

Essential functions of tone in Ngambay
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Abstract

Ngambay is a Nilo-Saharan language spoken in southern Chad. This under-documented SVO language contains a body of literature which fails to mark tone despite having both lexical and grammatical tone. Verbs are inflected for both subject-agreement and tense by grammatical tone. Some subject-agreement morphemes have both segmental and tonal components, while others only have a tonal component. Sentences (1) and (2) illustrate the essential role which tone has in distinguishing second and third person subjects in this pro-drop language.

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| (1) ai↑ man↑
2SG.SAGR.drink water
‘You drink water.’ | (2) ai↓ man↑
3SG.SAGR.drink water
‘He drinks water.’ |
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Ngambay has eleven verb classes which are divided according to their unique tonal conjugation patterns. Since some verbs have identical segmental components, the verb classes also serve to contrast lexemes, as seen in (3) and (4).

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| (3) <i>uɿnda↑</i> ‘hit’ (Class 11) | (4) <i>u↓nda↑</i> ‘put’ (Class 10) |
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