

## **Approaches to the Bantu Melodic H**

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Many Bantu tone systems are characterized by the ‘melodic H’, a high tone that is assigned to verbs in a particular tense/aspect/mood (TAM) category. Melodic tone patterns are rich, extremely complex, and varied – both across languages and within languages. The intersection in Bantu languages of (1) complex tonal phonology that applies when tones from various sources come into contact, (2) underlying tone contrasts on verb stems and affixes, and (3) a large number of distinct TAM categories (each of which can assign a melodic H to various phonologically or morphologically defined positions in the verb) results in tonal patterns on verbs that are so complex that they often defy a straightforward analysis and cause us to question whether such systems can possibly be stable historically. The analysis of such a tone system typically involves the assignment of melodic H tones by rules specific to the TAM category, followed by the application of a series of regular phonological tone rules, some of which may be morphologically restricted (whether by applying only in certain TAM categories, or by specifying that the H tone trigger and/or target must come from a particular source). In response to such an analysis, questions are often posed as to whether the entire system could be analyzed in morphological terms rather than via this mix of phonological and morphological factors. For example, if a language appears to have a TAM category that assigns a H tone to the third mora of the verb stem, why not say instead that the TAM category is marked by a /LLH/ tonal morpheme? And if a language appears to have a phonological rule specific to some TAM categories that deletes the H of a stem, why not say instead that those TAM categories have a /L/ tonal morpheme?

In this paper, I evaluate competing approaches to melodic Hs in Bantu, focusing on a few specific cases including Kuria and Maragoli, and considering in particular the tradeoffs in complexity between the phonology and morphology in the different possible analyses. The discussion will also take into account melodic H patterns from a wide variety of other Bantu languages – an endeavor that has recently been made much easier thanks to the publication of a special edition of *Africana Linguistica* (volume XX) dedicated to data-rich descriptions of melodic tone patterns in Bantu. The publication of that volume in a sense makes this ‘the year of the melodic H’ (in the words of Bickmore 2015) and a good time to consider whether a unified approach is possible for melodic tones in Bantu and, if so, what it should look like.

### **References**

Bickmore, Lee. 2015. Tones gone crazy: The adventures of the melodic tone in Bantu. Plenary lecture given at the 46<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on African Linguistics, University of Oregon.