Week 1: Bantu Overview, Swahili Morphology

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1 Bantu Overview

1.1 Geography

By some estimates, there are about 450 Bantu languages, spoken in 27 African countries, by about 240 million speakers.

See Wikipedia map for distribution.

(1) Top 10 Bantu languages by number of native speakers
(Adapted from information on <http://www.bantu-languages.com>.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Rwanda</td>
<td>9.3 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Zulu</td>
<td>9.1 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Shona</td>
<td>8.3 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Xhosa</td>
<td>6.9 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Luba/Kasai</td>
<td>6.3 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Rundi</td>
<td>6 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Gikuyu</td>
<td>5.4 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Swahili</td>
<td>5 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Nyanja/Chewa</td>
<td>5 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Sukuma</td>
<td>5 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.2 Genetics

(2) Bantu classification (Adapted from information on <http://www.bantu-languages.com>.)

Zone A: South Cameroon and North Gabon.
Zone B: South Gabon and West Congo-B.
Zone C: North-West, North and Central Congo. Longo, Lingala.
Zone D: North-East, East Congo-K and Rwanda-Burundi. Ruanda, Rundi, Lega.
Zone E: South Uganda, South-West Kenya and North-West Tanzania. Ganda, Gikuyu, Koria, Jita, Meru, Giryama.
Zone F: North and West Tanzania. Sukuma, Nyamwezi.
1.3 Some characteristics of Bantu languages

Here are some characteristics of the Bantu languages. By the end of the course you will be able to think of a lot of other syntactic and morphological commonalities on your own.

1.3.1 Common vocabulary

There is a certain amount of common vocabulary across the family, especially in basic items:

(3) Some vocabulary items in common

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zulu</th>
<th>Swahili</th>
<th>Ganda</th>
<th>Lingala</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ukupheka</td>
<td>kupika</td>
<td>ōkubiza</td>
<td>-lámba</td>
<td>“to cook”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ukulima</td>
<td>kulima</td>
<td>ōkulima</td>
<td>-tima</td>
<td>“to farm, grow (crops)”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ukubona</td>
<td>kuona</td>
<td>ōkūlabā</td>
<td>-mōna</td>
<td>“to see”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>umuthi</td>
<td>mti</td>
<td>ōmũti</td>
<td>njetē</td>
<td>“tree”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>imbuzi</td>
<td>mbuzi</td>
<td>ōmbuzi</td>
<td>ntaba</td>
<td>“goat”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-bili</td>
<td>-wili</td>
<td>-birī</td>
<td>mfbalē</td>
<td>“two”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-thathu</td>
<td>-tatu</td>
<td>-satū</td>
<td>mísātu</td>
<td>“three”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But don’t think for a minute that you can understand even the most basic texts in one language on the basis of your knowledge of another:

(4) Some very basic vocabulary items not in common

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zulu</th>
<th>Swahili</th>
<th>Ganda</th>
<th>Lingala</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>intombazane</td>
<td>msichana</td>
<td>ōmũwalā</td>
<td>mwána mwási</td>
<td>“girl”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inkosikazi</td>
<td>mwanamke</td>
<td>ōmũkazi</td>
<td>mwási</td>
<td>“woman”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>igazi</td>
<td>damu</td>
<td>ōmusayi</td>
<td>makilá</td>
<td>“blood”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>izinyembezi</td>
<td>machozi</td>
<td>amazigā</td>
<td>mísoli</td>
<td>“tear(s)”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Little cross-borrowing for modern concepts:

(5) Unrelated vocabulary for modern concepts

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1 Ganda items are from (Kitching and Blackledge. 1952), Lingala items from (Guthrie and Carrington 1988).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zulu</th>
<th>Swahili</th>
<th>Ganda</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>umongameli</td>
<td>rais</td>
<td>ômûkûbirizi</td>
<td>“president”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u-television, umabonakude</td>
<td>televisheni, runinga</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>“television”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ukushaya ucingo, ukufonela verb</td>
<td>kupiga simu verb</td>
<td>êssimû noun</td>
<td>“telephone”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See appendix for Guthrie’s (1970) reconstructions of ∗-jɨ/*-nɨ “water” and ∗-jɨə- “know”.

1.3.2 Noun classes

Noun classes in Makonde:

(6) malîná láángu (6+) “my names” (Kraal (2005), p. 105)
    dinjáá dúyáángu (10) “my nets”

Noun classes in Zulu:

(7) a. Abafana abancane bazofunda.
    boys small will.read books big
    “The little boys will read.”

b. Abafana abancane bazozifunda izincwadi ezinkulu.
    boys small will.read books big
    “The little boys will read the big books.”

c. Amantombazane amancane azozifunda izincwadi ezinkulu.
    girls small will.read books big
    “The little boys will read the big books.”

d. Amantombazane amancane azolifunda iphephandaba elikhulu.
    girls small will.read newspaper big
    “The little boys will read the big newspaper.”

Kikuyu (Benson 1964) concord table in the appendix.

1.3.3 SVO word order typology

SVO. While certain interesting inversion constructions exist, the canonical (basic) word order in most Bantu languages is SVO.

(8) vá- váana váalé ntandaasa (Makonde)
    CONN- children 2.eat.OPT cassava.porridge
    “the children should eat cassava porridge” (Kraal (2005), p. 334)

N Adj.

(9) npindo nuééhu (Makonde)
    piece.of.cloth long
    “a long cloth” (Kraal (2005), p. 337)
1.3.4 CV syllable structure

Observe any of the examples we’ve already seen. Typical features are:

- Overwhelmingly predominant CV syllable structure.
- No consonant clusters like *str* or *bl*.
- No consonant gemination contrast.

Note, however:

- Orthographic sequences like *mb*, *nd*, etc. typically represent a single, prenasalized con-
  sonant.
- Some languages have limited syllabic nasals and coda (syllable-final) nasals.
- Some languages have a length contrast in vowels.

**Challenge.** Find a Bantu language that has any of these words: *blump, imple, slast*.

1.3.5 Tone

Most Bantu languages are tonal, though some (like Swahili) aren’t.

**Lexical tone.**

(10) ma-hindíili “cooking stoves” (Makonde, Kraal (2005), p. 101)
ma-kumbaátu “fee”

**Grammatical tone.**

(11) tu-na-líma “we cultivate” (?) (Makonde, Kraal (2005), p. 296)
tú-ná-líma “we cultivated” (p. 298)

Don’t be deceived by orthography:

(12) Zulu imperative morpheme
[cula] “sing”:
úyàcùlà “you’re singing”, úcùlfì “you sang”, úrìcùlò “song”
cùlá! “sing!”

Just because you don’t see anything in the orthography doesn’t mean that there isn’t a mor-
pheme. We still need to decide if and how the morpheme fits in our syntactic structure.
1.3.6 Verbal derivation

Bantu languages typically have verbal suffixes that change the argument structure of the verb, such as:

- **passive, stative**: These remove an argument.

  \[(13)\]
  a. Maryamu₁ a- me- nunu- a kitabu₂. (Swahili)
  Maryamu 1.SBJ- PERF- buy- FV 7.book
  “Maryamu₁ has bought a book₂.”
  
  b. Kitabu₂ ki- me- nunu- liw- a.
  7.book 7.SBJ- PERF- buy- PSV- FV
  “The book₂ has been bought.”

- **reciprocal**: This removes a lexical object position.

  \[(14)\]
  a. Lori₁ i- na- pit- a motokaa₂. (Swahili)
  9.lorry 9.SBJ- PRES- pass FV 9.car
  “The lorry passes the car.”
  
  b. Lori₁ na motokaa₂ zi- na- pit- an- a.
  9.lorry and 9.car 10.SBJ- PRES- pass- RECIP- FV
  “[The lorry₁ and the car₂] pass each other.”

- **causative, applicative (prepositional)**: These add an argument.

  \[(15)\]
  a. Maryamu₁ a- me- nunu- a kitabu₂. (Swahili)
  Maryamu 1.SBJ- PERF- buy- FV 7.book
  “Maryamu₁ has bought a book₂.”
  
  b. Maryamu₁ a- me- wa- nunu- li- a watoto₃ kitabu₂.
  “Maryamu₁ has bought the children₃ a book₂.”

\[(16)\] Makonde verbal derivation

  
  b. Applicative: -himba “dig”, -himbila “dig for” (p. 177)

1.3.7 Tense and aspect prefixes (TAM)

\[(17)\] tu-ká-liile “we have not eaten” (Kraal (2005), p. 203)
  
  pa-tú-ká-liile “when we have not eaten”
  
  tw-á-ní-yangaátwae “we had helped long ago”
1.3.8 Applying what we’ve learnt

On the basis of these commonalities, it is easy to come up with a very plausible imaginary Bantu language of your very own! Here is a proverb from Gonda (Sigonda), an endangered language spoken principally in the picturesque imaginary village of Malolongo in the north of Malawi:


11.clay NEG- 11.SBJ say- NEG to- 1.potter 1S.SBJ- COP- 7.clay.pot

“The clay does not say to the potter, ‘I am a cooking pot.’” (That is, it is the parents’ purview to decide their child’s future.)

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2 For information on the fictitious Bantu language Ku, created for a commercial purpose by Said el-Gheithy, do a search on “kidman said ku bantu language” in your favourite search engine.
2 Swahili Morphology

2.1 Noun classes, adjective and verb agreement

   book  small  be.suitable
b. Kiazi kikubwa kitatosha. “The big potato will be enough.”
   potato  big  be.enough
c. Kitunguu kikubwa kilitosha. “The big onion was enough.”
   onion  big  be.enough
d. Kitunguu kidogo hakitosha. “The little onion will not be enough.”
   onion  small  be.enough
e. Vitunguu vidogo vitoza. “The little onions will go rotten.”
   onions  little  go.rotten
f. Vitabu vizuri vitosha. “The nice books will be enough.”
   books  big  be.enough
g. Vinofu vidogo vilitosha. “The little pieces of meat were enough.”
   pieces.of.meat  small  be.enough
h. Mayai mazuri yalifaa. “The nice eggs were suitable.”
   eggs  nice  be.suitable
i. Yai zuri lilifaa. “The nice egg was suitable.”
   egg  nice  be.suitable
j. Watu wawili hawatapika. “Two people won’t cook.”
   people two  cook

(20) Translate:

a. “big potatoes”

b. “two books”

c. “little eggs”

d. “The nice piece of meat went rotten.”

e. “The little potatoes were suitable.”
3 Languages cited

Information was culled from <http://ethnologue.org>. Figures include second language speakers and have been rounded. Figures may be manipulated in other ways. (For example, I have combined the Ethnologue entries for Swahili and Congo Swahili.)

Gikuyu. E.20, 5,300,000 speakers, spoken in Kenya.

Lingala. C.40, 2,000,000 speakers, spoken in the DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo).

Ganda. J.10, 3,000,000 speakers, spoken in Uganda.

Makonde. P.20, 1,400,000 speakers, spoken in Tanzania.

Swahili. G.40, 40,000,000 speakers, spoken mainly in Tanzania, Kenya, DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo).

Zulu. Guthrie S.40, 24,300,000 speakers, spoken mainly in South Africa.

References


4  Zulu morphology exercise

    sing

  b.  Siyadla. “We’re eating.”
    eat

    child sing

  d.  Abantwana badlile. “The children ate.”
    children eat

  e.  Umfana uyadla. “The boy is eating.”
    boy eat

    girl sing

  g.  Amantombazane ayalalela. “The girls are listening.”
    girls listen

  h.  Abafana balalelile. “The boys listened.”
    boys listen

    woman sing Q yes

(22)  Translate:

  a.
  “The children listened.”

  b.
  “The women are singing.”

  c.
  “We ate.”
(23)  a. Abantwana bayangibona. “The children see me.”
   children see

   b. Umfana ungibonile “The boy saw me.”
   boy see

   listen Q no

   d. Uyangilalela na? Yebo. “Are you listening to me? Yes.”
   listen Q yes

   e. Umfazi uyakuthanda. “The woman likes you.”
   woman like

(24)  Translate:

   a. “The girl saw you.”

   b. “Do you see me? Yes.”