

## **An evolutionary loner in Southern African Bantu: The classification of Yeyi**

Bantu is Africa's largest language family and part of the world's largest phylum, i.e., Niger-Congo. The relatedness of Bantu languages has been recognized since nearly two centuries, and their internal classification is better understood today than ever before. Nonetheless, there are still several important uncertainties obscuring not only the diachronic linguistic processes that gave rise to Bantu diversification, but also the migrations of ancestral Bantu speakers and other population dynamics underlying them. One of the persisting mysteries of Bantu genealogy is the unclassifiable Yeyi language, a minority language spoken in northwestern Botswana and northeastern Namibia. While the Bantu origin of Yeyi is straightforward and undisputed, it is not known what its closest relatives are, even not to which major Bantu branch it belongs (Gowlett, 1997; Seidel, 2005, 2009). This lack of genealogical resolution severely limits our understanding of the deep history of the Yeyi speech community and leaves us with questions on their origin and timing of their migration into their current habitat, and the deeper connections they might once have had with other language communities.

One of the possible explanations why it is so complicated to identify Yeyi's closest Bantu relatives is its incorporation of a large degree of linguistic influence from neighboring Khoisan languages. Khoisan languages, previously analyzed as a single phylum but more recently and accurately as (at least) three separate language families (Güldemann, 2014), are characterized by their use of click phonemes. These typologically rare consonants not only occur in Khoisan languages, but also in certain Bantu languages spoken in Southern Africa. They are therefore seen as a clear indicator of Bantu-Khoisan contact (Pakendorf et al., 2017). Yeyi has the largest click inventory of all attested Bantu languages (Fulop et al., 2003; Sommer & Voßen, 1992), which suggests extensive Khoisan influence. This is also seen in the presence of Khoisan loanwords, and the borrowing of certain bound verbal affixes (Gunnink, 2022).

In this paper, we intend to shed new light on the classification of the Yeyi language, with an aim to better understand its genesis and historical development. Using a lexicon-based, Bayesian phylogenetic approach, we will provide a new Bantu classification with the explicit objective of clarifying the position of Yeyi. We therefore include all Bantu languages of the wider geographic region, including even more far-flung languages that have previously been hypothesized to bear some relationship to Yeyi. The resultant linguistic phylogeny will show the (potential) linguistic affiliations of Yeyi. These will subsequently be studied in more detail in order to identify specific lexical, phonological or morphological innovations that Yeyi may share with its putative sister languages. The role of non-Bantu contact, particularly in terms of Khoisan influence, will also be taken into account. Together, they will provide new insights into the history of the Yeyi language and its speakers.

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