

Kilungunya - a newly discovered and endangered secret Bantu language spoken in Congo (DRC)

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KiLungunya originated as a secret Bantu language spoken in the north-east of the Democratic Republic of Congo. It was created by syllable permutation some time in the first half of the twentieth century. Its primary source language is KiNgwana, a variety of Congo Swahili, but there is also a considerable amount of French loan words which are part of KiLungunya and which have undergone this syllable reversal process.

In the first part of the paper, I discuss the sociolinguistic background: the origin and purpose of KiLungunya as a secret language against colonisers and missionaries in a multi-ethnic society in and around the town of Bunia, the meaning of the name given to it by those who created it, as well as its present endangerment.

Before continuing with topics like the source languages and the details of the reversal process, the audience will listen to a short recorded folktale, spoken by a native speaker of KiLungunya.

The next topic is the syllable-reversal process. One interesting morphological observation is that inflectional elements (subject prefixes, verbal tense/aspect markers, noun-class prefixes, infinitive prefix, locative suffix) do not take part in this syllable permutation, but remain in place, whereas derivational elements are considered as belonging to the lexical stem which undergoes the reversal process.

There is a basic and straightforward system of syllable reversal in disyllabic words, but its application in words consisting of more than two stem syllables is not always predictable. I describe the reversal processes of words of KiNgwana as well as French origin, including repercussions for phonology and stress placement.