

On the Historical Comparison of the Mundu-Baka Nominal System

The internal classification of Mundu-Baka (formerly Ngbaka), a language family of the notoriously under-researched Ubangi group, is traditionally based on a fraction of the available lexical data rather than on the comparison of grammatical structures. Fairly little work from a diachronic viewpoint has been produced on this group of languages since its establishment by Greenberg (1963). Among the most important lexical comparisons are Boyeldieu & Cloarec-Heiss (1986) and Moñino (1988). Against this background, I provide a more substantial diachronic assessment of Mundu-Baka. Based on the comparison of their nominal systems, I propose a more robust and detailed classification of this family. While the traditional division into an eastern and a western main branch finds verification by my work, I argue against the subdivision into six groups but propose four sub-branches. These are, regarding the western branch, Baka-Gundi and River, which subsumes three of the former sub-groups. The eastern branch incorporates Mayogo-Bangba and Mundu.

I examine the usability of bare nouns and apply the internal structural differences of the family as diagnostics to establish genealogical proximity. In my analysis, I concentrate on the basic principle of Mundu-Baka nouns. Being morphologically rather isolating and with lexical inventories that consist largely of monosyllabic stems, these languages disallow monosyllabic noun forms due to a ‘minimality condition’. Bare nouns in isolation cannot be used without some morpho-syntactic extension, a phenomenon also evident in the Bandic family (Olson 2012). As I show, three main strategies to meet the existing minimality constraints are known: 1) reduplication, 2) affixation, and 3) root compounding.

Reduplication (RED) as in (1b) is the most common one and is found across large parts of the family to differing extents.

(1) Baka (reduplication)

- | | |
|-------------|---------------------------|
| a. kpā | b. kpā-kpā |
| hand | RED-hand |
| ‘hand of X’ | ‘hand’ (Djoupee 2002: 30) |

The application of various bound morphological items such as the prothetic vowel (E) as in (2b), but also numeral affixes, generic affixes, and infinitive morphemes are building-blocks of permitted nouns.

(2) Mayogo (affixation)

- | | |
|-------------|-------------------------|
| a. li | b. i-li |
| name | E-name |
| ‘name of X’ | ‘name’ (Sawka 2001: 12) |

Finally, root compounding plays a vital role in avoiding minimal noun forms, as shown in (3). Where compounds are used, the other strategies become suppressed.

(3) Monzombo (root compounding)

- mò-tē
mouth-house
‘door’ (Boyi 1983: 205)

These structural strategies are not evenly distributed in the family. Building on my comparative analysis I propose a re-classification of the Mundu-Baka family. While reduplication and compounding are reconstructable for the proto-stage, differences in plural

marking support the west-east division. The generic suffix -bo speaks for Baka-Gundi. The unique prothetic vowels lead to the proposition of Mayogo-Bangba against Mundu. Different infinitive morphemes additionally confirm three of the proposed sub-branches. River sticks out by applying reduplication to express the infinitive.

This concludes an onset of the revision of Mundu-Baka. An evaluation of further grammatical subject areas is absolutely possible and indispensable for a broader picture.

References

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