

Variance and diversity in Adamawa languages of the Alantika Mountains and Faro Basin

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The Samba-Duru languages which are in the focus of this presentation are spoken in a contiguous area extending from the Adamawa Region and North Region of Cameroon into the adjacent Adamawa State of Nigeria. Several, mainly igneous, mountain massifs shape the landscape. The central water course is the Faro River, a tributary of River Benue. The northern part of the area, straddling the border of Cameroon and Nigeria, is dominated by the towering Alantika Mountains, which are/were the homes of the Gəmbe and Gəunu (aka Koma) peoples, as well as the eastern groups of the Vere peoples; their western relations inhabit the adjacent Vere Hills. The still poorly documented languages spoken by these peoples form the close-knit Gəmme-Vere or Vere-Gəmme group, one of the four subgroups/branches of Samba-Duru. Samba-Duru is part of the Central Branch of the Adamawa complex within Adamawa-Gur.

Samba-Duru and its subdivisions, Duru, Samba (aka Samba Leko), Doyayo (Dooyəyay) and Gəmme-Vere, are principally defined by common phonological traits, a significant number of common retentions and a number of shared innovations in the basic lexicon. They are spoken in a contiguous area, their geographical pattern of distribution correlates to a large degree to their linguistic division. Nevertheless, Samba-Duru languages display a remarkable degree of variance and diversity in their morpho-syntactical structures of which the presentation mentions but a few.

Peculiar to the Gəmme-Vere subgroup is that all members are noun class languages, while all but one language of the other subgroups of Samba-Duru apparently have lost/given up their former systems of nominal classification, though vestiges varying in degree are still to be noted. The only other full-fledged class language in Samba-Duru – and as a matter of fact even within the whole of Adamawa languages in Cameroon –, is Lɔŋto of the Duru subgroup. The noun class systems found in Lɔŋto and the Gəmme-Vere languages are unique among the class languages of Adamawa as regards the amount of their seemingly morphological and structural archaisms. This becomes evident by the fascinating correspondences with class systems found in Central Gur. Thus, these half a dozen languages spoken in and around the Alantika Mountains possess noun class systems which in their basic morphological and structural features most closely relate to languages spoken in Burkina Faso and Northern Ghana, while their relations, inhabiting adjacent mountain massifs have lost most of the significant morphological features of a noun class system and often mark nominal plurals, if at all, uniformly with only one single morpheme.

Gəmme-Vere languages and their relations in the Samba-Duru group also display a remarkable disparity as regards the constituent order in possessive or genitive constructions. While several languages follow a strict Head-Modifier syntax – as is the case in most of the other Adamawa language groups – their linguistically closely related neighbours place the possessor or genitival modifier in front of the head noun; a syntactical order commonly known in Gur. In several languages both constituent orders can be used, the variance is correlated to the formal distinction of associative constructions based on their respective semantics.

Post-verbal negative markers are attested in almost all Samba-Duru languages, in general in the final position of negative clauses displaying generally a Verb-(Object-X)-Negative word order. Regarding their respective negation patterns and the form of the various post-verbal negative markers however, the languages, even those closely related, vary considerably. In several languages, final negation markers are merely part of a more complex negation marking, while in others the post-verbal/clause-final negative markers are the only device marking negation.

The contribution reflects and ponders on possible explanations, contact situations, historical events, social networks which may account for the linguistic diversities and variances on the one hand and the apparent fascinating archaic morphological retentions on the other hand, particular as regards the languages of the Alantika Mountains.