

A preliminary phonology of Vale

In this paper, I present a preliminary phonology of Vale (ISO 639-3: vae), a Bongo-Bagirmi language (part of Nilo-Saharan) spoken in northern Central African Republic. To my knowledge, there is no previous research on the language's phonology. This paper is the first step in filling that gap.

The findings in this paper are the result of a three-week participatory phonology workshop held in Bangui in October 2021. I worked with two male native speakers of Vale, employing the methodology elucidated in Kutsch Lojenga (1996).

Vale has 25 consonants, which include implosives /b, d/, prenasalized fricatives /m̥v, nz/, and a bilabial flap /ɣ/ in one ideophone. Labial-velar plosives are absent, apparently lost from Proto Sara-Bongo-Bagirmi (Boyeldieu 2006:8). The rhotic /r/ is usually produced with a single contact [r] in intervocalic position, unless the word is emphasized. This process is also found in the closely related language Lutos (Olson 2013). The palatal approximant /j/ is nasalized [j̃] when followed by a nasal vowel. This allophone sounds like a palatal nasal [ɲ], but there is no contact between the tongue and the roof of the mouth. The syllable coda can be filled by sonorants, as well as the alveolar implosive /d/. This adds one more example to the literature of implosives patterning with sonorants (cf. Clements 2000:132–133).

Each of the five oral vowels /i e a o u/ in Vale has a corresponding nasal vowel /ĩ ẽ ã õ ù/.

Vale has two contrastive level tones, H and L. Monomoraic words take either a H or L tone. Bimoraic words have one of five surface tonal patterns: LL, HH, LH, HL, or H⁴H. This system resembles the Proto Sara-Bongo-Bagirmi system posited by Boyeldieu (2006:10–11), which also had two level tones (H and L) and five tonal patterns: LL, HH, LH, HL(a), and HL(b).

Preliminary evidence suggests that downstep [⁺] in Vale results from a floating L tone. For example, combining /jé.lè/ 'wind' and /kú.lí/ 'cool' into a noun phrase yields [jé.⁴lé kú.lí] 'cool wind'. Roberts et al. (2016) calls this process *HLH Plateauing*: The underlying L in /jé.lè/ delinks from its vowel, and the first H in 'cool' spreads leftward to the final vowel of 'wind'. The unassociated L remains floating in order to trigger downstep. If we apply the same process to monomorphemic bimoraic words, a word such as [kó.⁴né] 'year' would have the underlying representation /ko.ne, HLH/. As a result, I propose that Vale lexical words have five possible underlying tone melodies: /L, H, LH, HL, HLH/, an inventory also attested in Siane (PNG) (James 1994). The fact that /HLH/ does not surface directly in Vale reflects the crosslinguistic tendency that HLH sequences are dispreferred (Cahill 2007).

Word count: 448