

## Correlates of restructuring in Bantu gender systems

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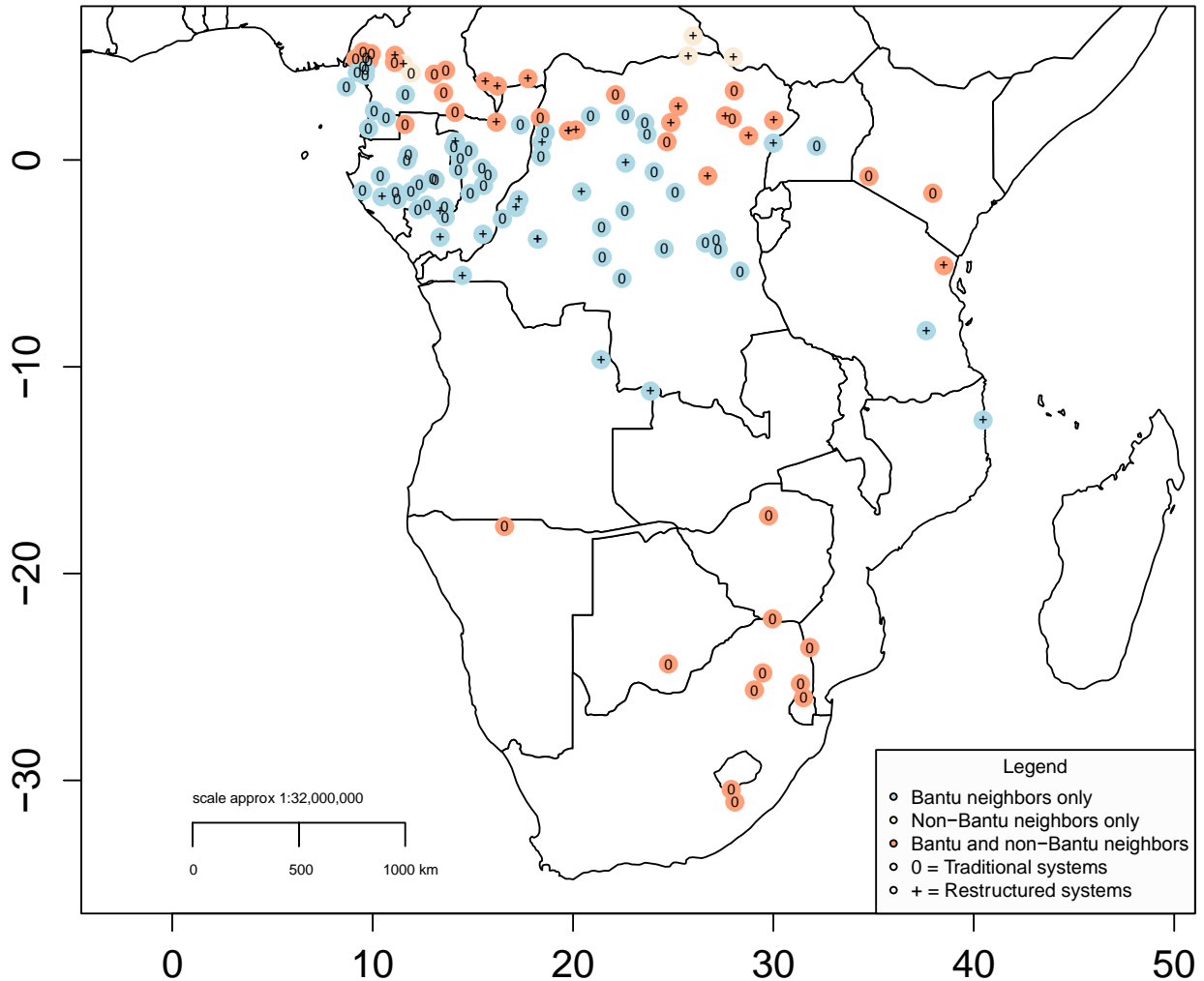
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The Bantu languages are well known for their remarkable gender systems (a.k.a. noun class systems). These are non-sex-based and typically consist of more than five distinctions with semantic and formal assignment. Gender markers are prefixal, they display cumulative exponence with number, and are very pervasive in discourse: nouns are overtly marked for gender, and various types of adnominal modifiers, pronouns, and predicative expressions inflect in agreement with the gender of nouns (Maho 1999, Katamba 2003). While this type of gender system is attested in most Bantu languages (e.g., Duala, ISO: dua), some languages within the family display instances of restructuring: partially animacy-based gender marking (e.g., Swahili, ISO: swh); heavily animacy-based gender marking (e.g., Kinshasa Lingala, ISO: lin), and no gender marking at all (e.g., Komo, ISO: kmw).

This paper is a diachronic typological study of the Bantu gender marking systems. The following questions are addressed: (1) what are the patterns of language change that account for the transition(s) from the Duala to the Swahili, Kinshasa Lingala, and Komo systems? (2) How do we explain this variation and its distribution? In order to answer these questions, we look at a sample of 120+ Bantu languages, the majority of which is spoken in the northernmost Bantu-speaking area, where heavily reduced systems are attested (Maho 1999). Each language is coded for: how many gender distinctions are marked on nouns and outside nouns; the word classes that carry gender marking besides nouns; whether (and where) animacy plays a role in the gender marking system; whether neighboring languages are Bantu, non-Bantu, both.

Some preliminary results are presented in the Figure. The sample languages are plotted based on two variables: “Traditional vs. Restructured systems” and “Genealogical affiliation of neighboring languages”. The map shows that, in the northernmost Bantu-speaking regions, languages with restructured systems (animacy-based and/or heavily reduced) tend to cluster geographically, and to be also surrounded by non-Bantu-speaking neighbors. This distribution is in line with Nichols’ (2003: 303) observation whereby “languages that lose gender are neighbors of each other and/or have non-sisters as neighbors”. However, contact with non-Bantu languages cannot be the only explanation. Restructured gender systems are also found further south, where they are surrounded by Bantu languages only. Furthermore, in the south, many languages with both Bantu and non-Bantu neighbors have traditional gender marking systems. In order to address these issues, we intend to study the emergence and distribution of restructured gender marking systems by means of phylogenetic comparative methods, using Grollemund et al.’s (2015) phylogenetic tree as a reference genealogy. We expect to find that animacy encroaches the gender marking system starting from anaphoric pronouns and gender markers on verbs, and that gender marking on nouns is more stable than gender marking on other word classes. In addition, we expect that a variety of demographic variables interacts with changes in the Bantu gender marking systems, e.g., contact with non-Bantu communities, number of second language speakers, and potential substrate effects from non-Bantu neighboring communities in the past.

## The language sample



### References

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