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Tonal Correspondences with Proto-Bantu

The purpose of this talk is to trace tonal correspondences between the widely accepted reconstructed tones of Proto-Bantu lexical morphemes (Meeussen 1980, Bantu Lexical Reconstructions 3) outside of Narrow Bantu proper. From the reconstructions of Proto-Grassfields Bantu (Hyman 1979, Elias et al 1984) we know that that the tones of noun stems and verb roots largely correspond (but with some differences), and we suspect that this may be true in other subgroups within Bantoid. The question which we propose to address in this paper is: How far out from Bantu and Bantoid do these tones reliably correspond? This is a timely question as we now have access to both data and analyses of numerous Bantoid and Benue-Congo languages. We will start by identifying a set of reconstructed Proto-Bantu noun and verb forms that are known to have widespread cognates elsewhere in Niger-Congo, e.g. from Mukarovsky's (1966-7) Proto-Nigritic. We will then compare these reconstructed tones with selected Bantoid languages and subgroups (Grassfields, Ekoid, Mambiloid, Tivoid etc.). After this we will venture outside Bantoid to other Benue-Congo, especially Cross-River. Depending on how this goes, we will venture further out. While we have already begun some preliminary examination of limited data, and have contacted a couple of colleagues to get their input and try to determine what is known about proto tone in different groups, the bulk of the study will take place in late spring and over the summer. As part of the introduction of the problem, we will highlight methodological issues that will undoubtedly arise, particularly in interpreting the data. Among these are the following initial concerns about each of the two word classes:

(i) For nouns, the stem tone is often affected by the noun class marker, usually a prefix, but sometimes a suffix. While noun class prefixes are reconstructed as *L in Proto-Bantu, the augment had a H tone which often shifts onto the noun stem even in Narrow Bantu. Once we move a little further out, Proto-Western Grassfields Bantu is reconstructed with mostly *H noun class prefixes. Given de Wolf's (1971) reconstruction of different tones on Benue-Congo prefixes, if noun classes have merged here and there, with *H or *L fusing onto the noun stems, this could complicate our ability to detect regular tonal correspondences. A second problem will occur in languages which have lost the second syllable of the mostly bisyllabic Proto-Bantu noun stems.

(ii) For verbs, the problem is even more acute for two reasons: First, it is well-known that many Niger-Congo languages do not have a lexical tonal contrast on verb roots. This is found in some Narrow Bantu languages which have lost the *H vs. *L contrast, but also in Edoid, Akan etc. Instead, tones are assigned by the morphology (tense-aspect-mood-negation etc.). Such languages will therefore be largely irrelevant to the search for tonal correspondences with Proto-Bantu lexical verb tones. We therefore will focus on languages that do have such a contrast. The second problem is that verb tones are heavily affected by these TAM markers, which differ significantly from language to language.

Our assumption is that it will be easiest (and perhaps most productive) to test for regular tonal correspondences between languages that have only (underlying) H and L tones, the assumed situation in Proto-Bantu. This would suggest considering the Proto-Igboid work of Williamson et al (2013), which we will do. However, it may be more difficult to have confidence in identifying cognates as Igboid has reduced Proto-Benue-Congo forms to CV roots. We therefore will first look at languages which have maintained a sizeable number of CVC roots, e.g. within Cross-River, often thought to be the closest sub-branch to Bantoid. While we cannot be assured of success in identifying regular correspondences outside of Bantoid, we do expect interesting

results and a possible contribution to methodology required in doing tonal reconstruction—and its possible relevance for subgrouping.