

Looking for the roots of an isolate: How typology can help identifying genetic affiliation

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In my presentation, I address the question of how the typological profile of the Bangime language (which is so far considered to be an isolate) can be used to evaluate its possible relations to the languages of other families spoken in Africa. Bangime belongs to the B1 type as famously defined by Heine and exhibits many properties that are typical of West Africa. Although typological profiles can only serve as an additional argument for identifying genetic affiliation of a language, I claim that several structural features of Bangime strongly distinguish it from neighboring languages thus indicating its possible connection to Niger-Kongo languages that were presumably never spoken in the Bandiagara zone. In my presentation, I focus on several phenomena which are of particular interest for the research problem in question:

1. Although Bangime exhibits the structural pattern S-AUX-O-V which is widespread in the Mandesphere, I claim that it cannot be equated to the one found in neighboring Mande languages (such as Bozo). Thus, the contact influence from Mande should be excluded, despite the superficial affinities.
2. The structural pattern S-AUX-O-V (alternating with S-V-O) is found in several other language families (Gur, Kru, Kwa). This (typologically rare) alternation can be regarded as a potential argument in favor of the relation with these language families (with which Bangime presumably did not have contacts).
3. The structural schemata S-AUX-O-V/ S-V-O as well as the general organization of the clausal structure resemble those found in other language families belonging to the B1 type. I present information on several possible syntactic/ morphological cognates from these families that: a) resemble those found in Bangime; b) preserve the same structural schemata.

For each of the phenomena, I evaluate the probability for it to have resulted from contact, language-internal change or genetic inheritance.