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Conceptualizing vegetation in the Bantu Expansion: Reflections on linguistics in central African history

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ABSTRACT

The state of linguistics research on human settlement in central Africa suggests that rainforest environments were undesirable locations for settlement for many of the early speech communities associated with the extension of Bantu-speaking populations and languages into the region. Explanations for this preference tend to focus on the presumed challenge of adapting the earliest Bantu savanna subsistence system to the new rainforest environment. Recent syntheses incorporating linguistic, archaeological, and paleoclimatic evidence argue that periods of climate change encouraged the growth of wooded savanna, secondary forest, and grasslands at the margins and even in heart of the rainforest; these more open environments may have facilitated the expansion of Bantu languages into the through central Africa. A re-analysis of three previously proposed lexical reconstructions, however, reveals that early Bantu words for generic forms of vegetation (forests, thickets, trees, and the bush) offer key insights into the changing ways that Bantu speakers conceptualized and valued uninhabited spaces and areas of dense vegetation even as the majority of Bantu speakers elected to settle within intercalary zones of wooded savanna, secondary forest, and grasslands located throughout the rainforest.

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1. Introduction

The communities whose histories we seek in the warm, humid forests of equatorial Africa were oral societies up to the mid-to late 20th century. Indeed, many communities in the remoter forests are largely oral societies today. Language is, therefore, an important form of evidence illuminating human-rainforest interactions, in both the present through ethnography and in deeper pasts across much longer time scales through oral historical and historical linguistic analysis. Our understanding of human–forest interactions in early central African history has grown tremendously since the early 1990s as a result of a number of innovative collaborations and new methodological approaches. The advent of genetics research (see [Perry and Verdu, in this volume](#)) and, in the case of historical linguistics, new phylogenetic methods for classifying the Bantu and Bantoid languages that dominate this region of Africa (e.g. [Holden and Gray, 2006](#); [Rexová et al., 2006](#); [Currie et al., 2013](#); [Grollemund et al., 2015](#)) have brought new energy to the study of the demographic history of the central African forests. This contribution reviews the state of research on linguistic reconstructions of

human settlement in the central African forests. It then describes the kinds of historical information embedded in two unique forms of linguistic evidence—the classification of language families and the vocabulary that can be reconstructed to particular nodes within the linguistic classification—and what those forms of linguistic evidence reveal about human-rainforest relationships, particularly with respect to the spread of Bantu languages and speakers into and beyond the African equatorial forests millennia before the present day.

Scholarship on the historical development of Bantu languages and on the settlement history of the rainforests are deeply entwined for the simple reason that the central African forests lie between the homeland of Bantu speech located to the northwest of the forests, near the boundary of modern-day Nigeria and Cameroon, and areas of later settlement to the south and east, in and beyond the rainforests. Thus, the rainforests stand quite literally at the center of the story of Bantu language history. Two models accounting for this spread of Bantu languages have dominated scholarship since the 1970s (compare, for example, [Ehret, 2001](#) to [Nurse and Philippson, 2003](#) and consider cites therein). In the “East next to West” scenario, proto-Bantu split into two coordinate branches with the languages of the western branch spreading into the central African forest and the eastern branch skirting the

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northern fringes of the forest before spreading throughout eastern and southern Africa from a secondary nucleus in the western Great Lakes region. In the “East out of West” scenario, there is no West Bantu branch coordinate with East Bantu. Rather, the Bantu languages spread in a successive series of splits across central Africa, with East Bantu eventually emerging as a rather late clade, itself splitting as eastern Bantu languages spread from the savannas south of the rainforests into eastern and southern Africa. These scenarios arise from the different ways scholars have classified the Bantu languages to account for their historical development, but they were also shaped by prevailing ideas about rainforest ecology and subsistence economies.

The unique characteristics of the rainforest environment and of rainforest–human interactions have long been important in debates about the pace and paths of the spread of Bantu languages and the settlement of central Africa. The earliest Bantu-speaking communities lived in savanna environments in Cameroon that were fairly similar to the savannas into which later Bantu-speaking communities spread in eastern and southern Africa. The differences between rainforest subsistence systems and those of the savanna created something of a problem in the Bantu Expansions story. In both expansion scenarios, the rainforest was understood as something of a barrier that slowed the spread of some Bantu languages and speakers and, in the “East next to West” model, diverted the paths of others. The different role of the rainforest environment in the two expansion scenarios—as a hindrance or even an impasse—were debated at the same time that the viability of forest lifeways were also in dispute (compare, for example, Bahuchet et al., 1991; Headland and Bailey, 1991; Noss, 1997; Yasuoka, 2006). All of these debates about settlement and livelihood in the central African forests illustrated the persistence of a much older bipartite view of the forest as either inhospitable or a diverse, rich landscape (Vansina, 1990; Klieman, 2003).

Debates about Bantu language classifications, settlement in the rainforests, and the relative productivity of different forest resources and subsistence activities continue today. If recent classifications route the Bantu Expansion through the forests (e.g. Ehret, 2001; Currie et al., 2013), a new synthesis complicates the role of the rainforest in that story with evidence for the opening of savanna environments in different periods. This synthesis, discussed in greater detail below, argues that linguistic classifications and reconstructed vocabulary for subsistence economies and specific vegetation species combined with archaeological, biogeographic, palynological evidence indicate that the majority of communities associated with the spread of Bantu languages through central, eastern, and southern Africa avoided settling in rainforest environments and purposefully followed savanna environments with which they were already familiar (cf. Currie et al., 2013; Bostoen et al., 2015; Grollemund et al., 2015). Even if the main backbone of the Bantu Expansion spread through central Africa, it would seem from this research that rainforest environments were undesirable locations for settlement for a large portion of the successive speech communities associated with the extension of Bantu-speaking populations and languages across the continent.

Explanations for this preference focus on the presumed challenge of adapting subsistence technologies to new environments (e.g. Grollemund et al., 2015). But foregrounding the emergence of new savanna zones blinds us to the potential value of the diversity of environments and, therefore, of subsistence activities available within a few days' walk to those Bantu speakers who settled in emerging savannas and open woodlands in the equatorial forests. A reanalysis of three previously proposed word reconstructions, however, reveals that early Bantu words for generic categories of vegetation—namely, forests, thickets, trees, and “the bush”—offer

key insights into the changing ways that Bantu speakers conceptualized and valued uninhabited spaces and areas of dense vegetation, even if the bulk of Bantu speaking communities focused their settlement on savanna environments. Instead of merely following the savanna, might Bantu speakers have been attracted to the close proximity of the diversity of environments available near the new savanna and open woodland landscapes created by climate change? We may well find that it was not so much that Bantu speakers' settlement was shaped by the availability of savanna environments, as Grollemund et al. argue (2015), but that the unique qualities of the interface between open and closed vegetation in central Africa facilitated both familiar savanna lifeways and novel combinations of subsistence activities; these new interface environments both preserved savanna lifeways that were eventually carried south of the forests and facilitated the innovation of forest lifeways that were eventually carried into areas of denser vegetation, as Grollemund et al. point out (2015). But we cannot understand the relative significance of savanna ecotones to the motives of Bantu speaking communities without considering what the communities involved in this demographic process themselves thought about the kinds of environments in which they settled. The contribution of this think piece is a research agenda that places culturally and historically contingent ideas about settlement and landscape alongside the equally important analysis of relationships between climate, environment, and language history as we seek to better understand humans' relationships with their environments in the central African rainforests and beyond. To do this, we need to first understand what kind of information languages supply about the historical relationships between people and environments.

2. Historical linguistics and human history

Linguistic evidence offers us an array of information about human experience in the central African rainforest, including two kinds of data from which we can learn about historical human-rainforest relationships in central Africa: classifications and reconstructed vocabulary. Classifications describe historical relationships among extant languages. Scholars have analyzed the locations of extant languages (which constitute the last stage of language differentiation in the classification) to reconstruct regional settlement histories in very broad terms, a point to which we will return in a moment (for Africa, consider: Nurse, 1997; Ehret, 2010; Dimmendaal, 2011). Such linguistically-derived settlement histories can then be compared to archaeological evidence for settlement, subsistence, political organization, and so forth (among examples relating to this region, compare: Vansina, 1990; Klieman, 2003; Currie et al., 2013; Bostoen et al., 2015; Grollemund et al., 2015; for other approaches, see: Ehret, 1998; Schoenbrun, 1998; de Luna, 2012). Of course, the methods by which languages are compared and classified also yield critical information about contact among related languages and between languages that are not related to one another.

Historical linguists can also reconstruct parts of the vocabulary that belonged to the ancestral languages, or protolanguages, represented as the nodes of a linguistic classification. Briefly, a word's phonological shape and distribution in extant languages determine whether it existed in the vocabulary of the speakers of the protolanguages represented in the classification. A word's phonological shape and distribution also tell us which of three historical processes is responsible for its presence in that branch: inheritance, internal innovation, or borrowing from other languages (Nurse, 1997; Ehret, 2010; Dimmendaal, 2011). After determining when a word was produced within the language history illustrated in the classification, and by what process, historians, linguists, and archaeologists then use that information to tell a story with broad

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