

## **Kikongo dialect continuum: internal and external classification**

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The Lower Congo region occupies a pivotal position in wider Bantu history. It lies at the junction of two major Bantu subgroups, i.e. North-West Bantu and West-Bantu, not only geographically, but also historically. Several studies have located a secondary nucleus of early Bantu expansion in this zone (Heine et al. 1977, Vansina 1984). Similarly, a recent reanalysis of lexicostatistical data suggests that the coastal Kongo area is indeed at the beginning of a long-term wave-of-advance which resulted in the settlement of the Inner Congo Basin by Bantu speakers (Wotzka & Bostoen 2009). It is very poorly understood, however, how and when Bantu speech communities peopled the Lower Congo area itself. It is generally assumed that Bantu speakers reached this region after an initial dispersal through the equatorial rainforest, but the option of a coastal Bantu expansion, as happened on the other side of the continent, has never been seriously examined. Moreover, it is not clear to what extent relatively recent extra-linguistic historical processes linked with the rise of the Kongo Kingdom account for the nuclear position of the wider Kongo area in terms of internal Bantu classification. Only if we understand these relatively recent convergence phenomena better, we can factor them out in order to come to a better-founded insight in early Bantu dispersals in this region and the Bantu expansion more generally.

What is commonly called Kikongo can be considered as a large dialect continuum manifesting a family resemblance structure. Neighbouring dialects are mutually intelligible, but dialects at the extreme ends of the chain are not. It has been claimed that Kikongo was the foundation of cultural unity throughout the Kongo kingdom (Obenga 1970). It remains to be seen, however, whether this linguistic unity was the trigger or rather the outcome of political centralization. The present-day linguistic landscape in the Kongo area suggests that both political centralization and economic integration had a considerable impact on language evolution in the region.

We deal here with a linguistic situation of unity in diversity, especially at the periphery of the dialect cluster, where certain dialects, such as Beembe (Jacquot 1962), manifest close affinities with neighbouring languages, in particular the Teke languages linked with the Tio kingdom. This could be a sign of first language interference from non-Kikongo speakers who shifted to Kikongo. On the other hand, there are also Bantu languages, such as Punu in Gabon, which do not belong to the Kikongo dialect cluster, but have unmistakably undergone Kikongo influence. This could again be an indication of substrate interference, but this time from Kikongo speakers who lost their first language. The fact that Punu pottery from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century can be considered an integral part of Kongo ceramic traditions is certainly no coincidence in this regard (Pinçon & Ngoïe-Ngalla 1990). This type of language shift might be the outcome of demographic evolutions linked with trade. Only a thorough study of how the Kikongo dialect continuum is internally organized and how it relates to surrounding language groups, such as the Teke group in the West, the Shira-Punu group in the North or the Kimbundu group in the South, can shed light on these questions.

In this paper, we will present the first results of the comparative-linguistic research carried out as part of the KongoKing project that builds on previous work of pioneers like Laman (1936), Daeleman (1983) and Mabilia (1999) and also incorporate unique and largely unexploited historical Kikongo language data from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century (cf. De Kind et al. forthcoming).

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