

Review of

Hubert Devonish, *Talking rhythm, stressing tone: The role of prominence in Anglo-West-African Creole Languages*. Kingston: Arawak Publications, 2002, 207 pp.

by

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The English-based creole languages spoken in the Caribbean display intriguing patterns of tone and stress. Both the nature of the patterns themselves and their emergence in creolization are the topics of the present book. Devonish argues that the rhythm and stress in what he calls Anglo-West African creoles has emerged by the same mechanisms that bring about tone and stress assignment in words borrowed from English into the tonal languages of West Africa, i.e. by integrating English lexical items into the substratal tonal systems of the speakers that created the creole. Devonish thus holds that 'loanword adaptation constitutes the model which best helps us to reconstruct the development of suprasegmental systems in Anglo-West African Creole languages' (p. 23, see also Alber & Plag 2001, Brousseau 2003 for a similar point).

In order to be able to talk meaningfully about these phenomena, Devonish starts out with a chapter in which the crucial notion of prominence is clarified. As he understands it, prominence can be divided into segmental prominence and tonal prominence, with segmental prominence (what is traditionally called 'stress') being mainly manifested by greater length (i.e. an additional mora), while tonal prominence in tonal systems prominence manifests itself through a specific tone melody (usually a H tone). Both such systems can co-occur and interact within one language, and creole languages are a case in point. I admit that I was first irritated by Devonish's assumption

that stress is mainly a matter of length, which is contrast to recent standard theorizing according to which stress can be manifested through pitch, loudness and length (and often by a combination of these). But used as a heuristic simplification, Devonish's assumption turns out to be fruitful for the understanding of the phenomena under investigation, in which vowel lengthening as a consequence of tonal prominence features prominently as a source of segmental prominence, i.e. stress.

Chapter 2 sets the socio-historical scene for the linguistic analysis. Devonish argues that the early Anglo-West African communities both on the Upper Guinea Coast and in Barbados (the most influential community for the spread of these varieties) were characterized by wide-spread English-African bilingualism. And it was the bilingual speakers who borrowed the lexical items from English and integrated them into the emerging creole, using their native prosodic systems as the basis for this process.

Chapter 3 reviews English intonation and stress, putting emphasis on the fact that in the English intonational system there is no automatic correlation between the location of stress and high pitch. The stressed syllable of the word marked off for emphasis or focus in a sentence is assigned sentence level prominence, which in turn is signalled by an intonational melody whose domain consists of the stressed syllable and syllables which may follow. Once the intonational melody and the most prominent syllable in the sentence is chosen, the pitch level of all other syllables is predictable. Devonish convincingly argues that English sentence level intonation was reinterpreted as a tone melody associated with an individual word. Thus, a tone language is produced from the output of a stress accent language on the basis of words spoken in isolation. This general idea of borrowing from stress/intonational languages into tone languages is further discussed in chapter 4, using Niger-Congo tone languages as examples.

Taking loanwords in Twi, Yoruba, Kikongo and Shona for illustration, Devonish first suggests that, abstracting away from the details in individual languages, a HL tone melody is generally assigned to each word as a reflex of the High Fall and/or Low Fall intonation in isolate English citation forms. The second suggestion is that all non-grammatical items would receive segmental prominence, i.e. stress (equals lengthening, see above) on the penultimate, if the word was not monosyllabic (p. 52).

In the following chapter 5 the evolution of rhythm and tone in Djuka and Guyanese is sketched, in which Devonish puts forward different stages of development in order to account for the complexity of prominence patterns and deletion and lengthening processes we find in the earlier and present-day varieties.

Chapter 6 presents an in-depth analysis of prominence in contemporary Guyanese Creole, attempting to revise previous analyses (without, however, explicitly discussing the new proposals in relation to earlier ones). Starting out from a very informative acoustic analysis of pitch, Devonish proposes a formal analysis of prominence according to which Guyanese has both iambic and trochaic feet, is weight-sensitive and has unbounded feet. He comes up with a set of rules that work together in a rather complicated way, leading to derivations of prominence of up to eight successive derivational steps. This analysis has a number of appealing characteristics. First, it seems empirically adequate, covering the wide variety of different patterns observable. Second, it is based on the very plausible idea that prominence in Guyanese is a negative rather than a positive feature, i.e. non-prominent syllables are simply reduced versions of prominent syllables. Third, the behavior of an intriguing class of lexical items, namely that which has prominence on all syllables, is explained in an elegant fashion. Fourth, he convincingly posits two parallel systems of marking prominence, one lexical and manifested by tone, the other rule-based and taking the form of segmental weakening, with the two systems becoming aligned with each other in the surface phonology.

However, these positive traits of Devonish's analysis carry with them a significant burden of much less appealing theoretical problems. The basic machinery is taken from the toolboxes of Clements and Keyser's (1983) *CV phonology* and Goldsmith's (1990) *Autosegmental and Metrical Phonology*. The way Devonish uses these tools made me seriously wonder about the possible constraints imposed on the resulting models. Devonish freely (and often without independent justification) makes use of devices such as lexical extrametricality, rule-assigned extrametricality, rule-based reversal of extrametricality, left-headed feet and right-headed feet within one word, unbounded feet, and uncommon syllabifications (in spite of the fact that he claims to apply onset maximization). For example, *kya.l.a.bash* 'calabash' is said to have an initial syllable *kya.l*,

with the very important consequence that such words allegedly have led diachronically to the general abandonment of the binary foot in favor of an unbounded iambic foot (p. 80). Another such assumption (from the preceding chapter) is that what looks like coda nasals in Djuka are taken to be in fact syllabic nasals (without presenting evidence for such a move). All this makes the analyses work, but at the same time much less convincing, and I have general doubts that such rather unconstrained use of technical devices is theoretically desirable.

This problematic point is related to another one, which holds for the whole book, i.e. the general neglect of recent pertinent work. Partly due to the advent of optimality theory, the field of metrical phonology has developed with unprecedented rapidity in the past one and a half decades. It is therefore a disappointment that important recent developments are ignored in this monograph, which appeared in 2002, and in which the most recent references are from 1990. At least Hayes' (1995) classic should have been consulted to check the adequacy of the proposed account with regard to more up-to-date findings in metrical theory and metrical typology which call into question important parts of Devonish's account.

Chapter 7 is an account of prominence in Saramaccan. Based on the analysis of some 300 items taken from different descriptions of Saramaccan prosody, he proposes that a word taken from a superstrate language usually received segmental prominence on the penultimate syllable, which is then assigned the usual HL melody (*wáka* < *walk*, *gu'jába* < *Gujaba* (place name)). This simple pattern, in which stress and tone coincide, is only disturbed in those cases where stress ends up on the antepenult, in which case the H-tone spreads to the right, and the L-tone is assigned to the final syllable (cf. *ángísa* < *handkerchief*). Words that have a H-tone on the antepenult but do not show H-tone spreading are taken to be lexically specified for their last syllable being extrametrical, as in *mókisi*, which is analyzed as (*mó.ki*)<*si*>, with a trochaic foot preceding the extrametrical ultima. Finally there are completely L-tone items (e.g. *logoso* 'turtle'), which are lexically specified as such and also block tone sandhi.

In sum, Devonish proposes that there are two options for the emerging creoles. Either segmental prominence is assigned to the prominent syllable, which then

attracts tonal prominence. This is the case of Saramaccan-type languages. Or the assignment of the HL melody is primary, with segmental prominence being assigned to the tonally prominent syllable. This would be the case of Djuka-/Guyanese-type languages. In order to account for the emergence of the two different systems, Devonish claims that there were different varieties of early Anglo-West African from which the different systems of Djuka/Guyanese on the one hand and Saramaccan on the other, descended. This claim is, however, quite problematic, since at least Saramaccan and Djuka seem to be offshoots of basically one and the same language, an early variety of Sranan, as evidenced in a number of early sources. Furthermore, this early variety of Sranan most likely was a tonal language itself (in spite of its being non-tonal today, see Smith 2003:100), which makes Devonish's scenario even more puzzling.

In chapter 8, the prominence systems of Krio, Nigerian and Cameroon Pidgin English are investigated, which show remarkable similarities with Saramaccan. Here, as before in chapter 5, the author lays out the connection between the different vowel systems and the different types of prominence systems. He makes a rather complicated, but interesting argument that the nature of the vowel system, i.e. having long vowels or not, had important repercussions on syllable structure and thus on prominence. However, the formal analysis requires again some rather unusual assumptions to make it work (e.g. that in Krio word-final consonants are underlyingly tone bearing).

Chapter 9 seeks to account for the fact that a significant portion of words in the English-based Atlantic creoles have the highest pitch on a syllable that is not the main-stressed one in the English etymon. Devonish proposes an account according to which the aberrant tone pattern originates with proper nouns in vocatives and spread from there through the lexicon.

The results are summarized in a conclusion, in which yet another type of ill-behaved items is discussed. In Saramaccan, words of Kikongo origin do not behave according to the rules established by Devonish. Rather, they consistently keep their native contours, which leads to the concluding sentence of the book that "rather than some single process such as creolisation, several simultaneous and overlapping

processes were involved in the formative stages of Anglo-West African varieties” (p. 192).

In addition to the controversial theoretical points already mentioned, some minor problems concern the presentation, which is sometimes not as reader-friendly as it could have been. The discussion is not always well structured, transitions between chapters or sections are often abrupt and it is frequently not clear why a certain point is made in a particular section. The notation is often not adequately explained, and some notational devices are multiply ambiguous, which makes it hard for the reader to follow the discussion. For example, asterisks are used to indicate reconstructed forms in the discussion of the diachronic development of forms, to indicate syllable boundaries in the acoustic figures, and to indicate stressed syllables in the table on p. 83. Prominent syllables in turn are indicated by a variety of notations, such as asterisks, primes or regular vs. italic print. Unfortunately, there is no table of abbreviations and notations which could be used for clarification.

Overall, this book presents a wealth of intriguing observations and interesting analyses concerning stress and tone in English-based creoles. Despite its drawbacks, *Talking rhythm, stressing tone* is an important, even if controversial, contribution to the study of creole suprasegmentals and of prominence patterns in language contact.

References

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