

Syllable weight in Dholuo

Jane Akinyi Ngala Oduor

University of Nairobi – Kenya

Dholuo, the language under study, belongs to the Nilo-Saharan family of languages. ‘The distinction between “heavy” and “light” syllables has received considerable attention in recent works’ (Hyman 2003:5). In Dholuo, there are both heavy and light syllables (Oduor 2002). In other words, some syllable structures have a greater weight or quantity than others.

Katamba (1989) and Hyman (2003) note that languages with a heavy and light syllable dichotomy follow one of the two patterns specified below. The first class of languages consider a syllable which consists of a short vowel as light, while a syllable with a long vowel or a long vowel followed by a consonant (or consonants) or a short vowel followed by a consonant (or consonants) is considered to be heavy. The second class of languages considers a syllable whose rhyme consists of a short vowel to be light, while a syllable whose rhyme consists of a long vowel is heavy. In this second class the presence or absence of coda consonants is irrelevant. The main difference between the first class and the second class of languages is that in the first class, the existence of the coda or margin may or may not be important in the determination of the weight of a syllable whereas in the second class the margin is completely irrelevant.

This paper attempts to show that Dholuo belongs to the second group of languages. The structure of the nucleus is important in distinguishing light and heavy syllables in this language. It shows that the presence or absence of coda consonants is not relevant in determining the weight structure of a syllable. Like in all other languages, the onset is irrelevant or does not count in the determination of the weight of a syllable in Dholuo.