A sketch of Naki Grammar
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MPI EVA, Work in Progress talk

1 Background

[1] **Note:** This is true work in progress, all information, claims, transcriptions, etc. should be considered tentative.

[2] Naki (ethnologue code MFF) is a Beboid language of Northwest Cameroon with, perhaps, about 3000–4000 speakers. The term *Naki* is used by speakers of the language to refer to themselves, not the language itself. My own speaker tended to spontaneously refer to the language as *Mekaf* (pronounced as "Menkaf" to my ears), the name of the main Naki village.

[3] Previous work on the language includes Hombert (1980), a survey of noun classes in all of Beboid, survey work done by SIL (Hamm et al. (2002), Hamm (2002), Brye and Brye (2002)), and a Master's thesis at the University of Yaounde I have not had a chance to look at.

[4] Naki has been classified as Western Beboid, presumably based on its geographic location. However, ethnographic and lexicostatistical evidence suggests it should be classified with Western Beboid languages.

[5] The most detailed work on the grammar of any Beboid language is Hyman's (1981) grammar of Noni (Eastern Beboid) and, at least superficially, Naki seems to be similar to Noni.

[6] My work was conducted primarily with one speaker in Bamenda, the capital of the Northwest Province of Cameroon over a period of about two and a half weeks. I made one overnight trip to the village of Mekaf to meet other speakers. English was the contact language.

[7] In the village of Mekaf, Naki is still used extensively, and the language does not appear to be in any imminent threat of becoming endangered due to its geographical remoteness. (However, one can imagine that things could change quickly if the Ring Road were paved.)

[8] The only local language which the Naki speakers appear to have competence in is Aghem, a Grassfields Bantu language spoken i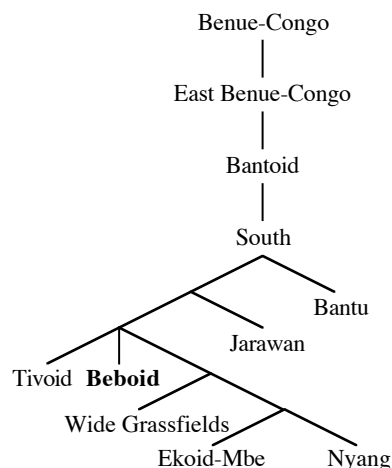n adjacent areas and the language of the area in and around Wum, the closest major town (about an hour away by car on a dirt road).

[9] Otherwise, the main language of communication with other groups is Cameroonian Pidgin, an English-based creole which appears to be related to Nigerian Pidgin and Krio. (This language is not anywhere near mutually intelligible with English.)

[10] The Beboid language area (Hamm 2002:4).
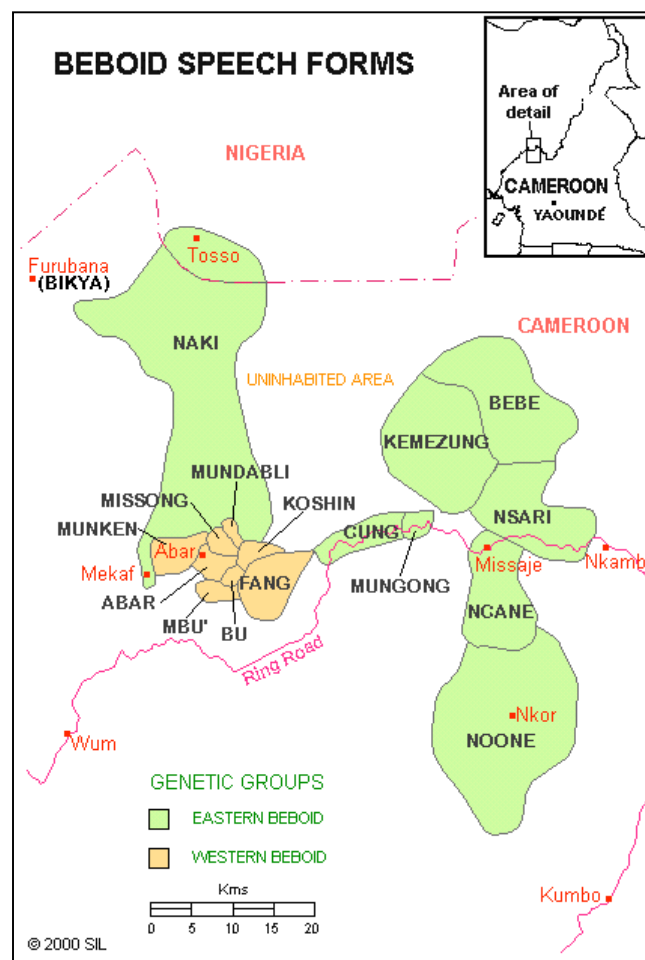
[11] Beboid within Benue-Congo, following Williamson and Blench (2000:31–5).

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                    Benue-Congo
                        |
                 East Benue-Congo
                        |
                     Bantoid
                        |
                      South
                      /    \
                    /        \
                   /           Bantu
                  /       Jarawan
                 /          /
        Tivoid  Beboid    /
              Wide Grassfields
                  Ekoid-Mbe    Nyang
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2 Phonology

2.1 Phonemic inventory

[12] **Consonants**

		LAB	ALV	ALV-PAL	VEL	LAB-VEL
STOP	VL	p	t		k	kp
	VD	b	d		g	gb
AFF	VL		c	ch		
	VD		dz	j		
FRIC		f, fy	s	sh		
NASAL		m	n	ny	ng	
LIQUID			l, r(?)			
GLIDE				y		w

[13] The sound transcribed as *fy* is realized that way sometimes, but with my primary consultant it typically had a different realization. Hombert (1980) transcribes it as *šf*. My first guess at it is that it can be realized as a doubly-articulated labial-alveopalatal fricative.

[14] The phonemic status of *r* is unclear. There certainly are phonetic *r*-like sounds

but they may be conditioned variants of an alveolar stop in coda position. I have identified one possible minimal pair of *r* with *t*:

[a] *bór* '9.fire'

[b] *bót* '9.gun'

[15] If there is a phonemic *r*, it would appear to have a limited distribution, only appearing word-finally. Perhaps, it is an allophone of *d*?

[16] The sound written here as *sh* often sounds more like *shy*. I write it as *sh* everywhere since I have not uncovered evidence for a contrast between the two sounds.

[17] Various consonants have been observed to phonetically have secondary articulations like labialization and palatalization. It has not been established if these should be treated as consonant-glide sequences or as single segments in their own right.

[18] **Vowels**

	FRONT	CENTRAL	BACK
HIGH	i		u
MID	e, ɛ(?)	ə	o
LOW		a	

[19] There might be a contrast between *e* and *ɛ*, but I have examined too few of the relevant lexical items to be sure. A possible minimal pair is:

[a] *ā-dzé* '12.mouth'

[b] *dzɛ̄* 'start'

[20] But, there are words where *e* and *ɛ* were transcribed as though there was free variation. In any case, as of today, I learn towards a phonemic distinction, at least in some environments, in particular, word-finally.

[21] A few lexical items were articulated with long vowels somewhat consistently. I have yet to determine, however, if vowel length is phonemically contrastive or if it is conditioned in some way.

[a] *ūdāà* '14.bridge'

[b] *uɲ̄à* '5.fufu'

2.2 Tone system

[22] First comment: The tone system is essentially unanalyzed.

[23] There are three tone levels: high, mid, and low

   [a] *shè* '5.hen'

   [b] *bwē* '5.dog'

   [c] *shé* '6.hen'

[24] There appear to be some monosyllabic tonal contours. The plural of the word *nyàm* '9.animal', for example, appears to have a mid-low contour and the first person plural pronoun appears to have a mid-high contour.

   [a] *nyầm* '10.animal'

   [b] *kấ* 'we (subject)'

[25] Different tones in different syllables do appear to be possible

   [a] *fìmfī* '9.wind'

   [b] *ā-dzé* '12.mouth'

3 Syllable structure

[26] Noteworthy about Naki syllable structure is that the language allows coda *p*, *t*, *k*, and *l*, which appears to be unique among Beboid languages, according to data in Hombert (1980:94).

[27] Some examples

   [a] *nsōk* '1.cup'

   [b] *kop* '1.knife'

   [c] *ā-kwát* '12.back_of_head' (plural *bī-kwála* '8.back_of_head')

   [d] *byòl* '9.fish'

[28] In addition, like other Beboid languages, Naki allows nasal codas.

   [a] *zhím* 'cut'

   [b] *fūmàjáng* 'seven'

[29] Nasals do not appear to be tone bearing units, but they can appear as part of complex "onsets" suggesting that they can possibly be syllabic.

   [a] *nsōk* '1.cup'

   [b] *nggú* '6a.water'

[30] Coda *k* is often fricativized

[31] Coda *t* is often unreleased, or, perhaps, articulated as a glottal stop

[32] As discussed above, a phone approximating an *r* (though sometimes voiceless, like a final Turkish *r*) seems to contrast with *t* word-finally. This is, perhaps, phonologically *d*—further adding to the range of possible Naki coda stops.

4 Morphology

4.1 Noun class system

[33] Naki noun classes are still fairly robust, though somewhat reduced from the Bantu prototype. Noun classes are relevant both for singular/plural pairs and concord. Verbs, generally, do not show agreement—so, obviously, noun classes in Naki do not factor into verbal agreement the way Bantu noun classes do.

[34] The noun classes given below, generally follow the numbering scheme of Hombert (1980), except I have not uncovered an instance of his class 14/26 and the one candidate word for this class seemed better characterized as 14/14.

[35] The concord has only been systematically examined for the definite article, which is what the concord column in the table refers to.

[36] A number of irregular words in a given class with respect to singular/plural pairs have been uncovered. The information in the table, therefore, might not apply to all nouns in a given class.

[37] **Naki Noun Classes**

NC	MORPH	CONC	EXAMPLE	SEMANTICS
1/2	Ø/bu-	w-/b-	nsōk/būnsōk 'cup'	humans, misc.
3/6	Cw/-ng	w-/n-	fwī́/fɔ̄ng 'moon'	not established
5/6	Ø/-ng	w-/n-	gí/gɔ́ng 'egg'	body parts, misc.
6a	N-	m-	mbí 'wine'	liquids
9/10	´↑	y-/y-	cùcú 'house'	animals, misc.
12/8	a-/(b)i-	k-/by-	ādzé/bīdzé 'mouth'	body parts, misc.
14/14	u-/u-	w-/w-	ūdāà/ūdāà 'bridge'	not established
19/26	fy-/m	fy-/m-	fyīdāà/mdāà 'culvert'	diminutive

[38] Further examples of class 1/2

[a] *mwā* '1.man', *būnī* '2.man'

[b] *kpām* '1.wife', *būkāābām* '2.wife'

[39] Further examples of class 5/6

[a] *tù* '5.horn', *tǔng* '6.horn'

[b] *kpɔ̄* '5.hand', *kpɔ́ng* '6.hand'

[c] *lī* '5.tongue', *lɔ̄ng* '6.tongue'

[d] *kùntù* '5.chest', *kùntùng* '6.chest'

[e] *yɛ̀t* '5.eye', *yɛ́* '6.eye'

[40] Further examples of class 9/10

[a] *shè* '9.hen', *shé* '10.hen'

[b] *nyàm* '9.animal', *nyǎm* '10.animal'

[c] *shyǎm* 'seed', *shyám* '10.seed'

4.2   Numbers

[41] I know nothing about numeral systems, but since there was a conference on them here recently, here are the Naki numbers I recorded. The tones are highly tentative since I haven't re-listened to the tape.

NUMBER	GLOSS
āmù	'one'
īfɔ́	'two'
ētád	'three'
ɔ̄nà	'four'
ītī̀	'five'
ūsí	'six'
fūmàjáng	'seven'
jáng	'eight'
fūmàdzófó	'nine'
dzófó	'ten'
mùcācā	'twenty'
mūdzó fūtád	'thirty'
mūdzó ɔ̄nà	'forty'

[42] Note that the numbers for seven and nine appear to be derived from the numbers eight and ten, respectively.

[43] Could the form of the number twenty be a trace of a former vigesimal system?

4.3   Personal Pronouns

[44] The basic subject pronouns, maybe—some of these might represent a fusion of the pronoun with a TMA marker, affecting the realization of the vowel.

	SG	PL
1st	mí	kɑ́
2nd	wá	bá
3rd	lá	bá

[45] The basic object pronouns

	SG	PL
1st	mī̀	sì
2nd	wɔ̄	bɔ̄
3rd	lù	bū

[46] Logophoricity may turn up, but some basic elicitation in the area did not reveal any obviously logophoric pronouns.

[47] Not thoroughly worked out are pronominal forms for non-human nouns.

5   Verbal morphology

[48] There is important, but limited, segmental verbal morphology and more extensive, but unanalyzed tonal verbal morphology.

[49] One major type of segmental verbal morphology are TMA-conditioned stem alternations for some verbs. The conditioning of these alternations has not been established, the morphophonology of the alternation is either not predictable or not obvious, and not all verbs seem to show two such stem types.

[a] *m' āmé   wɔ̄.*
   1sS see.NEAR.PST 2sO
   "I've seen you."

[b] *m' āmɔ̄ng   wɔ̄.*
   1sS see.2.NEAR.FUT 2sO
   "I will see you"

[50] Another verb showing the two stem forms is the verb dance, with stem forms *bi* and *byɛn*.

[51] The most productive segmental verbal morphology are TMA prefixes of form *a-*, *e-*, and, possibly, *ai-*, if it is truly monomorphemic.

[52] Though the analysis is tentative, *a-* appears to be a prefix meaning "near the present" and *e-* appears to mean "far from the present", with neither specified for tense. If *ai-* is a separate prefix, it appears to have a purely present use.

[a] *Kūm àjēn   lī.*
   Kum eat.2.NEAR.PST PART
   "Kum was (recently) eating."

[b] *Kūm èjēn   lī.*
   Kum eat.2.FAR.PST PART
   "Kum was eating (not recently)"

[c] *Kūm àìbí.*
   Kum dance.PRS
   "Kum is dancing"

[d] *gɔ́ng nɔ̄ ásânɔ̄   lī.*
   6.egg 6.the explode.NEAR.FUT PART
   "The eggs will explode (relatively soon, but not imminently)."

[e] *nggū   mā   ēbàshɔ̀.*
   6a.water 6a.the boil.FAR.FUT
   "The water will boil (far into the future)."

[53] While particular lexical pairs showed possible traces of verbal extensions (e.g., *kpē* 'die'/*kpɔ̄lɔ̄* 'kill') no clearly productive extensions were uncovered.

[54] There are some possible verbal suffixes, but, right now, I think they are better analyzed as postverbal "particles".

[55] A potential case of segmental agreement morphology is a homorganic nasal that appears at the beginning of certain verbs preceded by the first-person subject pronoun (perhaps they just need to have a first person subject regardless of the presence of the pronoun preverbally—I don't recall collecting the relevant data to test this). This is reminiscent of a similar phenomenon found in Noni (Hyman 1981:77).

M' ānjē   ùnà.
1sS eat.NEAR.PRS 5.fufu
"I am eating fufu."

[56] But maybe this is just a type of limited nasal harmony? (Relevant here is the fact that the village name *Mekaf* sounds like *Menkaf* to my ears.)

[57] In addition, of course, there's lots of tonal morphology, which plays a role in TMA marking and, making matters even more confusing, also plays a role in focus marking, as will be discussed below.

6   Syntax

6.1   Basic word order

[58] Basic word order in Naki is fairly rigid SVO

Kúm ákpɔ̄lɔ̄   fyēp yɔ̀.
Kum kill.NEAR.PST 9.rat 9.the
"Kum killed the rat."

[59] For the verb *give* unmarked objects have the order recipient-theme. Another construction is also available with an unmarked patient followed by a recipient marked with a circumposition(?).

[a] *Kúm ādɛ́   Síí fyó.*
   Kum give.NEAR.PST Sii 19.thing
   "Kum gave Sii something."

[b] *Kúm ādɛ́   āngpōngà kɔ̀   ì   Síí lī.*
Kum give.NEAR.PST 12.table 12.the for₁ Sii for₂
"Kum gave the table to Sii."

[60] Auxiliary verbs generally (only?) precede the main verb

Kúm sí   kpɔ́lɔ́ fyɛ̄p yɔ̀.
Kum will kill 9.rat 9.the
"Kum will kill the rat"

[61] There are postverbal elements which, I suppose, could be auxiliaries, like the *lī* "particle" seen in some of the above examples.

6.2 Focal word order

[62] A curious feature of Naki grammar is a special "focal" form of the verb—with different "tone" (intonation?) from the unmarked form—which is associated with different argument ordering than is otherwise allowed.

[63] A core use of this form is for subject Wh-questions—and answers for those questions—when the subject appears immediately postverbally.

[a] *Kúm ákpɔ̄lɔ̄   fyɛ̄p yɔ̄.*
Kum kill.NEAR.PST 9.rat 9.the
"Kum killed the rat."

[b] *Fyɛ̄p yɔ̄   ākpɔ́lɔ̄   yé?*
9.rat 9.the kill.NEAR.PST.FOC who
"Who killed the rat?"

[c] *Fyɛ̄p yɔ̀   ākpɔ́lɔ̄   Kúm.*
9.rat 9.the kill.NEAR.PST.FOC Kum
"*Kum* killed the rat." (A good answer to above question.)

[64] Word order in this focal construction appears to be relatively "free". (I have no idea what the information structure is of the two sentences below.)

[a] *Bū   fyɛ̄p yɔ ākpɔ́lɔ̄   ī   Síí lī.*
3pS(?) 9.rat 9.the kill.NEAR.PST.FOC for₁ Sii for₂
"They killed the rat for Sii."

[b] *Fyɛp yɛ b' ākpɔ́lɔ̄   ī   Síí lī.*
9.rat 9.the 3pS kill.NEAR.PST.FOC for₁ Sii for₂
"They killed the rat for Sii."

6.3 Negation and SAuxOV order

[65] SAuxOV word order is attested in Naki, though it's not a rampant phenomenon, and appears to be an optional variant of SAuxVO order where it is found.

[66] It did not seem to be possible with, for example, the future auxiliary *si*.

Kúm sí   kpɔ́lɔ́ fyɛ̄p yɔ̀.
Kum will kill 9.rat 9.the
"Kum will kill the rat"

[67] I found it, however, with the negative auxiliaries.

[a] *Mí shâ   jē kɔ̄ ūnā wɔ̄.*
1sS will.NEG eat NEG 5.fufu 5.the
"I will not eat the fufu."

[b] *Mí shâ   ūnā wɔ̄ jē kɔ̄.*
1sS will.NEG 5.fufu 5.the eat NEG
"I will not eat the fufu."

[68] Some unchecked examples transcribed in my notes indicate that for ditransitive constructions, the following orders are possible: $SAuxVO_{rec}O_{theme}$, $SAuxO_{theme}VO_{rec}$, $SAuxO_{rec}O_{theme}V$. But: *$SAuxO_{rec}OV_{theme}$. (But, note that the recipient was pronominal while the theme was not.)

[69] Orin, my apologies, but I didn't find a clear example of "other" when going over my materials in preparing for this talk.

6.4 Miscellaneous syntax

[70] Consecutivization with directionals

Kúm èdzɛ̄   ɛ̄ Mèkāf ágè   Bāmēndā.
Kum start.FAR.PST LOC Mekaf go.CON Bamenda
"Kum went from Mekaf to Bamenda."

[71] Verb-phrase coordination

M' ààntīfī   dzìm sī bū.
1sS sing.PRES.1S 9.song & dance
"I am singing and dancing."

[72] *want*

   [a] *Kúm álē   sī   kī   kwé kú.*
      Kum want.PRS 1pO 1pS(?) arrive home
      "Kum wants us to go home."

   [b] *Kúm álē   lɔ̄   kī   kwé kú.*
      Kum want.PRS COMP(?) 1pS(?) arrive home
      "Kum wants us to go home."

   [c] *Kúm álē   sī lɔ̄   kī   kwé kú.*
      Kum want.PRS 1pO COMP(?) 1pS(?) arrive home
      "Kum wants us to go home."

[73] Relative clauses

   [a] *Mū l' ājé   wɔ̄ ūnā wɔ̄ ādɔ̄ng   Kúm.*
      1.man 3sS eat.NEAR.PST 5.it 5.fufu 5.the be.NEAR.PST Kum
      "The man who ate the fufu was Kum."

   [b] *ūnā wí   Kúm ājé   wɔ̄*
      5.fufu 5.ASS Kum eat.NEAR.PST 5.it
      "the fufu that Kum ate"

7   For more information…

[74] In the spirit of Good (2004), I am experimenting with writing this grammar as a semi-structured database.

[75] At present, I am writing it using wiki-software. If you're inside the Institute, you can see its present stage of development at:

http://lingua79.eva.mpg.de/twiki/bin/view/NakiGrammar/

[76] At present, no one outside the Institute can see it.

[77] If you get asked for a username by your browser, you can use "GuestUser" with password "NakiGuest".

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