

## **The African "lax" question prosody: its realisations and areal distribution**

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African prosodic markers are quite diverse with a variety of high-pitched markers (downdrift reduction, raising of the last H, reduction or cancellation of final lowering, H tone or rising intonation) and of non high-pitched markers (L tone or falling intonation, polar tone, final lengthening, breathy termination, shortening of the penultimate syllable, open vowels). Some of these markers (L or falling intonation, final lengthening, breathy termination and [open] vowels) occur in various combinations in languages from various families throughout the Sudanic belt. We proposed that they are various facets of a "lax" prosody which might have a single historical origin (Rialland 2008, 2009). This talk focuses on this "lax" prosody.

Our data-base currently includes 54 languages with some form of "lax" prosody. First, we consider "lax" prosody within the Niger-Congo phylum, starting with the Gur family. All Gur languages in our data-base have some form of "lax" prosody. Phonetic realizations of "lax" prosodies involving breathy termination will be studied in several Gur languages (Moba, Wulé-Dagara, Kabiye).

We then consider the Kru family in which "lax" prosody also exhibits various forms resulting from diverse combinations of its components. Some form of "lax" prosody occurs in almost all languages of this group in our database. In the Mande family, "lax" prosody is less common. Special attention will be given to Bambara which includes, besides the "lax" prosodic marker *-àa* with lengthening and falling intonation, a rising question marker. In the Kwa family, L floating tones or the low-toned vowel *-à* occurs in almost all languages. In the Adamawa-Ubangi, Ijoid, and Benue-Congo families, the "lax" prosody is also well represented; however, we have not found it in the Bantu family, except in some languages located on the fringe of the Sudanic Belt.

The "lax" prosody is not restricted to the Niger-Congo phylum. Forms of "lax" prosody and types of "hybrid" prosodies ("lax" prosodies associated with the reduction of downdrift) are widespread in the Chadic family of the Afro-Asiatic phylum. Within the Nilo-Saharan phylum, they are particularly common among the Central Sudanic languages and they are also found in the Eastern Sudanic family alongside languages with high-pitched markers.

Thus, the "lax" prosody is an areal phenomenon found in three different language phyla across the "Sudanic belt", the vast savanna region extending from the Atlantic ocean to the Ethiopian-Eritrean highlands. Its geographical extension brings additional arguments in favor of considering the "Sudanic belt" as a linguistic area. Within this area, the distribution of the "lax" prosody will be compared with the occurrence of other characteristics found in the area, such as implosive consonants, labial-velar consonants, ATR harmony systems (Clements and Rialland, 2008).