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Tones - Some brief background

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What is a tone and what does it do?

When people use “tones” in a language, they basically change the pitch of their voice as they speak.

This change in pitch can bring about a change in the meaning of a word. For example, in Yoruba, a language spoken by about 20 million people in Nigeria, you have the words *kí* “greet” with a high tone, *kí* “thick” with a mid tone and *ki* “praise” with a low tone. These words all sound the same except for the pitch with which they are pronounced.

In other tone languages, the pitch can also be used as part of the grammar. In Ikann, a language spoken by around 5,000 people in Nigeria, tones are used to distinguish between different tenses and aspects. You can say *jé kana* “I am reading” with a high tone on *jé* and two mid tones on *kana*, or you can say *jè kánà* “I read” with a high tone on *jé* and a high and a low tone on *kánà*.

What kinds of tones are there?

Tones basically fall into two major groups – level tones and contour tones.

Level tones don’t really change their pitch. They are either high or mid or low or extra low etc.

Contour tones, however, have pitch movements. You can have falling pitches, or rising pitches, or even falling-rising, or rising-falling pitches. Some falls go from really high to quite low, whereas others may only go from somewhere medium-high to low and so on.

There are also some tones that come with other features attached to them. For example, not only are they low, but you also have to make your voice a little creaky.

Depending on the language you study you may encounter some of these and not others, so in all likelihood you won’t have to battle all of them at once! But it is good to know which tones your language has because this will help you with some of the practical techniques described in other helpsheets.

Do only tone languages use pitch?

Using pitch to put across differences in meaning is not actually restricted to tone languages. As speakers of English you already use pitch differences to express different shades of meaning. Think of all the different ways you can say “no” in English: making a simple statement, expressing disbelief, shock or encouragement or a bored “no” (read, e.g., David Crystal’s Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language, 169-172).

Native speakers intuitively pick up on most of these different pitches, understand the intended meaning correctly, and use them in their everyday conversations without any problems. So the good news is that your vocal cords have already learned to produce pitch differences, your ears have already learned to pick them up, and your brain has already learned to process these pitch differences and connect them to different meanings. All you have to do now is put that knowledge to some new uses!

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