

Tone alternations in Maay and the origins of its prosodic system

Descriptions of Maay [iso:ymm] varieties provide remarkably different accounts of the language’s prosodic system. Lower Jubba Maay (Paster 2006) has “not very prominent” root-final stress, but no tone or accent. Maay spoken in Isha Baydhabo (Saeed 1982) is similar, but High tone is a correlate of final stress, though there is no correlation between grammatical gender and tone location. Maay spoken in Mandera, Kenya (Biber 1982), is more clearly tonal (for Biber, accentual), notably exhibiting correlations between grammatical gender and tone location, similarly reported for other Cushitic languages like Somali (Saeed 1999). The current paper describes another variety of Maay, based on recent data collection, that shares many similarities with that reported in Biber yet is more complex in that it exhibits tonal alternations – specifically, H tone shifts – that are not reported in earlier work. Of note, there are tonal alternations in non-phrase-final environments affecting vowel-final grammatically “feminine” nouns like ‘coffee’ *qahwá* and ‘the coffee’ *qáhwá-ðii*, in contrast to grammatically “masculine” nouns like ‘head’ *məðá* vs. *məðá-yii*. Consonant-final nouns of both grammatical genders fail to exhibit such alternations, as in ‘horse’ *fərəs* vs. *fərəs-kii* and ‘cat’ *ɲáɲur* vs. *ɲáɲur-tii*. Other alternations affect “feminine” nouns of any shape when paired with some determiners, resulting in the absence of stem tone as in *qahwá-ðáɲ* ‘this coffee’ and *ɲáɲur-táɲ* ‘this cat’.

These alternations raise questions concerning the nature of Maay’s prosodic system and its origin. Biber (1982) assumes that the Maay system is derived from Somali via historical rightward tone shift. In comparison to Appleyard (1991), however, Maay might be seen as maintaining properties of the proposed Proto system, whereas Somali has diverged from it, with its tones shifting leftward. This paper offers an analysis aimed at unifying diachronic perspectives on Cushitic prosodic systems alongside Maay’s synchronic behavior. We propose that an approach grounded in a privative High/Ø lexical contrast, similar to that proposed by Hayward (1991) for Afar and seen in Owens (1980) for Oromo, offers a transparent account of the Maay system. Via this analysis, “masculine” noun stems are considered underlyingly toned, as evidenced by their immunity to alternation. “Feminine” noun stems are instead treated as underlying toneless, with H assigned by a default mechanism. This perspective is supported by their susceptibility to alternation, by tone shift, tone loss, and avoidance of rises, under notable conditions. In further support for this synchronic privative tonal contrast in the variety under consideration, we show that certain determiners and suffixes participate in tonal alternations in analogous ways. (1) exemplifies this with two plural suffixes; we treat *-jaál* as underlyingly H, while *-ə* is toneless. From a broader perspective, while there is evidence for this contrast in some Maay varieties, it appears to be neutralized in others, resulting in attested tonal and stress-accent varieties of the language.

(1) Plural Tonal Alternations

Stem	Stem-Plural	Stem-Plural-Def
məlái ‘fish’	məlai-jaál	məlai-jaál-kii
gəlaɲ ‘arm’	gəlaɲ-jaál	gəlaɲ-jaál-kii
saháɲ ‘plate’	saham-ə	sahám-o-ðii
bíʃɪɲ ‘lip’	bíʃɪmm-ə	bíʃɪmm-o-yii