It is regularly asserted in surveys of vowel harmony systems that vowel harmony ‘canonically’ applies within the (P)Word. That is, the domain is roughly the word but can be smaller than the word due to phonological or morphological conditions on harmony. The ‘word’ is usually taken to refer to the phonological word, not the grammatical word, since compounds are commonly disharmonic. Indeed, vowel harmony is said to rarely cross lexical word boundaries, either within compounds or within phrases. (See surveys such as: Archangeli & Pulleyblank 2007, Hyman 2002, Kaisse 2016, Krämer 2003, Rose & Walker 2011, van der Hulst & van der Weijer 1995.)

However, if one focuses on African languages, one gets a different perspective on how closely the domain for vowel harmony matches the (P)Word. As a reminder, approximately 2000/6000 (roughly 1/3) of the world’s languages are spoken in Africa, and three types of vowel harmony are found in African languages: ATR harmony; Bantu vowel height harmony; and raising harmony (in Sotho-Tswana). As Clements & Riall兰 (2008) point out, while the first two types of harmony are quite frequently found in languages spoken across the continent, they are not attested (or rarely attested) outside of Africa.

This talk will undertake a preliminary survey of vowel harmony domains from an Africanist perspective and present case studies from a variety of languages showing that it is relatively common for vowel harmony to apply in a domain that is either larger or smaller than the PWord. The talk will focus on harmony systems – almost all characterized as ATR harmony systems – that take a phrasal domain and demonstrate that it is perhaps not as rare for vowel harmony to apply across word boundaries as has been asserted in the previous literature on this topic. The talk will end by raising the question of why, in most of the known cases of cross-word harmony, ATR or some other laryngeal vowel quality is the harmonizing feature. And if phonologists had investigated ATR harmony systems first, would we have made the generalization that vowel harmony in general is a PWord phenomenon?