

Vulnerable But Not Forgotten: Documenting Bangantu's Body Parts Vocabulary

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Abstract

Bangantu, a vulnerable equatorial Bantu language spoken by approximately 10,000 people in Cameroon's East region, lacks comprehensive documentation. This study aims to preserve Bangantu by documenting its body parts expressions, contributing to language revitalisation efforts. Through qualitative and quantitative research methods, this project gathered primary data from fluent speakers, revealing complex morphological patterns and varied syllable structures in external and internal body parts terminology. Key findings have implications for linguistic preservation, language education, and research, safeguarding Bangantu's unique features, enhancing teaching materials, and informing linguistic typology and comparative studies. Following best practices in language documentation, this study contributes to linguistics, supporting language preservation and cross-cultural understanding, providing a foundation for further research on Bangantu.

Keywords: *Bangantu language, body parts expressions, language documentation, language education, linguistic preservation, linguistic typology*

Introduction

The Bangantu language, spoken by approximately 10,000 people in the Mbang subdivision of Cameroon's East region, is an endangered equatorial Bantu language. This paper aims to document and preserve this language by focusing on body parts expressions, thereby contributing to language revitalisation efforts and ensuring the language's survival for future generations. As one of the many undocumented languages facing the threat of extinction due to dominance of languages of wider communication, Bangantu represents not only a linguistic system but also a vital component of cultural heritage and identity of its speakers. By focusing on body parts terminology, this paper provides a structured and detailed analysis of a specific lexical domain which can be expanded into comprehensive resources for the development of educational resources such as dictionaries, glossaries and thematic vocabulary list which are essential for the teaching of Bangantu in both formal and informal settings enabling speakers to pass on

their language to future generations and providing linguists with valuable data for further research. The study adopts a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods to document and analyse body parts expressions in Bangantu. Furthermore the study incorporates community-based participatory research principles ensuring that the Bangantu speaking community is actively involved in the research process. This collaborative approach not only enhances the accuracy and cultural relevance of the data but also empowers the community to take ownership of their linguistic heritage.

2. Geographical Context

Bangantu is spoken in a canton of about seventeen villages in the Kadey division, bordered by the Mezime language community. The language remains unclassified, with no existing orthography or documentation. French is widely used for communication among the Bangantu community, leading to lexical borrowing and potential language shift.

3. Linguistic Classification and Status

Contrary to ALCAM's (2012) classification of Bangantu as a dialect of Mpo, the Bangantu people assert their language's distinctiveness, recognising Mbimo as a mutually intelligible language spoken in Yokadouma. This classification debate highlights the need for further linguistic research and documentation.

4. Objectives

This paper seeks to:

- Document and preserve Bangantu body parts expressions for posterity, creating a comprehensive record of the language's lexical and structural features;
- Expose the language to the global linguistic community, promoting awareness and recognition of Bangantu's unique characteristics;
- Demonstrate the language's structural features, such as consonants, vowels, and affixes, providing insights into its grammatical and phonological systems.

Language documentation is crucial for preserving endangered languages (Austin, 2006). This project follows best practices in documentation, ensuring responsible data collection, representation, and diffusion (Berge, 2010). By documenting Bangantu, we contribute to the broader field of language documentation and preservation.

5. Research Methodology

The following methods were used in carrying out this research:

5.1. Data Collection

Primary data was collected through:

- Interviews: In-depth interviews were conducted with fluent Bangantu speakers, focusing on body parts expressions. Consultants provided translations and explanations of terms;
- Recordings: Audio recordings of natural conversations and elicitation sessions were made to capture authentic language use;
- Participant Observation: Researchers participated in daily activities with Bangantu speakers, noting language use in context;
- Lexical Elicitation: Controlled elicitation techniques were used to gather comprehensive data on body parts expressions.

5.2. Data Analysis

Collected data was analysed using:

- FieldWorks Language Explorer (FLEX): A linguistic software tool for data management, analysis, and dictionary creation;
- Phonology Assistant: A software tool for phonological analysis and syllable structure identification;
- Transcriptions and Translation: Data was transcribed and translated into French and English for further analysis.

5.3. Consultants and Participants

Five regular consultants and several occasional participants contributed to the study. Consultants were chosen based on their fluency and knowledge of Bangantu. Participants were selected to represent a range of ages, genders, and social backgrounds.

5.4. Ethics and Permissions

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Permission was granted by local authorities and community leaders. Data collection and analysis followed ethical guidelines for language documentation.

6. Literature review

Language documentation is a vital aspect of linguistic research, particularly for endangered languages like Bangantu. Despite its importance, Bangantu remains a vulnerable language with no comprehensive published works, making it essential to conduct research to preserve its linguistic and cultural

heritage.

The existing literature on language documentation highlights the significance of responsible data collection, representation, and diffusion (Austin, 2006). Berge (2010) emphasises the importance of adequate documentation, including the collection of primary data, standardisation of metadata, and making data accessible. Himmelmann (1998) stresses the need for comprehensive documentation, covering all aspects of language.

However, the lack of published works on Bangantu makes it challenging to understand its linguistic structures, vocabulary, and cultural context. This knowledge gap underscores the need for rigorous documentation and research to preserve the language.

Currently, Medi Yves Nacise, an MA student, is conducting research on focus constructions in Bangantu, marking a significant step towards documenting the language. This study aims to build upon Medi's work and contribute to the comprehensive documentation of Bangantu, following best practices in language documentation (Berge, 2010; Himmelmann, 1998).

By examining the language's grammatical structures, vocabulary, and cultural context, this study aims to provide a solid foundation for further research and language preservation efforts. The documentation of Bangantu will not only contribute to the field of linguistics but also help preserve the cultural heritage of its speech community.

7. Findings

This section presents the findings on the expressions of body parts in Bangantu, categorised into two main sections: External Body Parts and Internal Body Parts.

The External Body Parts section delves into the expressions and terminology used to describe visible body parts, including:

- Head: exploring the various terms and phrases used to refer to the head, face, and related features;
- Trunk: examining the expressions used to describe the torso, chest, back, and abdominal regions;
- Members: investigating the terminology used to refer to arms, legs, hands, and feet.

The Internal Body Parts section focuses on the expressions and concepts used to describe non-visible body parts, namely the organs: discussing the terms and phrases used to refer to internal organs such as the heart, lungs, liver, and others.

7.1. On the External Body Parts

7.1.1. The head

The head is a complex body part with various components, each with its unique terminology in Bangantu. The following terms and their plural forms are used to describe the head:

Entries		
Lexeme Form	Glosses	plural
Show All	Show All	Show All
dā tjem	palate	idā tjem
dēs	chin	mēs
dīs	eye	mīs
dīs ēbòk	small of back	mīs m̀pòk
dóʔ	nose	móʔ
dʷāl	nape of the neck	mʷāl
dʒemb	tongue	pʒemb
dʒind sɪŋ	thumb	mʒind sɪŋ
édyeʔ	tooth	médyeʔ
ékʒs	eyebrow	mékʒs
élʒ	ear	mélʒ

ɛpʰúk	cheek	nɪpʰúk
ɛtʰám	tuft, lock of hair	ɛtʰám
ɛtʃém	eyelash	nɪtʃém
ɛtʃík	molar tooth	nɪtʃík
kʰɔ́ŋkʰɔ́ŋɔ́l	throat	íkʰɔ́ŋkʰɔ́ŋɔ́l
kʰɛl	shin	nɪkɛl
kʰònd éís	eyelid	kʰònd mís
kʰònd nùmb	lip	kʰònd múmb
lò	head	nɪlò
mín	adam’s apple	nɪmín
nùmb	mouth	múmb
òbáj	jaw	máj
pèn éóʔ	bridge (of nose)	nɪpèn móʔ
pʰòmb	forehead	nɪpʰòmb
pʰòŋ	hair of the head	pʰòŋ
tʃín	neck	nɪtʃín
zʰɛl	beard	zʰɛl

The analysis of the head components reveals a range of fascinating patterns in the plural formation, showcasing the language’s creativity and complexity.

• **Prefixation**

In Bangantu, prefixation is a common strategy for forming plurals. For instance, the plural form of “Adam’s Apple” [mín] is created by adding a prefix [nɪ-] to the singular form, resulting in [nɪmín]. This pattern is also observed in other terms, such as “Forehead” [phòŋ], which becomes [nɪpʰòmb] in the plural form. The use of prefixes to indicate plurality is a widespread feature of many languages, and Bangantu is no exception.

• **Consonant Substitution**

However, Bangantu also employs consonant substitutions to form plurals, a less common strategy in language. For example, the plural form of “Mouth” [nùmb] is formed by substituting the initial [n-] with [m-], resulting in [mùmb]. This process changes the initial sound of the word, creating a distinct plural form.

• **Complete Change: A Surprising Exception**

In contrast, the plural form of “Jaw” [òbáj] undergoes a complete change, resulting in [máj], with no apparent similarity to the singular form. This

unexpected transformation highlights the language's capacity for innovation and creativity in forming plurals.

- **No Change: A Notable Exception**

Interestingly, the singular and plural forms of “Beard” [zjèl] remain identical, with no morphological changes to indicate plurality. This exception underscores the language's flexibility and adaptability in forming plurals. These diverse patterns demonstrate the complexity and richness of Bangantu's plural formation system, showcasing the language's unique blend of common and innovative strategies. By examining these patterns, we gain insight into the language's structure and the creative ways in which speakers convey meaning.

- **On the Syllabic Structure**

The components of the head in Bangantu exhibit a range of syllable structures, including monosyllabic (e.g., [mìn] ‘Adam's apple’, [nùmb] ‘mouth’, [phòŋ] ‘forehead’), disyllabic (e.g., [èkôŋ] ‘eyebrow’), and polysyllabic forms (for some plural forms). The data also shows that some components have identical syllable structures in both singular and plural forms (e.g., [zjèl] ‘beard’), while others exhibit changes in syllable structure between singular and plural forms (e.g., [phòmb] ‘jaw’ vs. [m̀phòmb] ‘jaws’).

Furthermore, the data suggests that Bangantu may have a preference for CV (consonant-vowel) syllable structure, as seen in components like [mìn] and [pʰòŋ]. However, more data is needed to confirm this observation.

7.1.2. The trunk

The trunk, also known as the torso, is the central part of the human body, connecting the head and limbs. It comprises the chest, abdomen, back, and pelvis. The trunk contains vital organs such as the heart, lungs, liver, and stomach, and is protected by the ribcage and abdominal muscles.

In Bangantu, the trunk is a complex body part with various components, each with its unique terminology. The selected data found in table 2 below reveals interesting insights into the language's morphology.

Entries		
Lexeme Form	Glosses	plural
Show All	Show All	Show All
bèt	chest	m̀pèt
bòk	side of the body	m̀pòk
d̥ɔ̃	navel	m̥ɔ̃
d̥ɔ̃s ɛ̀bòk	small of back	m̥ɔ̃s m̀pòk
ɛ̀bɛl	breast	m̀bɛl
ɛ̀pʰal	testicle	m̀pʰal
ɛ̀tʃùkùl	heel	m̀tʃùkùl
kòŋ	back	m̀kòŋ
tɛ	waist	itɛ

Some remarks are made on plural formation and syllable structure:

• Plural formation

The plural formation patterns in the trunk region exhibit a range of strategies, including:

affixation: Many singular forms take a plural prefix |m̀-| (e.g., [bèt] ‘chest’ → [m̀pèt] ‘chests’, [bòk] ‘side of the body’ → [m̀pòk] ‘sides of the body’);

Consonant change: Some singular forms change their vowels to form the plural (e.g., [d̥ɔ̃] ‘navel’ → [m̥ɔ̃] ‘navels’);

Irregular formation: Some plural forms appear to be irregular, with no clear pattern (e.g., [d̥ɔ̃s ɛ̀bòk] ‘small of back’ → [m̥ɔ̃s m̀pòk]).

• Syllable Structures:

The syllable structures in the trunk region vary, including:

Monosyllabic forms with CV, CVC patterns etc. (e.g., [d̥ɔ̃] ‘navel’, [kòŋ] ‘back’,

[bèt] ‘chest’)

Disyllabic forms (e.g., [ɛ̀bɛl] ‘breast’)

Polysyllabic forms (e.g., [ɛ̀tʃùkùl] ‘heel’)

7.1.3. The members

The human body comprises various members, including upper and lower limbs, digits, joints, and other appendages. These members work together to facilitate movement, sensation, and overall bodily functions.

In Bangantu, the members are categorised into distinct groups, each with

unique terminology and morphological patterns. The data below presents the terms and their plural forms for various members:

Lexeme Form	Glosses	plural
Show All	Show All	Show All
b'āk	shoulder	mp'āk
d'ōŋ	elbow	m'ōŋ
ɖʒind	finger	mpind
ɖʒind kò	toe	mpind kò
ɖʒind sɔŋ	thumb	mpind sɔŋ
ébɔŋ	knee	mbɔŋ
ébò?	sole	mbò?
ébɪnd	penis	mpɪnd
ébók	buttock	mbók
ɛkɔɔɖɔ	hand	mkɔɔɖɔ
	palm	
ɛnɪk mbó	wrist	mɪnɪk mbó
ɛtʃúkùl	heel	ɛtʃúkùl
ɪsɪk	armpit	ɪsɪk
kò	foot	mko
	leg	
kù	hip	mku
kúnl?	fist	ikunl?
nɪ?	finger nail	lna?
pɛl	shoulder blade	ipɛl

p'ògòl	ankle	ṛipògòl
pómb	calf of the leg	ṛipòmb
sùk èpínd	knuckle	ṛisùk ṛipénd
tj'ès	thigh	ṛitj'ès
zám̩b	arm	zám̩b
	upper arm	
	forearm	

The data above exhibits a range of morphological patterns, including:

- Affixation: Many plural forms take a plural prefix ṛ- (e.g., [bjàk] 'shoulder' → [ṛmp'àk] 'shoulders', [èbón] 'knee' → [ṛmbón] 'knees', [ètjùkùl] 'heel' → [ṛntjùkùl] 'heels', [kútà?] 'fist' → [ìkùtà?] 'fists'), indicating a change in number or quantity.
- Unchanged form: Some plural forms remain the same as the singular form (e.g., [isík] 'armpit'), indicating no change in morphology.

In the same light, the syllable structures vary, including:

- Monosyllabic forms (e.g., [kò] 'foot', [ná?] 'fingernail'), consisting of a single syllable.
- Disyllabic forms (e.g., [èbón] 'knee'), consisting of two syllables.
- Polysyllabic forms (e.g., [èkòndʒ] 'hand', [ètjùkùl] 'heel'), consisting of three or more syllables.

7.2. On the internal body parts

The Bangantu language exhibits fascinating morphological and phonological patterns in its vocabulary for internal body parts. This section explores the terminology for organs and structures within the human body, shedding light on the language's intricate structure. Consider the table below:

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Lexeme Form	△ Glosses	plural
Show All	▽ Show All	▽ Show All
būm pū	kidney	p'ūm pū
dīndēl	bladder	mīndēl
dʒēm kòs	clitoris	mp'ēm kòs
éziúk ndà?	rectum	míziúk ndà?
gúnd	stomach	ígúnd
ká kɔŋ	spine	míká míkɔŋ
kɔ	umbilical cord	míkɔ
kpéklà	bone	míkpeklà
l'ém	heart	míl'ém
mbil isik	anus	míbil mísik
mɔ?	abdomen	mámɔ?
mɔŋgbólɔ?	bonne marrow	míŋmgbólɔ?
	brain	
ndà?	intestine	míndà?
pòk		p'òk
	vagina	
p'áɲdʒ	rib	íp'áɲdʒ
pòpò ló	skull	mpòpò ló
pòpò ɲól	skeleton	mpòpò mɲól
sápúl	lung	isápúl
sís	vein	mísís

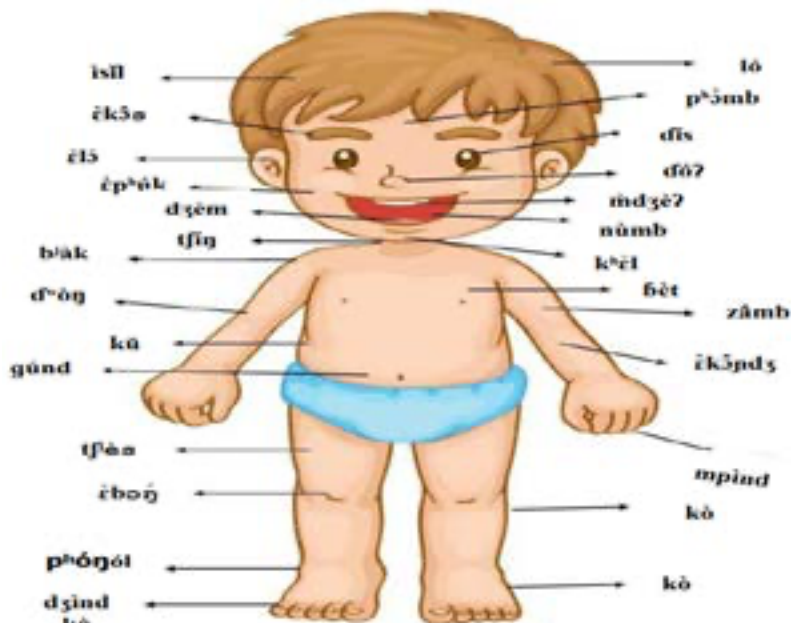
sʔk	liver	isʔk
rʔámú	tendon	lʔámú
tʔá?	blood	mʔá?
zám	muscle	zám
zòŋ	gall bladder	izòŋ
	bile	

The internal body parts in Bangantu display varied morphological processes, including affixation, [kpáklà] “bone” → [m̀kpáklá], [l̀jèm] “heart” → m̀ljèm, [pòpò ló] “skull” → [mpòpò ló], substitution [d̀d̀nd̀èl] “bladder” → [m̀nd̀èl] and unchanged forms [zám] “muscle” → [zám].

Moreover, the internal body part terms in Bangantu typically follow varied syllable structures: CVCC: [gúnd] ‘stomach’, CVCV: [kpáklà] ‘bone’, CVC: [b́úm] ‘kidney’, [d̀èl] ‘bladder’. These patterns demonstrate the complexity and richness of the Bangantu language.

8. Conclusion

This paper has comprehensively documented the terminology for body parts in Bangantu, providing a valuable resource for linguistic research, language teaching, and cultural preservation. The study's primary objective was to catalogue and analyse the body part terms, shedding light on the language's unique characteristics. The key findings have some implications for linguistic preservation (safeguarding Bangantu's unique linguistic features), language education (enhancing teaching materials and language learning resources, and research (informing linguistic typology, comparative studies, and language contact research). This paper contributes to advancing linguistic knowledge. Supporting language preservation. Facilitating cross-cultural understanding and providing a foundation for further research. Selected body parts expressions in Bangantu are presented in the diagram below:



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