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The phonological systems of the Mbam languages of Cameroon with a focus on vowels and vowel harmony

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English Summary

The languages of the Mbam-et-Inoubou district of the Centre Region of Cameroon have a unique position in Bantu linguistics. Being in between “narrow” Bantu and “wide” Bantu, they sometimes pattern with the one and sometimes with the other, and as such are a rich motherlode for comparative and historical research. The Mbam languages have another point of interest as well. They have formerly been analysed as standard 7-vowel languages (/i, e, ε, a, ɔ, o, u/) with Advanced Tongue Root (ATR) harmony

There is a high degree of multilingualism among the speakers of the Mbam languages. These are small language groups in close proximity, acknowledging an ethnic interrelationship and history. As a result, most adults speak not only French as a second language but often one or more of the neighbouring (not exclusively Mbam) languages. The languages discussed in this study are Nen, Maande, Yambeta, Tuki, Gunu, Elip, Mmala, Yangben, Baca and Mbure.

This study begins with an overview of the ten languages concerned, the previous linguistic work done in them and the type of data collected for this analysis.

Basic phonological summaries of the contrastive consonants, vowels and tones, as well as overviews of how the vowel-harmony systems operate within roots and between roots and affixes, for each of the ten languages are given as background information for the study of the complexities of the vowel harmony of these languages. The microvariations within these comparable but different vowel (-harmony) systems provide a greater understanding of the phonologies of each individual language, and, by finding in a bottom-up manner, the relevant parameters of variation, contribute to the understanding of vowel harmony in general.

The vowel harmony of the Mbam languages is very complex. Four different types of interrelated vowel harmony (ATR, rounding, fronting and height) exist in these languages, with any given language having between one and three types of vowel harmony. The particularities of vowel harmony of the Mbam languages, various issues such as the behaviour of /a/ and other non-participating vowels, directionality in, and the domain of vowel harmony as well as the mismatches between the phonological and the grammatical word between the different vowel-harmony types are discussed in light of the variations found in the Mbam languages.

The phonological issues in vowel harmony, in particular Drescher's (2009) model of a contrastive-feature hierarchy of features, are discussed at length and applied to explain the relationship between the vowel inventory, vowel harmony and the gaps

in vowel harmony found in the Mbam languages. Drescher's contrastive-feature hierarchy is useful in particular to explain why high round vowels, /u/ and /o/ do not participate in rounding harmony, why languages with similar vowel inventories and even similar contrastive features have rather different vowel-harmony systems. This is particularly useful in explaining the unusual ATR disharmony found in Mmala where all instances of /o/ in the context of /ɔ/ surface as a [+ATR] vowel, /u/.

Next we look at the interrelationships and subgroupings of the Mbam languages within the context of the group by means of diachronic sound and structural changes to consider to what extent historical processes can explain the patterns found in Mbam vowel harmony.

Finally we consider the synchronic lexicostatistical subclassifications of the Mbam languages and their relationship in the wider context of the Bantu and Bantoid languages.