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A grammar of Nchane: A Bantoid (Beboid) language of Cameroon

Boutwell, R.L.

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Author: Boutwell, R.L.

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Summary in English

Nchane is a Bantoid (Beboid) language with approximately 15,000 speakers located primarily in five villages in the Northwest Region of Cameroon. The language is vigorously used in Nchane homes and at community events, with a growing list of vernacular literary works available since the early 2010's. This book provides a description of Nchane grammar, beginning with the sound system and ending with information structure. The data corpus supporting this work includes a lexicon with about 1,600 entries, 23 texts of various genres, and some elicited material. Most of this data was collected while I lived in the Nchane village of Nfume from 2004 to 2015.

The sound system is composed of 18 consonants, seven vowels and seven tone melodies involving three level tones. The vowel inventory includes one fricative vowel, realized as a near high central vowel with accompanying friction, but often showing behavior consistent with a high back vowel, which is the best analysis for its underlying form.

There is an observable preference for monosyllabic roots, and syllable codas are limited almost entirely to the velar nasal **ŋ**. The process of syllable reduction has resulted in the allophonic variants **CVŋ** and **C \tilde{V}** , as well as what could be described as half-long vowels. A few phonological processes are observed, including nasal place assimilation and high front vowel laxing in the environment of a following NC sequence.

The tone system is characterized by high, mid and low level tones, which combine into high-mid, high-low, mid-low and mid-high contour tones. Vowels serve as tone-bearing units, with tones serving to mark lexical items as well as some grammatical distinctions. Tone analysis is complicated by lowering-tonal effects associated with the nasal of nouns belonging to so-called nasal classes (eg, classes 1,

8 and 9). Tonological processes include downdrift, downstep, and a number of phrase-boundary phenomena.

Nouns are grouped into 17 different noun classes, with noun class affixes the primary form of nominal morphology. Most noun classes are characterized by the noun having either zero marking or a prefix. Classes 9 and 10 are distinguished by low and high tone clitics respectively and class 3 is marked by a labial glide infix **-w-**, which is an innovation of the Beboïd and nearby Yemne-Kimbi languages. Derivational classes include two locative noun classes (classes 16 and 18), which correspond to the prepositions **fè** ‘at’ and **à** ‘in’ respectively, with the core semantics of the prepositions usually evident in the locative nouns as well.

Noun phrases are head-initial, consisting of a head nominal followed by an optional modifier of some kind. Modifiers always agree with the head noun, expressed through an agreement prefix. The anaphoric demonstratives are of particular interest, with the anaphoric demonstrative 2 **yú** appearing with participants which are judged by the speaker as being associated with a usually negative quality, in addition to marking it as a major participant in the discourse. Very few Nchane adjectives have been discovered, with attributes more commonly expressed through verbs.

Nchane pronouns may be divided into two types: simple and compound. Compound pronouns have only been observed in Cameroonian languages and consist of two pronominal elements. The base form denotes plural reference in addition to either first or second person. The second element specifies the other member(s) of the reference. Generic reference is made through the impersonal pronoun **bā**, the antecedent of which is the noun **bā-mī** ‘people’. Unlike nearby languages such as Noni (also Beboïd), Nchane does not have a dummy subject. Constructions in which a dummy subject element appears in these other languages, are observed with a gap in the preverbal “subject” position in Nchane.

Verbs tend to be monosyllabic. Verb morphology is limited to the first-singular subject agreement prefix and Progressive, Distributive and Causative suffixes. A high tone clitic is observed in a number of constructions, including Imperative and Hortative constructions. The normally high-toned Progressive suffix of verbs in constructions with the accompanying high tone clitic is realized with a low tone, indicating that the Progressive high tone is itself the same high tone clitic, which is usually restricted to a single iteration per sentence. Tense and aspectual distinctions are largely expressed through various preverbal particles. Nchane also has a number of post-verbal adverbs, some of which belong to the verb complex.

Nchane makes use of two copulas **lé** ‘COP’ and **jù** ‘COP(N)’, with **lé** often expressing static states and **jù** expressing dynamic states. In addition to their function in copula clauses, **lé** functions as an auxiliary verb in future constructions and perfect constructions, while **jù** also functions as marker of counter-expectation focus. These

copulas appear in nonverbal predicate constructions, with a variety of elements serving as predicate, including nouns, numbers, adjectives and prepositional phrases.

Clauses consist of a verb (minimally) and usually one or more nominal constituents. The nonverbal clause constituent types include Subject and Object (both of which are formally unmarked), Applied Object, Comitative Oblique and Locative Oblique. While Nchane could be classified typologically as an SVO language, constituent governance is based upon semantic roles and information structure concerns more than upon grammatical roles. Agents are strongly associated with the preverbal position, as are sentence topics. Meanwhile, Patients almost always occur in the postverbal position, which is also the position most frequently associated with focus.

Applied Objects are marked by the Applicative postposition **lẽ**, in contrast to most analyses of applicatives in Bantu languages, which typically involve an applicative verbal suffix. The applicative analysis is supported by the occurrence of this postposition with semantic RECIPIENTS/ BENEFACTIVES, ADDRESSEES, and LOCATIVES, semantic roles commonly associated with applied objects in Bantu languages. Further support comes from some cases of the Applicative postposition effecting an apparent semantic alternation.

Relative clauses are introduced by a relativizer that agrees with the head nominal. Relativized constituents leave a gap in the relative clause, except in the case of constituents introduced by prepositions, which makes use of resumptive pronouns. Relativizers are realized with a high tone when the relativized constituent is preverbal and a low or mid tone when it is postverbal. The verbs of relative clauses are only slightly less finite than those of main clauses, with relative clauses requiring subject agreement in fewer tense environments than in main clauses.

Sentences involving more than one verb are common in Nchane. While some nearby languages display distinctive serial verb constructions, sentences with multiple clauses of equal status in Nchane are better described as clause chaining structures. Most support (cf. subordinate) clause types usually precede their focal clause counterparts. Furthermore, most are introduced by a particle or word of some sort, indicating the type of support clause. Complement clauses are introduced by one of three complementizers. The most common complementizer is **lẽ**, which introduces complements of verbs of cognition and communication.

Polar questions are marked by a low tone enclitic and content questions utilize one of several question words, which correspond to the unknown constituent. Question words often occur *in situ*, appearing in the canonical position associated with the constituent to which the question word corresponds. However, the use of cleft constructions to mark the question word as focused is relatively common.

Negative constructions usually involve discontinuous negative marking, with the clause-final negative marker **gē** always present. Negated constituents are preceded by the same negative marker **gē**, while negated clauses are marked either by the auxiliary **bá** ‘still’ (in the case of past tense and nonprogressive verbs) or a clause-initial **á** (in all other contexts).

In canonical sentences, the preverbal position usually expresses sentence topics, while the postverbal position is associated with focus. When the topic is for some reason unclear, Nchane uses one of three strategies to indicate the topic: left dislocation, left detachment, or DP-internal word order change. Each of these strategies is usually accompanied by a higher tonal register realized on at least a portion of the topic-marked phrase.

Several strategies are utilized for the expression of various kinds of focus. Non-canonical word order is limited to focusing Agents only, with the Agent constituent occurring in the immediately-after-verb position. When an Object (usually a Patient) is also present, it is “defocalized”, occurring in the preverbal position. This kind of strategy normally expresses exhaustive or contrastive focus.

Cleft constructions may be used to focus any nominal constituent, usually identifying the denotation, for example in answering “who” or “what” questions. And the words/particles **m̄**, **ɲù** and **l̄** are used in expressions of scalar, counter-expectation, and assertive focus respectively.