



Toneme: is it different from underlying tone?

Valentin Vydrin

INALCO – LLACAN (CNRS, UMR-8135), Paris
vydrine@gmail.com

1. Toneme, its definition and criteria

Toneme is a basic unit of tonology which can distinguish lexical and/or grammatical meanings.

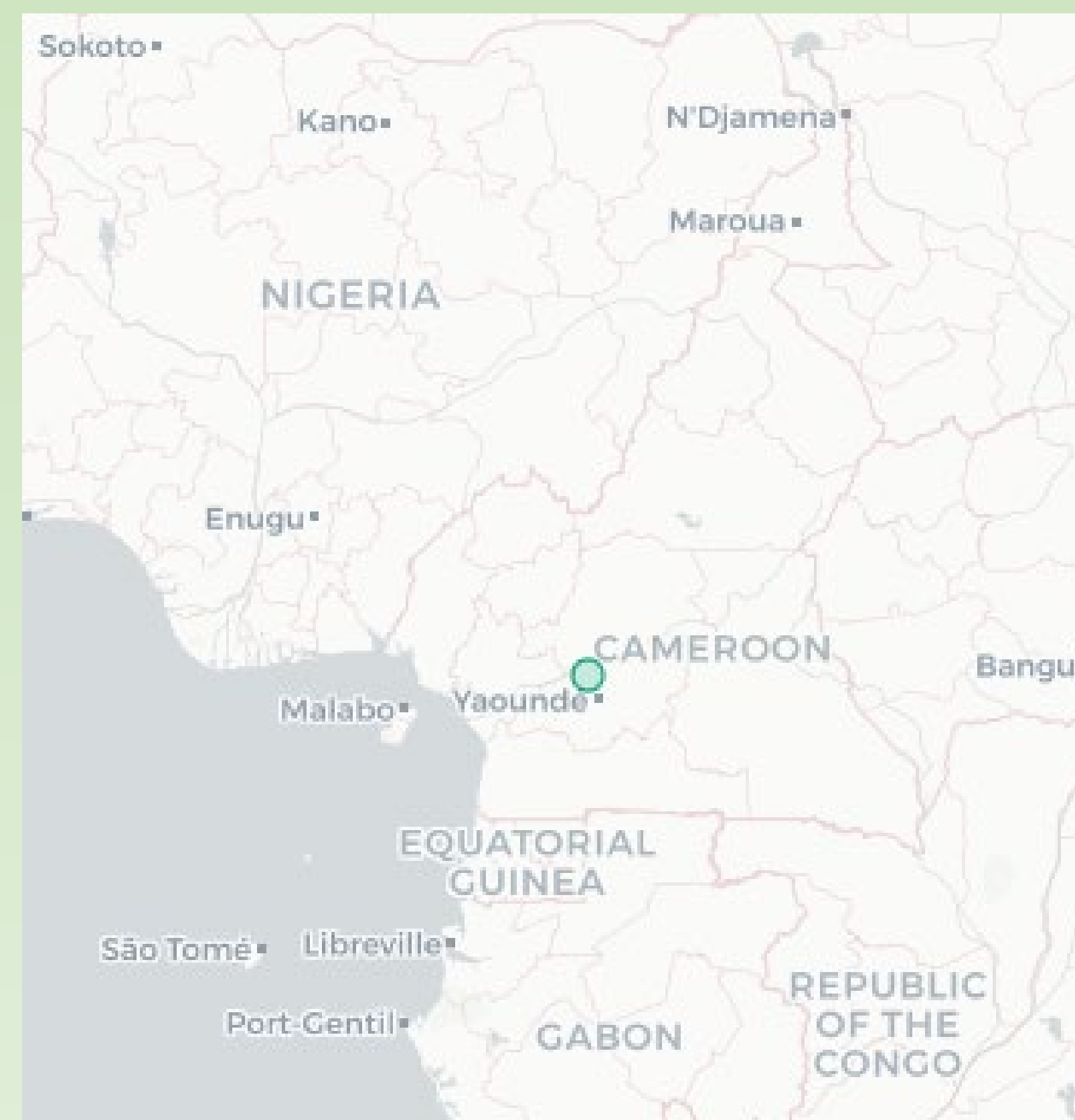
Criteria of tonemic status: general criteria, criteria of contour toneme, criteria of non-zeroeness

See the Toneme poster nearby ([Maslinsky & Vydrin, 2025](#)).

2. Toneme = underlying tone?

There is considerable overlap between the two concepts.

However, tones generated by processes can exhibit characteristics of tonemes.



3. Eton (Northwestern Bantu, Cameroon)

Two tonemes, /L/ and /H/.

[Van de Velde \(2008\)](#):

D, “dissimilating high tone” on certain syllables.

In fact, these are toneless syllables tonalized through tonal polarization.

D → L\H_

(1) Ñ-kúl wamà → ñkúl wámò ‘my slit drum’

D → H\L_; D → H\#_

(2) Ñ-pàn wamà → mpan wámô ‘my arrow’

H-tone spreading rule:

- In (1), the L generated by polarization becomes compressed thus resulting in a tonal contour. According to the Shared TBU Criterion, this L tone must be recognized as a toneme.

- In (2), the high tone on wa generated by polarization spreads on the subsequent L-toned syllable (wamò → wámô). According to the Activity Criterion, this H tone must be recognized as a toneme too.

4. Mwan

(Southern Mande, Côte d’Ivoire)

([Perekhvalskaya & Vydrin 2025](#))

Co-existence of two rules:

Tonal spreading = the extension of the span of a H toneme (3b); the original /L/ toneme shrinks, but it is not erased.

(3a) Jàdà á bǎǎ fǎǎ-dǎ.
lion 1SG.POSS chicken steal-PRF
‘A lion has stolen my chicken’.

(3b) Jàdà á kpé fǎǎ-dǎ.
lion 1SG.POSS duiker steal-PRF
‘A lion has stolen my duiker’.

Tone copying = the generation of a new toneme.

/H/ is copied on toneless (4) or L-toned (5) foot; /L/ is deleted.

(4) màfá ‘gun’ + pii ‘powder’ → màfá píí ‘gun powder’

(5) é 2SG + kòò ‘hand’ → é kóó ‘your (sg.) hand’



Munduruku (Tupian, Brasil)

([Gerasimov 2025](#))

Two tonemes: /H/, /L/.

Toneless syllables (assigned an L by default).

The floating H is docked the preseding or the following toneless syllables, provided that it is (a) word-final; (b) is not preceded by another /H/.

Tone Dissimilation after /L/:

/L/ + /L/ → LH

/L/ + Ø → LH

The Tonal Dissimilation precedes Floating H docking:

(6a) ɔ̃-t-a^H-da^H → [ò.tà.dá]
1SG-3OBJ-CL-cook
‘I cooked it.’

(6b) ɔ̃-t-a^H-da^H → [ò.tá.dà]
3-3OBJ-CL-cook
‘She cooked it.’



Conclusion:

The fact that there are languages where tonemes can be generated through tonal processes is the most conspicuous feature distinguishing tonemes from the underlying tones.



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