

Phonological and Morphological Evidence for Historical Contact between Mokpá~Enyá~Metóko and Mbole, Four Bantu Languages of the Northeastern DR Congo

The present study compares four Bantu languages spoken South of Kisangani, in the Northeast of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. All were classified in group “D10” by Guthrie (1948), but recent research confirms that they belong to two different genetic Bantu subgroups (see Ricquier *et al.* 2021a, 2021b). Mokpá (D142) is affiliated to Metóko (D13) and Enyá (D14), all part of the Lega subgroup. Mbole (D11), on the other hand, is a member of the Upper-Congo languages, which form a subgroup of Central-Western Bantu.

In previous research, we demonstrated that the occurrence of labial-velars in the phonological inventory of Mokpá, Metóko and Enyá indicates a substrate which resembles Mbole. Here, we further explore this hypothesis. The present study identifies other phonological and morphological aspects that may be due to contact between Mokpá, Metóko and Enyá on the one hand and Mbole on the other. The voiceless fricative [ɸ], for instance, is integrated in the phonological system of Mokpá, Metóko and Enyá whereas other Lega languages do not have this consonant. In certain contexts, it appears as an allophone of [p] and [b]. Another aspect is the absence of the voiced plosive [b] in Mokpá and Mbole, in contrast to closely affiliated languages. This phenomenon is regular in Mbole which has a reduced consonant system, missing [b], [ɸ], [p], [d], [ɗ] and [g]. In Mokpá, we also see that consonants of the noun class prefixes disappeared, which is also a characteristic of Mbole where all prefixes of noun classes 1, 2, 3, 4, 6 and 8 are vocalic. By means of the historical-comparative approach, we thus offer more evidence for historical contacts between the concerned ethnolinguistic communities, possibly in the form of substrate influence.

References:

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