

Some Major Pathways of Grammaticalization in Africa

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Sub-Saharan Africa is an area for which hardly any earlier written documents are available. The student of African languages is therefore at a disadvantage when it comes to reconstructing processes of grammaticalization. That this is nevertheless possible has been demonstrated in a number of works (especially Heine and Reh 1984; Heine et al. 1991), using a conjunction of internal reconstruction and diachronic typological generalizations as a tool.

The present paper provides an overview of salient grammaticalization pathways to be observed on this continent. The observations made suggest that these pathways tend to pattern areally. On the one hand, there are pathways that affect only smaller groupings of languages; on the other hand, they affect sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, showing directions of grammatical change that are common throughout the continent. While most of these changes can also be observed occasionally in other parts of the world, they are distinctly more common in Africa. What these findings suggest is that, rather than being necessarily a language-internal process, grammaticalization tends to be influenced by language contact.