

Areal features and linguistic reconstruction in Africa

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

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Abstract

It is well known that languages can share features either because they derive from a common ancestor or because they have been in contact. Such contact can cause unrelated languages to look quite similar, so much so that they may mistakenly be identified as belonging to the same language family. Thus, while Greenberg (1963) originally grouped African languages into four macro-phyla (Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan, Afro-Asiatic, Khoisan), many scholars now believe the continent to consist of up to 20 distinct linguistic families, including several isolates (Dimmendaal 2011: 407-8). Given the lack of written historical records and poor documentation of so many African languages, claims of genetic relatedness have often been based on typology, e.g. whether languages have the same syllable structure, certain vowel or consonant sounds, noun classes, serial verbs, and so forth. While recent work has sought to delineate areal contact zones and their shared features (see especially the chapters in Heine & Nurse 2011), proposals such as Güldemann's (2008) Macro-Sudan Belt mask a greater internal diversity. Worse yet, the overgeneralization of shared features has been invoked to support quite unrealistic linguistic reconstructions. As a case in point, Güldemann (2011) cites the alleged analytic tendency of Macro-Sudan Belt languages to argue contra Hyman (2004, 2007a,b) that Proto-Niger-Congo lacked inflectional verb prefixes and had only a "moderate" system of verb extensions. Güldemann's assumption was that if a linguistic property is widespread, it must be old. Hyman (2011) responded that given that Proto-Niger-Congo is 10-12,000 years old, there has been plenty of time for the daughter languages to have changed their typology more than once. In our talk we will focus on the following five "areal" properties: 1) ATR and nasalized vowel systems; 2) multiheight tone systems; 3) templatic morphology and phonology; 4) verb extensions; 5) serial verb constructions. What unites these is that in each case what has been claimed to be an areal feature has important exceptions which bear directly on our key question: How can or should we exploit areal phenomena in doing linguistic reconstruction in Africa—and by extension, elsewhere in the world? We will show that none of these properties can safely be ascribed to Proto-Niger-Congo, rather that they diffused in interesting ways, and with considerable variation.

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