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An overview of the Bantoid languages

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Abstract

The Bantoid languages are a body of some 150–200 languages positioned geographically between Nigeria and Cameroon. They do not form a genetic group, but all are in some way related to Bantu more closely than other branches of Benue-Congo. The most well-known branches are Dakoid, Mambiloid, Tivoid, Beboid, Grassfields, and Ekoid. Bendi, formerly Cross River, may be Bantoid, while Jarawan is probably Narrow Bantu. Their classification is controversial. Due to their inaccessibility, many are poorly described. The article summarises the literature on their classification and main linguistic features, and in particular how these relate to Bantu. It also includes a brief survey of endangerment of smaller languages and the state of literacy development.

Their main typological characteristics include S (AUX) OV word order, functioning or fossilised nominal affixing and concord (sometimes alliterative), suffixed verbal extensions, ATR vowel harmony and labial-velars in the phonology. Some languages have developed highly complex tone-systems as a result of extreme erosion of segmental material.

Keywords: linguistics, Niger-Congo, Bantoid, typology, classification

1 Introduction

The Bantoid languages are a body of some 150–200 languages positioned geographically between Nigeria and Cameroon and between Benue-Congo and Bantu in terms of their position within Niger-Congo. Often referred to as Bantu, for example in the term 'Ekoid Bantu', their classificatory position remains uncertain both in relation to Narrow Bantu and to Benue-Congo. However, their noun morphology is not that of classic Bantu, although their affixes are often ascribed its class numbers. This can be misleading, since it suggests a direct relationship with those of Bantu which is far from proven. It is important to recognise that 'Bantoid' does not represent

a genetic group in the sense that there are a series of undisputed lexical or morphological isoglosses which argue for its coherence. Bantoid is better treated as a cover term for a member of Benue-Congo which split away before the genesis of Bantu proper. Even the division between Bantu and Bantoid has been questioned, as some authors have observed that much of Bantu A, with its highly reduced noun-classes, would perhaps be better treated as Bantoid. As a consequence, this is not a group about which linguistic generalisations can be made and examples of characteristic features are relevant only to particular subgroups. This text therefore summarises the characteristics of individual groups, and although it proposes a 'tree', this cannot be fully justified by innovations. Whether it is reasonable to expect such diagnostic innovations at such a time depth remains an open question. The reader should thus be aware that the classification and membership of Bantoid is far from settled, and this text represents the views of the author.

According to Möhlig (1983), Krause introduced the term 'Bantoid' in 1895, but this seems to have been subsequently forgotten. Sigismund Koelle (1854) and Wilhelm Bleek noted that many languages of West Africa also showed noun classes marked by prefixes, and Bleek went so far as to include a 'West African' division in the family he named Bantu. Bantu and parts of Bantoid are characterised by systems of nominal affixes and alliterative concord. These are highly eroded in some Bantoid subgroups but their former presence can be detected by fossil morphology and unproductive affixes. A different tradition was introduced in Meinhof's work; he saw languages without noun classes (typically Ewe, but including many Nilo-Saharan languages) as a type he named 'Sudanic'. He regarded languages which were apparently related but had noun classes as being 'influenced' by Bantu although there is no clear geographical model as to how this could have come about. This subset of languages was named 'Semi-Bantu' a term adopted by Johnston (1919–1922). The result of such views was a typological rather than a truly genetic classification.

The term Bantoid re-appears in Guthrie (1948) to describe what he called 'transitional' languages, replacing the rather more vague term 'Semi-Bantu'. Nonetheless, the underlying model espoused by Meinhof and Johnston was maintained by Guthrie. The modern sense of the term may first appear in Jacquot & Richardson (1956)

which includes summary sketches of Nyang, Ekoid, Tikar and Grass-fields languages although the volume as a whole also incorporates material on Bantu and a variety of Adamawa and Ubangian languages. The revolution in thinking that followed Greenberg (1963) is described in more detail below.

The literature on many Bantoid subgroups is sparse, to say the least, and many important sources are unpublished. This is in part a reflection of accessibility, since the poor roads are often cut in the wet season discouraging extended fieldwork. The regions of Nigeria where these languages are spoken can barely be reached without a four-wheel drive, while in Cameroon, either helicopter or several days' trek has been the only option. In addition, civil insecurity in several areas where Bantoid languages are spoken has discouraged recent fieldwork[1].

Access to previously unpublished data has, however, improved significantly. There are two key caches of unpublished and mainly electronic data, the files of SIL (which incorporates much of the data collected for ALCAM, the Linguistic Atlas of Cameroon) and the student dissertations supervised at the University of Yaoundé. Part of the legacy material is available on the SIL Cameroon website (http://www.silcam.org) although much material, especially Fieldworks lexicons, remain in the hands of its members[2]. Wycliffe Nigeria has recently undertaken surveys of the Bantoid languages on the Nigerian side of the border, resolving numerous queries about the extent and classification of particular branches[3]. University of Yaoundé linguistics theses have been scanned up to 2006 through Jeff Good and are available on a CD. Robert Hedinger has been in charge of a programme to digitise legacy data, for example, mimeo'd lexicons from earlier fieldwork, and to create Android

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1 For example, Bamenda, formerly a major centre for researchers of Bantoid languages, was recently described in a BBC report as a 'ghost town'. See https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-61871027

2 I would like to take this opportunity to thank SIL members, who have always been willing to share material and to observe, that despite academic sniping from university academics, our knowledge of Bantoid would be markedly impoverished without the contributions of SIL members.

3 Materials from Nigeria created by SIL survey staff are available on personal application.

apps to make it accessible. This material is now freely available for download.

The function of this overview is to provide basic information on the geography, classification and major typological features of the Bantoid languages[4]. Given that they are as numerous, diverse and presumably of greater antiquity than Indo-European[5], this implies a certain superficiality. Some hypotheses about their phonology and morphology can be set out, but these must remain tentative, as the type of lower-level reconstruction necessary to build more solid constructs remains to be undertaken. As for the higher levels of linguistic description, little can yet be said, as the grammars on which this could be based have yet to be written.

The structure of this paper is as follows; the initial discussion in section 2 concerns genetic classification, both the disputed boundary between Bantoid and Bantu, and the place of Bantoid languages within the larger framework of Benue-Congo. Section 3 provides an overview of languages considered to fall within Bantoid, which forms the basis for this synthesis. Section 4 covers a selection of features which can be said to characterise Bantoid. These are not necessarily ideal for typology, but they were chosen because they have been the subject of previous research and therefore the data can be cited more confidently than for other areas of phonology and syntax. Similarly, section 5 covers two topics for which we have relatively

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5   This might seem a controversial statement, but Bantu proper, with its relatively transparent internal relationships, is at least 4000 years old, if current archaeology is accepted. Proto-Indo-European is usually treated as 6000–7000 years old. The lexical and morphological diversity within Bantoid must surely have taken several thousand years to evolve.

good data, language endangerment and the use of specialised language registers. Topics such as child language acquisition and even the impact of major lingua francas remain only patchily discussed. Section 6 concerns orthography, literacy and media, which is relatively well-studied, due to the primacy given to literacy in many language programmes initiated by SIL and CABTAL.

2 The genetic classification of Bantoid

2.1   Bantoid vs. Bantu

Although Bantu has been treated as a genetic unity since the middle of the nineteenth century, it remains an open question as to whether there is any distinctive boundary between Bantu and the languages related to it. As Bostoen & Van de Velde (2019) note, no lexical or morphological isoglosses have been identified that clearly demarcate Bantu from its closest relatives. Greenberg (1963) underlined this by treating Bantu as merely a branch of Benue-Congo, i.e. the adjacent languages of southern and eastern Nigeria and Cameroon. He says 'the Bantu languages are simply a subgroup of an already established genetic subfamily of Western Sudanic [i.e. Niger-Congo, broadly speaking] (Greenberg 1963: 32). Figure 1 shows Greenberg's classification.
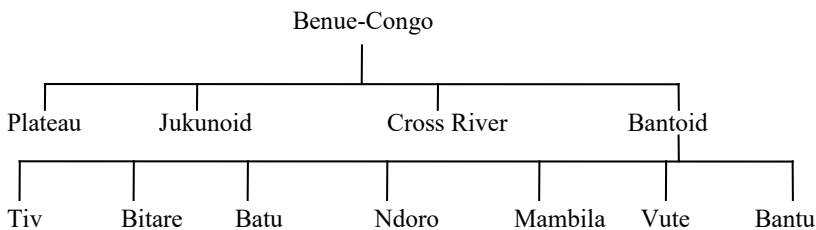
Figure 1. Greenberg's classification of Bantu (1963)

Greenberg (1963: 35) also clearly stated 'supposedly transitional languages are really Bantu'. In other words, many languages without features which are supposed to be characteristic of Bantu are nonetheless related to it. This approach to Bantu was refreshing and made historical sense in a way that Guthrie's views never had.

 Since the 1960s, data has gradually accumulated on the vast and complex array of languages in the 'Bantu borderland', i.e. the region between Southern Cameroon (where Guthrie's Bantu begins) and

Eastern Nigeria. The next step in the evolution of our understanding of Bantoid was the formation of the Grassfields Working Group in the early 1970s. Some early results this found its way into the classification in Williamson (1971) but much of the data, such as the comparative Ring wordlists, circulated as photocopies for many years. Apart from delivering monographs on particular languages (e.g. Hyman 1979; 1981), a field team undertook large-scale survey work and began the process of putting this mass of unknown languages in order (e.g. Hyman 1980; Elias, Leroy & Voorhoeve 1984). Hyman et al. (1980) was a major focus for publication of new evidence for linguistic features of particular Bantu subgroups, with a focus on Cameroon. Also in the late 1970s, the surveys for the ALCAM [*Atlas Linguistique du Cameroun*] (Dieu & Renaud 1983) began as part of a broader process of surveying Francophone Central Africa. Many of these findings were summarised in overview articles from this period, including Hedinger (1989) and Watters (1989).

The common feature of this body of work is that the classifications are presented with limited justification. This is not surprising as the number of languages is very large and many were poorly known, then and still today. Piron (1996, 1998) and Bastin & Piron (1999) represent classifications of Bantoid using lexicostatistics. Despite the large amount of data cited in Piron, it is marred by the sampling procedures used. Grollemund (2012) applies the most recent statistical techniques to the classification of Bantu and Bantoid. The focus of her thesis is on Bantu with South Bantoid languages sampled in a somewhat random fashion, omitting several branches of Bantoid described in this document and uses somewhat outmoded terminology. For example, Beboid is still treated as a unity. Moreover, since the cognacy judgments on which the calculations are based is not given it is difficult to assess the resultant trees. A welcome aspect of the thesis is the attempt to link the Bantu material with archaeology and palaeoclimatic data. Whether the conclusions concerning the classification of northwest Bantu will stand remains to be seen, but the contribution to our understanding of Bantoid is limited.

Publications on Bantu continue to dominate the field. In the large volume on Bantu edited by Nurse & Philippson (2003), there is a chapter on Grassfields Bantu (Watters 2003). While the chapter is welcome, there is no explanation why this short summary of a very complex zone is included while the other branches of Bantoid

excluded, notably Jarawan, which is the best candidate for simply being a Bantu language and not Bantoid. In the second edition of this book (Van der Velde et al. 2019), Bantoid languages have disappeared and the inventory of Bantu varieties in Hammarström (2019) follows Guthrie fairly closely. Marten (2020) is a short summary of recent developments on Bantu/Bantoid classification. Grollemund et al. (2023) updates the statistical techniques used in subclassifying Bantu, together with an extended model of its expansion, but Bantoid is not treated in the same way.

2.2   The membership of Bantoid

Bantoid is a member of Benue-Congo, a large and complex group of languages, whose exact membership remains disputed. Originating with Westermann's (1927) *Benue-Cross-Fluss*, it took shape in Greenberg (1963), Williamson (1971) and De Wolff (1971). For a period in the 1980s and 1990s, it was considered that all the languages in former 'Eastern Kwa', i.e. Yoruboid, Igboid, Nupoid etc. were part of Benue-Congo, i.e. Western Benue-Congo. This view was published in Williamson & Blench (2000: 31) but without evidence and recent publications revert to the definition of Benue-Congo in Greenberg's original, with the potential addition of Ukaan, a small cluster of languages spoken southwest of the Niger-Benue Confluence (see e.g. Salffner 2009, 2012). Ukaan has alternating prefixes marking number and concord, hence its likely affiliation with Benue-Congo, but its exact position remains to be determined. Salffner & Sands (2012) discuss the difficulties of classifying Ukaan, for lack of unambivalent isoglosses. With this is mind, Figure 2 provides a revised subclassification of Benue-Congo languages.

Bendi, previously considered part of Cross River, has been shifted to Bantoid, a change of affiliation proposed by Blench (2001). Connell (p.c.) believes that Central Delta languages should not be considered part of Cross River and accordingly, they have been provisionally moved to an independent branch of Benue-Congo.

One aspect of this figure requires consideration, the division of Bantoid into North and South. Dakoid, Mambiloid and Tikar represent language groupings with either no noun classes, or relics of a highly idiosyncratic system, as in Tikar. There is some evidence for classifying these three together (see Blench 2012). However, the lack
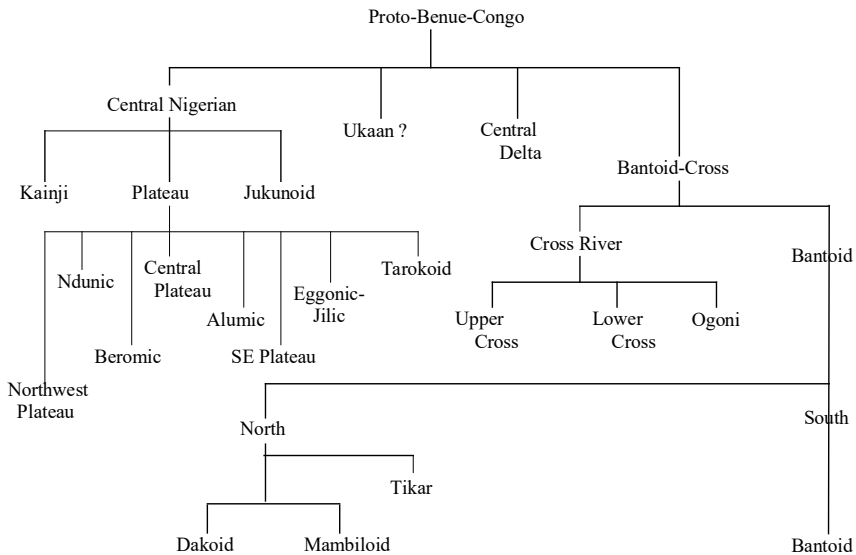
Figure 2. Revised subclassification of Benue-Congo languages

of data for some languages and convincing reconstructions of their historical morphology makes this a speculative hypothesis at best. The other side of the equation is 'South Bantoid', not a genetic group but a convenient cover term for all the languages that are close to Bantu without being part of it. As Figure 3 shows, individual groups split away from a common stem, and developed their own characteristics, in contrast to a genetic group such as Plateau or Kainji. The order in which this took place remains controversial, and will take considerable further work to resolve in a satisfying manner.

Benue-Congo is of considerable importance for the understanding of Bantoid, because some languages exhibit features which resurface in Bantu, but which are only attested in fragmentary form or not at all in Bantoid. Evidence for many Bantoid languages suggests that noun-classes can be radically restructured, to the point where the correspondences with Bantu are difficult to discern (e.g. Tikar). The likely conclusion is that early Bantoid had a noun-class system, but that it was relatively simple, and that it has gradually evolved through re-analysis and class-splitting to the complex systems found today. Languages with no traces of such a system, must have lost it despite a lack of segmental evidence for this.

In the light of this, Figure 3 presents a tentative tree of South Bantoid.
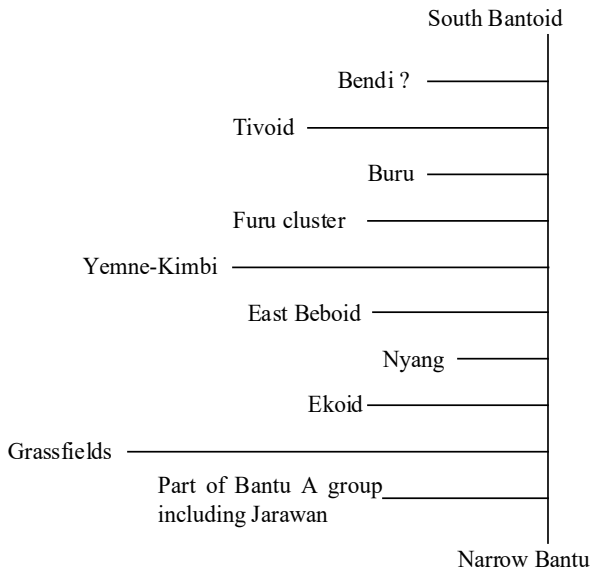
Figure 3. Genetic tree of Bantoid languages

3 Bantoid Overview

Figure 2 shows all the language subgroups described that 'stand between' Eastern Benue-Congo and Narrow Bantu. These languages are very numerous (>200) and also highly diverse morphologically. It seems likely that new languages are yet to be discovered and more work in historical reconstruction will improve our understanding of how these languages relate to one another. This section lists the major Bantoid subgroups as they are presently understood. A more complete list of all known languages is given in the Ethnologue[6] and Glottolog[7]. Table 1 lists the major subgroups of Bantoid following the order in which I believe them to have diverged from Benue-Congo.

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6 http://www.ethnologue.com

7 https://glottolog.org

Table 1. Major subgroups of Bantoid

Group	Country	Location	Representative languages
Dakoid	Nigeria	Around Ganye	Daka, Taram, Gaa (= Tiba)
Mambiloid	Nigeria/Cameroon	Around Gembu	Mambila, Kwanja, Vute, Ndoro
Tikar	Cameroon	NE of Foumban	Three dialects
Bendi	Nigeria	Around Ogoja	Bokyi, Bekwara, Alege
Tivoid	Nigeria/Cameroon	Around Obudu	Tiv, Iyive, Ugarə
Buru	Nigeria	Buru	Buru
Furu	Nigeria/Cameroon	Furu Awa	Furu
East Beboid	Cameroon	Around Nkambe	Noone[8], Ncane
Yemne-Kimbi	Cameroon	NE Grassfields	Fungom, Mundabli
Nyang	Cameroon	Mamfe	Kenyang
Ekoid	Nigeria/Cameroon	Mamfe	Ejagham, Etung
Mbe	Nigeria	Ogoja	Mbe
Ambele	Cameroon	Grassfields	Ambele
Menchum	Cameroon	Grassfields	Menchum
Grassfields	Cameroon		
Ndemli	Cameroon	Nkam, Littoral region	Ndemli
Ring	Cameroon	Grassfields	
Centre	Cameroon	Grassfields	Babanki, Kom, Mmen, Oku
East	Cameroon	Grassfields	Lamnso?
South	Cameroon	Grassfields	Bamunka
West	Cameroon	Grassfields	Aghem, Isu
Momo	Cameroon	Grassfields	Moghamo

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8 This language name is spelt in various ways (Noni, Nooni) in bibliographic references and even within the Noone community.

Group	Country	Location	Representative languages
Southwest	Cameroon	Grassfields	Manta
Eastern	Cameroon	Grassfields	
Bamileke	Cameroon	Grassfields	Bamileke, Ngie-mboon, Ngomba
Ngemba	Cameroon	Grassfields	Bafut, Mankon, Ngemba
Nkambe	Cameroon	Grassfields	Limbum, Mfumte, Yamba
Jarawan	Nigeria/Cameroon	East-Central Nigeria	Jar, Mbula-Bwazza, Mama
Bantu A	Cameroon	Southern Cameroon	Akɔɔse

It is important to flag some major caveats. Not all authors agree Dakoid is Bantoid (e.g. Boyd 1994) and the placing of Ndoro in Mambiloid remains doubtful. Bendi has long been treated as Cross River, following Greenberg (1963) and Williamson (1989), but without good evidence[9]. The data on Furu is too uncertain to be sure it has been correctly classified; a Jukunoid affiliation is possible. Jeff Good (2013) has argued convincingly that Beboid is not a unity, and even that the languages within Yemne-Kimbi [= West Beboid] may not constitute a genetic group. Ambele and Menchum are treated as co-ordinate with Grassfields, but the evidence remains sketchy. Momo has been split up into Momo proper and Southwest Grassfields.

However, the most controversial is the placing of Jarawan Bantu. In most texts it is placed outside Narrow Bantu, as Bantoid. Lexically, Jarawan is more closely related to Narrow Bantu languages, perhaps Guthrie's A60 group (cf. Piron 1998, Grollemund et al. 2015), but the loss of both verbal and nominal morphology makes its integration into Narrow Bantu uncertain. An alternative interpretation could be that this loss is a later areal feature. A striking disagreement over the classification of Jarawan Bantu was aired at the First Bantoid Conference, in March 2022. The present author's claim of an A60 affiliation seems to be in line with Wills & Grollemund (p.c.) who assign Jarawan to Bantu A40–60. By contrast, Van de Velde &

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9 Forthcoming papers cited by an anonymous reviewer confirm the Bantoid affiliation of Bendi first argued by this author.

Ididatov (2022) argued for Bantu A80–A90. Clearly this argument has some way to go.

4 Typological features of Bantoid

4.1 Overview

The descriptive data required to characterise Bantoid languages in ways which would satisfy typologists is not available for many branches. Because so much of the material has focused on an ultimate goal of orthography and literacy, phonology and noun-classes remain much better understood than, for example, verbal extensions. Even the basic characteristics of syntax have to be inferred from text examples, rather than drawing on explicit statements. This section therefore draws together tables of examples, by necessity focusing more on phonology. Moreover, as will be seen in the table on word order, this is generally stable, unlike sound systems which are very diverse.

One author who has attempted to summarise the typological differences between Bantu and Bantoid is Hyman (2017). He summarises these in the expression "from syntheticity to analyticity" and discusses the way in "which [Bantoid] languages compensate for the loss of valence-adding extensions, e.g. the applicative, which has multiple functions in Common Bantu" (Hyman 2017: 69). He identifies periphrasis, unmarked double objects, adpositions and nominal constructions as strategies for dealing with the loss of verbal extensions. Table 2, adapted from Table 3 in Hyman (2017: 74) summarises the sort of contrasts which can be expected.

Table 2. Canonical Bantu compared with Bantoid (Hyman 2017: 74)

Feature	Canonical Bantu	Bantoid
phonology	minimum word = 2 syllables	maximum stem = mostly 2~3 syllables
morphology	highly synthetic, agglutinative	less so, gradual move towards analyticity
verb extensions	many, mostly marking valence	few, mostly marking aspect
unmarked objects	multiple	at most two, ultimate limitation to one per verb

Feature	Canonical Bantu	Bantoid
object marking	head marking on verb	various prepositions and/or serial verbs
ditransitive verbs	a few (*pá* 'give')	few or none

Not all of these will be covered in the following discussion, which focuses on specific aspects of typology which can be documented in some detail.

4.2 Distribution of individual features

4.2.1 How structured were Bantoid noun-class systems?

Proto-Bantu is generally assumed to have had a complex system of noun-classes, marked by alternating prefixes and alliterative concord with adjectives and other parts of speech (Van de Velde 2019). When Bantoid languages have nominal affixes they are almost always prefixed, though suffixes and both prefixes and suffixes are recorded for some languages, especially in the Tivoid group. By Meeussen's (1967) system there were 19 such classes, but no branch of Bantoid has such a complex system, except possibly Mbe, and many languages either have few classes or none. Very characteristic of Bantoid is non-alliterative concord, where the segments in the nominal affixes do not match the agreement markers. Since alliterative concord is typical of Kainji, Plateau and Southern Jukunoid branches of Benue-Congo, it must be assumed that the nominal prefixes have either merged or been renewed, leaving the concord markers frozen. In other words, affix renewal without the corresponding concord, leaves the markers unanchored and often assigned to multiple affixes. One piece of evidence for renewal is the common situation where the concord markers are often marked with consonants, whereas the nominal prefixes may be vowels. Branches such as Bendi, Ekoid and East Beboid have noun-classes and alliterative concord recognisably similar to Bantu, although it can be difficult to match particular segments. These are likely to have retained their system from Benue-Congo while other branches of Bantoid became more divergent. Table 3 shows a summary of the situation for the individual branches of Bantoid.

Table 3. Noun-classes in Bantoid and Bantu

Bantoid Group	Language or group	Noun-classes	Reference
Mambiloid	Mambiloid	None functional today, but frozen morphology indicates their former presence	Connell (ms. word-lists), Pepper (2010), Martin (2012); Thwing (1987)
Dakoid	Daka, Tiba	None functional today, but some suffixes may indicate their former presence	Boyd (1994, 1999)
Tikar	Tikar	Two singular and two plural classes, not correlated with Bantu	Stanley (1991)
Bendi	Bendi	Eight noun-class pairings with extensive allomorphy	Blench (ms. word-lists)
Tivoid	Ugare	Six noun-class prefix pairs (all vowels) with alliterative concord. Some Tivoid languages have both prefixes and suffixes	Cassetta & Cassetta (1994a)
Buru	Buru	Four singular/plural noun-class prefix pairs. Concord unknown.	Koops ms.
Nyang	Kenyang	Eleven noun classes[10]	Mbuagbaw (2002), Ojong (2005)
East Beboid	Noone	Noone has classes corresponding to the major Bantu classes, plus three locative classes with no equivalent	Hyman (1981)

10 The methodology here is suspect as Ojong (2005) arranges her treatment by Bantu noun-classes, regardless of the non-correspondence of segmental materials.

Bantoid Group	Language or group	Noun-classes	Reference
Yemne-Kimbi	Abar	Nine singular and seven plural classes	Good et al. (2011)
Furu	Bikyak	Seven unproductive class prefixes	Kießling (p.c.)
Ekoid	General	Nine prefix classes with concord	Watters (1981)
Mbe	Mbe	Sixteen prefix classes with concord	Pohlig (2006)
Ambele	Ambele	Not explicitly analysed, but there appear to be six nominal prefixes	Nganganu (2001)
Momo	Throughout	Six singular and four plural classes distinguished on basis of concord	Eyoh (2010)
SW Grass-fields	Throughout	No descriptive literature	Blench (ms. word-lists)
Menchum	Befang	Thirteen class prefixes arranged in seven sg./pl. pairs with concord	Gueche (2004)
Ring	Babungo	Thirteen class prefixes with associated concord	Schaub (1985)
Eastern Grassfields			
Bamileke	Ngyembɔɔn	Ten noun classes and concord, though 9 and 10 are only distinguished by tone	Lonfo & Anderson (2014)
Nun	Bamun	Six classes and concord, although there is considerable duplication of segmental material	Hombert (1980)
Nkambe	Yamba	Only retains Cl. 1/2 alternation with other nouns having zero prefix. Concord highly eroded	Nassuna (2001)

Bantoid Group	Language or group	Noun-classes	Reference
Ngemba	Bafut	Six singular and four plural classes. Non-allierative concord preserved	Tamanji (2009)
Ndemli	Throughout	Noun class and concord system almost completely collapsed, though non-productive prefixes can be identified	Ngoran (1999)
Jarawan	Throughout	No functional nominal prefixes, although evidence for their former presence abundant	Maddieson & Williamson (1975), Blench (ms. word-lists)

Until we have reconstructions of the proto-forms for each individual subgroup, assessing the overall systems of early Bantoid remains problematic.

4.2.2   Labial-velar consonants

Labial-velar consonants, /kp/, /gb/, /ŋm/ and ngb (usually realised as /ŋmgb/ or /ŋgb/), are some of the most characteristic African double articulations (Connell 1994; Cahill 1999). Although /ŋm/ is more common worldwide, /kp/ and /gb/ are confined to Africa, except for a few Papuan, Oceanic and Sino-Tibetan languages (Güldeman 2008). Clements & Rialland (2008) and Idiatov & Van de Velde (2021) provide a more detailed overview of the occurrence of labial-velar stops in the immediate Bantu borderland. Table 4 shows the occurrence of labial-velar stops in both Bantoid and Bantu for sample languages.

Table 4. Labial-velars in Bantoid and Bantu

Bantoid Group	Language or group	kp	gb	ŋm	Reference
Dakoid	Tiba	+	+	-	Boyd (1999)
Mambiloid	Mambiloid	+	+	+	Robson (2010), Martin (2012)
Tikar	Tikar	+	+	-	Stanley (1991)
Bendi	Bendi	+	+	+	Blench (ms. wordlists)
Tivoid	Ugarə	+	+	-	Cassetta & Cassetta (1994b)
Buru	Buru	-	-	-	Koops ms.
Nyang	Denya	+	+	+	Mbuagbaw (1996)
East Beboid	Noone[11]	+	-	-	Lux (2016)
Yemne-Kimbi	Mungbam	+	+	-	Lovegren (2013)
Furu	Bikyak	+	+	-	Kieβling (p.c.)
Ekoid	General	+	+	+	Crabb (1969)
Mbe	Mbe	+	+	-	Pohlig (2006)
Ambele	Ambele	+	+	-	Nganganu (2001)

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11 This is slightly problematic. The sounds that are treated in the Noni orthography as labialised labial-velars, i.e. /kpʷ/, Hyman considers as labiodentalised velars, thus /kpw/ is written <kfu> in Hyman's orthography (Hyman 1980: 1). Labio-dental offglides are also reported in Ncane (Boutwell & Boutwell 2008).

Bantoid Group	Language or group	kp	gb	ŋm	Reference
Momo	Throughout	+	+	-	Blench (ms. wordlists)
SW Grassfields	Throughout	+	+	+	Blench (ms. wordlists)
Menchum	Modele	+	+	-	Boum (1981)
Ring	Common	+	+	+	Hyman (ms. wordlists)
Ndemli		-	-	-	Ngoran (1999)
Eastern Grass-fields					
Bamileke	Throughout	+	-	-	SIL/ALCAM (ms. word-lists)
Nun	Throughout	+	-	-	SIL/ALCAM (ms. word-lists)
Nkambe	Throughout	+	-	-	SIL/ALCAM (ms. word-lists)
Ngemba	Throughout	+	-	-	SIL/ALCAM (ms. word-lists)
Zone A languages	A10–20, A53, A64, A70, A83	+	+	+	Clements and Rialland (2008)
Jarawan	Bwazza	+	+	-	Blench (ms.)
Zone C languages	C104, 12a, 13, 14, 20, C30, 34, 37, 41, 45, 53, 54, 104	+	+	+	Clements and Rialland (2008)
Zone D languages	D12, 13, 14, 21, 311, 22, 32, 33	+	+	+	Clements and Rialland (2008)
Other Bantu	E72a	+	+	+	Clements and Rialland (2008)

Two comments are necessary on this listing. The nasal labial-velar is not always analysed as a distinct phoneme, since it occurs homorganically, preceding the velars and labial-velars, so it is probably more widespread than appears here. The broad absence of /gb/ and /ŋm/ throughout Grassfields is surprising. There are languages where these have been transcribed, but they are rare.

4.2.3 ± ATR vowel harmony

Vowel-harmony systems have been reported from a number of the language phyla of the world, most notably in Africa and in Altaic languages (Comrie 1981: 59 ff.). In Africa, however, vowel harmony is usually characterised as Advanced Tongue Root (ATR), which is distinct from the labial and palatal harmony systems in, for example, Altaic. The phonetics of these systems have been described in some detail in Stewart (1967) and Lindau (1975). The exact characterisation of these systems has been debated and Lindau argued that the feature would be better described as expanded pharynx. The + or -ATR vowels most commonly form regular parallel sets and these can usually be interpreted as erosion or reduction of an original 10-vowel set. These 5 + 5 systems are typically present in Nilo-Saharan and Niger-Congo (Hall et al. 1974), updated in Dimmendaal (2001). Authors who discuss these issues with particular reference to Niger-Congo are Casali (2003, 2008), Güldemann (2008) and Clements & Rialland (2008). Hyman (1999) has inventoried the main Bantu languages exhibiting this type of vowel harmony. Dimmendaal (2001) highlights a restricted number of cases where ± ATR vowel harmony seems to have diffused across phyletic boundaries. It is rare in Bantu but is present in languages of the A40 and A60 groups, as well as in D30 languages (e.g. Budu in Koehler 1995; Bila in Kutsch Lojenga 2003). It has been argued that these D group languages represent contact with neighbouring Central Sudanic languages (Grégoire 2003), but there is no evidence of the lexical borrowing that usually appears to go along with the adoption of such a radical restructuring.[12]

Table 5 shows languages for which vowel harmony is attested in phonological descriptions for Bantoid.

Table 5. ATR vowel harmony in Bantoid

Bantoid Group	Presence	Language	Reference
Mambiloid	Absent		
Dakoid	Absent		
Tikar	Absent		
Bendi	Absent		

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12 Although scenarios are possible to explain this situation, none have yet been proposed.

Bantoid Group	Presence	Language	Reference
Tivoid	Present	Ugare	Cassetta & Cassetta (1994b)
Tivoid	Present	Iyive	Foster (2012)
Tivoid [?]	Present[13]	Esimbi	Hyman (1988), Koenig, Coleman & Coleman (2007)
Buru	?		No analysis
Nyang	Absent		
East Beboid	Residual	Kemezung	Cox (2005)
Yemne-Kimbi	Present	Mundabli	Voll (2017)
Furu	?		No analysis
Ekoid	Absent	Ejagham	Watters (1981)
Mbe	Absent	Mbe	Pohlig (2006)
Ambele	Not stated	Ambele	Nganganu (2001)
Western Momo			No reference
Menchum	Absent		
Ring	Absent		
Momo	Absent		
Eastern Grassfields	Scattered	Yamba	Scruggs (1980)
Bantu	A,C,D		Clements & Rialland (2008)
Jarawan	Absent		Rueck et al. (2009)

The residual ATR systems in East Beboid make it probable it should be reconstructed for the group, but this has yet to be shown.

4.2.4   How many vowels?

The number of vowels in proto-Bantu is probably closely related to the previous discussion of vowel harmony, since languages with more than seven vowels tend also to demonstrate harmony phenomena. The features of 'classic' Bantu are the rather unusual seven vowel set proposed by Guthrie, where the high vowels exhibit two qualities (see discussion in Hyman 2019). Outside Bantu, most seven vowel languages usually show the mid-vowels splitting, and there is plenty

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13 Esimbi has an extreme version of vowel harmony, where the vowel is usually identical in all multisyllabic roots.

of evidence that this is the common outcome of vowel merger in non-Bantu nine-vowel languages. Bantoid languages commonly have quite large vowel inventories; in the case of some Grassfields languages vowel-splitting has led to more than ten basic vowels.

Table 6 shows representative languages and the number of phonemic vowels is attested in descriptions of Bantoid and Bantu.

Table 6. Vowel systems in Bantoid and Bantu

Bantoid Group	Language	Vowels			Reference
		O°	N	L	
Mambiloid	Mambila	7	-	-	Connell (2001)
Dakoid	Sama Mum	8	-	+	Boyd & Sa'ad (2010)
Tikar	Tikar	8	-	-	Stanley (1991)
Bendi	Bekwara	7	-	-	Stanford (1967)
Tivoid	Ugarə	8	-	+	Cassetta & Cassetta (1994b)
Tivoid [?]	Esimbi	8	-	+	Koenig, Coleman & Coleman (2007)
Buru	Buru	7	-	-	Koops (ms.)
Nyang	Denya	7	-	-	Mbuagbaw (1996)
East Beboid	Ncane	7	5	5	Boutwell (2020)
Yemne-Kimbi	Mungbam	8/9	-	-	Lovegren (2013)
Furu	Bikyak	10[14]	-	-	Kießling (p.c.)
Ekoid	Ejagham	7	-	-	Watters (1981)
Mbe	Mbe	7	-	-	Pohlig (2006)
Ambele	Ambele	10	-	4	Nganganu (2001)
Western Momo	Manta	7	-	7	SIL wordlists
Menchum	Befang	8	-	7	Boum (1981), Gueche (2004)
Ring	Isu	7	-	7	Anderson (2013)
Momo	Ngwo	7	-	7	Eyoh (2010)

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14 From the fragmentary data it is unclear if the vowels are phonetic or phonemic.

		Vowels			
Bantoid Group	**Language**	**O°**	**N**	**L**	**Reference**
Eastern Grassfields					
Bamileke	Fe'fe'	10	-	8	Hyman (1972)
Bamileke	Ngomba	6	-	6	Satre (1997)
Ngemba	Bafut	13[15]	-	11	Tamanji (2009)
Nun	Chufie'	9	8	9	Hamm (2013)
Nkambe	Mfumte	10	-	-	Eyoh & Hedinger (2008)
Zone A languages	P-Manen-guba	7	-	7	Hedinger (1987)
	Bafia (A53)	11	-	-	Guarisma (1969)
Jarawan	Bwaza	6	-	-	Bwazza Literacy Committee (2007)
O° = Oral, N = Nasal, L =Length					

Nasalised vowels are highly unlikely to be a feature of early Bantoid. They almost certainly derive from reduction of CVN sequences, hence the lack of correspondences between individual Bantoid branches. The antiquity of long vowels is more difficult to establish. Again cognacy of long vowels across Bantoid branches is apparently absent and long vowels probably arise independently from deletion of intervocalic consonants.

4.2.5 *Fricative vowels*
A poorly understood, but striking phonological feature is the existence of fricative vowels, in several branches of Bantoid. The only review of fricative vowels that takes a comparative approach is Connell (2000, 2007). Regrettably very few of the occurrences of fricative vowels reported since his survey are in the public domain. As Connell (2000: 234) points out, comments about families such as Eastern Grassfields suggest strongly they may be present elsewhere, notably in Limbum (Fransen 1995). Nonetheless, it seems to be worth compiling their distribution, as this is clearly relevant to the recon-

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15 This is a rather extreme claim and it would be helpful for it to be supported with evidence for phonemic contrast.

struction of proto-Bantu phonology. Table 7 shows all the cases of fricative (and pharyngealised) vowels in Bantoid that are reported.

Table 7. Fricative vowels in Bantoid

Family	Language	Reference
Mambiloid	Len	Connell (2000)
Mambiloid	Wawa	Martin (2012)
Mambiloid	Kwanja	Robson (2010)
Beboid	Mundabli	Voll (2017)
Grassfields Nkambe	Limbum	Fransen (1995)
Zone A languages	Kwasio	own research, Duke (p.c. 2010)
Zone A languages	Bagielli	own research, Duke (p.c. 2010)
Zone A languages	Fang	Kelly (1974), Mve (1997)
Jarawan	Jar	Rueck et al. (2009)

Connell (2007) is cautious in his conclusions about the relevance of cognates between Len and proto-Bantu but since more evidence has come to hand it seems more reasonable to assume that these types of vowels are widespread, that they related to labiodentalisation and that they were present in proto-Bantu.

4.2.6   Tones

Bantu is reconstructed as having two tones, without any complications such as glides and downstep (Guthrie 1967–71; Marlo & Odden 2019). While this is characteristic of numerous Bantu languages in the central area, many languages, especially in Zone A, have a more elaborate system, which resembles more closely the three and four-tone systems which are common in Bantoid. Table 8 compiles a sample of descriptions of tone systems for Bantoid and Bantu, only listing languages with three tones or more.

Table 8. Tone systems in Bantoid and Bantu

Bantoid Group	Language	Tones	Reference
Dakoid	Sama Mum	H, M, L, R, F	Boyd & Sa'ad (2010)
Mambi-loid	Mambila of Gembu	Four level tones and numerous glides	Perrin (1974), Connell 2000, 2017); Kwanja (Weber & Weber 2008); Wawa (Martin 2012)

Bantoid Group	Language	Tones	Reference
Tikar	Tikar	H, L, R, F	Stanley (1991)
Bendi	Bekwara	H, M, L, four glide tones	Stanford (1967)
Tivoid	Ugarə	H, L, U, D	Cassetta & Cassetta (1994b)
Tivoid [?]	Esimbi	H, M, L, R, F	Koenig, Coleman & Coleman (2007)
Buru	Buru	H, M, L	Koops (ms.)
Nyang	Denya	H, L, D, R, F	Mbuagbaw (1996)
Beboid	Noone	H, M, L, HL, HM, H, ML, LF, MR, LH	Lux & Lux (1996)
Furu	Bikyak	H, M, L, (?VL), F	Kießling (p.c.)
Ekoid	General	H, M, L, R, F	Crabb (1969)
Mbe	Mbe	H, L	Pohlig (2006)
Ambele	Ambele	H, M, L, R, F	Nganganu (2001)
Western Momo	Manta	H, M, L	SIL Wordlists
Menchum	Modele	H, L, F	Boum (1981)
Ring	Isu	H, M, L, four glide tones	Anderson (2013)
Momo	Ngwo	H, M, L, R, F	Eyoh (2010)
Eastern Grass-fields			
Bami-leke	Fe'fe'	H, M, RL, L, R, F	Hyman (1972)
Bami-leke	Ngomba	H, D, L	Satre (1997)
Ngemba	Bafut[16]	H, L or H, M, L	Tamanji (2009) or Mfonyam (1990)
Nun	Chufie'	H, M, L, three glide tones	Hamm & Hamm (2007)
Nkambe	Mfumte	H, M, L, R, F	Eyoh & Hedinger (2008)

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16 By contrast, Mfonyam (1990) claims three tone levels.

Bantoid Group	Language	Tones	Reference
Bantu Zone A	P-Manen-guba	H, L, R, F	Hedinger (1987)
Jarawan			No analysis
H = High, M = Mid, L = Low, R = Rising, F = Falling, U = Upstep, D = Downstep, VL = Very Low. Sequences of two letters describe combination tones, thus LF is Low falling			

In principle, these tones apply to single vowels and where differing tones occur on VV sequences contour tones are heard. However, some authors show VV sequences to clarify contour tones, even where vowels are short (e.g. Eyoh 2010). There is clear relationship between the year of a description and the complexity of a tone system. Older accounts broadly show simpler tone systems; as researchers are more attuned to these systems, greater complexity has emerged.

Tone reconstruction is a more complex task than vowels and consonants in part due to the differing descriptions of tone in different authors and a failure to distinguish clearly surface and underlying tone. Some families, such as Jarawan, lack a single reliable synchronic description of tone. However, if the evidence from North Bantoid is relevant, then early Bantoid probably had either two[17] or three level tones, as well as rising and falling. However, in many branches of Bantoid, the downstep derives from an underlying L tone between two surface H, the L tone persisting after a tone bearing unit had been lost. Surface contour tones are common but only further work will determine if they are an underlying feature of Bantoid.

4.2.7   Word order

The characteristic word order of Bantoid is S (AUX) V O, as virtually all the sources in Table 9 attest. Some languages allow the auxiliaries after the main verb, including much of Bantu, but this is also attested in Tikar and Vute and is thus not diagnostic.

Table 9. Word order in Bantoid and Bantu

Bantoid Group	Language	Word order	Reference
Dakoid	Sama Mum	S (AUX) V O	Boyd & Sa'ad (2010)

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17 Connell (2018) argues for two.

Bantoid Group	Language	Word order	Reference
Mambiloid	Vute	S (AUX) V O, S (AUX) O V	Thwing (1987)
Tikar	Tikar	S V (AUX) O	Stanley (1991)
Bendi	Bekwara	S (AUX) V O	Stanford (1967)
Tivoid	Tiv	S (AUX) V O	Voeltz (2005)
Buru	Buru	no data	Koops (ms.)
Nyang	Denya	S (AUX) V O	Abangma (1987)
Beboid	Kemezung	S (AUX) V O	Cox (2005)
Furu	Bikyak	S (AUX) V O	Kießling (p.c.)
Ekoid	Nkem	S (AUX) V O	Sibomana (1986)
Mbe	Mbe	S (AUX) V O[18]	Pohlig (2006)
Ambele	Ambele	S (AUX) V O	Nganganu (2001)
Western Momo	Manta	No data	SIL Wordlists
Menchum	Modele	S (AUX) V O	Gueche (2004)
Ring	Kom	S (AUX) V O	Shultz (1993)
Momo	Meta'	S (AUX) V O	Spreda (1986)
Eastern Grassfields			
Bamileke	Yemba	S (AUX) V O	Harro & Haynes (1991)
Ngemba	Bafut	S (AUX) V O	Tamanji (2009)
Nun	Chrambo	S (AUX) V O	Wright (2009)
Nkambe	Limbum	S (AUX) V O	Mpoche (1993)
Jarawan	Bwazza	S (AUX) V O	Rueck et al. (2007)
Bantu Zone A	Akɔɔse	S V (AUX) O	Hedinger (2008)

4.2.8 *Verbal extensions*

Verbal extensions in Bantoid are absent in some branches, especially in those more remote from Narrow Bantu, where they have disappeared without leaving obvious segmental traces (see overview in

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18   Inferred from examples.

Blench 2022). Table 10 summarises the situation for the different Bantoid subgroups identified in the literature. It should be emphasised that there are no specific publications on extensions in many of them. Those marked functional have been identified in the literature as in active use, whereas inferred suffixes are those which I have extracted from lexical data. The claim for their presence or absence has to be based on inferences from the lexicon or incidental data. Some of the more diverse subgroups, such as Mambiloid, may include languages with no remaining extensions and those where they are evidently present. In some cases, functioning verb extensions only remain for a small subset of verbs, but these are still assigned as present. Key references are given for individual languages.

Table 10. Verbal extensions in major Bantoid subgroups

Group	Verbal extensions		Language	Reference
	Functional	**Inferred**		
Dakoid		+	Daka	Boyd & Sa'ad (2010)
Mambiloid	+	-	Nizaa	Kjelsvik (2002: 19 ff.)
Mambiloid	+	-	Vute	Thwing (1987), Martin (2012)
Tikar	+	-	Tikar	Stanley (1991)
Bendi	-	-	Bekwarra	Stanford (1967)
Tivoid	-	-	Tiv	Arnott (1958)
Buru	?	-	Buru	Koops (n.d.)
Furu	?	-	Furu	Breton (1993), Kiessling (p.c.)
East Beboid	+		Noone	Hyman (1981)
East Beboid	+		Mungong[19]	Boutwell (2014)
East Beboid	+		Nchane	Boutwell (2020)
Yemne-Kimbi	-	-	Mundabli	Voll (2107)
Nyang	-	-	Denya/ Kenyang	Unpublished lexicons

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19 However, these consist only of a multiple action extension and an extremely rare causative in -*si*.

Group	Verbal extensions		Language	Reference
	Functional	Inferred		
Ekoid	-	-	Ejagham	Watters (1981)
Mbe	+	-	Mbe	Bamgboṣe (1967)
Ambele	?	?	Ambele	Nganganu (2001)
Menchum	?	?	Befang	Gueche (2004)
Grassfields				
Ndemli	+		Ndemli[20]	Ngoran (1999)
Ring	+		Lamnso?	Grebe & Siiyaatan (2015); Akumbu (2020); Hyman (2018)
Momo	+		Meta'	Spreda (1995), Hyman (2018)
Southwest	?	?	Manta	Ayotte & Ayotte (2002)
Eastern				
Bamileke	+	-	Ngiem-boon	Blench (ined) from Lonfo & Anderson (2014)
Nkambe	-	-	Mfumte	McClean (2014)
Ngemba	+		Bambili	Ayuninjam (1998)
Narrow Bantu zone A	+	+	Akɔɔse (A10)	Hedinger (1992, 2008)
Jarawan	+	+	Mbula	Van de Velde & Idiatov (2022)

Hyman (2018) is a survey of Bantoid verb extensions which includes Grassfields, Mbe (Ekoid), Tikar, Noone, Kemezung (Beboid) and Vute (Mambiloid) in his comparative tables. To throw light on the ancestry of Bantu verbal extensions we must create a basic tabulation of the presence of extensions in individual Bantoid branches, although some may eventually be discarded as not relevant to Bantu.

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20 Although Ngoran (1999: 73) states that "[i]n this language, we have been unable to uncover any vestiges of suffixal extensions", they are identified in Ndedje (2016).

5 Some sociolinguistic aspects

5.1   Language endangerment

In any region with a density of languages as high as the Bantoid area, there are likely to be endangered languages. Endangerment can arise from the gradual spread of minority languages, where communities gradually switch from one to another. For example, within the Mambiloid group there are several moribund or extinct languages whose speakers have switched to the languages of their neighbours (Connell 1998, 2010; Connell et al. 2021). With Africa as a whole, the major threat to diversity is 'predatory' languages, spoken by politically dominant groups or as trade languages. Typical such languages are Hausa, Bambara or Sudanese Arabic. Until the colonial era, there were no such languages in the Bantoid area, although it is on the fringe of the region where Fulfulde is a lingua franca, and it is beginning to have an impact on Mambiloid (Connell 2009). Within Nigeria, Hausa is spreading on the Mambila Plateau and in the Dakoid area. Within Cameroon, the threat to language vitality in the twentieth century has come from Pidgin English. Children either do not learn, or learn their languages poorly.

Through the surveys conducted by SIL and referenced throughout this document, a significant number of studies of language vitality exist. Broadly speaking, most Bantoid languages are still spoken in their home area, and speakers have a positive attitude to speaking their mother tongue. In the case of Mambiloid, there is a scatter of very small languages on the point of extinction in Bankim sub-division of Adamawa Province in Cameroon. For example, the Njerep language, part of the East Mambila cluster, is moribund with a single speaker still able to converse in 2000 and some five rememberers (Connell & Zeitlyn 2000). This cluster also includes Cambap, with some 30 speakers in 2000, Kasabe, extinct in 1995 but for which wordlist data exists, and Yeni, for which only songs are remembered (Connell 1998). The Njanga language, with just five speakers in 2008, is becoming increasingly difficult to recover. Speakers are changing to the related Sundani and engage in codeswitching, making it less than sure that the Njanga forms are 'authentic' (Robson 2010). As an example of the fate of smaller languages, Table 11 shows a summary of the extinct or moribund Mambiloid languages.

Table 11. Extinct or moribund Mambiloid languages

Language	Number of Speakers	Closest Relative
Cambap (aka Twendi)	30 (2000)	Mambila (Langa)
Somyev (aka Kila)	20 (2000)	Tep, Wawa
Njanga	5 speakers, 5 rememberers (2008)	Kwanja
Njerep	6 (2000)	Mambila (Langa)
Bung	3 (no native speakers)	Kwanja
Kasabe (aka Luo)	0 († 11/95)	Mambila (Langa)
Yeni	0	Mambila (Langa)
Sources: Connell (2010), Robson (2010)		

By and large, these languages have been assimilated by speakers of other Mambiloid languages, rather than a widespread lingua franca. This seems to be rather exceptional, and it is interesting to speculate whether the disruption to social patterns in the region caused by the Fulɓe invasions and raiding in the nineteenth century upset the delicate balance of languages, causing some to expand and others to lose their cultural identity. The Furu languages have also been subject to massive replacement. The absence of good (socio)linguistic data on these languages makes it difficult to speculate why they have become moribund, since they are in an extremely remote area. Another similar situation is the Lower Fungom region on the northern Ring Road. This is an area of extreme multilingualism, with a number of languages confined to a single village (Good 2013; Good et al. 2011; Di Carlo et al. 2020). Some languages are down to less than 100 speakers, and it appears almost no-one speaks only a single language.

5.2 Specialised languages

The notion of a hierarchically-structured lexicon and grammar which reflects vertical authority relations in society is familiar from East and Southeast Asia; Japanese and Javanese are well-known examples. Within Africa, there are some examples of register, the use of a particular speech-form to express aspirations (Ma'a/Mbugu is a well-known example, cf. Mous 2003). There are also court languages, or hierolects, where an incoming royal dynasty retains the speech or elements of speech from their original ethnicity. In the Grassfields of Cameroon, a number of chiefdoms have developed a replacement lexicon marking particular strata of society.

One example[21] is the replacement lexicon in Bìfî[22] and relates these to the overall social structure of Bafut[23]. The Bafut people form part of the complex of chiefdoms which make up the Cameroon Grassfields. Although small in geographical extent, these chiefdoms are characterised by elaborate political hierarchies, a highly distinctive material culture and a great diversity of languages (Knöpfli 2008). Bafut social hierarchy may be broadly described as consisting of both ascribed and achieved levels, with a hereditary royal family and a nobility composed of wealthy and powerful individuals. Bafut society is interpenetrated by secret societies at every level, mostly organised around masquerade dances. Table 12 shows the levels of authority in the Bafut social hierarchy.

Table 12. Bafut social hierarchy

Title	Gloss
mfò	Fon
ŋ̀kùm	Nobility
àtaŋtso	Village chief
tanikuri	Village leader

Respect terms in Bafut can be broadly divided into three categories, objects and places, body parts and verbs. The terms are used 'upwards' i.e. a commoner would use respect terms when speaking to a Fon or chief. All of these are lexical replacements; there is no evidence for distinctive syntax or morphology. The vocabulary of objects and places has a significant diversity of terms used with the nobility, whereas body parts are confined to the Fon. Verbs used in speaking to the Fon also include a couple of specialised forms used when speaking with princes. Table 13 shows the respect terminology for objects and places.

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21 Based on fieldwork in Bafut in January 2010. The material was checked with the current Fon, His Majesty Adumbi II, to whom our thanks.

22 The language is Bìfî and the town, people and culture is Bafut.

23 Di Carlo & Ayu'nwi (2020) present another, somewhat different account, without making reference to existing prior work.

Table 13. Respect terminology for objects and places

English	Everyday form	Fon	Aristocracy	Chief
calabash	fɨtɔ̄ɔ̀, dàà, bà'à[24]	ká'á		
chair/stool	àlə̀ŋ	àbə̀rī̄		
compound	ǹdugə̀	ǹtɔ̀'ɔ̀	ǹdùgə̀/ābɛ̀ɛ̀	ābɛ̀ɛ̀
cup	ǹdōŋ	ānɔ̄		
door	àbà'à	àbù'ù	àbù'ù	
dress	àtʃə̀'ɔ̀	ǹvì		
food	àtʃūgə̀/àtʃú'ù	àkɔ̄ɔ̀	ndʒòò	
grave	nɨ̀sjɛ̀	nɨ̀fùm		
gun	mɔ́'ɔ́/ŋgārə̀	kwàrə̀	táfán	
house/residence	ǹdâ	àtʃùm	fɨ'ɨ̀ndâ	
parlour	ǹtɨ̄ì bù'ù	múm tʃàà	tʃàà	
relaxing place/ courtyard		àyɔ̄'ɔ̀	bə́ŋ	
shoes	ǹtām/àbā'ākòrə̀	(àbā'ā) ǹtʃā'à		
umbrella	àkōŋ	àtʃɨ̄rə́		

This type of specialised language has been little-studied and may therefore be far more common than present publication suggests.

6 Orthography, literacy and media

6.1   Orthographies for Bantoid languages

Cameroon represents a confluence of a government with a relatively positive attitude to linguistic diversity, vivdly reflected in the fact that there is a government sanctioned orthography for Cameroonian languages (Tadajeu & Sadembouo 1984). The resources of the university system and SIL have resulted in a rich body of analysis, in particular phonologies, with literacy and ultimately bible translation as their goal. Bantoid languages on the Nigerian side of the border are much less well documented, and almost none have orthographies

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24 All names for different kinds of calabash, i.e. their proper names.

which have been accepted by the community and are used in literacy materials. Cameroon ethnolinguistic communities have also shown interest in linguistic documentation as part of cultural renovation, and many small dictionaries have been funded by the speakers themselves. Figure 4 shows a typical workshop at a community-funded literacy centre among the Noone people. Table 14 is a summary of the Bantoid languages for which either an orthography exists, or is in development.

Figure 4. Noone literacy committee, March 2009

Table 14. Orthography development in Bantoid languages

Group	Country	Orthographies developed
Dakoid	Nigeria	Sama Mum, but not officially accepted
Mambiloid	Nigeria/Cameroon	Mambila (2 varieties), Kwanja, Vute
Tikar	Cameroon	Tikar
Bendi	Nigeria	Bokyi, Bekwara
Tivoid	Nigeria/Cameroon	Tiv, Oliti
Buru	Nigeria	None
Furu	Nigeria/Cameroon	None
East Beboid	Cameroon	Noone, Nsari, Kemezung

Group	Country	Orthographies developed
Yemne-Kimbi	Cameroon	None
Nyang	Cameroon	Denya, Kenyang
Ekoid	Nigeria/Cameroon	Ejagham
Mbe	Nigeria	Mbe
Ambele	Cameroon	None
Menchum	Cameroon	None
Grassfields		
Ndemli	Cameroon	None
Ring		
Centre	Cameroon	Babanki, Bum, Kom, Mmen, Oku
East	Cameroon	Lamnsɔ
South	Cameroon	Bamunka, Kensweyswey, Vengo
West	Cameroon	Aghem, Isu, Weh
Momo	Cameroon	Moghamo, Mundani, Ngie, Ngwo
Southwest	Cameroon	None
Eastern		
Bamileke	Cameroon	Ngiemboon, Ngomba, Ngwe, Yemba
Ngemba	Cameroon	Awing, Bafut, Bambili, Bamukumbit, Pinyin
Nkambe	Cameroon	Limbum, Mfumte, Yamba
Nun	Cameroon	Bamali, Bambalang, Bamukumbit, Bamun, Bangolan, Chufie'
Bantu A	Cameroon	Numerous
Jarawan	Nigeria/Cameroon	None

6.2 Indigenous scripts

The Bamun people became famous for developing an indigenous script to write the language of the court (Dugast & Jeffreys 1950; Schmitt 1963). The script itself was devised at the end of the nineteenth century by Sultan Njoya and his scribes. The traditional Bamun corpus consists of manuscripts, chiefly history, treatises on traditional medicine, local cartography, personal correspondence, and illustrated folktales. Some of these can be seen on display at the museum in

the palace at Foumban. The script passed through several stages of evolution, from a largely ideographic script to broadly phonetic. In its most recent incarnation it has some eighty characters. Its current use is limited to some signage (Figure 5) but a proposal has recently been put to assign Unicode numbers to the characters.
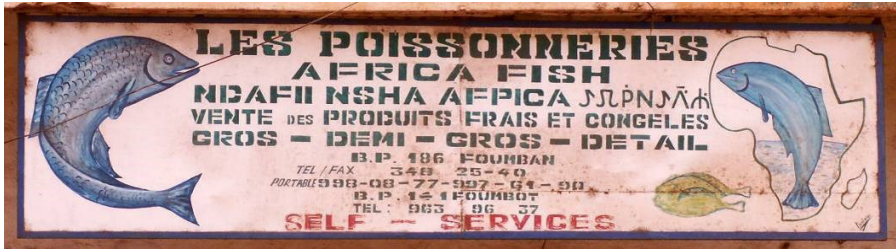

Figure 5. Bamun script on fishmonger's shop sign in Foumban. Source: Author, 2008

The Bagam, a subgroup of the Mengaka, a Bamileke language, appear to have developed their own script, probably sometime in the nineteenth century. L.W.G. Malcolm, an administrator and ethnographer, documented this script and submitted a paper to the *Journal of the African Society* (1920/21). The journal was edited by Sir Harry Johnston, who for reasons best known to himself, considered indigenous African scripts to be 'clumsy copies of Roman script'. As a consequence, no Bagam characters were ever published and only came to light some seventy years later, when they were published in the journal's successor, *African Affairs* (Tuchscherer 1999). There is a clear connection with the Bamun script and some characters are the same. Unfortunately, the Bagam script has disappeared and it is unlikely we will know more than is contained in Malcolm's admittedly amateur record.

7 Conclusions

The Bantoid languages are a nexus of families on the Nigeria/Cameroon borderland, all of which show features which link them to Bantu. However, they do not constitute a unitary genetic group and their relations with one another remain a matter for further research. Depending on definition of dialect and language, there are between 150 and 200 languages. The inaccessibility of the terrain where many are spoken has meant that documentation remains scanty and full-

length grammars and dictionaries are rarities. Compared with Bantu, the systems of nominal classes and verbal extensions are often highly reduced or even lost, corresponding to a rise in the complexity of phonological and tonal systems. Finding correspondences between Bantoid and Bantu noun-class markers is often problematic and it is likely that borrowing and affix renewal have played a major role in their genesis. It is clear that we should not read back the features of Bantu into Bantoid and assume absence is evidence for erosion.

The linguistic interest of Bantoid is its extraordinary morphological and phonological diversity. Comparative evidence from the Kainji languages suggests strongly that early Bantoid had a rich system of noun-classes and verbal extensions, but relatively simple tones and phonology. These have eroded and been rebuilt, sometimes into systems of great complexity. Tracing the pathways by which this occurred has hardly begun, and remains a challenge for future linguists. This can only be achieved by continued attention to documentary linguistics, the creation of dictionaries, grammars and text collections. Greater attention from the international scholarly community would thus be welcome.

Some of these languages are endangered, especially in the Mambiloid and Furu groups. However, in the Grassfields, there are thriving literacy programmes, and we can be reasonably optimistic about their survival in the immediate future. Moreover, the Cameroon government takes a positive view of language diversity and development, so development of orthographies and a greater media presence can be foreseen.

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