

Tones and Commissives as Aspects of Oath-taking in NKST Priestly Ordination Ceremonies

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Abstract

Priestly ordination ceremonies constitute significant sites of ritual communication in which language functions not only as a medium of interaction but also as an instrument for enacting institutional and spiritual commitments. Despite the growing body of scholarship on the Nongo u Kristu u i Ser u sha Tar (NKST), linguistic investigations into the phono-pragmatic dimensions of its ordination discourse remain limited. This study examines the interaction between tonal patterns and commissive speech acts in oath-taking during NKST priestly ordination ceremonies. Adopting a qualitative phono-pragmatic approach, the study analysed thirty tone tokens extracted from audio-recorded oath-taking sessions using Halliday's Systemic Phonology and Searle's Speech Act Theory. The Tiv data were translated into English by three translation experts with due consideration for phonological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic equivalence. Findings reveal that tonal realizations of commissive force are language-specific. In the first three oath-taking responses, Tiv employs rising tones to encode affirmation and commitment, whereas their English equivalents realize the same commissive force through falling tones. However, from the fourth to the ninth responses, both Tiv and English consistently employ falling tones to reinforce solemn vows, institutional obligations and irrevocable ministerial commitment. The study concludes that although tonal configurations differ across languages, they perform equivalent pragmatic functions within ritual discourse, thereby demonstrating the intricate relationship between prosody, commissive speech acts and oath-taking in ecclesiastical communication.

Keywords: *Tones, commissive speech acts, oath-taking, NKST priestly ordination, Systemic Phonology, phono-pragmatics.*

Introduction

Language performs not only the function of conveying information but also the social function of enacting commitments, identities and institutional relationships. Within religious discourse, language acquires an even greater performative force because utterances are often embedded in ritual contexts where speaking constitutes a form of social and spiritual action. One such context is priestly ordination, a solemn ecclesiastical rite through which candidates are formally commissioned into ministerial service. During ordination ceremonies, candidates publicly declare commitments to doctrinal fidelity, moral integrity, pastoral responsibility and obedience to ecclesiastical authority. These declarations are not mere statements; rather, they constitute ritualised oaths through which future clergy bind themselves to specific courses of action and institutional expectations. Consequently, ordination discourse offers a fertile site for investigating the interface between prosody and pragmatics in the realisation of commitment-oriented speech acts.

Central to the interpretation of spoken discourse is intonation, a prosodic resource through which speakers signal meaning beyond lexical and grammatical structures. Crystal (1975) describes intonation as a crucial component of linguistic communication that conveys attitudinal, interpersonal and discourse-organisational meanings. Similarly, Wichmann (2000, 2016) argues that intonation functions as a rhetorical resource that structures information, manages interaction and indexes speakers' communicative intentions. In ritual contexts, tonal choices become particularly significant because they contribute to the expression of authority, solemnity, conviction and commitment. Falling tones, for instance, are frequently associated with finality, certainty and speaker commitment, whereas rising and fall-rise contours may signal incompleteness, negotiation, or shared assumptions (Brazil, 1997; Wichmann, 2000). Thus, the study of tones in ordination ceremonies provides valuable insights into how prosodic patterns reinforce the communicative force of ritual utterances.

The pragmatic dimension of such utterances is captured by Speech Act Theory. According to Searle (1979), commissive speech acts are utterances through which speakers commit themselves to future actions. Promises, pledges, vows, undertakings and oaths belong to this category because they place the speaker under an obligation to act in a specified manner. Oath-taking, in particular, represents one of the most institutionally powerful forms of commissive speech action because it combines linguistic commitment with moral, religious and social accountability. Studies of oath-taking have demonstrated its importance in legal, political, cultural and religious contexts as a mechanism for establishing credibility, accountability and social trust (Hassan & Al-Atabi, 2022; Johnson, 2025; Laing, 2014). Nevertheless, existing scholarship has largely concentrated on the semantic, legal, sociological and ritual dimensions of oaths while paying limited attention to their prosodic realisation.

Within Christianity, priestly ordination ceremonies are highly ritualised communicative events characterised by formal declarations, vows, blessings and public commitments. In the Universal Reformed Christian Church, popularly known as NKST (Nongo u Kristu u i Ser u sha Tar), ordination candidates are required to respond

to a series of doctrinal and ministerial questions through oath-like declarations that commit them to lifelong service in the church. These responses constitute explicit commissive acts whose force extends beyond linguistic meaning to encompass spiritual and institutional obligations. Yet, while substantial scholarship exists on the history, theology, administration and sociocultural development of the NKST, linguistic investigations of its ritual discourse remain scarce. Existing studies have examined issues such as Pentecostal influence, clergy welfare, church administration, dress practices and theological traditions, but little attention has been devoted to the phono-pragmatic dimensions of language use within the church.

Furthermore, previous studies on intonation in religious discourse have focused predominantly on sermons, interviews, political speeches and pedagogical contexts, while studies on commissives and oath-taking have largely examined textual structures without considering the prosodic mechanisms through which commitment is encoded in actual performance. Consequently, a significant gap exists regarding how tonal contours interact with commissive speech acts in formal religious ceremonies. This study addresses that gap by examining tones and commissives as aspects of oath-taking in NKST priestly ordination ceremonies. In exploring the relationship between intonation patterns and commissive force, the study contributes to the growing field of phono-pragmatics and deepens an understanding of how prosodic resources function in the enactment of religious commitment, institutional authority and ritual obligation.

Review of related study

Given the extensive documentations of intonation, speech acting and oath-taking, the review of related studies seeks to examine previous studies in these areas in connection with the NKST Church to determine the relevance of the current study. Crystal (1975) posits that prosodic features such as intonation are foundational to understanding linguistic behaviour in social contexts, going beyond segmental phonology and syntactic structures capturing how speakers signal social assumptions, role relationships and persuasive intent. Reviewing ethnographic and sociolinguistic research, Crystal shows that stress and intonation patterns function as communicative strategies which can replace or reinforce syntactic and lexical choices. In religious discourse, prosodic resources become crucial in conveying authority, emotional engagement and rhetorical power, what Crystal terms “delivery” in the classical rhetorical tradition. While other studies have investigated intonation in sermons and liturgical speech, most of these focused on information structure or attitudinal meaning (Khalif & Abbas, 2024). Thus, the gap that remains is how intonation patterns realise commissive speech acts, especially oath-taking in priestly ordination ceremonies; the present study seeks to address this academic vacuum by analysing tonal contours accompanying commissive utterances in NKST ordination rituals.

Wichmann (2000) examined intonation structures in spoken discourse using the Spoken English Corpus (SEC) including religious texts such as sermons and prayers identifying pitch patterns of topic-initial high onsets, cohesive pitch depression, finality-marking cadences and a stylistically marked “liturgical drop” (p. 67) but the work remained on boundary marking and information structure neglecting speech act realisation regarding how specific tonal contours encode commissive acts in oath-

taking ceremonies. On their part, Anggraini et al. (2022) examined intonation patterns in pre-service English teachers' talks, while Adejuwon (2019) analysed discourse intonation among Nigerian English speakers, finding that natural speech intonation often deviates from established norms. Purnami (2017) investigated EFL learners' storytelling intonation and Wijana (2021) provided a comprehensive overview of speech act classifications across multiple languages. These studies converge on the significance of intonation for meaning conveyance but diverge in contexts and speech act types examined. Notably, Sikumawati (2024) analysed Zakir Naik's speech, identifying predominantly assertive illocutionary acts using Ladd's Intonational Phonology framework. However, existing research has largely overlooked commissive speech acts in ceremonial contexts, particularly oath-taking.

Mahfudhoh's (2021) study identified all tone types such as proclaiming, referring and the level in discourse intonation used by the native English-speaking preacher Yusuf Estes in an Islamic sermon, using Brazil's (1997) framework of information context (shared/unshared) and the speaker's conversational control role but leaves a gap in the phono-pragmatic analysis of intonation in sermonic discourse. Khalif and Abbas (2024) examined how tone variations affect meaning within grammatical structures in Nahj Al-Balagha's sermons, revealing that intonation can replace explicit grammatical tools in structures such as conditionals, exclamations and interrogatives. The findings demonstrate intonation's semantic weight in religious discourse but the study did not address the specific interplay between intonation and commissive speech acts in oath-taking. Al-Kamit (2021) analysed commissive acts of threats/warnings in Trump's political speeches, applying Speech Act Theory and Brazil's model, while Akmal et al. (2020) focused on how intonation shapes meaning and illocutionary force within sermons and religious lectures. Ajileye et al. (2024) examined how Nigerian Pentecostal preachers use elicitation and dialogic strategies to transform traditionally monologic sermons into more engaging performances generating dramatic pauses combating audience fatigue and reproducing persuasive ideologies. Their study shifts does not consider the prosodic dimension of religious discourse, specifically the tonal patterns accompanying commissive acts in oath-taking contexts.

Showing how intonation conveys discourse meaning across structure (information/text organisation), language in use (pragmatics/conversation) and societal reflection (power/persuasion), Wichmann (2016; 2014) argued that intonation functions beyond grammatical marking, serving as a rhetorical tool rooted in classical delivery. With the aim of analysing the intonation patterns used by students of English Department at IAIN Metro focusing on rising and falling tones in declarative, interrogative and imperative sentences, Pratiwi (2021) found that students produced inappropriate intonation due to first language interference and lack of practice highlighting persistent challenges among EFL learners in Islamic higher education. Using discourse intonation by Brazil and Van Dijk's ideological square in President Bush's post-9/11 speech, Mahmoud and Al-Thalab (2025) examined the way intonation conveys non-domination in political discourse with findings that Bush basically employed a non-dominant intonation role through specific tone choices such as falling and fall-rise tones. The study contributes to understanding the ideological functions of intonation

but it does not examine the role of intonation in formal, ritualised oaths in religious discourse. Aimed at identifying intonational meaning and the controlling role exhibited by public figures in specific contexts, Alia (2020) analysed discourse intonation patterns in a religious interview featuring Muhammad Ali interacting with a young Muslim, examining the manner in which the boxer used intonation for pragmatic effect highlighting how celebrity speakers employ intonation to convey meaning and manage turn-taking in dialogic settings. But the study did not address formal ceremonial contexts.

Several studies on speech acting focusing on commissives abound in the literature some of which have been reviewed here. For example, Supriyani et al. (2022) identified commissive speech act types in the Indonesian translation of Surah Maryam examining their function in developing students' prophetic characters finding promise, threat and pledge commissives, with argument that they are pedagogically applied to instill honesty, responsibility and discipline. While the study focused on commissives in sacred text aligning with the current one in religious oath-taking, the textual approach does not capture how intonation patterns realise commissive force in actual oral performance. Tajabadi and Pourmohammad (2022) evaluated the use of commissive acts in the Qur'an and identified four linguistic structures of oath, promise (al-wa'd), threat (al-wa'id) and pledge, manifesting in both divine and non-divine forms. "Promise" was the most frequently occurring sub-speech act demonstrating how power dynamics between speech participants shape the choice of linguistic structures. The study provides a taxonomy of commissives in sacred scripture, but does not examine the prosodic features. Aimed at identifying illocutionary act types in Nouman Ali Khan's sermons, Akmal et al. (2020) analysed ten video-transcribed speeches finding no occurrence of commissive acts of oaths or pledges reflecting genre differences between didactic preaching and ritual ceremonies. Razzaq (2023) examined linguistic features and persuasive strategies in Islamic sermons, with focus on rhetorical devices such as repetition, metaphor and parallel structures, revealing that such features enhance emotional engagement and audience persuasion. Though converging in religious discourse, the study neither addressed intonation nor commissive acts or oath-taking rituals.

Identifying linguistic strategies of directive and expressive acts projecting hopeful futures, Hussein and Alhussaini (2023) investigated how optimism is pragmatically expressed in English and Arabic religious sermons, revealing cross-linguistic similarities in optimism markers, even though Arabic employed more explicit religious lexicon. The study differs from the current one by examining expressive/directive acts rather than commissives of oaths, or pledges and being text-based ignoring prosody. Jasim (2025) investigated forms and functions of commissives selected political discourse of Hamas spokesperson Abu Obaida, revealing that promises, threats and oaths dominate the speeches, projecting commitment, resistance and ideological unity confirming the centrality of commissives in persuasive discourse but the study does not consider the prosodic realisation of these commissives focusing solely on linguistic forms. In a text-based non-prosodic study, Al-Zubeiry and Alzahrani (2025) examined the socio-pragmatic functions of ostensible commissives of invitations/offers in Saudi

spoken Arabic using participant observation and recall interviews revealing eight core functions of signaling welcome, expressing gratitude, demonstrating courtesy, softening embarrassment, acknowledging familiarity, easing conversation endings, conveying sympathy and alleviating social discomfort confirming the centrality of commissives in everyday social interaction. With the aim of identifying Aristotelian persuasive strategies, Holíčková (2019) did a contrastive discourse analysis of Catholic and Protestant scripted sermons, revealing that both denominations employ similar strategies, with varying emphasis; whereas Catholic sermons rely on ethos and authority, Protestant sermons prioritise logos and scripture-based argumentation. Though analysing religious discourse, the study examined scripted texts rather than oral performance in oath-taking and it focuses on persuasion rather than speech acts entirely omitting prosody.

Significant studies on oath-taking have been carried out some of which are reviewed here. For instance, employing critical discourse analysis to investigate oath-taking as truth-negotiation mechanism in Sierra Leone's plural justice system to compare formal court oaths like Bible or Quran with customary rituals such as ancestral invocations, or libations, Johnson (2025) revealed that both systems use fear as a moral regulator, but formal oaths privilege textual legality while informal oaths rely on embodied spirituality. Though the study affirms the importance of oaths in negotiating truth and authority, oath-taking is investigated as a discursive social practice without addressing how prosody encodes its commissive speech acting. Based purely on textual frame without prosodic consideration, Hassan and Al-Atabi (2022) investigated the pragmatic features of oaths in Arabic ceremonies, with focus on the way they function as performative speech actions, revealing that English oaths involve explicit and implicit performative acts, realised through verbs such as "swear" and "pledge" including future tense structures. On their part, examining oath-taking as a ritual mechanism for conflict resolution in Nigeria, Benjamin et al. (2026) found that indigenous oath rituals function as socio-legal deterrents, reinforcing communal accountability and truth-telling in ways that formal state courts often fail to achieve. But the study does not cater for intonation patterns encoded in commissive acts in the performative utterance of an oath.

Adopting a cultural linguistics perspective in investigating oath-taking as a social practice in the Iranian film "Qasam", Dabbagh and Keshavarz (2025) traced three conceptual levels underlying oath performances including a foundational worldview, cultural schemas such as "GOD AS WITNESS" and "FAMILY" and the linguistic-visual encoding of these schemas in film dialogues with findings confirming oath-taking as a deeply culturally embedded commissive act, but omitting the tonal precision of the ceremonial context essential to the felicity of the speech act. On their part, with an ethnographic framework without any linguistic investigation of oath utterances themselves such as prosody or speech acts, Ani and Oyon (2024) examined the socio-cultural function of oath-taking among the Izzi people of southeastern Nigeria, revealing that oath-taking serves as a mechanism for resolving conflicts, bonding society and discouraging violence. Akinwumi and Adekunle (2017) appraised the efficacy of Nigerian political oaths of office and allegiance as a strategy for national

security, revealing that though constitutionally mandated, the oaths are poorly enforced, lacking cultural resonance, undermining their deterrent power and thereby failing to curb corruption or enhance political accountability. In his study, Kalu (2020) evaluated the potency of African Traditional Religion oath-taking as a mechanism for achieving resource control and combating corruption in Nigeria, revealing that Bible- or Quran-based oaths have lost their deterrent power, proposing traditional oaths whose alleged supernatural sanctions would ensure public accountability. The study remains at the level of institutional practice and social belief, with no attention to the linguistic structure of the oath utterance itself.

Oladipupo (2021) interrogated the feasibility of mandating traditional Yoruba oath-taking to combat corruption in Nigeria's democratic system, contrasting its supposed deterrent power with the failure of modern legal sanctions, advocating a turn to indigenous ritual enforcement as a last resort against 'democratic corruption'. The study omits prosodic dimension of encoding the illocutionary force of an oath. Though lacking in intonation and commissives, Sesay and Johnson (2025) assessed oath-taking in the plural legal system of Sierra Leone, finding that customary oaths invoke ancestral fear to enforce truth-telling, while formal court oaths of the Bible or Quran are perceived as symbolic but ineffective. Revealing that they function as a truth-seeking mechanisms which invest language with the power of providing justice, or, when broken, causing real harm, Laing (2014) analysed oath-taking and oath-breaking in early medieval England and Iceland through the framework of speech acting emphasizing the potency of swearing as more than the procedural traditional view, arguing that it represents a decisive social practice where words are used not only in describing commitments but performing them under communal supervision. The study dwells on legal and literary texts without accessing the illocutionary force of oath-taking through prosodic dimensions. Finally, revealing the historical and sociological shift away from indigenous oaths stemmed from a fear of their severe and immediate supernatural sanctions standing in stark contrast to the "futuristic" punishments of modern oaths, Lawrence-Hart (2018) assessed the viability of reintroducing traditional African oath-taking to curb corruption and promote good governance in Nigeria's Niger Delta region recommending subjecting political officeholders who secretly practice African traditional religions to indigenous oaths. The study however does not analyse the oaths' internal linguistic structure or prosodic features, a gap the current fills.

Literature on priestly ordination also abound with a few examined here. Using a socio-theological analysis without ritualistic speech acting and prosody, Sibani and Wachukwu (2024) investigated women's spiritual gifts suppression and discrimination with patriarchal arguments justifying exclusion in Nigeria's Catholic, Anglican and Methodist contexts. Similarly, with descriptive hermeneutical methodology, Onotere and Ojameruaye (2023) examined arguments surrounding women's priestly ordination, stereotypes, discrimination and leadership faced within the Nigerian Baptist Convention, revealing mixed responses of male-female congregants for or against. Cataloguing rituals' social functions and how ordination ceremonies maintain communal cohesion and social order, Odo and Edith (2018) analysed the rituals

involving traditional priestly ordination in the Elugwu Ezike Igbo culture diverging with the current study in theory and context. Veenstra (2018) investigated theological tension between the Baptist doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and the practice of ordaining women in the Baptist tradition, revealing that although the priesthood of all believers suggests an egalitarian access to ministry, its interpretation within Baptist ecclesiology does not inherently mandate the formal ordination of women. Lastly, in examining Christian's participation in Christ's priesthood ordination through incorporation into His Body and exercising that priesthood in liturgy and virtue, Simms (2020) surveyed the theological concept of the priesthood of the baptised in Augustine, Chrysostom and Aquinas without addressing the ritual's linguistic or prosodic structure.

There are a number of studies on the NKST but linguistic ones are rare. For example, Asadu and Iorbee (2026) examined clergy welfare and ecclesial administration/responsibility in the NKST; Kyegh (2024) investigated evolution of dressing patterns among females; Annger (2013) examined the influence of Pentecostalism on the NKST; Kyernum and Nyamibo (2023) analysed faith based health institutions and rural health improvement, Vembe (n.d.) and Yawe (2026) provide the history of NKST and Christianity in Tiv land and Africa, Usue (n.d.) discussed the ethical and theological parallels between biblical psalms and the NKST indigenous Christian songs and many other studies on the NKST none of which analysed either prosody or commissives.

Theoretical framework

This study is anchored in Systemic Phonology, a component of Systemic Functional Linguistics developed by Halliday (1961, 1967) and Halliday et al. (1964) from Firth's (1948) Prosodic Analysis. Unlike Classical Phoneme Theory, which focuses on segmental units, Systemic Phonology emphasises prosodic features that extend across larger units of speech, particularly tone, stress and intonation (Tench, 1992). Central to the theory are the concepts of hierarchy and system networks, which explain how phonological choices operate within tone groups, feet, syllables and phonemes to realise meaning (Halliday, 1961; Halliday et al., 1964). Of particular relevance is its treatment of intonation as a meaning-making resource through which speakers express commitment, certainty, finality and interpersonal relations. This makes the theory suitable for analysing NKST priestly ordination ceremonies, where oath-taking is enacted through commissive speech acts. The tonal contours accompanying candidates' responses help encode degrees of commitment, obligation and resolve, thereby reinforcing the pragmatic force of the oaths within the ritual context (Bowcher & Smith, 2014; Tench, 1992).

Speech Acts

This study also draws on Speech Act Theory, particularly the category of commissive speech acts developed by Searle (1969, 1979). The theory views language as a form of action through which speakers perform social functions rather than merely convey information. Commissives are utterances that commit speakers to a future course of action and include promises, vows, pledges, undertakings, oaths and guarantees

(Searle, 1979). Their illocutionary force lies in the speaker's acceptance of an obligation to perform specified actions in the future. This framework is particularly suitable for the analysis of NKST priestly ordination ceremonies because candidates publicly undertake solemn obligations relating to doctrinal fidelity, pastoral service, obedience and moral conduct. The responses given during the oath-taking session function as commissive acts through which ordinands voluntarily bind themselves to ecclesiastical responsibilities. Consequently, Speech Act Theory provides an effective analytical tool for identifying and interpreting the commitment-oriented utterances that constitute the core communicative and ritual functions of NKST ordination discourse.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative phono-pragmatic research design to investigate the relationship between tones and commissive speech acts in oath-taking during NKST priestly ordination ceremonies. The primary data comprise audio-recorded oath-taking sessions purposively selected from NKST ordination ceremonies because they contain ritual utterances characterised by explicit commissive acts. The recordings were subjected to repeated auditory and acoustic analyses to identify intonation patterns and their interaction with commissive force within the ritual context. The utterances, originally produced in Tiv, were translated into English by three independent experts in Tiv–English translation. The translation process carefully preserved the contextual, phonological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic properties of the original texts to ensure fidelity and equivalence of meaning. The translated data were subsequently cross-validated through expert consensus before analysis. Data analysis was guided by Halliday's Systemic Phonology and Searle's Speech Act Theory, with attention to how tonal contours reinforce the illocutionary force of commissive utterances during oath-taking, thereby revealing the interaction between prosody and ritual commitment in NKST priestly ordination discourse.

Data presentation and analysis

The data is presented in Table 1 for analysis and discussion.

Table 1: Table 1: Oath-taking questions and responses

SN	Questions in Tiv: <i>Mbampin</i>	Response in Tiv and tonal pattern: tonal pattern: <i>M rumun</i>	English Equivalence	Response in English and tonal pattern	Pragmatic goal and function
1	Una jigh jigh wer, Aôndo yila u sha icighantom ne sha u eren nongo Na tom sha ci u icivir Na, zee?	Een↗	Do you believe that God called you to this sacred assignment to serve His Church for His glory?	Yes↘	The response performs a commissive act of affirmation and acceptance of the divine call. The falling tone in English signals certainty, finality and unwavering commitment, while the rising tone in Tiv, which is different from the English falling tone, indexes readiness to undertake the sacred responsibility.
2	U rumun wer, Aôndo ngu môm, Ter man Wan man Icighan Jijingi, man u shi u rumun Yesu Kristu wer, ka Oryiman wou man Ter u kpaa, zee?	Een↗	Do you affirm that there is one God: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit; and do you also affirm that Jesus Christ is your personal Lord and Saviour?	Yes↘	The response functions as a commissive declaration of doctrinal allegiance. The tonal patterns (though different in both languages) reinforces conviction, certainty and voluntary commitment to the Christian faith and ministerial vocation.
3	U na jighjigh wer, Ikyuryan i Tse kua i He ka mkaanem ma Aôndo vough man shi ka tindi u Karen kwagh u jighjigh u nan man shi mlu u vough a mi kpaa, zee?	Een↗	Do you believe that the Old and New Testament are the true words of God; and they are the precepts of measuring faith and righteous living?	Yes↘	The response constitutes a commissive affirmation of scriptural authority The falling tone (for the English language which is different from the rise in Tiv) marks categorical acceptance and solemn commitment to uphold biblical doctrine throughout priestly ministry.

4	U ver ishima sha agee a Ter wer, u zenden sha mlu u a kom Aôndo hen ior cii, zee?	M rumun\, Aôndo A wasem\	Do you depend on the power of the Lord to walk before all men in a manner worthy of one who professes God?	Yes \, I do\	The utterance performs a commissive pledge of holy living and dependence on divine grace. The repeated falling tones project solemnity, resolve and irrevocable commitment before God and the congregation.
5	U tôndo zwa sha agee a Ter wer, u keren mba ve saa kua mba ve hide ijime sha u van a ve hen mgemshima man jighjigh u nan hen Aôndo, zee?	M rumun\, Aôndo A wasem\	Do you pledge by the power of the Lord that you will seek the lost and backsliders and bring them back to repentance and faith in God?	Yes \, I do\	The response is a commissive promise to fulfil the evangelistic and pastoral mandate. The falling tones encode certainty, sincerity and binding obligation to ministerial service.
6	U rumun u nan batisema man kwaghyan u umbur Ter hen Mbakristu mba i rumun u nan ve la tseeagh, zee?	M rumun\, Aôndo A wasem\	Do you accept to administer baptism and the Lord's Supper to only those Christians permitted?	Yes \, I do\	The response functions as a commissive undertaking to administer the scriptural injunctions faithfully according to church doctrine. Falling tones reinforce institutional loyalty and ritual certainty.
7	U taver ishima u vendan isholibo cii man *sha[shi] anza a bo, man u vendan ityesen i i kaha kposo a Bibilo la man shi u vendan mbampav ken nongo u Kristu kpaa, zee?	M rumun\, Aôndo A wasem\	Will you be firm in rejecting all sin and vices; and denouncing doctrines that are contrary to the Bible and rejecting divisions in the Church of Christ?	Yes \, I do\	This response realises a commissive vow of moral integrity and doctrinal fidelity . The falling tone indexes firmness, authority and unwavering resolve to uphold biblical truth.
8	U rumun u wan tahav mbu ken nongo u Kristu la iko, zee?	M rumun\, Aôndo A wasem\	Do you accept to be obedient to the authority of the Church of Christ?	Yes \, I do\	The utterance constitutes a commissive pledge of obedience to ecclesiastical authority. The falling

Discussion of findings

This analysis examines how tonal patterns and commissive speech acts interact in the oath-taking responses of Tiv and their English translations (Table 1, SN1–SN9). The commissive acts verbally bind the speaker to future actions (Searle, 1979). Intonation patterns (rising ↗, falling ↘) serve pragmatic functions. In English, falling contours typically mark finality or certainty, while rising contours signal incompleteness or continuation. In the data, SN1–SN3 Tiv answers use rising tone (“Een↗”, literally “Yes”) paired with falling “Yes” in English, whereas SN4–SN9 responses use falling tone in both languages (for example, Tiv “*M rumun*↘, *Aôndo A wasem*↘” equals English “Yes↘, I do↘”) suggesting a cross-linguistic mismatch where Tiv rising contours functionally equate to English falling tones in these commissives, indexing readiness and commitment. In SN4–SN9, convergent falling tones in both languages reinforce solemn commitment. These findings illustrate how intonation contours contribute to the illocutionary force of vows and their perlocutionary impact on the congregation with implications for systemic phonology and phono-pragmatics (Halliday, 1967; Tench, 1992).

Commissive speech acts and prosodic functions

Commissive acts are illocutionary speech acts in which a speaker commits to future actions (Searle, 1979). In the context of NKST priestly ordination, the ordinands' responses are explicitly oath-taking commissives where each “Yes” or “I do” formally binds the candidate to doctrinal fidelity or ministerial duties. Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979) emphasises that such utterances have a performative force beyond literal meaning – they create social and moral obligations. Critically, intonation, the prosodic contour of an utterance, modulates this force, conveying the speaker's attitude and the speaker–hearer relationship (Crystal, 1975; Wichmann, 2000). For example, a falling terminal tone often signals resolution or finality, reinforcing the sincerity of a pledge, whereas a rising tone can signal that a speaker is still open to negotiation or adding information (Brazil, 1997; Wichmann, 2000). Thus, analysing the intonation patterns (rising ↗, falling ↘) of these ritual utterances can reveal how Tiv and English prosody contribute to the illocutionary force (the commitment made) and the perlocutionary effect (the impact on the audience) of the oaths.

Tonal annotation and analytical assumptions

In Table 1, tone is annotated with arrows: ↗ indicates a rising terminal intonation contour and ↘ a falling terminal contour. This notation follows standard discourse-intonation practice (Halliday, 1967; Wichmann, 2000). It is assumed that each response is a single *tone unit* or intonational phrase, with its nuclear stress on the key word (for example, *Een*, *Yes* and *do*) and a terminal pitch movement. A falling contour (↘) is assumed to indicate finality, certainty and commitment, whereas a rising contour (↗) suggests continuation or openness. These assumptions are grounded in systemic phonology (Halliday, 1967) and discourse prosody (Brazil, 1997; Wichmann, 2000). It is also assumed that the transcription (“↗” and “↘”) reflects trained auditory/ acoustic analysis of the audio data, consistent across speakers. Although Tiv is a tonal language, focus is on the final intonation contours rather than lexical tones; the

context and minimal responses (for example, *Een*, *Yes*) suggest these are intonational rather than lexical tone changes.

Comparative analysis: Tiv↗ vs English ↘

In SN 1–3, the ordinand's Tiv response is a short affirmation “*Een↗*”, whereas the English gloss is “*Yes↘*” (Table 1). Superficially, one might expect both languages to use similar contours (for example, falling for a final “yes”), but here they diverge. In English, a falling *Yes↘* unambiguously signals confirmation and closure. In Tiv, however, the rising *Een↗* nonetheless functions as a firm affirmation of belief or acceptance. This inversion suggests a cross-linguistic difference where Tiv speakers appear to use a rising terminal tone to encode what English expresses with a falling tone. One possible interpretation is that Tiv *Een↗* still marks completion of the utterance (the response is over) but with an upward pitch, perhaps reflecting heightened affect or communal deference typical in vow contexts. On the other hand, Tiv may treat yes/no responses differently; for instance, rising intonation on a yes-response might be conventional to show readiness to comply, the “answering tone”. Nevertheless, the rising contour on “*Een↗*” indexes the commissive force, signalling the ordinand's resolute commitment, “readiness to undertake the sacred responsibility” (context of SN 1). In English, the falling “*Yes↘*” straightforwardly indexes certainty. Thus, although the shapes differ, both intonation patterns pragmatically serve the same function; they license the ordinand's commitment to the Church's call, the illocutionary act of acceptance.

This pattern recurs in SN 2–3 as well. Each Tiv *Een↗* (“*Yes↗*”) contrasts with English *Yes↗*, yet both mark endorsement of faith/doctrine. For example, SN 3 (affirming Scripture) has Tiv “*Een↗*” vs English “*Yes↘*”. In English, falling intonation on “*Yes*” is typical in declarative replies (Crystal, 1975; Wichmann, 2000). The use of a rising tone in Tiv suggests an inverted intonational mapping between these languages which can be interpreted as evidence that the same underlying pragmatic function, commitment to the oath, is prosodically realised differently, highlighting the importance of phono-pragmatics where the interplay between sound patterns and communicative force may vary by language (Gussenhoven, 2004).

Convergent falling tones

Starting with SN 4, both Tiv and English use falling terminal tones in the responses. The Tiv phrase “*M rumun↘*, *Aôndo A wasem↘*” (literally “Yes, God help me”) parallels the English “*Yes↘, I do↘*.” Here “*M rumun*” means “I do” or “yes I accept.” Thus, each word or clause carries a falling contour on its tonic syllable (notated ↘ after both *rumun* and *wasem*). The English “*Yes↘, I do↘*” similarly places falls on “*Yes*” and “*do*.” Thus, in SN 4–9, there is prosodic convergence, with both languages using falling intonation throughout the response. This convergence reflects the nature of these questions; they are vow-like pledges rather than mere affirmations. SN 4–9 involve explicit commitments, (pledging to minister faithfully, reject sin and obey authority). Falling tones in both languages underscore the solemnity and finality of these commitments (Brazil, 1997). In English, falling “*Yes↘, I do↘*” is a classic vow answer with strong assertive force. The double fall pattern, fall on “*Yes*” then on

“do”, indicates a closed and firm pledge. In Tiv, the analogous double fall (on “*M rumun*↘” and “*Aôndo*↘”) carries the same effect. The phrase “*Aôndo A wasem*” (“God help me”) itself is a fixed formula uttered with finality.

In pragmatic terms, these falling contours function to reinforce the perlocutionary impact in which the congregation hears an unmistakable and unhesitating vow. The final falls punctuate each utterance like a declarative period (Halliday, 1967), resulting in a clear end-of-turn, signaling the ordinand's resolve. Thus, for SN 4–9, the tonal patterns across Tiv and English both index absolute commitment. The similarity suggests that for certain speech acts (vows), there is cross-linguistic alignment in intonational strategy; solemn promises are prosodically marked by finality in many languages, such as “*amén*” endings or double falls in liturgy.

Tonal contours, illocution and ritual context

The tonal contours observed have clear illocutionary implications. In each response, the falling or rising tone serves to legitimize the speaker's commitment. A falling tone (↘) in both languages signals that the speaker is *saying it definitely and unreservedly*, thereby validating the performative power of the oath. A rising tone (↗) on “*Een*”, though unusual in non-ritual English, still marks completion of the utterance in Tiv context, carrying a deferential or emphatic flavour appropriate to swearing an oath. In either case, the intonation contributes to the illocution, turning an utterance into a binding pledge. Perlocutionarily, these contours affect how the audience receives the vow. Falling tones in solemn oaths can evoke respect and acceptance, cueing the listener that a promise has been unequivocally made. In SN 4–9, the dropping pitch has a ritual effect of communal closure, the “Amen” equivalence. In SN 1–3, the rising *Een*↗ invites a mental confirmation (a “Yes, indeed, I understand”) from the congregation before the pledge begins. In systemic-functional terms (Bowcher & Smith, 2014), the prosody here interfaces with information structure: falling pitch marks the end of a prosodic unit, highlighting its importance, whereas rising pitch can indicate shared context or follow-up action.

Significantly, these ordination oaths are institutional rituals. In ritual speech, formulaic language and consistent intonation patterns create a sense of tradition and authority (Tench, 1992). The repetitive falling patterns of “*Aôndo A wasem* ↘” across multiple vows in Table 1, for instance, encode a conventional solemnity. According to Halliday's framework, each tone group consists of feet and syllables culminating in a nuclear tone (Halliday et al., 1964). Here, the nuclear tone on “*wasem*” and “*do*” in SN 4–9 carries the weight of the commitment. The hierarchy of prosodic units (tone group > foot > syllable) ensures that the final foot carries the tonic accent, making the contour meaningful (Halliday et al., 1964; Tench, 1992).

Phono-pragmatic and translation implications

This study exemplifies phono-pragmatics, how phonological features such as tone and intonation serve pragmatic ends. The findings show that tonal patterns in ritual speech do not merely reflect lexical meaning but shape the social action of speech (Crystal, 1975; Wichmann, 2000). In particular, the cross-linguistic variation (Tiv rising vs English falling for the same commissive function) highlights the culturally

conditioned mapping of tone to illocution with implications for cross-cultural pragmatics where a foreign observer might misinterpret Tiv “*Een* ↑” as a question or hesitancy, but within Tiv it is read as a confident affirmation.

The methodology included a rigorous Tiv–English translation step; three translation experts jointly rendered the data, attending to phonological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic facets which was essential in capturing the full context of each utterance, for example, conveying that “*M rumun*” corresponds to the English idiom “I do” within the oath. As Baker (2011) observes, translating ritual speech requires preserving illocutionary force; the multi-expert process, involving linguists and cultural insiders, aimed for pragmatic equivalence. This careful translation allowed analysis in English terms without losing the subtle semantic and pragmatic features of the original tone usage.

In all, the results contribute to cross-linguistic prosody research with Table 1 offering a detailed phono-pragmatic portrait of NKST ordination oaths. While much intonation research focuses on English or question–statement contrasts, this study shows how a ceremonial context yields unique patterns. Few studies have examined prosody in ritual discourse such as confessionals and prayers; and none specifically on oath-taking intonation. The data align with the view that intonation in performative contexts often departs from everyday norms (Wichmann, 2000), creating room for future comparative work that could explore other tonal languages in similar rituals to see if rising “commissives” recur.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that tones are indispensable prosodic resources in realising commissive speech acts during NKST priestly ordination ceremonies. While English responses predominantly employ falling tones to encode certainty, finality and commitment, the Tiv data reveal that both rising and falling tones may function as markers of commissive force depending on the ritual context. Specifically, rising tones characterise affirmative responses in the first three oath-taking exchanges, whereas falling tones consistently reinforce solemn vows in subsequent responses. These findings underscore the language-specific nature of intonation and highlight the intricate interaction between prosody, ritual discourse and institutional commitment in religious communication.

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