

Recovering data on Mpra [=Mpre] a possible language isolate in North-Central Ghana



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1. Introduction

The Mpra language of North-Central Ghana was first reported by Cardinall (1931) at which time it was already in the course of disappearing. Cardinall says; ‘well off the beaten track there lies in the Southern Province of the Northern Territories the curious village of Butie....Butie is the last survivor of a group of villages where long ago there dwelt the people called by themselves Mpre.’ With this fairy-tale opening, Cardinall goes on to describe the ruins of houses up to five stories high and underground cisterns or tanks cut out of the laterite. He does, however, also provide an interesting wordlist of the language.

Figure 1. Butei village sign



The only other record of Mpra is in an article by Goody (1963) who gives a short comparative wordlist of Mpre recorded in December 1956. Goody says that he checked Cardinall’s list with ‘the one remaining inhabitant said to have any knowledge of this language’. This was recorded in ‘Bute (or Butie) and in parts of Deber (e.g. Buruge)’. I am unsure where or what Deber is although Cardinall also mentions it. Both Cardinall and Goody record the name of the language as Mpre, but all my informants were clear the correct name was ‘Mpra’. I am at a loss to account for this difference. Whether this is a recent hyper-correction based on typical Twi names or just an error is unclear.

To see whether any speakers still existed, I visited the village of Butei (Bute in Goody) (Figure 1) on February 28th 2007¹. Butei can be reached from the main Tamale-Kintampo road, branching east towards Mpaha shortly after the Fulfulso junction leading to Damongo, and between the two branches of the Volta. Butei is some 20 km. from the main tarmac road (Figure 2).

Somewhat to my surprise, the several elderly residents of the village freely admitted to being ‘Mpra’ and were able to produce a very small amount of lexicon, but also the initial phrases of a number of proverbs in the Mpra language (Table 2). The contact as well as the main language of Butei was Gonja and Dukulbi, Muhammed Seidi and Jimawe kindly acted as my interpreters. The five ‘rememberers’ of Mpra were;

Chief Abudu Ata
Mary Traba
Tentenso (F.)
Lansiche (F.)
Agbefo (M.)

Figure 2. Location of Butei and Tuluwe



who are shown in Figure 3. The chief also noted that there was formerly another village of speakers of the language at a place in the bush known as Kulusu Bito. This village has now dispersed and the site cannot be reached by road. The creation of the Volta Lake in the 1970s has radically altered the geography of this region and further villages across the river might once have existed.

¹ Although I had been planning a trip to search for the Mpre for some years, the immediate stimulus was Mary-Esther Kropp-Dakubu’s account of her quest in Tuluwe, which I had seen only a few days previously across the river near Mpaha. My thanks to her for discussion and hospitality.

Figure 3. The last remaining 'rememberers' of Mpra in Butei

There are now no traces of the tall and intricate houses described by Cardinall and my enquiries met with no response. However, a more extensive prospecting in the nearby bush might well reveal the ruins Cardinall mentions. Similarly with the underground cisterns, these may well exist; similar tanks are now a stop on the Salaga tourist trail although they only date from the slaving era in the nineteenth century.

Goody (1963:178) also notes the existence of another language, Mpur, spoken in 'Tuluwe and Kusawgu division' but records that 'no one now appears to speak this language'. Prof. Mary-Esther Kropp-Dakubu of the University of Ghana at Legon was able to visit Tuluwe in February 2007 and was able to confirm that another language seems once to have been spoken there. Political issues concerning the legitimacy of the local Gonja chief prevented the recording of more than a couple of words, but they do not resemble Mpra and this language may have been altogether different. It seems likely that more could be recorded of this language if it proves possible to overcome local inhibitions.

2. Mpra lexical data from Cardinall and Goody

Table 1 presents all the lexical data in Cardinall and Goody. Cardinall is the primary source, original items in Goody and differences in transcription are marked with G. The external parallels are drawn mainly from Hérault (1983) and Cansdale (1971) as well as the Gonja dictionary of Rytz (n.d.). The comparison with Dompò are based on my own unpublished field data².

Table 1. Mpra lexical data

English gloss	Mpre	External parallel (if any)
Body Parts		
arm	ebopa	cf. Avikam èbǒ
eyes	anisi	
fingers	ataza	cf. Ega etá
foot	eputo nasi	
hair	nmin	
hand	eno	
palm of hand	G. ebaga	
head	zekpa	
leg	eputo	

² A wordlist of Dompò can be downloaded for my website. I would like to acknowledge an unpublished paper by Paul Whitehouse which first drew attention to the parallels between Dompò and Mpra animal names.

English gloss	Mpre	External parallel (if any)
mouth	nchumu	
nose	masuma	
skin	ekuli	No clear Kwa cognates but a #-kul- root for 'skin' is widespread all over Africa.
toe	atazai	
tongue	nchuma	
teeth	ate	
People		
child	nzui	
earth-priest	sunko kawuseggi G. kawuziggi	
father	chichi G. tʃitʃi	
mother	emo G. mɔmɔ	cf. Adyukru mów
son	nkemnzu G. ndzi	cf. Adyukru džím
man	G. esana	cf. Baule sɾâ
woman	ejo G. edʒo	cf. Adyukru jów
Plants		
cassava	wanchi	< Twi
corn (=maize)	aza	
sorghum	G. abo'o	
millet	avue	
calabash	G. esokpaliga	
shea-nut	gwizi	
shea-butter	ngu	cf. Alladian ngū . Nzema and Abidji have similar forms
silk-cotton tree	ejini	
tobacco	asara	
tree	eyia	? cf. Ebrie áyá
yam	ampi	
Animals		
animal	abrimapre	
bee	zinwi	
bird	bobo	
bushbuck	chankpala	cf. Gonja caɲpəla
bush-cat	bata	
bush-cow	zingilzinogha	
bush-pig	juro	
cow	nogha G. na'uwo	widespread in West Africa, e.g. Fulfulde <i>nagge</i>
dog	tebe	? cf. Avikam ètyé
donkey	kwimi	cf. Dompō kunumɔ
duiker	kukru	
duiker, red	pumpu	
elephant	ewogo	
fish	enchini	< Abbron àcíní
fowl	kohor G. kowɔ	
goat	ade G. ade	
guinea-fowl	aiyili	
hartebeest	junga	cf. Dompō cɔŋ
hippopotamus	chaji	cf. Dompō ca
honey	byunkonkon	

English gloss	Mpre	External parallel (if any)
horse	vema G. kumia	
hyena	jingachi	
kob	volò	cf. Dompò fulòfulò
leopard	jankamma	
lion	jikpajikpakoseggi	
locust	tintumba	
oribi	wulo	cf. Dompò wulon
reedbuck	kurunku	
roan antelope	bruguni	? cf. Dompò burun ‘waterbuck’
scorpion	lemma	
sheep	G. fɛɛ	
snake	ewoa	cf. Avikam wō , Abbron òwò but also widespread Niger-Congo root #ewa

Natural World

fire	eja	cf. Avikam éja
rain (it rains)	agbem aba	
water	nkaw G. nkwo	
earth	sunko G. sunkwoi	
God	agbem G. agbun	
sun	ezol G. edzul	
moon	nnopava	
stars	achepreza	
tail	edu	? cf. Nzema dùàlè

Objects

arrow	ncho	
axe	etile	
bow	etawa	-ta- element is a widespread Niger-Congo root for ‘bow’
bush	zingelza	
cloth	busa	
cowry	amuseraga	
farm	ebaza	
hat	yiculwi (RMB)	
hoe	enwona G. danwena	
house	eso	cf. Avikam ésǎ
iron	epolebona	
loin-cloth	dakor	
compound	G. ezo	
village	adebanza	

Adjectives

black	ziri	
white	fuli	Widespread Niger-Congo root #-ful-
red	ejuli	

English gloss	Mpra	External parallel (if any)
Numerals		
one	ekpe	
two	enyo G. enyo	cf. Avikam áńǎ but other Ivory Coast Kwa languages have related forms. Also Dompō nyǎǎ
three	eta	Widespread Niger-Congo root #-ta but only Ega (ità) has this root in Kwa
four	ena	cf. Avikam àńá but reflecting a widespread Niger-Congo root #-na
five	enu	cf. Eotile ànù but also other Kwa languages and further a widespread Niger-Congo root #-nu
six	grume G. gurumi	
seven	ɲpa	
eight	nenengene G. nelenjele	
nine	gokpa G. bokpa	The difference between the two versions suggests that the correct form was <i>gbokpa</i> .
ten	edu	? < Abbron dú?
eleven	edu bili mpe	
twenty	ado nyo	< Abbron àdyònǔ
hundred	kelafa	
two hundred	lefanyo	
thousand	agbu	? cf. Mbatto āgǎě

The external parallels are very perplexing. There are a very few Gonja loans, as also some from Abbron (Brong in Ghana). The Abbron do not border the Mpra today, but the situation may have been different in the past, especially if the Mpra are migrants from further west, as some of the other lexical similarities seem to suggest. Mary-Esther Kropp Dakubu (p.c.) has discovered that Kandarle, a language spoken in a single village near Salaga, is in fact a dialect of Brō and probably results from a group fleeing Techiman some two centuries ago after a chieftaincy dispute.

There are also a few very specific parallels with the names of animals in the Dompō language. Dompō is spoken by about seventy people in one quarter of Banda, in west-central Ghana close to the border with Cote d'Ivoire. The map in Goody (1963:184) shows a substantial area of Dompō spoken along what would today be the main road towards Techiman, southwest of the Mpaha junction. It is doubtful if there was ever such an extensive population there, to judge by the remnant group I recorded in Banda in 1998. Dompō is generally so close to Gonja as to be simply a dialect, but in the area of hunted animals, it has a quite distinct vocabulary. The explanation for this is unclear; were the Dompō originally a separate group of hunters who switched language to Gonja but retained their own words for large animals? Or were these names originally part of a specialised speech-form that have been incorporated into everyday speech? Whatever the case, the parallels with Mpra are puzzling. The two languages seem to share no other vocabulary, so perhaps the antelope names were part of a common language of hunters, picked up by the Mpra on their migrations. This phenomenon is not unknown; for example, the Idoma and Igala languages in Nigeria share a number of terms for large animals even though the languages themselves are not closely related.

However, the most notable source of parallels with Mpra is Avikam, a language spoken along the coastal lagoons of Cote d'Ivoire west of Abidjan (Hérault 1983b). Some of the lexical similarities are only shared with Avikam, to judge by Hérault (1983a), others are also found in other coastal languages such as Eotile, Adyukru and Nzema. Strangely, the parallels with Adyukru are only in the field of kinship. Figure 4 shows the location of these languages.

Overall, a large proportion of the vocabulary of Mpra has no evident source. It therefore seems likely that the similarities to Lagoon languages might be ancient loans rather than true genetic cognates, particularly as many are extremely close in form and there are no obvious regular sound changes. In this Mpra resembles Ega, which has limited cognates with Kwa, but a large amount of idiosyncratic vocabulary.

How is this to be explained? Mpra may either be a Niger-Congo isolate branch like the similarly named but unrelated Mbri language in Cote d'Ivoire or it may be an isolate language, such as Bangi Me in Mali. It is probably impossible to decide between these alternatives on the limited data available. However, it is becoming increasingly

clear that the notion that a language can be assigned to an overarching category such as Niger-Congo on the basis of a few cognates is simply false, or this would certainly lead to misclassification in other regions of the world. It is perfectly possible that Mpra *is* simply an isolate that has taken on colours from the languages with which it has interacted.

The cognates or loans from Lagoon languages are surely a record of the original homeland of the Mpra, who presumably lived along the sea-coast. Cardinall mentions hunters named by oral tradition, but nothing like this. Figure 4 shows the languages mentioned in the text and a possible migration route that would bring the Mpra to their present location while allowing contact with the relevant languages. This depends on the assumption that the configuration of languages in the past was much as it is today, which remains to be argued.

Figure 4. Proposed migration of the Mpra people



3. Mpra data from 2007 field trip

The following Mpra data were recorded at Butei on 28th February 2007. Only one individual lexical item was recovered, given in Table 1. The remainder was in exclamations and phrases which were the said to be the first clause of proverbs. These were run together in modern pronunciation, so the exact word division is guesswork. I was given the overall sense of the proverb and this is given in column 3 below. Table 2 shows the Mpra phrases recorded in Butei;

Table 2. Mpra phrases recorded in Butei

Mpra	Translation	Proverbial completion
Mōnta fəla təga	I am a friend to you	
Sɪŋkpe kaw riziri	I am the chief of the village	
Jire digi	I feel very thirsty	[and therefore I might drink dirty water]
Nya ja ta	When you are feeling satisfied	[you can give people things out of charity]
Nyin purase	said to have exactly the same meaning as the previous phrase	
Agbɔ rugbɔ, nyen direki	When you are poor, you aren't regarded well in the community	
Dɛŋkəri	When you come to a village	[the people may seem of good character, but just stay with them and you will see more clearly']
Dabinyam burso	When I get rich	[I will resemble my peers]
Kamba raja	If you go to a poor man	[for help, you won't get what you want]
P ^o laza	Turn your back!	
Peku maji	Someone who suffers too much	[won't eat]
Alamane	It is nothing!	
Anwaso?	What do I do?	
Ametɛ kuri	Only God	[can disgrace a human being]

Unfortunately, it is difficult to draw any conclusions from this data, as none of the words or morphemes obviously resemble those in Table 1. Even the phrases in Table 2 said to begin with the pronoun 'I' do not yield an analysable morpheme. However, the phrases no longer make sense as words to the Mpra people, so it may be that the translations are very free.

4. Conclusions

Several points emerge from the analysis of the data. The first is that Mpra seems to have been a real language, produced consistently between Cardinall, Goody and my informants over a period of nearly eighty years. There is no evidence it was a ritual, coded or other type of non-genetic speech-form.

Some items in the Mpra vocabulary show striking similarities to words in languages spoken along the sea-coast of Cote d'Ivoire, especially in the lagoon areas. It is unclear whether these are loans or evidence of a genetic connection, but it can be concluded the Mpra migrated from this region and that they interacted with different Kwa-speaking groups along their route. The high numbers of words with no obvious external parallel open up the possibility that Mpra is a language isolate and that its Niger-Congo cognates are borrowings. If so, then this might be apparent in its formers speakers' genetic profile, which should be studied from the point of view of both nuclear and mtDNA. There would appear to be no barrier to this if the correct permission is sought and the community gives its assent.

It is possible that more of Mpra could be recovered in Tuluwe or some other villages in the region, although the fragmentary information also raises the possibility that another, distinct language was spoken in Tuluwe. However, it would certainly be worth making a further visit both to Butei and the other villages in this region to try and record any more lexicon or oral traditions that might throw further light on this surprising group.

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