

The Tone Structure of Noun Phrases in Defaka

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This paper details and compares the tone structures of Noun Phrases in Defaka, a severely endangered language of the Niger Delta. The focus is on compounds and clitic phrases. The tone patterns of both structures appear to be borrowings from Nkoroo, its closest Ijo relative. Both Nkoroo and Defaka are the subject of an ongoing documentation project.

In Defaka, the first person proclitic is an L-toned [i], and the third person plural proclitic is a H-toned [wa]. The L tone of the first person spreads one step into the noun that follows, while the H tone of the third person causes a following H to downstep. It appears that Defaka borrowed this spreading process from Nkoroo.

More interesting is the structure of compounds. The compounds discussed here are those of body parts such as “armpit” (= arm + under), “heart” (chest + seed), “womb” (child + bag). In this structure, the tone of the second noun of the simply becomes L, regardless of the underlying tone, and regardless of the tone of the first noun in the compound. If the first noun is already L, then the compound may be LL. Again, lowering of the tone of N2 appears to be a borrowing from Nkoroo.