



A multi-media documentation of two endangered Bantu languages of Cameroon - Wovia and Isubu

Location and history

Isubu is spoken in Bimbia in the coastal area of the South-West Region of Cameroon. Bimbia comprises three villages - Bona Ngombe, Bona Bile and Dikolo.



Location of Isubu

This area has a complex history of migration movements and contact scenarios, some of which must be rather old. Moreover, due to the settlement of European missionaries and the establishment of large plantations during colonial times, there has been a massive influx of people from different parts of West Africa and Cameroon.

Since then many Isubu moved to nearby urban centres. As a result, the community of practice is today widely scattered, leaving the villages almost empty and the Isubu live in highly diverse multiethnic and multilingual environments.



Bona Ngombe

Linguistic features

Isubu belongs to a continuum of closely related Narrow Bantu languages (Benue-Congo) including Douala, Mokpe and Wovia. As such its structure is characterised by a noun class and concord system.

ò ɸònd-í té bù-wá w-ɲngɔ ò w-òwà
2SG pick-TAM when 14-grass 14-2SGPOSS 2SG 14OBJ-wash
'When you have picked your vegetables, you wash it.'

ì wòlà-né tàsé jà m-ísò mà-ndéné
1PL do-COMIT 9:type of net 9:GEN 6-eyes 6-big
'We use the Tase with big eyes.'



Bimbia coast

Linguistic, cultural and social practices

The Isubu are multilingual, so code-switching and code-mixing are very common. The relations between the various languages spoken in the area must have changed several times. For example, Mokpe and especially Douala have been the dominant languages of the area. Since the influx of migrant workers, however, Cameroonian Pidgin English has gained increasing relevance as a lingua franca. Thus, while many elder Isubu speak Douala and/or Mokpe, younger speakers rather use Pidgin English. For many of them it has even become the mother tongue. Isubu has lost its function as a public language being largely confined to private homes, closely-knit groups and specific festivities.



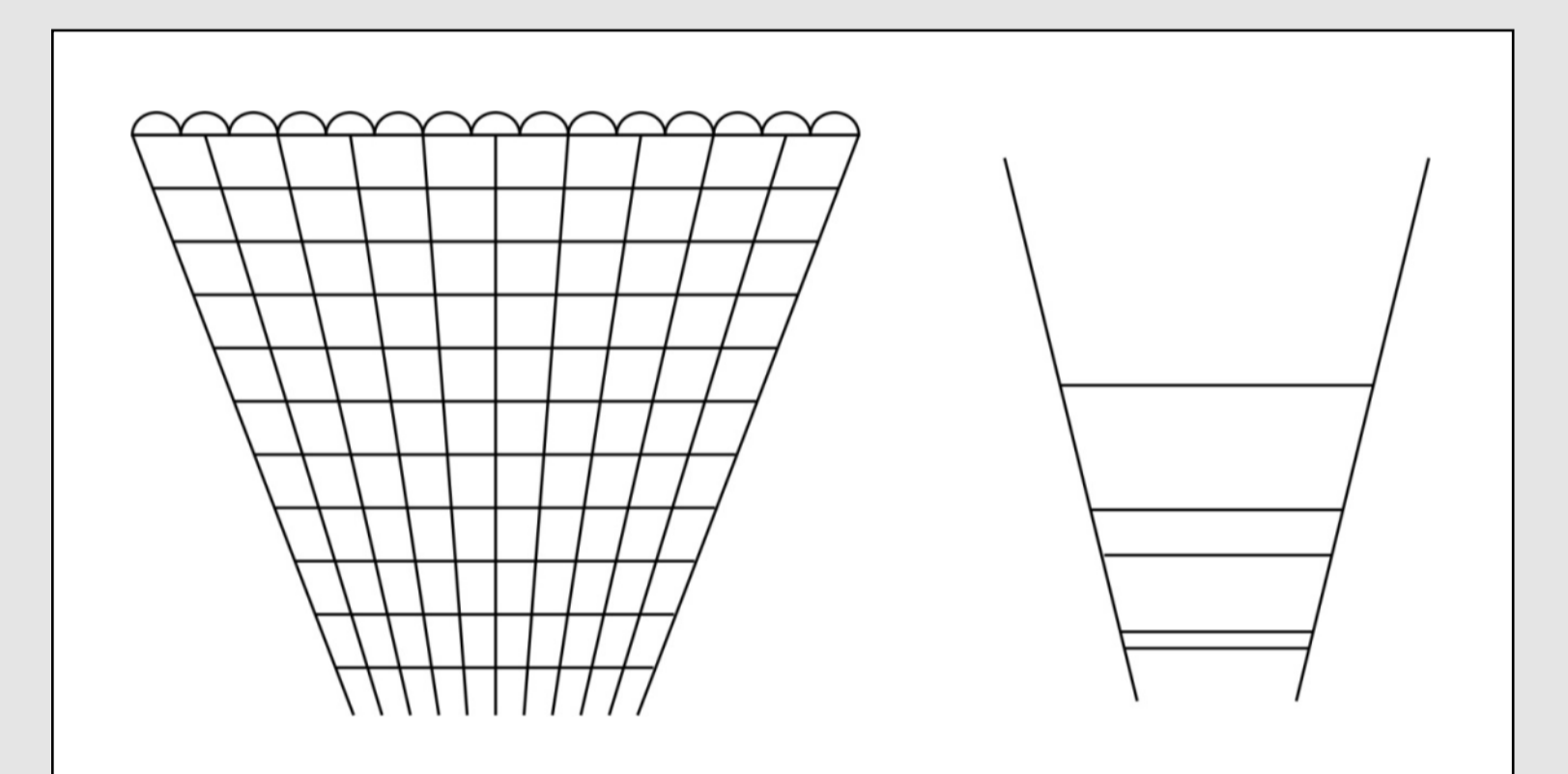
Drying of fish

With the social, cultural and economic changes of the past decades, many practices have largely been given up - among them fishing and the drying of fish, which have been the main subsistence. On the one hand, the urban centres offer numerous job opportunities. On the other hand, fish resources are declining and fishing does no longer suffice as source of income. Moreover, modern technologies like fridges have rendered techniques like the drying of fish almost obsolete.



Dugout canoe

For example, the fishing technique specific to the Isubu - the *ndemba* - is no longer practised. The building of this fish trap requires the mutual help of the fishermen. First a fence of mangrove poles (*etaka*) is built in the sea. Then a cane basket (*ndemba*) is put inside. Into this *ndemba* another basket made from bamboo (*isenge*) is lowered. The location of the fish trap is indicated by a stick (*mwele*) that protrudes from the water.



The *ndemba* (left) and the *isenge* (right)

Objectives of the project

One of the objectives of the project has therefore been to document such practices which are often only remembered by elderly speakers. It has been tried to raise awareness among the speakers about the role and wealth of the language and to support local initiatives. Another objective of the project has been to document the multilingual practices of the Isubu and the transformations of the language in the urban settings.

Team

Dr. Gratien G. Atindogbé, team leader and linguist, University of Buea

Prof. Dr. Anne Storch, project responsible and linguist, University of Cologne

Doris Richter gen. Kemmermann, archive manager and field linguist, University of Cologne

Sirih Nagang Nancy Nyindem, PhD candidate and field linguist, University of Buea

CONTACT ADDRESS

University of Cologne, Institute for African Studies, Meister-Ekkehart-Str. 7

P.O. Box 63 University of Buea, Department of Linguistics

isubu-and-wovia@uni-koeln.de

