# Bɛrɛ: a language of Côte d'Ivoire of unknown affiliation

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## 1. Introduction

The Bɛrɛ (Mbre, Bere, Bre, Pre, Pre Pisia) language is spoken in Cote d'Ivoire in the Marabadiassa area, northwest of Bouake and Diabo, Bondosso and Niantibo villages. The number of speakers in 2000 was about 200 with some 700 acknowledging a Bɛrɛ ethnic affiliation. The population is switching to Koro, a Maninka lect. The interest of Bɛrɛ is that it is not aligned with any of the major branches of Niger-Congo. This paper is thus an attempt to establish lexical parallels to try and see where it might 'fit'.

## 2. Bɛrɛ wordlist

The wordlist is a composite derived from Creisssels' manuscript and a later unpublished manuscript of Jacques Rongier (Rongier ined.), resorted by semantic category.

| Gloss | Bɛrɛ | External parallel (if any) |
|---|---|---|
| **Body Parts** | | |
| back | **gbrɛo** | ? cf. Mande e.g. Maninka **bɔ̀rɔ́** |
| beard | **gbi-komu** | ? + hair. ? cf. Dyan **ŋ̃õkobu** |
| belly | **beɣa** | ? |
| blood | **ɲamu** | Cf. Nyabwa (Kru) **ɲemo**. |
| bone | **ko** | Similar forms are widespread, even in Nilo-Saharan, usually with a bilabial stop in $C_2$ position (W. 238). Mande has close comparisons, e.g. Kpan **xɔ́** |
| breast | **ɟomu** | ? |
| cheek | **bõ** | |
| chin | **gbenaŋmruku** | |
| cough | **trɔ̃** | |
| ear | **nɛ** | Niger-Congo typically has #**nu** with back vowel for 'ear' |
| elbow | **gbɔnɔɣɔ** | |
| eye | **ɟisi** | Cf. Kru forms such as Bete of Daloa **ɟi**. The **-si** is an unproductive suffix. |
| fontanelle | **peɣi** | |
| forehead | **siw** | East Benue-Congo typically has #si for 'face' |
| hair | **komu** | |
| hand | **bɔ̃** | Not common Kru but cf. Seme **bɔ**. A widespread Proto-Atlantic-Congo root reconstructed by W. (212) as **-búá(k)-**. Usually without nasalisation it shows signs of an m- prefix in Atlantic. |
| head | **ɲĩ** | The first element in many Gur languages is **ɲũ-** but the vowel change is somewhat unusual |
| heart | **sozi** | |
| heel | **gbɔ̃kuŋru** | |
| intestine | **lali** | # la is widespread Niger-Congo |
| knee | **gbonuɣu** | |
| leg, foot | **gbɔ̃** | Parallels for this are found in the Volta-Niger languages of Nigeria, notably Bini **igbố**. However, it may also be connected with common Kru **ɓo** (.e.g. Dida). Kru shows no trace of either nasalisation or labialisation. |
| liver | **tɛ** | |
| nose | **mɛ̃** | Perhaps cf. Kru forms such as Nyabwa **mɔ́ná**. However, M. (373) reconstructs similar forms to Proto-Atlantic-Congo so this is less than conclusive. |
| nostril | **pukrɛ** | |
| neck | **fye** | |
| pus | **pɛ̃** | |
| shoulder | **kaɲĩ** | |

1

| Gloss | Bɛrɛ | External parallel (if any) |
|---|---|---|
| skin | **gbaw** | ? |
| stomach | **gbõ** *or* **koni** | W. gives -ku- as a reconstruction, but his examples show that $C_2$ was probably a nasal, making this form a likely cognate. |
| sweat | **syɛ̃** | |
| thigh | **gboŋmo** | See comment under 'leg' |
| tongue | **ɟeŋe** | ? |
| tooth | **ɲɔɣɔmu** | ? |
| urine | **nɛnɛ** | |
| wound, sore | **nɔmu** | A single Senufic language, Nyarafolo, has a cognate **nɔmu**-gɔ/-yɔ. However, a question remains as to the source of this word. |

**People**

| Gloss | Bɛrɛ | External parallel (if any) |
|---|---|---|
| baby | **tɛwɛ tɛnɛ** | et. ? + 'new' |
| chief | **jew-kɔ** | et. village + master |
| child | **tetra** pl. **tanwa** | |
| corpse | **srɔɲɔŋɔ** | |
| father | **to** | Usually found with a long vowel in Senufic languages e.g. Nafã̄ra **tòò** or Kafiire **tóo**. Also found in Kru languages, e.g. Dida **to**, Godié **tʉ́**. |
| fool, madman | **kube kɔ** | |
| friend | **tɔgbe** | |
| husband | **fuwo** | |
| grandfather | **laɣa** | |
| grandmother | **seɣa** | |
| man/male | **sre** | |
| maternal uncle | **ko** | |
| mother | **ma** | cf. Dewoin **mǎ**, but this has a world-wide distribution for 'mother'. |
| old man | **gbrɔ** | |
| older brother | **kuri** | |
| person | **ɲɔŋɔ** | This has a direct parallel in some Senufic languages, e.g. Lorhon **ɲɔ̀,** but initial ɲ- is fairly widespread in Mande-Congo. However, compare also Nyabwa (Kru) **ɲuɲɔ̀**. As **ŋɔ**- is a suffix in Pre this parallel may be misleading and this is simply case of a retention of the old Proto-Mande-Congo 'person' root. |
| ruler | **bleŋ misre** | < Agni-Baule |
| slave | **syã** | |
| stranger | **nãpɔŋɔ** | |
| woman | **su-wa** | |
| younger brother | **ɲɛnɛ** | |

**Plants**

| Gloss | Bɛrɛ | External parallel (if any) |
|---|---|---|
| baobab | **titiɣili** | |
| bark | **wo** | |
| bean | **gbɛ̃** | |
| calabash | **kaɣa** | |
| grass | **sɛ̃** | This resembles some Mande forms, for example, Busa **sɛ̃**, although linguistic geography excludes this being a loan. Other Mande forms have a back vowel and no nasalisation (see Prost, 1953:88) |
| liana | **kɔw** | |
| leaf | **faniɣi** | widespread in Volta-Congo although the proximate source may be Lobiri **faa**. $C_2$ was apparently /g/ since many other Senufoid languages have a weakened form **waga**. However, the retention of |

| Gloss | Bɛrɛ | External parallel (if any) |
|---|---|---|
| | | the f-n-g sequence argues for the Pre form being closer to the original. |
| millet | kew | |
| okra | sɛ̃ | |
| palm-tree | ŋmɛtĩ | |
| pepper | sɛnɛŋɛnɛ | |
| raffia-palm | dusu *or* klõ | |
| reed | mɛnɛpɔmɔɣɔ | et. water + ? |
| rice | mlã́ | cf. Dyula **màlo**, but this is a widespread loanword in this region probably originally spread by the Fulɓe. |
| rubber | nɔnɔ | |
| silk-cotton tree | sɔŋɔ | |
| tree | gbeɣa | |
| yam | sɔɣɔ | |

**Animals**

| Gloss | Bɛrɛ | External parallel (if any) |
|---|---|---|
| animal, meat | namu | widespread in Niger-Congo, usually as #nama |
| bat | tiɣilaŋmrã | |
| bee, honey | tuɣuɲɔŋɔ | cf. Dyan **tugbunu** |
| bird | nɔ̃ | widespread in Volta-Congo, reconstructed by M. (405) as -**nùn**-, although curiously not attested in the Gur languages surrounding Pre. |
| butterfly | gbeneɣele | |
| canary | pala | |
| cat | kɛni | |
| chameleon | nɛŋrɛ | |
| chicken | tɔ | |
| chimpanzee | kosã | |
| cock | kokro | **k-k-r** roots for 'cock' are widespread *Wanderwörte* in West Africa |
| cow | nũ | Although -**na**- roots are widespread in West Africa (cf. W. 262) this precise form occurs in Senufic languages, e.g. Tagbana, Supyire **nǜ** whence it was presumably borrowed. |
| crab | kamu | #-**kal**- is a widespread form for 'crab' (W. 230) but the -**mu** suffix is unusual and may relate to Kru forms such as Koyo **kɘ̀mɔ̃**. |
| cricket | kõdo | |
| cutting-grass | gbɛ̃ | This root appears to be widespread in this region, although the proximate cognates may be Kru forms such as Niaboua **gwɛ̀ɛ̃́** |
| dog | kesi | ? |
| duck | tɛ̃bobo | |
| elephant | gbõdro | |
| fish | sɛmu | ? |
| fly | gbɛnɛtiɣɛnɛ | |
| goat | bobo | Probably a loan from Mande. cf. Yaure **bobo** |
| guinea-fowl | samu | |
| hare | besi | |
| hippopotamus | tumɔwɔw | et. water + ? |
| hyena | ɟelɔɣɔ *or* krakumo *or* komwo | |
| leopard | naŋma | |
| lion | tɔ̃kɔ | |

| Gloss | Bɛrɛ | External parallel (if any) |
|---|---|---|
| lizard | mɛ | |
| louse | simɛ | |
| mason wasp | pɔ̃pɔ̃ | Tepo (Kru) has **popo káŋmo** but this is unique within Kru. **popo** in Tepo means 'butterfly' so this may be an accidental resemblance. |
| millipede | gbɔɣɔlɔkɔŋɔ | |
| monkey | lɛw | |
| mouse | gbeɣele | |
| partridge | to | |
| porcupine | sumuɣu | |
| python | saŋme | |
| rat | gboɣolo | Perhaps cf. Kru forms such as Kyo **kpólu** |
| sheep | baba | Probably a loan from Mande. cf. Gban **baba** |
| snake | sɔw | This root for 'snake' is widespread in Benue-Congo languages but not in this area. Some Kru languages have a form with a front vowel, e.g. Dewoin **sɛwɛ**. |
| spider | nuna | |
| termite | sɛŋɛnɛ | ? |
| toad | tɔtɔli | |
| tortoise | kruwɛ | #-**kuru** is a virtually pan-African root for tortoise (Blench, 1997) and is attested in some neighbouring Gur languages, e.g. Nabaj **xuru**. |
| warthog | gbɛ | |

**Natural World**

| ashes | tuɣunibo | Probably a compound with the first element corresponding to the Proto-Atlantic-Congo root #**toN**- (cf. M. 560) |
|---|---|---|
| white clay | bɔwa | Perhaps related to Kru forms such as Bete **bʌla**. |
| cloud | gbõ | |
| field | tɔ̃ | |
| fire | na | A Niger-Congo root given by Westermann (1927: 262) as -**ná**-. Occurs in Senufic as Nafãӑra, Tyebara **naà** |
| fireplace | kɔ̃ | |
| forest | taŋa | |
| ground | sasi | |
| hill | koŋoli | |
| hole | tɔw | |
| rain | mɛnɛ | |
| root | duɣu | |
| river | jeɣa | |
| sand | muŋakasi | |
| seed | doɣosi | |
| smoke | donuɣu | |
| stone | ba *also* kuni | |
| thorn, spine | sɛ̃ | |
| water | túmṹ | Occurs in several Senufoid languages, notably Palaka **tónmó**, Tagbana **tɔ̃mɔ̃** with intial /t/ weakening to /n/ and then /l/ in many lects |
| well | krɔ̃tɔ | |
| wind | fili | |
| lie | ɟɛ̃ | |
| dance | yɔsi | |
| song | pesi | |
| story | puma | |

| Gloss | Bɛrɛ | External parallel (if any) |
|---|---|---|
| language | **pisi** | |
| name I | **pyela** | |
| name II | **yèré** | Widpespred but scattered Niger-Congo root. Cf. Kru Konobo **ɲi**, Atlantic Mankanya **nyi-**, Gur Mampruli **yuu-ri**, Dakoid Nnakenyare **yiri** |
| truth | **gbeŋmre** | |
| smell | **fili** | |
| shadow | **wõ** | |
| medicine | **gbotuɣu** | |
| charm/fetish | **sɛ** | |
| food | **gba** | |
| work | **tʉ̀dɔ̀** | The **tʉ̀** element looks as if it is cognate with widespread Niger-Congo #**tom-**. |
| war | **syela** | |
| thing | **dɛ** | cf. Dyan **de** |
| inheritance | **pɔ̃** | |
| dream | **ɲɛsrã** | |
| hunger | **frɛ̃** | |
| dirt | **pyela** | |
| cold | **tɛtɛɣɛ** | |
| cold in head | **fɛŋro** | |
| smallpox | **gbawisi** | |
| world | **poni** | |
| spirit, soul | **ɲa** | |
| sky/God | **duɣu** | |
| sun | **sɛni** | Almost certainly related to the word for day (see below) with a similar association in Senufoid languages. |
| moon | **mɔ̃** | |
| road | **nã** | |
| house | **ɲini** | cf. **ɲĩɲɔ̀** in Jimini -but this is a unique form also. |
| wall | **ku** | |
| village | **yew** | |
| market | **powa** | |
| fat, oil | **dowa** | |
| palm-wine | **kɔmi** | |
| peel (fruit) | **kɛsɛ** | |
| tail | **se-w** | |
| horn | **gbɛ̃** | Perhaps cf. Kru forms such as Niabwa **gbòɔ́** or Aizi **gbeli**. |
| wing | **di-w** | ? |
| feather | **komu** | ? |
| egg | **kuŋuni** | ? |

**Time**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| morning | **tini** | |
| evening | **bisɔ** | |
| day | **sɛnnɛ** | A rare Senufoid root found in Fodonon **cɛ̀nɛ̃**, Nyarafolo **cɛ̀ngɛ̀** and Nafãára **cangà**. |
| night | **be** | |
| yesterday | **sa** | |
| today | **prã** | |
| dry season | **naɲyami** | |
| rainy season | **kruwami** | |

| Gloss | Bɛrɛ | External parallel (if any) |
|---|---|---|
| **Objects** | | |
| arrow | **fã** | |
| axe | **toŋmo** | |
| basket | **gbeŋmeɣe** | |
| broom | **pesi** | |
| chair | **gboŋmro** | |
| cloth | **pɛ̃́** | ? < French **pagne** |
| head-pad | **tiɣini** | |
| hoe | **ba-ɣa** | |
| iron | **fɛɣɛnɛ** | |
| knife | **sila** | |
| mat | **gbaɣa** | |
| mortar | **jɔɣɔni** | |
| net | **kra** | |
| porridge | **bomu** | |
| rope | **ɟese** | |
| sauce | **ti** | |
| thatch | **do** | |
| toothstick | **nɔɣɔsi** | |
| trap | **byɛ̃** | |
| winnowing tray | **sali** | |

**Adjectives**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| black | **bi** | A widespread Niger-Congo root (W. 206). However Rongier (ined.) gives **bìlí** for 'red' and there seems to be some confusion here. |
| new | **tɛnɛ** | |
| red | **syoli** | perhaps cf. Lobiri **da syɛ** although these are not common Gur forms. |
| small | **trɛ̀** | cf. Senufo **cɛ̀rɛ́** |
| large, big | **gbálà** | cf. Proto-Gbaya *gbà. Widespread but scattered Niger-Congo root |
| good | **ŋmǎ** | cf. Tagbana **kmaǎ**, |

**Numerals**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| one | **pĩ́dɔ́** | #-do is a common element in Mande for 'one' but this leaves the **pĩ** element unexplained. |
| two | **yɔ̀gɔ́** | cf. Avikam **áɲɔ́** but other Ivory Coast Kwa languages have related forms. Also Dompo **nyɔ̀ɔ̀** |
| three | **tã̃́gɔ́** | # tã̃́- is Niger-Congo and the -gɔ affix is apparently Pre (cf. 2,7) |
| four | **na** | #na- is Niger-Congo (W. 263) |
| five | **nū** | #-nu is Niger-Congo |
| six | **ni sĩ́ĩ́** | ? |
| seven | **ni yɔ̀gɔ́** | ? perhaps a compound of 5 + 2 |
| eight | **bɔ̃dɔɣɔna** | ? |
| nine | **krɔ̃dɔ** | < Bambara **korondo** |
| ten | **gbrĩ** | ? Unless connected with Westermann's (225) -guá- |
| twenty | **mwà** | |
| fifty | **bí lōōlū** | < Dyula **bi looru** |
| hundred | **kɛ́mɛ̀** | < Dyula **kɛ̀mɛ** |

| Gloss | Bɛrɛ | External parallel (if any) |
|---|---|---|
| **Verbs** | | |
| to ask for | **se, seni** | |
| to be big | **byɛ̃** | |
| to be long | **woli** | |
| to be quick | **kalɔ** | |
| to be ripe | **be** | |
| to be somewhere | **wɔ̀** | cf. Dyan **wɔ** |
| to be sour | **kórè** | |
| to be tired | **gbõ** | |
| to be wet | **yɛtrɔ** | |
| to beat | **ɲa** | |
| to bite | **nɔ** | cf. Kru Seme **nuõ**, Gur Basari **ŋmɔ**, |
| to blow | **poli** | |
| to braid | **mɛnɛ** | |
| to build | **sɔ̃** | |
| to buy | **sɛ̀ɛ̀** | cf. Dyula **sàn** |
| to call | **jre** | cf. Tyembara **jèrè** |
| to come | **ya** | |
| to come from | **su** | |
| to count | **sɛni** | |
| to cut | **sa** | cf. Nigerian Niger-Congo languages Yoruboid Yoruba **ʃá**, Nupoid Nupe **sá**, Kainji Lopa **sari**, Plateau Mada **săr** |
| to dig | **wɔ** | |
| to die | **fu** | cf. Niger-Congo Kru Kuwaa **fãlã**, Atlantic Temne **fi**, Ubangian P-Gbaya **\*fe** |
| to do | **pò** | cf. Tagbana **po**, |
| to drag | **kɔ** | |
| to dry | **fulɔ** | |
| to eat | **dɛ** | |
| to fall | **pre** | |
| to finish | **ta** | |
| to fire at | **tyeli** | |
| to fly | **file** | |
| to forget | **pɛ̃de** | |
| to gather | **frɛ̃** | |
| to get up | **file** | |
| to give | **so** | |
| to go down | **sĩde** | |
| to go in | **mi** | |
| to go to bed | **pĩde** | Lobi **pi** |
| to go up | **pɛ̃** | |
| to greet | **sĩ** | |
| to grow | **ɟe** | |
| to hear | **ɲĩdɔ** | |
| to help | **pɔɣɔlɔ** | |
| to hunt | **mrã** | |
| to insult | **myã** | |
| to jump | **yɛli** | |
| to kill | **ɟi** | |
| to know s.o. | **se** | |
| to laugh | **mã** | |
| to lay (eggs) | **ɟewu** | |

| Gloss | Bɛrɛ | External parallel (if any) |
|---|---|---|
| to leave | kiŋɛ | |
| to live | mɔŋɔ | |
| to look at | ɲrĩ | |
| to lose | ŋmɛnɛ | |
| to marry | gbe | |
| to melt | yaɣa | |
| to pass night | ɟo | |
| to pierce | du | cf. Kwa Ga dǔ, Nupoid Nupe tũ |
| to pound | we | |
| to push | kana | |
| to put in | wi | |
| to put on | sɔ̃ | |
| to put in ground | sɔ̃ | |
| to refuse (food) | kale | |
| to rot | pɔɣɔlɔ | Apparently some connection with Senufoid. cf. Nafara fɔ̀ɔ̀gɔ̀ and Lɔmaka fõlɔ |
| to run | lato | |
| to say, speak | te | cf. common Niger-Congo root ta- for 'narrate' |
| to search for | kɛ | |
| to see | ɲa | |
| to sell | ɟe | |
| to send back | mrã | |
| to shell | kɛli | |
| to shake | tiŋa | |
| to share | la | |
| to shave | wile | |
| to shout | tɛnɛ | |
| to show | ŋɔnɔ | |
| to sleep | lale | cf. Lobi dar, but widespread Niger-Congo |
| to snore | fini | |
| to sow | to | |
| to swallow | mɛ̃ | |
| to swell | foɣoli | |
| to take | kũ | |
| to throw away | bu | |
| to throw stones at | ta | widespread Niger-Congo for 'shoot, throw' |
| to turn over | sɛ̃ | |
| to vomit | kɔɣɔli | |
| to wake up | file | |
| to walk | ɲã | |
| to wash | boɣoli | |
| to wash body | ɟi | |
| to weave | mɛnɛ | |
| to weep | bye | |

**Miscellanea**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Inside | kɔ̀ndɔ́ | cf. Dyula kɔnɔ |

**Pronouns**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| I, me | ke | |
| you sg. | mì | cf. Senufo mɔ̃ |

| Gloss | Bɛrɛ | External parallel (if any) |
|---|---|---|
| **Q words** | | |
| | | |
| Here | **wɔna** | |
| How much? | **ɟyɛ̌** | cf. Dyula **jòlí**, Senufo **jòòrí**, Lobi **yemõ** |
| There | **lɔɣɔna** | |
| What? | **ya** | |
| When? | **yila** | |
| Where? | **bɛ** | |
| Who? | **ŋma** | |

## 3. The classification of Bɛrɛ

Bɛrɛ has a limited number of Niger-Congo cognates which are widespread; enough to suggest that it *is* Niger-Congo. Numerals 3,4,and 5 are all Niger-Congo. It has a set of frozen suffixes on nouns (-rV, -ɣV, -ŋV, -mV) and what look like unproductive verbal extensions (-li). As a consequence, it was probably originally a noun-class language. It has recent loans from Kru languages and somewhat older ones from Mande. I therefore propose that it be treated as a single-language branch of Niger-Congo, either branching off before Gur-Adamawa or co-ordinate with it. Figure 1 shows how this would look on a restructured tree of Niger-Congo.

**Figure 1. Niger-Congo restructured**