

## **“Individual-level lexical variation in the Bantu homeland and its implications for the development of Benue-Congo”**

This talk presents results of research making use of individual-based wordlists collected from speakers of Bantoid varieties found in the same micro-area, and it considers the implications of these results for models of linguistic diversification within Benue-Congo. The database on which this work is based comprises more than 15,000 wordlist entries from forty-four speakers of thirteen linguistic varieties of the Lower Fungom region of Cameroon. The communities of Lower Fungom are associated with extensive individual-level multilingualism and small-scale societies of a sort that were likely typical of the majority of Sub-Saharan Africa before the advent of wide-scale urbanization, and their sociolinguistic dynamics can serve as a potential historical model for the low-level patterns within Benue-Congo that led to present-day genealogical and areal configurations. In contrast to typical practice, no attempt was made to standardize the wordlists across speakers, and this individual-based data is being used in this work as a proxy for lexical variation in Lower Fungom communities. By applying tools originally designed for cognate detection for historical linguistic purposes to questions of synchronic variation, it has been possible to assess the degrees of similarity and dissimilarity among Lower Fungom’s linguistic varieties, observe where boundaries between varieties are more or less strongly defined, and explore which varieties are associated with greater degrees of lexical variation than others. The initial findings of this work suggest that an individual-based approach to wordlist collection is a promising tool for providing a snapshot of the structure of linguistic variation within an areally defined region and for determining which lexical items are salient local markers of linguistic distinctiveness, among other topics. They also suggest that a model of linguistic diversification within Benue-Congo that assumes that the primary driver of language change is dispersion of communities due to migration is not a good fit for the sociolinguistic reality of Benue-Congo communities.