

Divergence and convergence in emergence of lateral obstruents in Shona (Bantu)

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This talk focuses on the emergence of lateral obstruents in Shona, a genealogical subgroup of Southern Bantu (Gunnink et al. 2022), whose languages are spoken in Zimbabwe and surrounding countries. Certain Shona varieties make use of lateral obstruents such as /ɬ/ and /ɮ/, as in the examples below.

	Coastal Ndau	Mhari-Nyubi
ɬ	ɬoya 'examine'	kuɬa 'to fear'
ɮ	ɮakama 'a name'	kuɮa 'eat'

Lateral obstruents are rare in Bantu and not reconstructed for Proto-Bantu, the family's most recent common ancestor (Meeussen 1967). Other Southern Bantu subgroups such as Sotho-Tswana, Nguni and Tsonga are well known for their lateral obstruents (ɬ, ɮ, ɬɬ, ɬɬ, ɬɬ, ɬɬ), which are typically reflexes of the reconstructed Proto-Bantu palatals *c and *j, possibly realized phonetically as [*ɬ] and [*ɬɬ] (Gunnink et al. 2022, Van der Vlugt 2023). The development of Shona lateral obstruents seems to be independent from the development in these other clades as Proto-Bantu *c and *j have different reflexes in Shona.

Proto-Bantu	Shona	Tswana	Pulana	Zulu	Phuthi	Tsonga
*ɬáànù 'five'	shanu ¹	ɬáánú	-kɬanu	ɬanu	ɬáánù	ⁿ ɬáanu
*N-ɬɬògù 'elephant'	nzou ¹	ɬòù	kɬ'óu	i ⁿ -ɬovu	i-ɬòvù	ⁿ ɬòpfu

This leads to the question how these Shona varieties developed lateral obstruents and what this can tell us about Shona language history. This research contributes to our understanding of the origin and diversification of Shona as a language cluster and its relation to Southern Bantu.

References

- Meeussen, A.E. 1967. Bantu Grammatical Reconstructions. *Africana Linguistica* 3. 80–121.
- Gunnink, H., K. Bostoen & N. Chousou-Polydouri. 2022. Divergence and contact in Southern Bantu languages and population history. *Language Dynamics and Change* 13(1). 74-131. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22105832-bja10022>
- Van der Vlugt, N. 2023. *The development of lateral obstruents in Nguni languages (S40, Southern Bantu): A diachronic study* [Master's thesis, Leiden University].

¹ In the Shona varieties of Karanga, Korekore, Manyika and Zezuru.