

## Understanding the first Bantu migrations through the study of mammal names

This paper will present a comparative study of mammal names for the Bantu languages spoken in the Western area (Guthrie's zones A, B, C, D, H, K and R) in order to shed new light on the early Bantu migrations. For historical linguistic purposes, the basic lexicon is most often investigated in order to understand languages' relatedness in linguistic classifications. However, the study of cultural vocabulary and specialized lexical fields has also proven to be important in the domain of historical linguistics research. For example, the study of Bantu plant names (Bostoen 2007, Grollemund and Hombert 2012) has allowed for a new perspective on linguistic classifications and therefore enhanced our understanding of the history of the Bantu-speaking populations.

For this paper, we focused on the study of mammal names. We built a database containing 130 mammals documented for 100 Bantu languages spoken in the North-Western and Western areas. We chose to focus more particularly on languages spoken in the North-Western area (Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Congo and Republic Democratic of the Congo) because these languages constitute the first ones to diverge from the Bantu tree. The resulting analyses will therefore allow us to refine our understanding of the first Bantu migration waves.

The lexical data were coded into cognate sets allowing us to build phylogenetic trees using distance-based methods (Neighbor-Net) and Bayesian methods. The resulting trees will be compared with a phylogenetic tree based solely on the study of basic lexicon (100 words documented for the same Bantu languages). The preliminary results show that the tree based on the study of mammal names displays the same Bantu subgroups such as the North-Western, Central-Western or the West-Western implying therefore that specialized lexicon retain some kind of phylogenetic signals. However, when comparing the two trees and their subgroups, some differences emerge. The differences observed between the two trees can be explained by the contacts that occurred during the several migration waves. In this talk, we will explain the differences observed and the impact of contacts on the study of mammal names.

The analyses of the subgroups distinguished in the tree based on mammal names also allows to unravel the primary steps of the Bantu expansion. The first group of languages identified contains solely languages spoken in Cameroon at the border of the Equatorial rainforest, illustrating the very first expansion from the PB nucleus. The second group comprises only languages that are spoken in the rainforest, showing the penetration in the rainforest with a southern expansion. While the Bantu were migrating through the rainforest, they had to adapt to their new environment and, therefore, acquire new mammal names. Finally, the last group shows an expansion in the south and western areas.

To sum up, we will discuss the use of specialized lexicon for historical linguistic studies and demonstrate that mammal names can enhance our understanding of the first Bantu migrations.

### References

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