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Do – Re – Mi – Fa Tone! The fluidity of tone and Ubuntu Linguistics

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Prof.dr. Nancy C. Kula

Do – Re – Mi – Fa Tone!
The fluidity of tone and Ubuntu Linguistics

Universiteit
Leiden

Bij ons leer je de wereld kennen

Do – Re – Mi – Fa Tone!
The fluidity of tone and Ubuntu Linguistics

Inaugural Lecture by

Prof.dr. Nancy C. Kula

on the acceptance of her position as Professor

African Linguistics

at Leiden University

on Monday, 23 March 2026

Universiteit
Leiden

Mevrouw de rector magnificus

Inleiding

My work in African Linguistics started very much with a love of puzzles and working out patterns probably induced by studying for my "Special Paper 2" for my final primary year exam in Zambia. Special paper 2 focuses on, I now conclude, after also doing some pedagogical research, developing cognitive skills to do with pattern recognition and a deeper understanding of sequencing and predicting probable and improbable patterns, given a particular baseline. I was also known in my childhood as being fond of making up possible worlds and friends with the wonderful multiplier effect of making one physical doll thus represent multiple characters to be engaged with. Surely if Malita (my own made rag doll) existed then it follows that she must have a mother, father, and some sisters and brothers and friends and cousins and all these are part of the fabric of her story and hence had to play a role in my playing with and engaging with Malita. Thus, the connection to phonology and its data sets and puzzles was an easy one. The understanding that there is more to the sequences of sounds that we can individually identify that betrays interactions that we can organize into patterns and types of patterns did not require much conviction. Within the walls of the University of Zambia, this was always a comparative affair revolving around the many different languages represented in the classroom. Thus, also getting into the seat of further investigating comparative Bantu was just continuing the foundations already set.

The crossover to the study of tone on the other hand was a quite different and deliberate move. It simply bugged me that I was lagging behind in these studies despite speaking tone languages. It wasn't a matter of being tone deaf because in speech tone is connected to context and you never speak in the words in isolation that we elicit tone data in. Thus, apart from being able to easily identify minimal pairs of words, it is not at all always intuitive for speakers of tone languages (at least in eastern Bantu) to identify tone on a string of words, even though a wrong tonal pattern by those learning the language is immediately spotted. This latter reaction is indicative of the fact that there is a system of tonal patterning that speakers follow whether they are aware of it or not, and this is of course the remit of what linguistics is. I thus became increasingly interested in understanding this otherwise elusive aspect of language and which was quite deeply embedded even within my own language system. My own contribution to the field is thus to help us better understand this system and what scope it has in the grammar of tonal languages and beyond that, also evaluate to what extent the patterns we see in tone languages can help us to understand language more broadly. In African languages of central, eastern and southern Africa, orthographies generally do not include tone, presumably because texts and novels when available are written for speakers of the languages who will be expected to use the correct tone and intonation. English and Dutch also do not mark stress. This suggests that visual cues are also important in perhaps reinforcing more easily recoverable cognitive representations of tone. In linguistic work as a field, driven by African linguistic work, there is a strong drive to ensure that tone marking is always included in data representations whatever the focus of the work may be, and indeed misanalyses of data have various times been noted where tone marking was absent but where it was crucial to phenomenon where it was assumed to be irrelevant. In this sense tone is central to understanding a wide range of linguistic phenomena and cannot be left out of data representations. As renowned scholar, mzee and guru of Bantu linguistics in whose footsteps we follow is known for saying: "if you leave out the tones, why don't you also leave out the vowels?!" (Prof. dr. T.C. Schadeberg)

Derived versus lexical tone

One thing that makes tone hard to perceive by speakers, or hearers for that matter, in Bantu languages is the contrast between lexical tone and surface tones. This is precisely the

domain of interest for phonology. What happens between the lexical tone (underlying structure) and the tone we have on the surface (surface form). Between these two levels of representation is the potential for phonological processes in the form of tonal rules to apply. The application of tonal rules leads to predictable but also varied forms that cannot simply be memorized by speakers, but which must be part of their unconscious cognitive knowledge of the language. Bemba or icibemba (with the noun class prefix included) is one of the Bantu languages that I both speak and study. One of the features of Bantu tone and hence also Bemba is that the measurable pitch of tone (the fundamental frequency) is relative and although perhaps a frequency range can be defined for how high tone can be, the actual level is relative to the context so that a final high tone (H-tone henceforth) may phonetically be as low as a low tone. In such cases the phonological context gives us useful information on what the actual tone is. In his 2011 chapter discussing whether tone is different from segmental phonology, Hyman concludes that it is, because "tone can do everything that segmental phonology can do but also more!" One of the constraints on segmental phonology is generally that segments that affect each other need to be contiguous and when they are not, like in processes of vowel harmony or long-distance effects, phonology finds ways of modelling the interaction to ensure that segments that interact are contiguous at some level, leading to multilayered representations. Tone was as such the basis of Goldsmith's (1976) seminal thesis proposing *Autosegmental Phonology* to capture the three properties of tone of (i) mobility (ii) stability and (iii) autonomy.

Eastern Bantu - number of tone contrasts is not where complexity lies

On the face of it, Eastern Bantu appears totally unremarkable if we consider the tone systems involved in terms of number of tones. Most systems contrast a H-tone vs zero (Bemba) where although there is L-tone on the surface, this is inactive phonologically and is considered as redundantly filled in and interpreted as low tone, at the end of the derivation. Tone systems that have a three-way contrast with H, L and zero and further H, L, M are found elsewhere further in West Africa. Even though these tonal contrasts can be further increased by contour tones in some cases, these are mainly missing as distinct categories in Eastern Bantu. However, where the complexity lies is in the tonal mobility of these few tones. Thus, their syntagmatic representation is subject to different spreading rules. Bemba in particular, in work I have done jointly with my colleague and collaborator Lee Bickmore, on Bantu zone M, shows two significant patterns of Bounded H-tone spread and unbounded H-tone spread. But apart from the contrast, it shows the tonal mobility referred to earlier, a H-tone can be realized over many syllables, in this case to its right. Bantu languages are structurally excellent ground on which to study such long distance spreading because the shape of the verb, in particular lends itself to agglutination, where many morphemes are attached to each other to create a verb form. There can be between five to eight different slots before the verb stem and then after that a number of derivational and possibly also inflectional suffixes that allow the testing of hypothesis on the domain of tonal spreading.

In my PhD thesis, too many moons ago!, I looked in particular at phonological domainhood in the Bantu verbal domain, and using segmental phonological alternations/processes, such as vowel harmony and Bantu spirantization, demarcated verbal complexity as consisting of three domains, two of which were interleaving. Essentially at the segmental phonology level, there is evidence for a derivational domain that contrasts with an inflectional domain. Although I postulated based on morphology that there must also be an overarching inflectional domain that consists of complete full verb forms, also at the phonological level, there was in fact no phonological evidence that made this conclusive. Tone now provides excellent evidence for this as spreading patterns can be seen to extend across the two earlier defined phonological domains. Thus, in a verb form like (1a) below the lexical H tone of the lexically

toneless verb is realized all the way to the end of the verb via H-tone spreading across tense-aspect prefixes to the verb stem and beyond (1b). Lexical tones are underlined with the syllable in bold. The tone bearing unit (TBU) in Bemba is the mora (so each vowel rather than the syllable). We know the verb stem itself is L-toned from the data in (1c) where it appears with a preceding L-toned prefix in the same paradigm and is then all L-toned (Bickmore & Kula 2013).

H----------→H
(1a) **<u>bá</u>**-ká-tú-lóóndólólá
2SM-3FUT-2PLOM-INTRODUCE
'they will introduce us'

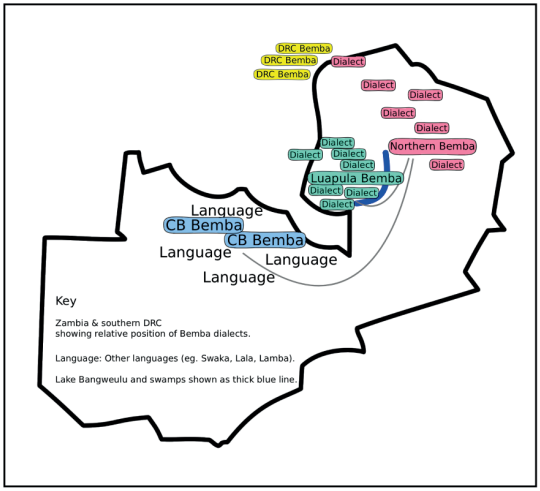
H----------→H
(1b) **<u>bá</u>**-ká-tú-lóóndólwéélá
2SM-3FUT-2PLOM-INTRODUCE.APPL
'they will explain for us'

LLLLLLLLLLLLL
(1c) tù-kà-lòòndòlòlà
'we will introduce"

Apart from the lexical tone specification of verbs (as well as nouns and other parts of speech) there are also what are called *grammatical tones* or *melodic tones* (Bickmore & Odden 2014). Melodic tones are tone patterns which are associated with particular tense aspect mood (TAM) markers and which are either the sole markers of those aspects or else are used in addition to segmental morphological markers. Melodic tones tend to be fixed in pattern and show no "spreading" as they are usually associated with a stretch of TBUs. They are more like a straight jacket that the language slips into. However, the spreading types of tones do react to melodic tones in usually clear and predictable ways which make the patterns fall into the realm of phonology with the idea that there are rules that can capture their distribution being feasible. Examples in (2) show Melodic Hs interacting with the mobile spreading H-tone, resulting in what is termed as *bounded spreading* contrasting with the unbounded pattern already shown. Bounded spreading in Bemba is of two types depending on dialect (see map). Northern Bemba (NB) shows binary spreading while Copperbelt Bemba[1] (CB) shows ternary spreading.

H H - Binary
(2a) NB: **<u>bá</u>**-ká-tù-lòòndó**<u>lólé</u>**
2SM-3FUT-2PLOM-INTRODUCE.SUBJ
'they should introduce us'

H H H - Ternary
(2b) CB: **<u>bá</u>**-ká-tú-lòòndó**<u>lólé</u>**
2SM-3FUT-2PLOM-INTRODUCE.SUBJ
'they should introduce us'



Map 1: Depiction of location of Bemba dialects showing movement from the north to the central Copperbelt region

1 Copperbelt Bemba here refers to Bemba spoken by ethnic Bemba peoples that are part of movements from the North to the central Copperbelt region from about the 1920s. This is not to be equated with the commonly termed "Town Bemba" though aspects of TB may well be part of CB Bemba. In recent times a new significant mining region has developed in the Northwest of the country in and around Solwezi. Luapula and DRC Bemba are domains of future research.

Apart from the alternation in (1) the data in (2) provides additional evidence that tone has phonological constraints. In addition, there is a further phonological process associated to this which is downstep as a result of an OCP effect, i.e. a constraint against having two lexical adjacent Hs. That OCP applies for lexical but not for derived H-tones is further evidence that there is a difference between a lexical H-tone and a derived H-tone. H-tone OCP thus supports a multi-layered representation of tone as established by Goldsmith (1976). At a higher level, there is adjacency between two lexical H-tones even if there is none at the surface level. So what is the OCP rule? Well, if a spreading H-tone is in a context where somewhere down the line a melodic tone follows then its unbounded spreading seen above is disrupted and it spreads short of the following H – in a bounded pattern. So here we see good evidence of tone in phonology, helping us to define phonological domains in the Bantu verbal domain.

Tone indicating Morphology

In a number of African languages, tone plays an important role in morphological marking. There are languages where this can be very complex with a multiplier effect on derivational forms. In Bemba we also see some of this in for example the past tense system where in a 4-way past contrast tone is used to contrast P3 and P4, although the distinction is being lost from what likely used to be a superhigh tone to a regular high tone. The four pasts are an immediate past, a hodiernal past, an intermediate past (not equivalent to hesternal past), and a remote past. The segmental marker for P4 is L-toned *-à-* while for P3 it is H-toned *-á-*. This gives a tonal minimal pair just like in lexical items.

Another morphological domain where tonal work has been shown to play a role is in marking the so-called conjoint-disjoint distinction (Hyman and van der Wal 2016). Simplifying, some Bantu languages have an alternation in verb forms where two forms exist for a verb, generally controlled by TAM with some TAMs showing the alternation while others do not. Bemba is a classic example with a high number of morphemes showing this alternation as given in Table 1. When a segmental morpheme from the conjoint paradigm is used, a verb may not be final, but when the disjoint form is used the verb may be final. There are also discourse effects associated with this alternation and in most of the languages showcased in the Hyman and van der Wal (2016) volume, some kind of focus effects are present on the constituent following the verb in conjoint forms, while focus falls on the verb in disjoint forms that lack a following constituent. This is also true in Bemba and furthermore, if we ignore the segmental markers and look at the tone of the disjoint and conjoint forms, we find exactly the same pattern as seen in the bounded vs unbounded H-tone spreading patterns, viz. the conjoint forms show bounded spreading and the disjoint forms show unbounded spreading. Thus, sentential complementation is indicated by the tone pattern.

	PRESENT/ HABITUAL	**P1/F1 (PERFECTIVE)**	**P3 (PERFECTIVE)**	**P4 (PERFECTIVE)**	**P4 (ANTERIOR)**	**ZERO (ANTERIOR)**
CONJOINT	-Ø- -a	-á- -a	-á- -ile	-a- -ile	-a- -a	-Ø- -ile
DISJOINT	-la- -a	-áa- -a	-álii- -a	-alí- -ile	-alí- -a	náa--Ø- -a

Table 1: Segmental markers of the CJ-DJ in six tense-aspect markers in Bemba (adapted from Sharman 1956; Kula 2016)

Tone indicating syntactic structure

In some earlier work done with Leiden colleague here Prof. Lisa Cheng, we show that Bemba relative clauses are marked by a Low tone! With no changes in segmental marking, L-tone on a subject marker indicates a restrictive relative clause. In this case it could be argued that there is simply tonal allomorphy involved. An allomorphy analysis may possibly be supported when we are dealing with a single tone as in this case illustrated by the contrastive examples in (3).

		LLLLLLLLLLLLLL		
(3a)	àbáànà	bà-kà-lòòndòlòlà	ni	bályà
	2 CHILD	2SM.2REL-FUT3-EXPLAIN	COP	2DEM3
	'The children that will explain are those (over there)'			

		H----------→H
(3b)	àbáànà	bá-ká-lóóndólólá
	2 CHILD	2SM-FUT3-EXPLAIN
	'The children will explain'	

However, or let's say in addition, there are also tonal contrasts that extend beyond a single tone and which helps us to explain the widely discussed literature on object-marking in Bantu, by which objects present in a construction can be either dropped or extra-clausal. Object markers are similar to clitics in Romance languages with clitic doubling having a parallel in languages like Setswana (Botswana and South Africa) that are able to have multiple object markers. Although this is not always the case, Herero (Namibia) being one such example, object nouns following object-marked verbs are generally extra clausal and this is again, very nicely reflected by the tone! Apart from seeing tone perform these morphosyntactic demarcative roles, there is also the great excitement of the tone pattern in itself and how far a H-tone can spread - being able to do so over a number of adjacent constituents (4a), (our favourite example in Kula & Bickmore 2015) is quite a feat! This long-distance H-tone spreading is brought to a halt when there is no object marker present (4b). Thus, unbounded spreading indicates that a phonological phrase boundary immediately follows, where as bounded spreading indicates that there is no such boundary and a following constituent is part of the verbs phonological phrase. This offers cues for parsing and also for syntactic constituency.

	H ----------→H			
(4a)	(**bá**-ká-mú-shíík-íl-á)	Chítúúndú)	cáángá)	bwíínó)
	2SM-3FUT-3SGOM-BURY-APPL-FV			
		CHITUNDU	BUSHBABY	ADV
	'They will bury the bush baby for him (Chitundu) well'			

	H -----→HLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLL			
(4b)	(bá-ká-shíík-íl-à	Chìtùùndù	(cààngà)	bwìinò)
	2SM-3FUT-BURY-APPL-FV			
		CHITUNDU	BUSHBABY	ADV
	'They will bury the bush baby for Chitundu well'			

A fluid grammar and Ubuntu Linguistics

That tone fluidly applies and is used in marking phonological domains, morphological categories and syntactic constituency suggests a non-modular grammar where phonology through tone and prosody talks to the other modules of grammar. In this sense it's the tone that sets the tempo! It seems odd to consider that all these tonal gymnastics, with very systematic patterning, lies outside the grammar and is only there to mirror independently defined phonological domains, morphology and syntactic structure and does not itself act as a cue to constituency. This argumentation is further questionable as there is also intonation as an independent level cuing the overall structure of utterances and which behaves independently of the phonological tone discussed here with its own set of intonational tones above the lexical tone patterns. Part of the argumentation is of course to do with the history of the field and the genesis of generative grammar. Had generative grammar started in Malawi by say someone called Noel

Chombe[2] the hypothesis of what the shape of grammar should be, would probably be more fluid with tone playing a much more significant role in our conceptualization of grammar. Further, it is also now ripe time for studying dialectal variation within specific Bantu languages, moving inwards from the renowned comparative Bantu work across different Bantu languages. Particularly for tone, the granularity needed to identify patterns that illuminate crucial points of variation is served best at the dialectal level with microvariation. The identification of one "Bemba" language, misses the richness of the dialect pool as shown in map 1.

The fluidity of tone leads me to consider African Linguistics more broadly and what opportunities I see this chair opening up for future investigation. On one of my data collection trips in Northern Zambia in 2019, I was very honoured to meet an enthusiastic and energetic language and culture activist (Richard Mukuka) who is interested in Bemba language and culture and for which he has been mapping out the different tribes and chieftainships within the broader Bemba dialect area in Northern Zambia. He has published some insightful work that provides much needed material and discussion on the connections and migrations between different groups in Northern Zambia (Mukuka 2020, 2021a,b). I was quite chuffed when he said he had read some of my work but then he went on to advise me: "it would be nice if you wrote things that are readable and understandable by the local people!" To be fair I had already been pondering this as my attempts to collaborate with colleagues at UNZA (University of Zambia) had for long periods not been successful, despite their open welcome to my seminar talks. Of course, in seeking collaboration, I wanted to work on the topics that I've always done in phonology, Element Theory, morphophonology and morphosyntax. Attracting interest in this was not exactly easy. On reflection I changed my approach and adopting a more Ubuntu[3] Linguistics approach sought to understand what colleagues were working on and what areas might be the most fruitful for collaboration. It wasn't long until this led to a great collaborative project on multilingual education and how language in education policy can be reconceptualized to be more inclusive by (again) adopting a more fluid approach where the multilingual lives and linguistic repertoires of learners are brought into the classroom. The 3-year project was between colleagues at the Universities of Botswana, Dar es Salam, Zambia and Essex. In the spirit of Ubuntu Linguistics the project was structured with equitable partnership in mind making the colleagues in Africa equal partners in the research as co-investigators on the project, rather than as unrecognized contributors. With this chair I hope to strengthen and redress the imbalance in conducting research in Africa so that the expertise of scholars on the continent is more visible in projects and outputs, so that we continue to steer away from extractive patterns of conducting fieldwork and the recarving out of Africa, again! - only this time by linguistically claiming domains where we wish to be the experts rather than see this as a joint enterprise where individual success is downgraded in favour of Ubuntu collaborative practices. For me, rather than view the whole new strand of work on multilingualism, focusing on more applied linguistic research as a threat or competitor to my theoretical linguistic work, I see this as reflective of a needed fluid linguistics where insights from different approaches and perspectives and disciplines can be drawn upon so that we do not only exist and investigate language in silos. In reflecting on my own practices, ubuntu, interconnectedness, multi- have been a pillar of my navigating linguistics, and which has led to many productive collaborations. In this I hear the echo of the words of late South African president Nelson Mandela in a 2009 preface:

2 This is a fictitious character.

3 Ubuntu is composed of the noun class 14 prefix ubu- for abstract nouns and the stem -ntu meaning "person". Thus, ubuntu means humaneness, encapsulating interconnectedness and the idea that humans need each other and indeed, that we are only who we are through others.

“In Africa there is the concept of Ubuntu -
the profound sense that we are human
only through the humanity of others;
that if we are to accomplish anything in this world,
it will in equal measure be due to the work and achievement of others”
Preface in Fifteen lessons on life, love and courage (Stengel 2009)

Dankwoord
It is really impossible to thank all the people that have inspired me in so many tremendous ways to shape my thinking and development, and there are many colleagues and students whose names are not mentioned but from whom in different and significant ways I have gained from conversations and interactions that have influenced my thinking in many ways.

Here in Leiden during the time of my PhD I am very grateful for having had the fortune to be placed right in the middle of descriptive and theoretical linguistics and I thank many colleagues for some very inspiring conversations: Thilo Schadeberg, Felix Ameka, Maarten Mous, Harry van der Hulst, the late Jan Kooij for very therapeutic sessions in his office, Crit Cremers, Ben Hermans, Norval Smith and Jeroen van de Weijer. Before that I really got steeped into phonology and linguistics at SOAS and in London and thank teachers Monik Chartette, John Harris, Jonathan Kaye and Ruth Kempson who were very instrumental. Along the years there have been some really great Government Phonologists it has always been a joy to talk to and who have shown ubuntu: Jean Lowenstamm and the late John Rennison. You have shown that ubuntu is broader than the southern hemisphere.

From the University of Zambia where I’ve had the pleasure to go and present my work multiple times, to an audience where heated discussions on data judgments always ensue, a welcome change to my regular western experience. I thank you for your open welcome, the late Professor VM Chanda and the late Professor Mubanga Kashoki who leaves this world convinced I was the most creative Bemba speaker! The foundations you have laid will remain with me and the field. And at the University of Botswana, now emeritus I thank Professor Herman Batibo for his selfless ubuntu approach to African linguistic research, what an honour to engage with you over the years.

To colleagues I have worked with and developed with, it remains inspirational to work with you and create knowledge together: Lee Bickmore, Silke Hamann, Kuniya Nasukawa, Gastor Mapunda, Joseph Mwansa and the “mllpers aka the crocodile loafers” Tracey Costley, Hannah Gibson and Colin Reilly, you make collaboration fun. To my wonderful co-editors of the fabulous Oxford Guide to the Bantu Languages (2025), I hope we’ve created something that will have a lasting impact on the field and I am very proud of the very balanced and ubuntu approach we adopted in making this work more representative of African scholars – Lutz Marten, Ellen Hurst-Harosh and Jochen Zeller, thank you for the shared experience.

To my friends across the globe, Bojana Petric, Ignazia Posadinu, James and Joscelyn Essegbey, the convent 89ers, lets enter the next phase with grace. To the many renewed friendships on my return to The Netherlands - goed met jullie nog een keer te zijn! and to new friendships, especially my Gospel choir here in Leiden and my Church community at COS in Den Haag, I look forward to continued uplifting interactions.

For all my forefathers and mothers, family and friends who have gone before us, and sometimes too soon, thank you for your indelible mark on my life.

To my mama Hilary Mulenga Fyfe, thank you for being an example of a super strong and classy African woman.

To my partner Marco Cali, thank you for your unfaltering support and belief in me, for your love and for being the best

brainstorming partner ever. If only I could enact half of the millions of ideas we share!

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Ik heb gezegd!

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Prof.dr. Nancy C. Kula

Tone is a predominant feature of the more than 500 Bantu languages of sub-Saharan Africa, which has been argued to be part of the majority of languages with even conservative estimates showing that at least 50% of the world's languages are tonal. In eastern Bantu languages, and of which Bemba is an example, tone permeates Bantu grammar and can fluidly be used to mark phonological, morphological and syntactic domains and constituency. Rather than be considered as simply reaffirming independently defined domains at different levels of grammar, tone should be seen as cuing those structures and be part of understanding derivational processes of grammar. The fluid behaviour of tone and its dismissing linguistically constructed boundaries mirrors how we can view African Linguistics through an ubuntu lens where research on and in Africa should be more inclusive and collaborative and ensure the visibility of Africa as central to the future of the field. Through adopting an *Ubuntu Linguistics* approach, we can rebalance the field to ensure that new insights and new knowledges from the continent are part of mainstream discussions.

1990 1994	BA Education (African Languages and Linguistics), University of Zambia
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