

Vowel harmony and vowel merger in Yukuben

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Abstract

In this paper I present a nice little case of local and non-local vowel assimilation that once again shows how rock-solid the I, U, A elements for vowels are. (Here I leave aside questions of the precise representation of A.) Yukuben, a Jukunoid language of Nigeria and Cameroon, superficially has a surprisingly large number of noun-class prefixes and proclitic 3sg. subject pronouns. The former all have the phonetic shape (C)V, where C is one of {b,k} and V one of {i,e,a,o,u}, i.e. the entire set of oral vowels. All logically possible combination of (C)V occur. The proclitic 3sg. subject pronouns have the shape V, and... what else?... V can be any of the 5 vowels.

This apparent free-for-all is nevertheless highly structured, and when VH from the stem vowel to the prefix vowel is taken into consideration, a clearer picture emerges. However, some prefixes still have unexpected mid vowels where high ones would be expected, and they seem to be immune to VH. These can be explained by a floating A element at the left edge of the stem, which merges with the prefix vowel (resulting in *e* from *i*, *o* from *u*, and *a* unchanged).

Taking all this into account, the true phonological shape and number of the Yukuben NC prefixes and proclitic 3sg. subject pronouns is revealed.

Link

<http://www.univie.ac.at/linguistics/yukuben/>