Pronoun systems as evidence for language history: Personal pronouns in Mambiloid

Bruce Connell
Centre for Research on Language Contact
Glendon College
York University, Toronto

The types of evidence adduced for historical relationships among languages have traditionally included sound correspondences, morphological, and lexical evidence, as well as lexicostatistic analyses. In work on the history of African languages generally little attention has been given to the use of subsystems of the grammars of languages to gain insight into their histories and historical relationships. Some such subsystems however can be considered relatively stable over time and therefore have the potential to contribute important evidence for comparative and historical linguistics. Pronoun systems may be considered a case in point; due to their typically constituting a closed class, their frequency of use and specificity of reference, pronouns tend to remain relatively resistant to change.

The Mambiloid group, situated in the Nigeria-Cameroon borderland, comprises some 25 languages and dialects; the grouping is generally accepted to be Bantoid (Connell 2000, 2010, Greenberg 1963, Williamson & Blench 2000), though its precise place within Bantoid has been subject to some debate; a subclassification of the group has been somewhat more elusive, in part due to the apparent high degree of contact found among the languages. Past and ongoing work has revealed a number of sound correspondences across the group which confirm a connection to Bantu but which at the same time are inconclusive regarding Mambiloid internal relationships. The present work looks at the personal pronouns of the various Mambiloid member languages, as well as those of other nearby languages, to arrive at a tentative reconstruction of the system that may have existed in the latest common parent of Mambiloid. This allows for a hypothesis concerning the integrity of the putative grouping and a proposal for a sub-classification of the languages of the group.

References