

Understanding the micro-dynamics underlying large-scale areal patterns: A case study from a rural West African region

Jeff Good

University at Buffalo

4pm January 18, 2024 · IfL Seminarraum rechts

The last decade or so has seen increased interest in the large-scale areal distribution of grammatical patterns on the African continent, and a striking pattern is the extent to which certain features (e.g., labial-velar consonants) are distributed across areas with a high degree of linguistic fragmentation and genealogical diversity. This means that featural spread cannot be straightforwardly linked to the spread of any specific language or language family and leads to the question: What kinds of low-level dynamics have led to these continent-scale patterns? This talk will consider this question by examining lexical data collected from a cluster of languages in a compact region of the Cameroonian Grassfields known as Lower Fungom, where around nine languages are found and which has traditionally been characterized by high degrees of individual-level multilingualism. The lexical data comprises 53 wordlists collected from individual speakers representing all of the region's languages. No attempt was made to standardize the wordlists across speakers of a single variety so that they could serve as a means to gather semi-controlled data on lexical variation at the individual level. This dataset is considered from several perspectives and, in particular, with respect to what it can reveal about the extent to which spatial patterns are reflected in the lexical data and the nature of the processes that have shaped the lexicons of some of Lower Fungom's varieties. The picture that emerges is one where the presence of small language communities whose members are multilingual can facilitate the local spread of linguistic features in ways that are analogous to what has been observed in large-scale areal studies.