how speakers use tone appropriately in different

social situations and cultural expressions. The rationale for adopting this theory is that it helps to situate tone within real-life language use and demonstrates the relationship between language, culture, and identity among Yorùbá speakers. It further highlights the importance of tone in preserving indigenous knowledge and oral heritage.

Furthermore, the study incorporates principles from Language Pedagogy to address the instructional aspect of tone analysis and acquisition. This framework is relevant because the mastery of tone is essential for effective communication in Yorùbá, yet learners often experience difficulties in producing and interpreting tones correctly. Language pedagogy provides strategies that support tone teaching through learner-centered approaches such as auditory discrimination, repetition, imitation, oral drills, and the use of culturally relevant instructional materials. The rationale for adopting this framework is that it offers practical methods for improving the teaching and learning of Yorùbá tones, especially in formal classroom settings. It also supports the integration of tonal instruction into the Yorùbá language curriculum in order to enhance learners' pronunciation, comprehension, and communicative competence (Bánjò, 2026)

Overall, the combination of Autosegmental Phonology, Sociolinguistics, and Language Pedagogy provides a comprehensive theoretical foundation for the study. While Autosegmental Phonology explains the structural organization of tone, Sociolinguistics accounts for its cultural and communicative functions, and Language Pedagogy addresses its effective teaching and learning. The integration of these frameworks therefore enables the study to examine tone in Yorùbá as a linguistic, social, and educational phenomenon, thereby bridging the gap between theoretical analysis and practical application.

5.1 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative descriptive–analytical design to examine the aesthetic and functional roles of tone in the teaching of the Yorùbá language. The design is suitable for exploring tonal phenomena within authentic pedagogical contexts and for capturing the interplay between linguistic structure and instructional practice. The study is theoretically grounded in Phonology and informed by insights from Language Pedagogy.

Data for the study were derived from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data consisted of classroom observations, audio recordings of learners' oral production, and informal interviews

with teachers and students. These were complemented by secondary data drawn from Yorùbá language textbooks and selected oral texts, including proverbs, poetry, and songs, chosen for their rich tonal and stylistic features. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants Yorùbá language teachers and learners from selected secondary and tertiary institutions based on their relevance to the study.

Data collection involved non-participant classroom observation to document instructional strategies and learner engagement, alongside audio recordings to capture tonal realization in speech. Informal interviews provided additional insights into pedagogical challenges and learner difficulties. Data were analyzed qualitatively using descriptive and interpretive methods, with particular attention to tonal accuracy, patterns of deviation, and pedagogical effectiveness. Analytical procedures were guided by phonological principles in order to account for tone as a meaning-bearing feature.

6.1 Discussion and Findings

6.1.1 Functional Role of Tone in the Yorùbá Language

Tone performs multiple, interrelated functions in Yorùbá, making it indispensable to both linguistic structure and communicative effectiveness. As a tonal language, Yorùbá relies on pitch variation, realized through High, Mid, and Low tones, not only for distinguishing meaning but also for encoding grammatical relationships and shaping expressive discourse. These functions are best understood within the framework of Phonology and its interface with syntax and pragmatics.

Lexical (Meaning-Distinguishing) Function

The most fundamental role of tone in Yorùbá is its lexical function, where it serves as a phonemic feature that differentiates words with identical segmental structures. A change in tone alone can produce entirely different meanings in words like:

- 3a. ọkọ (high-high) ‘husband’
- b. ọkò (low-low) ‘arrow’
- d. ọkó (mid-low) ‘hoe’

The examples above shows that tone is not optional but constitutive of the identity of words in Yorùbá.

Grammatical Function

Tone also plays a significant grammatical role in Yorùbá by marking distinctions such as tense, aspect, mood, and syntactic relationships. In many constructions, tonal variation signals differences between statements, questions, or commands, as well as between noun phrases and verb phrases. For instance, tonal changes may indicate whether an utterance expresses completion, continuity, or emphasis. In addition, tone can differentiate between grammatical categories that are otherwise segmentally identical. This function demonstrates that tone operates beyond the lexical level, contributing directly to sentence structure and interpretation.

4. a. Olú ní lọ
 Np tns V
 ‘Olú is going’
 b. Olú lọ
 Np. V
 ‘Olú went’
 d. Olú máa lọ
 Np Tns V
 ‘Olú will go’

Morphological Function

Closely related to its grammatical role is the morphological function of tone. In Yorùbá, tone can mark derivational and inflectional processes, helping to form new words or modify existing ones. Certain morphological constructions rely on tonal alternations rather than the addition of affixes. For example, nominalization, reduplication, or verb–noun distinctions may be signaled through tonal shifts. This highlights the economy of the Yorùbá language, where tone serves as a productive morphological resource. For example:

- | | | | |
|----|------------------|--|------------------|
| | /è/ (Low) | | /e/ (Mid) |
| 5. | a. è+so → èso | | b. e+wu → ewu |

d. è+ rò → èrò

e. e+gbé → egbò

Syntactic and Disambiguation Function

Tone contributes significantly to syntactic clarity and disambiguation. In connected speech, tonal patterns help listeners identify phrase boundaries, relationships between constituents, and the intended structure of an utterance. Where segmental cues alone may lead to ambiguity, tone provides additional information that clarifies meaning. This is particularly important in rapid or natural speech, where tonal contours guide interpretation and prevent misunderstanding.

- 6 a. Mo ra ọkọ yẹn ‘I bought that hoe’
b. Mo ra ọkọ yẹn ‘I bought that vehicle’

Pragmatic and Discourse Function

Beyond structural roles, tone serves important pragmatic functions in discourse. It can signal emphasis, focus, contrast, or speaker attitude. Subtle tonal variations may indicate whether a speaker is expressing certainty, doubt, politeness, or irony. In conversational contexts, tone works alongside intonation to convey communicative intent. This makes it a vital tool for effective interaction, as it helps to align meaning with context and social expectations. Here is an example where tone command and calm.

- 7 a. Sún síbí ‘Move here’ (high tone, command/anger)
b. Sùn síbí ‘Sleep here’ (low tone, calm/gentle)

Aesthetic and Stylistic Function

Tone plays a prominent aesthetic role in Yorùbá, especially in oral and artistic expressions. In genres such as poetry, chants, praise-singing, and songs, tonal variation enhances rhythm, musicality, and emotional depth. The interplay of High, Mid, and Low tones contributes to the melodic quality of Yorùbá speech, making it particularly suited for artistic performance. This aesthetic dimension reinforces cultural identity and preserves traditional forms of expression. Let us see this example of tone in song below.

8. Ọlórún mí ga
Emí náà á ga
Olówó ni Jésù

Emi náà a lówó

Communicative Efficiency

Finally, tone contributes to communicative efficiency by allowing a limited set of segmental forms to carry a wide range of meanings. Through tonal variation, speakers can encode complex distinctions without increasing word length or structural complexity. This efficiency, however, also means that errors in tone can significantly disrupt communication, underscoring the need for accurate tonal competence among learners. See the function of tone in (9a &b) below.

9. a. A sùn ‘ We slept’

b. A sùn? ‘Did we sleep?’

6.1.2 Aesthetic Dimensions of Tone in the Yorùbá Language

Beyond its grammatical and lexical functions, tone in Yorùbá possesses profound aesthetic value, shaping the beauty, rhythm, and artistic expressiveness of the language. As a tonal system organized around High, Mid, and Low pitch levels, tone contributes to the musical quality of speech and serves as a stylistic resource in various forms of Oral literature. In this regard, tone transforms language from a mere communicative tool into an artistic medium.

Tone and Musicality in Yorùbá Expression

One of the most striking aesthetic features of Yorùbá is its inherent musicality. The tonal patterns of utterances often resemble melodic contours, giving spoken language a song-like quality. This is particularly evident in performance contexts where speech and music intersect. The alternation of High, Mid, and Low tones produces rhythm and harmony, creating an auditory experience that is both pleasing and meaningful.

In traditional settings, tone aligns closely with melody in music, ensuring that the linguistic meaning of lyrics is preserved even when sung. This close relationship between tone and melody distinguishes Yorùbá from non-tonal languages, where musical adaptation may distort meaning.

10. Ìgbà òwúrò la wà

Ọba jẹkáyé sanni

Jé káyé san wá o
Bàbá jé káyé yèwá (Ebenezer Obey)

In Ebenezer Obey's song above, the tone enhances the melody and communicates the intended message

Tone in Proverbs

Yorùbá proverbs are concise, culturally rich expressions that rely heavily on tonal precision for their effectiveness. Tone ensures clarity and prevents ambiguity, as a slight tonal shift can alter the intended meaning of a proverb. For example, the wisdom embedded in a proverb is often conveyed not only through its lexical content but also through its tonal delivery. Proper tonal rendering enhances the proverb's rhetorical force, making it more impactful and memorable. In addition, tonal patterns contribute to the balance and symmetry that characterize many Yorùbá proverbs, reinforcing their aesthetic appeal. See the tone relevance in the proverb below.

11.a. Àgbà kò sí ilú bàjé, baálé ilé kú ilé dahoro

‘When there are no elders in a town, the town
falls into disorder, when the head of a household
dies, the home becomes desolate’

b. Bí etí ò bá gbọ̀ yìnkìn, inú kì í bàjé

‘when the ear does not hear unpleasant,
the heart does not become troubled’

The tone in the proverb above preserve the cultural value of the meaning of the proverb. Without the tone, this could wrongly be read

Tone in Poetry (Oríkì and Chant Forms)

In Yorùbá poetry, particularly in forms such as praise poetry (oríkì) and chants, tone plays a central role in structuring rhythm and artistic expression. Poetic performance relies on deliberate manipulation of tonal patterns to create emphasis, evoke emotion, and maintain audience engagement. The interaction between tone and rhythm in poetry produces a dynamic flow that is both expressive

and culturally meaningful. The aesthetic power of Yorùbá poetry thus lies not only in its words but also in its tonal architecture. The correct identity and praise in the ‘oríkì’ below are clearly shown by the tones in some words where distortion might have occurred.

12. Ọmọ Olówù lásàndé
- Ọmọ onígbo oníwin
Ọmọ ọsàn pòn dèdè kẹni má yàrà-án
Ọmọ dàiko dèdè kẹni má yásàndé
Ẹní yàrà-án ọ san
A béégún sékété níbi tó gbé ń fọso
Pààkà méjì ń dèdà
Eégún Àsàndé dorikodò ó ń mìsaworo sẹkẹsẹkẹ
Ọmọ ọpẹ ro,
Ọpẹ ọ ro
Eégún Àsàndé ọ le sàimẹmu wálé (Oríkì iran Olówù)

The effectiveness of this ‘oríkì’ lies in its tone, which powerfully conveys its message

Tone and Dramatic Performance

In theatrical and ritual performances, tone enhances characterization, mood, and narrative delivery. Actors and performers use tonal modulation to convey emotions such as joy, anger, sorrow, or reverence. Tone also helps to differentiate characters and situational contexts, adding depth to dramatic expression. In ritual chants and incantations, precise tonal rendering is often believed to carry spiritual significance, further elevating its aesthetic and cultural importance.

13. Àbẹsọrí ni tògèdè
- Àbẹsọrí ni ti ìrèké
Ọwọ tí ọgèdè bá gbé
Ara rẹ ní fí ń nà
Bí ẹlúúlú bá pe ọjò
Orí ara rẹ ní pè é lé
Bí àrígiségi bá ségi
Orí ara rẹ ló fí ń gbe

The tone in the enriches the dramatic performance of the incantation presented above, making its expression more powerful.

6.1.3 Tone and Meaning in Yorùbá Communication

In the Yorùbá language, tone is not a peripheral feature but a core determinant of meaning. As a fully tonal language, Yorùbá uses pitch variations that is, High, Mid, and Low tones to distinguish lexical items, encode grammatical relations, and ensure communicative clarity. Within the framework of Phonology, tone is therefore treated as a phonemic feature, meaning that it functions at the same level as consonants and vowels in distinguishing meaning.

Tone and Ambiguity in Communication

One of the most significant roles of tone in Yorùbá communication is its function in preventing or creating ambiguity. Because many Yorùbá words share identical consonant and vowel structures, tone becomes the primary distinguishing feature. When tone is correctly produced, meaning is clear and unambiguous. However, when tone is misused or omitted, communication may become unclear or completely misleading. For instance, a single syllabic structure can represent multiple meanings depending on tonal patterning. Without accurate tonal realization, listeners may misinterpret intended messages, especially in spontaneous speech where contextual cues are limited. Consider the examples in (14 a & b) below.

14a. Ikú pa Abírí

Abírí kú

Ikú pa Abìrì

Abìrì rọrun

b. Àpọ̀n n yànyà

Ó ní òun n yànyá

The examples above highlights the fact that tone is essential for semantic precision in Yorùbá.

Tonal Minimal Pairs

A key linguistic concept illustrating the importance of tone in Yorùbá is the tonal minimal pair. These are sets of words that are segmentally identical but differ in meaning solely due to tonal variation. For example, different tonal patterns on the same syllable structure can produce distinct lexical items

with unrelated meanings. These minimal pairs clearly demonstrate that tone is not decorative but contrastive and meaning-bearing. See examples in (15a & b) below.

15. a. bàtà ‘shoe’ bàtá ‘drum’
 b. ìgbà ‘season’ ‘igba’ ‘two hundred’

Communicative Consequences of Tonal Errors

Errors in tone production or perception can have serious communicative consequences in Yorùbá. Because tone is essential to meaning differentiation, incorrect tonal usage may lead to misunderstanding, confusion, or unintended interpretation. In everyday communication, tonal errors can result in the listener interpreting a completely different word from the one intended by the speaker. This may affect social interaction, academic communication, and even formal discourse. In some cases, tonal mispronunciation can produce humorous or socially inappropriate meanings, highlighting the sensitivity of tone in context. See the examples in (16).

- 16 a. Mo jẹ ìrẹ̀sì ‘I ate rice’
 *b. Mo jẹ ìrẹ̀sì ‘I am rice’

Tone and Contextual Dependence

Although tone is highly contrastive, Yorùbá communication also relies on context to resolve potential ambiguity. In connected speech, listeners may use situational clues, discourse context, and shared knowledge to interpret meaning even when tonal realization is imperfect. However, reliance on context does not eliminate the importance of accurate tone production; rather, it compensates for occasional lapses. This interaction between tone and context demonstrates that Yorùbá communication is both structurally precise and pragmatically flexible. For instance, in Yorùbá, *ilẹ̀* may mean ‘house’ or ‘home’ depending on the context. Likewise, *ó n lọ* means ‘he is going’, but a tonal variation such as *ó n lẹ̀* can alter the meaning, showing that both tone and context are essential for correct interpretation

6.1.4 Challenges in Teaching and Learning Yorùbá Tone

The teaching and learning of tone in the Yorùbá language remain a major pedagogical challenge despite tone being a core feature of the language. As a tonal system governed by High, Mid, and Low pitch distinctions, Yorùbá relies heavily on tone for meaning differentiation. However, effective

acquisition of tonal competence is often hindered by a range of linguistic, pedagogical, and environmental factors. These challenges are best understood within the framework of Language Pedagogy and Phonology.

First Language Interference

One of the most significant challenges is interference from learners' first languages, especially for students whose mother tongues are non-tonal, such as English. These learners often struggle to perceive tone as a meaningful linguistic feature because their linguistic background does not assign lexical or grammatical value to pitch variation. As a result, they tend to rely on segmental sounds alone, leading to tonal inaccuracies and misinterpretation.

Inadequate Teacher Preparation

Many Yorùbá language teachers lack sufficient training in tonal phonetics and phonology. This results in weak or inconsistent instruction of tone in classrooms. Teachers may themselves have limited awareness of phonological rules governing tone or may not possess effective strategies for teaching tonal distinctions. Consequently, tone is often simplified, ignored, or treated as secondary to vocabulary and grammar.

Insufficient Instructional Materials

Another major challenge is the lack of adequate teaching materials that explicitly focus on tone. Many textbooks either underrepresent tone marking or fail to provide sufficient exercises for tonal practice. In some cases, orthographic materials omit tone markings altogether, making it difficult for learners to develop accurate tonal perception and production skills.

Complexity of Tonal System

The Yorùbá tonal system itself is inherently complex. Tone operates not only at the lexical level but also interacts with grammatical and syntactic structures. Processes such as tonal assimilation, down step, make mastery difficult for learners. The dynamic nature of tone in connected speech further complicates acquisition, especially for beginners.

Lack of Audio-Visual Support

Effective tone learning requires strong auditory exposure, yet many learning environments lack sufficient audio-visual resources. Without access to recordings of native speakers, songs, or interactive listening exercises, learners struggle to internalize correct tonal patterns. This limits their ability to distinguish subtle pitch differences.

Curriculum Constraints

In many educational settings, Yorùbá language curricula do not allocate sufficient time or emphasis to tone instruction. Assessment practices also tend to prioritize written knowledge over oral proficiency, further marginalizing tonal competence in evaluation systems.

Learner Attitude and Motivation

Some learners perceive tone as difficult or less important compared to vocabulary and grammar. This negative attitude reduces motivation to practice tonal accuracy consistently. Over time, this leads to fossilized errors in pronunciation and reduced communicative effectiveness.

6.1.5 Pedagogical Approach for Teaching Tone in the Yorùbá Language

Effective teaching of tone in Yorùbá requires deliberate, systematic, and learner-centered pedagogical strategies that reflect the phonological nature of the language. Since tone is a meaning-bearing feature within Phonology, it must be taught explicitly rather than assumed. A successful pedagogical approach therefore integrates auditory, visual, communicative, and cultural methods to develop learners' tonal awareness and competence (Bánjo, A.E. 2026:8-9)

Explicit and Systematic Tone Instruction

foundational approach is explicit instruction, where tone is directly taught as a core linguistic feature. Teachers should clearly explain the High, Mid, and Low tones, their markings, and their functional roles in meaning differentiation. Learners should be guided to recognize that tone is not optional but essential to accurate communication. Systematic progression from isolated syllables to words and sentences, helps learners gradually internalize tonal distinctions.

Auditory Training and Listening Practice

Because tone is primarily auditory, listening-based instruction is essential. Learners should be exposed repeatedly to native speaker pronunciation through recordings, teacher modeling, and interactive

listening exercises. Activities such as minimal pair drills help learners distinguish between words that differ only in tone. This strengthens perceptual sensitivity and reduces tonal confusion.

Repetition, Imitation, and Drilling Techniques

Repetition and imitation remain effective in tone acquisition. Learners should be encouraged to mimic correct tonal patterns through guided oral practice. These techniques are especially useful for beginners and learners whose first languages are non-tonal.

Use of Visual Tone Marking

Visual reinforcement enhances tonal learning. The use of tone marks (´, ` , and unmarked mid tone) in instructional materials helps learners associate pitch patterns with written symbols. Charts, diagrams, and digital tools can further support understanding.

Integration of Oral Literature

Incorporating Oral literature such as proverbs, poetry, songs, and chants provide authentic and culturally meaningful contexts for tone learning. These materials naturally embed tonal patterns, allowing learners to experience tone in real communicative and artistic use. Songs, in particular, help align tone with melody, reinforcing memory and enjoyment.

Communicative Language Teaching Approach

A communicative approach emphasizes the use of tone in meaningful interaction rather than isolated drills alone. Learners engage in dialogues, role-plays, and storytelling activities where correct tone is necessary for successful communication. This approach helps bridge the gap between phonological accuracy and real-life language use.

Corrective Feedback and Error Analysis

Teachers should provide timely and constructive feedback on tonal errors. Error analysis helps identify recurring difficulties such as tone substitution, omission, or interference from the first language. Corrective feedback ensures that learners gradually refine their tonal accuracy.

Technology-Enhanced Learning

Modern pedagogical practice can benefit from digital tools such as language learning apps, audio recordings, and pronunciation software. These resources allow learners to practice independently and receive immediate auditory feedback, improving tonal acquisition outside the classroom.

6.1.6 Implications for Yorùbá Language Teaching

The findings of this study on the aesthetic and functional role of tone in the Yorùbá language have significant implications for curriculum design, teacher training, and language policy. Since tone is a core meaning-bearing feature within Phonology, its effective teaching is essential for achieving communicative competence and preserving linguistic integrity.

Implications for Curriculum Design

The study underscores the need for a restructured Yorùbá language curriculum that gives explicit and sustained attention to tone. Currently, tone is often embedded indirectly or treated as a secondary feature, which limits learners' mastery. Curriculum designers should ensure that tonal instruction is systematically integrated across all levels of learning from basic to advanced stages.

Implications for Teacher Training

The effectiveness of tone instruction depends largely on teacher competence. The findings indicate a need for specialized training programmes for Yorùbá language teachers that focus on phonological awareness and tonal pedagogy.

Teacher education curricula should include modules on Yorùbá phonetics and phonology, with emphasis on tonal structure, tonal processes, and common learner difficulties. Teachers should also be trained in practical instructional strategies such as auditory drills, minimal pair practice, and corrective feedback techniques.

Implications for Language Policy

At the policy level, the study highlights the need for stronger institutional support for Yorùbá language education, particularly in relation to tone instruction. Educational policies should recognize tone as a fundamental component of Yorùbá literacy and oral competence. Policy makers should mandate the inclusion of tone marking in instructional materials, textbooks, and examination standards. This will ensure consistency in teaching and learning across schools.

7.1 Conclusion

This study has examined the aesthetic and functional roles of tone in the Yorùbá language, with particular attention to its implications for teaching and learning. Drawing from Phonology and pedagogical perspectives, the study has demonstrated that tone is not a peripheral feature but a central component of Yorùbá linguistic structure and communicative practice.

Key insights from the study reveal that tone performs multiple essential functions, including lexical distinction, grammatical marking, syntactic clarification, and pragmatic expression. Beyond these linguistic roles, tone also contributes significantly to the aesthetic richness of Yorùbá, especially in Oral literature such as proverbs, poetry, songs, and chants, where it enhances rhythm, musicality, and cultural expression. However, despite its importance, tone remains underemphasized in many instructional settings, leading to persistent challenges in learners' pronunciation, comprehension, and communicative competence.

The study further highlights that effective teaching of tone requires deliberate and systematic pedagogical strategies, including auditory training, visual tone marking, explicit instruction, and the integration of culturally rich oral texts. It also emphasizes the need for improved teacher preparation, curriculum reform, and supportive language policies that prioritize tonal competence as a core learning outcome.

This study contributes to existing scholarship on the Phonology and Language Pedagogy by foregrounding the dual linguistic and aesthetic functions of tone in the Yorùbá language and by bridging the persistent gap between theoretical phonological analysis and classroom practice.

In conclusion, tone is fundamental to both the structure and identity of Yorùbá. Its accurate teaching and learning are indispensable for meaningful communication, linguistic proficiency, and cultural preservation. Strengthening tone instruction in Yorùbá education will therefore not only improve learners' performance but also safeguard the linguistic and artistic heritage embedded in the language.

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