

## **Pharyngealized vowels in Kwasio (Bantu A80): A case of de-voicing?**

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Kwasio is a Bantu A80 language spoken in the South Province of Cameroon, crossing over into Equatorial Guinea and Gabon. Alongside the basic system of seven vowels (which can be long, short, or nasalized) are a series of five “pharyngealized vowels.”

How should these vowels be characterized? They have been described variously as “pharyngealized” (Yemmene 2004), “expired or aspirated” (Woungly-Massaga 1973:18), “with a pharyngeal off-glide” (Beavon 2006), or “reduced and followed by an almost imperceptible pharyngeal fricative” (Lemb 1975:5). All of these descriptions consider that a feature has been added to the vowel. Another plausible description, considered here, is that there has been partial devoicing.

The vowels do not have phonemic status. Although it is not obvious from the first glance, they are related to the complex distribution pattern of the allophones of the velar stops /k/ and /g/.

Note that in the final position, the velar has been either: (1) reduced to an offglide on the preceding vowel; or (2) deleted, leaving the quality of pharyngealization on the preceding vowel.

Is this a case of the quality of pharyngealization as a place feature spreading from a deleted consonant to the preceding vowel? Or are the vowels partially devoiced due to a word-final devoicing rule?

Several approaches will be brought to bear: studies in acoustic phonetics, studies of cognates in other Bantu A80 languages, and comparison with vowel devoicing in two Bantu A40 languages: Tunen and Nomaande.