

What can the verb phrase tell us about the mid tone in Uwu?

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Uwu (Benue-Congo, Nigeria) is characterised by a three-way tonal contrast. This paper will try to answer whether this contrast is made up of three or two underlying tones. In the latter case, M would not be represented on the underlying level. In order to answer this question, the verb phrase will be analysed.

Uwu shares many features with Yoruba (Benue-Congo, Nigeria). Yoruba also has a three-way tonal contrast. Its M is the least stable tone. In consequence, whenever the combination of verb and noun results in the loss of a tone bearing unit (TBU), M will never win the battle for the remaining TBU. The reason may be that M is not represented on the underlying level and only appears on the surface level as a default tone. If so, it just cannot win because it is not really there. Another possibility is that M is represented on the underlying level but that it is less marked than any of the other tones. If so, M is set afloat and might affect the surface level, e.g. by blocking peak delay (a process, present both in Uwu and Yoruba, that turns any sequence of L.H and H.L into L.LH and H.HL respectively).

This paper will answer whether tonal stability in Uwu also is asymmetric. To do so, the tones of the Uwu verb phrase will be analysed. However, the focus will be on the behaviour of M. The result will be used in order to argue for or against an underlying representation of M in Uwu.