

## TONOLOGY OF ÈLÓYÌ LANGUAGE

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### **Abstract**

Èlójì (also known as Afo, Afu, Aho, Èjirí) is a tone language with its own unique syllable structure and tone system. This work is meant to carry out a tonological analysis on Èlójì language using the auto-segmental approach. Like every other tone language, certain tonal systems may or may not be obtained. Èlójì, like most West-African languages, operates basically a register tonal system where high, mid, and low tones are all attested. The study reveals that contour tones are also permissible in the language with a few cases of occurrence. A downstepped high tone is somehow also permissible in Afo. The function of tone in Èlójì cannot be overemphasized as tone functions in Èlójì to mark pitch on words and express certain grammatical information and to larger extent, distinguish between identical lexical/grammatical categories.

**Keywords:** Èlójì, tonal system, functions.

### **Introduction**

Linguistic analysis is carried out at three different levels; speech sound level, structure level, and meaning level. At the speech sound level, we have phonetics and phonology. Phonology, being the concern of this work, is studied at two levels; segmental and suprasegmental level. Under the supra-segmental, tone is studied. This work is meant to carry out a tonological analysis on Èlójì language using the auto-segmental approach. Auto-segmental phonology is a modification of generative phonology formally introduced by John Goldsmith to account for tone, which generative phonology failed to. Tone is said to be the variation in pitch which is significant at both lexical and grammatical levels. It is attested in many languages of the world with a vaster amount operating in West African and American languages. It is so important that it distinguishes between words that have same spelling and pronunciation (homonyms).

Èlójì language is an indigenous Nigerian

language spoken in the central part of the country popularly known as the "Middle Belt" (or North Central), specifically Nasarawa and Benue States. It is classified to be under the Benue-Congo subgroup of Niger-Congo language family.

Unfortunately, the aspect of tone in Èlójì language has not been given attention as such, one could hardly find any work on that; hence, the researcher deems it necessary to draw a scholarly linguistic attention to it as it is a special and important aspect of the language. Therefore, this research aims primarily at broadening the horizon of the native and non-native speakers of Èlójì language on the phenomenon of tone and its functions in Èlójì language.

### **Conceptual Review**

#### **Name, Location, Demographic and Ethnographic Information of Èlójì language**

The word or name "Èlójì" is pronounced with a stress on the second syllable. Èlójì is the real name the language, but it is also called a number of names especially by non speakers of the language as; Afo, Afu, Ejiri, Aho, Afau. The

speakers of the language are called Ajiri (though, some call them Èlòyì just like they call the language itself). It is spoken by the Èlòyì people of Agatu LGA, Benue State, and Nasarawa State in Nigeria. It has a population of about 45,000 native speakers (Joshua Project).

The Èlòyì people are found scattered among the Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau Provinces in central Nigeria. The principal geographic feature in their region is a fifteen-mile range of steep rocky hills, in which most of the Èlòyì lived until 1918 when a revolt occurred, and most Èlòyì were forced to leave their strongholds in the rocks and to settle in the plains at the foot of the range. Since then, some have moved back to the rocky hills, leaving them again isolated, even from their Èlòyì brothers in the plains.

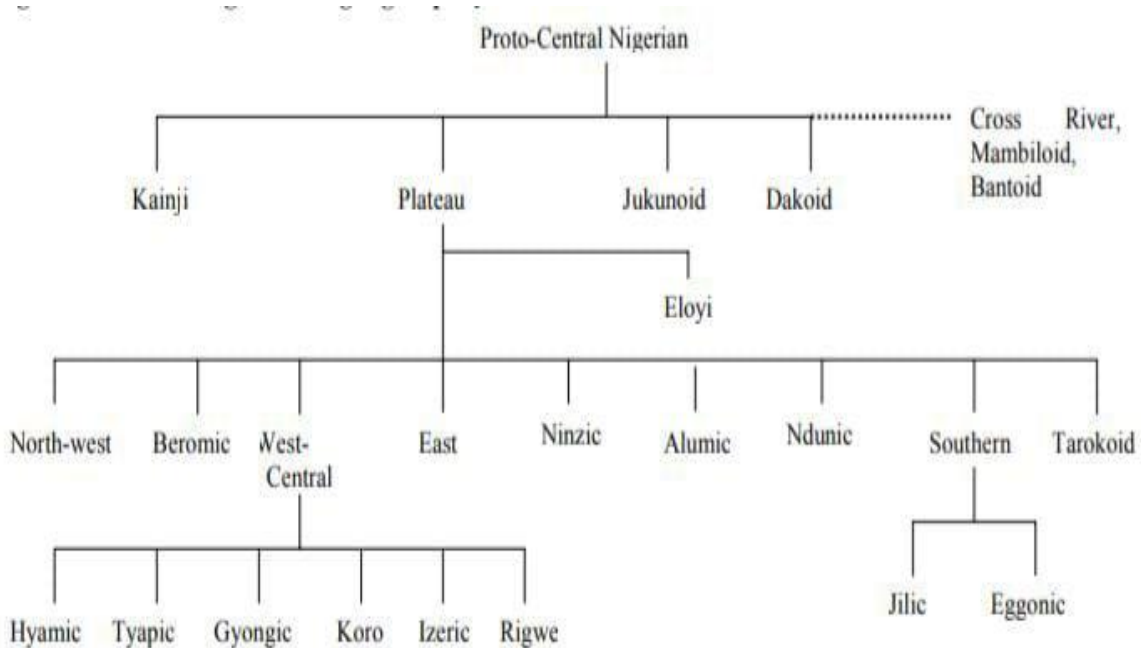
In 1932, the British divided the Èlòyì into ten village areas, each under a village head. However, the Èlòyì preserved their attitude of independence and refused to recognize the village

head, feeling that their customs, traditions, and religion were being threatened. Today, though many of their customs persist, large numbers of Èlòyì are working for wages as they gradually become integrated into a larger commercial economy.

**Language Family Affiliation (Genetic Classification)**

Armstrong (1955, 1983) classifies Èlòyì language as Idomoid, but the classification was based on a single wordlist and he later expressed doubts. However, all other preliminary investigations and accounts classify it as Plateau, and Blench (2007) leaves it as a separate branch of Plateau. Blench (2008) concludes that Èlòyì is of course a Plateau language, but has undergone Idomoid influence. Recent studies have also shown that Èlòyì is a Plateau language but has some Idomoid features because of its relatedness to Idoma ethnic group.

Below is Èlòyì language family tree showing its Benue-Congo ancestry.



**Typological Classification**

Generally, languages are grouped into typologies on the basis of sound combination (phonology), word formation (morphology), and word ordering (syntax). This leads us to the basic levels of linguistics which are phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax (and semantics).

**Phonological characteristics:** sounds in Èlòyì language do not just combine to form words, they follow an order acceptable in the language. One of the phonological constraints in Èlòyì language is that, consonants do not occur word finally.

Èlòyì is arguably said to have thirty nine phonemic sounds – both vowels and consonants.

**Vowels:**

There are seven vowel sounds in the language;

1. /i/
2. /e/
3. /ε/
4. /a/
5. /ɔ/
6. /o/
7. /u/

	Front	Central	Back
Close	i		u
Close-mid	e		o
Open-mid	ε		ɔ
Open		a	

**Consonants:** there are twenty-four consonant sounds in Èlòyì:

- |         |         |
|---------|---------|
| 1. /p/  | 15. /f/ |
| 2. /b/  | 16. /m/ |
| 3. /t/  | 17. /n/ |
| 4. /d/  | 18. /ɲ/ |
| 5. /k/  | 19. /ŋ/ |
| 6. /g/  | 20. /j/ |
| 7. /kp/ | 21. /y/ |
| 8. /gb/ | 22. /w/ |
| 9. /f/  | 23. /l/ |
| 10. /v/ | 24. /r/ |
| 11. /s/ |         |
| 12. /z/ |         |
| 13. /θ/ |         |
| 14. /ð/ |         |

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Alveolar	Alveo-palatal	Palatal	Velar	Labial velar	Glottal
Plosive	p b		t d			j	k gkp gb	
Nasal	m			n		ɲ	ŋ	
Trill				r				
Fricative		f v		s z		ʃ		
Approximant					y	w		
Lateral approximant				l				

[Culled from Blench 2007]

**Tone:** Èlòyì as a tone language operates both register and contour tones functioning both lexically and grammatically. Detailed explanation on this would be done in chapter four.

**Morphological typology:** as a branch of linguistics, morphology deals with word formation. The object of study here is morpheme – smallest meaningful linguistic unit.

Morphemes are of two types; free and bound morphemes. In Èlòyì, only free morpheme is found, where it is seen as a word. Moreover, Èlòyì language is an isolating language where each word or morpheme consists of only one word element. That is, a word/morpheme is represented by a single word. For example;

1. Èné mi e yi mu ògbà “My mother is at home”

(mother my is at home)

2. Mikuúmésherí “I am a kid”

(me is kid)

**Syntactic typology:** having done with word formation in a language, phrases, clauses, or sentences need to be constructed. That branch, which deals with sentence construction, is what is referred to as syntax.

Èlòyì language operates a SUBJECT + VERB + OBJECT (SVO) pattern in its combination of words to form sentences. Examples;

1. Obagu a ka mu utu “Obagu went to farm”  
 S V O

2. Enuma a yaapla “Enuma bought clothes”  
 S V O

**Theoretical Framework**

Research during the period of generative phonology was concerned with segments especially on the account of English stress. In the early 1970s, attempts to describe the tonal systems of languages led to important considerations about tonal system and assumptions about representation. The classical theory had assumed that phonological theories idea on representations were given in the form of a single matrix where each row represents a phonological distinctive feature and the column representation is based on the assumption that there is one to one relationship between the specification for any given feature and those for all other features, since each column contains exactly one specification for each feature. These assumptions led to the development of auto-segmental representation in which features specification were linked by lines of association rather than all being on segments.

Therefore, the auto-segmental phonology was formally introduced in the mid-1970s following a publication –*Auto-segmental phonology*– by John Goldsmith. It emerged as another phase of generative phonology to resolve its major constraints. Auto-segmental phonology posits two or more parallel tiers of phonological segments where it sees tone and segments as separate tiers. Therefore, a word like ‘Èlòyì’ would be analyzed auto-segmentally thus:

Tonal tier	L	H	L
Association line			
Segmental tier	e	l o	y i

In order to function effectively and to ensure universal conformity, Goldsmith employed a construct known as “Well-Formedness Conditions” (WFC) as the association convention that links up the different tiers. This construct may manifest in four (4) different forms. These are: mapping, dumping, spreading and association lines are not allowed to cross. See explanation about these principles below, using data from Hausa:

zân ‘I will’  
 jē ‘go’

*gīdā* 'home'  
*gòbē* 'tomorrow'

**Method of Data collection, instrumentation and analysis**

The instrument used in collecting data for this research was the Blench Wordlist with which an interview was conducted to collect data from five (5) native speakers of the language. Three (3) of the native speakers were males, and two (2), females. A mobile phone was used for recording as the interview was being conducted. The method of data collection employed by the researcher was the primary data collection method. The Blench Wordlist was used to collect data by conducting interviews to some native speakers of the language and recording was done as they responded. The data collected for this work were presented in a normal/descriptive fashion and analysed using the principles of auto-segmental phonology in the description of the tonal pattern of the language.

**Data presentation and analysis**

**Tones in Èlòyì**

Tone is simply the variation of pitch in a language. There are two types of tone and both are attested in Èlòyì language. These two types of tone are “register, and contour tones.”

**Register Tones**

The register tones are the three (3) basic tones known as High (H), Mid (M), and Low (L). The high tone is symbolically represented thus ( ´ ), the mid tone, ( ¨ ), and the low, ( ` ).

In register tonal system, tones are essentially level. That is to say, the pitch of a syllable does not glide or shift from one level to another in the course of its production just like we can see in the table below:

Table 1 - High Tone on Monosyllabic Words

W o r d	T r a n s c r i p t i o n	T o n e t y p e	M e a n i n g
R i	[ r í ]	H	t o e a t
w o	[ w ó ]	H	t o d r i n k
b o	[ b ó ]	H	t o c o m e
k p o	[ ɓ ó ]	H	t o d i e / p o u n d
k p a	[ ɓ á ]	H	t o b e a t
L o	[ l ó ]	H	t o p u t o n ( s o m e t h i n g )
T o	[ t ó ]	H	t o p i c k / t a k e
s h i	[ \$ í ]	H	T o c a r r y
m a	[ m á ]	H	t o s e e / l o o k

Table 2 - Mid and Low Tones on Monosyllabic Words

k a	[ k ā ]	M	‘ w e n t ’ p r e s . ‘ g o ’
w o	[ w ō ]	M	‘ t o d o ’
s h i	[ \$ ī ]	M	‘ t o g i v e ’
s o	[ s ō ]	M	‘ t o p l a n t ’
m i	[ m ī ]	M	‘ m e ’
s o	[ s ò ]	L	‘ t o g o / a t t e n d ’
y a	[ j à ]	L	‘ t o c l i m b ’
P y a	[ p j à ]	L	‘ t o s h i f t ’
S h i	[ \$ ì ]	L	‘ t o l e a v e b e h i n d ’
Y i	[ j ì ]	L	‘ t o g e t / l i f t ( s t h ) u p ’

Tables (1&2) above exemplify the register tonal system in Èlòyì language on monosyllabic words. Words in table (1) are all in a High (H) tone, whereas first five in table (2) are in a Mid tone (M), and the rest, in a Low tone (L). This explains the possibility of their occurrences in the language. The tables have four parts: “word, transcription, tone type, and meaning”. Table (1) explains the High tone, whereas the Mid and Low tones are

explained in table (2).

**Table 3 - Tones on Disyllabic Words**

K o l e	[ k ó l é ]	H	H	‘ l e g ’
K o k i	[ k ó k ī ]	H	M	‘ s t o n e ’
U b i	[ ú b ì ]	H	L	‘ p a p ’
E m b i	[ ē m b ī ]	M	M	‘ w a t e r ’
O k u	[ ō k ú ]	M	H	‘ s t r e a m ’
K o s o	[ k ō s ò ]	M	L	‘ b o w l ’
E n d e	[ è n d è ]	L	L	‘a female given name’
U p i	[ ù p j í ]	L	H	‘ s t i c k ’
O k y o	[ ò k j ò ]	L	L	‘ m a t ’
O g y e	[ ò g j è ]	L	L	‘ s a n d ’

Table (3) above shows the possible operational occurrence of register tones in Èlòyì’s two-syllable words. Some words could have a High-High (H H) combination, some Mid-Mid (M M), some Low-Low (L L) to the end, as can be seen. A combination of Low-Mid (L M) is somehow not obtainable.

**Table 4 - Tones on Polysyllabic Words**

The table below presents a list of Èlòyì words with more than two syllables and how register tones operate on them.

E d u w o	[ ē d ū w ó ]	M	M	H	‘ m o n e y ’	
E r e n d o	[ è r ē n d ó ]	L	M	H	‘ f o o l i s h n e s s ’	
K u w e y i	[ k ú w ē j ī ]	H	M	M	‘ t r e e ’	
K u t a k a n d a	[ k ù t à k à n d ā ]	L	L	L	M	‘ s u g a r c a n e ’
K u m b u l o y i	[ k ú m b ú l ō j ī ]	H	H	M	M	
E r e w o	[ é r è w ò ]	H	L	L	‘ s e v e n ’	
O b o s h i	[ ò b ó \$ í ]	L	H	H	‘ h e r b a l i s t ’	
E r a n d a	[ é r à n d á ]	H	L	H	‘ e i g h t ’	
E d u l a	[ è d ù l á ]	L	L	H	‘ c u r s e ’	
K u k u n a b o	[ k ū k ú n á b ō ]	M	H	H	M	

### Contour ones

In this type of tonal system, a syllable undergoes a glide in pitch during its production. Such cases are also obtainable in Èlòyì where three of contour tones are attested. The three contour tones found in Èlòyì are Falling ([F] which results from a glide from high to low tone), Rising ([R] a glide from low to high), and Rising-Falling ([RF] a glide from a low tone to a high, and then to another low). However, these types of tone are of rare occurrence. See the table below.

**Table 5 - Possible Occurrences of Contour Tones in Èlòyì**

O n z u	[ ò n z ù ]	R		‘ p e r s o n ’
(w)enzu	[ ě n z ù ]	R		‘ p e o p l e ’
Y i t u	[ j î t ù ]	F		‘ t o k n o w ’
N n n	[ ñ ]	R	F	‘negative form of response — no’
E e e	[ ě ] [ ε ]	R	F	‘negative form of response — no’

It should be noted that, the Rising-Falling tone is often found in these two negative forms of response ‘nnn’ and ‘èèè’ as exemplified above.

**Significance of Tone in Èlòyì**

Tone in Èlòyì is a very interestingly significant phenomenon. It is so significant that it is capable of distinguishing between meanings of identical lexical and/or grammatical categories. That is to say, tone differentiates between the meanings of two or more words spelt the same, as well the two or more sentences.

**Lexical Functions of Tone**

Just like minimal pairs, tonal pairs/sets exist in tone languages. These are words with the same phonemes and graphemes whose only difference is in the tone configuration. In such pairs/sets, tone functions lexically to inflect existing words or derive new words with an entirely different word class. Some tonal pairs/sets found in Èlòyì are presented in the table below.

Table 6 - Tonal Pairs/Sets in Èlòyì

W o r d s	Tonal Contrast		S e m a n t i c C o n t r a s t	
Y a [ j á ]	H		[ v ] ' t o b u y '	
Y a [ j á à ]	F		[ v ] ' b o u g h t '	
Y a [ j à ]	L		[ v ] ' t o c l i m b '	
Y a [ j à á ]	R		[ v ] ' c l i m b e d '	
U t u [ ū t ū ]	M	M	[ n ] ' f a r m '	
U t u [ ú t ú ]	H	H	[ n ] ' n i g h t '	
Endo [ ēndō ]	M	M	[ n ] ' f o u r '	
Endo [ èndō ]	L	M	[ n ] ' c o w '	
Kole [ kɔlɛ ]	M	M	[ d e t ] ' t h i s '	
Kole [ kɔlɛ ]	H	H	[ n ] ' l e g '	
U pi [ ū p j í ]	M	H	[ n ] ' t u m o u r '	
U pi [ ù p í ]	L	H	[ n ] ' s t i c k '	
Rishi [ rì\$ī ]	L	M	[ n ] ' m a r k e t '	
Rishi [ rí\$í ]	H	H	[ n ] ' m a d n e s s '	
Pwama [ pwàmà ]	L	L	[ v ] ' t a s t i n g '	
Pwama [ pwāmà ]	M	L	[ v ] ' h e a r i n g / l i s t e n i n g '	
Onu [ ó n ú ]	H	H	[ n ] ' h u s b a n d / k e y '	
Onu [ ò n ū ]	M	M	[ n ] ' s u n '	
Enyi [ é p j í ]	H	H	[ n ] ' n a m e '	
Enyi [ é p j ì ]	H	L	[ n ] ' t e e t h '	
Enyi [ ē p j í ]	M	H	[ n / a d j ] ' o n e / s i n g l e '	
Erendo [ èrēndó ]	L	M	H	[ n ] ' f o o l i s h n e s s '
Erendo [ érēndō ]	H	L	M	[ n ] ' n i n e '

All the above examples show the derivational function of tone in which a change in tone brings about an entirely new word, though the word class remains unchanged except in the fifth and last rows where the change in word class occurred. However, the first tonal set “ya” shows that tone also performs inflectional functions in Èlòyì to mark tense.

**Grammatical Functions of Tone**

Tone in Èlòyì is also significant at the sentence level where it brings about such difference in meanings of grammatically identical structures, and even changes sentence type. See the table below:

Table 7

m ī	k ǎ	M R	[ P E R F . T ]	' I h a v e g o n e '
m ī	k ā	M M	[ S I M P . P S T ]	' I w e n t '
m ī	k ā `	M F	[ Q U E S T . ]	' D i d I g o ? '
m ĩ	k ā	R M	[ F U T U R E T ]	' I w i l l g o '
m í	t ó	H H	[ S I M P . P S T - S T A T E . ]	' I t o o k '
m ì	t ó	L H	[ S I M P . F U T U R E - S T A T E . ]	' I w i l l t a k e '

m í t ò ó	H R	[PERF. PRES. - STATE.] ‘I have taken’
m í t ô	H F	[SIMP. PRES/PST.] ‘I refuse(d)’
K ā m i	M	‘ b r i n g ( t o ) m e ’
K á m i	H	‘ w r i t e ( t o / f o r ) m e ’
K à m i	L	‘ d i v i d e m e ’
s ô n e	F	‘ s p e a k ( t h e n ) ! ’
s ò n e	L	‘ g o ( t h e n ) ! ’
s ò ò n e	F	‘ p l a n t ( t h e n ) ! ’

In the table above, we could see the role tones play in changing sentences types of identical structures from statements to questions, and also changing the tenses of sentences from simple past to perfect tense to simple future. This simply explains the level of significance tone has in Èlòyì.

### Conclusion/ Research Findings

From the presentation and analysis above, the following have been discovered as the research findings:

- i. It has been found that there exist tonal pairs/sets in tone languages just like there are minimal pairs/sets in languages.
- ii. It has also been discovered that tone plays a significant role in languages by distinguishing two or more lexically/grammatically identical items/structures.
- iii. It has been found that (not only register tones), contour tones also obtainable in Èlòyì.
- iv. The Èlòyì mid tone sounds like a “downstepped high tone”. It is therefore recommended that; an acoustic analysis should be carried out for clarification.

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