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Grammatical Sketch of Beng

General information

Section 2

Denis Paperno



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General information

Section 2

Denis Paperno

2.1. Beng people and their language

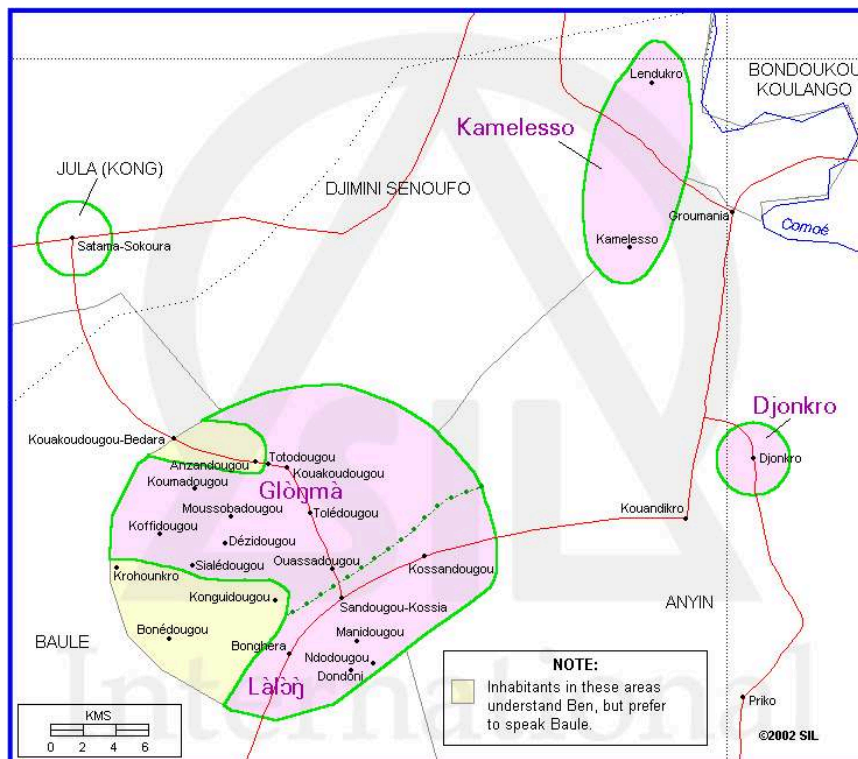
- 1 The South Mande language Beng is a minority language of Côte d'Ivoire, spoken by the ethnic group of the same name. The Beng people is isolated in space from all other South Mande speaking groups. The closest of them, Wan, is spoken about 200 kilometers west of the Beng territory. In historic times, another closely related linguistic community, the Gbin, populated a territory to the East of the Beng (Delafosse 1904). The Gbin were heavily assimilated by the neighboring Gur ethnic groups of the Northern Côte d'Ivoire, and their language reportedly went extinct in the early 20th century (Tauxier 1921). Culturally, modern Beng language and culture show a considerable influence from the neighboring Baule, a major ethnic group dominant in central Côte d'Ivoire. Among other things, the Beng borrowed Baule personal names given to the person according to the day of the week when one is born, the corresponding names for days of the week, as well as the seven-day week itself, which coexists in the core Beng area with the traditional six-day week.¹ The Baule influence goes so far that the Beng share the belief that their ancestors had arrived to their current area from the East, implausible on geographical grounds since the Beng are by far the eastmost among the whole South Mande group. This legend might have been directly borrowed from the Baule who have indeed arrived from the east just a few centuries ago; cf. (Gottlieb, Murphy 1995; Gottlieb 1992).
- 2 The Beng language belongs to the Southern-Eastern branch of the Mande language (Niger-Congo phylum), as confirmed by the lexicostatistic method (Vydrin 2009) that uses (Swadesh-based) 100 word lists of basic vocabulary. At any rate, separation of Beng within South Mande occurred quite early, right after the South Mande linguistic unity dissolved.
- 3 The main Beng area is within the Prefecture of M'Bahiakro of Côte d'Ivoire. Before the Ivorian civil war started in 2002, Beng was the main language of everyday

communication in eighteen villages²: Bonguera, Dézidougou, Djonkro, Dondoni, Kamelesso, Kofidougou, Kossandougou, Kouakoudougou, Koumadougou, Lendoukro, Manidougou, Mousobadougou, N'Dodougou, Sandougou-Kosia, Sialédougou, Toledougou, Totodougou, and Ouasadougou. In addition, five villages maintain Beng identity but are almost completely assimilated linguistically by the Baule; inhabitants of those villages (Anzandougou, Bonédougou, Kongidougou, Krohounkro, and Kouakou-Bédara) know Beng at best passively.

- 4 Beng dialects have never been subject to linguistic study, although students of Beng note the existence of some, primarily lexical, differences among varieties of individual villages. Paesler (1992) lists four dialects of Beng, selected primarily by self-identification of territorial groups of the Beng rather than by linguistic criteria:

- The Savanna dialect (Dézidougou, Kofidougou, Kouakoudougou, Kounmandougou, Mousobadougou, Sialédougou, Toledougou, Totodougou, and Ouassadougou).
- The Forest dialect (Bonguera, Dondoni, Ndodougou, Sandougou-Kosia, and Kossandougou).
- The dialect of Kamelesso and Lendoukro.
- The dialect of Djonkro.

Map 1. Dialects of Beng



By Valentin Vydrin, digitized by Matt Shafer.

Source: http://www-01.sil.org/silesr/2000/2000-003/Ben_map.htm

- 5 The Savanna and the Forest dialects are reported to be fully mutually intelligible, with slight lexical differences. The distinction between those two dialects, whose names only approximately correspond to natural zones referred to in their names, is based exclusively on the group identities of two previously rival groups of the Beng, each of which used to have its own 'king' in the pre-colonization times. Members of both groups call Beng their native language.

- 6 The dialect of Kamelesso and Lendoukro, on the one hand, and the central dialects (Savanna and Forest), are reported to be mutually intelligible to some degree. The dialect of Djonkro is not mutually intelligible with any others. We have no credible information on the linguistic distinctions underlying the dialectal segmentation. Gottlieb (1995: xiii) largely agrees with Paesler (1992: 2) when it comes to Beng dialects, with two differences. First, she does not mention the villages of Kamelesso, Lendoukro and Djonkro. Second, she considers the variety of Sandougou-Kossia ‘independent’ from the Forest-Savanna divide. Neither a synchronic description nor a historical analysis of the Beng dialects exists to date.
- 7 During the Ivorian civil war of 2002-2011 the Beng country was crossed by the armistice line (« ligne de confiance »). Most of the Savanna and the Forest zones were under control of the “New Forces” (i.e. the rebels), with the Forest zone right on the armistice line, partially controlled by peacekeepers. Some villages closer to the line, including Ouassadougou, were almost completely abandoned; the inhabitants moved either north to other Beng villages or south to the part of the country loyal to president Laurent Gbagbo. A few thousand of the Beng found refuge in the nearby Prikro, a sous-préfecture center.

2.2. Sociolinguistic situation

- 8 Beng is spoken by about 14 thousand people (based on the 1988 census). The total Beng population was about 16 thousand according to Paesler (1992). Some Beng are spread out in bigger cities of Côte d’Ivoire, particularly Abidjan, but it’s hard to provide quantitative estimates on this part of Beng population.
- 9 The Beng are generally bi- or multilingual. The Beng’s second languages are most often Baule (Akan), Julia (Mande), and French (Indo-European); older people also speak Jimini (Gur) and Ando (Akan). Second languages are used in inter-ethnic contacts, French is the official language of Côte d’Ivoire and is taught in school.
- 10 Beng, like other languages of similar speaker base, is potentially endangered. Projecting the assimilation trends into the future, in particular taking into account the Baule influence, it is possible that Beng will get extinct through assimilation. However, its present state of conservation is quite satisfactory.
- 11 Beng has no official status and is used orally, mostly in everyday communication. No literary standard exists, even though there is a folklore tradition, represented by folktales, historical legends, proverbs, as well as songs. The Beng themselves consider the Beng song genre to be a recent innovation: songs used to be sung only in other languages such as Baule.
- 12 In the mid-1980s a Summer Institute of Linguistics scholar W. Paesler, the first linguist to do a systematic study of Beng, developed a Latin-based writing system, with the addition of letters *ɲ, ɔ, ɛ* ; and acute and grave diacritic marks for tone levels. In 2006 the Beng literacy enthusiast Kouadio Destin and I proposed a new variant of this orthographic system, with new features primarily in tone notation, which to my knowledge has never been used.
- 13 Beng has no function in education. From 1980 till 1986 the Summer Institute of Linguistics published calendars in Beng. Later, adopting the orthography by W. Paesler, SIL published the first Beng primer (Kouadio, Kouakou 1997). The authors of the primer

are Kouadio Kouadio Destin and Augustin Yao Kouakou, the first linguist of Beng provenance, who defended in the 1996/1997 academic year a D. E. A. degree thesis on his native language (Kouakou 1997). But despite the support from SIL and the enthusiastic efforts by Kouadio Kouadio Destin, massive literacy training in Beng was never organized.

2.3. Names of the language

- ¹⁴ *Beng*, a name of a people and its language, reproduces the native ethnic name *bèŋ*; this name has been used in most recent works on Beng (Paesler 1989; 1991; 1992; Gottlieb, Murphy 1995). Beng, however, has been mentioned in the literature under other, similar or unrelated, names: *bɛ*, *Ben*, *Gbëingn*, *Gan*, *Gɔ*, *Gan-né*, *Ganra*, *Ngɔ*, *Ngain*, *N'Gain*, *Ngen*, *Ngan*, *N'Guin*, *Ngin*. These names are derived from words for 'Beng' in the neighboring peoples' languages: *ŋgɛ* (Baule), *gã* (Jula), *gbɛmlɔ̃* (Jimini). The *-né* element in *Gan-né* is probably a plural marker from some Beng dialects, see 3.2.
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NOTES

1. Still, the six day cycle is deeply entrenched in the traditional Beng habits, determining market days and Earth adoration schedule.
 2. The main source for sociolinguistic information is (Paesler 1992).
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AUTHOR

DENIS PAPERNO

University of Trento, Italy
denis.paperno@gmail.com