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Tshiluba Language Structures

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Introduction

Students in the linguistics emphasis capstone course have been documenting the Tshiluba language as a group project.

What is linguistic fieldwork?

- Working only with native speakers (often without the aid of a writing system) language data are gathered and analyzed in order to develop an understanding of the grammatical structure of the language.

What is language documentation?

- Creating a record of a language that is lasting and as complete as possible by focusing on how the language is used in a broad range of natural settings.

Why linguistic fieldwork for the Senior Seminar?

Documenting the distinct linguistic features of an unfamiliar language allows students to apply linguistic knowledge acquired in previous courses and build proficiency in linguistic fieldwork methodologies.

Why Tshiluba?

- Tshiluba is spoken by around 50-60 refugees in Boise and over 6 million people worldwide.
- Members of the Boise Tshiluba community hope that participation in the project will be a step toward broader recognition by the general public of the presence of the language and its speakers.

Methodology

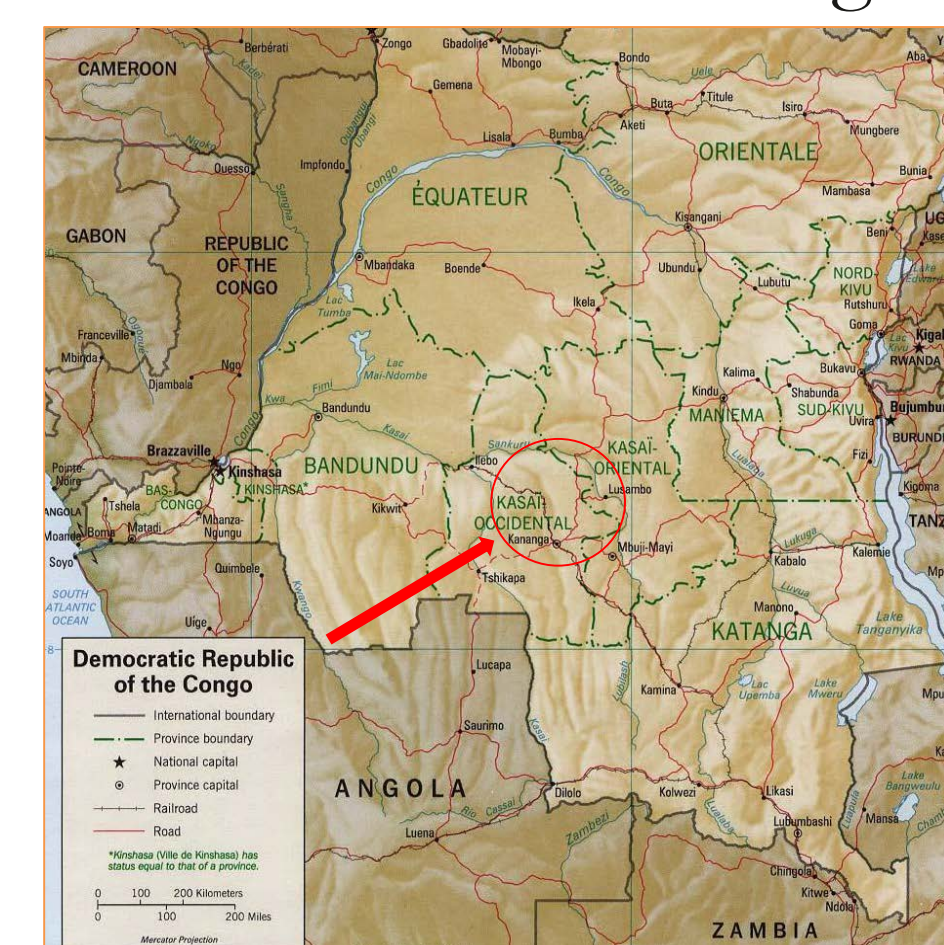
- Two native speakers of Tshiluba have been consulted for this project, though we work primarily with just one main consultant.
- The entire class meets a consultant once per week and smaller groups of students meet with him every two to three weeks throughout the semester.
- Students conduct *elicitation*, an interview method that targets specific areas of language's structure to gather linguistic data for analysis.
- Audio and video recordings are made of each elicitation session.
- All recordings are transcribed and analyzed by the students.
- Each week, the class discusses findings and develops strategies for future sessions.
- Students also learn to work with free-flowing narrative, using specialized software to develop transcription, translation, and analysis.
- The class is also developing a stock of useful everyday words and phrases for anyone interested in learning to speak Tshiluba.

Language Background

- Tshiluba (ISO 639-3 lua) is characterized as an Atlantic-Congo, Narrow Bantu, Central language in the Niger-Congo language family. It is classified as L31 in the Guthrie classification system for Bantu languages.
- Tshiluba, along with Kikongo, Lingala, and Swahili, is one of the national languages of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).



Tshiluba is also known as Luba-Kasai and is most widely spoken in the provinces of Kasai Occidental and Kasai Oriental in DRC



The Consultants



Tshiluba language consultants:
Albert Romain
Bantumbakulu Mukuna
and
Daniel Miko-Mikyene

Phonology

The Tshiluba Sound System: The sounds in the charts below appear in Tshiluba.

Distinctive features of Tshiluba phonology: Tshiluba is a tonal language, which means that a change in tone can carry a change in meaning. There are two tones, high (H) and low (L). High is marked with an accent over the vowel and low is unmarked.

Compare:

[tudʒí tudʒimona] 'They (cf. elephants) see themselves.'

[túdʒi tudʒimona] 'We see ourselves.'

[dʒúlu] (HL) 'nose' and [dʒúlú] (HH) 'sky'

- Like other Bantu languages, Tshiluba has syllabic nasals at the beginning of words: [m, 'bwa] 'dog' and [n, 'ze.vu] 'elephant.'

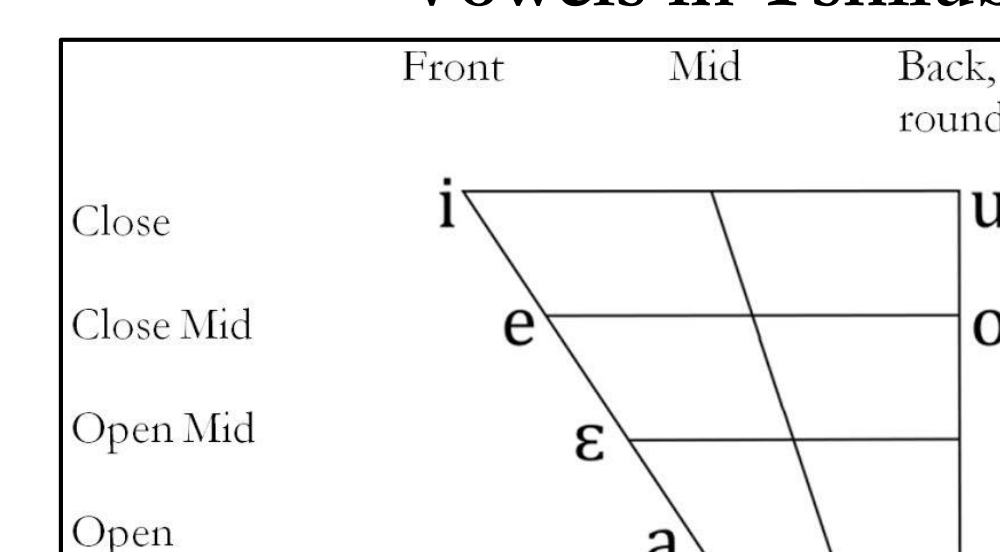
Phonological rules in the language include:

- Final vowel devoicing: /bimpa/ → [bimp(a)] 'good'
- Adjacent vowel assimilation: When two vowels occur together in a word, the second vowel overrides the first in the final form: /dʒi+ulu/ → [dʒu:lu] 'nose,' and /ne+abu/ → [na:bu] 'near them.'
- Glide formation before /a/ and /o/: /ku+ela/ → [kʷɛla] 'to put into' and /bi+onsu/ → [bʷonsu] 'all (cf. C8 'hands)'

Consonants in Tshiluba

Place →	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Alveolar	Post-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
↓ Manner							
Stops	p b		t d			k g	
Fricatives	ɸ β	f v	s z	ʃ ʒ			h
Affricates				tʃ dʒ			
Nasals	m		n		ɲ	ŋ	
Lateral			l				
Glides	w				j	(w)	

Vowels in Tshiluba



Morphology

- As with most Bantu languages, Tshiluba utilizes a noun class system whereby nouns have prefixes that determine the class they belong to:

Singular Noun Class #	Prefix	Plural Noun Class #	Prefix
1	mu-	2	ba-
3	mu-	4	mi-
5	dʒi-	6	ma-
7	tʃi-	8	bi-
9	N-	10	N-
11	lu-	12	N-
13	ka-	14	tu-
15	bu-	16	ma-
17	ku-	18	ma-

Many elements in a given sentence will agree with the head noun based upon its noun class. This is realized through the addition of the appropriate prefix to modifiers and verbs. This can be seen in examples like: [bibi bitoke] 'white doors (Class 8)' as compared to [mikanda mito:ke] 'white books (Class 4).'

Syntax

Like English, basic word order in Tshiluba appears to be SVO (subject-verb-object). Subject agreement is sensitive to noun class. Object agreement is also present when the object is not otherwise specified in the sentence.

m-b^wa 'mu- mona nsoku m-b^wa 'mu- ba- mona
C9-dog C9.SUB- see monkey C9-dog C9.SUB- C2.OBJ- see
'The dog sees the monkey.' 'The dog sees them.'

In noun phrases, modifiers appear in a (mostly) fixed order.

mi- kanda j- ani mi- kunze i- bidʒi
C4- book C4-my C4- red C4- two
'My two red books'

As you can see, every word in the noun phrase agrees with the noun class of the head noun 'book.'

Aside from behaving like other noun class markers, ka- (Cl.12, singular) and tu- (Cl.13, plural, above) also serve a *diminutive* function, making the noun root to which they attach understood to be "small" or in some cases, "insignificant; unimportant."

Compare: m-b^wa ka-b^wa mu-ntu ka-ntu
C9-dog C12-dog C1-person C12-person
'dog' 'small dog' 'person' 'inconsequential person'

Semantics: Color Terms

Tshiluba has just four basic color terms: [múfike] 'black,' [mútoke] 'white,' [mukunze] 'red,' and [kalabi] 'yellow.' Other terms that English speakers may consider "basic" are either borrowed, as with [bule] 'blue' (from French), or descriptive, as with [maji a matamba] 'green' (literally, 'color of cassava leaves').