

Heterophonic homography in African and Semitic: Comparing the functions of tones and vowels

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Bird (1999a, 1999b) was one of the first to draw attention to the similarities between the newly emerging Roman script orthographies of African languages in which tone is often under-represented, and Semitic orthographies in which most vowels are usually under-represented. This paper demonstrates that not only the orthographies, but the very linguistic *functions* of tone in African languages and vowels in Modern Hebrew and Modern Standard Arabic are similar, and not just generally so, but in the detail. It catalogues heterophonic homographs that are lexical (whether same- or cross-category), and grammatical (person, number, gender, determiners, adpositions, voice, transitivity, TAM categories, and six kinds of derivation), as well as cases of interaction between these. African languages then go further, often encoding many more lexical distinctions by means of tone patterns than Hebrew and Arabic do with vowel structures, and also using tone to articulate case, demonstratives, negation, focus, relative clauses, copula and genitive verb phrases, predicate nominals, singulative derivations and augmentative derivations. Given the striking similarities between the linguistic functions of African tone and Semitic vowels, Africanists would do well to heed the extensive literature on Hebrew and Arabic literacy acquisition and to identify what lessons can be extracted when developing tone orthographies.

Bird, Steven. 1999a. Strategies for representing tone in African writing systems. *Written Language and Literacy*, 2(1), 1-44.

Bird, Steven. 1999b. When marking tone reduces fluency: An orthography experiment in Cameroon. *Language and Speech*, 42, 83-115.