How databases shape research: labial-velars distribution in Africa

Guillaume Segerer

ギヨーム・セジェレル

LLACAN (CNRS-INALCO) – FRANCE - フランス

The experiment

Look at a relatively

well-known linguistic feature

through

online linguistic databases (ODBs)

Aims of the experiment

- Show how online databases differ

- Look at the consequences for research

and eventually

- Try to capture the nature of the areal distribution of labial-velar consonants in Africa

The well-know linguistic feature

Presence vs absence of labial-velar consonants in the phonological inventory

- distribution already known (restricted to Africa - except Amele and Yeli Dnye, both in Papua New Guinea)
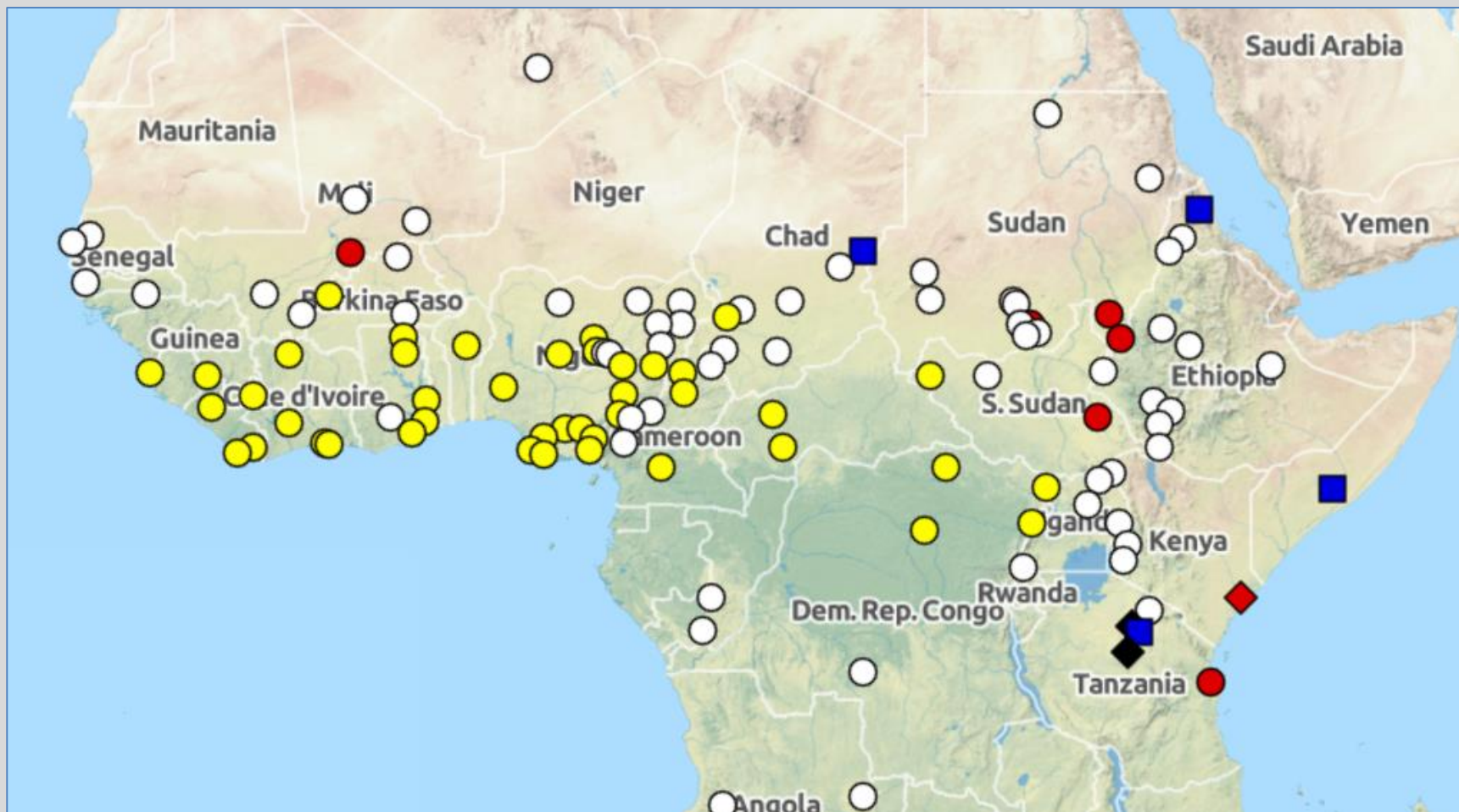- apparently easy to decide

The online databases

- WALS : http://wals.info/

- PHOIBLE : http://phoible.org/

- LAPSYD : http://www.lapsyd.ddl.ish-lyon.cnrs.fr/

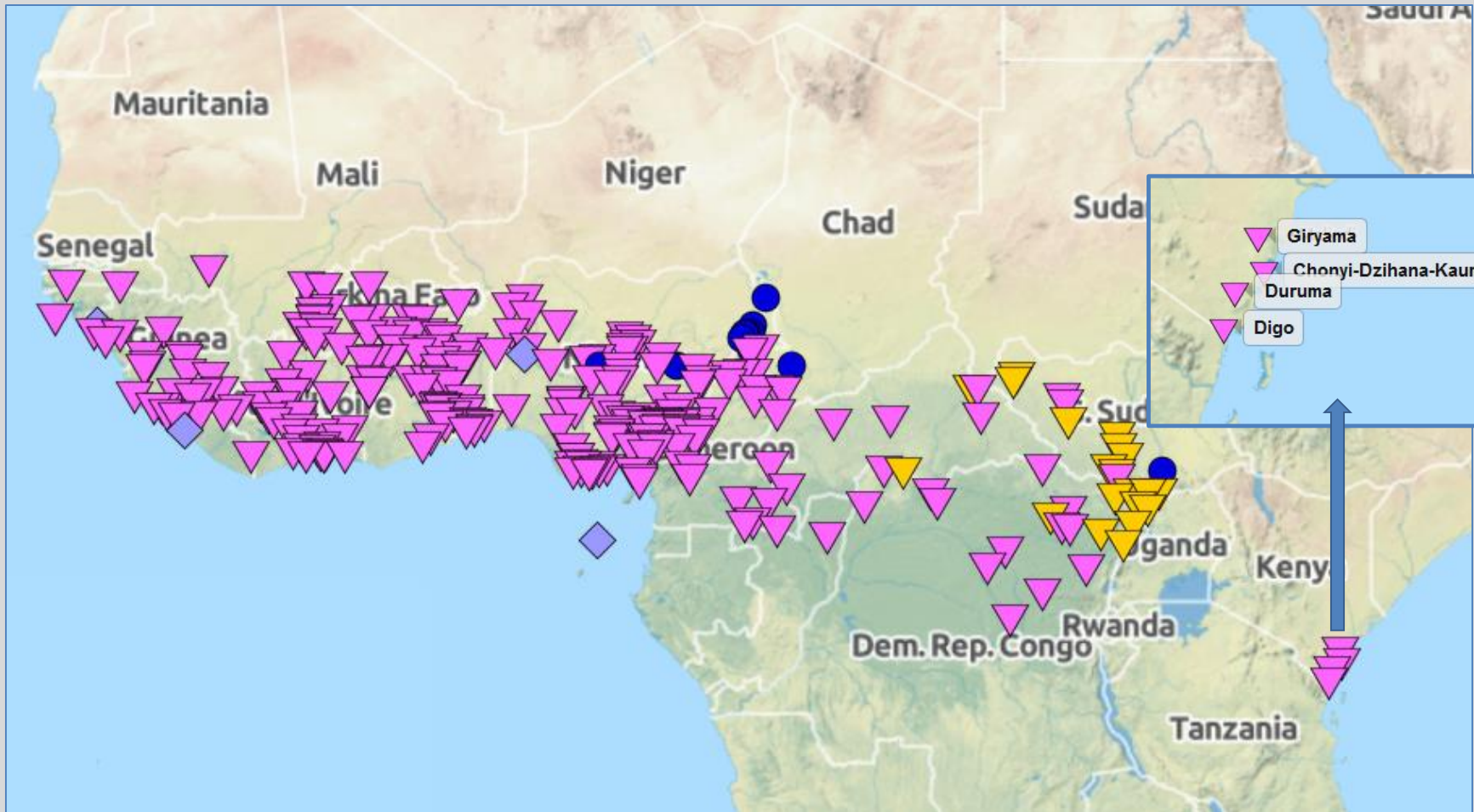- RefLex : http://www.reflex.cnrs.fr

LAPSYD: 14 lgs

WALS: 43 lgs (yellow)

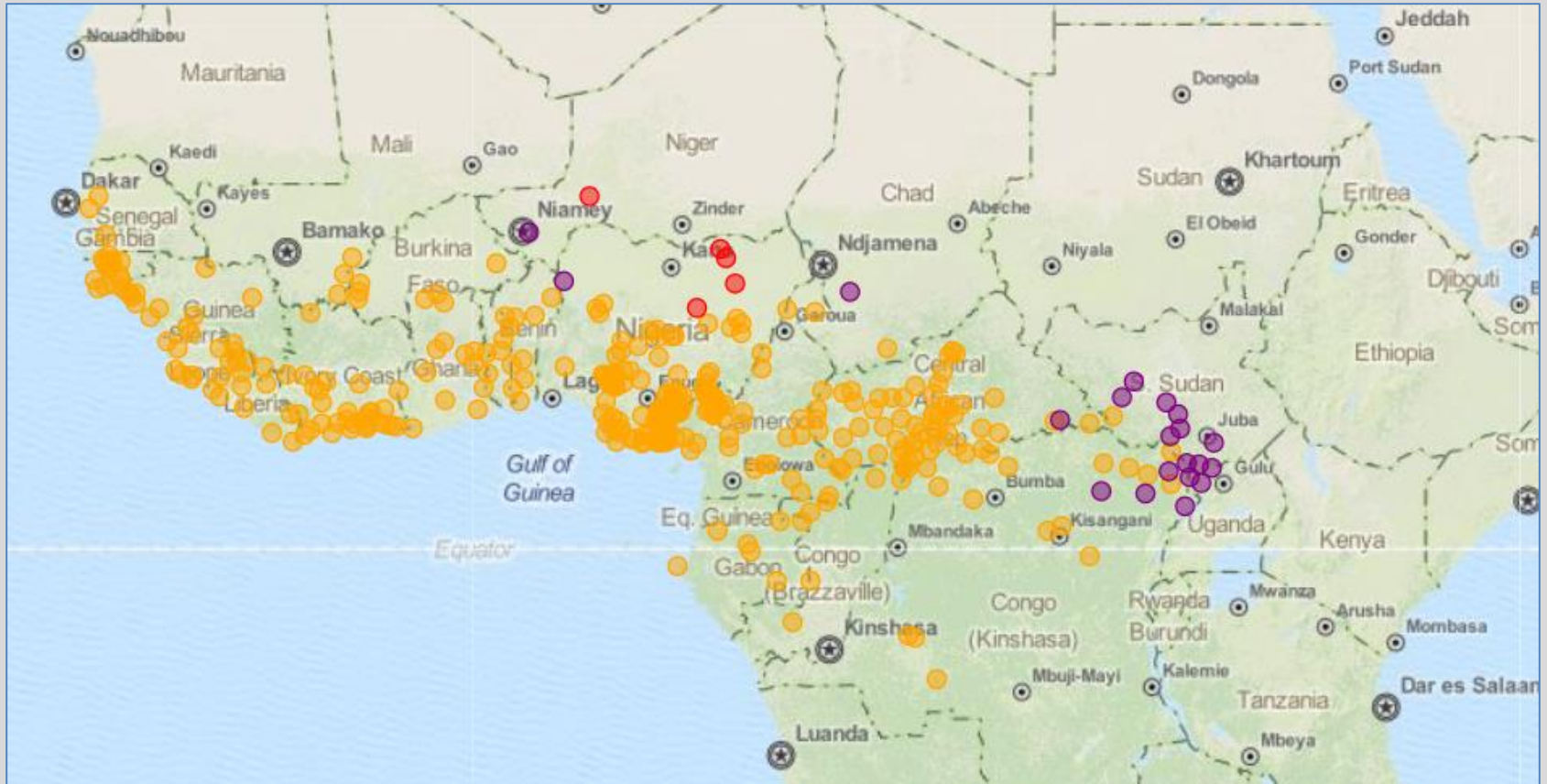**Feature 19A: Presence of Uncommon Consonants**

PHOIBLE: 315 lgs

distribution of gb only (combined distribution of gb and kp impossible to display)

REFLEX: 361 lgs

DBs drawbacks for the current purpose

- LAPSYD : not suitable for quantitative analyses
- WALS : misleading (we'll see why later)
- PHOIBLE : limited display possibilities
- RefLex : lexicon-based > needs manual tuning

- None of these have data on **ALL** lgs
- None of these can display lgs **WITHOUT** LVs

Summary of the data

552 languages

(in the databases)

have labial-velar consonants

Summary of the data

552 languages

	PHOIBLE	RefLex	
	191	237	428
		124	124
Total	315	361	**552**

What you can get from databases

It depends on:

- What you are looking for

- What databases actually contain

- What databases allow you to look for

Gaps in the data

- Hard to evaluate the exact number of missing languages

- Hard to evaluate if data is available for those languages

Problems / Solutions

- False positives : Limba

- False negatives : Ikwere

- Inconsistencies : Fang

- Mistakes : Bassari (Ncam)

Limba (NC, unclass.)

- Only 9 words (out of 4500) : dagba, hudigbɔ, kudagbala, kuligbi, kusagbi, kusegbi, kutagba, kutegbe, nalegbe

- Only gb

- Never stem-initial

- mostly class ku- nouns

>> probable borrowings (although the source could not be found yet)

Ikwere (NC, Igboid)

- no LV in Phoible

BUT (Clements & Osu 2005):

- ḅ and ʔḅ are reflexes of *gb and *kp
- ḅ and ʔḅ are written gb and kp in the orthography

Should one include Ikwere in the list?

Fang (NC, Bantu A75)

- kp & gb present in Phoible

BUT:

- no LV in Galley (1964)
- kp & ngb in Meguedo (1991)
- kp, ngb & nkp in Mba Nkoghe (1999)
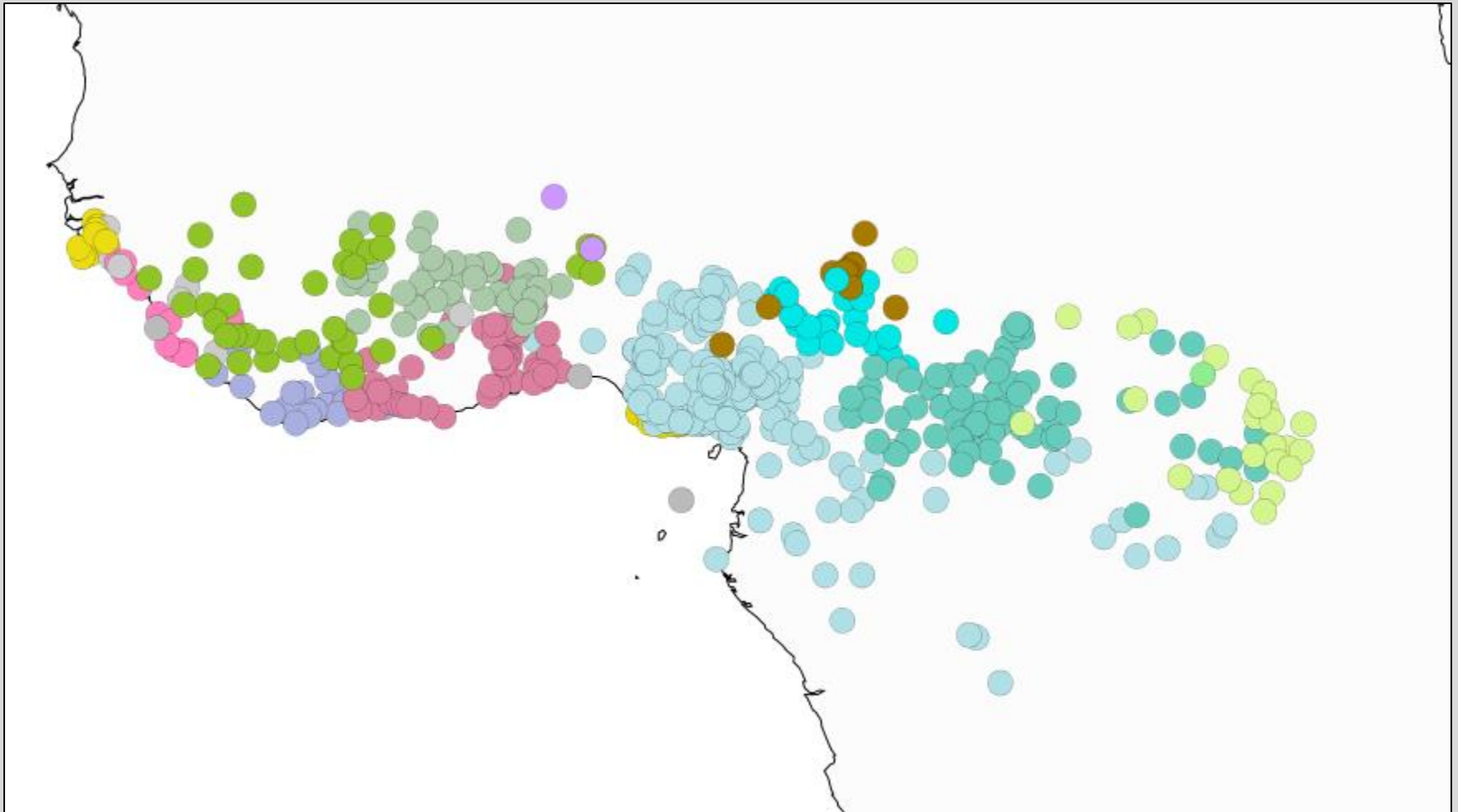
Bassari (Ncam)

Two languages are known in the literature under the name Bassari:

- Bassari of Senegal (Onyan) : Atlantic
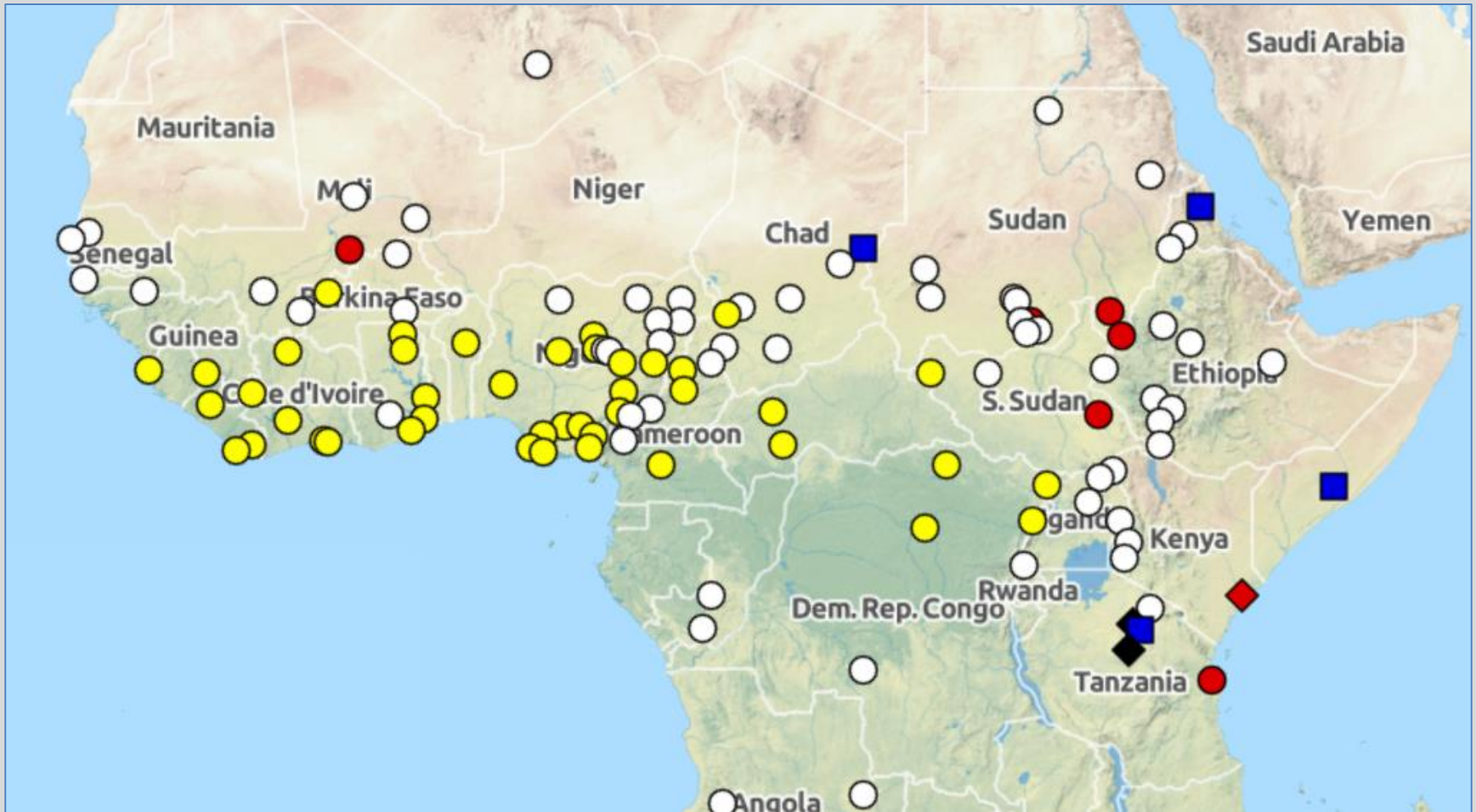
- Bassari of Burkina Faso (Ncam) : Gur

They are commonly mistaken.

In Phoible, the Ncam inventory is attributed to Onyan > Onyan is supposed to have **kp** and **gb**, which is **not** the case (Ferry 1968).
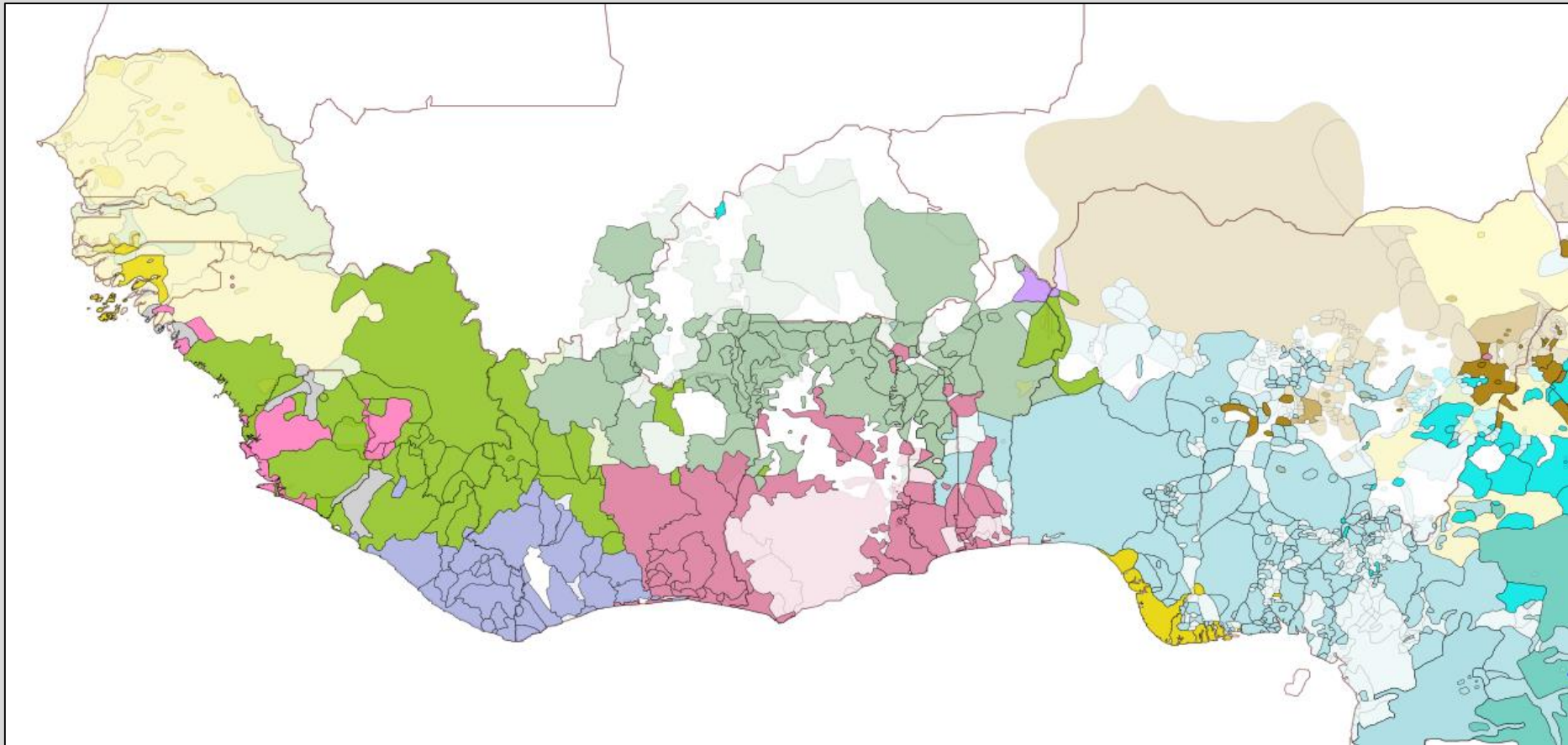
Distribution of LV in Western Africa

WALS: 43 lgs (yellow)

Feature 19A: Presence of Uncommon Consonants

Distribution of LV in Western Africa

References

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Thank you！
ありがとうございます