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Campus Westend, SKW-Gebäude, 5. OG, B118

Einladung zum Vortrag

Antti Laine & Stephan Schulz, University of Helsinki

The vowel system of Ishenyi (JE45) – an account of variation and change

Ishenyi (also *Isenye*) is a Lacustrine Bantu language spoken in the diverse Mara region of Tanzania. With its neighbours Ikoma, Nata (JE45/ntk together with Ishenyi) and Ngoreme (JE401/ngq), it forms a tightly-knit group called Western Serengeti (WS; cf. Roth 2018; Laine 2023). Around a dozen other Bantu languages are spoken in the Mara region, along with the Nilotic Luo and Datooga. Most Mara Bantu languages have a 7-vowel system with a distinction best described in terms of ATR (Advanced Tongue Root) in either the mid or high vowels. Such a system, along with complex and somewhat unusual vowel harmony processes, was described for Ikoma by Higgins (2012). On the other hand, there are other languages in the area where the vowel system is undergoing changes: Ngoreme, for example, has neutralized ATR distinctions in verb stems, but operates a 7-vowel system in nouns, and Zanaki (JE45) has variation between a 7-vowel system and a symmetric 10-vowel system reminiscent of Nilotic languages (Aunio et al. 2019).

The vowel system of Ishenyi also seems to be in flux: 7-vowel patterns and harmony processes akin to those found in Ikoma are attested to an extent, but there is also a great deal of variation and inconsistency in both vowel qualities and harmonies, with a general tendency to level the mid-vowel ATR distinctions. However, Ishenyi also has something resembling –ATR high vowels, though the exact quality of them has been difficult to measure. These unusual vowels occur as morphologically conditioned allophones of the +ATR mid-vowels /e o/ in verb stems combining with certain derivational suffixes, but they seem to elude description in terms of ATR harmony.

This talk accounts for the Ishenyi vowel (harmony) system, and the variation and inconsistency therein, discussing the break-up of a formerly stable state of affairs and its implications for the relevance of ATR as a descriptive concept. In addition to the synchronic description of Ishenyi, we provide comparative data both from Ikoma, with its stable vowel system, and from proposed Proto-Bantu reconstructions, thus attempting a robust diachronic account of the attested WS systems.

References

- Aunio, Lotta, Holly Robinson, Tim Roth, Oliver Stegen & John B. Walker. 2019. The Mara languages JE40. In Mark van de Velde, Koen Bostoen, Derek Nurse & Gérard Philippson (eds.), *The Bantu Languages*, 2nd edition. 501-532. London & New York: Routledge.
- Higgins, Holly Ann. 2012. *Ikoma Vowel Harmony: Phonetics and Phonology*. SIL e-Books, 43. Dallas: SIL International.
- Laine, Antti Olavi. 2023 [accepted]. *Microvariation in Western Serengeti: Comparative Morphosyntax of Ikoma, Ishenyi, Nata and Ngoreme*. University of Helsinki PhD dissertation.
- Roth, Tim. 2018. *Tense and aspect in Ikoma and Ngoreme*. University of Helsinki PhD dissertation