Towards a new classification of Western Bantu languages using non-lexical data

The present contribution aims at revisiting Nurse and Philippson's 2003 paper wherein they propose a new classification of Bantu languages based on the study of 30 phonological and morphological criteria. According to the authors, classifications based solely on the study of the lexicon can lead to errors because of the imperfect notion of similarity (cognate) used to classify languages, possible borrowings and the rapid evolution of vocabulary. Therefore, Nurse and Philippson proposed the first non-lexically based historical classification of 80 Bantu languages across the entire family. While Nurse and Philippson's approach and methodology were innovative, they encountered some problems: (i) the 80 Bantu languages selected for their study inadequately covered the North-Western area with only 8 languages spoken in zone A, 1 in zone B and 4 spoken in zone C, (ii) the available data lacked both in quantity and quality, and (iii) the study lacked the use of advanced classificatory techniques.

In order to address these problems, we propose here to work on a new sample of languages and on the selection of new non-lexical data. For this paper, we have decided to focus first on the study of Western Bantu languages that are spoken in Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea (EG), Congo, DRC, Angola, Namibia, Zambia and Botswana by building a database containing approximately 100 languages from zones A, B, C, D, K, R, H, L. We selected morphological criteria from both the nominal and verbal domains as well as phonological criteria to be used to classify these languages. Such criteria include but are not limited to the presence/absence of gender categories, patterns of syncretism within nominal paradigms, singular/plural correspondences, verbal derivation, tense-aspect morphology, and sound changes.

Brown et al. (2023) tests the historical informativity of these criteria focusing solely on 32 languages in Zone A and B spoken in Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon with promising results (i.e., Northwest Bantu). The classification produced therein consists of strong genetic groupings that correspond to what is found in the lexically based classifications in Grollemund 2012 and Grollemund et al. 2015—namely among A70-80-90 languages and the West Coastal languages (B20-50-60 in our sample). Even more revealing was the emergence of larger grouping containing languages from Zone A10-20-30 and B10-30. The majority of these languages are spoken along the coast of Cameroon, EG and Gabon. It is therefore possible that the non-lexical criteria considered for this study have uncovered a contact relationship among these languages that the lexical data failed to show.

The resulting phylogenetic classification of the Western Bantu languages based on non-lexical parameters has also proven to be enlightening. For example, a clear division between the Forest Bantu languages (Zones A, B, C, parts of H and parts of D10-20-30) and the rest of the sample emerges when looking at the expression of perfectivity. Forest languages almost exclusively exploit the suffix *-i* for perfectivity (and related temporal categories) while the others utilize the suffix *-ile*. Furthermore, phonological evidence further divides Forest Bantu in two groups. We find that North-western languages (Zones A, B20 and some C languages) have the reflexes Ø and k for the PB consonants *k and *g respectively. These results reveal the utility of considering non-lexical data in doing language classification.

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