

Syllable weight and tone in South Mara Bantu languages

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Ikoma-Nata-Isenye (JE45, ISO 639-3 ntk) and Ngoreme (JE401, ISO 639-3 ngq) are Great Lakes Bantu languages spoken in the southern Mara region in Western Tanzania. These four language varieties have retained the vowel length contrast reconstructed for Proto-Bantu. However, these varieties have deviated from Proto-Bantu in that the tone bearing unit (TBU) is the syllable and not the mora. This has allowed syllable-weight-sensitive tone rules to arise that are not commonly found in Bantu languages (Odden 1999). Within Great Lakes Bantu, there are other languages, such as the Suguti (JE20) languages (e.g. Jita; Downing 1996), that have the syllable as the TBU, but tone rules do not operate based on syllable weight. Most languages in the area that have retained a vowel-length contrast have also retained the mora as the TBU. This is the case, for example, for the Kuria (JE43; Odden 1987; Mchacha 2008) and Luhya languages (JE30; see, e.g. Marlo 2007 for Lunyala and Lumarachi; Paster & Kim for Tiriki) in the north, and the JE60 languages to the south-west (e.g. Ha; Harjula 2004).

In Ikoma-Nata-Isenye and Ngoreme, syllables with lexical long vowels are considered heavy by tone rules. In addition, there are conditioned long vowels caused by prenasalization, labialization, and palatalization. These conditioned long vowels are phonetically shorter than the contrastive long vowels (Higgins 2012), but are also considered heavy by tone rules.

The dialect cluster of Ikoma-Nata-Isenye is interesting, since the three varieties all show tone–syllable weight interaction, but do so in different contexts. For example, Ikoma *lexical* tone systems are not sensitive to syllable weight (Aunio 2010), but the Nata nominal tone system has developed to an accent-like system in which toneless words are not allowed (Anghelescu 2012). However, Ikoma *grammatical* tone melodies have different surface realizations depending on the syllable structure of the verb (Aunio 2013). For example, the melodic H of the Subjunctive is assigned to the second syllable of the macrostem, but retracted to the first syllable of the macrostem if the first syllable is heavy (example 1). In some verb forms, for example in the Narrative, syllable weight is so important that the melodic tone fails to surface if the penultimate syllable of the verb is not heavy (example 2). The same restriction is found in Isenye, but, again, occurs in different contexts. While Ikoma and Nata tone assignment rules count syllables up to two, Isenye differs from the others in that syllables are counted up to three. Ngoreme, on the other hand, assigns all lexical tones in relation to syllable weight – a system that is previously unattested in Bantu languages.

This paper will discuss the different syllable types found in Ikoma-Nata-Isenye and Ngoreme, showing how syllable weight is used in assigning both lexical and grammatical tones. Although these language varieties are geographically and historically closely related and they

all make use of a phenomenon which is not common across Bantu languages, the details of the tone–syllable weight interaction are different in all four varieties. This paper also gives new evidence for the claim that syllables, not moras, are TBUs in some Bantu languages (Marlo & Odden forthcoming).

(1) Ikoma¹

tu[remé

tu-rem-e

1.PL. SM- CULTIVATESBJV

‘let us cultivate’

tu[rééte

tu-rééte-e

1.PL. SM BRING SBJV

‘let us bring’

(2) Ikoma

baaga[chetóóra

ba-Vka-che-toor-a

2.sm-nar-7.om-put-fv

‘and they put it’

baaga[chetora

ba-Vka-che-tor-a

2.sm-nar-7.om-pierce-fv

‘and they pierced it’

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¹ Examples from the author’s field notes. The vowel contributing the tone is underlined.