

Question Prosody in Two Nigerian Languages

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Abstract

Work on numerous African tone languages (e.g. Chichewa, Myers 1996; Hausa, Leben 1983; Ibibio, Connell 2004; Isoko, Donwa-Ifode 1984; Mambila, Connell 2005) has shown that variation exists across languages as to the phonetic characteristics associated with the realization of different sentence types. Rialland (2007) presents a general survey, discussion, and typology of the question prosody characteristics of some 75 African languages and shows that, for a great many of them, the usual association of high or raised pitch with questions does not hold, and that a constellation of different features may be used.

In this report the phonetic realization of questions and corresponding statements in two endangered languages of Nigeria, Defaka and Nkọrọọ is examined and compared. A pilot study of Defaka (Connell et al 2009) indicated heightened pitch is the main phonetic feature characterizing questions; impressionistic work on Nkọrọọ (Harry 1987) claims questions are distinguished from statements by context alone. Two issues are addressed in the present study. First, we seek to establish what phonetic characteristics distinguish questions from statements in the two languages. Second, we examine the extent to which question prosody in Defaka differs from that found in Nkọrọọ. This latter issue is of particular interest given the severely endangered status of Defaka and that Nkọrọọ is the primary language of all Defaka speakers.

The methodology used involved recording simulated conversations between two male speakers, in the case of Defaka, and two male speakers and a female speaker for Nkọrọọ. Speakers took turns asking and answering questions of each other. This permitted questions and statements of comparable lexical and tonal content. Recordings are examined and compared to ascertain the extent of F0, durational, and phonatory differences between sentence types, as well as other possible differences.

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