

Disentangling tone, intonation and register in selected Bantu tone languages

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Most sub-Saharan African languages are tone languages, and the investigation of their tonal systems has been a fruitful area of research for many years. Indeed, the foundations of autosegmental theory were laid by linguists analyzing African tonal systems (e.g., Leben 1973, Goldsmith 1976). Perhaps because of the successes of the autosegmental approach to lexical tone, other factors that influence pitch realization – like intonation and register – have tended, until recently, to be analyzed as purely tonal processes.

In this talk, I will discuss two pitch phenomena which have been analyzed in lexical tonal terms: depressor effects and phrase-final tone lowering. Data will be drawn from Xhosa and Zulu to illustrate the choice between analyzing depressor effects as a depressor tone or depressor register. Data from a variety of other (mostly) Bantu languages will be presented to illustrate phrase-final tone lowering phenomena that have been variously analyzed as due to the introduction of a Low tone or as due to the influence of an intonational Low boundary tone. For each case, after giving a brief introduction to the tonal system of the representative language and the relevant data, I will argue that what has been analyzed in tonal terms in some work on the language is best analyzed in terms of register or intonation.