

Tone Patterns of Possessive Constructions in the Asante Dialect of Akan

Sefa Owusu

Department of Applied Linguistics
University of Education, Winneba
Winneba, Ghana

Abstract

This paper discusses tone patterns of possessive constructions in Asante Twi within the framework of auto segmental phonology. Asante Twi is one of the dialects of Akan. I have limited myself to only one dialect of Akan because it is not easy to make an in-depth study of tonal behaviour of Akan as one language. The paper is divided into four sections. Section 1 is the introductory section. Section 2 discusses the tone patterns of alienable and inalienable nouns. Section 3 also presents the tone patterns of superior and non-superior nouns. The final section discusses the tone patterns of the possessive noun phrase whose nouns have the tone patterns LH, HH, LL, and HL.

Keywords: Tone, Possessives, Asante Twi

1.0 Introduction

Like stress and intonation in English, tone is also considered as a non-segmental feature of speech which can be used to bring about differences in the meaning of words which are otherwise identical. The meaning of a word in a language can change by merely changing the pitch level at which the word is said. The Akan examples in 1 and 2 from Owusu (2014) show how differences in pitch are used to distinguish one word from another.

1. (a) [kùráá] 'never'
- (b) [kùràá] 'calabash'
2. (a) [á!só] 'a girl's name'
- (b) [àsó] 'hoe'

Languages such as Igbo, Ewe and Akan in which pitch variation on syllables may alter the meaning of the word are classified as tone languages. According to Crystal (1995) more than half the languages of the world are tone languages. The distinctive pitch levels of these languages are referred to as tones. Akan has two basic register tones – High tone (H) and low tone (L). The tone of a noun in Akan in possessive noun phrase may be different from when it occurs in isolation or in other constructions. The following examples in 4 and 5 from Dolphyne (1988) illustrate this.

3. [kòfí nàmí sù] 'Kofi Nyame is big /fat'
4. [kòfí ná!mí sù] 'Kofi's God is great'

As far as the tone patterns of the possessive noun phrase in the Asante dialect are concerned, Dolphyne (1986, 1988) groups Asante's nouns into two classes; Class I and Class II and posits a stem initial floating High tone between the possessor noun and the possessed noun. She continues that the associative High tone spreads to the stem initial syllable of the possessed noun in the case of Class I nouns. However, with Class II nouns, it spreads to the final syllable of the possessor noun as illustrated in fig1 below:

Inalienable Alienable

- 7. (a) [mì tí] (b) [mí !tíré] ‘my head’
- 8. (a) [mì εϕíní] (b) [mí !εϕíní] ‘my nose’
- 9. (a) [mínái] (b) [mí !ái] ‘my leg’
- 10. (a) [mì tú] (b) [mí !túó] ‘my buttocks’
- 11. (a) [mì kóú] (b) [mí !kóú] ‘my neck’

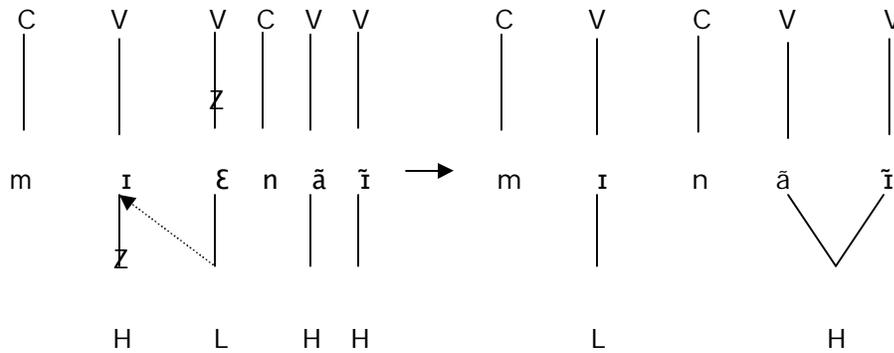
The alienable nouns above may refer to parts of a carcass. They may be preceded by nominal prefixes. These nominal prefixes are said on Low tone when the words occur in isolation as in 12 – 16.

- 12. [ètíré] ‘head’
- 13. [èεϕíní] ‘nose’
- 14. [ènáí] ‘leg’
- 15. [ètúó] ‘buttocks’
- 16. [èkóú] ‘neck’

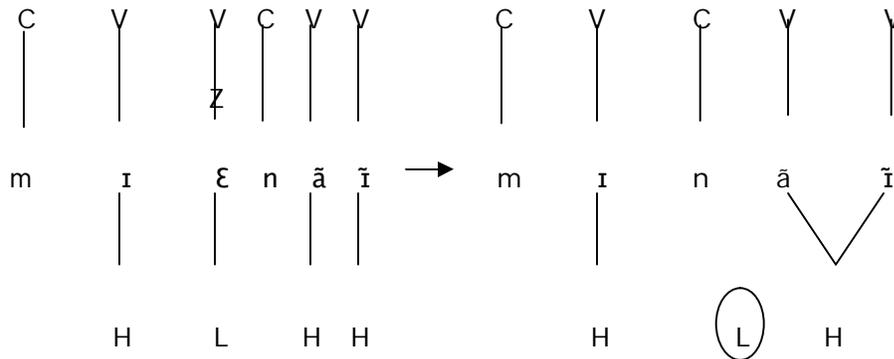
When the nominal prefix is deleted in a possessive construction, its Low tone becomes a floating tone, and causes the initial syllable of the stem (which is on a High tone) to be down stepped. With inalienable nouns, the Low tone of the deleted nominal prefix spreads to the preceding possessive adjective as illustrated in fig 2.

Fig 2

(i) Inalienable noun



(ii) Alienable noun



3.0 Superior and Non-Superior Nouns

The tone pattern of the possessive adjective in the Asante dialect enables us to distinguish between kinship nouns that refer to older relations (superior nouns) and those that refer to younger relations (non – superior nouns). The possessive adjective maintains its High tone before superior nouns. It is however said on Low tone when it occurs before non – superior nouns as in 17 to 22.

Superior Nouns Non-Superior Nouns

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 17. (a) [míwòfà] ‘my uncle’ | (b) [mìwòfàási] ‘my nephew’ |
| 18. (a) [mí nàná] ‘my grandparent’ | (b) [míná!ná] ‘my grandchild’ |
| 19. (a) [mípàpá] ‘my father’ | (b) [mìbá] ‘my child’ |
| 20. (a) [mí !kúnú] ‘my husband’ | (b) [mìjírí] ‘my wife’ |
| 21. (a) [mímààmí] ‘my mother’ | (b) [mìbá] ‘my child’ |
| 22. (a) [míwùrà] ‘my master’ | (b) [mì ákú!á] ‘my slave’ |

4.0 Tone Patterns of Other Nouns in Possessive Constructions

Tone patterns of possessive noun phrase whose nouns do not belong to any of the groups discussed above are always determined by the tone patterns of the nouns involved. This section looks at the tone patterns of possessive noun phrase whose nouns have tone patterns LH, HH, LL, and HL.

4.1 Nouns with Low-High Tone Patterns

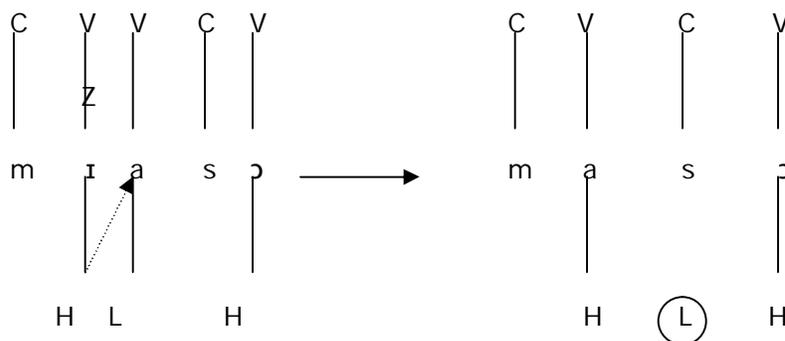
Most nouns with LH tone patterns have vowel or syllabic nasal nominal prefixes which are always said on Low tone. When the nominal prefix is the low vowel [a], the vowel in the possessive adjective is deleted provided the possessive adjective is [mí], ‘my’ [wù], ‘your’ or [ní], ‘his/her’. The nominal prefix therefore becomes the possessive element and it is said on Low tone if the initial stem syllable is on Low tone as in 23 – 25. In the possessive noun phrase the initial stem syllable is said on High tone as the High tone on the possessive adjective ‘docks’ onto it. On the other hand, when the initial stem syllable is already on High tone, the possessive adjective is said on High tone, and the following initial stem syllable of the possessive noun phrase becomes a Down stepped High tone as in 26 to 29.

Nouns with Low – High Tone Patterns

- 23. /mí/ + /ànùmàá/ → [mànù!màá] ‘my bird’
- 24. /mí/ + /àpòjìtè/ → [màpòjìtè] ‘my goat’
- 25. /mí/ + /àkòdàá/ → [màkòdàá] ‘my child’
- 26. /mí/ + /àsó/ → [má!só] ‘my hoe’
- 27. /mí/ + /àfúó/ → [máf!úó] ‘my farm’
- 28. /mí/ + /àdzúí/ → [má!dzúí] ‘my kernel’
- 29. /mí/ + /àwúó/ → [má!wúó] ‘my birth’

The representation in Fig 3 illustrates this tonal phenomenon.

Fig. 3

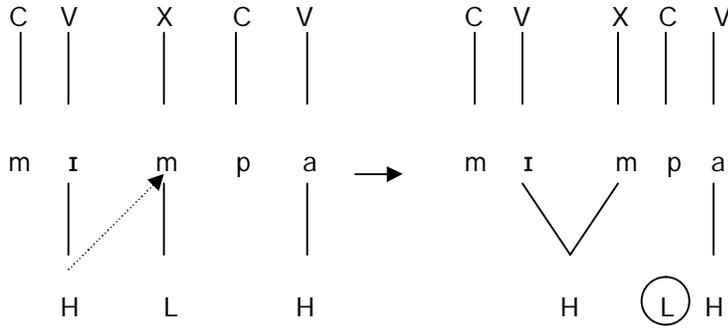


When the nominal prefix is a syllabic nasal instead of a vowel, both the nasal prefix and the possessive adjective are said on high tone, and the initial stem syllable becomes a down stepped High tone, as shown in 30- 34.

- 30. /mímpá/ → [mí m!pá] ‘my bed’
- 31. /mínsá/ → [mí n!sá] ‘my drink’
- 32. /mínsúó/ → [mí n!súó] ‘my water’
- 33. /míjìtémí/ → [mí j!témí] ‘my salt’
- 34. /míjìkúkó/ → [míj!kúkó] ‘my chickens’

The preceding High tone of the possessive adjective spreads onto the following Low tone syllabic nasal prefix. In effect, the Low tone on the syllabic prefix becomes a floating tone and causes the following High tone on the initial stem to be down stepped. This is illustrated in Fig 4 below.

Fig 4



The same tonal phenomenon occurs when the Low-High noun does not require a nominal prefix as in 35-39.

- 35. mí sɪká mì sí!ká → ‘my money’
- 36. mí kùbé → mì kú!bé ‘my coconut’
- 37. mí kátá → mì ká!tá ‘my mat’
- 38. mí pùmá → mì pú!má ‘my walking stick’
- 39. mí bìdíé → mì bí!díé ‘my charcoal’

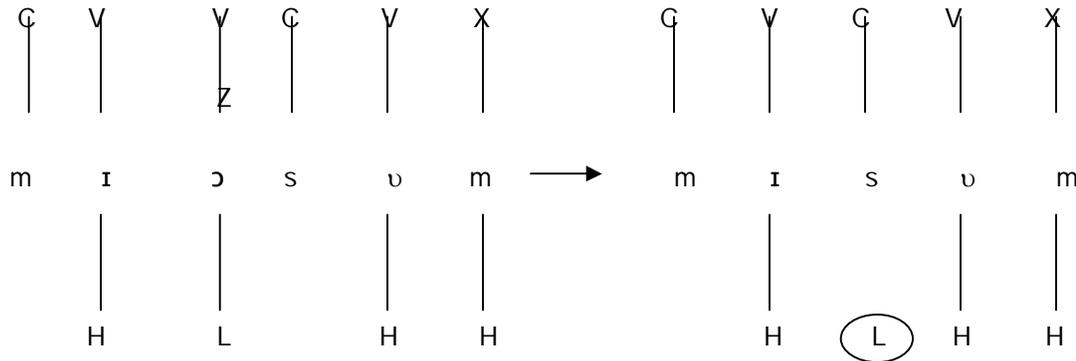
4.2 Nouns with High – High Tone Patterns

Most Akan nouns with High-High tone patterns may be preceded by vowel nominal prefixes which are said on Low tone. In the possessive construction with the possessive adjective, this Low tone vowel prefix is deleted but its tone remains. This floating Low tone of the deleted prefix causes the initial stem syllable of the noun to be downstepped, as in 40-43.

- 40. /mí òdzɔ́áí/ → [mí !dzɔ́áí] ‘my sheep’
- 41. /mí ɔ́sɔ́m/ → [mí !sɔ́m] ‘my service’
- 42. /míébiré/ → [mí !biré] ‘my time’
- 43. /míébuó/ → [mí !buó] ‘my stone’

The representation in Fig 5 below illustrates this tonal phenomenon.

Fig 5



The possessive adjective is however said on Low tone if the High – High disyllabic nominal stem does not require a nominal prefix as in 44.

- 44. /mípápá/ → [mìpápá] ‘my good deeds’

4.3 Nouns with Low –Low Tone Patterns

There are very few disyllabic nouns with Low-Low stems in Akan. In possessive constructions with the possessive adjective, the initial syllable of these nouns is said on High tone while the possessive adjective is said on Low tone as in 45 – 47.

45. /míkètè/ → [mìkètè] ‘my kete’ (traditional dance)
 46. /mìàgò/ → [mìàgò] ‘my velvet’
 47. /mìpàpà/ → [mìpàpà] ‘my fan’

4.4 Nouns with High – Low Tone Patterns

Nouns with High –Low tone patterns are very few in Akan, and many if these nouns are English loan words. The tone pattern of these nouns does not change in the possessive noun phrase with the possessive adjective. The possessive adjective is however said on low tone as in 48 – 54.

48. /mífótò/ → [mífótò] ‘my photo’
 49. /mìlètà/ → [mìlètà] ‘my letter’
 50. /mítíteà/ → [mítíteà] ‘my teacher’
 51. /mítájà/ → [mì tájà] ‘my tyre’
 52. /mìpájà/ → [mìpájà] ‘my pear’
 53. /mìsófì/ → [mìsófì] ‘my shovel’
 54. /mìlòrì/ → [mìlòrì] ‘my lorry’

5. Conclusion

The tone pattern of the possessor noun (i.e. the noun that is used to show possession) does not normally change in the Asante possessive noun phrase. When the noun that is used to show possession is replaced with a possessive adjective, the tone on the possessive adjective is always determined by the tone pattern of the possessed noun. In effect, the tone pattern of the possessive noun phrase in the Asante dialect is determined by the tone pattern of the possessed noun involved.

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