

Documentation of the Bezen Language

Language Situation

Bezen, a hitherto completely undescribed Jukunoid language of the Yukuben-Kuteb subgroup, is spoken by approximately 450 individuals (Ethnologue 2009) in the village of Bezen in the Furu-Awa Subdivision of the North-West Region of Cameroon. Restricted to intra-ethnic communication in contexts of family and village life, farm work, local council meetings and traditional ceremonies, the Bezen language is exposed to serious endangerment due to ongoing processes of shift towards languages of wider communication such as Jukun and Pidgin English.



Villagers with a big groundnut-basket

Livelihood

The Bezen people are farmers. Groundnuts, maize and pumpkin seeds are produced in the village and traded with neighbouring communities. The forest provides for hunting and the river Katsina Ala, on whose banks the village is situated, is rich in fish. Otherwise, there are many difficulties the Bezen have to face on a daily basis. There is neither electricity, nor water supply. During the dry season water becomes very scarce, and transport basically is a problem due to a lack of infrastructure. While current plans of the construction of a dam close to the village give hope to some who expect an improvement of living conditions through future access to electricity and a better road, others rather see the dangers of cultural disruption and disintegration of the community in the case of resettlement.



Crossing the river Katsina Ala with brand new furniture

Project Aims

Especially this prospect of upcoming - radical, probably disruptive - changes in Bezen society upgrades the urgency of this project which aims at an ethnolinguistic documentation of Bezen by providing a corpus of narrative and dialogic texts of various genres in a sustainable multimedia format that satisfies both practical and scientific concerns. Beyond providing an understanding of Bezen grammar, the project already



Bezen village: morning mist over the river

contributes to boosting the self-esteem of Bezen people and to preserving the endangered cultural knowledge enshrined in their language.



Grandmother processing corn in Bezen village

Linguistic features

In phonology, the Bezen language exhibits various features typical of the area: a set of labiovelar consonants (*kʰ*, *gʷ*, *ŋm*), prenasalised stops (*mb*, *nd*, *ɲj*), six vowel phonemes and three contrastive level tones which distinguish grammatical as well as lexical meanings, e.g. *hú* 'die' (high level tone) vs. *hū* 'gather' (mid level tone) vs. *hù* 'fall' (low level tone); *káb* 'chew' vs. *kāb* 'add' vs. *kàb* 'cover'. In the grammatical domain, the central contrast of centrifugal vs. centripetal action relies on a tonal contrast exclusively.

In morphology, the pre-existing Benue-Congo noun class system has largely disappeared and left its traces in a complex system of deverbal



Robert Akoko, Fon Omah Jama Lucas, Evelyn Fogwe and Fonbod Mathew together with an elderly farmer by the river Katsina Ala.

nominal derivation and nominal number marking by prefix alternations. Verbs are inflected for various tenses, aspects and moods by an interaction of proclitics, enclitics and changes in tonal patterns. Some markers of grammatical categories could be traced back to their lexical sources, e.g. the perfect enclitic *mí* and the habitual proclitic *ɲi* are transparently derived from verbs meaning 'finish' and 'sit, stay', respectively. Future research will shed more light on prominent phenomena in syntax such as verbal serialisation and intensification of intransitive verbs by cognate complement constructions such as *dō mbūr ùmbūr mí* 'we are very tired' (literally: "we have tired tiredness").



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The team

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