

# Toneme as the central notion of tonology



Valentin Vydrin

# History of the term/notion

- Introduced by Douglas Beach (The Science of tonetics and its application to Bantu Languages. *Bantu Studies*, 2/1, 1923).
- Sporadically mentioned by tonologists (Pike, Welmers, Hyman & Leben, and many others).
- An elaborated study of what is toneme cross-linguistically seems to be lacking.

# A tentative definition

- **Toneme** as a meaningful tone, i.e. a tone which can (potentially) distinguish lexical and/or grammatical meanings.
- An analogue of phoneme, with the necessary adjustments.
- Toneme is close to the underlying tone, however, it seems to be better adapted to the languages of the Mende type, therefore more universal.

# Three sets of problems:

- toneme vs. zero tone (mainly for level-tone systems);
- a contour toneme or a combination of level tonemes;
- tonal melody: one toneme or a sequence of tonemes?

# Toneme vs. zero tone ( $\emptyset$ )

Criteria:

- A  $\emptyset$  tone cannot float. If a tone can float, it is not zero.
- If a tone can spread, it is a toneme.
- If two level tones can be assigned to one TBU, both tones are tonemes, and neither is  $\emptyset$ .
- A tonal (non-segmental) morpheme, both additive or replacive, contains at least one toneme.
- *There are constraints on the marked tone occurring, and there are no constraints on  $\emptyset$  occurring.*

# And what if a language has no tonal processes?

- Imagine a language with H and L tones,
- and there is no tonal spread, no contours on one TBU, no tonal (non-segmental) morphemes (no criteria!).
- Are we obliged to consider one of the tone as  $\emptyset$ ?
- (A question for discussion!)

# A contour tone: a toneme or a sequence of (level) tonemes? *(for discussion)*

- If a language has a tonal contour composed of levels which are not available in this language as tonemes, this contour is a toneme.
- If a contour can be copied or spread on a unit, it is a toneme.
- If a contour can float, it is a toneme.
- *If a tonal contour can appear on one TBU as an exponent of a single morpheme, and the contour is not a result of a tonal process (such as tonal spread, etc.), this contour is a toneme. (I.e. one TBU cannot bear two tonemes, if no tonal process is involved.)*

# Tonal melody: a toneme or a sequence of (level) tonemes?

(For discussion:)

- If a language has a limited set of tonal melodies, and each melody has a variable domain length (e.g., it corresponds to a word), these melodies are tonemes.
- E.g., Bambara: /H/ and /L/ (= [L] or [LH]), domain: min. 1 syllable, max. illimited.
- Mende: /H/, /L/, /LH/, /HL/, /LHL/, min. 1 syllable, max. 3 (or 4?).
- Lhasa Tibetan: /H/ and /L/ (= [L], [LH], [L LH]), 1 or 2 syllables.



# Tonal melodies which are not tonemes: Eastern Soninke

<b>1 syllable</b>	<b>2 syllables</b>	<b>3 syllables</b>	<b>4 syllables</b>
H	HH	HHH	HHHH
fLH	LH	LLH	LLLH
	HL	HHL	HHHL
		HLH	HHLH
			HLLH
		LHL	LLHL
			HLHL
			LHLH
L	(LL)	(LLL)	(LLLL)

# Tonal phrase

- A syntactic construction including more than one tonal span, where some tonological processes occur.
- E.g. Eastern Soninke tonal phrase:
  - the tone of the 1st component is flattened (HLH → HHH, LHL → LLL, etc.);
  - the tone of the 2nd component is maintained, but it can undergo the H tone plateauing.