

Towards Proto-Mande

Mande family counts 60 to 75 languages forming two branches, Western and South-Eastern. Glottochronology provides a date of 5300 to 6000 for the Western – South-Eastern split. The Proto-Mande homeland can be tentatively localized in Southern Sahara, to the north of 16° or even 18° northern latitude, between 3° and 12° of Western longitude (Vydrin 2009).

Certain features of the Proto-Mande and some vocabulary can be reconstructed today (for an early tentative of Proto-Mande initial consonants and vocabulary, see (Pozdniakov 1978); for the Proto-Manding reconstruction, see (Pozdniakov & Vydrin 1986/1988; Creissels 1979; Creissels 2004); for the Proto-Western Mande phonological reconstruction, see (Kastenholz 1996), and (Vydrin 2000) for a critical analysis; for South-Western Mande, see (Dwyer 1973; Dwyer 1974; Vydrin 1989; Vydrin 2006a); for Eastern Mande, see (Schreiber 2008), and (Vydrin 2010) for a critical analysis of Schreiber's reconstruction; for Southern Mande, see (Vydrin 2006; Vydrin 2008).

The vocalic system distinguished 9 oral and 5 nasal vowels, probably also a zero-aperture nasal vowel N (of limited distribution); there was an ATR and nasal harmony (the domain is a metric foot). In the consonantal system, implosive consonants (**b*, **d*, **g*) are reconstructable; no nasal consonants had phonemic status. More precisely, nasal sonants were allophones of implosives and/or oral sonants (Vydrin 2004, Vydrin 2006a).

Two tones can be tentatively reconstructed; the proliferation of tones in South-Eastern languages, Bobo and Samogho might be due to innovations and areal influences (Vydrin 2002).

Little morphology can be reconstructed, modern Mande languages being predominantly isolating (the abundant pronominal and verbal inflectional morphology in the languages of Southern, Eastern, South-Western branches and Bobo is mainly of innovative nature; see Babaev 2010, Babaev 2011b, Vydrin 2006b, Vydrin forthcoming). However, there are some verbal extensions (causative suffixes *-ndi* in Mandinka and Soninke, *-ni* in Bozo; valency-decreasing suffix *-e* in Soninke and Bozo) which may be remnants of the proto-language state.

There are reflexes of a nominal nasal classificatory morpheme in Western Mande languages; they seem to be present also in some Southern Mande languages (Vydrin 1989, Vydrin 1994, Vydrin 2006a). Several plural suffixes can be reconstructed. The opposition of alienable and inalienable nouns, represented in the great majority of Mande languages, can be also postulated for the Proto-Mande.

The basic word order to be reconstructed for the Proto-Mande is S – AUX – O – V – X, it remains stable in the modern languages.

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