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Documenting Luyia Together: Noun Tone in Tiriki

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Tiriki is an understudied member of the Luyia language cluster of western Kenya. The research presented here has been carried out by Quinn Cunningham and Michael Marlo, using data provided by Tiriki speaker Kelvin Alulu and building on prior research by Marlo and Alulu. This presentation updates the results of our research presented at the 2020 Fall Forum.

Over the past several months, we have been working to tonally transcribe and categorize the tonal patterns of approximately 2000 Tiriki nouns with one or two syllables. We have determined that noun stems with one syllable have one of two patterns: LL (*mu-nwa* 'mouth') or HL (*mú-ŋ wi* 'head'). (L stands for low tone; H stands for high tone; high tones are marked with an acute accent; the noun class prefix is set off from the noun stem with a hyphen.) Noun stems with two syllables show more patterns. When the stem-initial vowel is short, there are three patterns: LLL (*mu-limi* 'farmer'), HHL (*mú-xáli* 'woman'), or H⁺HLL (*má⁺-ŋéle* 'frogs'). (* indicates that the pitch of following high tone is lowered.) When the stem-initial vowel is long, there are two additional patterns that differ in whether the penultimate vowel has a level H tone (HH) or a falling tone (HL): LLLL (*mu-koongo* 'back'), HHLL (*mú-xáana* 'girl'), HHHL (*mú-sáála* 'tree'), H⁺HLL (*vú⁺-lwáale* 'sickness'), or H⁺HHL (*í⁺-símbwa* 'dog').

Recently, we have collected new data involving 500+ nouns with three or more syllables in the stem in an attempt to accurately transcribe, categorize, and analyze the tonal patterns of longer nouns in the Tiriki dictionary. We are using the results of our study to try to determine how the pronunciation of words has changed over time in the Luyia language cluster by comparing cognate vocabulary in Tiriki and related languages like Logoori, Wanga, and Bukusu.