

Function of tone in Tennet

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Tennet is one of the Surmic languages that are found in Southern Sudan. According to Randal (1995:1), Tennet belongs to the Southwest Surmic family. Surmic linguistically belongs to the Eastern Sudanic branch of Nilo-Saharan, and is a sister to the Nilotic languages. Other members of Southwest Surmic in Sudan are: Murle, Didinga, and Narim. They are all found in Eastern Equatoria State, Southern Sudan.

Tennet belongs to the group of languages with VSO word order. It has two sets of vowels (+ATR) and (-ATR) with vowel harmony in operation throughout the word. It has two level tones and one contour tone that are distinguished in the orthography: The acute accent /á/ indicates high tone, an unmarked vowel /a/ indicates low tone, and the circumflex /â/ indicates falling tone. All these phonological features have an important role in written and spoken Tennet, but tone carries the heavier functional load and is the focus of this paper.

*The goal of this paper is to examine the function of both lexical and grammatical tone. Lexical tone distinguishes words such as **irong** 'house flies', **îrông** 'want', and **iróng** 'not'. Grammatical tone distinguishes subject from object and other case marking, differentiates statement from question, and also can be the only distinctive showing number in the verb. This paper also shows the importance of marking tone in the Tennet orthography.*