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

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Stellingen

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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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1.   The facile labelling of the Mbam vowel inventories as canonical triangular 7-vowel (i, e, ɛ, a, ɔ, o, u) systems does not fit with their phonological behaviour. Certain vowels, considered in previous studies as mid vowels, actually function phonologically as high vowels and are better represented as /ɪ/ and /ʊ/.

2.   Hyman (1999) proposes that Bantu suffixes such as the applicative should be analysed as having a degree 3 vowel (i.e. *-ed), rather than a degree 2 vowel (*-ɪd). This study supports this view since it would explain why the applicative does not cause palatalisation on /n/ in Maande as high front vowels do, and why the applicative is height dominant in Mmala.

        Hyman, Larry. 1999. The historical interpretation of vowel harmony in Bantu. In Hombert, Jean-Marie and Larry Hyman (eds.), *Bantu Historical Linguistics: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives*. 235-295. Stanford: CSLI Pub.

3.   The difference in spread between ATR and rounding harmony in the verb is due to three factors: the presence and type of neutral vowels (opaque or transparent), where the phonological word boundaries are, and the location in the phonological word of harmony-dominant vowels.

4.   Van der Hulst and Smith (1986) propose a universal law that a neutral vowel is transparent if it shares the dominant value, and is opaque if it has the recessive value. This analysis does not work for the Mbam languages, because there are counter-examples. In Gunu, the vowels with the recessive value (i, ɪ) are transparent to rounding harmony, and those with the dominant value (u, ʊ) which are opaque.

        Hulst, Harry van der & Norval Smith. 1986. On neutral vowels. In Bogers, K., H. van der Hulst and M. Mous (eds.), *The Phonological Representation of Suprasegmentals,* 233-279. Dordrecht: Foris.

5.   Those Mbam languages which may have an object preceding a complement verb (infinitive), S V [O V] ~ S V [V O], generally have a word boundary before the verb stem. Those Mbam languages which only have the object following the complement verb, S V [V O], generally do not have a word boundary before the verb stem.

6.   A linguistic theory is a good tool to analyse new language data, but only if the theory is the servant rather than the master. The linguist must be careful not to force new language data to "fit" the theory - and in doing so,

he may miss pertinent aspects of the language - but rather, he should try to discover if and how the theory can shed light on the particularities of the language in question.

7.   If linguists base their identification of the vowels of a given language only on their own auditory impressions, their own linguistic grid will influence how they hear and interpret those vowels. A better method is to identify how a vowel patterns in the language and determine its contrastive features accordingly, even if that means that an acoustically rather low vowel is interpreted phonologically as a high vowel.

8.   Linguistic varieties which are lexicostatistically close may have fundamental structural differences. To label such varieties as "dialects" based only on lexicostatistical studies and phonetics is to miss crucial differences between them.

9.   Mission service in many contexts no longer focuses on the idea of service as the complete and utter dedication of the entire person - strength, heart and mind - in life and in death. Rather it has become service as in "community service", something that one does during one's "spare time" and for a limited period.

10.   Man and woman should work together like the right and left hands. As the African proverb says: "It takes two hands to tie a bundle."