Reassessing Western Beboid

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1 Background

[1] The Western Beboid area, also known as Lower Fungom, is given on right (map based on (Hombert 1980:84), with minor updates).

[2] Western Beboid languages are currently classified within Southern Bantoid, giving them a pivotal position within Benue-Congo.

[3] Beboid (adapted from the Ethnologue)

[4] Eastern: Bebe [bzv], Cung [cug], Kemezung [dmo], Naki [mff], Ncane [ncr], Noni [nhy], Nsari [asj] (see Brye and Brye (2002))

[5] Western: Abar [mij], Fang [fak], Koshin [kid], Mbu’ [muc], Mundabli [boe]

[6] The branches pattern geographically following their names, except that Naki is at the western fringe of the group.

[7] The name Beboid initially appears in Hombert (1980), the first published survey of the entire group of languages.

[8] Despite its widespread adoption as a classificatory label for a dozen or so languages, no publication has ever presented evidence for the group in terms of shared innovations.

[9] Existing work on the languages of the region includes Chilver and Kaberry (1974:37–40), Hombert (1980), and Hamm et al. (2002). (One also finds references to language names in earlier literature.)

[10] Naki has seen the most detailed study, especially in recent years (Kum (2002), Kum (2007), Good (forthcoming))

[11] Most of the data found here derives from field work by various individuals since 2004, representing the first time the varieties of all Western Beboid villages were surveyed.

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2 Geographic and sociohistorical setting

[10] The Western Beboid languages lie in what has been termed the “Sub-Saharan Fragmentation Belt” (Dalby 1970:163) at the northern edge of the Cameroonian Grassfields.

[11] Stallcup (1980:44) points out that the Grassfields area lies within the most fragmented part of this belt.

[12] Eastern Beboid speakers generally appear to view their languages as related to each other (see Brye and Brye (2002)), and Naki speakers’ oral history unambiguously portrays their present distribution as being the result of recent movements.

[13] Therefore, while it is not proven that all the languages currently classified as Eastern Beboid are a genealogical unit, it seems a reasonable hypothesis, especially given the lexicostatistical results of Brye and Brye (2002).

[14] The Western Beboid situation is quite different:

[a] Speakers do not recognize any Western Beboid unity in linguistic terms.
[b] Speakers do not recognize any Western Beboid in historical terms.
[c] Speakers do not recognize any linguistic or historical connection with the one Eastern Beboid language they are in close contact with: Naki (and the Naki have similar attitudes).

[15] These facts must be placed against a sociolinguistic backdrop of a general lack of antagonism and frequent intermarriage among these groups.

[16] Two additional issues:

[a] Standard mutual intelligibility questions are not good diagnostics for relatedness in this area.
[b] The oral history of many of the groups in the area quite explicitly treats them as being intrusive in recent times (though we must treat such claims with caution (Nkwi and Warner (1982:24–29), Fowler and Zeitlyn (1996)).

3 Languages overview

[17] The languages of the region are all quite small, but not immediately threatened, though the spread of Cameroonian Pidgin as a lingua franca may change this.
4 Grammatical points

4.1 Noun class systems


[24] Data here on Fang, Mbu’, and Bù should be considered fairly tentative. Not yet clarified is which segmentally homophonous concords may be tonally distinct.

[25] Class numbering conventions are intended to suggest Proto-Bantu cognates, though they should not be considered definitive reconstructions.

[26] Fon languages

[a] Fon is conservative in retention of vowel prefixes, though there is otherwise considerable dialect variation.

[b] MUNKEN

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>SINGULAR</th>
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<td>1 u- w-</td>
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<td>3 u- w-</td>
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<td>12 a- k-</td>
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<td>19 shi- sh-</td>
<td>26 mu- mw-</td>
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<td>7(a) ki-(...-l) ky-</td>
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<td>8 bi- by-</td>
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<td>6a N- m-</td>
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[c] Class fluctuation

[i] Singular: āyìhù kínkà ‘12.jaw 12.this’
[ii] Plural: kìyìhù kúèñkí ‘7.jaw 7.this’, bìyìhù bìènì ‘8.jaw 8.this’
[iii] Singular: ìëthë ‘5.eye’
[v] Singular: ìëhù ‘5.bee’
[vii] Singular: lìpì ‘5.death’
[viii] Plural: lìpìlì ‘7a.death’, *kìpì

[d] Prefix fluctuation like this seems to be a general characteristic of the group, though similarities/differences among villages have not been explored.

[27] Ji languages

[a] MUNDABLI

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<td>3 ‘- w-</td>
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<td>5 Ø- k-</td>
<td>8 Ø- b-</td>
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<td>7 ‘- y-</td>
<td>10 ‘- y-</td>
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<td>26 m-</td>
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<tr>
<td>6a N- m-</td>
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</table>

[b] Mundabli examples

[i] Class 3/4: gbjì wèn ‘3.house 3.this’ / dzì yèn ‘4.house 4.this’ (< PB *-jì?)

[kpán wèn ‘3.wood 3.this’ / tsìwàn yèn ‘4.wood 4.this’ (< PB *-kìnì?)

(see Kießling (2009+))

[ii] Class 5/7: yì wàmì ‘5.eye 5.one’ / ìfì kìfì ‘7.eye 7.two’

[iii] Class 7/8: nìm kèn ‘7.belt 7.this’ / nìm bìn ‘8.belt 8.this’


[c] Mufu appears to be essentially same as Mundabli

[b] Bù is more divergent

[i] In elicitation contexts some prefixes that are lost in Mundabli and Mufu are retained in Bù, for example class 7 shows a kò- prefix.

[ii] These prefixes can be lost constructionally. For example, if a class 7 noun is followed by demonstrative or possessive, the prefix can be dropped, reminiscent of phenomena seen in nearby languages like Aghem (Hyman 1979:57).

[iii] Bù also shows a plural circumfixal class comparable to other classes referred to here as 7a with form kò-...-tò not (yet?) found in Mundabli or Mufu. (This is the class 27 of Hombert (1980:93).)

[28] MBU’ [muc]

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<th>SINGULAR</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>5 Ø- y-</td>
<td>6 a- y-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Ø- y-</td>
<td>7a kà...-lò k-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 kà- k-</td>
<td>8 bà- b-</td>
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<td>6a N- m-</td>
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Reassessing Western Beboid Bantu 3, Tervuren, 26 March 2009

4.2 Verb stem alternations

[11] As in other languages of the area, some (all?) Western Beboid languages show stem alternations across something like perfective/imperfective lines.

[12] There are varying degrees of productivity, with Ji languages seeming to show the most stems exhibiting the alternation, at least upon initial inspection.

[33] Naki (Eastern Beboid) shows these alternations as well, as does nearby Aghem (Ring; Grassfields) (Anderson 1979:78) and Noni (Eastern Beboid) (Hyman 1980:41).

[34] Munken

[35] Koshin

[36] Mundabli

[37] Could these alternations be useful in subgrouping?

5 Comparative assessment

[4] The retention of the b- in class 2 and class 8 concord is noteworthy in the region since neighboring Ring (Grassfields) languages show different concord patterns in these classes (e.g., gh- in class 2 and w- in class 8 in Aghem (Hyman 1979:19)).

[8] Fon varieties all share the noteworthy feature that they retain the vowels in the prefixes for classes 3/4 and 9/10.

[9] Mundabli and Mufu are much closer to each other than Bù (see also Hamm et al. (2002:12))—it seems likely that Bù should be considered a separate language.

[10] Circumfixal class 7a crosscuts apparent genealogical boundaries.

[11] The presence of class 13 in both Fang and Koshin is noteworthy since it is not found elsewhere in Western Beboid.

[12] Mbu’ appears to be the most divergent within Western Beboid.

[13] The noun class systems do not obviously point to the existence of a Western Beboid genealogical unit.
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The Proto-Eastern Grassfields and Proto-Western Grassfields noun class and concord systems as reconstructed by Hyman (1980:182)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CLASS</th>
<th>PREFIX—EASTERN GRASSFIELDS</th>
<th>CONCORD</th>
<th>PREFIX—WESTERN GRASSFIELDS</th>
<th>CONCORD</th>
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<td>1a</td>
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Some links between Western Beboid languages and Grassfields languages

- They generally pattern with Proto–Western Grassfields for classes 3/4.
- Fang and Koshin share with Proto–Western Grassfields class 13.
- At least some Fang varieties, along with Mbu’, show distinct class 6/6a forms similar to what is found in Proto–Western Grassfields.
- Consonant mutations of the sort seen in the Ji group, Fang, and Koshin are attested in some contemporary Ring (Grassfields) languages—for example, Mmen, Kom, and, apparently incipiently, in Aghem. (See Kießling (2009+).)
- Overall, Western Beboid seems to pattern more with geographically adjacent Western Grassfields than more distant Eastern Grassfields.

6 Lower Fungom as an areal unit?

The Western Beboid data collected so far seems more consistent with a non-genetiological interpretation of the group than a genealogical one.

Its area—Lower Fungom—bears resemblances to Nichols’ 1992 notion of a residual/accretion zone.

At this point, Western Beboid is probably best understood as a set of unclassified Bantoid languages which have found refuge in a “backwater” region.

Are there other groups in the Bantu homeland area like this?

References


Kum, Julius Nang. 2007. The noun morphology of Naki. Yaoundé: University of Yaoundé FLSH, Mémoire de DEA.

