

The Chronicle of Lingbe, an Extinct Bantu Language of East Congo

Lingbe, aka Ngbele, was a Bantu language spoken in the Northeast of the Democratic Republic of Congo, near the Bomokandi river. UNESCO (Moseley 2010) and the Summer Institute of Linguistics (see Eberhard et al. 2022) consider the language to be extinct. Indeed, a recent questionnaire on the language, recorded in 2020, resulted in a 100-word list of a Nilo-Saharan language, possibly Mangbetu, rather than the Bantu language we were actually looking for.

We are presenting the chronicle of a death foretold: the extinction of Lingbe was already announced in the 1930s. Moeller (1936) writes that the Mangbele were fishermen, one of the “Bakango” peoples living at the Uélé and Bomokandi rivers. At Rungu and Wamba the Mangbele had already exchanged their language for Mayogo, an Ubangi language. Other Mangbele had been conquered by the Mangbetu and incorporated in Mangbetu and “Madjaga” communities. As mentioned, Mangbetu is a Nilo-Saharan, more specifically Central-Sudanic, language. The present paper explores historical sources from the early 20th century that document the language and its speakers as well as the on-going language shift. This allows us to study the context in which the language shift and ultimate extinction of Lingbe occurred.

Still, the language lived at least until the 1990s when the second author recorded a wordlist in Lingbe. As short as it may be, merely 67 words, it has already allowed the authors and colleagues to identify Lingbe as a Boan Bantu language, more specifically affiliated to the western Boan subgroup which includes Leboale, Kango and Ngelima. Interestingly, this is in line with the hypothesis forwarded by Moeller (who cites De Calonne-Beaufaict 1921) that they are closely related to the Ababua. The present paper compares the surviving linguistic material to the surrounding Bantu, Central-Sudanic and Ubangi languages, as such reconstructing as much as is possible on Lingbe’s early history and studying the process of language shift.

The present paper assembles all available documentation on Lingbe, be it historical sources, linguistic or other, and retrieves the utmost from the linguistic material. The research results offer unique insights into the history of a lost Bantu language.

References:

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