

AN INTERPRETATION OF THE TEMNE TONE SYSTEM

W. A. A. WILSON

In his article 'Lexical analysis in Temne' (JWAL 3.2.1966), David Dalby takes me to task for my 'apparent lack of awareness' of certain tonal features, in my 'Outline of the Temne language' (1961). In the Outline, as I stated, I was not giving any tonal analysis, but simply drawing attention to certain points of tonal behaviour that seemed 'particularly important in the word or construction concerned' (p. 6). At that time I had not yet discovered a key to the analysis of Temne sentence tone, and so had not been able to determine how many tonal phonemes should be postulated.¹

Through his painstaking examination of tonal data, Dalby has been led to differ from me as to what is 'particularly important' in the system. I question, however, whether his enthusiasm has not run away with him when he says his findings 'invalidate' mine (Dalby p.5, fn.5) or whether his system of class concord exponents does in fact 'differ substantially' from mine (Dalby, p.8).

The main purpose of this article is to present a preliminary statement of the tonal structure of the language, to which a key now suggests itself. A recent visit to Temne country, after several years away from the language, has offered a brief opportunity for a fresh look at some of the problems. Dalby's article has also been used as a source of data.

TWO-TONE TERRACED-LEVEL SYSTEM

Temne can be characterized as having a terraced-level system of tones, though in comparison with such a 'classical' example as Twi, this is largely obscured by the fact that the descending pitch contours typical of this type of system are in general quite short, so that sentences frequently have a tone pattern composed of two or more such contours, each having approximately the same highest pitch.

The tone patterns of individual items are often complex, in that there frequently are glides on the last syllable. All patterns, however, appear analysable in terms of two tonal phonemes, Low (L or `) and High (H or ^),² and of a juncture phoneme of Downstep (').³ It is possible, then, to regard Dalby's 'High-falling' as High-Low, and his 'Low-rising' as Low-High.

Dalby's lexical sample includes monosyllabic noun stems of five tonal patterns, and disyllabic noun stems of seven tone patterns. They may be analysed as follows, each noun being quoted in its indefinite form, with Low tone on its class prefix:

¹ For this reason I used the term 'middle tone' ('Outline', p. 23), rather than mid tone, to avoid implying that I postulated three contrastive tones. Dalby uses the expression 'relative mid or mid-falling tone' to show that he too is talking in phonetic rather than phonemic terms. He does not state how many tones he postulates, contenting himself with indicating tonal contours by means of six 'tone-marks' (Dalby, p. 7). [Further to his article referred to here, David Dalby has been preparing "A Tonal Analysis of Temne", to appear in this journal in a later issue. In the course of that article, he will take the opportunity of commenting on W. A. A. Wilson's article.—ED.]

² Dalby leaves his High tone 'unmarked', and uses ^ for his 'upstep' or ultra-high pitch.

³ It is for typographical reasons that Downstep is indicated by the sign ' instead of the more usual raised exclamation mark.

