

Verbal stem-gradation in Proto-Dogon

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The internal genetic structure of the Dogon family is slowly becoming clearer. There appears to be a primary binary division into eastern and western, both of which have subdivisions.

- (1) Eastern Dogon (uninterrupted)
 - Toro Tegu
 - mainstream Jamsay, montane Jamsay (e.g. Pergué), Togo Kan, Tengou Kan, Guimri Kan, Woru Kan
 - Ben Tey (Beni), Bankan Tey (Walo), Nanga
 - Tommo So, Donno So
 - Toro So group (Yorno So, Sangha So, Ibi So, etc.)
 - Tomo Kan

- (2) Western Dogon, in two geographic (not necessarily genetic) clusters
 - a) eastern cliffs
 - Yanda Dom
 - Tebul Ure
 - b) western cliffs
 - Najamba, Kindigué
 - Tiranige (Duleri)
 - Dogul Dom
 - SW Dogon: Bunoge Mombo, Ampari, Penange

In addition to sound changes and lexicon, key diachronic issues bearing on Proto-Dogon include verbal derivation (causative, mediopassive, etc.), verbal inflection (stem-gradation, inflectional suffixes, auxiliaries, lexical and grammatical tones), pronominals (independent, clitic, and affixal), nominal suffixation or stem-gradation (e.g. animate/inanimate, singular/plural, sometimes more than one inanimate class), possession, focalization, relativization, and NP tonosyntax.

This talk focuses on verbal inflection, especially the role of stem-gradation, which may suggest wider Niger-Congo (especially Gur) connections. Stem-gradation refers to vocalic alternations, either in the form of final-vowel **mutation** or stem-wide **ablaut** (the latter involving ATR harmony). The 7 vowels distinguish \pm ATR only at mid-height: high {i u}, mid-height {e ε o ɔ}, low a.

CvCv is the prototypical shape for verb stems, though others (Cv:, Cv:Cv, CvNCv, CvCvCv, etc.) are also possible. Regularly occurring CvCv vocalisms are in (3).

- (3)
 - a. identical non-high vowels: CeCe, CεCε, CoCo, CɔCɔ, CaCa
 - b. high-mid sequences agreeing in backness/rounding: CiCe, CiCε, CuCo, CuCɔ

Using the types in (3a), typical stem-gradation patterns that appear to be reconstructible for Proto-Dogon are those in (4).

(4)	bare stem:	CeCe	CεCε	CoCo	CɔCɔ	CaCa
	I/U-stem:	CeCi/u	CεCi/u	CoCi/u	CɔCi/u	CaCi/u
	E-stem:	CeCe	CεCε	CoCe	CɔCε	CaCe/ε
	A/O-stem:	CeCo	Cε/eCa	CoCo	Cɔ/oCa	CaCa/o

There is much variation among Dogon languages as to the set of stem-grades distinguished and their grammatical functions, making reconstruction difficult. At one extreme, Jamsay has no productive stem-gradation, basing all verbal inflections on the bare stem, except that an LH-toned form of the U-stem functions as verbal noun. At the other extreme is Penange, which lacks a lexically primary bare stem, but has distinct O-, A/O-, and A-stems corresponding to the A/O-stem in (4), in addition to an E-stem and distinct I- and U-stems.

Languages that have some variant of the A/O-stem disagree as to whether it is characterized by final vowel-mutation only, or whether nonfinal -ATR vowels are simultaneously ablauted to +ATR. The relevant cells in (4) are Cε/eCa for bare stem CεCε and Cɔ/oCa for bare stem CɔCɔ. A further complication is that several Dogon languages distinguish two major verb classes, in one of which (typically including all prosodically “heavy” stems plus some others) the I/U-stem corresponds functionally to the bare stem and E-stem of the other class.

The E-stem may disappear entirely (Jamsay), or conversely it may spread and become lexically basic (Donno So). However, evidence from several languages points to a diachronic locus in the otherwise inflectionally unsuffixed perfective positive paradigm. In some languages it is specific to the 3Sg subject (or generalized Sg subject) in this paradigm. The A/O-stem commonly functions, in the absence of further inflectional suffixes, as imperative positive, and is also common before marked inflectional suffixes (perfective negative, imperfective negative, imperfective positive). Strikingly, there is also some evidence that the A/O-stem occurred in the 3Pl subject perfective positive.

Reconstruction of verbal stem-grades must therefore be articulated with that of pronominal-subject marking, which in the daughter languages ranges from outer suffixes on the verb, through enclitics and proclitics, to English-like clause-initial pronouns.

Reconstruction of the Proto-Dogon E-stem as a simple perfective may lead to wider connections in Niger-Congo, particularly with Gur languages. Verbs in Tiefo (SW Burkina), for example, have a binary perfective/imperfective stem split, and in many cases the perfective shows final vowel-mutation to e/ε. I hope to learn of other possible connections.