

Bantoid languages in Koelle's Polyglotta Africana

Roger Blench

Sigismund Koelle (1823-1902) was the first to present a major comparative vocabulary of the languages of West-Central Africa, based on the language spoken by freed slaves in Sierra Leone. Koelle (1854) clearly recognised the unity of Bantu and the vocabularies he collected are grouped together. He also collected a significant number of Bantoid languages, for which this is the first record in many cases. The Bantoid languages are split between the Mókō languages (IX) and Unclassified South African (XII.E). In the case of the Mókō group all the Grassfields languages, except, surprisingly, Nsɔ are grouped together with Bantu A group languages such as Duala. In the case of 'Unclassified South African' (scattered individual vocabularies from different Bantoid subgroups) the listing includes what would now be called East Benue-Congo languages. Dalby (1964) provisionally identified some the languages recorded in Koelle but left question marks in respect of others. Some names appear as alternates in the Ethnologue, but are again clearly not always the language listed by Koelle. Table 1 lists Koelle's original classification and name, Dalby's identification, my identification or else the current name where Dalby is correct and the Bantoid subgroup of the language in question;

Table 1. Bantoid languages in Koelle (1854)

Group	Koelle's name	Dalby	Current	Bantoid subgroup
Mókō	Ba:yoŋ ¹	Bate?	? Limbum, Kwaja, Mbə	Nkambe, Grassfields
	Ba:yoŋ of Pa:ti	Bate?	? Limbum, Kwaja, Mbə	Nkambe, Grassfields
	Kum/Bakum ²	?	? Kako A. 90	Bantu
	Ba:gba	?	Bati ?	Nun, Grassfields
	Ba:lu	Bali/Ngaaka ₃	Baba'	Nun, Grassfields
	Bamom/Mom	Bamum	Shu Paməm	Nun, Grassfields
	Ŋgoa:la	Bangongola	Bangolan ⁴	Nun, Grassfields
	Mo:menya/Ba:men ya	?	Bamenyam	Nun, Grassfields
	Pa:pi:ax/Moba	Baba	Baba	Nun, Grassfields
	Pa:gham	Bagam	Məngaka	Bamileke, Grassfields
Unclassified South African	Dja:rawa/ Nyamnyam	Jarawa	Jar	Jarawan
	Ŋki:	Bokyi	Bokyi	Bendi
	Alege	Alege	Alege	Bendi
	Bute	Vute	Vute	Mambiloid
	Ndɔb/Buruke:m	Tikar	Ndɔp	Tikar
	Tumu	Tikar	Twumwu	Tikar
	Koŋgu:aŋ/ɔku:I	Banyangi	Kenyang	Nyang
	Tiwi/Mi:dji/ Mbi:dji/Difū	Tiv	Tiv	Tivoid
	Nshɔ	Nsaw	Nsɔ	Ring

The main source for identifying Grassfields is the comparative database prepared by Cameron Hamm. The fit is not perfect; the Nun languages are very close to one another and the modern data is often rather variably transcribed.

¹ Koelle (1854) has two wordlists of a language he calls Bāyon' and this is listed as an alternative name for Ndemli in the Ethnologue. However, Koelle's list is clearly not Ndemli, although it is a Grassfields language.

² An obvious identification would be the Grassfields language Kom, but Koelle's data do not match this language.

³ Despite Dalby's identification this language is clearly not Bali Mungaka

⁴ A key lexeme is the word for 'eye', *ndi* in Koelle and *ndihi* in the available wordlist. This shift from the more usual *li* appears to be quite distinctive.