



Panel title: **West Africa as a linguistic area – Linguistic areas in West Africa**

Panel coordinator: **Georg Ziegelmeyer**

During the past decade the study of geographical typology and linguistic areas attracted more and more attention in African Studies. On the one hand some scholars have claimed that Africa as a whole can be considered a linguistic area, i.e. Africa can be defined as a linguistic area vis-à-vis the rest of the world. For instance, Heine & Leyew (2008) tried to confine Africa as a linguistic area which can be separated from the rest of the world with a set of eleven features, while Creissels et al. (2008) put forward the hypothesis that Africa forms a linguistic area based on morphosyntactic properties.

On the other hand several scholars reject the idea of Africa as a single linguistic area, but identify smaller linguistic areas on the continent, e.g. Clements & Rialland (2008) who divide Africa into six phonological areas, or Güldemann (2008) who defines the Macro-Sudan belt as a linguistic area in northern sub-Saharan Africa. Both of these linguistic areas may still be considered macro-areas which overlap geographically in large parts with West Africa, and therefore constitute the focal point of interest for SyWAL.

However, we think with Aikhenvald (2011: 18) that: *“Areal studies on a macro-scale are useful for a general view of what languages are like. But they communicate little about the precise history of the people involved, or the exact type of language interaction or the type of contact-induced change ... Low-tier convergence zones within macro-areas allow us to establish the mechanisms by which matching structures develop, and also to see which features are resistant to being adjusted. This is where the knowledge of each other’s languages, and contact between groups come into play.”*

As we believe that for our understanding of the linguistic and historical implications in the region of West Africa areal factors like language contact are equally important as inherited genetic factors, we would like to focus on the areal distribution of features which cross genetic affiliation and which are thought to be relevant to establish meaningful linguistic areas.

Participants of the panel are invited to discuss the following questions among others:

- Can West Africa as a whole constitute a meaningful linguistic area?
- Which low-tier convergence zone can be established?
- What are the phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic or pragmatic features that constitute the linguistic areas at issue?
- What are the diachronic mechanisms that lead to linguistic areas?
- Can linguistic areas help us to get a better understanding of African pre-history?
- Can linguistic areas help us to get a better understanding about genetic affiliations and/or historical migration patterns?

References

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