

The acquisition of lexical and grammatical verb tone in Seenku (Mande, Burkina Faso)

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The literature on the acquisition of tone remains dominated by East Asian languages, leaving many tonal phenomena virtually unstudied due areal tendencies. One such phenomenon is grammatical tone, uncommon in East Asian tone systems but quite prevalent in other tonal hotspots such as Africa. This paper presents a first analysis of grammatical tone acquisition in Seenku, a Northwestern Mande language spoken in Burkina Faso by around 15,000 people, focusing on the domain of verbs. Seenku's tone system has characteristics of both Asian and African tone systems, with four contrastive levels and multiple contour tones, hosted by largely mono- and sesquisyllabic lexical items. In this talk, I investigate the acquisition of two classes of grammatical tone found on verbs: morphological tone, wherein tone is the primary exponent of a morpheme (segmental morphology being limited in the language), and argument-head tone sandhi, which is sensitive to morphosyntactic structure but does not directly encode any meaning. Preliminary analysis of naturalistic data from five children (1;0-4;0) shows that children have good command of both types of grammatical tone from their earliest utterances, but with overall higher accuracy for morphological tone than for the more complex patterns of tone sandhi.