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# The historical implications of the linguistic relationship between Makua and Sotho languages.<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Makua, known also as Emakhuwa, is a Bantu language, spoken by the Wamakhua people who occupy the eastern coastal region from south Tanzania to most of northern Mozambique. There are over half a million Makua speakers in Tanzania and over 3.2 million speakers in Mozambique. It is Mozambique's most numerous language constituting over 27.5% of its population<sup>2</sup>. The Makua language forms a linguistic cluster with two other languages to the south, namely Elomwe and Chuabo. Together they form the greater Makua group. Not much has been written so far about the historical affiliation or movements of the Makua people.

Sotho, on the other hand, is part of Southern Bantu and it comprises groups of people who are linguistically very closely related, namely the Basotho, Bapedi, Batswana, Bakgalagadi and Balozi, among others. These groups are said to have occupied their respective areas progressively from AD1100 to AD1800<sup>3</sup>. The above groups are found mainly in present-day South Africa, Lesotho, Botswana, Namibia and Zambia. They constitute a population of over 6 million people.

## Linguistic Affinity between Makua and Sotho

Although the Makua cluster of languages is spoken at least 500 kilometers north of the region where Sotho languages are spoken, their structural resemblance with the Sotho languages has been recognized over the past fifteen years. Several studies have remarked repeatedly that there are certain common linguistic features between Makua and Sotho groups<sup>4</sup>. Some studies have also pointed out that Makua is radically different from the rest of the languages in North-Eastern Bantu<sup>5</sup>. One common element in all these studies is their use of phonological data, especially sound correspondences and shift as evidence. Further evidence, based on lexical data, was provided recently<sup>6</sup>.

## *Phonological Arguments for Early Makua-Sotho Connections*

The most important arguments which have been used as evidence of early Makua-Sotho connections involve the identical phonological changes which have occurred in both groups. These have been identified as follows<sup>7</sup>:

- (i) the identical shift of the sound [t] to [r].

### *Sotho*

- \*tatu > rarU (orth. raro) 'three'
- \*tuma > rUma (orth. roma) 'send'
- \*ma-tama > ma-rama 'cheeks'

### *Makua*

- \*ma-tama > ma-rama 'cheeks'
- \*mu-tu > mu-ru 'head'

- \*pita > vira 'pass'  
(ii) the identical shift of the sound [p] to [f] or [v]

*Sotho* (based on Setswana)

- \*pica > fitlha 'hide'  
\*pa > fa 'give'  
\*ma-paca > ma-fatlha 'twins'

*Makua*

- \*poda > vola 'become cold'  
\*kupa > ikhuva 'bone'  
\*ma-paca > ma-vatha 'twins'

- (iii) the identical shift of the sound [k] to [x] or zero

*Sotho*

- \*kama > xama (orth. gama) 'milk' (verb)  
\*kana > xana (orth. gana) 'refuse'  
\*n-yoka > noxa (orth. noga) 'snake'

*Makua*

- \*tapika > raphca 'vomit'  
\*toka > roa 'get out'  
(in both cases [k] became zero).

- (iv) the identical shift from [mb], [nd] and [ng] to [p], [t] and [k] respectively

*Sotho*

- \*mbudi > pUdi (orth. podi) 'goat'  
\*genda > eta 'go/visit'  
\*tunga > rUka (orth. roka) 'tie/sew'.

*Makua*

- \*mbuda > epula 'rain'  
\*numba > enupa 'house'  
\*mu-gendo > mweto 'leg'  
\*yingida > ikela 'enter'

- (v) the identical shift from [c] and [j] to dentals [tlh] and [tl] or [th] and [t] respectively before a or o.

*Sotho*

- \*pica > fitlha 'hide'  
\*ma-paca > ma-fatlha 'twins'  
\*ma-ico > maitlho 'eyes'  
\*ja > tla 'come'  
\*jala > tlala 'famine'

*Makua*

- \*yico > -itho 'eye'  
\*bu-ico > witho 'face'  
\*ma-paca > mavatha 'twins'  
\*jenga > teka 'build'  
\*jada > tala 'famine'

Although identical sound shifts in Bantu languages are very common and that often such shifts occur independently of each other in zones which are not contiguous, the resemblances in the case of Makua and Sotho, as demonstrated above, were unique on the following grounds:

- (i) As argued also by some scholars<sup>8</sup>, the coincidences are just too many. It would be naive to attribute all of them to chance or coincidental resemblance.  
(ii) Some of the common shifts, such as the one involving voiced prenasalized stops ([mb], [nd], [ng]) changing to voiceless stops ([p], [t], [k]) are so unique that they are not found anywhere else among the Bantu languages outside the region.

The linguistic evidence provided above would tend to point to common historical development between Makua and Sotho as a linguistic cluster or community of languages in close proximity at one time.

**Common Lexical Items:**

One further evidence of Makua-Sotho affinity involving lexical data was provided recently<sup>9</sup>. The study was based on 720 lexical items selected from basic, environmental and cultural vocabulary.

Although the results showed that Sotho languages shared less common vocabulary with Makua compared to other Southern Bantu languages, there were considerable lexical items in Makua which were part of Southern Bantu<sup>10</sup>, some of which were only shared with Sotho languages, as shown in Table 1 below:

*Table 1. Common lexical items in Makua and Sotho/Nguni*

The presence of items of vocabulary in Makua which were not part of the entire Eastern Bantu, but confined to Southern Bantu was another evidence that, unless such items were a result of later diffusion, Makua had common development with Sotho, and

	MAKUA	SOTHO (based on Setswana)	NGUNI (based on Isizulu)	GLOSS
1	mweto (Elomwe)	loeto	umlenze	'leg'
2	etura (Emakhuwa)	melora	umlotha	'ashes'
3	esavi (Chuabo)	tlhapi	enhlanzi	'fish'
4	nnyaka (Emakhuwa)	lonaka	uphondo	'horn'
5	nhaava (Emakhuwa)	moshawa	isihlabathi	'sandy ground'
6	nconco (Emakhuwa)	uxokoN (kgokong)	ubhejane	'rhino'
7	kuva (Chuabo)	kxofa (kgofa)	ikhalane	'tick'
8	thelo (Elomwe)	loselo	-	'winnowing tray'
9	pogo (Chuabo)	poo	inkunzi	'bull'
10	saboko (Chuab)	poko	impono	'he-goat'
11	nkhoro (Emaka)	N-oro (ngoro)	usango	'entrance gate'
12	opeleka (Chuabo)	belexa (belea)	-beleka	'deliver' (child)
13	mwanthiyana	mosetsana	intombazana	'girl'
14	omwanana	monna	umyeni	'man/husband'
15	muthipo (Elomwe)	tshipi	intsimbi	'iron'

southern Bantu in general.

Moreover, some lexical items originating from Proto-Bantu or Eastern Bantu have undergone identical semantic changes in Makua and Sotho as it is exemplified in Table 2 below:

ITEM	MEANING IN PROTO-BANTU	MEANING IN SOTHO & MAKUA
*genda --> loeto (Sotho) --> mweto (Makua)	'go' (v)	'leg' (n)
*m-bogo --> poo (Sotho) --> pogo (Makua)	'buffalo'	'bull'
*m-pongo --> poko (Sotho) --> saboko (Makua)	'bush-buck'	'he-goat'
*di-juba --> leuba (Sotho) --> ncuwa (Makua)	'sun'	'drought'

*Table 2: Cases of identical semantic shift in Sotho and Makua.*

## Reconstructing the Historical Scenario

If we accept the linguistic evidence as constituting convincing clues for common historical development, we need to relate these findings with the known Bantu migratory patterns in order to explain the presence of the Makua in their present north-eastern location and the Sotho in the Southern location.

An attempt has been made to reconstruct the possible historical scenario<sup>11</sup>. It was observed, in this study, that all the ancestors of Southern Bantu came from the north. Hence, Southern Bantu had some common features with the rest of Eastern Bantu. All the groups that now constitute Southern Bantu arrived in the Southern region during the first wave of Bantu immigration, that is around the 1st century of our era. Southern Bantu was first divided or linked between Nguni/Tsonga, on the one hand, and Venda/Sotho, on the other. Makua was in close contact with Sotho, and probably Venda, for a considerable time. All these groups inhabited one, reasonably restricted, area, for a certain time. This area is presumed to be the lower Limpopo valley, where many of the early archaeological sites of the region are located. According to this description<sup>12</sup>, an immigration from the north and north-east, in present-day Zimbabwe and central Mozambique (probably of the ancestors of Chichewa, Chishona, Chisena, etc.) might have pushed the Sotho (and conceivably other southern groups) away further south-wards, while the Makua remained in the north or migrated in that direction. This is presumed to have happened eight to nine hundred years ago (i.e. AD 1100–AD 1200).

According to this view, Makua was in contact with Sotho for a considerable time in a restricted area and that it was during this time that Makua and Sotho not only developed common sound shifts but also shared some common vocabulary. We would like to share this view, and especially to emphasize on the close contact and interaction between the various linguistic communities. This is why they were able to share such multiple and complex changes in their phonological systems and far-reaching innovations in the lexicon. This would suggest that Makua and Sotho were at one point part of one and the same linguistic continuum, and that they were separated by some internal or external forces. In the light of our data, the historical scenario could be speculatively restated as follows:

Makua and the rest of Southern Bantu languages were among the first language groups to immigrate into central and southern Africa during the thrust of the south-ward Bantu migration between AD100 and AD 400<sup>13</sup>

These groups occupied different but contiguous areas, somewhere between the Zambezi river and the northern catchment of the Orange river, with population centering around the Limpopo river, where a concentration of the early archaeological sites has been found<sup>14</sup>. This location coincides with the area in which the origins of Sotho-Tswana culture is presumed to have emanated before their migrations around 1300 to the Vaal area and later to their present habitats<sup>15</sup>. Moreover, the early common occupation by Southern Bantu groups of an area near the sea is evidenced by the presence of a common vocabulary depicting the sea and the coast<sup>16</sup>.

Gradually, because of the constant interaction, a linguistic continuum was created between these groups. Such a continuum was manifested linguistically by the increased sharing of common innovations which became typical of that region. These common innovations can be described as follows:

- (i) strong aspiration of the voiceless stops, namely [p], [t], [k] becoming [ph], [th], [kh] respectively, as still manifested in the Nguni, Sotho, Tsonga, Inhambane and Venda groups.
- (ii) velarization of [w] and sensitivity of that sound to any [-back] consonants in its environment, resulting in complex phonotactic rules found in most Southern Bantu languages.

(iii) the use of *-ana* as a diminutive form replacing the earlier prefixal forms that had identical functions, namely noun class prefixes 12 and 13 (*ka-* and *tu-* respectively).

(iv) the creation of a sizeable stock of lexical items to be found only in the region<sup>17</sup>. These items include the following:

*tanda 'love'	*tenga 'buy'
*koka 'pull'	*cimbi 'iron'
*cambi 'fish'	*camba 'swim'
*belega 'give birth'	*n-koci 'chief'

Even where these items exist in other Bantu languages, they do not have the same semantic attributes. For example *n-koci* means 'lion' in north-western Bantu<sup>18</sup>.

Moreover, given the large extent of this linguistic area and the earlier diversity of the groups, a process of dialectalization took place, resulting in two main varieties, one in the north (variety A) and the other in the south (Variety B). It is most likely that by around 600 AD, the two varieties could have become remarkably distinct from each other<sup>19</sup>.

Variety A, which was later to separate into Venda, and then Sotho and Makua groups, developed its own specific innovations, which included:<sup>20</sup>

- (i) the shift of the voiceless stops [p], [t] and [k] to the continuants [f], [r] and [x] respectively.
- (ii) the hardening of the voiced prenasalized stops [mb], [nd] and [ng] to the voiceless stops [p], [t] and [k] respectively. The phonological motivation behind this change has been presumed to be the emergence of a new feature in the nasal component, namely the fortifying property which would cause voiced consonants to become voiceless<sup>21</sup>.
- (iii) the dentalization and hardening of [c] and [j] to [th] and [t] respectively.
- (iv) loss of the long/short syllable or vowel distinctions.
- (v) loss of the pre-prefix (i.e. initial vowel). As a result all noun prefixes became monosyllabic.
- (vi) the creation of some common lexical items, not found in variety B.

It could be observed that the survival of A, as one integral linguistic community, probably up to as late as 1100 AD, allowed remarkable phonological and lexical innovations to take place, as can be noted from the above. An off-shoot group, which later came to be known as Venda, must have branched off slightly earlier, as it did not develop some of the characteristics described above.

Variety B, later to separate into Nguni, and Tsonga groups (among others), also developed its specific characteristics, including the following:<sup>22</sup>

- (i) spirantization of consonants preceding high vowels, thus creating fricative consonants. This is presumed to have precede the process of fricativization of stops in Nguni, Tsonga and Inhambane groups.
- (ii) the reduction of vowels from seven to five.
- (iii) the lateralization of certain consonants to form lateral fricatives and affricates. The resulting lateral fricatives that are conventionally written as *dl* and *hl* in the current orthography
- (iv) the creation of some common lexical stock, not found in A.

Certainly, the changes in Variety B were not as dramatic as those which affected Variety A., particularly in the sound system.

The separation between the groups forming variety A and B could have been prompted by internal or external forces. If we go by that description<sup>23</sup>, an immigration from the north or north east in present-day Zimbabwe and central Mozambique, triggered the dispersal movements, thus interrupting the earlier continuum, particularly between the Makua and the rest of the now Southern Bantu languages. As argued by Janson, although there is so far not much historical evidence to support this hypothesis, the scenario is

quite plausible, especially that, as shown elsewhere<sup>24</sup>, a new type of pottery appeared rather suddenly in the region around the eleventh century.

It is possible that other movements from the north and north-east into the area, as suggested by some scholars<sup>25</sup>, some of which could be described as off-shoots of North-Eastern Bantu, infiltrated into the Makua area as it became a corridor, and therefore a melting pot, between North-Eastern and South-Eastern Bantu. This would explain the mass of North-Eastern lexical material in Makua and its reduced percentage of Southern Bantu lexical material as noted above.

In their new habitat, Makua and Sotho made further separate phonological and lexical changes to result in some of the differences pointed out above. Sotho, particularly, went through more complex phonological changes triggered by the sensitivity and articulatory characteristics of the semivowels [w] and [y]. Also the group, presumably, adopted the Nguni lateralization process to characterize the dentalized consonants as suggested by some scholars<sup>26</sup>. Makua on its side, became overwhelmed by an influx of lexical stock from North-Eastern Bantu. This greatly affected its lexical identity with Southern Bantu. Moreover, not only more phonological changes took place, but also the diminutive formation process with the form *-ana* became non-productive.

## Conclusion

In this study we have attempted to accomplish two important discussions regarding the apparent historical relationship between Makua and Sotho languages.

First, we have tried to summarize the existing linguistic evidence which has been presented so far as proof of the historical affinity between the two groups. This evidence consists of phonological, lexical and semantic similarities. It is due to its qualitative and quantitative aspects that linguists have regarded it as significant.

The second part of the paper has attempted to provide a linguistic based account of the possible line of historical development of Southern Bantu and Makua based on the present linguistic characteristics underlying the various groups in the family. Certainly, although our description coincides with some historical and archaeological findings, it must be regarded, at this stage, as tentative and speculative. More specific linguistic (including morphologically and structurally based) and historical studies are still needed in throwing more light not only to the question of Makua affiliation with Southern Bantu but also the form of ramifications which took place among the southern Bantu communities.

## Notes & References

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2. The authors would like to thank Mr. Pedro Afido and his two colleagues for the collection of the data on the Makua group, and Dr. Gregorio Firmino for the very useful comments on an earlier version of this paper.
3. As described by scholars such as D. W. Phillipson (1994) *African Archaeology*, Second Edition, Cambridge University Press; N. Parsons, (1993) *A New History of Southern Africa*, Second Edition, Macmillan; and T. Tlou and A. C. Campbell (1984) *History of Botswana*. Gaborone: Macmillan.
4. These studies include the works of W. J. Mohlig (1981) "Stratification in the History of the Bantu Languages", in *SUGIA*, 3:251-316; J. A. Louw and R. Finlayson (1990) 'Southern Bantu Origins as Represented by Xhosa and Tswana' *South African Journal of African Languages*, 10.4: 401-410; T. Janson (1991/92) 'Southern Bantu and Makua', *SUGIA*, 12/13:63-106; and H. M. Batibo, J. Moilwa and N. Mosaka (1995) 'The Group that Went Astray? The Case of

- Makua's Relationship with Southern Bantu' in *Proceedings of the 4th LASU Conference, University of Swaziland*, October 1995.
5. These include D. Nurse (1988) "The Diachronic Background to the Language Communities of Southwestern Tanzania", in *SUGIA*, 9:15 - 115; T. J. Hinnebusch (1981) 'Northeast Coastal Bantu'. In *Studies in the Classification of Eastern Bantu Languages* T.J. Hinnebusch, D. Nurse and M. Mould (Eds), *SUGIA*: 21-125.
  6. Batibo et al., 'The Group that went Astray'
  7. See for example Janson, 'Southern Bantu'; Batibo et al., *ibid*.
  8. Such as Janson, *ibid*;; Louw and Finlayson, 'Southern Bantu Origins'
  9. See Batibo et al., 'The Group that went Astray'.
  10. Evidently, our study would have been more comprehensive if all the Southern Bantu languages had been investigated.
  11. See for example Janson, 'Southern Bantu'.
  12. Janson, *ibid*, 97.
  13. As suggested by D. W. Phillipson (1977) *The Later Prehistory of Eastern and Southern Africa*, London, Heineman.
  14. As remarked by Janson, Southern; T. N. Huffman, 1988, "Southern Africa to the South of the Zambezi", in *Africa from the Seventh to the Eleventh Century*, M. Elfasi (Ed.), pp 664-680: Paris: UNESCO & London: Heinemann; T. N. Huffman (1989) "Ceramics, Settlements and Late Iron Age Migration" *African Archaeological Review*, 7, pp 155-182; and Fagan, B. M. (1984) 'The Zambezi and Limpopo Basins: 1100-1500', in *Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century*, D.T. Niane (Ed.), pp 525-550. Paris: UNESCO & London: Heinemann.
  15. As described by scholars such as L. D. Ngcongco and J. Vansina (1984) "Southern Africa: Its Peoples and Social Structures", in *Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century* D. T. Niane (Ed.), pp 578-596. Paris: UNESCO & London: Heinemann.
  16. As observed by H. M. Batibo (1996), *The Role of Language in the Discovery of Cultural History: Reconstructing Setswana Speakers' Cultural Past*. Professorial Inaugural Lecture Series. No.12, March 1996. NIR, University of Botswana.
  17. See for example A. Van der Spuy (1990) "Phonological Relationships between the Southern Bantu Languages", *African Studies*, 49/11: 19-147.
  18. For more information see Y. Bastin (1994) 'Reconstruction formelle et semantique de la denomination de quelques mammiferes en Bantou' *Afrikanistische Arbeitspapiere*, 38:5-132, June 1994.
  19. For more details see Janson, 'Southern Bantu', 70-88.
  20. This analysis is based on the common features which characterize Sotho, Venda and Makua.
  21. For full description see P. Dickens (1984) 'The History of the So-Called Strengthening in Tswana', *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics*, 6: 97-125.
  22. This analysis is based on the common features which characterize Nguni and Tsonga languages.
  23. As provided by Janson, 'Southern Bantu', 96.
  24. See for example D.W. Phillipson (1988) 'Central Africa to the North of the Zambezi' in *Africa from the Seventh to the Eleventh Century*, M. Elfasi (Ed), 643-663. General History of Africa. Paris: UNESCO & London Heinemann.
  25. See for example Ehret, C. (forthcoming), *Eastern Africa in the Early Iron Age : Explorations in History, 1000 BC to AD300*.
  26. As suggested by Janson, 'Southern Bantu', 88.