

Divergence and contact in the language history of the Western Province of Zambia: a comparative phonological and morphological approach

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The high linguistic complexity of the Western Province (WP) of Zambia results from the successive influx of Bantu speech communities representing chronologically distinct, but partially overlapping language strata (Bostoën 2007). The region's lingua franca Lozi constitutes one of the most recent layers. This language was only introduced in the second half of the 19th century by immigrants from an area close to modern-day Lesotho (Flint 1970; Gluckman 1951). It is historically related to the more southerly Sotho languages (Gowlett 1989). The WP is also home to several minority languages, most of which pre-date the arrival of Lozi. These languages are commonly subdivided in four distinct Bantu groups, i.e. Tonga, Nkoya, Luyana, Cokwe-Lucazi (Fortune 1970). These groups affiliate differently with two major Bantu branches. The area happens to be a zone of interference between South-West-Bantu and East-Bantu languages (Bastin et al. 1999; Lisimba 1982; Vansina 2004). In spite of their deep historical split, the WP Bantu language groups have progressively integrated through contact into a common linguistic area blurring the original boundaries between language groups. This is not only evidenced by the substrate influences which Lozi underwent (Gowlett 1989), but also by the fact that the WP Bantu languages share among each other certain vocabulary which they do not share with their closest relatives outside the WP (Bostoën 2007). In this paper, I will focus on the historical relationship between the Nkoya, Tonga and Luyana groups and especially on the position of Kwamashi and Mbukushu within the latter. Lexicostatistical studies point out that the Luyana, Nkoya and Tonga languages are closely related East-Bantu subgroups (Bastin et al. 1999), but their precise historical interrelationship is uncertain. Moreover, it is doubtful whether Kwamashi and Mbukushu, often seen as part of Luyana, can be considered as eastern Bantu. They appear in certain respects closely related to the Kavango languages of the western Caprivi, unmistakably belonging to the South-West-Bantu branch. A systematic comparative phonological and morphological approach should elucidate how the WP Bantu languages can be historically sub-grouped, how they relate to languages from neighbouring areas and which role contact played in the gradual integration of the historical subgroups.