

Templatic phonology and morphology: an areal feature of Northern sub-Saharan Africa?

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

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Abstract

A small number of phonological and grammatical features have been proposed by Clements & Rialland (2008) and Güldemann (2008) as characteristic features of the (Macro-)Sudan(ic) belt, a region of northern sub-Saharan Africa stretching from the Atlantic ocean to the Ethiopian highlands. In this paper, we seek to determine whether templatic word and sound structures should be counted among those features.

Many cases of apparent phonological and/or morphological templaticity have indeed been documented in various languages of this area belonging to different families and phyla, which seems to indicate that some form of templaticity may indeed be an areal tendency, rather than a genetically inherited feature. Such cases include:

- Stem-initial prominence, documented in many Dogon, Gur, Adamawa, Benue-Congo, or Nilotic languages, among others (see Downing 2010 for more examples and references);
- Stem- or word shape conditions, e.g. in Kera (Pearce 2013), where lexical words are minimally iambic (–) or (–), or Turkana, where the minimal word is a bimoraic foot (Dimmendaal 2012);
- Metrical structure and its role in other phonological processes: foot-sensitive tone assignment, vowel harmony, as in Kera (Pearce 2013), or morpho-phonological processes, as in many Nilotic languages (Dimmendaal 2012);
- Morphologically determined phonological templates, as documented for instance in Ibibio (Harris 1990/2004; Akinlabi & Urua 2003), Nilotic languages such as Anywa (Reh 1996) and many Chadic languages (see Newman 1990 for examples of pluralization strategies using templates).

In this paper, we will:

- Establish a fine-grained typology of phenomena that could be described as involving phonological and/or morphological templaticity in a representative sample of languages and language families spoken in Northern sub-Saharan Africa, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Ethiopian Highlands;
- Disentangle areal features from inherited ones (e.g. templatic morphology shared only by Afroasiatic languages);
- Verify the congruence of our results with the area(s) proposed so far by Clements & Rialland's (2008) and Güldemann (2008), and propose preliminary answers to the following questions:
 - Is phonological/morphological templaticity (or specific templatic phenomena) areal in Northern Sub-Saharan Africa, i.e. are certain templatic phenomena found across lineages in that area that are absent elsewhere in Africa?
 - Or are there several micro-areas of templaticity within the area, without any possible generalization to the whole area?
 - How do peripheral languages (e.g. Atlantic, Dogon, Songhay, Chadic, Ijoid, Northern Bantu, Nilotic, cf. Güldemann 2008) pattern with respect to templaticity? Can templatic phenomena be used to refine our definition of the (Macro-)Sudan(ic) belt?

To what extent can phonological/morphological templates in the languages of the area be used in comparative reconstruction work?

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Keywords: phonology, morphology, areal linguistics