

In characterising the vowel systems of the Narrow Bantu languages, Maddieson notes that “Bantu vowel inventories, both five- and seven-vowel systems, are split between those which are similar to global norms in their spacing and those in which the vowels are atypically crowded in the higher part of the vowel space” (2003). A “crowded” vowel system is predicted by vowel dispersion theory in its various incarnations (see Flemming 2005 for a recent example) to be diachronically unstable. We might suspect the crowded vowel spaces found in some Bantu languages to be the product of an unlikely and unstable vowel system in their mother language, Proto-Bantu. But data from Mungbam, an endangered and virtually unstudied language of Cameroon, shows that the genesis of a crowded vowel system may not be such a rare event.

Mungbam is a Southern Bantoid language spoken at the northern edge of the Cameroonian Grassfields, the putative Bantu homeland. It has not more than 2000 speakers. Its five dialects are spoken in a very small area (roughly 8 mi.²) and its speakers have constant contact with speakers of other dialects. What is found within the five dialects of Mungbam are systems exemplifying both the evenly spaced type and the crowded type. The facts about Mungbam suggest that the split between the two types of vowel systems occurred very recently, and that contact between speakers of different dialects has not put pressure on the “crowded” dialects to simplify their vowel systems. The data presented below, collected by the author, show possible noun and verb stem vowels.

MUNKEN			MISSONG			BIYA		
i		u	i		u	i		u
		o			o	e		o
e			e		ôa	ɪ		
ɛ	(ə)	ɔ	ɛ	ə	ɔ	êa	ə	ɔ
	a			a			(a)	

ABAR		NGUN	
i		u	
e		o	
ɪ		ɔ̃	
ɛ*	(ə)	ɛ	(ə)
	a		a

Vowels are presented in a way that reflects their relative acoustic heights, as determined from a spectrographic analysis. Vowels appearing in parentheses are those which are restricted closed syllables in native words. We note first of all that it would be difficult to claim that differences between the dialects reflected minor variations on a single underlying set of vowel phonemes. The systems not only differ in their number of vowels, but also generally fail to correspond to each other in a one-to-one fashion in cognate words.

The Munken and Missong dialects can probably be considered to have the greatest similarity as far as the overall shape of the inventory is concerned. Both of them have roughly similar seven-vowel triangular inventories, plus /ə/. This is especially true if we note that the Missong diphthong ôa regularly corresponds to the sequence /-an/ in the other four dialects (exactly how such a correspondence came about is uncertain at this point). The other three dialects require individualized treatment.

The Ngun dialect distinguishes three front vowels, and has an apparent four-way height distinction for back vowels. The same may be said of the Abar front vowels, except I must note that /ɛ/ is extremely rare in type-frequency in this dialect (although the two verbs it is attested in are of high frequency). Biya distinguishes three front monophthongs and three back monophthongs. The three highest front vowels in Biya and the three highest sets of front and back vowels in Abar are quite close in terms of phonetic height, such that some pairs of vowels are not fully distinct in terms of F1 for at least one speaker of Abar.

The Mungbam dialects provide an example of the recent development of a highly unbalanced vowel system (i.e. Abar’s). A reliable reconstruction of the pre-Mungbam vowel system is not ventured at this point, but acoustic data is consistent with an explanation in terms of a prior system with a phonologically active feature [ATR]. One secure finding, however, is the importance of a multilectal and phonetically oriented approach to the study of the phonologies of endangered languages.

References

Maddieson, Ian (2003). The sounds of the Bantu languages. In Nurse and Philippson eds., *The Bantu Languages*. London: Routledge.
 Flemming, Edward (2005). Speech Perception in Phonology. D. Pisoni and R. Remez (eds.) *The Handbook of Speech Perception*. Oxford: Blackwell.