

The phonological status of stem-initial prominence in Grassfields Bantu (and beyond)

Kathryn Franich
Harvard University

The phenomenon of ‘stem-initial prominence’—or asymmetries in consonant, vowel, and tonal contrasts across positions within the stem—has been observed for Southern Bantoid languages (Danis 2012, Lovegren 2012, Franich 2021), as well as in Northwest Bantu (Hyman 1989, Idiatov & van de Velde 2016) and other languages of Northern Sub-Saharan Africa (Lionnet 2017; Hyman et al. 2020). While some have proposed that such asymmetries reflect the presence of metrical structure (Akinlabi & Urua 2003; Lovegren 2012), there has been considerable debate as to whether this is a necessary facet of these effects. This talk focuses on such patterns in two Grassfields Bantu languages, Medumba and Kejom/Babanki, through the lens of *coordinative practices*—here, patterns of musical text-setting, dance, and co-speech gesture—to demonstrate that stem-initial syllables in these languages bear many similarities to stressed/accented syllables in terms of their temporal alignment to a beat or a gesture. It is argued that this aspect of the behavior of stem-initial syllables may be a key unifying property of metrical accent more broadly, including in languages which do not display canonical acoustic cues to stress.