

Irregular sound change in Bantu

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In Bantu, especially in the northwest (Janssens 1993), but not only (Kanyamwiba 1982; Botne 1992; Bostoen 2009), one proto-consonant may have two or more recurrent reflexes without a clear phonological conditioning, a situation referred to as “double reflexes” (see, e.g., Van Leynseele and Stewart 1980; Janssens 1993; Teil-Dautrey 2008; Philippon 2022) or “multiple unconditioned reflexes” (Pacchiarotti and Bostoen 2022).

Two mutually exclusive diachronic scenarios have been proposed to explain this apparent violation of Neogrammarian regularity of sound change: phonemic merger vs. phonemic split. In the merger scenario, the Proto-Bantu sound system had more contrasts than those reconstructed, namely, a contrast between fortis and lenis consonants responsible for the double reflexes and reconstructible not only to PB but higher up in Niger-Congo (Stewart 1973, 1989, 1993). In the split scenario, it is assumed that the consonant displaying two or more reflexes underwent a divergent evolution determined by a conditioning that got lost (Guthrie 1967: 58; Nsuka-Nkutsi 1980; Mieke 1989; Janssens 1991, 1993). Most relevant research did not contain sufficient data to assess these hypotheses.

Few recent studies based on larger datasets show a mixed situation. In the northwest, double reflexes of PB voiced stops in stem-initial (C1) position can be shown to adhere to the split scenario with tone as a conditioning factor, while double reflexes of PB voiceless stops in the same position have no identifiable conditioning and are thus true instances of irregular sound change (Philippon 2022). Further south, West-Coastal Bantu has been shown to display occasionally two reflexes of Proto-Bantu velar stops (*k and *g) in C1 position, while the same protosounds display up to three reflexes in C2 position without any apparent conditioning. In a West-Coastal Bantu subgroup, PB *ŋg also undergoes an unexplainable and incomplete lenition chain *ŋg > ŋ > Ø (Pacchiarotti et al. 2024). Both cases illustrate a deviation from Neogrammarian regularity in sound change (Pacchiarotti and Bostoen 2022). Proposed explanations include lexical diffusion à la Wang (1969) (Pacchiarotti and Bostoen 2022: 409-411; Philippon 2022: 40; Pacchiarotti et al. 2024: 40-46), substrate interference, multilingualism, and spread-over-spread events (Pacchiarotti and Bostoen 2022: 411-417).

Despite these recent, data-driven, and localized attempts to understand the phenomenon, we lack a Bantu-wide view. Hence, we invite bottom-up case studies of consonantal double/multiple reflexes shedding light on the following questions:

1) Is your case really a case of double/multiple unconditioned reflexes? Or is it possible to identify a diachronic conditioning environment (synchronically no longer operating)? What was the phonetic motivation (if any) for this diachronic conditioning?

2) In cases without diachronic conditioning, we are interested in the following aspects:

- a. How many reflexes does one and the same protosound have?
- b. What is their frequency in the lexicon?
- c. What is the phonotactic position within the stem to which double/multiple reflexes apply?

- d. Which Proto-Bantu consonants recurrently have double/multiple reflexes?
- e. What parallels and differences are there with respect to (d) in the northwest vs. other areas?
- f. Do these irregularities require revising reconstructions in BLR3?
- g. What do these irregularities tell us about the phonetics of the protosounds?

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