

KINYARWANDA TONES MADE EASY

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Kinyarwanda tones were thought to be the hardest, within the Bantu language group, to describe and explain. This is due to the fact that it indeed has a very complex verb structure. It is among the few which can have multiple tenses within the same verb, multiple object pronouns, multiple verb extensions and multiple grammatical suffixes. Another factor which led tonologists to think that this language was complex was because languages they have been dealing with have their tone rules apply from left to right and don't have extraprosodic domains whereas in Kinyarwanda, they apply from right to left and all vowels after the first mora of verb stem for lexical tones and the first mora of the second syllable for grammatical tones are extraprosodic. What is complex for verb tones is tone assignment. Language learners have to know which tense-aspect-modality (TAM) morphemes assign a tone on the first mora or the second syllable first mora of the verb stem and which ones erase tones. Noun tones are very simple. A simple noun can have only two tones and a compound-noun a maximum of three tones. This presentation is a summary of my 2002 book, *A Tonal Grammar of Kinyarwanda : An Autosegmental and Metrical Analysis*

I. The nature of tone.

In Bantu and African tonology, linguists have identified different types of tones : high tones, low tones, rising tones, falling tones, register tones, etc. This classification has unfortunately misled tonologists from finding out what the true nature of tone is and has led them to introduce unnecessary diatritics in the language description and analysis. But they have also found similarities between tone, accent and stress. There are words which have tones and other which don't. There is only one tone per morpheme. There are secondary or tertiary tones. Tones also delete. This phenomenon and behavior is shared by stress languages (Kimenyi, 2002). The Kinyarwanda data show that like in accent and stress languages tone and high tone are synonymous and redundant and that only one diatritic, the acute accent [´] is needed. Thus a word or morpheme has a tone or doesn't have one.

II. The One tone rule

What is interesting about Kinyarwanda tones, is that a word has only one phonemic tone. Simple nouns can have a secondary tone and compound nouns a tertiary tone all derived from the underlying tone. Some nouns have stray tones which are not involved in tone rules. Verbs can have multiple phonetic tones caused by the phonemic tone spread rule in the metrical domain. Some tense-aspect-morphemes (TAM) which appear in the verbal pre-stem position have tones but these tones are also extraprosodic or stray since they don't affect tone rules.

III. Role of tones

Kinyarwanda tones are either lexical, morphological or syntactic. Lexical tones differentiate words which share segmental features such as *inda* 'stomach' and *indá* 'louse' or *umuryaango* 'family' and *umuryáango* 'door'. Morphological tones correspond to segmental morphemes of other languages.

Thus the verb *gusoma* /ku-som-a/ can appear without a tone, or with a tone on the last syllable or the first syllable in the present tense as in *abaantu basoma* 'people read', *abaantu basomá* 'people who read' or *abaantu básoma* 'when people read'.

Words can also lose or acquire tones depending on the position they occupy in the sentence structure.

For instance, the imperative verb form usually deletes tones. But when it is preceded by another word, it gets a tone, even if it is lexically toneless.

Geenda /ku-geend-a/ ‘go’ <> *vuga* /ku-vúg-a/ ‘talk’

Ubu géenda ‘now go’ <> *ubu vúga* ‘now talk’

IV. Prosodic Domain and Stray Tones

Extraprosodic domains refer to the areas in the word structure where there is no tone assignment or tone activity. In nouns, for instance, augments (preprefixes) and prefixes (class markers) don’t carry tones. Verbal extensions, both lexical extensions (derivational morphemes) and grammatical extensions (inflections) don’t carry tone, either. In verbs, tones are assigned either on the first mora of the verb stem (lexical tones) or on the first mora of the second syllable. There is no tonal assignment or activity beyond that. Some prefixes such as tense markers have tones, but these are referred to as stray tones because they are not involved in any tone activity in the whole verb structure. It is the same with nouns as well. Some polysyllabic words have a tone which appears on some of the syllables but this tone is never involved in any tone activity such as tone addition, tone deletion, tone spread, etc. That is the reason why these tones are called stray tones.

V. Floating Tones

Floating tones are not attached to any particular mora or syllable. They are carried by few lexical items and morphemes. For instance, some words such as the copulars *ni* and *si* or the negator and presentative *nta* and *nga* when they are preceded by other words but don’t get any tone when they occur by themselves or in the sentence initial position. A word such as *amáazi* ‘water’ is underlyingly /*a-ma-zi*/, *-zi* being the stem, *-ma-* the class marker and *a-* the preprefix or augment. For it to have a long vowel and a tone on the first mora of the class marker, it is because of this floating tone of the noun stem *-zi*.

VI. Tone Rules

Kinyarwanda has the following tone rules : secondary tone assignment or beat addition, tertiary tone assignment, Meeussen rule or beat deletion, Iambic Reversal, Weak Beat Insertion, and tone assimilation and tone dissimilation.

Secondary tone assignment or beat addition applies to nouns. If a noun has a tone on the third mora of the stem or beyond, the first mora of the stem acquires one as well as in *igikóokó* /*i-ki-kookó*/ ‘animal’. Verb stem with the lexical tone, can many tones added if they have multiple object markers as in *kunáhabábamúkoreeshereza* /*ku-na-ha-bi-ba-mu-kór-iish-ir-izal*/ ‘to also make them do it for him/her there’. The tertiary tone assignment applies with compound-nouns. The majority of compound-nouns in Kinyarwanda consist of a verb and a noun. The verb is on the left and the noun on the right as a complement. If it has a tone on this third mora or beyond, a tone is assigned on this first mora and that of the verb as in *umutégarúgoré* /*u-mu-teg-a#u-ru-goré*/ ‘woman’. Meeussen rule deletes the tone on the right if two tones occur in adjacent moras. Since there is only one tone per morpheme, two tones appear in proximity because of tone rules namely beat addition and tone assimilation. For instance, the tone found in the second syllable of the name *kiményi* ‘Kimenyi’ deletes if it is preceded by the associative morpheme *na* which puts a tone on the first mora of the following syllable if this one has a tone, as in *na kíményi* /*na kíményi*/ ‘with Kimenyi’

Iambic Reversal refers to rightward tone displacement found with few morphemes lacking a consonant in the first syllable as in *úno* /*ú-no*/ ‘this’ versus *báno* /*bá-no*/ ‘these’ where the tone remains in the first syllable in the latter but moves to the second syllable in the former.

Weak Beat Insertion is the addition of a toneless mora between two tone-bearing moras. This happens most with the monosyllabic associative morphemes *na* ‘with’, *nka* ‘like’ –*a* ‘of’, the complementizers *kó* and the locative clitics *hó*, *mó* and *yó*.

nkúmbwá /*nká+imbwá*/ ‘like a dog’. But *nkíngwe* /*nká+ingwe*/ ‘like a leopard’

Tone assimilation and assimilation apply mostly nouns with onomastic prefixes.

Tone assimilation is similar to the secondary tone assignment which occurs only if a noun has an augment *nyamúgabé* /*nya+u-mu-gabé*/ 'military general'. Tone dissimilation deletes the prefix tone if the head noun has a tone : *rwáamagana* /*rwáa+a-ma-gana*/ 'Rwamagana' versus *rwaamakúba* /*rwáa+a-ma-kúba*/ 'Rwamakuba'. It is important to note that in Kinyarwanda, the deletion of the augment bleeds the application of some tone rules whereas its presence or addition triggers them. It will be interesting to find if in other Bantu languages, the augment also feeds and bleeds the application of tone rules also to see if languages which don't have the augment behave differently from those which do have them.