

A functional status of a foot in Gouro

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Gouro belongs to the South Mande group of a Niger-Congo language family. It has a complicated tonal system (3 contour tones and 2 modulated tones) and a rich vowel system (4 +ATR vowels, 4 –ATR vowels, 1 neutral oral vowel, 5 nasal vowels).

Tone and vowel combinations within morphemes and wordforms are not restricted in terms of absolute phonetic laws, though one observes certain phono- and tonotactic tendencies. Thus, the most typical lexical morpheme in Gouro has a structure CVLV (C – any consonant, L – a consonant l; both vowels are identical and carry contour tones in certain combinations). The second widespread structure (especially typical for pronouns, auxiliaries, grammatical morphemes) is a monosyllable (C)V.

Past and present development of Gouro manifests a powerful dynamic trend for reduction towards these two types of structures, especially to CVLV. This reduction is not chaotic, it passes several stages following certain phonetic rules: 1) intervocalic clusters turn into l; 2) single consonants turn into l, w or drop out; 3) phoneme l undergoes phonetic assimilation with vowels and consonants in the same foot; 4) nearby vowels assimilate and utterly merge into one vowel; 5) vowels divided by a consonant assimilate utterly becoming identical.

The reduction level of a sequence correlates with its idiomaticity level. In synchrony, sequences at any stage of this ‘footization’ process are found in the language. Thus, there’s no clear border between feet and non-feet in Gouro.

Disyllabic sequences undergoing phonetic reduction to a monosyllable [CLV] or [C^wV] (the tone contour of a disyllable remains the same) are ‘indisputable feet’. Other types of idiomatic phonemic sequences (simple words, composite words, phrases) are on their way to a foot, more or less close to it. In turn, a foot in Gouro becomes an intermediate stage towards a monosyllabic language organization.