From documenting languages to documenting language dynamics: Experiences from Lower Fungom, Cameroon

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Acknowledgments

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What’s Where Why?
following Bickel 2007

What targets grammatical patterns

Where focuses on striking diversity

Why requires interdisciplinarity
Sources of information

• Comparative linguistic data
• Ethnographic investigation
• Geographic coordinates and topography
• Shallow archaeological exploration
• Also: Archival records as probe into history
• One application: DiCarlo & Good 2013+
Linguistic divergence

• Linguistic evidence for Missong distinctiveness
  • Lexicostatistical dissimilarity
  • Contrastive vowel length
  • Distinctive pronoun
  • Patterns of verbal stem alternation

• These differences cannot plausibly result from “natural” language diversification

• Linguistics raises the question, Why Missong?, but it cannot answer it on its own
Ethnographic divergence

- Quarters are not exogamous
- Proliferation of ritual sites across quarters
- Lack of village-wide institutions beyond that of the chief
- Oral histories emphasize distinctive origins
- **Overall lack of cohesion**
As my father told me, we were from Fang side, even in Bum side there were many of us. When you people are cooperating you speak one language, if you speak one language you cooperate. As a group of relatives moves, the brothers may decide to split, each choosing a different place to stay. This is what happened to us... Each family attached itself to a village and therefore had to speak the general language used there. For example, we Bambiam attached ourselves to Bikwom and hence had to adopt their language; Bikwom people are attached to Bidjumbi and Biandzam to form the village of Missong, and this is why they all had to use the same language, that is, Missong.

—Makpa Buo Amos
Memory places and GIS

18th century

19th century

20th century

Legend

- Abar
- Koshin
- Ajumbu
- Kung
- Biya
- Buu
- Fang
- Mufu
- Mundabli
- Munken
- Mashi
- Ngun
- Missong
- Nsom

DiCarlo and Pizziolo 2012
Archaeological layering
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What is Missong?

- A naive approach would take “Missong” to be an ancestral/traditional/indigenous “dialect”
- Such codes are taken to be objects in need of documentation/preservation/maintenance
- But, Missong seems to be an expedient code, rather than an ancestral one
- The variety exists as part of the expression of an ephemeral political configuration
- Interdisciplinary data helps us understand What’s where why for Missong
Lessons from interdisciplinarity
How interdisciplinarity?

- Our starting point: A question whose answer required interdisciplinary data
- Why is Lower Fungom so linguistically diverse?
- There was not a vague sense that, “This project needs an anthropologist.”
- Rather, we knew that ethnographic data would give insight to language ideologies
- The question placed focus on intellectual commonalities over disciplinary differences
How to start

• What did the main linguist (me) need to do to pursue this interdisciplinary research?

• Read, read, read: Everything on the region

• Accept that each discipline has its own methods, and focus on their strengths

• Treat “intellectual personality” as a key qualification for research partners
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