

# Vowel Harmony in Mbili Verbs

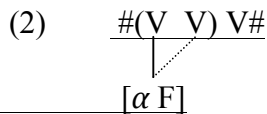
This paper investigates Vowel Harmony (VH) in the verbs of Mbili, a Grassfield Bantu language spoken in the North West province of Cameroon. VH refers here to the complete assimilation of vowel features in both the derived and bare verbs<sup>1</sup>. At first glance, the spreading of vowel features seems to be unpredictable. I will demonstrate, however, that the patterns we observe can be accounted for in a simple and straightforward way within the framework of prosodic phonology.

The following examples illustrate the various vowel patterns in Mbili verbs: (1a) complete VH, (1b) VH in only part of the word, and (1c) no VH at all.

(1a) fege	‘hold tightly’	(1b) bɛgɛnə	‘attack’	(1c) ) kwaʔdə	‘think’
tigi	‘select’	twɛgɛdə	‘mix’	tse:ni	‘sneeze’
lwəgə	‘lap’	labalə	‘connive’		

As can be seen, the number of syllables cannot be the determining factor for the difference in vowel patterns since in (1a), the forms are disyllabic and show complete assimilation of vowel features, while in (1c) the forms are also disyllabic forms but do not show the harmonious pattern. In (1b), the trisyllabic words show partial harmony.

In my analysis, I propose that VH of Mbili verbs is restricted to the first metrical foot, which is the root, or part of the root, of the verb. Only a single foot will be constructed at the left edge of the verb. As shown in (2), the first two syllables of a verb are grouped into an iambic foot from left to right. The vowel feature spreading starts at the first vowel in the root, and proceeds from left to right within the foot



I propose moreover that there are only three possible vowels in the underlying representations, /a, i, ə/, and they behave differently. [a] and [ə] are assigned the vowel features of the root when they are grouped into the same metrical foot with syllables in the root; otherwise they surface as their underlying forms. [i] resists assimilation wherever it is.

It is shown that the distinction between the two-syllable words in (1a) vs. (1c) can also be predicted on the basis of foot structure. That is, VH does not apply to the latter since iambic foot is sensitive to weight. Thus, the first heavy syllable of the words in (1c) cannot be grouped into the same metrical foot with the following light syllable, so the vowel feature cannot spread. Note that it is also correctly predicted that prefixes do not show VH since they are to the left of the metrical foot.

Finally, with regard to the trisyllabic words, also shown that the crucial factor is foot structure. Since the vowel feature spreading rule applies only once - within the single foot domain - the third syllable (whether it is part of the root or part of the suffixes) does not get the same vowel features as the vowel of the root since it is not in the crucial foot. When a schwa does not get a feature from spreading, it surfaces as its underlying form.

<sup>1</sup> Mbili does not have rich verbal morphology. So verb roots are the most frequently found form in sentences.

## References

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