

High vowel fricativization as an areal feature of the northern Cameroon Grassfields

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

FAYTAK, Matthew

University of California, Berkeley (mf@berkeley.edu)

Abstract

The northernmost languages in the Cameroon Grassfields exhibit fricativized realizations of their highest vowels as a shared phonological feature, gained through a sound change I dub *high vowel fricativization* (HVF). The resulting *fricative vowels* are reflexes of the first-degree high vowels *i, *u typically reconstructed for proto-Bantu and Grassfields Bantu, while second-degree *ɪ, *ʊ are reflected as typical high vowels [i], [u]. Given that the languages in this area hail from four distinct language groupings, I propose that the spread of HVF is due to recent areal spread rather than genetic inheritance, with implications for reconstruction of vowel systems in Bantoid.

Assuming the seven-vowel reconstruction common for Narrow and Grassfields Bantu (1a), the reflexes of second-degree *ɪ, *ʊ are [i], [u] throughout the HVF-affected area. The reflexes of first-degree *i, *u are realized with (post)alveolar and labiodental frication, respectively. These *fricative vowels* resemble voiced fricatives but have a stronger ratio of harmonics to fricative noise (Connell 2007). ‘Type 1’ languages in the HVF zone (1b) have fully fricated reflexes (i.e. [z], [ɣ]). ‘Type 2’ languages (1c) exhibit an analogous fricative followed by a central vowel (i.e. [zi], [vu]). These vowels typically occur only after varying sets of fricative or affricate initials (S, F) which suggests an origin for Type 2 segment sequences in the weakening of frication towards the end of the vowel (i.e. [zɪ̯]) commonly seen in Type 1.

(1a) Proto-Bantoid	(1b) HVF Type 1 (Kom, Len, Nɔ̃ne, Limbum)	(1c) HVF Type 2 (Isu, Aghem, Oku, Lamnso’)	(1d) Bantu Spir. (from Schadeberg 19xx)
Deg. 1 *i, *u	/z/, /v/	/Si/, /Fu/	/Si/, /Fu/
Deg. 2 *ɪ, *ʊ	/i/, /u/	/i/, /u/	/i/, /u/

Figure 1. First and second degree vowels in proto-Bantoid and their reflexes in HVF languages. /z/ and /v/ are fricative vowels; /S/ is an alveolar consonant and /F/ a labiodental consonant.

The distribution of HVF languages suggests that recent areal effects are responsible for the spread of HVF in the aforementioned region. HVF is attested in languages from four different subgroups of Southern Bantoid: Mambiloid, Beboid, and (within Grassfields Bantu proper) Ring and Mbam-Nkam. These languages form a geographically contiguous group where intermarriage and multilingualism is extremely common, making contact-induced sound change likely. A majority of languages in each genetic group, positioned outside of this core area, do *not* undergo HVF.

Although HVF appears to be an analogue to Bantu Spirantization (1d), I do not wish to claim it is a retention of some first-degree vowel quality of proto-Bantoid or a precursor to Bantu Spirantization: evidence points to HVF as a recent and independent innovation in a small polyphyletic group. All the same, HVF may prove useful as an external analogue of Bantu Spirantization, which Schadeberg (1995) notes preserves the contrast between the unstable second-degree vowels and the more stable first-degree vowels. HVF, too, effectively maintains the three-way height contrast in the Bantoid system, suggesting that HVF and Bantu Spirantization are distinct but related reinforcements made to the same reconstructible system of unstable contrasts.

References

- Connell, Bruce (2007). Mambila fricative vowels and Bantu spirantization. *Africana Linguistica* 13.
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