

Wordhood in West African languages and beyond

Workshop to be proposed for the 58th Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea, University of Bordeaux, 26–29 August 2025

Keywords:

phonological word, morphosyntactic word, morpheme boundaries, clitics, West African languages

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Call for abstracts:

We invite abstracts for the workshop titled “Wordhood in West African languages and beyond”, to be held as part of the 58th Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea, University of Bordeaux, 26–29 August 2025. Preliminary abstracts of 300 max. words must be received no later than 15 November 2024 to be included into the workshop proposal. In case the workshop proposal is accepted, you will have to submit full abstracts by 15 January 2025 to be further reviewed by the Scientific Committee of SLE and by the workshop convenors.

Description:

There is general consensus over the existence of a mismatch between phonological (prosodic) and morphosyntactic (grammatical) words, as well as of particular items called clitics, traditionally defined as morphosyntactic, yet not phonological words. In particular, the “Leipzig Glossing Rules” (Comrie et al. 2008) recommend to distinguish between words, morphemes within a word and clitics in glossed examples, and indeed this is well established practice in contemporary descriptive linguistics. At the same time, the problem of wordhood has been discussed extensively by linguists during the last decades and especially in recent years (among many others Haspelmath 2011, 2023; van Gijn & Zúñiga 2014; Aikhenvald et al. 2020; Zingler 2020, 2022; Tallman 2020). In particular, new concepts have been proposed for items which are neither clearly words nor clearly non-words, such as weak words and anti-clitics (Zingler 2022), bound and free constructs (Haspelmath 2011); featural foot (Green 2013; Vydrin 2020). Old concepts are also redefined in new ways, for example, Haspelmath (2023) proposed a definition of clitics that excludes any phonological criteria.

Despite this active discussion on wordhood, recent theoretical findings and proposals in this domain are rarely implemented into the practice of language description and analysis. Reversely, linguistic diversity could contribute more to the problem of wordhood. While many criteria of wordhood are language-specific (as summarized, e.g., in Aikhenvald et al.’s (2020) overview), it seems reasonable to aim for more typological comparability in this domain. We propose to explore a bottom-up approach that establishes language-specific wordhood criteria to be then compared between different languages, first within a same linguistic area, and potentially beyond in a second phase.

The problem of wordhood is especially relevant for West African languages.

On the one hand, most works on West African languages either do not specify the definition of word that they use, or reproduce some definition without delving into the details of how it applies to the language in focus. The criteria for representing certain items as separate words, clitics, or morphemes within a word, often remain implicit. Studies focusing directly on wordhood in West African languages are extremely rare (but see Perekhvalskaya 2015; Kuznetsova 2021 on some Mande languages).

On the other hand, for many West African language groups there is no practical consensus on wordhood. For example, some descriptions of Ghana-Togo Mountain languages represent pre-root verbal grammatical morphemes as prefixes, while others represent them as independent

words. Given that this absence of consensus is observed even for very closely related lects, it is clearly an artefact stemming from different implicit analytical decisions. Moreover, the experience of fieldworkers themselves shows that the first practical choice on conjunct vs. disjunct spellings in transcription is usually arbitrary.

This gap is all the more significant as West Africa constitutes a linguistic area with distinct features, many of which are relevant for wordhood. First and foremost, the majority of West African languages have tonal systems involved in the issues of phonological wordhood. Combinations of morphemes within a phonological word producing agrammatical tonal patterns are solved via tonal compactness phenomena that do not occur in combinations of separate phonological words. Conversely, other tonal phenomena such as downdrift, downstep and upstep, are governed by boundaries assumed to be those of phonological words. Second, most West African languages feature vowel harmony and/or assimilation phenomena, which are generally assumed to take the phonological word as their domain. However, their domain does not always match that of other phenomena which are also assumed to apply to the phonological word. Third, West African languages typically exhibit a highly rigid word order, rendering the traditional criterion of uninterruptibility for determining word boundaries inapplicable. Moreover, the rigidity of many syntactic constructions also complicates the application of the traditional criterion of occurrence in isolation. Furthermore, it is typical for West African languages to feature semi-grammaticalized items that keep a transparent connection with corresponding lexical items, and whose wordhood status, both phonological and morphosyntactic, is problematic. Finally, in certain languages (for example, Pukur < Atlantic, Rochant 2023), a multitude of sandhi phenomena occur at certain loci which are neither boundaries between two phonological words nor within a phonological word. Needless to say, this is not an exhaustive list of wordhood-related phenomena in the linguistic area in focus.

The goal of our workshop is to stimulate a joint effort of linguists for understanding wordhood and wordhood-related phenomena in West African languages and beyond. We are primarily focused on this particular linguistic area and invite contributions presenting and analyzing data from a West African language and comparative studies in West African language groups or in the area as a whole. We also welcome submissions dealing with languages from other linguistic areas from linguists interested in comparing their data with those of West African languages or testing their findings against the perspective of West African languages.

Possible topics of submissions include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Criteria for phonological wordhood and their interaction
- Criteria for morphosyntactic wordhood and their interaction
- Correlations between phonological and morphosyntactic wordhood
- Criteria for clitic hood
- Phonological units smaller than phonological words as parts of phonological words
- Morphosyntactic units smaller than morphosyntactic words as parts of morphosyntactic words
- Phonological units larger than phonological words as consisting of phonological words
- Morphosyntactic units larger than morphosyntactic words as consisting of morphosyntactic words
- Correlations between phonological and morphosyntactic units smaller and larger than words

Important dates:

- Preliminary abstract submission deadline: 15 November 2024
- Preliminary notification acceptance/rejection by workshop convenors: 20 November 2024
- Notification of workshop acceptance/rejection: 15 December 2024
- Full abstract submission deadline: 15 January 2025
- Notification of workshop acceptance/rejection: presumed to be 31 March 2025
- Early bird registration: presumed to be 30 April 2025
- Registration and revised abstract submission: presumed to be 31 May 2025
- Conference: 26–29 August 2025

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