

Why do Bantu languages prefer a bisyllabic verb stem template?

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In the majority of Bantu languages, the verb stem is bisyllabic. The following paradigms are universal : -CVC-, -CVVC-, -CVVNC-, -VVC-, or -VVNC-. Monosyllabic verbs are also found but can be only counted on fingers. Polysyllabic stems are numerous of course but as a result of verbal extensions which are either derivational (lexical suffixes) or inflectional (grammatical morphemes).

What is interesting, however, is that nouns can be monosyllabic, bisyllabic or polysyllabic. Thousands of words consisting of only one syllable abound.

It is also interesting to note that many phonological, morphological phenomena are governed, dictated or constrained by this bisyllabic template.

In Kinyarwanda, for instance, tones are assigned only to the first mora of the verb stem or the second mora of the second syllable. The domain after the first mora of the second syllable is extraprosodic. All syllables there are toneless. and no tonal activity takes place there.

Only bisyllabic verb stems can undergo reduplication. Monosyllabic and polysyllabic verbs can't.

Monosyllabic verbs become bisyllabic by the addition of consonants or vowel lengthening when they occur in the passive form or carry a perfective aspect morpheme.

Monosyllabic verbs have the vowel *i* added when they occur in the imperative form. In Swahili, monosyllabic verbs have to have the infinitive prefix *ku-* added in certain tenses.

Certain suffixes have to reduplicate when they are added to monosyllabic verb stems.

In polysyllabic verb stems, no high vowels (*i* and *u*) are found in syllables which immediately follow syllables containing their respective mid vowels (*e* and *o*). Thus we find verbs of the type *gutégeka* 'to rule/lead/command' but not **gutégika*; *gutóbora* 'to pierce' but not **gutóbura*. This shows that all the linguistic material that appear after the second syllable, are all suffixes and not of the verb root. The mid vowels never in both derivational and inflectional suffixes. They are found there only at the phonetic level due to vowel harmony.

These are just few examples which show that many linguistic phenomena are only sensitive to the bisyllabic template.

This paper is intended to stimulate a discussion on the implication of these observations. For instance, this phenomenon may shed light on the genesis of

verbal extensions in Bantu and how they can be reconstructed..It might also have interesting implications on linguistic typology and linguistic universals. It is these issues that this paper wants to explore.