

Several Typologically Unusual Features of the Nama–Damara (Khoekhoegowab) Phonology

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1. There are click consonants in Khoekhoegowab. It is especially unusual that all the 20 theoretically possible combinations of the 4 places and the 5 modes (in the broad meaning of the term) of articulation are really present.
2. While tonemes mark moras, nasal consonants at the end of a syllable are also subject to tonemes.
3. There is an opposition of au ~ ao, as well as ae ~ ai. Yet, a reservation should be made – I can hear that the posterior vowel written as a is less open in au and ai than in ao and ae.
4. In the system of plosive egressive (i. e. non-click) consonants, there is neither opposition of voiced ~ voiceless, nor aspirated ~ smooth, nor strong (tense) ~ weak (lax). In most languages, there is normally at least one of them. (The kh is in fact an affricate, and the ts is the other one.)
5. Nasal vowels are opposed to oral ones even before a nasal consonant ending the syllable. Syllables having a nasal vowel at the end are opposed to those having an oral vowel at the end and to those having a vowel + a nasal consonant at the end.
6. While Khoekhoegowab is basically a syllabic language, there can be a consonant at the end of a syllable, representing a separate morpheme (it can only be a s, ts, or b, and whatever of those 3 consonants be at the end of a syllable, it can only represent a separate morpheme). There are some cases of resyllabation, too (probably, residual): /gam and /ga-ma ‘two’. So, the situation with regard to the function of a syllable is typologically similar to that of Old Tibetan, showing evidences of transition from the “conventional” phonemic structure to the almost pure syllabic one, like in Modern Chinese (Putonghua).