

Aspects of linguistic diversity in western Central Africa

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This poster addresses two issues related to the linguistic diversity in western Central Africa: the linguistic situation as related to the dichotomy “villagers” vs. “hunters-gatherers”, and the so-called “Fang enigma”.

Villagers vs. hunters-gatherers

As for Bantu-speaking Africa, western Central Africa attests the highest degree of linguistic diversity. Scholars nowadays agree the Bantu homeland was located in the northwestern part of this area. Western Central Africa must have been the scene of the gradual spread of Bantu, in particular the western, southbound expansion. The present, often extremely complex, linguistic situations can be accounted for by gradual fragmentation and extensive linguistic convergence due to prolonged contact and multilingualism.

According to Bastin & al. (1999), Bantu can be subdivided into four major groups of unequal size: Mbam-Bubi, Northwestern Bantu, Western Bantu and Eastern Bantu. A major linguistic barrier between Northwestern and (central) Western Bantu crosses the Gabon-DRC-Congo area. The first cluster comprises the A zone languages as well as the MYENE (B10), KELE (B20) and TSOGO (B30) groups. The exact status of B20 needs further investigation.

In western Central Africa, the villagers, who practise some rudimentary form of agriculture, all speak Bantu language varieties. The linguistic situation of the small groups of semi-nomadic hunters-gatherers is more complicated. Three different linguistic situations (or strategies) can be distinguished. Most groups of hunters-gatherers have adopted a nearby Bantu language and (presumably) abandoned their former language (language shift). Sometimes these “Pygmy” varieties preserve archaic traits no longer found in the neighboring language(s). Some groups of semi-nomads use mixed Bantu language varieties combining elements from several surrounding Bantu languages. Finally, some hunters-gatherers speak a non-Bantu language, presumably adopted at some earlier stage (e.g. in Gabon, the Bakao speak Baka, an Ubangian language).

The Fang enigma

One fairly well documented demic expansion within the Cameroon-Gabon area is the Fang expansion. Some 1000 YBP, a group of Bantu-speakers left the Yaunde region moving southwards. Part of them, the Proto-Fang, also invaded the Gabon area. Their wave-like expansion intensified during the 17th century A.D. and came to an end only in the first half of the last century.

Fang is an A zone language spoken in Cameroon and most of northern Gabon. It comprises northern and southern dialects, as well as some intermediate varieties (Medjo Mvé, 1997). In Gabon, Fang has a strong impact on the surrounding languages and is currently replacing several of them (e.g. the Shiwa language (A83) spoken by the Makina).

A theory elaborated by Rev. Trilles (1912, 1931) in the early 20th century claims an Egyptian origin for the Fang population, its language and its culture on the basis of its oral tradition, and several linguistic, cultural and physical traits. This theory has become very popular, especially among Black African scholars, and often takes a strong ideological dimension as it accuses (white) Egyptologists of falsifying ancient History. It suffers, however, from important methodological and theoretical weaknesses. Cheikh Anta Diop and Théophile Obenga are the main representatives of this school of thought. Similar claims have been made by other Bantu-speaking populations (cf. Basaá, A43a).

Guthrie (1948), Hombert & *al.* (1989) and Medjo Mvé (1997) have shown that Fang presents all the traits of a regular Bantu language. There is absolutely no evidence of a non-Bantu substratum. Most cultural anthropologists also reject the alleged parallels and consider the “Out-of-Egypt” theory to be untenable. Analysis of the MtDNA variation in Gabonese and Cameroonian populations does not seem to support a non-Bantu origin for Fang either. The study of Y-chromosome diversity, however, sheds surprising new light on this issue of debate. If the results obtained so far are confirmed, a highly interesting case of complete language shift may have to be dealt with within the context of Bantu.