

Afrika

Littig, Sabine: *Linguistische Beschreibung des Kolbila*. Eine Adamawasprache der Nordregion Kameruns. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe 2016. XV, 227 pp., 8° = Grammatische Analysen Afrikanischer Sprachen/Grammatical Analyses of African Languages 53. Paperback. € 44.80. ISBN 978-3-89645-569-7.

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Introduction

The reviewed book is the first grammatical description of Kolbila (glottocode: kolb1240, ISO 639-3 code: klc), a Central Adamawa language spoken by some 2,000 native speakers (among about 4,000 people who identify ethnically as Kolbila) spread across the North Region of Cameroon. This is a very welcome publication for various reasons. It is one of the few comprehensive treatments of Central Adamawa languages currently available¹. On top of that, Kolbila appears to be in danger of extinction and Kolbila traditional culture has atrophied to a stage where traditional oral literature and traditional technologies have been forgotten by even the oldest of speakers². Like other languages in the region, Kolbila features cross-linguistically rare phenomena such as labialvelar consonants (/kp/ and /gb/), logophoric pronouns, verb-object word order with postpositions, and different orders in possessive constructions for nominal possessors and pronominal possessors. Kolbila has a rather analytic structure, making use of particles, auxiliaries, sometimes clitics, and some derivational suffixes, to express grammatical concepts.

¹ Out of 29 known Central Adamawa languages, only five have been treated in considerable depth, including Kolbila; for bibliographical information, see Hammarström, Harald & Forkel, Robert & Haspelmath, Martin. 2017. *Glottolog 3.0*. Jena: Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History. (Available online at <http://glottolog.org>.) One might go as far as saying that the 'Adamawa' label generally refers not so much to a genealogical unit of languages but rather to a group of languages spanning across northeastern Nigeria, northern Cameroon, northwestern Central African Republic, and southwestern Chad, of which the most striking common characteristic is that they have all been very much understudied.

² There has been no formal assessment of the state of endangerment of the language.

The book was written within the framework of Littig's PhD project, during which she was supervised by Raimund Kastenholz, who has worked on quite a number of languages in the Adamawa group over the course of his career. Her description is based on lexical and grammatical questionnaires, and recorded texts on various subjects from a varied sample of speakers. The size, in terms of length in time, of the textual corpus, which contains 32 items, is not given. It is not clear whether any conversations were recorded, or only monologue, and which genres were covered. Littig adopts a 'functional-typological' perspective to analyze Kolbila grammar, and is mainly inspired in this by William Croft's views on typology and his *Radical Construction Grammar*³. This is reflected above all in the structure of the book, which presents an analysis mainly focused on word classes and their distributions.

Structure

The book contains a table of contents, an index of images and tables, a list of abbreviations, five chapters, and an appendix on (1) distribution of phonemes and minimal pairs, and (2) a comparative table of personal pronouns in Kolbila, Dii (glottocode: diii1241), Samba Leko (glottocode: samb1305) and Doyayo (glottocode: doya1240). Two glossed texts are included in the introductory chapter, illustrating speakers' perspectives on language endangerment (2 pages) and on Kolbila history (12 pages). These are the only texts in the book. It is not clear whether the other collected texts are available somewhere or will be made available in the future. No lexicon is provided, but a dictionary including about 2,500 words will be published by the author (p. 33). Following an elaborate introductory chapter on the language, the speakers, and the project (39 pages), Kolbila segmental phonology and some aspects of suprasegmental phonology are described (27 pages). The third and longest chapter, 'Morphosyntax', deals with each word class identified in the language, and the constructions they occur in (117 pages). The fourth and second shortest chapter, 'Syntaktische Strukturen', is mainly about word order, and gives an overview of relativization and clause combining (13 pages). The 'Conclusio' (4 pages) provides a summary of the most striking facts of the language.

³ Croft, W. (2001). *Radical Construction Grammar: Syntactic Theory in Typological Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Croft, W. (2003). *Typology and universals* (Second edition). Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

The balance between chapters is slightly off, and it is a bit confusing that ‘morphosyntax’ and ‘syntax’ are accorded different chapters, while in fact no clear distinction is made between them. Most issues to do with clause and phrase structure, which is what is traditionally understood by ‘syntax’, are treated under the heading of word classes. Copula clauses and non-verbal clauses, as well as existential clauses and their negation (pp. 86–89), for example, are treated in the section on nouns, together with noun phrase structure and attributive possession constructions under the rather broad subheading ‘Distributionelle Eigenschaften von Nomen’. It is difficult to guess from this title in the table of contents that information on such clausal constructions can be found in these pages. A slightly more transparent way of structuring the book would be to leave out the distinction between chapter three and four, treat their current subsections as smaller, independent chapters, and move those items pertaining to clause structure instead of noun or verb phrases to a chapter of their own (pp. 86–89 on non-verbal predication, pp. 109–112 on verbal predication, pp. 117–120 on negation).

A note on transcription and glosses

The IPA is generally used except for the convention, common among Africanists, to use <y> for a palatal approximant, instead of <j>. Long vowels are written with double vowel symbols, (e. g. <aa>), instead of the IPA length diacritic (<a: >). I will follow Littig’s conventions in this review. Glosses are not always easy to interpret, because in some cases, notably auxiliaries (AUX), ideophones (IDEO), copula’s (KOP), and postpositions (PP), a gloss referring to the form is used instead of an indication of meaning or function. To check and interpret examples, one often has to move across different sections of the book.

Chapter by chapter summary and comments

The introductory chapter provides a discussion of attempts to classify Kolbila and locates it within the Samba-Cluster of Central Adamawa, a subgroup of Adamawa-Gur. A short text gives a speaker’s perspective on the status of Kolbila as an endangered language. An overview of the contemporary whereabouts of the speakers is provided along with a map. The recent history of the Kolbila is illustrated with a piece of Kolbila text recounting the group’s migration to

Bantadjé and then to Demsa. A basic summary follows of Kolbila social life, including the division of agricultural tasks, village and house structure, and a mention of some artefacts. Following a discussion of the theoretical background of the grammatical analysis is a description of the field work and corpus. Finally, a practical orthography is introduced.

The phonology chapter provides a consonant inventory of 18 consonants, distinguishing six places of articulation and five manners (/m, n, ŋ, p, b, t, d, k, g, kp, gb, f, v, s, z, fi, l, y, w/). Minimal pairs are provided in the appendix, but only for voicing contrasts and /l/ vs. /d/. The distribution of consonants in words is typical of languages in the region, being very restricted word-finally. If loan words are taken into account, three additional phonemes could be added to the inventory: /dʒ/, /β/ (in Fulfulde borrowings), and /v/ (in probable borrowings from an unknown contact language).

According to Littig, Kolbila has 8 vowels (/i, e, ε, a, ə, u, o, ɔ/), two of which can be nasal (/ĩ/ and /ã/, but see below), and for all of which length is phonological. However, no minimal or near-minimal pairs (or any other examples of contrasts) are presented in the relevant sections for the /o/ vs. /ɔ/ distinction and for length distinctions in /o/ and /e/, nor for /ĩ/ and /ã/. This, and somewhat confusing statements such as “... ist anzunehmen, das /e/ (kurz) als /ε/ realisiert wird.”; “Wurzelinitial wird /e/ als /ε/ realisiert”; and “/o/ tendiert dazu, lang realisiert zu werden, /ɔ/ dagegen kurz”, gave me the impression that the vowel inventory could do without a short /o/ and possibly without long /ee/ and long /ɔɔ/⁴. There is one minimal pair for /e/ and /ε/, i. e. /lēg-/ ‘to split up, separate’ vs. /lēg-/ ‘to be sweet’. Some near-minimal pairs can be found within the book for /o/ and /oo/, however (wō ‘3SG:ABS’ and bōó ‘also’, for example, in the text on p. 4). I did not immediately find contrasts for [ee] and [e] and [o] and [ɔ]. It would have been easier for readers to validate the proposed vowel inventory if all contrasts were illustrated with at least similar environments.

Although in her analysis so far there are only two phonological nasal vowels, Littig later claims that all vowels can be phonetically nasalized (pp. 62–63). Such nasality, however, causes a meaning shift in some words (e. g. /ēm-/ ‘walk, march’ vs. /ēm̄-/ ‘march with a goal’), so it is

⁴ The vowel inventory could thus possibly be reduced to a 7 vowel system with a length contrast for 5 vowels, which is neutralized in cases of nasalized vowels. In this analysis, /ɔ/ has a long [oo] allophone and there is a short /e/ which is sometimes realized as a long [ee].

not clear why Littig does not analyze this as phonological nasality, as it is clearly contrastive. All nasal vowels cause anticipatory assimilation when following /y/, which is realized as [ɲ] before /ã/ and as [ŋ] before other nasalized vowels.

Tone is only briefly discussed. Kolbila features three surface contrasts, H, M, and L, which are illustrated with minimal pairs. A future publication is promised that will detail the tone system of Kolbila along with its tone rules.

In the chapters on morphosyntax and word order, it is clear that this is a typologically geared grammar. There is often a questionnaire-like structure, with a short introduction on, for example, nouns (pp. 71–72), compounds (p. 78), or noun phrases (pp. 82–83), from a general typological perspective, and then an explanation of how the introduced phenomenon behaves in Kolbila. This makes the grammar very easy to use for typologists and anyone interested in a selection of topics in Kolbila. Reading the grammar does not require much (if any) background knowledge of linguistic terminology, except in a few isolated areas ('Absolute Pronomen', see below). Often, useful comparisons are made with other languages that are related to or geographically close to Kolbila, and the Kolbila system is cast within such a comparative framework.

The section on nouns (pp. 71–89) includes a discussion of possible traces of a defective (no longer functional) noun class system with suffix -m for non-countable nouns, and a note of comparison with surrounding languages with a similar, sometimes still functioning noun class system. Nominal derivation is discussed, and some pages are devoted to compounds, which are of four types: lexicalized N-N combinations that occur as one phonological word, N-N combinations tied together with a connector element, idiomatic associative constructions, and V + N (+ N) combinations yielding property words. Noun phrase structure and attributive modification of nouns, as well as attributive possessive constructions are also treated in this section. As mentioned above, non-verbal predication, i. e. copula clauses (pp. 86–87), nominal negation (pp. 87–88), existential and locational clauses (pp. 88–89), and negation of copula clauses (p. 89) are also discussed in this section.

Other noun phrase morphosyntax is not discussed until pages 146–157, where the phrase-final marker, nominal plural, demonstratives and quantification (with numerals and other quantifiers) are treated. Adpositions, which are variably realized as enclitics or free postpositions, are discussed in pages 172–181.

Verbs are often duplicated in what could be called 'double verb constructions' in Kolbila. Littig provides a

useful comparison of the forms and functions of such constructions in related languages and other languages in the area (pp. 95–97). She argues that in Kolbila the construction does not mark any tense, aspect, or mood or modality distinctions, and proposes that it may mark predicate focus. No analysis of contextualized examples is provided to defend this proposal, however.

Next, verbal extensions are treated, again with a convenient overview of different extensions and their functions in other languages (pp. 100–102), before a description of the system in Kolbila is given and compared with them (pp. 102–109). The causative and applicative extensions are said to be the most productive, but the reader does not learn much about the productivity of other suffixes. The examples given with the different extensions are mostly single word stems, so there are no examples in context to fall back on for interpreting their grammatical functions. In natural speech, usually a maximum of only two suffixes are combined (and usually only the causative and applicative), but under artificial elicitation conditions any combination is said to be possible (pp. 107–109).

There are periphrastic future tense, progressive aspect, and habitual aspect constructions, of the type 'auxiliary (+ object) + verbal noun' (pp. 113–115). Standard negation is expressed with a clause final particle.

The reader does not learn about number agreement by means of an enclitic on verbs until the section on pronouns, in a subsection on subject pronouns (pp. 138–139).

Property concepts, described in the next section (pp. 120–127), can be encoded by either nouns or verbs.

Pronouns and interrogatives are described in detail on pages 127–146. There is an inclusive-exclusive distinction for first person plural pronouns and there are five different forms of most pronouns: an 'absolute' pronoun that occurs sentence-finally or in isolation, one that occurs sentence-medially, a subject pronoun, an object index that is suffixed to verbs, and a possessive index that is suffixed to nouns. It is not entirely clear to me what is meant with 'Absolute Pronomen', as it does not signify an exact function: it can appear in subject position, in possessive constructions, where it is in the same position as a nominal possessor, it can occur as an answer to a content question, in focus constructions, and as a relative pronoun in relative clauses. Perhaps it has something to do with the distinction between independent pronouns and indexes⁵.

Kolbila has a politeness distinction in second person pronouns, which is, to my knowledge, fairly rare in the area. The second person singular possessive pronoun and

⁵ I would like to thank Mark Van de Velde for this idea.

the second person plural pronoun are used to address elders or persons of higher social status.

An analysis of particles with many examples is given in pages 157–172. Particles in Kolbila express speaker stance (modality), aspect, conditional mood, topicalization (the topic marker sometimes occurs as a clitic on a noun phrase or a verb, rather than as a particle), emphasis and intensification.

Ideophones and adverbs are discussed on pages 181–186. An overview of constituent and word order, with reference to Greenberg's proposed correlations across languages, is presented in pages 187–193. Relativization, complementation and coordination receive a relatively short treatment on pages 193–199.

Concluding notes

'Linguistische Beschreibung des Kolbila' is a very accessibly written grammar, and will be appreciated by anyone interested in African languages and the history and culture of the Central Adamawa language groups and area. It is very easy to navigate, although, as mentioned, there are a few quirks in the organization of chapters. The treatment of topics focuses on current and traditional interests in language typology and is comprehensive in this regard.

Finally, a comment on the language of the publication. As Kolbila is probably to be considered a rather vulnerable language, it is unfortunate that no treatment of it is yet available in French or English. The language of the book may be a difficult obstacle to cross for most linguists and Africanists who are interested in Kolbila, and makes it virtually inaccessible to Cameroonian linguists, and probably also to most Kolbila speakers who might want to know more about their language.