

The mutable and non-mutable vowels of Kikamba; a Bantu language

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Kikamba is Bantu Language spoken in the Eastern Province of the Republic of Kenya. Like many other Bantu Languages neighbouring it, Kikamba has a seven vowel system. These vowels display vowel length characteristics where each has a short or long distinction thus doubling the number from seven to fourteen. The language also experiences consonant deletion and vowel stringing. The phenomena of consonant loss in this language is important in accounting for vowel clustering but Kikamba vowels seem to belong to an unpredictable series of mutable and non-mutable sets.

Research has found this phenomenon of mutable non mutable vowels is responsible for constant deletion which leads to the formation of vowel clusters in certain environments of occurrence and may also lead to glide formation in other environments, replacing certain consonants. This behavior is related to vowel harmony, and in this language it is found to cause constant deletion and to create long clusters of vowels. However, it is not obvious why some vowels are mutable allowing for consonant deletion and others are non mutable, blocking consonant deletion and instead creating glide formation.

In this paper I will use Kikamba data to discuss the phenomenon of mutable and non-mutable vowels in the language and further, through a discussion, show the relationship this phenomenon bears to regular phonological processes in the language.