

“The languages of the Ituri forest Pygmies: contact and historical perspectives”

Knowing whether Pygmy populations, have a common or independent origin is essential to understanding whether biological features specific to several Pygmy populations evolved recently and separately in each population or whether these features were inherited from a common ancient ancestral population (Hewlett 2014). What was the language of the ancestral population is a fundamental question about Pygmies of Central Africa. This leads to some comparative questions such as: is Asua an old form of the Mangbetu-Asua language group? The differences between the Ituri Bantu languages is obviously the consequence of phases of contact between them and the Pygmies. Can we infer things about borrowing mechanisms and the history of the area? Comparative data shows that there is a common vocabulary between the Asua and the Efe, between the Asua and the Kango but much less between the Efe and the Kango, Tshwa or Sua. Analysis of specialized lexicons (botanical, zoological and ornithological) suggests that - for this part of the lexicon at least - the Pygmy languages can be divided into two groups which reflect the distinction between Central Sudanic and Bantu. Asua appears to be closer to Bantu languages than Efe, which suggests a contact of which we do not know how old it is.