Stress features in Kimbundu?

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Kimbundu is a Bantu language spoken by 1 million people in Angola. It has several mutually-intelligible dialects and is spoken by almost everyone in the rural areas and mainly by older adults in urban centers. A great number of its speakers now live abroad, mainly in Lisbon, as a consequence of long war periods in Angola.

On the one hand, Kimbundu, as a Bantu language, is traditionally considered not but a tonal system, showing lexical contrasts by means of pitch variation, presenting two level tones, high (H) and low (L), according to Atkins (1953), Vatomene (1974), Arvanites (1976), and Van Dam (1977).

On the other hand, Pedro (1993) is able to find some stress minimal pairs in Kimbundu, implying that both tone and stress have phonological roles in this language. It suggests that Kimbundu is a mixed prosodic system. These two distinct views reveal that Kimbundu phonology needs a more accurate description. The aim of this paper is to present some phonological aspects and acoustical data showing the tonal and/or stress nature of Kimbundu and to bring to matter the prosodic specificity of this language up to discussion on African linguistics studies. The data – words, phrases, sentences and narratives – were provided by six Kimbundu speakers and digitally recorded. We also focused on the words claimed to be stressed. In addition to the phonological analyses we eventually transferred the data onto a computer and applied a speech analysis system to provide values related to acoustic correlates of prosodic features, as fundamental frequency, duration and intensity.

Phonological representation was made following the Autosegmental model by Goldsmith (1976, 1984a).