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STUP



# TONE AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH TENSES BY BOKI LEARNER- USERS OF ENGLISH

By

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## Abstract

*This study entitled 'Tone and the learning of English tenses by Boki learner-users of English' was designed to investigate how tone, as a word formation process in Boki, affects the learning of English tenses by the Boki learner-user of English, with a view to offering pedagogical remediation where necessary. The theoretical linguistic tool adopted in this study is the M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Model of grammatical analysis. Data on English and Boki word formation processes were obtained through valid and reliable research instruments such as questionnaire and test, and also from the library and resource persons. It was discovered that English tenses are formed through suffixation, and through zero allomorph while Boki verbs are purely tonal. The outstanding peculiarities in the tenses of the two languages were found to be responsible for the difficulty the Boki learner-user of English experience in learning English tenses. Based on the above findings, recommendations are made to relevant authorities for the improvement of Boki learner-user performance in the learning and use of English tenses.*

**Keywords:** Tone, Learning, English, Tenses

## 1. Introduction

The Boki people are discovered to have migrated from western Cameroun at about the 17<sup>th</sup> century. They live in the forest area of the northern part of Cross River State of Nigeria. It forms the largest contiguous language unit in the north-central district of Cross River State and occupies the largest geographical area of approximately three thousand square miles and 1.6 million people (Gregor, 2006). It may be helpful at this point to make a distinction between the words Boki and Bokyi respectively. Whereas Boki refers to the people and the community as a whole, Bokyi refers to the language spoken by the Boki people. A Boki man, therefore, could be said to speak Bokyi language. A study of Bokyi lexical items carried out in 1967 by Bruns, P.C. at the University of California,

Los Angeles, shows that Bokyí is a sub-group of the larger Bendi language family (Bruns, 1975). The Bendi languages remain almost completely unstudied, apart from Stanfford's (1967) *Bekwara grammar; An introduction to the study of the Bokyí language*, (Tawo, 1977), *Bypang-byiraambyi Bokyí* (A dictionary of the Bokyí language) (Bruns, 1975), Long essays on Bete (Bendo-Samuel, 1998). This study, which aims at investigating how tone affects the learning of English by the Boki learner-user of English, is therefore a valuable asset not only to scholarship on English/Bokyí (or tonality generally) but also to scholars interested in the Bendi language family and the Benue –Congo larger family.

Since Bokyí and English are naturally distinct, speakers of both languages should expect difficulties in an attempt to use either of the languages as a second language, especially as the mother tongue is generally said to have pervasive influence on the second language. In the English language, for instance, while Bokyí uses tone in the realization of its verb form, English uses the tense. According to Elemi (2001), English word formation results in omission of the phoneme /ð/ in the word 'comfort' /k^mfðt/ when the derivational morpheme '-able' is added to it to become 'comfortable' /k^mfðtbl/. Also, there is a situation where the phoneme /ð/ in the word 'petrol' /petrðl/ changes to /ðu/ in 'petroleum' /petrðuiliem/. Again, in English language, certain words often admit 'zero' plural formation because they are in base form and they are irreducible. For instance, the words 'sheep' and 'deer' retain their morphological shapes in both their singular and plural forms. Also, in English language, we have a process whereby an item changes its word-class in context without the addition of an affix (conversion). For example, the word 'release' (as 'They releases him') corresponds to a noun release (as in 'They ordered his release'), and this relationship may be seen as parallel to that between the verb 'acquit' and the noun 'acquittal' (Elemi, 2001). These processes of word formation in English may be alien to a Bokyí learner-user of English as a second language, and so difficulties abound. The focus of this study was to investigate how tone affects the smooth acquisition of English by the Bokyí learner-user of English as a second language.

## 2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical linguistic tool adopted in this study is the Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday's Systemic Model of grammatical analysis 'earlier known as the Neo-Firthian theory as well as the scale and category grammar' (Halliday, 1985). The model identifies four theoretical categories set up for the description of the grammatical pattern of any language. The categories include; unit, structure, class and system. The analysis of whatever language (English and

Bokyi inclusive) can be done within the categories, because the model provides the principles for investigating data obtained from any human language.

Class is the category set up to account for the grouping of members of a given unit. This suggests that individual words in every language have natural groupings. Quirk et al (1973:192) sees class as 'any set of linguistic items having the same possibilities of operation in structure'. Its most widespread use is in relation to the classification of morphemes into form – classes and words into word classes.

Unit is the category set up to account for stretches that carry grammatical pattern. The category of unit has five sub-units of grammatical description, namely morpheme, word, group, clause and sentence viewed as hierarchy either upwards or downwards. It is possible for a unit of a higher rank to go one or more places down the scale to function in the next lower unit. This is referred to as 'rank-shifting', (or 'down-grading' in the tradition of American linguistics. Each grammatical unit is in principle realizable by a separate chunk of phonological (or graphological) material. In the examples in (a) below the symbol + stands for the boundary of such a chunk, and not for syllable boundary (syllables are purely phonological units, and are established without reference to grammatical structure; for instance, while the word fees is monosyllabic it consists of two morphemes: {fee}+{s}). Example 1 below provides for word boundaries:

**Example 1**

(a)	reader:	read+er	/rid+ə/
	stolen:	stol+en	/stəul+ən/
	musical:	music+cal	/mju:zɪk+l/
	sending:	send+ing	/send+ɪŋ/
	outspokenness:	out+spoke+en+ness	/aut/spəʊk+ən+nəs/
	translation:	trans+late+ion	/trænz+leɪf+ən/

We can also use upright lines to separate the immediate constituents of a sentence as shown in example 2 below:

**Example 2:**

The boys push ed the cars

Structure, according to this model, is the category set up to account for the pattern that the unit carries. It helps in the analysis of grammatical units of a language, except the smallest (the morpheme) that has no structure. Sentences (i) and (ii) in Example 3 below are saying the same thing but they differ in their patterns:

**Example 3**

- i. The manager suspended the two girls yesterday.
- ii. The two girls were suspended by the manager yesterday.

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	outspokenness:	out+spoke+en+ness	/aʊt/spəʊk+ən+nəs/
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- i. The manager suspended the two girls yesterday.
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The category of system is that set up to account for the occurrence of one rather than another from among a number of like elements or events. According to Robins (1989, p.180):

The term 'system' applies to any infinite set of formally connected units (referred to variously as the terms or 'members' of the system), where the interrelationships are mutually exclusive (i.e. two members of the same system cannot co-occur) and mutually defining (i.e. the meaning of one member is specifiable only with reference to others).

For this study, the category of class and system were considered appropriate for the analysis of English and Bokyì verbs. Class, as earlier noted, is the category set up to account for the grouping of members of a given unit. This suggests that English and Bokyì verbs naturally belong to the same group of linguistic units (words that signify action), however, with different modes of formation – suffixation and tonality respectively. Also, since the occurrence or choice of a particular possibility (or form of a verb) excludes the use of any other form in the same context, the category of system was also considered useful for the analysis of the verb pattern of the two languages.

### 1. Tone as a linguistic process

Tone refers to the distinctive pitch level of syllable/word. In many languages (mostly the Niger-Congo languages), the tone carried by a word is an essential feature of the meaning of that word (lexical tone), e.g. in Beijing Mandarin Chinese the word *ma* when pronounced in a level tone means *mother*, and in a falling-rising tone means 'horse'. In Yoruba, the word 'ogun' has at least nine different meanings depending on the pitch it is pronounced. These meanings, are 'war', 'medicine', 'he/she stabbed', 'twenty', 'inheritance', 'long', 'he/she climbed', 'sweet', and a prefix for certain deities. Languages whose word meanings or grammatical categories (such as tense) are dependent on pitch level are known as tone languages. Many languages of South-East Asia and Africa are tone languages, illustrating several types of tonal organization.

According to Katamba (1993:176), tone is a word formation process. That is, the application of different tones to a particular word in different contexts results in the derivation of different words, which though have similar spelling, have also their respective meanings, pronunciations and tone markers. For example, the three letter word *áwò*, in Igala, can have many meanings depending upon the tone used in its production. Example 4 below provides various meaning of 'awo':

#### Example 4

The different meanings of the Igala word 'awo'

<u>Word</u>	<u>Meaning</u>
-------------	----------------

awò	guinea fowl
aw $\bar{O}$	an increase
awò	hole (in a tree)
āwō	a slap
áwō	a comb
áwó	star.

## 2. Tonality as a word formation process in Bokyi

Bokyi, in addition to other processes of word formation, uses pitch variations (tone) to determine the meaning of certain words. That is, a particular word in Bokyi can have several meanings depending on the pitch used in its realization. The pitch applies independently to each syllable of the word. This agrees with the position of Katamba (supra) that tone is a word formation process. In Oshita (2004:107), Tawo (1977:126) agrees that Bokyi is a tone language. According to him, a single word could give different meanings depending on the pitch sound applied. For example, the word 'Dibe' in Bokyi could mean 'shoe' or 'kola nut' depending on the pitch sound applied. Again the Bokyi word 'be' could mean 'we, marry, or come', depending, also, on the tone applied. Because of this, therefore, tone markers are very vital in the Bokyi language so as to avoid confusion in the use of words. Just as many meanings can be derived from the Igala word 'awo', as illustrated earlier, in Bokyi there are as many meanings as possible depending on the pitch used in the realization of a particular word. Table 1 (below) also provides examples of tonal variation in the following Bokyi words:

**TABLE 1**

Tone variation/meanings of words in Bokyi

<b>Bokyi</b>	<b>Tone</b>	<b>Meanings</b>
káyáng	high/high	small animal
káyàng	high/low	an idiot
kāyàng	mid/low	a mosquito
dibé	low/high	cola
dibē	low/mid	marriage
dibé	low/low	shoe
abé	high	cola-nuts
abè	low	shoes
abē	mid	marriages
kwá	high	cough
kwā	mid	grind
bè	low	come
bé	high	marry

bē		mid	we
ónáng		high/high	visitation/person's name
ònáng	low/low		intended
ōnáng	mid/low		scorpion

### 3. Tonality of Bokyi verbs

Bokyi verbs are basically tonal. Apart from the progressive form of the verb, which is realized by adding the pronominal prefix (okuo-) to the base, all other forms of the same verb are formed by applying the right tone (pitch level) to the base. For instance, the different forms of the Bokyi verb oki (give) can be realized by applying the right tone to the base (oki) as follows:

- Okí (a high tone on the final vowel of the base produces the Bokyi equivalent of the English 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular (v+s))
- Óki (a high and low tone to the initial and final vowels of the base produces the Bokyi equivalent of the English past perfective (V+ed<sub>2</sub>)).
- Okì (a low tone on the final vowel of the base will produce the Bokyi equivalent of the English past imperfective (v+ed<sub>1</sub>)).
- Okì (a level tone on the initial vowel of the base will produce the negative form of the verb (does not +v)). See table 2 below for further clarification.

**TABLE 2**

Tonality in Bokyi verbs

A Base	B Present (v+s)	C Past Imperfective (v+ed <sub>1</sub> )	D Past Perfective (v+ed <sub>2</sub> )	E Progressive (v+ing)	F Negative (does not +v)
kì (give)	okì (gives)	okì (gave)	Okì (given)	okuokì (giving)	okì (does not give)
fì (return)	ofì (returns)	ofì (retuned)	Ofì (returned)	Okufì (returning)	ofì (does not return)
juab (drink)	ojuáb (drinks)	ojuáb (drank)	Ojuáb (drunk)	okuojuab (drinking)	ojuab (does not drink)
fe (put)	ofé (puts)	ofè (put)	Ofè (put)	okuofe (putting)	ofe (does not put)

Table 2 above on forms of verb in Bokyi may be interpreted as follows:

- (a) The Bokyí equivalent of the English third person singular (v+s) is realized by applying a high tone (/) to the final vowel of the Bokyí inflected verb (e.g. okí, ofí, efé).
- (b) The Bokyí equivalent of the English past imperfective (v+ed<sub>1</sub>) is realized by applying a low tone (\) to the final vowel of the Bokyí inflected verb (e.g. okí, ofí, efé).
- (c) The Bokyí equivalent of the English past perfective (v+ed<sub>2</sub>) is realized by applying a high tone to the initial vowel and a low one to the final vowel of an inflected verb (òfí, ókí, ófè).
- (d) The Bokyí negative form of the verb (does not +v) is formed by replacing the initial short vowel of the inflected verb with a long vowel (e.g. òkí, òfí, òfè).
- (e) The Bokyí equivalent of the English progressive form of the verb (v+ing) is realized by adding the pronominal prefix (okuo-) to the base form of the Bokyí verb. Example, okuo- (prefix) + ki (give) = okuoki (giving).

### 1. Inflection of English verbs

English verbs inflect in five forms: The base or infinitive (v), the third person singular form (v+s), the progressive (v+ing), the past imperfective (v+ed<sub>1</sub>) and the past perfective (v+ed<sub>2</sub>). The way these forms inflect depends on whether the verb is regular or irregular. In English, a verb is said to be regular if it fits into a paradigm that yields consistent inflectional suffixes, marking the base form from the modified forms. Table 3 (below) distinguishes the inflectional pattern of regular and irregular verbs. The verbs under (i) are regular, because they are inflected in a uniform and predictable manner. But, those under (ii) are irregular, because their past and perfect tenses are realized in a variety of unpredictable forms (ie they lack a paradigm.)

**TABLE 3**

Inflection of English verbs

V	V+-s	V+ing	V+ed1	V+ed2
(i)				
Walk	Walks	Walking	Walked	Walked
Greet	Greets	Greeting	Greeted	Greeted
Laugh	Laughs	Laughing	Laughed	Laughed
(ii)				
Eat	Eats	Eating	Ate	Eaten
Hit	Hits	Hitting	Hit	Hit



Take                      Takes                      Taking                      Took                      Taken

Like the Z morphemes, the past tense inflectional morpheme (also referred to as the D morpheme) yields three allomorphs arising from the phonological conditioning of their environments. The past tense morpheme (-ed) has the following allomorphs /t/, /d/ and /id/ as illustrated in example 5 below:

**Example 5**

Kicked /kikt/

Ministered /ministəd/

Wanted /wɒntɪd/

From the above, it should be noted that:

- /t/ occurs after bases ending in voiceless sounds except /t/
- /d/ occurs after bases ending in voiced sounds except /d/ and /id/
- /id/ occurs after bases ending in the sounds /t/ and /d/.

We also have the zero allomorph /Ø/ which occurs where in an irregular verb, there is no change in the morphological shape of a verb as it occurs in the past or non past as follows:

- hit (non past), hit (past)
- put (non past), put (past) etc.

**2. Tone and its implication in the learning of English tenses**

Having known that verbs in Bokyì are formed through tone, and in English through inflection (suffixation), we may now examine the implication of tone in the learning of English tenses (as it affects a Boki learner of English). As pointed out earlier, verbs in English are inflected by adding a morpheme (-s, -ing, -ed<sup>1</sup> or -ed<sup>2</sup>) to the base, while in Bokyì, apart from the progressive form of the verb which is derived by adding the pronominal prefix 'okuo-' to the base, other forms of the same verb are derived through the application of the required tone (pitch level) to the base (see Table 2 above). In summary, therefore, while Bokyì uses tone to derive its verb forms (applying the right tone to the base), English does so through suffixation (adding, the right suffix to the base). The outstanding dissimilarity in the area of verb formation between the two languages poses much learning problems to a Bokyì learner of English. This is evidenced in their use of the English infinitive (v) in positions where other forms of the English verb should function. In the written test administered to the SS II students, constructions such as the following were noted:

- (i) Orim go to school yesterday only but Banku go every day.
- (ii) When the principal drive us for school fees before I can reach home my mother was go to farm.

(iii) The teacher is wiked, he beat us everyday.

Also, it was noticed that while tone changes the meaning and word class of a word (ie in the derivation of Bokyí adverbs), stress, in English, equally changes the meaning and/or word class of English word as can be found in words such as envelope, import, convert, rebel, addict, escort, etc. which can either be a noun or verb depending on the syllable that is stressed. Tone in Bokyí and stress in English may therefore be serving a similar function; that of changing the meaning and/or the word class of a particular word in either language. This situation from our experience/knowledge of the concept of language learning, should naturally facilitate the learning process. But since there is no one to one correspondence between the English and Bokyí words that are so involved, the application of the appropriate stress to syllables of English words by a Bokyí learner of English language was found to be impeded. This may be the reason why the words such as escort, rebel, covert, import as used in the test administered to SS1 were wrongly stressed as nouns and as verbs respectively. Wrong application of stress would necessarily result in wrong intonation pattern. These areas need to be given special attention by teachers of English to Boki learner-users of English. Table 4 below shows the Bokyí learner –user of English problem and non-problem areas in English tense formation; which are not unconnected with the difference and similarity existing between English and Bokyí verb formation:

**TABLE 4**  
Problem and non-problem areas of English verb formation to the Bokyí/English bilinguals

Word class	Problem areas	Non-problem areas
Verb	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular formation -s</li> <li>- the past perfective (ed<sup>1</sup>)</li> <li>- the past imperfective (ed<sup>2</sup>)</li> <li>- modal auxiliaries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The progressive (-ing)</li> </ul>

### Conclusion

To what extent can the existing similarities and differences facilitate or hinder the performance of the Bokyí learner –users of English? The observation of Elemi (2001:114) seems to have provided answer to the above question. According to the source, “what an individual acquires before affects what he learns now or later; positively in the areas of similarities, and negatively in the areas of differences”. Elemi's observation (above) is in tandem with Wilkins (1998:206)

view in his analysis of tense system of English and French. The study revealed that areas of similarities and differences between the tense system in the two languages result in facilitation and difficulties, respectively, for English/French learners of either language.

From this study, it was discovered that some Bokyí words have several meanings depending on the tone applied in their realization. Also, Bokyí uses tone to derive its verb forms; by applying the right tone to the base to have the needed verb form. This process of verb formation is different from what obtains in English, making the learning of English tenses difficult for the Bokyí learner-users. The learners therefore need to be adequately exposed to the operation of English tenses, and be encouraged to embrace wider learning and reading opportunities so that they can familiarize themselves with English tenses and internalize them consciously and unconsciously.

A teacher's good knowledge of the target language cannot proffer solutions to all learning difficulties. It has to combine with ability to perfectly analyze the two languages (L1 and the target language) showing areas of similarities and differences and their pedagogical implications. This applies also to the teaching/learning of the English language by English language teachers and the Boki learners. The English language text writer can avail himself/herself of this wealth of knowledge for a guide, as these linguistic phenomena recur in many African languages.

The results/observations of this study are in affirmation of the position of Eleme (2001:114) and Wiikin (1998:206) above regarding what facilitate or hinder the performance of second language learners. Evidently, the Boki learners experienced difficulty in realizing all English tenses (except the progressive). These resulted from the similarities and differences existing between the two languages in those areas.

However, differences and similarities may not be the sole factors constituting difficulty or facilitation in second learning. Oliver (1998:308) sees a range of factors – learning environment, pedagogical materials, psycho-social and cognitive factors. These factors, however, go beyond the realm of language learning.

With the above discovery, it is therefore required of the designers of the English language syllabus as well as authors of the English language textbooks to avail themselves of this wealth of knowledge to guide them respectively in their pursuit of imparting knowledge to language learners; as these linguistic phenomena recur in many other African languages. Designers of the syllabus need to lay emphasis on the areas of difference, which impede the learning process, while the authors of the English language textbooks, being aware of the

needs of the learner also, should produce English texts that are meant to tackle the identified areas of difficulty (as emphasized in the syllabus). While no time should be wasted on aspects that pose no problem, sufficient practice materials should be provided in areas where problems are identified.

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