Introduction

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Abstract

This paper introduces the monographic issue of *Linguistic Typology at the Crossroads* entitled "Language contact and non-convergent change: cases from Africa", edited by Pierpaolo Di Carlo and Pius W. Akumbu. After briefly outlining non-convergent change under contact with a special attention to African settings, it deals with the fact that the languages discussed in the monographic issue have been spoken for generations in contexts of small-scale multilingualism. This is a key aspect to consider since small-scale multilingualism is a type of multilingualism that is overall little known as to its possible effects at the level of language change. The paper then addresses methodological aspects related to the study of non-convergent change in contact situations and introduces the novel concept of *correlated dissimilarity*. A call for the collection of new and more comprehensive data in the field as the only possible way to test the hypotheses raised in this volume concludes this introduction.

Keywords: language contact; small-scale multilingualism; convergent and non-convergent change; Africa.

> "Sociolinguistics is not like chemistry, and
> when you put two languages together the
> same thing does not always happen."
> (Appel & Muysken 2005: 5)

1. Non-convergent change in contact settings

Languages in contact normally undergo processes of convergent change, which is a cover term for both bilateral (i.e. convergence) and unilateral (i.e. advergence)

patterns of increased similarity between languages. However, a growing number of studies highlight contact phenomena that cannot be straightforwardly accounted for in terms of diffusion or of language-internal change or of broader typological tendencies. These contact phenomena include cases of language stability (i.e. non-change) and language divergence (see, e.g., Kühl & Braunmüller 2014: 14) which are referred to here as types of non-convergent change (cf. Kaufmann 2010). The purpose of this volume is to contribute to this developing tradition of studies, with a specific focus on sub-Saharan Africa.

Since the literature on language contact and non-convergent change is still quite limited, it might be useful to recall here some of the main existing works - with no intention to provide a comprehensive literature review, which is beyond the scope of this short introduction. Language stability refers to situations in which two or more languages in contact do not undergo convergent change as it would be expected. Examples include the maintenance of clearly distinctive lexicons in the otherwise structurally convergent languages of the Vaupès and other regions in the Amazon (e.g. Aikhenvald 2001, Epps 2020), the very minimal instances of French lexical and structural borrowing in English as a minority language of Quebec (Poplack et al. 2006), and the maintenance of grammatical gender in varieties of Norwegian in contact with Finno-Ugric languages in northern Norway (Sollid et al. 2014). Language divergence in contact settings is exemplified by cases such as relexification[1] in Oceanic languages of northern Vanuatu (François 2011), language esoterogeny[2] (e.g. Thurston 1989, Ross 1997), and restructuring at the level of suprasegmental phonology in East-Tukanoan languages (Gomez-Imbert 1999) and of noun morphology in Iwaidjan languages (Evans 2019). In spite of clear differences, what these cases have in common is that they foreground the importance of extralinguistic factors, such as speakers' language ideologies,[3] as the main factors that can possibly account for such "unnatural" outcomes of contact.

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[1] Relexification is a mechanism of language change by which one language replaces much or all of its lexicon with the lexicon of another language, while its grammar remains largely intact.

[2] Esoterogeny is a term referring to a sociolinguistic development in which speakers add linguistic innovations to their language that increase its complexity and, therefore, make it harder to learn for outsiders.

[3] "[I]deas, or sets of beliefs, shared by the members of a community concerning language, its uses, and its role in their social world" (Pakendorf et al. 2021: 837).

In this overall limited literature, cases from Africa feature rarely. Except for relatively isolated remarks found in works such as Schadeberg (1981), Connell (2001), Mous (2001), Storch (2011), Mve et al. (2019), and Dimmendaal (2015: 64–81) the possibility to focus on non-convergent change phenomena in African contact settings has, to a large extent, remained outside of the linguists' agenda, although there appear to be no objective reasons why such phenomena should be so rare in this part of the world. This latter stance finds support in inspiring, general statements such as the following:

> Bantu speakers have long lived in a multilingual continuum, where many speakers master not just their own variety of speech but also those of their neighbors. Linguistic differentiation and convergence are actively pursued, one serving to establish distinct group identities, the other one to forge alliances and to foster good neighborship. (Schadeberg 2003: 158)

The papers contained in this volume are in some way related to Schedeberg's words as they (i) focus on settings where being multilingual in neighboring languages has most likely been the norm for speakers since precolonial times and (ii) explore ways to test the significance of possible connections between social, sociolinguistic, and linguistic patterns in influencing the direction of language change. I deal with these two topics in the next two sections, following which I will summarize the papers contained in this volume (section 4) and add some final comments.

2. Linguistic diversity and small-scale multilingualism

The papers contained in this volume target languages spoken in areas of relatively high linguistic diversity (see Fig. 1) where, due to the absence of lingua francas, multilingualism in neighboring languages has been the principal means of intercommunity communication before colonial times. This is established for the Cameroonian Grassfields (e.g. Warnier 1980; Di Carlo et al. 2019; Chenemo & Neba 2020), where the languages targeted in this volume by both Akumbu & Kießling and Di Carlo & Good are located (see Fig. 1). As for Usaghade (usk; Niger-Congo, Lower Cross), Connell (this volume) has collected some basic sociolinguistic information suggesting that, unsurprisingly, its speakers are also proficient in neighboring languages and there appear to be no objective reasons not to extend this state of

things back in time. The case of Bade (bde; Afro-Asiatic, Chadic), discussed by Ziegelmeyer in this volume, is less clear due to the apparent scarcity of sociolinguistic and ethnographic data.

Figure 1: Map showing the approximate locations of the languages discussed in the papers in this volume. The so-called *sub-Saharan fragmentation belt* accommodates about 80% of Africa's linguistic diversity (Dalby 1970).

Bade is located in a region in which the influence of Kanuri (knc; Nilo-Saharan, Western Saharan) began no less than five centuries ago, and where Hausa (hau; Afro-Asiatic, Chadic) has gained speakers over the past century. This means that, unlike the previous cases, Bade has been long spoken in a diglossic environment (i.e. one where there is a power imbalance between communities which is ideologically extended to their languages) where being competent in Kanuri would have theoretically enabled intercommunity communication for centuries. At the same time, however, variation between Bade varieties is so high that it is debatable whether they should not be considered as distinct languages instead, thus adding to the historical scenario of diversity of the area. In such a situation, and based on evidence collected in overall similar environments of liminality between traditional communities and centralized states (e.g. the contact between Mandara montagnards and Wandala, in

Moore 2004), it seems reasonable to infer the existence of widespread multilingualism in neighboring languages / lects over the past centuries.

Why is it so important to establish a baseline for the kind of multilingualism that was (and is) practiced in these areas? Since the loci of language contact are the minds of the multilingual speakers, identifying the kind of multilingualism that these communities have practiced is key to understanding what kind of contact phenomena would be more or less expected between the languages that they speak. This is well-known (e.g. Weinreich 1953: 71–110, Thomason & Kaufman 1988: 65–100). What is lesser known is that, in its discourse about how the social factors influence language change, contact linguistics has enormously relied on a model of societal multilingualism, i.e. diglossia, which was only recently recognized to be one out of a number of possible such models, rather than the only one (see, e.g., Lüpke 2016, Di Carlo 2018, Vaughan & Singer 2018).[4] As a matter of fact, the forms of small-scale multilingualism that have characterized the communities discussed in this volume have surely included significant non-diglossic components. The most evident differences between diglossic multilingualism and small-scale multilingualism include the following:

- the conceptual systems supporting forms of diglossic multilingualism hinge on a socially widespread perception of power and prestige asymmetries between communities associated with different codes, whereas small-scale multilingualism typically arises where there are no significant inter-group differences in terms of socio-economic dominance—which is why it was first labeled *egalitarian multilingualism* (Haudricourt 1961);
- diglossic forms of multilingualism normally co-occur with models of construction of identity *qua* membership in social categories—which is the norm in industrialized and urbanized societies (e.g. Ma & Schoeneman 2007, Henrich et al. 2010)—whereas small-scale multilingualism co-occurs with relational-positional models of identity, where language choice in interaction has the effect of representing oneself as occupying a specific position within a

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[4] For the sake of convenience, in this introduction I generalize the use of the term *diglossia* to encompass both diglossia and polyglossia—i.e. situations in which the languages participating in the system of social evaluation and domain-specialization are more than two—and of multilingualism as a cover term including bilingualism and forms of multi-code competence labeled as *bi- / multi-lectalism*.

concrete network of people rather than as an instance of an abstract social stereotype (e.g. Di Carlo et al. 2020, Lüpke 2021).

Both points have consequences for research focused on contact between languages spoken in contexts of small-scale multilingualism. The first point stresses that arguments so pervasive in the literature such as those based on the notion of (overt or covert) prestige imbalance between communities, might in fact be to a large extent irrelevant, if not misguided, in accounting for the social facts influencing patterns of change in these contexts (see references above and the contributions in Vaughan & Singer 2018 and Di Carlo & Good 2020).

The second point highlights a complex node which I can only briefly sketch here. In multilingual societies where language choice indexes one's membership in a concrete network of people *vis à vis* those of one's co-interactants, linguistic diversity is not only a fact of social life but also *enables* one's social relations and the activation of associated sets of rights and obligations in daily life. From this perspective one can see how, in contexts where multiple groups of roughly equal power exploit an environment that offers limited (economic and political) resources, individuals may have an interest in maintaining this multiplicity since membership in more groups means having potential access to more sources of rights and support, which can be strategically leveraged according to needs (some cases from Africa can be found in, e.g., Lüpke & Storch 2013: 22–45, Di Carlo 2018, Cobbinah 2020). In some societies, this interest surfaces in ideologically-loaded constraints on code-switching between local languages (e.g. Ojong Diba 2020). This attitude towards diversity, the relatively small size of the communities involved, and the widespread presence of individuals who, thanks to their multilingual competence, would be aware of the items and structures that make any two local languages similar or different from each other, make it likely (if not predictable) that contexts of small-scale multilingualism may be especially conducive to stability and divergence of the languages involved.

A sociolinguistically-informed study of contact that can do without prestige and without social stereotypes is yet to come, and this makes it difficult to actually put to test the claims summarized above. My view is that, until sociolinguistics is globalized, it is wise to acknowledge that we are not in a position to state with certainty what can and cannot happen to languages spoken for generations in a context of small-scale multilingualism, because existing knowledge of contact phenomena has been elaborated for the most part on the basis of crucially different sociolinguistic contexts.

From this perspective, paraphrasing Haspelmath (2004), one might say that the main goal of this volume is to contribute to raising the study of non-convergent change in African contact settings from near non-existence to a hunting and gathering stage—i.e. a stage of research in which data is provided but analyses still lack systematicity. Where contents of this volume may appear to be making "bold and not fully substantiated claims", it might be useful to recall that sometimes this serves "the useful purpose of instigating others to look for counterexamples or confirmation" (Haspelmath 2004: 220).

3. Assumptions, claims, and challenges

There are indeed some basic yet unarticulated claims that underpin the papers in this volume to a greater or lesser extent, which I briefly address in this section.

3.1 Language boundaries

The first claim has to do with where one should draw language boundaries—a practical necessity of doing work on language contact (cf. Nicolaï 2019). In this regard, "there seems to be no need to assume fundamental structural differences between dialects and languages that would make a comparison between dialect contact and language contact impossible when investigating structural changes or stability in language contact" (Kühl & Braunmüller 2014: 13–14). More specifically, what actually counts in determining if a named language is eligible to comparison is whether it is learned and used independently of any other that is reported in the speakers' multilingual repertoires, and its use (regardless of the quality and quantity of its distinctive items, cf. Watson 2019) has at least some desired social indexical effects that no other named language has for its speakers (e.g. Di Carlo et al. 2019: §3.5).[5]

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[5] There is a term that is often found in research on non-convergent change phenomena but which I have purportedly avoided in this introduction: namely, *hyperdialectism*. Peter Trudgill (1986) introduced it to refer to those cases in which it was observed that one or more linguistic features that are typical of a dialect are overgeneralized by its speakers in order to increase its distinctiveness from the standard language or a neighboring dialect. This concept is of limited use in the perspective taken in this volume because of its implicit claim that such changes are specific to dialects, but there are

3.2 Correlated dissimilarities

A second claim concerns the phenomena under analysis. The fact that contact leads to borrowing and interference—i.e. to instances of convergent change—is a truism and therefore needs not be demonstrated. In actual practice, this means that comparatists can build on a shared expectation without the burden of proving it— they mainly answer the question of how the change came about, rather than why it did. By contrast, the studies in this volume focus on differential rather than similar features between languages and wonder whether these *differences* are due to contact. That contact may be the source of maintenance or enhancement of dissimilarities between languages is the marked scenario and requires an explanation (e.g. Labov 2010: 5), so the very act of taking that stance must be justified in the first place. This means taking up the challenge of testing whether some cross-linguistic dissimilarities in contact settings are somehow connected to each other. I introduce here the term *correlated dissimilarities* to refer to this special class of cross-linguistic differences, until a better term is found.

Providing an exhaustive compendium of the types of correlated dissimilarities that have been proposed in the literature is not among the goals of this short introduction, but recalling some of them might be helpful. One type of cross-linguistic difference that is often discussed as a potential index that the difference is a correlated dissimilarity is the so-called *flipping*: two items, most commonly two paradigmatic sets, from two (or more) named languages appear to be in a relationship of inversion. Consider, for instance, the case of Barasana and Taiwano (bsn), two closely related East Tukanoan languages, where there is a recurring correspondence between inverted tonal melodies of segmentally identical noun roots: Bar. *cudíró* (LHH), Tai. *cúdiro* (HLL) 'piece of clothing'; Bar. *~wibágí* (LHH), Tai. *~wíbagi* (HLL) 'child'; Bar. *~jokó* (LH) Tai. *~jóko* (HL) 'star' (see Gomez-Imbert 1999). An example involving three languages comes from the distribution of nouns across genders in neighboring Iwaidjan languages of northern Australia (Evans 2019: 575–579). Mawng (mph; Iwaidjan, Iwaidjic), the most conservative of the three languages, has five genders (masculine, feminine, vegetable, land & liquids, and miscellaneous) with most nouns occurring in masculine and feminine, few in vegetable and land & liquids, and very

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well-known difficulties in drawing a principled distinction between languages and dialects in several parts of Africa (e.g. Nurse & Philippson 2003: 2-3).

few in the miscellaneous gender. Two neighboring Iwaidjan languages, i.e. Ilgar and Iwaidja (ilg and ibd; Iwaidjan, Iwaidjic), have simplified this system but, where Ilgar has done so in the expected way (i.e. generalizing the most frequent genders), Iwaidja has enigmatically done the opposite by generalizing the miscellaneous gender. Other instances of inversion in noun class systems are also documented in Africa (e.g. the case of Laru (lro; Niger-Congo, West-Central Heibanic), see Schadeberg 1981 and Dimmendaal 2020, and one such case has also been proposed for some Ring languages by Akumbu & Kießling (this volume, see also below).

There appear to be no linguistic-only arguments that make it possible to establish that a given cross-linguistic difference can be legitimately viewed as a correlated dissimilarity. The first step that linguists working on data of this kind have taken has been to look for support in extralinguistic evidence. In this regard, linguists' efforts widely differ: those who can rely on a substantial body of knowledge provided by earlier ethnographic work (such as, e.g., in the case of the Vaupès, see references above) are facilitated in connecting the linguistic and the extra-linguistic dimension of analysis since the latter is sufficiently developed and convincing. By contrast, where such knowledge is scanty or non-existent (which is the norm in many African settings), linguists approach the problem by raising fundamentally unresolved questions, though from different starting points. In this volume, authors such as Akumbu & Kießling and Ziegelmeyer have limited sociolinguistic data to build on and therefore include the extra-linguistic dimension as a "last resort" by invoking general tendencies, such as Larsen's (1917) notion of *naboopposition*—i.e. a process of intentional differentiation between neighboring languages—as the main factors at play. The paper by Di Carlo & Good, on the other hand, stems from a significant body of ethnographic and sociolinguistic knowledge and devotes a lengthy discussion to the problem of what kind of characteristics might make a given instance of change a better or worse candidate to be viewed as a correlated dissimilarity (see also below).

However, it must be kept in mind that even solid and convincing extra-linguistic data can hardly answer the twofold problem of the actuation and of the propagation of non-convergent change phenomena under contact. As Campbell & Poser (2008: 352) write about the concept of language esoterogeny (which is a form of non-convergent change): "...it is not clear how this hypothesized cultural motive for these changes – conscious exclusion of outsiders (Ross 1997: 239) – could be tested or how the investigator might distinguish changes motivated for this purpose from changes that just happen with no such motive". These are crucial points that are more or less

tightly connected to the problem of deliberate language change (e.g. Thomason 2007, Storch 2011), a possibility that work on non-convergent change puts under focus. None of the papers in this volume have managed to resolve these issues, but all of them can be viewed as the initial pieces of a (timidly) unfolding scholarly debate within Africanist linguistics.

4. The papers in this volume

Pius W. Akumbu and Roland Kießling focus on a set of phonological and morphosyntactic features crisscrossing two subgroups of Grassfields Bantu languages, namely Central Ring (CR) and West Ring (WR). While some of these features might be interpreted as outcomes of contact-induced convergent change between CR and WR languages—such as, e.g., Kuk and Kung (kuk and kfl; Niger-Congo, Narrow Grassfields, Central Ring) gender assignment of various nouns that pattern with WR rather than with CR, e.g., 'neck' (gender 3/4~6a) vs. CR (gender 3/6~5/13)—others are less straightforwardly interpretable this way. The most glaring example of a potentially correlated dissimilarity is the merger of two noun classes (10 and 13) in two CR, just as in WR languages. However, while WR languages have generalized class 13, the two CR languages have generalized class 10—another possible instance of crosslinguistic flipping (see previous section). Akumbu & Kießling put forward the possibility that this phenomenon is an instance of neighbor-opposition, but at the same time admit that the scanty sociolinguistic data at hand are not sufficient to substantiate (or dismiss) this claim.

In his paper, Bruce Connell aims to understand the extent to which the morphological differences that Usaghade displays if compared to the other Lower Cross (Bantoid) languages can be explained in terms of prolonged contact with neighboring Bantu A.10 languages, especially Londo (bdu; Niger-Congo, Narrow Bantu). There are three domains in which Usaghade morphology differs from the other Lower Cross languages: (i) it preserves a fully functional noun classification and agreement system which is found mostly in the form of fossilized prefixes in the other Lower Cross languages; (ii) it marks some temporal or aspectual distinctions post-verbally whereas pre-verbal marking is default among Lower Cross languages; (iii) in a form of verb classification, it uses suffixes that find no parallel among Lower Cross languages. Thanks to a thorough comparative analysis, Connell argues that Usaghade noun morphology is in a state of *arrested erosion*—i.e. all prefixes are inherited, not

borrowed—which was reasonably maintained as a result of the presence of structurally similar but formally distinct noun class systems in Londo and other neighboring languages with which the Usaghade community interacted closely for long time. Limited knowledge of verb morphology in these languages does not allow to make equally grounded claims in this regard. However, the fact that the changes in verb morphology appear to be aberrant leads Connell to cautiously hypothesize that they could be instances of contact-induced divergence. Considering that Usaghade has borrowed about a third of its lexicon from Londo, this case lends itself to be viewed as a particularly telling example that contact can lead to different outcomes in different subsystems of a language: namely, stability in noun morphology, advergence in lexicon, and divergence in verb morphology.

Di Carlo & Good discuss two conundrums in the comparative study of the Yemne-Kimbi referential group of Bantoid languages spoken in Lower Fungom, an area of high linguistic diversity located at the northern fringes of the Cameroonian Grassfields—i.e. the puzzling cross-linguistic distribution (i) of the prefixes encoding singulars of nouns having plurals in *bi-* and (ii) of the tense-aspect markers. Existing accounts of these phenomena had to recur to *ad hoc* reconstructions of language-internal processes and left unaddressed the issue of contact. In response to this gap and based on a degree of knowledge of local societies, language ideologies, and multilingual behaviors that is relatively unusual for this type of studies, Di Carlo & Good develop a sociolinguistic model that they call *social semiosis layer*. Put roughly, the model aims to predict what features of a language will be more subject to change when the community of its speakers undergoes ideological pressures for becoming more similar or more distinct from a neighboring community. In its application, in fact, the semiosis layer model does not serve the purpose of predicting change but, rather, of assessing the likelihood that a given change might be attributed to processes of what the authors label *neighbor-bias*—a novel concept that includes but is not limited to Larsen's (1917) *naboopposition*. Linguistic items (i.e. any piece of structure or lexicon that can be learned and transmitted) are assessed in terms of their potential for encoding neighbor-bias (e.g. usage frequency), for being readily acquirable (e.g. semantic congruence of forms in the languages involved), and for being minimally disruptive of the existing systems. The analysis of both Yemne-Kimbi conundrums reveals that the phenomena under analysis involve items having high potentials in all these dimensions, which makes them good candidates as exemplary members of a layer of items that are expected to be leveraged first in situations of increased need

for a community to obtain distinctiveness from its neighbors. The ethnographic and historical overview provided by Di Carlo & Good suggests that speech community events compatible with this kind of language change processes can be reconstructed in the history of the Cameroonian Grassfields as a whole.

Georg Ziegelmeyer presents data about the distribution of twelve features among languages of the Bade-Ngizim group of West Chadic B.1. Some, like the loss of a distinctive opposition between two r-sounds, can be interpreted as the outcome of convergent change towards one or the other of the main languages of the wider region—i.e. Hausa or Kanuri. Others can be accounted for by language-internal factors, like the fact that a prefix *a-* encoding third person independent pronouns across all related varieties can take on the value of marking third person direct and indirect object pronouns in one of them (Gashua Bade). Two features are especially puzzling as they escape both areal and genetic interpretations. One is the presence of a verb meaning 'have' in two languages within an area where predicative possession is expressed through comitative constructions, with the roots being different in the two languages and having no known etymology. Another is nunation—i.e. the presence of an -n suffix—on nouns to mark indefiniteness, which is a non-inherited feature observed only in Western Bade and can hardly be the outcome of contact. Given these difficulties, Ziegelmeyer resorts to *naboopposition* as the most promising research hypothesis to test in future studies, but also stresses the lack of sociolinguistic and historiographical data for the region as the main obstacle to further pursue this goal.

5. Conclusion

What I tried to summarize so far brings about a reflection about the significance of this research for linguistic typology. In concluding his review of case studies of contact-induced divergence, Evans writes that:

> [a]lthough it is likely that contact-induced divergence is commoner in the lexicon, phonetics and phonology (Sankoff 2002), probably because these are generally the most accessible to conscious monitoring, the examples I have marshaled here [i.e. lexicon (Banks Islands of Vanuatu), phonetics and phonology (Temiar, Barasano, twelfth-century Vietnamese), morphology (Iwaidja), syntax (Portuguese DOM), and the semantics of grammar (Kuninjku)] show that the range of

divergence effects goes much further than has generally been realized by historical linguists. (Evans 2019: 587)

If patterns of non-convergent change may materialize beyond the lexicons of languages in contact, then advances in this field might call for some future adjustments in typological language sampling. Typologists need to avoid both areal and genetic biases in constructing samples, so that languages from the same part of the world (i.e. that may bear signs of mutual resemblance because of contact) and from the same family (i.e. that may bear signs of mutual resemblance because of parallel evolution from a common source) are not overrepresented (e.g. Dryer 1989, Miestamo et al. 2016). Should future research identify the existence of areas where contact materializes also in *structural* non-convergent change, this should be considered as a third variable for a balanced (or just informed) sampling, as languages contained in such areas might be dissimilar from each other due to small-scale reactions among neighbors' structures. We are not any close to this and such a possibility would come out of the blue for most of today's typologists. At the same time, it cannot be ignored that the current scarcity of data about non-convergent change under contact is also due to discipline-internal dynamics. Our limited knowledge enables us to raise legitimate and, I believe, relevant questions that only future work can aspire to answer.

This work will have to be based on new field-based research. I have already mentioned that the availability of more and better sociolinguistic and ethnographic data is paramount for the study of language contact to be able to capture phenomena of non-convergent change. In addition, the virtual absence of psycholinguistic studies focusing on African languages (let alone on those spoken in contexts of small-scale multilingualism) represents another formidable obstacle to the advancement of knowledge in this domain, and this should change, too. The studies in this volume call for more scholarly efforts towards the collection of these types of data in African settings, with the hope that this is done through the active inclusion of both local scholars and communities of speakers.

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earlier version of this paper. All the papers in this volume except for Connell's have been developed on the basis of presentations given at the workshop entitled "Language contact and non-convergent change in West African languages", held within the 4th Symposium on West African Languages (University of Naples "L'Orientale", 21-23 September 2022). My gratitude goes to the conference organizers and participants for their stimulating feedback and discussions, in particular Zygmunt Frajzyngier, Tom Güldemann, and Valentina Schiattarella.

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