Moânre: the language of the Mossi people

Moânre is a Gur language spoken by the Mossi people, the largest ethnic group of Burkina Faso (40% of the population, approx. 5 million people) (Lewis et al. 2014). They live mostly in villages around the Volta River Basin.

According to legend, the Mossi come from the marriage of a Mamorou princess and a Mandé hunter. They gave birth to the first Mossi, Ouédraogo, who is considered the father of Mossi. The Mossi place high value on family, land and ancestors. In family, the Mossi believe in a collectivist approach to community, in which the behavior of one member is seen as the behavior of the entire family.

Our project aims to provide a description of Moânre starting from the smaller units (i.e. sound inventory) up to the larger ones (sentence structure). Most of the previous work on Moânre is in French. We seek to: (i) make a contribution to the general knowledge about the structure of this language; (ii) develop a resource for typological work on Gur languages; and (iii) give non-French-speaking scholars access to the Moânre language.

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1 Representing the sounds of Moânre
How can we visualize speech?

Human speech can be ‘visualized’ by a waveform and a spectrogram. A waveform shows the energy of the sound wave. A spectrogram is a representation of the frequencies of sound waves in the vocal tract when a word is produced. Figure 1 is a visualization of biligé ‘child’ in Moânre.

Moânre is also a tone language. This means that each vowel in a word has a distinctive pitch, which can be high (H) or low (L). The H tone is indicated with the acute accent á and the L tone with the grave accent à. Two words can be identical in shape but their meaning can vary if their tone melodies are different, as in the following examples:

HH bâlásé ‘dog’
HL bâlásé ‘finish’
LH zâgâsé ‘houses’
HL zâgâsé ‘to water’

2 Sounds of Moânre
How many vowel sounds does Moânre have?

This graph represents a speaker’s acoustic vowel space. The x-axis corresponds to how far front or back the tongue goes when making the vowel. The y-axis corresponds to how close the tongue is to the roof of the mouth (palate).
Moânre has at least 7 vowel sounds: / û, /o, /e, /i, /a, /ɛ, /ɔ/ and /ɔ/ (Canu 1976, Nikiema 2000). These are contrastive: if we change one with the other within a single word, the meaning of the word changes:
ťu ‘dog’
tɔ ‘insult’
tɔ ‘another’

The red arrow in Figure 2 points to the position of these three vowels /u o i/ in the vowel space. We are still investigating whether there is a contrast between /e/ vs. /ɛ/ and /ɔ/ vs. /ɔ/. These vowels are signalled by the blue arrows.

3 Building words in Moânre
How do you make a plural in Moânre?

In English, many words can be made plural by adding –s at the end, as in cat/cats. In Moânre a word is singular, it can end in any of 7 different singular forms. If the word is plural, a speaker must choose from 8 different plural endings.

Take a look:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SINGULAR</th>
<th>PLURAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wôb-gô</td>
<td>wôb-sé</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>elephant-SG</td>
<td>elephant-PL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bâa-ga</td>
<td>bâa-sé</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dog-SG</td>
<td>dog-PL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pând-û</td>
<td>pând-à</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>frog-SG</td>
<td>frog-PL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pâg-û</td>
<td>pâg-bà</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>woman-SG</td>
<td>woman-PL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3 shows all possible singular and plural matches.

4 Building sentences in Moânre
How do you say it all in one word?

To build a Moânre sentence, you follow the same order as English, Subject-Verb-Object (as in the English sentence ‘She ate bananas’).

mám tâg-s-d-à fóó ‘I am telling you.’

However, Moânre has a second option. You can include the object inside of the verb, but the ending of the verb also changes:

mám tâg-s-d-f-à-mé ‘I am telling you.’

5 Research significance

We have shown different aspects of the Moânre language, sound inventory (phonetics), shape of words (morphology) and sentence structure (syntax), but more data collection and analysis await. Our scientific investigation increases knowledge of a relatively under-studied language family (Gur). Importantly, this feeds directly into literacy development and the improvement of the current Moânre writing system on which many controversies exist. As a result, our research contributes to the education and production of cultural materials for the language community. Finally, it shows to speakers of Moânre the importance of their language and the cultural knowledge embodied in it for the scientific study of human language in general.

REFERENCES