

## Reconstructing Proto-Bantoid Morphology: An appraisal

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### ABSTRACT

In this presentation my goal is to provide an overview of some of the issues arising in the reconstruction of Proto-Bantoid morphology. The task of attempting such a reconstruction is rather daunting, as it is unclear whether there is a coherent branch of Benue-Congo that can be confidently identified as Bantoid, and if so, what its exactly relationship is to Proto-Bantu (PB). If we largely accept the reconstructions of Meeussen (1967), most of them reiterated in different chapters of Nurse & Philippson (2004, 1983), the major issue is how to relate the very different (poly-agglutinative) morphological typology of PB to non-Bantu Bantoid. Since many of the latter languages have a more isolating typology, with reduced (ultimately relic) systems of noun and verb morphology, the assumption has been that they have evolved from a more PB-like system through loss and replacement: For example, the inherited causative, applicative etc. head-marking on verbs which licenses multiple objects has largely been replaced by an analytical syntax of serial verbs or prepositionally marked obliques, with the resultant structure of one object per verb. If the history of non-Bantu Bantoid has been one of simplification and loss, reconstructing on the basis of present-day languages will be all the more difficult, at least as concerns higher nodes such as Proto-Bantoid. We must, of course, also separate out more recent areal phenomena (see Güldemann 2008, 2010 vs. Hyman 2004, 2011). Still, I think there are possibilities, and will offer some suggestions.

In this talk, I will begin with a survey of the morphological situation in non-Bantu Bantoid, contrasting it with PB as well as Cameroonian “Narrow Bantu” zone A (Guthrie 1967-1971, updated by Maho 2009), which often also diverges from more canonical “Meeussen Bantu” (MB). I first address the noun phrase, then turn to the verb. After giving a brief update on noun structure (roots, prefixes, suffixes) and noun classes in the Bantoid area (which is covered rather well in other works, e.g. Watters 2003, Watters & Leroy 1989, Hyman & Voorhoeve 1980, chapters in Hyman 1980a etc.). Particular attention will be on whether Bantoid shows evidence of the PB augment and how this might (Hombert 1980) or might not (Hyman 2005) relate to the H tone found on noun class prefixes in Western Grassfields Bantu and beyond. I also hope to say something about nasal vs. oral noun class prefixes again (cf. Hyman 1980b), since there has been so little response to Mieke (1991). I then briefly survey what is known about modifiers: the “connective”, numerals, adjectives, determiners, and pronouns.

Most of my attention will, however, be on verb morphology. I first survey verb extensions within different Bantoid languages and subgroups, again comparing them to Cameroonian Bantu zone A. Extending my survey of Niger-Congo extensions (Hyman 2007a), I show that there is a band of contiguous languages in the Grassfields area where a number of contrastive verb extensions have relative productivity (cf. the studies in Idiata & Mba 2003). Interestingly, the languages in question belong to several subgroups: Limbum (NE Eastern Grassfields Bantu), Noni (Beboid), Kom and Babanki (Ring Western Grassfields Bantu), Bafut and Mankon (Ngemba Eastern Grassfields Bantu). (Languages which are in the same subgroups but fall outside this geographical band have very few extensions.) The above-mentioned languages allow a possible reconstruction of \*CV extensions with \*s, \*t, \*n, \*l, \*k, \*m. A major property of Bantoid extensions is the relative frequency of aspectual-type extensions, especially marking different types of pluractionality (iterative, frequentative, distributive, repetitive), attenuative (diminution of action), and intensive (augmentation of action) semantics. In many languages the same suffix form covers two or more of these functions. The hypothesis is that the original system was more like Proto-Bantu, with extensions being more valence-related, but over time these very same extensions became reinterpreted as aspectual. Both the means and reasons for this are briefly discussed.

The final issue to be addressed is how tense, aspect, mood, and polarity (TAMP) are marked. Contrasting with languages further to the West, many Bantoid, especially Grassfields languages contrast multiple degrees of past and future tense, as generally found in MB (Nurse 2008). This is in turn related to the question of whether PB (and perhaps Proto-Bantoid) had prefixal inflection markers (Hyman 2007, 2011) or whether TAMP was expressed analytically (Nurse 2007, Güldemann 2010).

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