

## **Does contact really make grammars more similar? A case study on Western Nilotic**

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### **Abstract**

Investigations into the realms and limitations of linguistic areas may take on different forms. The most obvious one, perhaps, would be to define a geographic area or region which is characterised by the occurrence of similar grammatical techniques and common typological patterns in a number of otherwise probably unrelated languages. A second approach would deal with the time depth of a *sprachbund* or language contact area. Here, geographical boundaries may vary during the course of time, as the grammatical features that help to identify the contact zone could tend to diffuse into other languages or contact areas, while they may become unproductive in parts of their former zone of origin. In the East African set-up that will be discussed here – focusing on Western Nilotic languages of the Nilo-Saharan phylum –, the emergence of intensive and extremely productive contact situations appears to depend on several sociolinguistic as well as geographic parameters that are not continuously given in the entire area. It seems that the introduction of new economic techniques and a different lifestyle can be correlated to the spreading of particular aspects of the grammar, and subsequently the creation of a linguistic area, which remained productive over a very long period of time. In later contact situations the grammatical properties that characterised the linguistic area spread again, but out of completely different reasons. As a result, various strata of contact and diffusion can be identified in these ‘layered languages’.