

The monophonematic analysis of prenasal clusters deriving from the lexicalization of noun class prefixes in Bantoid languages: the case of Koshin [‘Beboid’ Bantu, Cameroon]

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The phonological status of consonant clusters in general and prenasal clusters (homorganic sequences of a nasal consonant followed by an oral consonant) in particular is amongst the controversial topics in the phonology of non-well-described languages. In fact, as Creissels (1994: 106) highlighted, in African languages for example, there is a problem, especially for prenasalized consonants interpreted as syllabic onsets. The author suggests that, in a language where say, *mb* occurs as a syllabic onset at word initial position and where *m* and *b* can also be attested as isolated syllabic onsets within the same language, the monophonematic analysis of *mb* can be viable only if the nasal *m* cannot be isolated as a prefixal morpheme in the language and if the monophonematic interpretation entails somehow a significant simplification of the system.

In Koshin [Beboid, Cameroon], data collected from native speakers and analysed on the basis of the Basic Linguistic Theory (Dixon, 2010) reveal that the prenasalised clusters (mostly but not only derived from the lexicalization of noun class prefixes) are attested, as well as the isolated nasal consonants, in syllabic onset slots. Besides, in some circumstances, nasal consonants can still occur as prefixal morphemes in the language. There are not enough minimal pairs including prenasalized clusters to testify their monophonematicity in the phonology of the language, but there are instances of morphological and syntactical evidence that clearly support the monophonematic analysis of these complex segments. Moreover, analysis from other Bantoid languages (Voorhoeve, 1980) strengthen the hypothesis that the monophonematic status of prenasalized clusters in Bantoid is sustainable. This sounds as a contradiction to Creissels’ assumption, given that there is no way of considering the Koshin system with phonemic prenasalized clusters as simpler than the one without them.

As assumed by the Basic Linguistic Theory, the morphological and syntactical support to the monophonematic analysis of prenasal clusters reminds us that languages are truly integrated systems in which each portion is related to the others and that no portion can be satisfactorily understood without taking into consideration the others.

References

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