

“The greater Sahara in the historical linguistic geography of Africa”

In a worldwide survey of several nonlinear measures of phonological complexity along continental or hemisphere-sized clines we found a unique slope shape extending from the Sahel to the Mediterranean coastal zone in Europe. Slopes vary depending on the feature measured but always show either a plateau or the steepest slope in the transition zone. Based on previous experience we would have expected a sharp, quick transition or a gradual effect extending farther into both Africa and Europe. The slope perimeters vary from feature to feature, suggesting that the zone is not a linguistic area in any usual understanding of the term. There is no evident geographical correlate with either the perimeters or the core of the zone. The zone can thus be regarded as a linguistic area based on the geospatial distribution of complexity rather than (as for most language areas) on substantive typological resemblances. More substantively, it may be the surviving typological profile of the languages of the Sahara region prior to the large-scale east-west language spreads and climate changes of the middle to late Holocene; or a zone of crisscrossing diffusions from diverse languages that have at one time or another been economically or culturally influential, locally or regionally. Our talk will elaborate on some of the quantitative considerations and possible interpretations of the pattern, and raise questions and hypotheses for further Africanist work.