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Tshiluba Language Structures

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**Tshiluba Language Structures**

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**Introduction**

Students in the linguistics emphasis capstone course have been documenting the Tshiluba language as a group project.

What is linguistic fieldwork?

- Working only with native speakers (often without the aid of a writing system) language data are gathered and analyzed in order to develop an understanding of the grammatical structure of the language.

What is language documentation?

- Creating a record of a language that is lasting and as complete as possible by focusing on how the language is used in a broad range of natural settings.

Why linguistic fieldwork for the Senior Seminar?

- Documenting the distinct linguistic features of an unfamiliar language allows students to apply linguistic knowledge acquired in previous courses and build proficiency in linguistic fieldwork methodologies.

Why Tshiluba?

- Tshiluba is spoken by around 50-60 refugees in Boise and over 6 million people worldwide.
- Members of the Boise Tshiluba community hope that participation in the project will be a step toward broader knowledge and its speakers.

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**Language Background**

- Tshiluba (ISO 639-3 lua) is characterized as an Atlantic-Congo, Narrow Bantu, Central language in the Niger-Congo language family. It is classified as L31 in the Guthrie classification system for Bantu languages.
- Tshiluba, along with Kikongo, Lingala, and Swahili, is one of the national languages of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).
- Tshiluba is also known as Luba Kasai and is most widely spoken in the provinces of Kasai Occidental and Kasai Oriental in DRC.

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**The Consultants**

Tshiluba language consultants:  
Albert Romain  
Bantumbakulu Mukuna  
and  
Daniel Miko-Mikyene

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**Phonology**

**The Tshiluba Sound System:** The sounds in the charts below appear in Tshiluba.

**Distinctive features of Tshiluba phonology:** Tshiluba is a tonal language, which means that a change in tone can carry a change in meaning. There are two tones, high (H) and low (L). High is marked with an accent over the vowel and low is unmarked.

Compare:  
- [tudʒi] 'they (cf. elephants) see themselves.'  
- [tudʒi] 'we see ourselves.'

- [dʒul] (HL) 'nose' and [dʒulʰ] (HH) 'sky'

- Like other Bantu languages, Tshiluba has syllabic nasals at the beginning of words: [m̩,b̩̃] 'dog' and [n̩,b̩̃u] 'elephant.'

**Phonological rules in the language include:**

- Final vowel devoicing /b̩̃u/: /b̩̃u/ becomes /b̩/.  
- Adjacent vowel assimilation: When two vowels occur together in a word, the second vowel overrides the first in the final form: /dʒulʰu/ becomes [dʒulʰ] 'nose' and /m̩u:bu/ becomes [m̩u:] 'near them.'

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**Morphology**

- As with most Bantu languages, Tshiluba utilizes a noun class system whereby nouns have prefixes that determine the class they belong to:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noun Class #</th>
<th>Prefix</th>
<th>Noun Class #</th>
<th>Prefix</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>m-</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>m-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>m-</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>m-</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>m-</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>m-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>m-</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>m-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many elements in a given sentence will agree with the head noun based upon its noun class. This is realized through the addition of the appropriate prefix to modifiers and verbs. This can be seen in examples like [bibi bito] 'white doors' (Class 8) as compared to [mikanda mitokua] 'white books' (Class 4).

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**Syntax**

Like English, basic word order in Tshiluba appears to be SVO (subject-verb-object). Subject agreement is sensitive to noun class. Object agreement is also present when the object is not otherwise specified in the sentence.

- mb-a 'mu- mona mosku'  
- mb-a 'mu- ba- mona'  
- C9-dog C9.SUB- see monkey  
- C9-dog C9.SUB-C2.OBJ- see 'The dog sees the monkey.'  
- 'The dog sees them.'

In noun phrases, modifiers appear in a (mostly) fixed order.

- mi- kanda j- ani mi- kunze i- bitdi  
- C4-book C4-my C4-red C4-two

‘My two red books’

As you can see, every word in the noun phrase agrees with the head noun of the head noun ‘book.’

Aside from behaving like other noun class markers, ka- (CL12, singular) and tu- (CL13, plural, above) also serve a diminutive function, making the noun root to which they attach understood to be ‘small’ or in some cases, ‘insignificant; unimportant.’

Compare:

- mb- a 'mu- mona mosku'  
- ka- b 'buni'  
- tu- 'bhlu'  
- C9-dog C12-dog C12-person 'dog'  
- C9-dog C12-red C12-person 'small dog'  
- C9-dog C12-less C12-person 'insignificant person'

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**Semantics: Color Terms**

Tshiluba has just four basic color terms: [mufik] 'black,' [mitokua] 'white,' [mukunza] 'red,' and [kalabu] 'yellow.' Other terms that English speakers may consider “basic” are either borrowed, as with [bul] 'blue' (from French), or descriptive, as with [mai] a matamba] 'green' (literally, 'color of cassava leaves').