

Labial-velars - a questionable diagnostic for a linguistic area

(Workshop 3: Areal Phenomena in Northern Sub-Saharan Africa)

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Abstract

A “linguistic area” is defined by unusual features which cannot be explained by genetic relationship or normal language development (Heine and Leyew 2008:16). These authors, as well as Güldemann (2008) and Clements and Rialland (2008), assert that the occurrence of labial-velars (\widehat{kp} , \widehat{gb} , $\widehat{\eta m}$, hereafter “KP”) is one diagnostic to identify the “Sudanic Belt” of Africa as a linguistic area, since KPs are a) unusual and b) largely arise through language contact. I argue that both these sub-assertions are incorrect, and that the occurrence of labial-velars is less decisive for establishing a linguistic area than these authors, as well as older ones (e.g. Dalby 1970, Greenberg 1983) have assumed.

Clements and Rialland (2008) state that labial-velars are “almost unique to Africa,” and in Maddieson (1984), only 6% of the languages sampled have KP, including only one outside Africa. However, a more extensive database of specific languages with KPs I have collected over several years shows that KP is not as unusual as previously thought, but occurs in at least 840 (12%) of the world’s languages, including at least 57 languages of the Pacific, and a handful of cases elsewhere.

Crucially, labial-velars occur from three sources:

a) Spontaneous sound change in both recent and older stages of a language, often via the path $*KU > Kw > KP$. For example, in the Sawabantu languages (Cameroon), Mutaka and Ebobissé (1996/97) show that a historical prefix $*ku-$ was realized as $*kw-$ before vowels (in a common glide formation process), and then $*kw > \widehat{kp}$.

	Eastern Sawabantu	Western Sawabantu
‘diarrhea’	$\widehat{kúbwako}$	$\widehat{kúgbako}$
‘sword’	$\widehat{kwátá}$	$\widehat{kpátá}$

b) Genetic, from parent languages. $*KP$ is reconstructable in several African proto-families, e.g. Central Sudanic (Boyeldieu 2006), Ijoid (Blench and Williamson 2004), Mande (Dwyer 1989), and the large Volta-Congo family (Stewart 1983), including several of its specific subfamilies such as Benue-Congo (deWolf 1971), Gur (Manessy 1979), and likely Kwa, Kru, and others. The recently-posted WALS Sunburst Explorer (<http://th-mayer.de/wals/>) reinforces this.

c) Contact with languages which had KP (even across major language family boundaries), particularly in the case of Bantu languages, which as a group generally lack KP (Grégoire 2003).

These sources have all been proposed not only for Africa, but also for Pacific languages (Lynch 2002, Ross 1998, Blust 1981); these are not Africa-specific processes. While historical data is not available for every language, it appears that KP in Africa arose from sound change in several dozen languages, from genetic inheritance in several hundred languages, and from language contact in a few dozen cases. Thus the existence of KP in the majority of African languages is attributable to sources a) or b).

Finally, asserting that the “Sudanic Belt” is where the highest concentration of Africa-specific properties exists minimizes the fact that this is also where most of the languages of Africa exist (see <http://www.sil.org/worldwide>).

Both the relative abundance of KP and its common sources in genetic relationships and regular sound change undermine arguments for including KP as one of the critical diagnostics for a linguistic area in Africa.

Keywords: labial-velar, sound change, linguistic area