

Erratic velars in West-Coastal Bantu: Explaining irregular sound change in Central Africa

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Abstract: In this article, we present the first quantitative study of what we call multiple unconditioned reflexes (MUR) in Bantu, more specifically of Proto-Bantu velar stops *k and *g in the West-Coastal Bantu (WCB) branch of the Bantu language family. MUR, also known as “doubles reflexes” in Bantu studies, represent a situation where one and the same proto-sound has two or more reflexes in a given language which cannot be accounted for by phonological conditioning and/or lexical borrowing. This diachronic irregularity has been explained in Bantu historical linguistics, and Niger-Congo studies more broadly, by reconstructing either an additional series of consonants (phonemic merger) or a latent conditioning that went lost (phonemic split). We show that MUR should not be explained, but rather taken as an indicator of the same pervasive irregularity of sound change reported in other parts of the world that are highly multilingual and lack a neat overlap between distinct languages and communities. Along with widespread multilingualism, we assess lexical diffusion, substrate influence, and spread-over-spread events in Bantu language history as complementary explanations for the rise of MUR in WCB.

Keywords: multiple unconditioned reflexes, irregular sound change, West-Coastal Bantu, substrate interference, small-scale multilingualism, spread-over-spread events, lexical diffusion

Acknowledgments: This research was funded by an ERC Consolidator Grant # 724275 granted to the second author and by a FWO (Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek Vlaanderen) postdoctoral fellowship n° 12ZV721N. We are grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their critical comments which greatly improved this article.

1 Introduction

Since its emergence in Indo-European studies in the second half of the 19th century, the Comparative Method “has been the key tool for investigating linguistic prehistory” (Weiss 2015: 127), and this in spite of many challenges. One main threat to the Comparative Method has been the calling into question of its underlying theory, i.e. the so-called “Neogrammarian hypothesis” of exceptionless regularity in phonological change, upon the recurrent observation of irregular sound shifts across the world’s languages (cf. Wang 1969, Labov 1981, Durie and Ross 1996 and chapters therein, Harrison 2003). Another serious challenge, closely linked to the previous, is the disputation of the Comparative Method’s universality. It has been questioned whether its applicability is not too strongly dependent on the specific historical context of Indo-European, not only in terms of language evolution (i.e. dispersal and divergence), but also in terms of documentation of both language and history (i.e. presence of old written records). Doubts have been raised on the successfulness of the Comparative Method in parts of the world where the current-day linguistic landscape does not primarily result from the differentiation of a common proto-language and where no ancient texts are available to reconstruct language evolution and the more general historical backdrop against which this happened (cf. Durie and Ross 1996 and chapters therein, Weiss 2015: 136-139). In this respect, Sub-Saharan Africa most definitely offers fertile ground for testing the Comparative Method’s suitability as an instrument to examine (linguistic) prehistory.

One of the Comparative Method's success stories in Africa is no doubt Bantu, especially for the reconstruction of Proto-Bantu (PB) (cf. Meinhof 1899, 1906, Greenberg 1948, Meeussen 1967, 1969, Schadeberg 2002, 2003, Bostoen and Bastin 2016, Bostoen 2019). Bantu is a relatively young “spread zone” (Güldemann 2011), viz. an estimated 4000-5000 years, which is the outcome of migration from a homeland on the border between Nigeria and Cameroon towards Eastern and Southern Africa (Bostoen 2018). Its rapid spread over a huge area no doubt favored the successful reconstruction of ancestral stages: close genealogical relatedness, high identifiability of cognates and well-documented internal variation (cf. Bostoen 2019: 308-309). Then again, when it comes to internal Bantu classification, the Comparative Method has proven to be less effective (cf. Nurse and Philippson 2003, Schadeberg 2003, Philippson and Grollemund 2019). Shared innovations turn out to be rarely diagnostic of genealogical subgrouping, because isoglosses have the tendency to crosscut rather than to overlap. This situation, likely the most common worldwide, has been attributed to longstanding and intensive Bantu-internal contact and intense multilingualism (cf. Schadeberg 2003: 158-159). One specific indicator of prehistoric contact between Bantu languages and/or shifts from one Bantu language to another would be what Möhlig (1977, 1981a) calls ‘hybrid sound shifts’ as opposed to ‘linear sound shifts’. Irregularity in sound correspondences would emerge through the ‘hybridization’ of regular inherited sound systems, for instance in case of language shift [*Sprachübernahme*] or the adoption of ‘pronunciation habits’ [*Aussprachegewohnheiten*] of other speech communities (Möhlig 1981b: 88). According to this ‘stratification model’ (Möhlig 1977, 1979, 1981b), the difficulty in establishing genealogical Bantu subgroups through shared phonological innovations is simply due to the fact that the sound systems of present-day Bantu languages did not regularly evolve from a one single ancestral language, but are actually intricate composites of superimposed historical layers (see also Nurse and Masele 2003). Briefly put, as in other parts of the world, such as New Caledonia (Grace 1996) and Papua New Guinea (Ross 1996), the role of intensive language contact in the rise of irregular phonological change as a structural and inherent feature of Bantu sound systems has been recognized since at least the late 1970s.

Alongside this recognition of irregularity in sound change and basically starting in the same period (i.e. from the early 1980s), there has been much debate in Bantu/Niger-Congo scholarship about the so-called “double reflexes”, a controversy which essentially fails to admit the possibility of irregular sound change. In several languages, especially in the northwestern part of the Bantu domain (though also in South-West and East Bantu, cf. Kanyamibwa 1982 and Botne 1992 respectively), certain PB consonants have two or more recurrent correspondences that are divergent but without a clear phonological conditioning. Broadly speaking, this synchronic situation has been accounted for by two mutually exclusive diachronic explanations: phonemic merger vs. phonemic split (cf. Janssens 1993: 1-18 for detailed overview of previous scholarship on Bantu double reflexes). In the merger scenario, the sound system of Proto-Bantu would have had more contrasts than those reconstructed. The “double reflexes” would then be archaisms reflecting those phonemic oppositions. In languages not having “double reflexes”, the ancient contrasts would have merged and been lost. John Stewart, the most ardent advocate for this scenario, argued that the contrast between so-called ‘fortis’ and ‘lenis’ consonants, which he had reconstructed for proto-Volta-Congo (Stewart 1973), was not only retained in Kwa languages but also in several north-western Bantu languages and by extension also in Proto-Bantu (Van Leynseele and Stewart 1980, Stewart 1989, 1993; see also Gerhardt 1986; Hedinger 1987; Bancel 1988 for related claims). In the split scenario, scholars assume that a reconstructed Proto-Bantu consonant having more than one unconditioned reflex in a given language underwent a divergent evolution through a conditioning that subsequently disappeared. Different scholars have proposed different conditioning factors, such as the following vowel (short vs. long) (Guthrie 1967: 58, but refuted, amongst others, by Nsuka-Nkutsi 1980, Van Leynseele and Stewart 1980, Janssens 1986) and the preceding prefix (e.g. Bachmann 1989, Mieke 1989, Blanchon 1991, Janssens 1991, 1993). In the end, John Stewart would have discarded the merger scenario in favor of the split hypothesis, at least as far as Bantu is concerned (Philippson 2018). In any event, oddly enough, the opposite sides of this “double reflexes” debate stick so hard to the Neogrammarian hypothesis that they even do not consider the possibility of irregular sound change.

In the end, the jury is out on how to account historically for irregular sound correspondences in Bantu. Whether they are seen as an indicator of intensive language contact or as so-called “double reflexes” whose regularity is salvaged by either ancient contrasts or latent conditioning, it is striking that the different accounts all suffer from both a lack of sufficient language data and a clear genealogical framework against which the comparative evidence can be interpreted diachronically. Most studies mentioned above are not only based on relatively little data, but also entirely miss a quantitative assessment of assumedly unconditioned reflexes of a proto-sound. It is not clear whether all reflexes are equally distributed across the lexicon or rather manifest certain frequency hierarchies. There has not been a systematic, quantitative study of this phenomenon to date. Moreover, most studies are carried out on an arbitrarily selected set of languages, whether or not spoken in a well delimited part of the Bantu domain, but certainly never within a given genealogical subgroup of the Bantu family. That is exactly why our study focuses on one specific branch within the Bantu family, i.e. West-Coastal Bantu (WCB), also known as West-Western Bantu. The genealogical unity and internal structure of this branch is well established, mainly on the basis of lexicon-based quantitative approaches (Vansina 1995, Bastin *et al.* 1999, de Schryver *et al.* 2015, Grollemund *et al.* 2015, Pacchiarotti *et al.* 2019), but also thanks to a uniquely shared phonological innovation (Pacchiarotti and Bostoen 2020). What is more, we have a decent knowledge of the diachronic sound changes different WCB languages underwent (Daeleman 1977, Rottland 1977, Hombert and Mouélé 1988, Idiata-Mayombo 1993, Mouélé 1997, Nguimbi-Mabiala 1999, Koni Muluwa 2010: 117-161, Bostoen and Koni Muluwa 2011, Crane *et al.* 2011: 255-270, Koni Muluwa and Bostoen 2011; 2012, Bostoen and Goes 2019, Goes and Bostoen 2019, Pacchiarotti and Bostoen 2020; 2021). Finally, thanks to dedicated documentation work as part of the successive KongoKing (<http://kongoking.net/>) and BantuFirst (<https://www.bantufirst.ugent.be/>) projects, we have an unequalled archive of digital language sources for this specific branch of the Bantu family and thus access to plenty of comparative language data.

In this article, we present a first quantitative study of what we call “multiple unconditioned reflexes” (henceforth MUR) in Bantu. The term MUR refers to a situation where one and the same proto-sound appears to have two or more synchronic reflexes in a given language without any phonological conditioning environment to tease them apart. We focus here on the MUR of the PB velar stops *k and *g in WCB, which we consider to be illustrative of the broader picture in the northwestern part of the Bantu domain. Our study serves four purposes. The first is to provide strong comparative evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, to prove that MUR are really the outcome of irregular sound change and need not be explained by positing either additional consonantal series in PB or uncovering latent conditioning factors. The second is to show that MUR in WCB are not so different from cases of pervasive irregularity in sound change reported in other areas of the world (Blust 1996, Grace 1996, Ross 1996) and that the common thread underlying lack of Neogrammarian regularity in geographically distant and genetically unrelated language families seems to be found in the sociocultural situation in which speech communities develop. The third is to demonstrate that intensive language contact indeed needs to be factored in as the main source for irregular sound change in Bantu, but not in such a way that it would undermine the basic Neogrammarian principle of regularity underlying the Comparative Method (cf. Campbell 1996). At least the “regularity assumption” remains intact (cf. Harrison 2003: 219-220). The fourth and last is to show that prehistoric language contact within the Bantu domain is not necessarily to be understood as the interaction – whether mutual or not – between neatly delimited speech communities speaking distinct languages, but could also be conceived as a multilingual context without “a close association between linguistically defined units and communities” (Grace 1996: 175). Scenarios for language contact to which irregular sound change is commonly attributed, such as lexical diffusion and substratum influence, tend to set off from the (implicit) assumption that a given language is spoken by a given speech community or ethnic group living in a given well circumscribed territory. If one departs from this traditional view of what a language is socially, conceptual borders between lexical diffusion (contact within a speech community) and substratum influence (contact-induced change having an external source) also become fuzzier. While the first is typically seen as process happening within a speech community, the second tends to be seen as an external influence, i.e. the impact of a recently lost source language on a recently acquired target language through language shift.

In line with these objectives, this article is organized as follows. In Section 2, we give some background on WCB and present the data and methodology. In Section 3, we show the results of a first quantitative study of MUR for Proto-Bantu velar stops in 40 WCB languages (3.1-3.2) and argue that they cannot be account for by either phonological conditioning factors (3.3) or borrowing (3.4). In Section 4, we consider different possible historical explanations to account for the synchronic situation emerging from the case study in Section 3: lexical diffusion (4.1), substratum influence (4.2), widespread multilingualism (4.3), and spread-over-spread events in Bantu language history (4.4). Conclusions are in Section 5.

2 Data and methodology

Ever since Vansina (1995), lexicostatical and lexicon-based phylogenetic approaches to Bantu internal classification have supported the existence of a major branch within the Bantu family called West-Coastal Bantu (henceforth WCB) (Bastin *et al.* 1999, Bostoen *et al.* 2015, de Schryver *et al.* 2015, Bostoen and de Schryver 2018a, b), a.k.a West-Western (Grollemund *et al.* 2015). Geographically, this branch spans across Gabon, the Republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (henceforth DRC) and northern Angola. In terms of Guthrie's referential (i.e. non-genealogical) classification (cf. Guthrie 1971, Maho 2009), this branch includes the B40-80, H10 and H30 language groups as well as Hungan H42 and Samba L12a. Figure 1 presents major subgroups according to the most recent and comprehensive lexicon-based phylogenetic classification of WCB in general (Pacchiarotti *et al.* 2019) and the Kikongo Language Cluster (henceforth KLC) in particular (de Schryver *et al.* 2015, Bostoen and de Schryver 2018a, b).

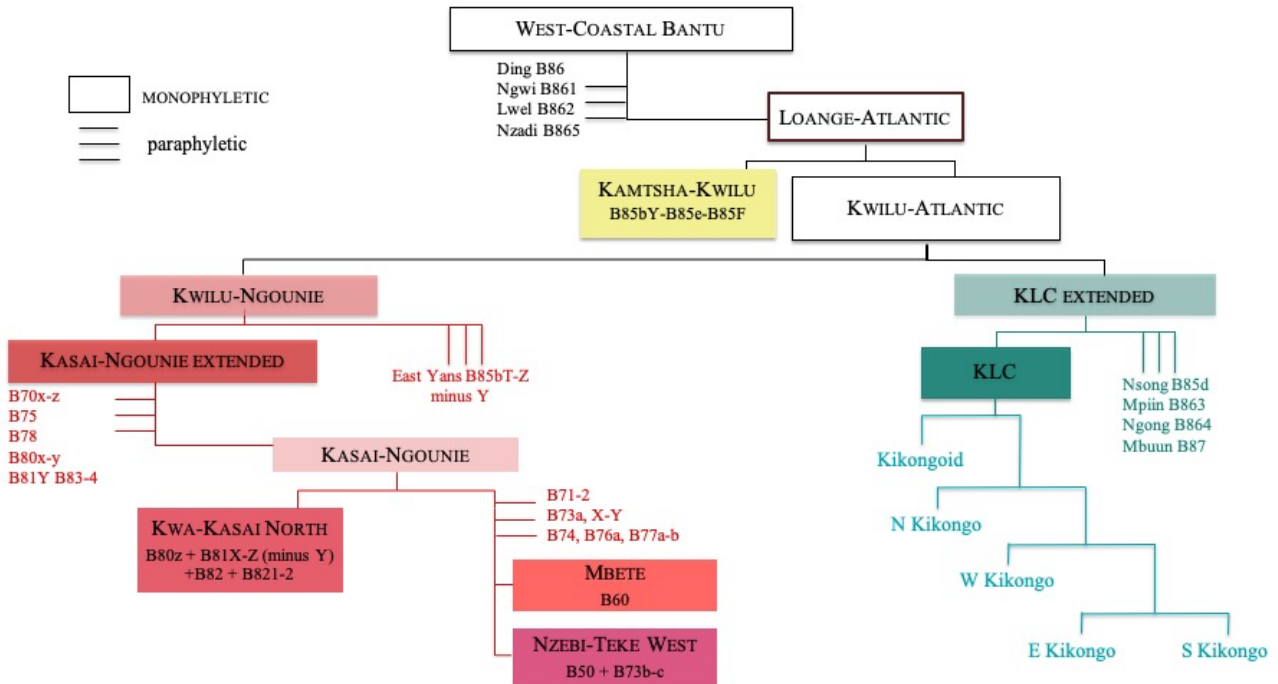


Figure 1: Internal lexicon-based phylogenetic classification of WCB (de Schryver *et al.* 2015, Bostoen and de Schryver 2018a, b, Pacchiarotti *et al.* 2019)

We choose the WCB branch for our quantitative case study because, unlike other branches, this branch has been the target of in-depth historical phonological work (Daeleman 1977, Rottland 1977, Hombert and Mou    1988, Idiata-Mayombo 1993, Mou    1997, Nguimbi-Mabiala 1999, Koni Muluwa 2010: 117-161, Bostoen and Koni Muluwa 2011, Crane *et al.* 2011: 255-270, Koni Muluwa and Bostoen 2011; 2012, Bostoen and Goes 2019, Goes and Bostoen 2019, Pacchiarotti and Bostoen 2020; 2021). Particularly relevant to our purposes is a recent study based on 41 WCB language varieties which shows that when not preceded by a nasal, PB *k and *g merged into *k minimally at Proto-WCB (PWCB) level (Pacchiarotti and

Bostoen 2020). While PWCB *k is stable and retained as such root-initially (i.e. C₁ in a C₁V₁C₂V₂ structure) virtually in every WCB language, there is much more variation and thus innovation in the developments of PWCB *k in root-medial position (i.e. C₂ in a C₁V₁C₂V₂ structure). Besides retentions of the PWCB velar stop *k, two major innovations in C₂ position are (i) lenitions to different kinds of fricatives in the back of the oral cavity, and (ii) loss (i.e. zero). However, very few WCB varieties are consistently conservative or innovative. Pacchiarotti and Bostoen (2020) note that PWCB *k in C₂ position has multiple unconditioned reflexes (MUR) in many present-day WCB languages.

In this case study, we present an in-depth analysis of the distribution and outcomes of this cross-linguistic phenomenon of irregular sound change and consider its possible origins. We focus on one specific branch of the Bantu family and on the MUR of only PB velar stops in C₂ position. Nonetheless, we consider our case study as representative of the broader phenomenon affecting the reconstructed series of PB voiceless and voiced stops (*p, *t, *k and *b, *d, *g) in C₁ and/or C₂ position, which has been examined since the 1980s especially in the northwestern part of the Bantu domain, i.e. Cameroon and Gabon, in relation to languages found in Guthrie's referential zones A and B. An example of such MUR (both in C₁ and C₂ positions) reconstructed by Bancel (1988: 10) for the putative most recent common ancestor of the so-called Ewondo-Fang languages of Guthrie's A70 group is given in (1). Noun classes are given in parentheses. The fact that MUR can be reconstructed to an ancestral stage indicates that the present-day Ewondo-Fang languages manifest the same variation and that this diachronic phonological irregularity must have a certain time depth. In 0, BLR stands for Bantu Lexical Reconstructions 2/3 (Coupez *et al.* 1998, Bastin *et al.* 2002) (see discussion below).

(1)	Proto-Bantu		Proto-A70	MUR in C ₁	MUR in C ₂
	BLR 1179	*dúk 'vomit'	*yô	*d > *y	*k > *Ø
	BLR 1109	*dók 'rain (v.)'	*e-lók 'rain (n.)' (CL 7/8)	*d > *l	*k > *k
	BLR 2476	*pèpèpè 'wind'	*m-fêp (CL 3/4)	*p > *f	*p > *p
	BLR 2430	*pèdim 'flash (v.)'	*vəs	*p > *v	
	BLR 2684	*pùkò 'bag'	*m-fêk (CL 3/4)	*p > *f	*k > *k
	BLR 2682	*púk 'be mature'	*vú	*p > *v	*k > *Ø
	BLR 2827	*tèk 'be soft'	*tèk	*t > *t	*k > *k
	BLR 3105	*túkù 'night'	*a-lú (CL 5/6)	*t > *l	*k > *Ø
	BLR 2811	*tátù 'three'	*lâl	*t > *l	*t > *l
	BLR 2808	*tààté 'father'	*tátó (CL 1a/2)	*t > *t	*t > *t
	BLR 2816	*tédam 'stand'	*táló	*t > *t	*d > *l
	BLR 2727	*tádè 'iron ore'	*e-láè (CL 7/8)	*t > *l	*d > *Ø
	BLR 3101	*túd 'forge'	*lúì	*t > *l	*d > *Ø

To develop a systematic examination of such MUR in a well-defined though large enough branch of the Bantu family, we took as a point of departure for the present case study the 66 cognate sets from Pacchiarotti and Bostoen (2020) that have reflexes of PB *k and *g (= PWCB *k) in C₂ position in 41 different WCB varieties (see Appendix 1). The cognate sets in Pacchiarotti and Bostoen (2020: 175-189) are chosen based on the most widespread protoforms across WCB. To these, we added for the same convenience sample (minus Teke Tyee B73d see footnote 23 in Table 1) language-specific reflexes of roots containing PB *k or *g in C₂ position that are less well distributed (see Appendix 2). To find these additional reflexes in each of the language varieties for these two PB velar stops, we used a top-down approach. This means that instead of positing reconstructions based on synchronic cognate sets, we relied on the already existing protoforms in the *Bantu Lexical Reconstructions 2/3* database (Coupez *et al.* 1998, Bastin *et al.* 2002) and posited synchronic forms in individual languages as likely reflexes of these protoforms. We choose to develop a MUR case study of velar protosegments for reasons of convenience, as it allows us to build on published cognate sets. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of MUR illustrated here is certainly not

epiphenomenal for reflexes of velar consonants in WCB. It is also found in the reflexes of PB labial stops in C₁ position (especially reflexes of PB *b and *p) and alveolar stops in C₂ position (especially reflexes of PB *d).

In Table 1, we list all varieties included in this study with their corresponding alphanumeric code, their phylogenetic subgroup according to Pacchiarotti et al. (2019) and their data sources.¹ In Table 2, we show the MUR of PWCB *k (the merged reflex of PB *k and *g) in C₂ for each variety in our 40-language convenience sample. The three types of MUR we have identified are (i) voiceless velar stop /k/, (ii) some kind of dorsal fricative, and (iii) zero. All MUR listed in Table 2 are to be understood as reflexes in the absence of a specific conditioning environment, such as high vowels, which commonly trigger distinctive sound shifts in Bantu (Schadeberg 1995, Labrousse 1999, Bostoen 2008). We illustrate this in (2) with data from Nzebi B52, which has /k/ and /x/ as reflexes of both PB *k and *g in C₂.² Meanings of Nzebi reflexes in (2) are indicated only when they differ from the meaning reconstructed for the protoform. Most reconstructions are taken from the BLR database (cf. supra). Those which say “Proto-Duma” are taken from Mouélé’s (1997: 349 and ff.) reconstruction of lexicon in Proto-B50, the most recent common ancestor of Wanzi B501, Duma B51, Nzebi B52, and Tsaangi B53. As can be seen by comparing for example Ø-kókò ‘chicken’ < BLR 1904 *kókò ‘chicken’ with kòxò ‘log’ < BLR 1427 *gògò ‘trunk, bridge’, it is hard to find a phonological conditioning environment to these the two reflexes apart. We discuss this in detail in §3.3.

(2) Nzebi B52 (Marchal-Nasse 1989, Mouélé 1997)

PB *k in C ₂	BLR 66	*bák ‘build’	>	ì-bàxà ‘wall’
	BLR 67	*bák ‘get, catch, rob’	>	ù-bàxà ‘get, receive, earn’
	BLR 820	*dáká ‘tongue, language, jaw’	>	n-dàxà ‘language’
	BLR 9590	*dákò ‘house (for men)’	>	mù-làkà ‘camp, encampment’
	BLR 9642	*káká ‘foot’	>	lè-kàkà ‘hand’
	BLR 1685	*kààkà ‘grandparent’	>	Ø-kààxà ³
	BLR 1906	*kòòkò ‘grandparent’	>	kòòkò
	BLR 7983	*kéèkéè ‘little, small’	>	mù-yéyé ‘youngest sibling’
	BLR 2286	*nók ‘rain (v.)’	>	ù-nòxò ‘rain (v.)’
	BLR 647	*còkà ‘axe’	>	Ø-tsòkò ‘traditional axe’
	BLR 2967	*tòk ‘boil’	>	ù-tòxò
	BLR 1904	*kókò ‘chicken’	>	Ø-kókò
	Proto-Duma	*kòkò ‘domestic cat’	>	mu-kòxò
	BLR 1355	*gègò ‘molar’	>	kèkè
	BLR 145	*béek ‘put (away)’	>	ù-bééka
	BLR 2828	*ték ‘draw (water)’	>	ù-téxè
PB *g in C ₂	BLR 1041	*dígi ‘string’	>	nzíxi
	BLR 1828	*kígè ‘eyebrow’	>	Ø-kíkì
	BLR 60	*bàgú ‘stumbling block’	>	bàkà
	BLR 55	*bààg ‘tear’	>	ù-bà:kà

¹ To carry out this quantitative study, we collapsed data from more than one dialectal variety of a single language (distinguished by means of capital X, Y, and Z after the alphanumeric code in Table 1). For example, data on Nzebi (Lébamba) B52Z from Marchal-Nasse (1989) and on Nzebi (Mbigou) B52Y from Mouélé are collapsed under Nzebi B52 in Table 2. Varieties included in this study but not in Pacchiarotti et al. (2019) are shaded in gray in Table 1. This paper also provides original fieldwork data on three poorly documented Bantu languages spoken in the DRC, namely Mpe B821, Nunu B822 and Ngwi B861.

² Different authors report different fricatives as the reflex of PB *g and *k in C₂ in Nzebi B52. Marchal-Nasse (1989) reports [x], while Mouélé (1997) reports [ɣ]. These could well be dialectal differences. In (2) we adapt the transcription of the data from Mouélé (1997) to [x] for convenience.

³ Pacchiarotti and Bostoen (2020: 185) give ngáxà ‘family, relative, friend’ as the Nzebi reflex of BLR 1685 *kààkà ‘grandparent’. This is a mistake. Mouélé (1997: 387, 390) reconstructs Proto-Duma *kààxà ‘grandparent’ as a reflex of BLR 1685 *kààkà, and Proto-Duma *ngàxà ‘parent’ not linkable to any existing reconstruction in the BLR database.

BLR 1427	*gògò ‘trunk, bridge’	>	kòxó ‘log’
BLR 808	*dàg ‘show (v.)’	>	ù-làxà
BLR 812	*dàgá ‘promise’	>	làxà
BLR 316	*bùgà ‘village, path’	>	mbóxà ‘at someone’s place, village’
BLR 315	*bùg ‘plaster, dig foundations’	>	ù-bókà ‘dig’
BLR 900	*dègè ‘weaver bird’	>	ndèkè
BLR 2180	*mìg ‘try (v.)’	>	ù-mèxà ‘taste (v.)’
BLR 3338	*jíg ‘learn, imitate’	>	ù-yíxà ‘learn’

In Table 2, MUR for each variety are ordered according to frequency, from the most frequent (see column “Reflex 1”) to the least frequent (see column “Reflex 3”). Each “Reflex” column in Table 2 has four subcolumns. The first subcolumn is the actual phonetic form of the reflex of PWCB *k in a given variety, e.g. /y/. The second subcolumn shows the ratio of BLR roots reconstructed with a PB *k or *g in C₂ displaying that reflex in a given variety over the total amount of reflexes identified for that variety. For instance the “Reflex 1” column for Punu B43 in Table 2 reads that /y/ is Reflex 1 (the most frequent reflex) of PWCB *k, and that we found 47 reflexes in Punu out of 58 total reflexes of BLR reconstructions containing a PB *k in C₂ having /y/ as a reflex (i.e. *k: 47/58), as well as 23 reflexes out of 34 total reflexes of BLR reconstructions containing a PB *g in C₂ having /y/ as a reflex (i.e. *g: 23/34). The third subcolumn converts each fraction (for each PB velar stop) into a percentage for the purpose of comparing percentages across varieties (i.e. in Punu B43 47/58 equals 81% of total identified reflexes of PB *k in C₂; 23/34 equals 68% of total identified reflexes of PB *g in C₂). The fourth subcolumn gives the combined percentage of roots with PB *k and *g in C₂ having a given reflex. For example, in Punu, we identified 92 reflexes of PB reconstructions containing either PB *k (58) or *g (34) in C₂. Of these, a total of 70 have /y/ as a reflex (47 for *k and 23 for *g): 70/92 equals 76% of all reflexes.

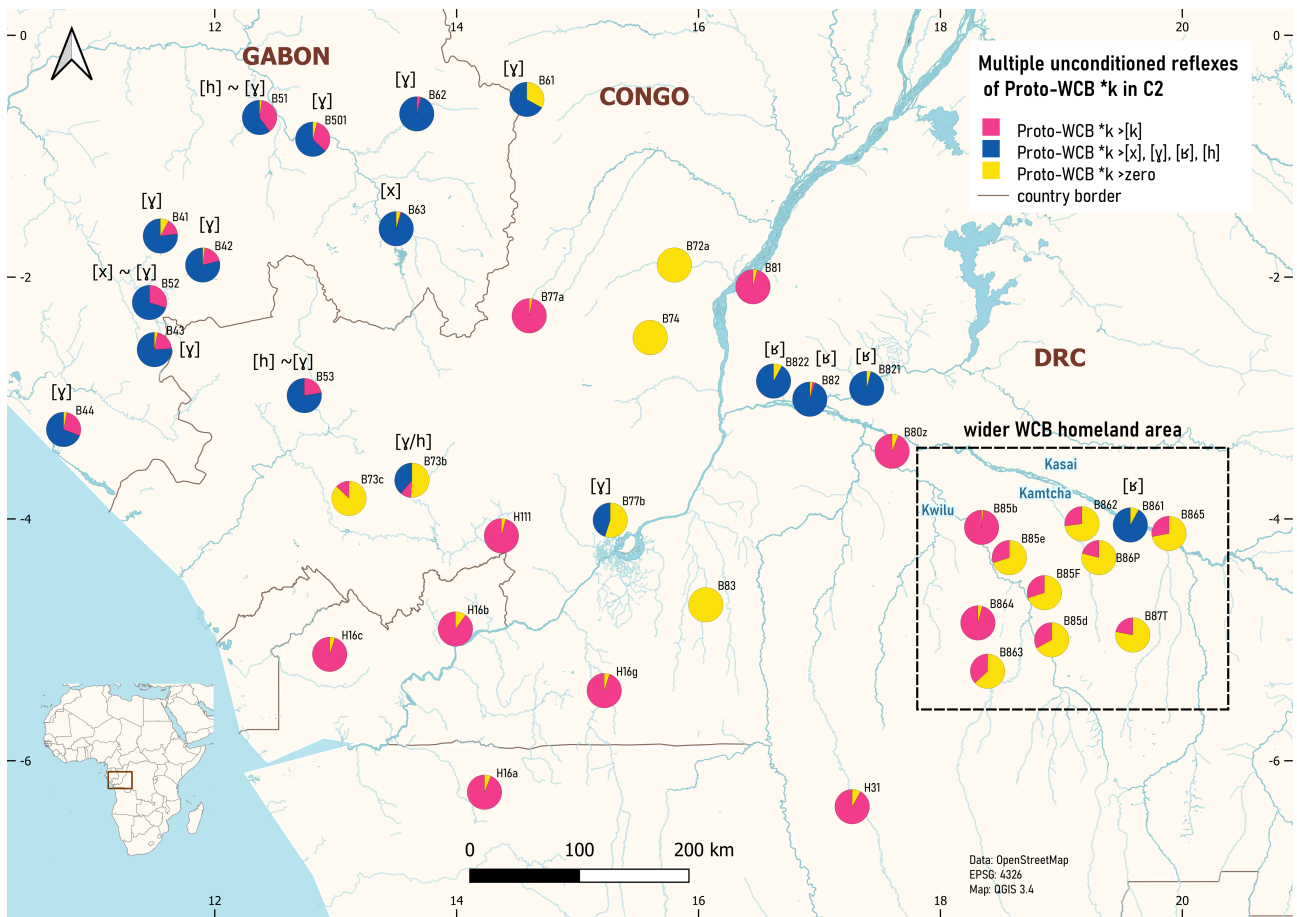
3 Results

In Map 1, we plot the MUR of PWCB *k in C₂ for each variety in our convenience sample. Specifically, each variety is represented by a color-coded pie chart displaying the total percentage of each reflex (see subcolumn 4 in each “Reflex” column in Table 2).⁴

By looking at the percentages in Table 2 and the pie charts in Map 1, a first observation is that some varieties have only one reflex for PWCB *k in C₂, which is always Ø (Ngungwel B72a, Eboo-Nzikou B74 and Mfinu B83). Other varieties have predominantly one reflex and only a smaller percentage of a second reflex, but ratios differ across languages:

- **9:1 ratio:** 90% or more lexical items with /k/ as a shared retention and only 10% or less with a zero reflex in the most conservative varieties (Boma Yumu B80z, Tiene B81, East Yans B85b, Ngong B864 and all KLC varieties of zone H, i.e. Hangala H111, Sikongo H16a, Manyanga H16b, Yombe H16c, Ntandu H16g and Yaka H31); over 90% fricative reflexes and 10% Ø in some innovative varieties (e.g. Mpe B821, Nunu B822, North Boma B82, and Ngwi B861) and 87% Ø and 13% /k/ in Yaa B73c;
- **8:2 ratio:** nearly 80% Ø and 20% /k/ in Ding B86 and Mbuun B87 or nearly 80% fricatives and 20% /k/ in Tsaangi B53;
- **7:3 ratio:** nearly 70% Ø and 30% /k/ in Lwel B862, Nzadi B865, and Nsong B85d and 70% of fricatives and 30% /k/ in Nzebi B52;
- **6:4 ratio:** 63% Ø and 37% /k/ in Mpiin B863 or 60% fricatives, 38% /k/ and 2% Ø in Duma B51.

⁴ Map 1 was created by using the Free and Open Source Software QGIS, a professional Geographic Information System (GIS) application downloadable at <https://download.qgis.org>.



Map 1: Multiple unconditioned reflexes of PWCB *k in C₂

In only a couple of varieties, the ratio is almost 5:5 (Fumu B77b) or 5:4:1 (Laali B73b). Excluding Laali, in varieties with up to three MURs, one of these three is usually lower than 10% (e.g. Nduumo with 1% /k/ or Punu B43 and Lumbu B44 with 3% Ø). Thus, a relevant question that has never been considered so far in the Bantu literature on so-called “double reflexes” is what ratio should be taken as threshold to claim the existence of MUR in a given Bantu language. Whatever the answer to this question might be, some of these ratios seem to be areally concentrated in Map 1.

A second, visually prominent aspect emerging from Map 1 has to do with cycles of innovations. Pacchiarotti and Bostoen (2020) posit the lenition chain in (3) to account for the innovation of fricatives and Ø after the fragmentation of PWCB.

(3) PB *k and *g > PWCB *k > Post-PWCB x/ɣ/ɛ/h > Post-PWCB Ø

However, Map 1 provides evidence for two distinct and possibly separate paths of innovation of PWCB /k/. The first one is PWCB *k > fricative > Ø, as proposed by Pacchiarotti and Bostoen (2020). The second one is PWCB *k > Ø. Although the abrupt loss of simple stops in intervocalic position might be rare cross-linguistically, we do not have any synchronic evidence to posit an intermediate lenition stage.⁵ As we

⁵ Two anonymous reviewers asked whether we knew of languages outside of Bantu where the loss of a velar happens without going through an intermediate lenition stage such as a fricative. We are not aware of any diachronic cases in intervocalic position, only in consonant clusters. Cser (2015: 199) states that “the gradual weakening [...] of sounds that may lead to loss in the long run [...] is not always distinguished terminologically from the more abrupt and categorical kinds of loss often encountered in clusters.” Cser (2015: 199-200) offers multiple examples of deletion (without an intermediate “lenited” stage) of consonants in consonant clusters, such as Latin *rupta* > French *route* ‘road, way’, *costa* > *côte* ‘coast, rib’. Synchronically, in some Flemish dialects, /k/ is realized as a glottal stop in intervocalic

discuss in §4, each of these chains operates within the same language variety and creates MURs for one and the same protosound. The lenition chain in (3) is supported by the B40 languages, Wanzi B501, Duma B51, Nduumo B63, and Laali B73b, where we find /k/, dorsal fricatives and zero as reflexes of PWCB *k (see Map 1). At the same time, there is evidence in favor of a direct shift from *k > Ø without going through an intermediate fricative stage. The twelve varieties with the highest number of Ø as reflexes of PWCB *k in C₂ ranging between 100% and 63% do not have any fricative reflexes. None of these languages has a dorsal fricative in its phonological inventory. These are: the first paraphyletic offshoots Ding B86, Lwel B862, and Nzadi B865; the KLC extended varieties Nsong B85d, Mbuun B87, Mpiin B863; the Kamtsha-Kwilu varieties Nsambaan B85F, Mpur B85e; and the Kasai-Ngounie extended paraphyletic varieties Ngungwel B72a, Yaa B73c,⁶ Eboo-Nzikou B74, Mfinu B83. If they have a second reflex, this is a retention of PWCB *k (ranging from 13% to 37%). These languages occur in all major subbranches of WCB. In our view, this is a strong indication for a direct PWCB *k > Ø sound shift. Similarly, the eleven most conservative varieties having between 98.5-90% retentions of PWCB *k only have zero as an alternative reflex but never a fricative (i.e. within Kwilu-Ngounie: Kukwa B77a, Boma Yumu B80z, Tiene B81, East Yans B85b; within KLC extended: Ngong B864, Hangala H111, Sikongo H16a, Manyanga H16b, Yombe H16c, Ntandu H16g, Yaka H31). We take this as one more indication that the *k > Ø innovation can start out by simply losing /k/ without going through an intermediate fricative stage.

A third consideration emerging from Map 1 related to the two cycles of innovation described above is that different languages are synchronically at different stages in the chain PWCB *k > fricative (> Ø). In some languages, PWCB *k in C₂ only underwent lenition to a dorsal fricative. Other languages went a step further and are losing the fricative in C₂ position. Among those which only innovated a fricative, this change appears to have applied to more than 90% of all retrievable lexical items in Nduumo B63, Mbaama B62, and North Boma B82. Languages which innovated a fricative but preserve a more significant percentage of roots which still have /k/ are several Nzebi-Teke West varieties, such as Wanzi B501, Duma B51, Nzebi B52 and Tsaangi B53 as well as the West-Kongo B40 languages of the KLC. In Shira B41, Punu B42 and Sangu B43, 10-30% of lexical items have /k/ instead of a fricative. To a neglectable extent, zero is also attested alongside /k/ and a fricative in the B40 group, Wanzi B501, and Duma B51. Perhaps the variety that best illustrates the PWCB *k > fricative > Ø chain is Laali B73b, a variety where 10% of roots still show a conservative /k/, 39% have a fricative while in the remaining 51% the fricative already became zero. Mpe B821, Nunu B822, Ngwi B861, Mbete B61Z, and Fumu B77b are the only two varieties that went a step further in the PWCB *k > fricative > Ø chain. They no longer have roots with /k/ in C₂, but only fricatives and zero as a further development out of the fricative innovation.

After these general observations, we now assess whether the two main innovations of PWCB C₂ *k, i.e. zero (§3.1) and dorsal fricatives (§3.2), can be reconstructed as shared innovations going back to certain ancestral nodes within WCB. This assessment obviously presupposes that we assign some validity to the phylogenetic WCB subgroupings emerging in Pacchiarotti et al. (2019). In the following subsections we assess whether we can exclude the possibility of explaining MURs discussed in §3.1 and §3.2 via phonological conditioning (§3.3) and/or borrowing (§3.4), two factors often held responsible for the apparent irregularity of sound change. Because we deal with forty varieties in this study, it is not feasible to discuss these possibilities for each and every language, also because our linguistic knowledge is not equal across varieties. Thus, we conveniently choose our own fieldwork data on Ngwi B861 spoken in the homeland region for the argumentation in §3.3 and §3.4. Most of what we argue for Ngwi is no doubt

position, e.g., *bakken* ‘to bake’ > [‘baʔn] (cf. De Wulf et al. 2005: 13). Additionally, an anonymous reviewer points out that *g is known to disappear more readily than *k. While it is entirely possible that PWCB *k underwent voicing to /g/ before the lenition chain started, we do not have any synchronic evidence for this intermediate stage. While several WCB varieties retained PWCB *k in C₂, none of them provides evidence for /g/ (see Pacchiarotti and Bostoen 2020: 175-189).

⁶ Yaa B73c stands out for being the only variety within Nzebi-Teke West to have almost completed the innovation to zero without showing any trace of a fricative as the reflex of PWCB *k in C₂.

applicable to other WCB varieties labelled with Guthrie's alphanumeric codes B85 and higher spoken in the wider homeland region (see data in Appendix 1 and 2).

3.1 Zero reflexes

As observed above, languages having zero reflexes ranging between 100% and 63% are found in all major WCB branches (see Figure 1), namely the first paraphyletic offshoots, KLC extended, Kamtsha-Kwilu, and Kwilu-Ngounie. Because this innovation is at different stages within different branches and given that there are varieties within these branches which are highly conservative in that they mostly have shared retentions of PWCB *k, it is impossible to reconstruct the zero innovation to PWCB level. Rather, the scattered distribution of this innovation across the different branches suggests that it should be considered as a series of independent parallel innovations across branches. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that distantly related WCB varieties such as Mbete B61 and Mbaama B62 on one hand, and Yans B85 and Ngong B864 on the other, synchronically lose velar consonants in C₂ depending on the dialect, as shown in (5)-0.

(4)BLR 70	*bàkàdà ‘man, male’	>	B85aY	bakæɫ	(Swartenbroeckx 1948)
			B85bV	bɛ̀a:l̥	(Rottland 1977)
			B864W	bàgál	(Ngulu Kibiakam 1986)
			B864X	ábá:l	(Koni Muluwa and Bostoen 2015)
(5)BLR3604	*júg ‘hear’	>	B61Y	yo-yuɣa	(Lane 1989)
			B61Z	ŋo-yúwá	(Ndouli 2001)
(6)	*coko ‘liver’	>	B62Y	le-sɔɔ	(Bastin et al. 1999) ⁷
			B62Z	le-sɔ́yɔ́	(Okoudowa 2016)

This strongly suggests that loss as a further development of PWCB *k in C₂ in different groups should be explained as distinct, parallel innovations. Considering that other consonants besides velars, e.g. some nasal clusters and some coronals, are also lost in many Teke varieties as well as in several languages closer to the WCB homeland (e.g. Ngwi B861), the recurrent loss of PWCB *k in C₂ was likely favored by a weak phonotactic C₂ position.

Although PWCB *k > Ø in C₂ should be posited as a parallel independent innovation in several WCB branches, this does not necessarily imply that no cases of PWCB *k loss happened at a deeper ancestral stage. In the case of conservative KLC varieties of Guthrie's zone H, for instance, a legitimate question is whether words which have a zero instead of /k/ as a reflex of PWCB *k unexpectedly lost this velar stop already at a much earlier ancestral stage and inherited a root with Ø in C₂ from their most recent common ancestor. As shown in (4), a root like BLR 2911 *tígad ‘remain’ lost PB *g (=PWCB *k) everywhere in C₂. This could indicate that the sound was lost at the ancestral node uniting the KLC and the paraphyletic KLC Extended languages (cf. Figure 1).

(7)BLR 2911	*tígad ‘remain’	>	KLC	B43	syaal-a
				B44	sial
				H111	sààl-á
				H16a	ku-ssaàl-a
				H16b	sal-a
				H16c	syáál-a
				H16g	sáál

⁷ The basic vocabulary which Bastin *et al.* (1999) used for their lexicostatistical study is currently available on the website of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren:
https://www.africamuseum.be/nl/research/discover/human_sciences/culture_society/lexicostatistic-study-bantu-languages.

	H31	sáál-á
KLC Extended	B864X	sal

The root BLR 3423 *jígu ‘hear’ in (5) also lost PB *g everywhere in C₂ except in Ngong B864 which maintained PWCB *k. Hence, one could argue here that the loss of PWCB *k in C₂ had certainly happened already in Proto-Kikongo, the most recent common ancestor of the KLC, and possibly even slightly earlier.

(8)BLR 3423 *jígu ‘hear’	>	KLC	H111	yw-á
			H16a	kú-ú-a
			H16b	w-a
			H16c	w-á
			H16g	w-a
			H31	w-a
		KLC Extended	B85dZ	wu:
			B863Y	wu:
			B864X	wuk
			B87W	wu:

As for the reflexes of BLR 3527 *jògà ‘mushroom’ in (6), PWCB *k is retained in two paraphyletic varieties belonging to the KLC Extended branch, namely Mpiin B863 and Ngong B864. Within the KLC proper, PWCB *k has voiced velar fricatives as reflexes in Punu B43 and Lumbu B44. Based on these attestations, it is impossible to reconstruct loss of PB *g (=PWCB *k) in BLR 3527 *jògà ‘mushroom’ at a deeper ancestral stage uniting at least some of the languages which have a reflex of this protoform in (6). Rather, the Ø reflex of PWCB *k in this lexical item must have emerged independently within the KLC (see e.g. B42, H16b, H16g, H31) on one hand and in the KLC Extended paraphyletic languages such as Nsong B85d and Mbuun B87 on the other hand.

(9)BLR 3527 *jògà ‘mushroom’	>	KLC	B42	by-oowu
			B43	bo-oŷu
			B44	bu-oŷu
			H16b	bù-wa
			H16g	bu-wá
			H31	bu-wá
		KLC Extended	B85dZ	b-ǝ:
			B863Y	bò-óku
			B864X	b-ǝk
			B87W	b-óó

3.2 Dorsal fricative reflexes

Dorsal fricative reflexes in C₂ are found close to the wider WCB homeland between the Kwilu and Kasai Rivers (cf. Pacchiarotti et al. 2019) and mostly to the northwest of the homeland area (see Map 1).⁸ Following the phylogeny in Figure 1, it is untenable to posit the development of fricatives in C₂ as a single shared innovation inherited from a most recent common ancestor. Languages having fricative reflexes of PWCB *k are too scattered across the family tree. This innovation is found in Ngwi B861, one of the languages to split off first within WCB, as well as in languages belonging to much lower nodes, such as the KLC within the KLC extended branch, and Mbete, Nzebi-Teke West and Kwa-Kasai North within the Kasai-Ngounie branch. Several of these subgroups also include languages which did not innovate PWCB *k in C₂.

⁸ We call it wider, because the putative WCB homeland area is supposed to be located between the Kamtscha and Kasai rivers (Pacchiarotti et al. 2019: 193).

For example, the Kwa-Kasai North subgroup includes the conservative Boma Yumu B80z and Tiene B81 alongside the innovative Mpe B821, Nunu B822, and North Boma B82 (see Map 1). In the KLC, only the B40 group shows fricative reflexes while all other zone H languages are conservative. Velar fricativization therefore occurred in all likelihood independently and recurrently in WCB as a parallel innovation. This does not mean, however, that all present-day languages having such fricatives developed them individually. Within the Kasai-Ngounie (Extended) subclade (see Figure 1), for instance, several languages did not develop fricative reflexes of PWCB *k as an innovation. Hence, while the innovation cannot be reconstructed back to Proto-Kasai-Ngounie (Extended), it is nevertheless widespread in its three main subgroups. Within Kwa-Kasai North, North Boma B82, Mpe B821 and Nunu B822 share voiced uvular fricatives. This might indicate that they are more closely related amongst each other than to Boma Yumu B80z and Tiene B81, which also belong to that subclade but by and large retained PWCB *k in C₂. In the two other lower Kasai-Ngounie subgroups, i.e. the Mbete (B60) and Nzebi-Teke West (B50 + B73b-c), fricative reflexes of PWCB *k in C₂ are omnipresent. These languages most likely inherited the innovation from their respective most recent common ancestor, or possibly from a slightly older ancestor shared by the two subgroups.

Moreover, certain dorsal fricatives may also have emerged as the result of contact-induced change. Dorsal fricative reflexes of PWCB *k are most pervasive in the north-western part of the WCB domain. They are not only attested in the Mbete (B60) and Nzebi-Teke West (B50 + B73b-c)⁹ subgroups of Kasai-Ngounie, but also in the neighboring West-Kikongo B40 languages, which belong to an entirely distinct WCB branch, i.e. the KLC (Extended). In the remainder of the KLC (Extended), fricative reflexes of PWCB *k are completely absent. The fact that only the most extreme north-western KLC varieties which are in direct contact with Nzebi-Teke West (B50 + B73b-c) languages acquired velar fricatives could point towards an areal feature. What is most striking is that the B40 languages which acquired velar fricatives as a result of contact are the most innovative WCB varieties: they are the only ones to have innovated velar fricatives also in C₁ position (cf. Pacchiarotti and Bostoen 2020). Contact with neighboring Laali B73bZ could also account for the fact that Fumu B77bX is the only the paraphyletic Kasai-Ngounie variety to have voiced velar fricatives (see Map 1).

As we previously observed for zero reflexes, the fact that fricative reflexes of PWCB *k are best analyzed as parallel independent innovations (except in the B40-B50-B60 convergence area) does not exclude that for some lexemes the fricative innovation might be reconstructed at some common ancestral node. We investigate this possibility in Table 3, where we present cognate series for two lower-node Kasai-Ngounie subgroups, i.e. Mbete and Nzebi-Teke West. We also include data from Fumu B77b, whose most recent common ancestor with the other languages in Table 3 would be Proto-Kasai-Ngounie itself according to the latest lexicon-based phylogeny (Pacchiarotti *et al.* 2019).

As far as data are available, roots 1-7 in Table 3 seem to have innovated a fricative out of PWCB *k across all languages. Hence, the most parsimonious explanation would be that the shift to a fricative started in the most recent common ancestor uniting Fumu B77b with the Mbete and Nzebi-Teke West. This cannot be Proto-Kasai-Ngounie itself as several languages belonging to Kwa-Kasai North, the other monophyletic Kasai-Ngounie subgroup (cf. Figure 1), have retained PWCB *k in C₂ (cf. Boma Yumu B80z and Tiene B81 in Map 1). In other words, the fricative shift could be a shared innovation indicating that the Mbete and Nzebi-Teke West subgroups and the Kasai-Ngounie paraphyletic languages like Fumu B77b (cf. Figure 1) are actually more closely related to each other than to Kwa-Kasai North and thus resolve the parphyly that emerged relying on basic vocabulary. More solid comparative data are needed to firmly prove this point.

On the other hand, as far as roots 8-19 in Table 3 are concerned, none of them seems to have consistently undergone the PWCB *k > fricative (> Ø) innovation across all languages. Hence, for all of these roots, it is necessary to posit PWCB *k as a retention at some higher ancestral node within the Kasai-

⁹ Yaa B73c, which is part of Nzebi-Teke West according to lexicon-based phylogeny in Figure 1, stands out amongst other languages within this group in that it does not have fricative reflexes of PWCB *k at all. It rather underwent loss of PWCB *k in C₂. This could be interpreted as a challenge to the phylogeny, but this specific innovation could also be considered as a further development in a chain such as PWCB *k > fricative > Ø.

Ngounie branch. This suggests that while this chain of innovation had started in the most recent common ancestor of Fumu B77b, Nzebi-Teke West and Mbete (cf. roots 1-7 in Table 2), it started out gradually, and affected only some targetable lexical items at a time (cf. roots 8-19 in Table 2). While the roots that had not been affected earlier on did undergo the shift quite consistently in Fumu B77b and Mbete B60, this does not seem to have been the case in Nzebi-Teke West, where PWCB *k was retained across all languages in several other roots, i.e. *bùgí ‘squirrel’, *gègò ‘(molar) tooth’, *kígí ‘eyebrow’, *káká ‘foot’ and *páágù ‘tree fork’.

3.3 Excluding phonological conditioning as an explanation for MURs

In this section we assess whether we can exclude the possibility of explaining MURs discussed in §3.1 and §3.2 via phonological conditioning.

We first assess whether it is possible to find some phonological conditioning for MURs in Ngwi. Because of its relevance for the following discussion, readers should be aware that like other WCB varieties spoken in the homeland area, Ngwi underwent systematic final vowel loss (Pacchiarotti and Bostoen 2021). By this we mean the historical loss of the word-final vowel segment in the reflexes of nouns and verbs reconstructed as *CVCV or *CVNVCV in BLR3. Historical comparative research on final vowel loss indicates that this diachronic change is relatively recent and happened only *after* the loss of intervocalic consonants in several languages of the homeland area. This means that final vowel loss did not apply to CVV shapes created from the loss of a C₂ consonant in a *C₁V₁C₂V₂ template, see e.g. Ø-mfúù ‘mouse’ in (10). As can be seen in Map 1, PWCB *k (the merged reflex of PB *k and *g) in C₂ has /ɤ/ as the most common reflex in Ngwi and zero as a second, less common reflex. We illustrate these two reflexes in (10). The fact that there are more zero reflexes for reconstructions featuring PB *k in C₂ is an artifact of the database. The BLR3 database contains many more reconstructions with *k in C₂ than *g in C₂ (see Pacchiarotti and Bostoen 2020: 162). In noun forms, we separate the noun class prefix from the simple noun stem. Infinitive verb forms in Ngwi consist of the root only.

(10) Ngwi B861 (own fieldwork)

PB *k in C ₂	BLR 1179	*dúk	‘vomit’	>	lúa	/Ø/
	BLR 5333	*puku	‘burrow’	>	ì-pûɤ ‘garbage hole’	/ɤ/
	BLR 2642	*púkù	‘mouse’	>	Ø-mfúù	/Ø/
	BLR 5464	*cúkù	‘sauce’	>	ò-súɤ	/ɤ/
	BLR 5339	*túkì	‘insult’	>	ì-tî	/Ø/
	BLR 3536	*jókà	‘snake’	>	Ø-ndʒúà	/Ø/
	BLR 7413	*cókì	‘saliva’	>	à-súì	/Ø/
	BLR 9461	*cákú	‘safou’ ¹⁰	>	è-súú ‘safou (fruit)’	/Ø/
	BLR 9605	*pákù	‘honey’	>	Ø-mpâɤ	/ɤ/
	BLR 1904	*kókó	‘chicken’	>	Ø-ŋkɔɤ	/ɤ/
	BLR 1685	*kààkà	‘grandparent’	>	Ø-ŋkiánkíá ‘paternal aunt’	/Ø/
PB *g in C ₂	BLR 2634	*pùgí	‘pot’	>	Ø-mpûɤ	/ɤ/
	BLR 761	*cúgù	‘day’	>	è-ʃúù	/Ø/
	BLR 4992	*túgú	‘ashes’	>	ò-túɤ	/ɤ/
	BLR 316	*búgà	‘path’	>	Ø-mbûɤ	/ɤ/
	BLR 814	*dàgò	‘promise’	>	ì-lâɤ	/ɤ/
	BLR 900	*dègè	‘weaver bird’	>	è-lêɤ	/ɤ/
	BLR 2433	*pègà	‘shoulder’	>	ì-péàɤ	/ɤ/
	BLR 1248	*dúg	‘paddle’	>	lûɤ	/ɤ/

¹⁰ The scientific name of this fruit tree is *Dacryodes edulis*. In West and West-Central African countries, it is also known as atanga, ube, African pear, bush pear, African plum, nsafu, bush butter tree, and butterfruit (cf. Bostoen 2014: 134-135).

BLR 1607 *jògù ‘elephant’ > Ø-ndzǝ /Ø/

As can be seen in (10), the secondary zero reflex of PWCB *k in Ngwi is found in those lexical items which were not possible targets for final vowel loss because they irregularly lost PWCB *k in C₂, while in most other lexemes this protosound evolved to /ɤ/. Perhaps one of the most striking examples showing the impossibility of finding a conditioning environment to tease apart the /ɤ/ and zero reflexes of Ngwi are *lúà* ‘vomit’ < BLR 1179 *dók ‘vomit’ and *lûɛ* ‘paddle’ < BLR 1248 *dóg. Due to the merger of PB *k and *g, at PWCB stage these two protoforms were (supra)segmentally identical, namely *dók. However, in *lúà* ‘vomit’ PWCB *k was lost while in *lûɛ* ‘paddle’ PWCB *k evolved into a voiced velar fricative.¹¹

Let us now examine the noun forms in search of a possible phonological conditioning. The word for ‘mouse’ Ø-*mfúù* < BLR 2642 *pókù ‘mouse’ is among those which display the zero reflex. In this word, the historical noun class prefix of class 9 *N-, a homorganic nasal, was reinterpreted as part of the root. Synchronically, the word belongs to class 7Ø/8Ø. One might think that this morphological reanalysis might have played a role in the irregular change PWCB *k > Ø in C₂ in Ngwi. In fact, two lexical items displaying the zero reflex in (10) have a fossilized nasal as part of their simple stem: Ø-*ndzúà* ‘snake’ < BLR 3536 *jókà ‘snake’, Ø-*ndzǝ* < BLR 1607 *jògù ‘elephant’. However, there are also several items with a fossilized nasal as part of their simple stem which display the /ɤ/ reflex, e.g. Ø-*mbûɛ* ‘path’ < BLR 316 *búgà, Ø-*ɲkók* ‘chicken’ < BLR 1904 *kókó. One might then posit that it was the particular quality of historical V₁ or V₂ (or a combination thereof) which had an effect on the reflex of PWCB *k in C₂ in Ngwi. This hypothesis is untenable as shown by pairs such as è-*súú* ‘safou (fruit)’ < BLR 9461 *cákú ‘safou’ and Ø-*mpâɛ* ‘honey’ < BLR 9605 *pákù ‘honey’ where we have the same historical vowels in V₁ and V₂ (*a and *u respectively) and two different reflexes for PWCB *k in C₂ (see also ì-*pûɛ* ‘garbage hole’ < BLR 5333 *puku ‘borrow’ vs. Ø-*mfúù* < BLR 2642 *pókù ‘mouse’).¹² The initial consonant of the C₁V₁C₂V₂ template does not make a good candidate as a phonological conditioner either, cf. è-*fúù* ‘day’ < BLR 761 *cúgù vs. ò-*súɛ* ‘sauce’ < BLR 5464 cúkù or ò-*túɛ* ‘ashes’ < BLR 4992 *túgù vs. ì-*tû* insult < BLR 5339 *tókì. Yet another possibility is that the different reflexes have to do with internal reduplication, but the /ɤ/ reflex of BLR 1904 *kókó ‘chicken’ and the zero reflex of BLR 1685 *kààká ‘grandparent’ speak against it.¹³ A tonal conditioning factor distinguishing the two reflexes must also be discarded based on the data in (10). Zero reflexes of PWCB *k in C₂ in Ngwi are found in reflexes of reconstructions with the following tone patterns: *HL as in BLR 761 *cúgù, *LL as in BLR 1607 *jògù, *HH as in BLR 9461 *cákú, and *LH as in BLR 1685 kààká. Nevertheless, reflexes of reconstructions with these tone patterns can also display the /ɤ/ reflex of PWCB *k in C₂, see e.g. BLR 9605 *pákù, BLR 900 *dègè, BLR 1904 *kókó ‘chicken’, and BLR 2634 *pùgí ‘pot’.

3.4 Excluding lexical borrowing as an explanation for MURs

Having excluded all possible segmental and suprasegmental conditioning environments, we now turn to lexical borrowing to salvage the regularity hypothesis and account for the apparent MURs in WCB varieties. The idea is that in languages like Ngwi, the more widespread /ɤ/ reflex would be the regular reflex of PWCB *k in C₂, while zero would have been introduced through borrowed words from neighboring varieties where zero is the most common reflex of PWCB *k in C₂ such as Ding B86, Lwel B862, or Nzadi B865 (see Map 1). According to this hypothesis, sound change is regular, despite the irregularity of the reflexes in one

¹¹ The final -a in *lúà* ‘vomit’ is very likely a historical derivational suffix with the shape -VC where C got lost and the remaining vowel merged to /a/ (see Pacchiarotti and Bostoen 2021 for additional examples in Ngwi and other WCB varieties spoken around the homeland).

¹² The historical *p in BLR 2642 *pókù ‘mouse’ became [f] in the Ngwi reflex *mfúù*, but not in the Ngwi reflex *pûɛ* < BLR 5333 puku. This fricativization triggered by a following PB *i, *ɪ, *u, and *ʊ is known to happen sporadically and irregularly in several WCB varieties spoken in the homeland area (Pacchiarotti and Bostoen 2020: 153).

¹³ See §3.4 for a discussion of the formal (ir)regularities of Ø-*ɲkíáŋkíá* ‘paternal aunt’ as a reflex of BLR 1685 *kààká ‘grandparent’.

and the same language: regular sound changes in different languages are blurred by later borrowings from related languages where the regular sound change is not at the same stage (cf. dorsal fricative and zero reflexes in §3.1 and §3.2). In (11), we present some easily detectable borrowings in Ngwi which have not been included in the present case study, i.e. nouns and verbs with a non-derivational final vowel.¹⁴ Often times speakers themselves are aware that certain lexical items are borrowings and indicate the donor language. We add this information whenever available in parenthesis next to each entry. Kongo Ya Leta is a vehicular variety of Kongo used as a *lingua franca* in the region where Ngwi is spoken (cf. Swartenbroeckx 1973).¹⁵

(11) Ngwi B861 (own fieldwork)

BLR 4998	*kùgú	‘sugar cane’	> ò-kùkú (cf. Kongo <i>mùkùkú</i>) ¹⁶
BLR 7402	*tòkó	‘mat’	> ì-tòkó (cf. Kongo <i>kítókò</i>)
BLR 1905	*kòòkò	‘sheep’	> ò-kòkò (cf. Kongo <i>kókò</i> ‘ram’)
BLR 6213	*jíkú	‘porcupine’	> Ø-žíkú
BLR 4574	*búdúgú	‘dwarf antelope’	> Ø-mblúkú ‘antelope sp.’ (cf. Kongo <i>mbùlúkú</i> ‘dwarf antelope’)
BLR 2368	*pàkàcà	‘buffalo’	> Ø-mpàkàsà (cf. Kongo <i>mpàkàsà</i>)
BLR 2967	*tòk	‘boil up’	> tòkìsà (cf. Kongo <i>tòkìsà</i>) àvòkà (French <i>avocat</i> , probably via Kikongo <i>àvòkà</i>)

As can be seen in (11), all borrowings in Ngwi preserve the final vowel. But there are also other features which make them easily detectable. First, non-nativized borrowed items have /k/ as a reflex of PWCB *k in C₂, e.g. Ø-mpàkàsà ‘buffalo’. In partially nativized borrowings the original /k/ shifts to /ɸ/, the most common reflex of PWCB *k in C₂, e.g. ì-tòkó ‘mat’. None of the borrowings in (11) displays the zero reflex of PWCB *k found in (10). Second, borrowed words usually do not display the tonal innovations typical of native words. For example, PB *LL became mostly HL in Ngwi, see e.g. BLR *dègè ‘weaver bird’ > B861 è-lê; BLR 1607 *jògù ‘elephant’ > B861 Ø-ndzô in (10). In borrowed words, the inherited PB *LL(L) pattern was maintained as such, see e.g. ò-kòkò ‘sheep’ < BLR 1905 *kòòkò.

Now that we have established that Ngwi words having zero as the reflex of PWCB *k are definitely not recent borrowings from the region’s vehicular language Kikongo ya Leta, we should also exclude the possibility that they might be loanwords from neighboring WCB languages. As Map 1 clearly shows, Ngwi is the only language in the wider homeland region to have a dorsal fricative as the predominant reflex of PWCB *k. In all others, the zero reflex prevails. Hence, Ngwi words manifesting the zero reflex may well be borrowings from one of these languages. We address this possibility based on the comparative data in Table 2, where we show the Lwel B862, Nzadi B865, and Ding B86 translation equivalents of the Ngwi words in (10) with a zero reflex of PWCB *k. Those three languages are spoken in the same territories as Ngwi (see Map 1) and all have zero as the most common reflex of PWCB *k in C₂ position. Note that even though we give in the first column of Table 2 the protoform of the Ngwi reflex, translation equivalents in the other languages are not necessarily cognate. For instance, while Nzadi ò-dzwó ‘snake (sp.)’ is in all likelihood also a reflex of BLR 3536 *jókà ‘snake’, Lwel *n-tààl* and Ding *n-tèl* are reflexes of BLR 2733 *tààdì* ‘snake’. A question mark in Table 2 means lack of data.

¹⁴ Thanks to a dedicated study (Pacchiarotti and Bostoen 2021), we were aware of similar easily identifiable borrowings in all homeland varieties which underwent systematic final vowel loss, namely Yans B85, Mpur B85e, Nsong B85d, Nsambaan B85F, Ding B86, Lwel B862, Mpiin B863, Ngong B864, and Nzadi B865.

¹⁵ Although we report the tonal notations in Swartenbroeckx (1973), these should not be taken at face value. The author claims to note High tone as [á] and low tone as [à]. However, throughout the dictionary one also finds [â] as well as vowels without any tonal notation. Judging from the discussion in Swartenbroeckx (1973: viii-x), there might be some conflation of tone and tonic accent in his suprasegmental transcriptions. He himself admits that these notations should be improved by tone specialists in the languages of the area such as his fellow-Jesuit Jan Daeleman.

¹⁶ The speaker is aware of native word, i.e. ò-fûŋ, which is a reflex of BLR 5111 *cùngù ‘Graminaceous spp.’.

	Ngwi B861	Lwel B862	Nzadi B865	Ding B86
BLR 7413 *cókì ‘saliva’	à-sùù	mè-tyé	à-té	mà-té
BLR 9461 *cákú ‘safou’	è-súú ‘safou (fruit)’	?	ò-té ó mfũṅ (tree)	lu-say
BLR 3536 *jókà ‘snake’	Ø-ndzúà	n-tààl	ò-dzwó ‘snake (sp.)’	n-tèl
BLR 3050 *tók ‘to insult’	túyè (v.)	tʃwé (v.)	ò-twâ (v.)	ò-sààr (v.)
BLR 5339 *tókì ‘insult’	ì-tî (n.)	? (n.)	è-pwǎn (n.)	mu-tsœœ (n.)
BLR 761 *cùgù ‘day’	è-fúù	là-fú	è-súù	è-tý
BLR 2642 *púkù ‘mouse’	Ø-mfúù	m-pú	m-púù	m-pú
BLR 1607 *jògù ‘elephant’	Ø-ndzǒ	n-dzòò	n-dzǒ	n-dzòò
BLR 1179 *dúk ‘vomit’	lúà	líir	ò-lwâ	ò-lwá
BLR 1685 *kààká ‘grandparent’	Ø-ŋkíánkíá ‘paternal aunt’	ŋ-kàá	ŋ-kàá	ŋ-kǎ ‘aunt’

Table 2: Equivalents of selected Ngwi lexemes with a zero reflex in neighboring languages

We now discuss the likelihood of borrowing for each of the Ngwi words in Table 2. The first four cases stand out as immediately discardable: à-sùù ‘saliva’, è-súú ‘safou (fruit)’, Ø-ndzúà ‘snake’, and ì-tî ‘insult (n.)’. In the case of à-sùù ‘saliva’, all three neighboring languages have a reflex of a different protoform for the same concept, namely BLR 6231 *tâi ‘saliva, spittle’. As for è-súú ‘safou (fruit)’, only Ding *lu-say* comes from the same protoform, but the two cognates do not look alike. Similarly, Nzadi ò-dzwó ‘snake (sp.)’ is in all likelihood cognate with Ngwi Ø-ndzúà, but the two forms have a different initial consonant (/dz/ vs. /dʒ/, the latter preceded by an erstwhile fossilized nasal noun class prefix in Ngwi), a different final vowel (/a/ vs. /o/), and a different root tone pattern (HL vs. H). As for ì-tî ‘insult (n.)’, Lwel and Nzadi have a reflex of BLR 3050 *tók ‘to insult’, tʃwé and òtwâ respectively. Nzadi uses the reflex of a different protoform for the noun ‘insult’. We unfortunately lack this information for Lwel. In Ding, the noun *mu-tsœœ* is also derived, just like in Ngwi, from BLR 5339 *tókì ‘insult’: the long /œ/ vowel is the result of umlaut effects triggered by V2 *ì on V1 *ú in *tókì (Bostoen and Koni Muluwa 2014). On the other hand, the verb ‘insult’ in Ding is a reflex of a different protoform. Thus, the only real cognate of Ngwi ì-tî is Ding *mu-tsœœ*, but these two forms hardly bear any formal similarity. Lwel tʃwé and Nzadi òtwâ are also cognate with Ngwi túyè ‘to insult’.¹⁷ In this case too, the degree of formal similarity among these three cognate forms does not support a borrowing scenario.

The remaining forms in Table 2 require a more in depth discussion. The Ngwi form è-fúù is not a borrowing from Ding è-tý (likely a reflex of BLR 3156 *túkù ‘day of 24 hours’) as suggested by the lack of formal similarity between the two. It is also unlikely that è-fúù is a Nzadi borrowing. While in Nzadi PB *c in C1 position has /s/ as a reflex (Crane *et al.* 2011: 256-257), in Ngwi the same protosound has two phonologically conditioned reflexes, /s/ when PB *c was followed by a non-high vowel (namely *a, *o, *e) and /ʃ/ elsewhere, e.g. BLR 394 *càbuk ‘cross river’ > sǎβ, BLR 631 *còbó ‘intestines’ > ò-sǎβ, BLR 508 *cèd ‘be slippery’ > sêr vs. BLR 5110 *cúngú ‘tree, bark’ > ò-fúṅ ‘tree’, BLR 604 *cíd ‘be finished’ > fîr ‘to finish’.¹⁸ Thus, if Ngwi had borrowed the word for ‘day’ from Nzadi we would expect it to have a root-initial /s/ and not /ʃ/. While it is possible that /ʃ/ is a nativization strategy, there are several Ngwi seemingly native words with /s/ followed by /u/ (e.g. ò-súṅ ‘meat’ < BLR 3778 *cùnì ‘meat, flesh’, BLR 9826 ì-cú-è ‘1PL’ > sú) which speak against this hypothesis. It is much harder (if not impossible) to exclude with certainty the possibility that è-fúù is not a borrowing from Lwel là-fú. If Ngwi speakers had borrowed this

¹⁷ The <y> (IPA [j]) in túyè might be epenthetic, but its conditioning is still not clear. Besides túyè ‘insult’, we only find it in the following lexical items: búyè ‘break’ (< BLR 372 *búg ‘break, snap’), fúyè ‘grow up’ (< BLR 1997 *kód ‘grow up’), Ø-mvúyè ‘rain’ (< BLR 368 *búdà), víyè ‘invite, call’ (< BLR 177 bíd ‘call, announce’), as well as kúyè ‘besmear, polish’, ò-ntúyè ‘mushroom (sp.)’, and ò-pfúyè ‘flea’ for which no protoform is available.

¹⁸ Many “exceptions” exist to this conditioning environment, that is, PB *c in C₁ also shows MURs in Ngwi.

word from Lwel speakers, they must have done so at a time when Lwel had not shortened CVV stems historically derived from *CVCV stems to CV, i.e., *cúgù > júú > jú. Otherwise, it would be impossible to account for the HL tone pattern on è-fúù considering that the present-day Lwel form has a H tone only, at least based on the only available phonological account of Khang Levy (1979). The same reasoning holds for Ø-mfúù ‘mouse’: if this word had been borrowed from Lwel or Ding, the loan event must be old, due to the fact that apparently both languages shortened an erstwhile form formally equivalent to Nzadi mpúù to mpú. That Ø-mfúù is a borrowing from Nzadi m-púù is unlikely due to the presence of a prenasalized fricative /mf/ in Ngwi instead of the expected Nzadi /mp/. In Ngwi, noun roots and stems with an initial /mp/, /mf/, and even /mpf/ followed by /u/ are all attested in native words, e.g., m-púy ‘skins’ (< BLR *pùcù), Ø-mpún ‘eagle’ (< BLR 2657 *púngú), Ø-mfúr ‘land turtle’ (< BLR 2108 *kúdù), Ø-mfúr ‘bird’ (< BLR 3962 *pùdú), m-pfún ‘stomachs’ (< BLR 1545 *kùndú), m-pfúk ‘doors’ (< BLR 5467 *kúk ‘cover’). This makes it unlikely that the word for ‘mouse’ got borrowed from Nzadi as m-púù and was then nativized to Ø-mfúù, first because native Ngwi words attest both /mp/ and /mf/ followed by /u/, and second because of Bantu Spirantization (Schadeberg 1995, Bostoen 2008). This sound change, which transforms stops into fricatives or affricates when they are followed by reflexes of PB *i and *u, happened only very occasionally in the history of Ngwi and yielded /pf/, not /f/, e.g. ò-pfún ‘burial’ (< BLR 2125 *kùnd ‘to bury’), è-pfúy ‘calabash’ (< BLR 5395 *gútù), ò-pfúy ‘fart’ (< BLR 3959 *pùdì). Moving on to Ø-ndzò, the only feature which seems to exclude borrowing is the HL tone pattern on the Ngwi reflex of BLR 1607 *jògù ‘elephant’. As discussed earlier on in this section and in §3.3, PB LL noun stems evolved into HL in Ngwi, see e.g. ì-lâk ‘promise’ < BLR 814 *dàgò, è-lêk ‘weaver bird’ < BLR 900 *dègè, ì-péâk ‘shoulder’ < BLR 2433 *pègà in (10), but also è-kúù ‘leg’ < BLR 1490 *gùdù, ò-lúù ‘bitterness’ < BLR 1168 *dùdù. On the other hand, borrowed words with a LL tone pattern are preserved as such, see examples in (11). While tonal nativization cannot be excluded with certainty, we do not have any examples of this alleged phenomenon in our database.

When it comes to lúà ‘vomit’, the formal similarity of the Ngwi reflex with its Nzadi and Ding cognates ò-lwâ and ò-lwá respectively is striking. We have evidence that elsewhere in Ngwi, sequences of two vowel nuclei such as /u/ and /a/ as in lúà ‘vomit’ arose, among others, from the reanalysis of diphthongs into sequences of two full vowels (see Pacchiarotti *et al.* in preparation for synchronic phonological evidence in favor of this analysis). This process likely affected words which lost a consonant in C₂ position. In these contexts, whenever a long vowel was created, it then broke into a diphthong, e.g. BLR 6882 *jòbó > dzòó > dzwò > Ø-dzùó, BLR 893 *ndédé ‘white man’ > ndéé > ndyé > ò-ndié. Two vowel nuclei were also created off of historical *CVV, e.g., ò-kúá ‘salt’ < BLR 1521 *gúá, Ø-mvúá ‘dog’ < BLR 282 *búà. While these data do not exclude the possibility that Ngwi lúà ‘vomit’ might be a borrowing from either Nzadi ò-lwâ and Ding ò-lwá where the diphthong was reanalyzed as a sequence of two vowels, they do not offer evidence in support of the borrowing hypothesis either. This is because this process happened consistently in the history of Ngwi to words which underwent (irregular loss) of a PB C₂, namely *b, *d, *c, and *j.

Lastly, Ø-ŋkíánkíá ‘paternal aunt’ is also a difficult case. At first sight, it seems unlikely that the Ngwi form might have been borrowed from one of its three cognate forms in Lwel, Nzadi, and Ding. In all three languages, reflexes of BLR 1685 *kààká ‘grandparent’ are regular in that: (i) they have zero as a reflex of PWCB *k in C₂; and (ii) they preserve the LH tone pattern of the reconstruction. The Ngwi reflex ŋkíánkíá is a full reduplication of BLR 1685 *kààká with a fossilized historical class 9 homorganic nasal noun class prefix Ñ- reanalyzed as part of the simple noun stem. We have evidence that whenever a long vowel [a:] was created in earlier stages of Ngwi due to the loss of a C₂ consonant in the language, this long vowel underwent palatal on-glide diphthongization and became /ya/. This diphthong in turn was reanalyzed as a sequence of two vowel nuclei, e.g. *kààká > kààa > kàa > kyá > kiá. Similar examples are: BLR 1662 *kádà ‘charcoal’ > ì-kiá, BLR 1294 *gádà ‘fingernail’ > è-kiá, BLR 406 cádá ‘feather’ > è-siá, BLR 1557 *jàdà ‘rubbish heap’ > Ø-dziá, BLR 1555 *jàdà ‘hunger’ > Ø-ndziá. However, the HH tone pattern of Ø-ŋkíánkíá is irregular and could indeed point towards borrowing. In Ngwi, *LH as in BLR 1685 *kààká is usually preserved, cf. BLR 2634 *pùgí ‘pot’ > Ø-mpúk in (10), or BLR 4570 *bùdú ‘swart, pimple’ > è-búù. Nevertheless, suprasegmental MURs are also common in Ngwi and not only for reflexes of reconstructed *LH nouns (see Philippson 1999 for a discussion of what he calls tonal double reflexes in Bantu languages).

If we posit that *Ø-ŋkíàŋkíá* was borrowed from Nzadi, Lwel or Ding, it must have been borrowed with the LH tone pattern and then have shifted to HH. The fact that the noun stem was fully reduplicated might have played a role in the development of an irregular tone pattern. The only other fully reduplicated noun stem in our database is *ì-ŋkíàŋkíà* ‘crow’ which has an unusual LLLL tone pattern.¹⁹ Whatever the case might be, while the possibility of borrowing cannot be excluded for *Ø-ŋkíàŋkíá*, it is also possible that this word might have been created language internally, by analogy with noun stems which lost a consonant in word medial position and were reconstructed with *a in both V₁ and V₂ positions such as BLR 1662 *kádà ‘charcoal’ > *ì-kíà*.

As we have shown in this section, most zero reflexes of PWCB *k in Ngwi cannot be explained by resorting to borrowing from neighboring languages. This of course does *not* mean that no lexical item displaying double reflexes in our dataset can be explained via borrowing. But at least in Ngwi, borrowing does not serve as an explanation for several of the words with a zero reflex of PWCB *k.

4 Discussion

By looking at the evolutions of PWCB *k in C₂ discussed in §3.1-3.2 and the argumentation in §3.3-3.4, it is hard to maintain the Neogrammarian view of pervasive regularity in sound change. The MUR in Map 1, sometimes up to three for one and the same proto-sound, do not have different phonological or grammatical conditionings. In other words, it is impossible to provide a Neogrammarian explanation for their synchronic co-occurrence as the outcome of a single PWCB phoneme. In earlier Bantu scholarship, this kind of double (or more) consonant reflexes were accounted for either by positing the existence of two series of PB consonants (cf. Van Leynseele and Stewart 1980, Gerhardt 1986, Hedinger 1987, Bancel 1988, Stewart 1989; 1993) or by supposing that the original context conditioning the split of a single reconstructed consonant became synchronically opaque (e.g. Guthrie 1967: 58, Bachmann 1989, Mieke 1989, Blanchon 1991, Janssens 1991, 1993). Although they advocated for two mutually exclusive diachronic accounts to explain divergent synchronic reflexes, i.e. phonemic merger vs. phonemic split, scholars of both convictions ardently stick to the Neogrammarian hypothesis. They failed to admit that irregularity in sound change can occur under specific sociocultural circumstances without necessarily jeopardizing the use of the Comparative Method as such for reconstructing linguistic prehistory. Our study of MUR of PWCB *k in C₂ show that irregular sound change is the rule, not the exception. As Map 1 shows, WCB languages having a unicolored pie chart, i.e. only one unconditioned reflex of PWCB *k in C₂, are rare. This pervasiveness of MUR urges us to accept irregular sound change as a historical-linguistic reality and to search for underlying historical sociocultural scenarios which may account for this synchronic outcome. In this section, we consider two traditional explanations that fall within the broad paradigm of language contact, but in structurally different ways. In Section 4.1, we consider lexical diffusion, which is traditionally seen as contact-induced innovation within a speech community. In Section 4.2, we assess substratum influence, which is traditionally seen as an external contact-induced influence on a community’s language through the inclusion of foreign speakers shifting to that language. In Section 4.3, we argue that these two accounts are not necessarily mutually exclusive and that the prehistoric linguistic landscape of Bantu-speaking Africa was possibly so multilingual that distinguishing contact between speakers from one and the same community from contact between speakers of different speech communities presumes a too neat one-to-one correspondence between linguistically defined units (i.e. languages) and socially defined units (i.e. peoples). In Section 4.4, we discuss interdisciplinary evidence suggesting that the history of Bantu languages is not tree-like but rather stratified, consisting of multiple layers of migratory events over time. We suggest that MURs could also be a result of this historical composition.

¹⁹ Partial stem reduplication is much more common in Ngwi. In this type of reduplication, the first syllable of the simple noun stem is reduplicated and preserves the same tone.

4.1 Lexical diffusion

Based on empirical evidence from several sound changes in Philadelphia English, Labov (1981) argues that two types of sound change can coexist at different levels within a variety. Low-level output changes such as raising, lowering, fronting and backing tend to show Neogrammarian regularity (sound change is phonetically gradual in that it proceeds in imperceptible increments and lexically abrupt in that it affects all lexical items at once), while more abstract phonological changes such as vowel split show ongoing lexical diffusion type of change (sound change is phonetically abrupt but lexically gradual). Labov (1981) claims that sound changes such as the split of a long vowel into a short and a long raised one are abstract in the sense that they often involve a whole set of phonetic features for their realization (such as length, height, fronting, directions and contours of glides, etc.). In the case of consonantal changes, lexical diffusion appears to be common in changes of place of articulation, while changes in manner of articulation would usually display Neogrammarian regularity (Labov 1981: 302-303). However, it seems to us that changes in manner of articulation also involve numerous subchanges, for example a different position of the velum, a different constriction of the oral cavity to produce a different degree of aperture, movements of the glottis, etc. Although certain studies did indeed show that shifts in place of articulation tend to spread gradually through the lexicon (cf. Kinkade 1973, Li 1982), several others provided evidence for the sensitivity of lenitions, which involve a shift in mode of articulation, to lexical diffusion conditioned by frequency (cf. Phillips 1984, Bybee 2001, 2002, Phillips 2006, cited in Garrett 2015).

In the case of the evolutions of PWCB *k in C₂, a change such as *k > ɣ, implies a set of subchanges in manner of articulation, place of articulation, voicing and duration. Since many subsystems are affected by the innovation, one would expect to find lexical diffusion type of change, where not all /k/ in a given language have become /ɣ/ yet, a snapshot of sound change caught in the process of happening. In languages where all /k/ became some sort of fricative and then some fricatives became zero, we also capture an ongoing second cycle of change. For Labov (1999: 542), the deletion of obstruents would be a typical instance of a lexical diffusion type of sound change, along with the shortening and lengthening of segments, diphthongization of mid and low vowels, the metathesis of liquids and stops and consonant changes in place of articulation. Such sound changes would result from “the abrupt substitution of one phoneme for another in words that contain that phoneme. The older and newer forms of the word will usually differ by several phonetic features. This process is most characteristic of the late stages of an internal change that has been differentiated by lexical and grammatical conditioning, or has developed a high degree of social awareness or of borrowings from other systems, that is, a “change from above”. The lexical diffusion type of change contrasts with regular sound change “resulting from a gradual transformation of a single phonetic feature of a phoneme in a continuous phonetic space.” (Labov 1999: 542). This type of “change from below” usually happens in the early stages of a change within the system, without any kind of conditioning or social awareness. Vowel shifts in place of articulation, diphthongization of high vowels, consonant changes in manner of articulation, vocalization of liquids and deletion of glides and shwa would typically fit into this category.

Unfortunately, our study cannot take into account any sociolinguistic variables, such as age, sex, social status, etc. which might have influenced the existence of multiple reflexes of PWCB *k in different present-day WCB languages, because we are dealing with sound changes for which no empirical historical evidence is available. However, it is striking that the initial sound shift which we take as a point of departure, i.e. the merger of PB *g and *k, was fully regular and affected the entire lexicon of PWCB to the extent that it can be considered diagnostic for the genealogical unity of this Bantu branch (Pacchiarotti and Bostoen 2020). Intervocally, WCB languages manifest no trace whatsoever of PB *g as distinct from PB *k.²⁰ The shift from PB *g to PWCB *k required the change of a single phonetic feature, i.e. voicing.

²⁰ An anonymous reviewer points out that in the Nzadi B865 grammar by Crane *et al.* (2011), one reads “as with the other stops, *k remained k in C₂ position, while *g alternatively devoiced (very rarely) or disappeared (much more common)” (Crane *et al.* 2011: 261). Then the following examples are given: BLR 2433 *pègà ‘shoulder’ > *i-pek*, BLR 1248 *dúg ‘paddle’ > *o-dwâ*, BLR 1621 *jùgú ‘groundnut’ > *e-dzuu*, BLR 3423 *jígu ‘hear’ > *o-zwâ*. However, the claim

However, all later transformations of PWCB *k, i.e. fricativization and deletion, were phonetically much more complex in that they required the mutation of several phonetic features at once. These further sound changes might have been more prone to lexical irregularity in the sense that word frequency could have played a role in whether a lexical item was affected by the innovation or not.

The fact that certain MUR patterns, such as k/Ø and k/dorsal fricative(/Ø), are geographically clustered and neighboring languages manifest variable ratios in the lexical distribution of certain reflexes suggests that the diffusion of a given phonological innovation across the lexicon did not only happen within a given speech community. Conceivably, it also spilled over to neighboring communities speaking closely related varieties. In this process sometimes called ‘dialect borrowing’, it is difficult to say whether a phonological innovation expands because words having undergone it are copied from a more innovative variety into a more conservative one (Thomason 2007: 43) or rather due to the spread of a (more prestigious) pronunciation norm (Campbell 1998: 191). In any event, the pervasiveness of MUR across WCB and the geographical clustering of certain specific MUR patterns seem to indicate that after the initial expansion of WCB, interaction between closely related varieties gradually intensified and stimulated sociolinguistic processes such as ‘dialect borrowing’ leading to the uneven contact-induced spread of further evolutions of PWCB *k. This phenomenon affected only a part of the speech community and only a portion of the lexicon. The innovation of PWCB *k therefore appears to have proceeded “in a quasi-wavelike fashion along the social and geographic dimensions of the speech community, and through the linguistic system itself” (Harrison 2003: 220).

4.2 Substratum influence

While the geographic distribution of specific MUR patterns point to language contact processes such as lexical diffusion and dialect borrowing, the geographical clustering of certain specific reflexes of PWCB *k, whether part of a series of MUR or not, could also be the outcome of another type of contact-induced change. As we argued in §3.2, the current-day geographic distribution of fricative reflexes of PWCB *k, especially in the northwestern part of the WCB domain, where B40-B70 belonging to different generalogical subgroups are in contact, can best be accounted for as an areal feature. Perhaps the scattered presence of fricative reflexes of PWCB *k throughout WCB, including the homeland area (i.e. in Ngwi B861), could be considered as parallel innovations with an areal bias. Outside of the northwestern corner of the Bantu-speaking area (i.e. Cameroon, Gabon, the Republic of the Congo and the DRC), fricative reflexes of PB *k and *g – whether velar x/ɣ, uvular ɣ or glottal h – are very rare (Guthrie 1967: 74-75).

In the northwestern part of the Bantu domain, apart from WCB, they are attested in several of Guthrie’s B10-30 languages from Gabon, which belong to the North-Western Bantu (NWB) branches (cf. Grollemund *et al.* 2015) and are spoken in close proximity of Guthrie’s B40-60 WCB languages. In B10 and B30, [ɣ] occurs as an intervocalic reflex of PB *k and *g (cf. van der Veen 1991, van der Veen 2003, Mouguiama-Daouda and van der Veen 2005: 110). In B20, [ɣ] is the only velar fricative sporadically attested (in less than ten words in each of the following varieties) as the phonetic realization of /g/ in Ntumbæde B22d, Wumbvu B24, Siwu B202, Saké B251 and Ndasá B201 (see Mokrani 2016: 189, 263, 320, 381, 389). Velar and glottal fricatives ([ɣ] and [h] respectively) as reflexes of PB *k and *g are also attested in North-Western Bantu (NWB) languages spoken in Cameroon, e.g. Bubi A31 and Bafia A53 (Janssens 1993: 25 and ff., 144 and ff.).

Within the Central-Western Bantu (CWB) branch (cf. Grollemund *et al.* 2015), the voiced velar fricative is also attested in some varieties of Mboshi C25 spoken in the Republic of the Congo (i.e. Akwa, Koyo, Mboko

that PB *k in C₂ position remained /k/ is not supported by any data. Rather, all reflexes of PB *k in C₂ found in Crane *et al.* (2011: 258-260) rather show that PB *k in C₂ became zero: BLR 3536 *jóká > o-dzwó ‘snake’, BLR 1044 *dík > o-dzya, BLR 5304 *búkù > e-bvûu ‘fish (sp.)’, BLR 67 *bák > o-bâa ‘get’. As can be seen from the 66 cognate sets in Pacchiarotti and Bostoen (2020: 175-189), while most PB *k (and *g) in C₂ became zero in Nzadi, some were retained as /k/, e.g. BLR 429 *càkud ‘to weed’ > o-sakul. Thus, the Nzadi data offers evidence in support of the merger of PB *k and *g to /k/ in both C₁ and C₂ at PWCB level.

and Ngare), where [ɣ] is the phonetic realization of /g/ intervocally, while in other varieties [ɣ] is realized as zero (Ndongo Ibara 2000: 40), and the Sakata cluster C34 in the DRC (cf. De Witte 1955: 81-141). These two CWB languages border with WCB varieties. Otherwise, fricative reflexes of PB *k and *g are absent from CWB languages (cf. Grégoire 2003), except maybe for Guthrie's Zone C languages spoken by hunter-gatherer communities. Given that: (i) NWB, CWB, and WCB are different branches of the Bantu language family tree; and (ii) dorsal fricatives are attested in a scattered fashion in these branches, it is impossible to posit their development as a single innovation which happened at an ancestral node uniting these three western branches before they split off.

According to Motingea Mangulu (2021), *k > x > h > ʔ > Ø would be a feature shared by the so-called 'Pygmy' languages from the Central Congo Basin. This claim needs further documentation and research. Nevertheless, given the overall rarity of fricatives as reflexes of PB *k and *g outside of the northwestern Bantu-speaking area and their reported occurrence in several hunter-gatherer Bantu languages, their relatively high frequency within WCB (especially in the northwestern part), as well as NWB and CWB immediately bordering them could be considered an areal feature originating in substratum influence from no longer spoken non-Bantu languages of extinct autochthonous hunter-gatherer groups. This hypothesis cannot be substantiated from a linguistic point of view, as no descendants of the languages spoken by Central African hunter-gatherers before they shifted to Bantu languages have survived the ravages of time. However, several genetic studies have shown that ancestral Bantu speakers did admix with indigenous groups and that this exogamy was biased towards the integration of hunter-gatherer women into the communities of Bantu-speaking settlers (Destro-Bisol *et al.* 2004, Wood *et al.* 2005, Quintana-Murci *et al.* 2008, Batini *et al.* 2010, Verdu *et al.* 2013, Patin *et al.* 2014, 2017).

Although ethnographic data on such mixed marriages are largely missing – let alone historical data (cf. Bahuchet 2012: 36), children of double descent probably grew in the Bantu-speaking village of their father, but not without also acquiring the non-Bantu language of their mother. Such intermarriages not only led to the cohabitation of men and women speaking different and unrelated languages, but also generated bilingual children. Depending on the number of speakers and speech communities involved and the social hierarchies ruling between them, this bi/multilingualism may have continued in the society during several generations, possibly with complementary functions for the different languages. When this stable bi/multilingualism eventually collapsed, it resulted in complete language shift towards the dominant Bantu language and in the death of the original non-Bantu language(s) of the mothers, at least within that specific speech community (cf. Winford 2003: 27). Contact-induced phonological change happens more readily in case of language shift under the imposition of the sound system of the original language (Van Coetsem 1988, Winford 2003: 377) than in situations of superficial contact between communities without widespread bilingualism (Winford 2003: 55). In this regard, it is not unlikely that the geographical clustering of dorsal fricatives (whether or not as reflexes of PB *k and/or *g) in the northwestern Bantu languages of the Central African rainforest is indeed an areal feature that rose as a parallel innovation through substratum influence. This hypothesis finds partial support in a recent genetic study targeting DRC individuals speaking WCB varieties addressed in this article. As discussed in §3.2 and shown in Map 1, dorsal fricatives are pervasive in the north-western part of the WCB domain, where they are found in the Nzebi-Teke West (B50 + B73b-c), Mbete (B60) and the KLC B40 languages. Fortes-Lima *et al.* (2021) show that amongst the sampled populations, individuals speaking Nzebi B52, Shira B41, and Punu B43 show high degrees of genetic admixture with western rainforest hunter-gatherer groups.²¹

²¹ On the other hand, speech communities in the WCB homeland such as Ngwi which also show dorsal fricatives manifest low degrees of admixture with documented western rainforest hunter-gatherer groups.

4.3 Intrinsic multilingualism as the norm

It is clear from Sections 4.1 and 4.2 that the pervasiveness of irregular sound change in Bantu-speaking Central Africa is to a large extent determined by the region's specific 'ecology of language evolution' (Mufwene 2001), namely the impact of social factors in particular and extra-linguistic factors more generally. It has long been acknowledged that linguistic change is inevitably speaker-based and that communal languages are only abstract extrapolations from idiolects (cf. Milroy 1992). However, in Central Africa, even what are commonly considered to be distinct (Bantu) languages are mostly abstract – not to say artificial – extrapolations or consolidations of very time-specific and often outsider interpretations of complex linguistic realities. Inventories of African languages and glossonyms mostly date back to the time of European colonialism and are often based on the wrong assumption that socially or ethnically defined groups speak distinct languages (cf. Fabian 1986, Van de Velde 1999). Very often one and the same language was spoken by different social groups, such as Tutsi and Hutu in the precolonial kingdoms of Rwanda and Burundi (whose languages can actually also be considered as regiolectal varieties), while large precolonial polities, such as the Kongo kingdom, were multilingual (cf. Mufwene 2001: 178, Bostoen and de Schryver 2018b). As a matter of fact, multilingualism was and continues to be the rule rather than the exception in (Bantu-speaking) Africa, as Schadeberg (2003: 158) recognizes: "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 neighbours. Linguistic differentiation and convergence are actively pursued, one serving to establish distinct group identities, the other one to forge alliances and to foster good neighborhood. The almost wilful selective adoption of new features is facilitated by structural similarities between Bantu languages."

Such a situation of "prolonged socio-economic intercourse amongst small-scale (genetically related) linguistic communities" is exactly what Harrison (2003: 230 ff.) considers to be a great adversary to the Comparative Method, because it makes contact-induced transfers between languages undetectable, especially if there has been a massive diffusion of lexical items across a multilingual domain. With reference to the linguistic landscape of New Caledonia, Grace (1996) argues in the same vein that regularity of sound change depends on particular sociocultural monolingual conditions, which are rather specific to Europe in recent history, i.e. a perfect overlap between the linguistic communities and linguistically defined languages or dialects. In linguistic communities where multilingualism is the norm, a linguistic repertoire includes resources from several languages. In pre-colonial times, there were probably no communities defined on the basis of one language in New Caledonia. Even though one language was spoken in more than one village, there was probably no sense of community among those villages speaking that same language. Grace (1996: 175) hypothesizes that "the aberrancy (which is to say the relative intractability by the comparative method) of the languages of southern New Caledonia comes precisely from such a lack of correspondence between the languages themselves and the associated linguistically relevant communities." Absolutely regular sound change would rather be surprising in a context in which "linguistically relevant communities (networks of intercommunicating speakers) fail to correspond to what according to strictly linguistic criteria are individual languages (or dialects)" (Grace 1996: 175).

When multilingualism is the norm, languages are constantly in contact and boundaries between languages – if existent at all – are necessarily highly fluid. Under such circumstances, it is rather hard to distinguish between lexical diffusion as a contact-induced process within a speech community and substratum influence as the outcome of language contact between distinct speech communities. The opposition between language-internal and language-external becomes rather fuzzy and communal norms with regard to pronunciation and ongoing sound change are rather liberal. In the absence of a notion of "correct" or in-group-specific articulation, synchronic phonological variability eventually resulting in irregular sound change is to be expected. Under such conditions, the Comparative Method loses effectiveness, especially when it comes to defining subgroups based on diagnostic shared innovation. However, it does not become entirely dysfunctional. It contributes to identifying regular patterns in irregular sound change and to undoing them for the sake of linguistic reconstruction.

One such example are reconstructed forms manifesting phonological variability in the BLR database. Reconstructions with the same meaning but slightly different forms, such as BLR 2568 *pígò ‘kidney’ vs. BLR 2587 *pījò ‘kidney’ vs. BLR 6234 *píkò ‘kidney’, are known in historical Bantu studies as ‘osculant’ (Guthrie 1962; 1967). Sometimes a more thorough knowledge of certain sound changes allows one to reduce phonologically osculant reconstructions to a single proto-form (cf. Bostoen 2001, Ricquier and Bostoen 2008). However, very often osculant reconstructions need to be maintained as they are, because sound correspondences between Bantu languages turn out to be not fully regular and systematic. In such cases, ‘osculance’ points either to a prehistoric language contact event (Bostoen and Bastin 2016) or to a sound change that started off but did not affect the whole lexicon of an ancestral Bantu language (cf. *supra*). The fact that certain sound changes were not fully systematic across all relevant lexical items explains why sound correspondences between present-day Bantu languages can often not be reduced to one single proto-form from which all present-day reflexes can be derived through Neogrammarian-like sound change.

4.4 Spread-over-spread events in Bantu language history

Current-day Bantu languages are commonly seen as descending directly from the ancestral languages of the first Bantu-speaking settlers in a given region. Likewise, language phylogenies based on them are interpreted as reflecting the original migration of Bantu speech communities (cf. Currie et al. 2013, Grollemund et al. 2015). Although migrating Bantu speakers definitely spread their languages from the Bantu homeland in the Cameroon-Nigerian borderland to Eastern and Southern Africa, their present-day geographic distribution does not necessarily reflect the original migration of Bantu speech communities. Analyses of human Y-chromosomal DNA from modern-day Bantu speakers indicate that several expansion phases succeeded each other, obliterating any possible founder event and camouflaging the genetic signature of the first migration (see, for instance, de Filippo *et al.* 2011, Ansari *et al.* 2013). Also archaeological data encourage us to adopt a spread-over-spread model for the Bantu language history rather than to reconstruct the dispersal of Bantu speakers and their languages as a single, and long-term continuous, macroevent. Seidensticker et al. (2021), for instance, argue that two periods of more intense human activity are separated in the entire Congo rainforest by a population collapse between 400 and 600 CE followed by major resettlement centuries later. A similar disconnection between Early and Late Iron Age, especially in terms of pottery production, has been observed in the archaeological record of Bantu-speaking Southern Africa (cf. Mitchell and Whitelaw 2005, Huffman 2007, Mitchell 2013, Schoeman 2013, Loftus *et al.* 2019). Such spread-over-spread events must have led to recurrent instances of Bantu-internal language shift, i.e. communities that abandon their ancestral Bantu language in favor of another (socially more successful) Bantu language (cf. Bostoen 2018). Today, this sociolinguistic process is known to be one of the principal causes of language death in Central Africa and elsewhere and must also have been common in prehistoric times. Attempts to disentangle successive strata of Bantu language history have been rare (cf. Möhlig 1977, 1979, 1981a, 1981b, Masele and Nurse 2003, Bostoen 2007). Moreover, their implications for historical linguistic method have never been fully assessed.

We believe that apart from synchronic multilingualism, which has been characteristic of Bantu speech communities through time, diachronic spread-over-spread events as the ones discussed above have contributed to the emergence of pervasive MUR patterns as observed in most present-day WCB languages. The fact that irregularity of sound change is so common in WCB languages may indicate that rather than having evolved from a single ancestral language, these varieties might instead be the complex product of multiple superimposed historical layers (cf. Möhlig 1977, 1979, 1981a, 1981b). In §3.3, we show that PWCB *k has /ɸ/ and zero as reflexes in Ngwi. Possibly, the words which have a zero reflex (distributionally less common) belong to a now extinct language from an earlier spread-over-spread event. In that language, PB *k and *g evolved to zero. When its speakers shifted to ancestral Ngwi, which had /ɸ/ as the regular reflex of PWCB *k, they may have retained a core of their ancestral vocabulary in which PB *k and *g had become zero. Even if such a scenario is hard – not to say impossible – to substantiate in the absence of historical language evidence, it ties in quite well with the fact that Ø is the predominant reflex of PWCB *k in the other languages of the wider WCB homeland and with what we know furthermore about

the chronology of sound changes in that area. Although we cannot date the loss of intervocalic consonants, we know that this loss is older than other common diachronic sound changes such as final vowel loss. Likewise, elsewhere in WCB, small portions of words with minority reflexes of PWCB *k could also be relics of ancestral languages that became extinct as the outcome of Bantu-internal language shift.

5 Conclusions

In this article we presented a first case study of multiple unconditioned reflexes of one and the same proto-sound (PWCB *k in C₂) in a well established Bantu branch (WCB). This study yields several conclusions that are significant not only for the diachrony of this major Bantu branch, but also for African historical linguistics more generally.

First of all, we proposed an evidence-based alternative solution to a longstanding problem within Bantu/Niger-Congo historical linguistics, i.e. the so-called “double (consonantal) reflexes”. We sought an explanation for the fact that certain PB consonants have two or more reflexes without a clear phonological conditioning in several northwestern Bantu languages outside of the two scenarios that have been traditionally debated, i.e. phonemic merger vs. phonemic split. In line with similar studies of pervasive irregularity in sound change in other parts of the world, we argued for a third explanation, i.e. the acceptance of irregular sound correspondences as the expected outcome of the specific sociocultural circumstances in which Bantu speech communities developed after the large-scale expansion of the Bantu languages. Irregularity does not need to be “resolved” by assuming ancient phonemic contrasts or latent conditions. Quite the opposite, it should be embraced as an indicator of intensive language contact and linguistic stratification in the linguistic prehistory of Bantu speech communities. Widespread multilingualism in Bantu-speaking Central Africa and the absence of a one-to-one overlap between linguistically and socially defined units make irregular sound change the expected outcome.²² Through the case study of MURs in WCB, we provided empirical evidence to place Bantu irregular sound change within the broader discussion of irregularity in Neogrammarian sound change across different language families (see most notably Durie and Ross 1996 and chapters therein).

Second, within this deeply-rooted multilingual environment without well-established linguistic “identities”, we argued that lexical diffusion or the irregular spread of sound change word by word instead of phoneme by phoneme might be one of the language contact scenarios that (partially) explains the MURs of PWCB *k. We showed that in contrast to the initial merger of PB *g and *k, the subsequent evolutions of PWCB *k rarely affected all targetable items in the lexicon of WCB daughter languages. In the absence of a clear-cut phonological or morphological conditioning, the gradual spread of these sound shifts through the lexicon is the most plausible scenario to account for the two or more reflexes of PWCB *k in C₂ in most present-day WCB languages. Lenitions such as fricativization or complete loss involve the mutation of several phonetic features at once and are known to be more sensitive to lexical irregularity in the world’s languages. Unfortunately, we miss data on precolonial sociolinguistic factors which may have inhibited the full spread of fricativization and/or deletion of PWCB *k in C₂ through the lexicon of the innovative WCB languages. Nonetheless, the geographic distribution of fricative reflexes of PWCB *k emerging from the case

²² An anonymous reviewer wonders whether with this statement we claim or imply that whenever we observe regular sound change in a given language family throughout the world, we should infer that the regularity is due to absence of multilingualism and/or language contact. The answer is no. For example, multilingualism is pervasive in Austronesian, a language family where the Comparative Method has been successfully applied (Kikusawa 2015). Nevertheless, while shared innovations have led to the identification of many undisputable subgroupings in Austronesian, languages spoken in the west of the Austronesian area posit considerable problems in this respect (Kikusawa 2015: 662-667). This shows that the regularity in sound change can serve for subclassification purposes in multilingual areas, but irregularity might coexist with regularity, at least in some areas of the world.

study in Section 3 does suggest that contact between closely related WCB varieties played a role in the diffusion of these sounds.

Third, given that velar and uvular fricatives are quite rare within Bantu more generally, their concentration in certain zones of the WCB domain indicates that they may be an areal feature. This is especially so in the northwestern part, where B40-70 languages belonging to different WCB subclades have been entertaining long-standing contacts, but also closer to the WCB homeland where several languages spoken in the vicinity of the Kasai River have them. We speculated that fricative reflexes of PB *k and *g in WCB (and neighboring CWB languages) might be the outcome of substratum influence from no longer spoken languages of extinct autochthonous hunter-gatherer groups, which already inhabited the region before the first Bantu speakers arrived south of the Equatorial rainforest some two to three millennia ago. This hypothesis finds only partial support in genetic studies on WCB speech communities.

Fourth, we entertained the possibility that MURs might be the result of the stratified non-tree-like history of the Bantu languages. Wilhelm Möhlig's 'stratification model' finds support in recent interdisciplinary evidence suggesting that the dispersal of Bantu speakers from their homeland in the present-day Nigeria-Cameroon borderland throughout sub-Saharan Africa between approximately 5,000 and 1,500 years ago was a series of multiple migratory events through time. In this scenario, populations and languages in a given area died out or moved elsewhere and left relics which were then absorbed by a new spread event and so forth successively. Each of these incorporated relic languages might have contributed an unconditioned reflex to the incorporating language.

The take-home message we hope to leave with our readers is that none of the scenarios in §4 which could account for the sound change irregularity observed in the West-Coastal Bantu region is mutually exclusive. At present, we are unable to say if one of these might have greater explanatory power compared to others and we therefore consider them all as possible contributing factors to the phenomenon of MURs in WCB.

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Table 1: Language varieties and sources in this study²³

	Language variety	WCB sub-branch	Source
1	Shira B41	KLC extended_KLC_North-West	(ALGAB) ²⁴
2	Sangu B42	KLC extended_KLC_North-West	(Idiata-Mayombo 1993)
3	Punu B43	KLC extended_KLC_North-West	(Blanchon 2008, Mavoungou and Plumel 2010)
4	Lumbu B44	KLC extended_KLC_North-West	(Mavoungou and Plumel 2010)
5	Wanzi (Mayela) B501Y	Kasai-Ngounie_Nzebi-Teke West	(Hombert and Mouélé 1988, Mouélé 1997)
6	Duma (Bembikani) B51Y	Kasai-Ngounie_Nzebi-Teke West	(Mickala-Manfoumbi 1988)
	Duma (Bembikani/Lastoursville) B51Z	Kasai-Ngounie_Nzebi-Teke West	(Mouélé 1997)
7	Nzebi (?) B52W	Kasai-Ngounie_Nzebi-Teke West	(Rossel 1998)
	Nzebi (Mbigou) B52Y	Kasai-Ngounie_Nzebi-Teke West	(Mouélé 1997)
	Nzebi (Lébamba) B52Z	Kasai-Ngounie_Nzebi-Teke West	(Marchal-Nasse 1989)
8	Tsaangi (Madouma) B53X	Kasai-Ngounie_Nzebi-Teke West	(Loubelo 1987)
	Tsaangi (Lekoko) B53Y	Kasai-Ngounie_Nzebi-Teke West	(Mouélé 1997)
9	Mbete (Ndjounou) B61Y [Congo]	Kasai-Ngounie_Mbete	(Lane 1989)
	Mbete ('Obaa', Tsaama I) B61Z [Congo]	Kasai-Ngounie_Mbete	(Ndouli 2001)
10	Mbaama (Okondja) B62Z [Gabon]	Kasai-Ngounie_Mbete	(Okoudowa 2016)
	Mbaama (Sibiti) B62Y [Congo]	Kasai-Ngounie_Mbete	(Lane 1989)
11	Nduumo ('Kuya') B63Y	Kasai-Ngounie_Mbete	(Biton 1969)
12	Ngungwel (Gamboma) B72a	Kasai-Ngounie	(Rurangwa 1982)
	Ngungwel ('Mpumpu') B72b	Kasai-Ngounie	(Raharimanantsoa 2016, pers. comm.)
13	Laali (Mayeye) B73bZ	Kasai-Ngounie_Nzebi-Teke West	(Bissila 1991)
14	Yaa (Bihoua) B73c	Kasai-Ngounie_Nzebi-Teke West	(Mouandza 2001)

²³ The language varieties and sources listed in Table 1 are identical to those found in (Pacchiarotti and Bostoen 2020: 190-194) with the exception of Tyee B73d which we were unfortunately not able to include in this study. Nevertheless, based on the lexical data found in Raharimanantsoa and Ntsiba Ngolo (2015) and additional data kindly provided to us by Ruth Raharimanantsoa (pers. comm.), Tyee appears to have /ɣ/ (with [h] as an allophones in between two high vowels) and zero as reflexes of PWCB *k in C2.

²⁴ ALGAB stands for the *Atlas Linguistique du GABon* project supervised by Prof. Lolke Van der Veen at Université Lumière Lyon 2 (cf. <http://www.ddl.ish-lyon.cnrs.fr/equipes/index.asp?Langue=FR&Equipe=8&Page=Action&ActionNum=48>). Basic vocabulary collected for this language atlas was also used in recent phylogenetic studies (cf. de Schryver *et al.* 2015, Grollemund *et al.* 2015, Pacchiarotti *et al.* 2019).

15	Eboo-Nzikou B74Y	Kasai-Ngounie	(Raharimanantsoa 2012a; b, 2017; pers. comm.)
16	Kukwa (West Plateau) B77aX	Kasai-Ngounie	(Paulian 1975)
	Kukwa B77aZ	Kasai-Ngounie	(Daeleman's archive; Raharimanantsoa pers. comm.) ²⁵
17	Fumu (Ngamaba) B77bX	Kasai-Ngounie	(Makouta-Mboukou 1969; 1976)
18	Boma Yumu (Pentane/Mondai) B80zX	Kasai-Ngounie_Kwa-Kasai North	(Burssens 1999)
	Boma Yumu (Ito) B80zZ	Kasai-Ngounie_Kwa-Kasai North	(Burssens 1999)
19	Tiene ('Dya', Mansele) B81X	Kasai-Ngounie_Kwa-Kasai North	(Ellington 1977, Bastin <i>et al.</i> 1999)
	Tiene ('Nketε') B81Y	Kasai-Ngounie_Kwa-Kasai North	(Motingea Mangulu 2004)
20	North Boma (Mushie) B82X	Kasai-Ngounie_Kwa-Kasai North	(Stappers 1986)
	North Boma (Mpukumbu) B82Z	Kasai-Ngounie_Kwa-Kasai North	(Bastin <i>et al.</i> 1999)
21	Mpe (Bolebe) B821	Kasai-Ngounie_Kwa-Kasai North	own fieldwork
22	Nunu (Mushie) B822	Kasai-Ngounie_Kwa-Kasai North	own fieldwork
23	Mfinu (Yuo) B83Y	Kasai-Ngounie extended	(Bastin <i>et al.</i> 1999; Daeleman's archive)
	Mfinu B83Z	Kasai-Ngounie extended	(Daeleman's archive)
24	West Yans (Mukonkie) B85aX	Kwilu-Ngounie	(Swartenbroeckx 1948)
	West Yans (Makwa) B85aY	Kwilu-Ngounie	(Mayanga 1985)
	East Yans B85bR	Kwilu-Ngounie	(Swartenbroeckx 1948)
	East Yans (Nkara/Niadi) B85bS	Kwilu-Ngounie	(Nguma 1986)
	East Yans (Nkara) B85bT	Kwilu-Ngounie	(Impubi Mukwa 1987), (Koni Muluwa and Bostoen 2015)
	East Yans (Mantshiene) B85bV	Kwilu-Ngounie	(Rottland 1977)
25	East Nsong ('Luniungu', Kipuka) B85dZ	KLC extended	(Koni Muluwa 2010, Koni Muluwa and Bostoen 2015)
26	Mpur (Kwebe) B85eX	Loange-Atlantic_Kamtsha-Kwilu	(Koni Muluwa and Bostoen 2015)
	Mpur (Due I) B85eW	Loange-Atlantic_Kamtsha-Kwilu	(Kibwenge India'Ane 1985)
27	Nsambaan (Kwilumpia/Longo K.K.) B85FX	Loange-Atlantic_Kamtsha-Kwilu	(Koni Muluwa 2015b)
28	East Ngwi (Mangai) B861X	WCB	own fieldwork
29	East Lwel (Sedzo) B862X	WCB	(Khang Levy 1979, Koni Muluwa and Bostoen 2015)
30	Mpiin (Kipuka) B863Y	KLC extended	(Koni Muluwa 2010, Koni Muluwa and Bostoen 2015)
31	Ngong (Kwenge) B864X	KLC extended	(Koni Muluwa 2010; 2015a, Koni Muluwa and Bostoen 2015)
	Ngong (Lukula) B864W	KLC extended	(Pokoso 1986)
32	Nzadi (Indolo) B865X	WCB	(Crane <i>et al.</i> 2011, Koni Muluwa and Bostoen 2015)

²⁵ The reference (Daeleman's archive) stands for the legacy of Jan Daeleman's research data that was trusted to Ghent University in 2018. Jan Daeleman was a Jesuit father who spent most of his life in the DRC and collected data on multiple Bantu languages spoken there.

33	West Ding (Mateko) B86P	WCB	(Mwan Mesongolo 1984)
	East Ding (Ipamu) B86Q	WCB	(Mufanga-Dzmar 1977, Munkyen Okab 1990)
	East Ding (Bantshione) B86R	WCB	(Mula 1977)
	East Ding (‘Mbentsie’, Bambudi) B86U	WCB	(Koni Muluwa and Bostoen 2015)
	West Ding (Sedzo) B86Y	WCB	(Ebalantshim Masuwan 1980)
34	Mbuun (Idiofa) B87T	KLC extended	(Dibata Mimpia 1977, Mundeke 1979; 2011)
	West Mbuun (Imbongo) B87W	KLC extended	(Koni Muluwa 2010; 2014, Koni Muluwa and Bostoen 2015)
35	Sikongo H16a	KLC extended_KLC_South	(Van Gheel 1652; KongoKing fieldwork, Narciso Cobe 2010)
36	Hangala H111	KLC extended_KLC_North	(Nkouanda 1997, Mabilia 1999)
37	Yombe H16c	KLC extended_KLC_South-West	(De Grauwe 2009)
38	Ntandu H16g	KLC extended_KLC_East	(Daeleman 1983, s.d.; Daeleman’s archive)
39	Manyanga H16b	KLC extended_KLC_Central	(Laman 1912, Laman and Meinhof 1928-29, Laman 1936)
40	Yaka H31	KLC extended_KLC_Kongoid	(Van Den Eynde 1968, Ruttenberg 2000)

Table 2: Unconditioned reflexes of PWCB *k in C2 in our WCB convenience sample

	REFLEX 1 in C2				REFLEX 2 in C2				REFLEX 3 in C2			
Variety	PWCB *k	Tokens	%	Total %	PWCB *k	Tokens	%	Total %	PWCB *k	Tokens	%	Total %
Shira B41	ɣ	*k: 9/12 *g: 1/1	75 100	77	k	*k: 2/12 *g: 0/1	17 0	15	∅	*k: 1/12 *g: 0/1	8	8
Sangu B42	ɣ	*k: 36/42 *g: 5/10	86 50	79	k	*k: 5/42 *g: 5/10	12 50	19	∅	*k: 1/42 *g: 0/10	2 0	2
Punu B43	ɣ	*k: 47/58 *g: 23/34	81 68	76	k	*k: 10/58 *g: 9/34	17 26	21	∅	*k: 1/58 *g: 2/34	2 6	3
Lumbu B44	ɣ	*k: 31/43 *g: 9/15	72 60	69	k	*k: 12/43 *g: 4/15	28 27	28	∅	*k: 0/43 *g: 2/15	0 13	3
Wanzi B501	ɣ	*k: 19/26 *g: 13/25	73 52	63	k	*k: 5/26 *g: 12/25	19 48	33	∅	*k: 2/26 *g: 0/25	8 0	4
Duma B51	ɣ	*k: 16/25 *g: 9/17	64 53	60	k	*k: 8/25 *g: 8/17	32 47	38	∅	*k: 1/25 *g: 0/17	4 0	2
Nzebi B52	x	*k: 28/39 *g: 17/25	72 68	70	k	*k: 11/39 *g: 8/25	28 32	30				
Tsaangi B53	h	*k: 18/22 *g: 13/18	82 72	77.5	k	*k: 4/22 *g: 5/18	18 28	22.5				
Mbete B61	ɣ	*k: 23/31 *g: 12/21	74 57	67	∅	*k: 8/31 *g: 9/21	26 43	33				
Mbaama B62	ɣ	*k: 17/18 *g: 10/10	94 100	96	k	*k: 1/18 *g: 0/10	6 0	4				
Nduumo B63	x	*k: 46/50 *g: 29/29	92 100	95	∅	*k: 3/50 *g: 0/29	6 0	4	k	*k: 1/50 *g: 0/29	2	1
Ngungwel B72a	∅	*k: 20/20 *g: 18/18	100 100	100								
Laali B73b	∅	*k: 16/33 *g: 10/18	48 56	51	ɣ/h	*k: 13/33 *g: 7/18	39 38	39	k	*k: 4/33 *g: 1/18	12 6	10
Yaa B73c	∅	*k: 41/48 *g: 20/22	85 91	87	k	*k: 7/48 *g: 2/22	15 9	13				
Eboo-Nzikou B74	∅	*k: 37/37 *g: 21/21	100 100	100								
Kukwa B77a	g	*k: 24/24 *g: 12/13	100 92	97	∅	*k: 0/24 *g: 1/13	0 8	3				
Fumu B77b	∅	*k: 20/40 *g: 15/24	50 62.5	55	ɣ	*k: 20/40 *g: 9/24	50 37.5	45				
Boma Yumu B80a	k	*k: 27/29 *g: 19/20	93 95	94	∅	*k: 2/29 *g: 1/20	7 5	6				
Tiene B81	k	*k: 30/30 *g: 20/22	100 91	96	∅	*k: 0/30 *g: 2/22	0 9	4				

North Boma B82	ɸ	*k: 21/22 *g: 18/19	95 95	95	*k > k *g > Ø	C2*k: 1/22 C2*g: 1/19	5 5	5
Mpe B821	ɸ	*k: 20/21 *g: 24/25	95 96	96	Ø	*k: 1/21 *g: 1/25	5 4	4
Nunu B822	ɸ	*k: 18/18 *g: 18/20	100 90	92	Ø	*k: 0/18 *g: 2/20	0 10	8
Mfinu B83	Ø	*k: 25/25 *g: 12/12	100 100	100				
Yans B85	k	*k: 48/48 *g: 22/23	100 96	98.5	Ø	*k: 0/48 *g: 1/23	0 4	1.5
Nsong B85d	Ø	*k: 21/33 *g: 11/16	64 69	67	k	*k: 12/33 *g: 5/16	36 31	33
Mpur B85e	Ø	*k: 17/23 *g: 11/17	74 65	70	k	*k: 6/23 *g: 6/17	26 35	30
Nsambaan B85F	Ø	*k: 19/26 *g: 12/18	73 67	70	k	*k: 7/26 *g: 6/18	27 33	30
Ngwi B861	ɸ	*k: 18/19 *g: 15/17	95 88	92	Ø	*k: 1/19 *g: 2/17	5 12	8
Lwel B862	Ø	*k: 19/25 *g: 11/16	76 69	73	k	*k: 6/25 *g: 5/16	24 31	27
Mpiin B863	Ø	*k: 16/24 *g: 6/11	67 54.5	63	k	*k: 8/24 *g: 5/11	33 45.5	37
Ngong B864	k	*k: 17/17 *g: 9/10	100 90	96	Ø	*k: 0/17 *g: 1/10	0 10	4
Nzadi B865	Ø	*k: 25/31 *g: 11/19	81 58	72	k	*k: 6/31 *g: 8/19	19 42	28
Ding B86	Ø	*k: 29/34 *g: 13/19	85 68.5	79	k	*k: 5/34 *g: 6/19	15 31.5	21
Mbuun B87	Ø	*k: 28/33 *g: 7/12	85 58	78	k	*k: 5/33 *g: 5/12	15 42	22
Hangala H111	k	*k: 40/40 *g: 7/9	100 78	96	Ø	*k: 0/40 *g: 2/9	0 22	4
Sikongo H16a	k	*k: 64/64 *g: 9/14	100 64	94	Ø	*k: 0/64 *g: 5/14	0 36	6
Manyanga H16b	k	*k: 40/40 *g: 14/20	100 70	90	Ø	*k: 0/40 *g: 5/20	0 30	10
Yombe H16c	k	*k: 55/55 *g: 14/18	100 78	95	Ø	*k: 0/55 *g: 4/18	0 22	5
Ntandu H16g	k	*k: 95/96 *g: 17/22	99 77	95	Ø	*k: 1/96 *g: 6/22	1 23	5
Yaka H31	k	*k: 40/40 *g: 9/13	100 70	92	Ø	*k: 0/40 *g: 4/13	0 30	8

Table 3: Assessing lexical items which might have escaped frication at some Kasai-Ngounie node²⁶

	Kasai-Ngounie									
	Nzebi-Teke West						Mbeté			Fumu
	B501	B51	B52	B53	B73b	B73c	B61	B62	B63 ²⁷	B77b
1. BLR 518 *cégé ‘grassland’	tséyé	?	?	tséhè	Ø-nséyé	–	?	?	li-tfège	Ø-ntseye
2. BLR 820 *dáká ‘language’	ndaya	ndaya	ndáxà	?	Ø-ndáá	ndáá	?	?	Ø-ndaxa	Ø-ndaya
3. BLR 1044 *dík ‘bury’	nzèèkà	?	?	ù-dìih-á	ó-dzítyè	díí	ηo-jéya	ò-dzùù-à	gi-djixa	u-dziya
4. BLR 1100 *dòg ‘bewitch’	lòyo	lòyo	?	ù-lóhò	ó-ló	ù-ló	ηo-ló	ò-lóy-à	gi-loxo	ú-lòyò
5. BLR 1685 *kààkà ‘ancestor’	?	kaya	ngáxà	kààyá	Ø-nkáyà	?	Ø-ηkáyá	?	nkaxa	nkàyà
6. BLR 2180 *mìg ‘try’	mìyà	?	mèy-à	mèy-à	–	–	ηo-míya	?	gi-mixa	u-miya
7. BLR 7216 *còik ‘hide, cover’	?	swèèyè	?	?	ó-swééyè	u-swè:	?	?	gi-tfwège	u-sweye
8. BLR 2568 *pígò ‘kidney’	li-piku	βíkù	?	?	–	mú-pfí	?	?	li-pfiyi	–
9. BLR 1607 *jògù ‘elephant’	nzòkù	nzókù	Ø-nzòxà	nzòhà	–	–	njo:	Ø-ndzoo	Ø-ndzoxo	Ø-nzòò
10. BLR 900 *dègè ‘weaver bird’	ndèkè	ndèkè	ndèkè	ndèkè	Ø-lyéyè	Ø-léé	?	?	Ø-ndege	?
11. BLR 320 *bùgí ‘squirrel’	mbúkú	?	mbúkú	?	Ø-mbúkɔ	Ø-mbúkú	?	?	Ø-mbuxu	–
12. BLR 1830 *kígí ‘eyebrow’	kíkí	kíkí	kíkí	kíkí	–	–	?	?	o- kigi	mi-kiu
13. BLR 1355 *gègò ‘(molar) tooth’	kèkù	kèkù	kèkà	kèkà	–	Ø-kékù	?	?	Ø-kegi	?
14. BLR 3612 *júkí ‘smoke’	?	úúkí	mù-ùkí	úúkí	Ø-lúúwè	lí-lúki	yuyi	yuyi	Ø-yugi	–
15. BLR 3444 *jíkò ‘fireplace’	nziku	diiku	?	?	Ø-dzí	Ø-díkí	?	?	–	–
16. BLR 9642 *káká ‘foot’ > ‘hand’	káká	?	lè-kákà	káká	lí-kákà	–	ηgaya	?	li-kaxa	kee (?)
17. BLR 2362 *págò ‘tree fork’	?	pákú	páká	?	–	lí-páká	?	?	li-pagi	?
18. BLR 711 *còk ‘wash’	tsoka	tsoka	u-tsoka	?	ó-swá-áy-à	swá:	?	ò-tfuka	gi-tsuka	swaya
19. BLR 760 *cúg ‘support’	sukú	súkà	?	?	–	–	–	?	gi-tfuxa	?

²⁶ In Table 3, “–” means there is another root for a given concept in a given variety and “?” means lack of data.²⁷ Biton (1969: 555) writes that <h> is realized *ch* as in German *suchen*, i.e. [x]. According to our understanding of the Nduumo B63 data in Biton (1969), <h> is in complementary distribution with <g>, which seems to appear only in front of <e>, <i> and <u>. Following Biton (1969: 555), <g> would always be like in French *goût*, i.e. [g], but Medjo Mvé (1989) reports that it is realized as [y] in between vowels.