

Tone loss in Tooro, a West Ugandan Bantu language

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Although most Bantu languages can be characterized as tonal or accentual, some are found to have lost their tone. Standard Swahili is a well-known example, but Tooro, which is spoken in Western Uganda, is also such a language.

In Western Uganda, Bantu languages such as Nyoro, Tooro, Nkore, Kiga are spoken. These languages and some neighboring Tanzanian languages like Haya are closely related and sometimes grouped under one label (Kitara, for example). However, with respect to their tone, they display a striking difference. Especially it is noteworthy that Tooro has lost its tone; penultimate syllables of phonological phrases are always pronounced high.

I have been investigating how this tone loss has happened in Tooro, taking into consideration tonal phenomena of Tooro itself and neighboring languages from a comparative perspective.

Whereas Haya and Nkore have a high tone in different positions in a word, Tooro uniformly has a high tone on penultimate syllables of words. We also find that although Nkore, like Haya, still keeps the underlying difference of the...HL pattern and the ...HL pattern, these two patterns merge in isolation in Nkore and become ...HL, which is the toneless Tooro pattern.

It is also interesting to find that low tone words of Haya and Nkore have high tone on penultimate syllables in Tooro and antepenultimate syllables in Nyoro.

The tendency is that the tone system becomes simpler as we proceed from south to north. This may have something to do with the fact that these languages are the northernmost Bantu languages in this area, and have been in contact with Luo languages such as Acholi, Lango, Alur, etc. But this is out of scope of the present study. I base my argumentation on internal facts of the languages under investigation.