

TONE AND MEANING IN THE IGEDE LANGUAGE

BY

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Abstract

This study titled tone and meaning in Igede language examines the supra-segmental roles of tone in Igede semantics. This study is relevant in that it investigates the phonological features and semantic roles of tonal patterns in Igede language, focusing on their contribution to meaning distinction, interpretation and discourse structuring. Igede is a tone language spoken in Oju and Obi Local Government Areas of Benue State, and its tone system is characterized by a complex pattern of high, low, and falling tones. The analysis is anchored on prosodic phonology theory as proposed by Nespor and Vogel (1986). This theoretical framework holds that phonological processes do not operate randomly but are organized according to prosodic domains (units) that exist above individual sounds. This theory provides a framework for explaining how supra-segmental features, including tone, stress, and intonation, operate systematically across larger units

of language such as syllables, words, and phrases. Data for the study were elicited from twelve (12) native speakers of Igede selected from two Local Government Areas through oral interview and observation. The study adopted twelve (12) native speakers because the research is qualitative and descriptive, focusing on obtaining rich and reliable phonological data rather than large- scale statistical generalisation. The informants were selected based on specific criteria such as being native speakers of Igede language. Data were elicited using instruments such as structured wordlist, interview guide, audio recording device and field notes. The study found that Igede employs a rich and systematic tonal system, encompassing level tones (High, Mid, Low) and contour tones (HL, LM, ML, HM, MH), which occur across words and connected speech, fulfilling the first objective of identifying tonal levels and patterns. The findings adds that these tonal patterns were shown to function as primary semantic markers, differentiating words with identical segmental sequences and enabling both homonymy and polysemy, thereby addressing how tonal contrasts contribute to meaning distinction and interpretation in the language. Finding show that tone is integral to discourse comprehension and communication, as tonal accuracy is crucial for correct interpretation, literacy, and effective teaching. Misplacement or omission of tones can lead to semantic ambiguity, showing that tone in Igede is not optional but essential for conveying intended meanings and structuring discourse. The study therefore, concludes that Igede employs a complex tonal system, including level tones (High, Mid, Low) and contour tones (HL, LM, ML, HM, MH), which occur systematically across words and connected speech.

Keywords: Language, Phonology, Supra-segmental, Tone, Semantics

Introduction

Tone is a supra-segmental feature of language that involves the use of pitch to convey meaning. Across many African and Nigerian languages, tone serves both phonological and semantic functions, marking grammatical contrasts and differentiating lexical items. Jija (2012) affirms that most sub-Saharan languages, including Nigerian languages, employ pitch to signal semantic and grammatical distinctions. For example, Tiv uses tonal variations to differentiate

meanings and grammatical categories, reflecting a broader linguistic reality in which tone operates at multiple levels of language.

Phonology, the study of a language's sound system, examines both segmental and supra-segmental features such as stress, intonation, and tone. Tone, as a key supra-segmental element, interacts with semantics by establishing sound-meaning correlations. Langacker (1968:24) emphasizes that language is a system linking sounds to meaning, highlighting how tonal patterns directly influence interpretation. In tonal languages, altering or omitting tones whether through interference from another language or in writing can obscure intended meanings, leading to miscommunication.

In Igede, tone plays a similar dual role. Existing studies have primarily focused on its phonological and phonetic properties, such as tonal levels, stress, and syllable structure. However, the semantic functions of tone in Igede remain underexplored. This gap limits our understanding of how tonal patterns contribute to meaning, interpretation, and discourse, and constrains the development of effective teaching and learning materials. This study, therefore, examines the supra-segmental role of tone in Igede, focusing on how tonal variations influence meaning. By bridging phonology and semantics, it investigates how tone mediates between sound and sense in Igede, thereby contributing to both descriptive linguistics and practical applications in language teaching and documentation.

Tone is a supra-segmental feature of language that involves the use of pitch to distinguish meaning between words or grammatical forms. In tonal languages, variations in pitch—whether high, mid, or low—are not merely expressive or emotional but serve a functional role in differentiating lexical meaning. Tones and tonal markers exist in the Igede language, which is spoken by the Igede people predominantly in Benue State, Nigeria, particularly in Oju, Obi, and parts of Konshisha Local Government Areas. Igede belongs to the Benue-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo language family, typologically classified as a tone language with a rich system of lexical and grammatical tone.

Tonal marking in Igede is vital for accurate reading, interpretation, and teaching; its absence can disrupt comprehension and discourse. Although scholars have examined aspects of Igede phonology such

as stress and syllable structure, tonal levels have received less scholarly attention. This research seeks to fill that gap by analyzing the phonological characteristics and semantic functions of tonal patterns in Igede, with particular focus on their role in meaning realization, interpretation, and discourse structure. Tones and tonal markers exist in Igede language. Tonal marking is vital for accurate reading, interpretation, and teaching of Igede, its absence can disrupt comprehension and discourse.

In tonal languages, variations in pitch whether high, mid or low are not merely expressive or emotional but serve a functional role in differentiating lexical meaning. The aim of the study is to identify the role tone plays in meaning realisation in Igede language. The objectives are to; identify the tonal levels and patterns that occur in Igede words and communication; examine how tonal contrasts contribute to meaning distinction and interpretation in Igede; and investigate the role of tone in discourse and comprehension, highlighting its importance for accurate reading, teaching and communication.

Grammatical Explorations into the Study of Tone

Language functions as a structured system through which humans encode, organize, and interpret experience. Beyond its communicative and cultural roles, language is a grammatical system in which meaning emerges from the interplay of form and function (Meyerhoff 2020). Linguistic analysis of grammatical systems examines the organization of sounds (phonology), word and phrase structures (morphology and syntax), and meaning (semantics), emphasizing how these levels interact to produce coherent communication.

Phonology, as a grammatical domain, studies the patterned organization of sounds and the rules that govern their distribution and combination in words and utterances. Segmental phonology examines individual phonemes, while supra-segmental phonology focuses on features such as tone, stress, and intonation, which operate across larger grammatical units. In tonal languages, supra-segmental features are integral to grammatical organization: tonal patterns can signal lexical contrasts, mark grammatical categories, and delineate syntactic boundaries.

Semantics, in its grammatical dimension, concerns how meaning is systematically encoded in linguistic forms. The relationship between sound and meaning is mediated through structured rules: phonological distinctions, including tonal contrasts, are directly linked to semantic contrasts. Tonal shifts can thus serve as grammatical markers, signaling differences in tense, aspect, modality, or syntactic relationships.

Empirical studies across Igede and related Niger-Congo languages provide insight into these grammatical and semantic roles of tone. Obega (2020) examined tone in Igede using an auto-segmental phonology framework, identifying four basic tones high, mid-high, low-high, and low that mark lexical distinctions and convey speaker mood, serving both semantic and phonological roles. While Obega focused primarily on the phonological aspects, the current study extends the analysis into semantics, exploring how these tonal patterns function in meaning differentiation and discourse interpretation.

Comparative studies in related languages further highlight the grammatical significance of tone. Adah (2021) investigated tonal functions in Idoma, identifying high, mid, and low tones, along with eight tonal patterns that distinguish word meanings and lexical categories. The study emphasized tone's role in reducing ambiguity and shaping communicative intent, aligning with the current study's interest in how tonal patterns govern meaning. Similarly, Apeh (2021) examined pitch as a semantic feature in Idoma, demonstrating how tonal variations generate meaning distinctions and recommending the promotion of Idoma in community communication. These studies underscore the importance of tone as both a grammatical and semantic feature, a perspective that informs the investigation of Igede tonal patterns.

Sokpo (2016) analyzed Tiv phonology from an auto-segmental perspective, showing how tones, vowel harmony, and nasalization contribute to meaning generation and resolve ambiguity. The findings highlight the broader relevance of supra-segmental analysis in tonal Niger-Congo languages and support the use of prosodic phonology in the current study. While Sokpo's focus was on Tiv, the current research applies similar analytical attention to Igede, shifting the theoretical lens to prosodic phonology to examine the systematic interaction

of tonal patterns and meaning at both lexical and discourse levels. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that tone functions as a grammatical and semantic tool, shaping meaning and discourse in tonal languages. The present study builds on this body of knowledge by focusing specifically on Igede, investigating how tonal marking strategies contribute to meaning differentiation, interpretation, and discourse structure, thereby bridging the gap between phonology and semantics within the language.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach, that is, an exploratory and descriptive design in combination with fieldwork to investigate the role of tone in Igede semantics. Data were collected through interviews and recordings with native Igede speakers from Oju and Obi Local government area of Benue State. A purposive sampling approach is used to select twelve (12) native Igede speakers for interviews and recordings, while convenience sampling was used to select Igede texts for corpus analysis. Research instruments include a semi-structured interview guide, and audio recording equipment. The data is presented on table and analysed based on identifying the tonal distinction and semantic variation in selected Igede words.

Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on prosodic phonology theory of Nespor and Vogel of (1980s). The prosodic phonology theory emphasizes the functional and hierarchical organization of suprasegmental features such as tone, stress, intonation, rhythm, and syllable structure. The theory posits that these prosodic elements are not isolated; rather, they interact systematically across larger units of language syllables, words, and phrases to convey meaning. In the context of Igede, a tonal language, prosodic phonology provides a framework for analyzing how tonal patterns distinguish lexical items in the language.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table I: Tonal Distinction and Semantic Variation in Selected Igede Words

S/N	Tone marked word in Igede	Tone Pattern	Meaning
1.	Ēgbé	M H	Moi moi (bean wraps
	Égbé	H H	Rashes
	Égbé	H H	Seeds/Fruit
	Égbè	H L	Male name
2.	uǵbá	H H	Palm leaves (death mark)
	Úgbá	H H	Rubber
	Úgbá	HH	Animal skin
	Uǵbà	L L	Big tree (usually at village square
3.	Éwú	HH	War
	Éwú	HH	Heap
	Èwú	L H	Knock
4.	oyí	H H	Epilepsy
	Oyí	H H	Shyness
	Óyì	H L	Seeing vision
	oyī	H M	Generation past
5.	Ōhū	M M	Cold
	ōhù	M L	Twenty
6.	Ōjé	M H	Bicycle
	Ojè	HL	Garden egg
	ōjè	M L	Iron
7.	Ógó	HH	A male given name
	Ógó	HH	Betting
	Ogo	M M	Stream
	Ógò	MH	Calabash
8.	Órú	H H	Game reserve
	Órú	HH	Powder form of something
	Òrú	M L	Smell
	Órū	HM	Husband

Source: Field research 2025

The tonal data from Igede vividly illustrate the crucial role of tone as a suprasegmental feature in semantic differentiation. Across the lexical items presented, tone operates not merely as a phonetic embellishment but as a core semantic determinant that distinguishes words sharing identical segmental structures. For instance, the word *Égbé* manifests four distinct tonal patterns Mid-High (MH), High-High (HH), and High-Low (HL) each correlating with different meanings such as *moi moi*, rashes, seeds/fruit, and a male name, respectively. This tonal contrast exemplifies tonal minimal pairs and homophones, where tone alone carries the semantic load, thus highlighting tone's functional indispensability in Igede lexicon.

Similarly, the data for *Ugba* display multiple homophones differentiated solely by tonal variation: *Úgbà* (HL) refers to palm leaves marking death, whereas *Úgbá* (HH) denotes rubber or animal skin, and *Ûgbà* (LL) identifies a big tree, underscoring the complexity and semantic density encoded in tonal variation. This pattern recurs across other lexical items such as *Ewu*, *Oyi*, *Ohu*, and *Oje*, where tonal shifts signal different semantic fields ranging from actions (knock), natural phenomena (war, cold), to tangible objects (garden egg, axe).

Furthermore, tonal markings on vowels bearing underdots such as in *Ọ́yí* (epilepsy) versus *Ọ̀yì* (seeing/vision) reflect the interplay between segmental and supra-segmental features, enhancing semantic precision. This tonal system also demonstrates grammatical functions where tone marks distinctions in tense, aspect, mood, or plurality, although such examples require further syntactic contextualization. In all, the data validate tone as a supra-segmental feature that directly influences semantic interpretation in Igede, making it imperative to represent tone accurately in linguistic analysis and orthographic conventions. The presence of tonal homophones and minimal pairs further implies challenges for language learners and underscores the need for explicit tone marking in literacy development to prevent semantic ambiguity.

WTable II: Tonal Distinction and Semantic Variation in Selected Igede Words

S/N	Tone marked word in Igede	Tone Pattern	Meaning
1.	Úbē	H M	Room
	Úbè	HL	Cock comb
	Ūbē	M M	Tree scar
	Úbè	H L	Alligator
	Úbé	H H	Bee wax
2.	Uchì	H L	Mortar
	Úchī	H M	Stupidity
	uçhì	M L	Adultery
3.	Úgbọ	HH	Plantain
	Úgbọ	HH	Paw paw
	Úgbọ	HH	Banana
	Úgbò	H L	Airplane
4.	Úyá	HH	Fight
	Uyà	HL	Jubilation
	Ūyā	MM	Prostitution
5.	Ójwó	H H	Cough
	Ójwó	HH	Sputum
	ojwọ	HM	Sandy soil
6.	Óló	HH	Ball
	Òló	HH	Curse
	Ólō	H M	Load
7.	Ókwó	HH	Wickedness
	Ókwō	H M	Cruelty
	Ókwò	HL	A given name
8.	Wúrú	HH	To call
	Wūrū	MM	To open
9.	Egá	M H	Soldier ant
	Égá	H H	Iron wood tree
	Égā	HM	One of the sub-clans in Ibilla clan in Oju

Source: Field research 2025

The tonal data presented for the Igede lexical items *Ūbē*, *Úchì*, *Ūgbọ́*, and *Úyá* further emphasize the pivotal role of tone as a supra-segmental feature shaping semantic distinctions in the language. Across these examples, tone functions as a primary semantic marker that differentiates words sharing identical segmental structures. For instance, the word *Ūbē* exemplifies tonal polysemy and homophony, with the tonal patterns High-Mid (HM), High-Low (HL), Mid-Mid (MM), and High-High (HH) corresponding respectively to room, cock comb, tree scar, alligator, and bee wax. This spectrum of tonal variation shows how tone expands semantic potential within a single segmental frame, manifesting both polysemous relations where meanings are conceptually related (e.g., different types of physical entities)—and tonal homophones, where identical tonal patterns (HL) correspond to semantically unrelated meanings such as cock, comb and alligator.

Similarly, the lexical set *Úchì* illustrates tonal minimal pairs and homonyms; tonal variation from High-Low (HL) to High-Mid (HM) to Mid-Low (ML) yields meanings such as mortar, stupidity, and adultery, respectively. Here, tonal shifts drive both lexical diversification and semantic disambiguation, highlighting tone's integral role in encoding both concrete and abstract concepts.

In the case of *Ūgbọ́*, the identical High-High (HH) tone pattern for plantain, paw paw, and banana suggests a clear case of polysemy where a common semantic domain (fruit) is lexically encoded under a single tonal and segmental form. However, a tonal contrast emerges with airplane (HL), marking it as a distinct lexical item through tonal modulation. This demonstrates how tone not only differentiates lexical meanings but also categorizes related semantic fields.

The final data set for *Úyá* further underlines tonal semantics, where High-High (HH) and High-Low (HL) tones denote fight and jubilation, respectively, both semantically related as emotional or social states, thus representing polysemy. Conversely, the Mid-Mid (MM) tone marks a distinct and unrelated meaning, prostitution, providing an example of tonal homonymy where identical segmental forms bear unrelated meanings distinguished solely by tone

In *Ojwo*, the forms *Ójwó* (cough) and *Ójwò* (sputum) have identical tone patterns (H H) but different meanings, making them homophones, while *Ójwó* (cough) and *Ójwò* (sandy soil) differ only in the tone of the final syllable, constituting a tonal minimal pair. In *Olo/Olo*, *Ólóló* (ball) and *Ólóló* differ by vowel quality, forming a segmental minimal pair, whereas *Ólóló* (ball) and *Ólóló* (load) differ by tone alone, making them a tonal minimal pair. In *Okwo/Okwo*, *Ókwó* (wickedness) and *Ókwò* (cruelty) differ in tone, as do *Ókwó* (cruelty) and *Ókwò* (a given name), both being tonal minimal pairs that show how tone can distinguish moral qualities from personal names. For *Wuru/Wuru*, *Wūrū* (to open) and *Wúrú* (to call) differ in both vowel quality and tone, showing that tone interacts with vowel contrasts to create distinct lexemes.

Finally, in *Ega/Ega*, *Egá* (soldier ant) and *Égá* (iron wood tree) form a tonal minimal pair, while *Égá* (iron wood tree) and *Égā* (sub-clan name) differ in both tone and vowel quality, making them distinct lexemes. Overall, the analysis demonstrates that Igede employs tone not only to create tonal minimal pairs but also in combination with vowel quality changes to differentiate meanings across diverse semantic domains such as human health, objects, environment, social identity, and moral attributes.

Table III: Tone patterns and Semantic Properties in Selected Igede Lexical Items

Word	Gloss 1	Tone level 1	Gloss	Tone level	Gloss 3	Tonal level	Gloss 4	Tone level 4	Gloss 5	Tone level 5	Classification
Rì	to roll	H	Eat	M	efficacious	L	-	-	-	-	Homonymy
Uhyi	Famine	MH	Fear	ML	servitude	HL	Beauty	HH	—	—	Polysemy
Uje	a sub-clan in Iyeché	HM	a hole/ditch	LL	—	—	—	—	—	—	Homonymy
Ujé	End of a yam tuber	LL	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	Homonymy
Uji	Anthills	HH	place where nuts are dried before storage	HH	Enmity	LL	a type of grass	MM	—	—	Homonymy

Uju	Rhenozeros bettle	LL	Pear	MM	brown rat	HH	—	—	—	—	Homonymy
Ujwo	gall bladder	HH	Folk- tales	LL	thorn/ thistle	HL	—	—	—	—	Homonymy
Ukpe	society of hunt- ers	HH	Frugal	HH	male name	LL	—	—	—	—	Homonymy
Ilo	Snake	ML	Load	LL	liba- tion/ ritual slimy fluids for cleans- ing	HH	Weight	MM	—	—	Homonymy
Ima	Salt	HM	a vil- lage	HM	play	ML	—	—	—	—	Homonymy
Ori	If	MM	shear butter	MM	rope	MM	Spin	HH	Court- ship	LM	Homonymy
Oko	Beak	HH	a kin- dred in Ame- ka Owo	LL	male name	HH	Bird	HL	trum- pet made of fluted gourd	ML	Homonymy

Source: Field research 2025

The above lexical items illustrate the suprasegmental role of tone in disambiguating meaning in Igede. Across these examples, identical or near-identical phonemic sequences change meaning entirely when their tone patterns vary. For instance, *rì* with a High tone means “to roll,” with a Mid tone means “eat food,” and with a Low tone means “efficacious,” showing clear homonymy different unrelated meanings with the same phonological form but distinct tonal realizations.

Some items, like *Uhyi*, reveal polysemy, as the meanings (“famine,” “fear,” “servitude,” “beauty”) share a related conceptual field involving states or conditions, and are differentiated partly by tone (MM vs. HH) but also by context. In contrast, most entries here (e.g., *Uje*, *Uji*, *Uju*, *Ujwo*, *Ukpe*, *Ilo*, *Ima*, *Ori*, *Oko*) fall under homonymy: the semantic domains of the meanings are unrelated, and tone shifts serve purely

to distinguish separate lexemes.

An interesting observation is that some forms (*Uji, Ukpe, Ori*) maintain the same tone for multiple meanings, suggesting homophonic cases where unrelated meanings share both segmental and tonal structure, relying solely on context for differentiation. This reinforces the idea that while tone is a key semantic marker in Igede, it operates alongside pragmatic and contextual cues to resolve ambiguity.

Discussion of Findings

The study confirms that Igede employs a rich tonal system comprising level tones (High, Mid, Low) and contour tones (HL, LM, ML, HM, MH). These tonal patterns occur consistently across lexical items and discourse, serving as a primary phonological feature in the language. For example, words like Ilo, Ube, Uchi, Ugbo, and Uya exhibit multiple tonal realizations on identical segmental sequences, demonstrating that tonal variation is a systematic property of Igede phonology. The data also reveal interactions between tone and segmental features such as vowel quality, including underdots, showing that tone operates in tandem with phonetic cues to enrich lexical expression and communication.

Also, tonal contrasts in Igede are crucial for lexical and semantic differentiation. Many lexical items function as tonal minimal pairs or homonyms, where tone alone distinguishes meaning. For instance, Ilo can mean snake (ML), load (LL), libation or ritual fluid (HH), and weight (MM) solely through tonal variation. Similarly, Ube shows multiple meanings (room, cock comb, tree scar, alligator, bee wax) differentiated entirely by tone. These patterns illustrate that tone in Igede is a primary semantic marker, enabling both polysemy, where meanings are related, and homonymy, where meanings are unrelated, within identical consonant-vowel frameworks. Such contrasts facilitate precise meaning interpretation and reduce ambiguity in communication.

The findings highlight that tone in Igede is obligatory for comprehension and effective communication. Misplacement or omission of tone can lead to semantic breakdown, as multiple meanings compete in the absence of correct tonal specification. Tone thus plays a critical role in

discourse interpretation, literacy, and teaching, ensuring that spoken or written messages are correctly understood. Its function extends beyond individual words to sentences and connected discourse, where tonal patterns guide listeners in parsing meaning, interpreting mood, and recognizing grammatical distinctions.

Conclusion

This study investigated the phonological features and semantic roles of tonal patterns in Igede, with a focus on their contribution to meaning distinction, interpretation, and discourse structuring. The findings confirm that Igede employs a complex tonal system, including level tones (High, Mid, Low) and contour tones (HL, LM, ML, HM, MH), which occur systematically across words and connected speech. These tonal patterns serve as primary markers of meaning, differentiating words that share identical segmental structures and enabling both polysemy and homonymy in communication. The analysis shows that tonal contrasts are essential for meaning distinction and interpretation. Lexical items such as Ilo, Ube, Uchi, Ugbo, and Uya demonstrate that shifts in tone alone can signal completely different meanings, confirming tone's role as a central semantic device in Igede. Furthermore, the interaction between tone and segmental features, such as vowel quality, enhances meaning precision, making tonal awareness crucial for correct comprehension.

Finally, the study highlights the role of tone in discourse, reading, and communication. Tone is not optional but a necessary element for accurate message encoding and decoding; misplacement or omission of tone can lead to semantic ambiguity. Its function extends beyond isolated words to broader communicative contexts, influencing understanding, teaching, and literacy development. This work underscores that tone in Igede is both a phonological and semantic instrument, vital for distinguishing meaning, structuring discourse, and supporting effective communication.

Contribution to Knowledge

This research makes a significant contribution to linguistics, particularly in the study of tone and meaning. It offers the first detailed analysis of Igede's tone system, adding new empirical data from

both acoustic analysis and perceptual observation. By documenting an under-researched language, the study broadens the typological understanding of tone systems and challenges simplified theories of tonal meaning. Methodologically, the study introduces and applies practical techniques for tone analysis that can be adapted to other languages. These approaches, supported by measurable acoustic data, provide a foundation for future tonal research and teaching practices.

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