Verb forms with umlaut in the Sari (Beboid) language: The connection between C_2-consonant and vowel length

Bep Langhout
SIL Cameroon

Sari verbs are either low-toned or mid-toned. The Sari verbs divide into two groups, umlauting and non-umlauting verbs. Umlauting verbs have umlaut (vowel raising and for /ɔ/ vowel fronting) and consonant hardening for imperfective, and almost always two different forms for the imperative. Their infinitive has a final vowel u. For instance **tɔ̄ŋɛ̄, tɔ́ɔ́** 'support!', **ntɔ̄ŋū** (INF), **tɔ́ɔ́** (PFV), **tēendī** (IPFV). The problem is establishing root forms given the variability of vowel length for different verb forms, and the possible change in the place of articulation between C_2 in the infinitive and the imperfective. This study claims that in the Sari umlauting verb TAM system, the imperfective form shows the length of the root vowel and the place of articulation of the root C_2. Certain vowel and consonant phenomena for the different TAM forms mask the features of the root.

More than a thousand verbs were collected, with four forms for each verb: imperative, infinitive or gerund, perfective, and imperfective. Twenty-six verbs with monosyllabic infinitive were kept out of this study. The umlauting verbs make up one third of the data.

Possible syllable structures are (N)C(G)V(V)(N), where G is a glide /w/ or /j/. VV stands for a long vowel, and the only possible consonant in the coda is the ŋ. The sequence VVN will become phonetic Ṽ Ṽ.

Most of the C_2 consonants are either alveolar (l, n) or velar (w, ŋ). The next examples of mid-toned verbs show that **ntanu** 'lose way' with C_2=n has a monosyllabic form **taŋ** (imperative and perfective) with a short vowel. **Ntaŋu** 'wait' derives C_2=ŋ from the root having C_2=ŋ, while **ntaŋu** 'initiate' derives C_2=ŋ from the root having a long vowel. Both have a monosyllabic form tãã (imperative and perfective) with a long vowel.

gloss	imperative	infinitive	perfective	imperfective	root
'lose way'	tanɛ, taŋ	ntanu	taŋ	tɛndi	/tan/
'wait'	taŋɛ, tãã	ntaŋu	tãã	tɛŋgi	/taŋ/
'initiate'	taŋɛ, tãã	ntaŋu	tãã	tɛɛndi	/taan/

The vowel in the monosyllabic form is long when C_2 of the disyllabic infinitive form $NC_1(G)VC_2u$ is velar. Additionally C_2 of the disyllabic infinitive form is velar when the root vowel is long or when C_2 of the root is velar.

In the Sari umlauting verb TAM system every TAM form except the imperfective has neutralization of vowel length or C_2 place features. The imperfective itself has complexity because of the change of the vowel quality and of the manner of articulation of C2. Typological comparison could explore similar syllable-pattern constraints in related languages, including the extent to which there is a connection between vowel length in the root and the place of articulation of C2 in certain TAM forms.