

The Small Bang

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The Small Bang represents a recently begun ERC-funded project dedicated to discovering the origins of the Bangime language and Bangande people. The language and its speakers are of particular interest to West African research as Bangime is one of the only isolates spoken in the region and the ancestors of the Bangande are also unknown. Using the latest computer-assisted technologies, the Bang team is amassing linguistic and genetic data and comparing them with a hitherto unexplored set of languages and peoples in search of a hidden history. Preliminary hypotheses suggest geographic isolation that has led to a bottleneck of at least 9,000 years. The question as to from whom the people and their language originated remains open.

Bangime in the Context of the Dogon Languages

The purpose of the ongoing ERC-funded project BANG (PI Abbie Hantgan) is to search for the origins of language isolate Bangime and its genetically distinct speakers, the Bangande. The Dogon languages represent the first step in this investigation. The Bangande live among, and claim to be ethnically, Dogon and to speak a Dogon language. Though the lowest mutual intelligibility rate among the Dogon languages is 32% (Heath et al. 2012), those between Bangime and the Dogon languages are estimated to be below 16% (Hantgan and List 2022). Thus, while the Dogon group does represent at least 21 mutually languages, Bangime cannot be considered to be one of them.

The root of the very name of the language, [baŋg-] means something ‘secret, hidden, or furtive’ among Dogon languages whose speakers today have little to no contact with the Bangande. Widely known within and outside of academy, Dogon themselves and their languages are the source of many myths. Primarily, the term ‘Dogon’ is often misconceptualized as a monolithic language and society. In fact, Dogon represents a group of diverse languages and customs whose speakers and cultural practitioners build their houses into the rough landscape of Bandiagara Escarpment in central eastern Mali. Further, though often depicted for their ritualistic masked dances, it is only the Dogon who live in the environs of Sangha who practice the Kanaga performance. Dogon from the western side of the Escarpment have no such traditions. Linguistically, the Dogon language group has recently been removed from the Niger-Congo phylum for its

purported lack of noun class markers (Guldemann 2018), however, this conclusion is based on a lack of up-to-date materials. Thus, one of the outputs of the Bang project will be a much-needed Dogon phylogeny using the methods put forth by the also ERC-funded Computer-Assisted Language Comparison (CALC, PI Johann Mattis List, <https://digling.org/calc/>) project.

Methods in Progress

In addition to using lexical wordlists of basic vocabulary to compare Bangime to the surrounding Dogon languages and other ethnolinguistic groups, the Bang project will focus on culturally relevant vocabulary to target potential borrowings in the language. Thus far, we have only performed linguistic and genetic comparisons within the immediate area. The next step will be to expand the scope to speakers who today have no contact with the Bangande. If any evidence of previous contact can be found through linguistic comparison, these speakers will be targeted for genetic sampling. With West Africa above the Bantu belt sorely underrepresented across the disciplines, we hope that the Bang study will shed light on migration patterns and historical events that are thus far unknown.

Upcoming Blog Posts

This post is only the introduction of an upcoming series outlining some of the technical aspects of the workflow being employed by the Bang team. We very much hope that our methods will be of use to other researchers with similar types of questions and thus we aim to be as transparent as possible about our methodology. The first post that is forthcoming will be a discussion of the ways in which we are converting the Dogon lexical worksheets that were gathered along with the Bangime data into CLDF format (Forkel et al. 2018).

References

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