

# Bèzèn Language Documentation Project (BeLDoP)

(DoBeS, [Volkswagen Foundation](#))

## Abstract

Bèzèn, a completely undescribed Benue-Congo language of probably Jukunoid affiliation, is spoken by no more than 450 individuals in the remote village of Beezen (formerly: Kpwep) in the Furu-Awa Subdivision of the North-West Region of Cameroon. The village is situated on both sides of the Katsina Ala river.



Katsina Ala river, Menchum Division, Beezen Village<sup>1</sup>

Restricted to intraethnic communication in contexts of family and village life, farm work, local council meetings and traditional ceremonies, ongoing processes of shift towards languages of wider communication such as Jukun and Pidgin English expose Bèzèn to serious endangerment by severely eroding its internal register diversity and the L1-competence of speakers of all generations. Bringing together scholars of anthropology and linguistics from the Universities of Buea and Hamburg, the project aims at an ethnolinguistic documentation of Bèzèn by providing a corpus of narrative and dialogic texts of various genres in a sustainable multi-media format that satisfies both practical and scientific concerns. Beyond an understanding of Bèzèn grammar, the project will hopefully contribute to preserving the endangered cultural knowledge enshrined in the Bèzèn language and thereby generating resources for language learning.



Processing crops in the afternoon, Beezen

## Historical and Socio-Cultural Background

In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Bèzèn migrated from Nigeria to Cameroon, heading southwards in search of a new settlement. Being blocked by the Isu community from continuing further south, they settled in the area close to the village Akum and called their village “Ndoshi”.

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<sup>1</sup> The pictures were taken by Viktoria Kempf during a fieldtrip to Beezen in November 2011.

In the late 1980s they moved to their current settlement close to the river Katsina Ala.

The Bèzèn people are farmers. They plant maize, cassava, yam and many other crops and supplement their diet by hunting and fishing. The Bèzèn live in contact with other neighboring groups such as the Akum, Isu, Furu-Bana, Furu-Awa, Nser and Badji. The younger people are converting to Christian religion, while the older ones hold on to traditional practices.

### **Previous Research and Classification**

Apart from Brye's "Rapid Appraisal" (2004) which contains 120 lexical items and a sociolinguistic survey, and exploratory elicitations conducted by Roland Kießling, Jeff Good, Scott Farrar and Cristin Kalinowski in 2007, Bèzèn remains virtually unknown.



Houses in Beezen Village

Given this lack of descriptive data, its classificatory position within Benue-Congo remains controversial. While Gordon 2005 lists Bèzèn as unclassified, Breton & Fohtung 1991 assign it to the Jukunoid language group, and Lewis 2009 lists it as belonging to the Yukuben-Kuteb subgroup within Jukunoid. According to present findings, Bèzèn seems quite detached both from neighbouring Akum and from Jukun proper. Even though lexical and grammatical data seem to confirm its closer affiliation to Jukun, it remains to be worked out how close the link actually is and – more important still – if it results from a genetic relationship or from extensive language contact induced by long-standing bilingualism of the Bèzèn population in Jukun prevailing in the area.

### **Phonology**

#### **Vowels**

Bèzèn exhibits a 5-vowel system, consisting of *i*, *ɛ*, *a*, *ɔ* and *u*. The phonemic status of the central high vowel /*i*/ is uncertain.

#### **Consonants**

The consonant system includes affricates, labiovelars and sets of labialized and palatalized phonemes.

### a) Simple Consonants

	labial	alveolar	palatal	velar	labiovelar	glottal
plosive	p b	t d		k g	kp gb	
nasal	m	n	ɲ	ŋ	ŋm	
prenasalised plosives	mb	nd			ŋgb	
trill		r				
fricative	f	s z	ʃ ʒ	x		h
approximant			y		w	
lateral approximant		l				
affricate		ts	tʃ			

### b) Labialised Consonants

	labial	velar
plosive		k <sup>w</sup> g <sup>w</sup>
nasal	m <sup>w</sup>	

### c) Palatalised Consonants

	labial	alveolar	palatal	velar	glottal
plosive	p <sup>j</sup> b <sup>j</sup>			k <sup>j</sup>	
nasal	m <sup>j</sup>				
trill		r <sup>j</sup>			
fricative	f <sup>j</sup>	s <sup>j</sup>	ʃ <sup>j</sup> (ç <sup>j</sup> )		h <sup>j</sup>
affricate			tʃ <sup>j</sup>		

### Tone

There are three distinctive tones in Bèzèn: high, middle and low.

### Major typological features of Bèzèn

Bèzèn is an agglutinative language with fusional elements (1, 5). As a typical type A language (Heine 1976), basic word order in unmarked clauses is S V O (2), while in nominal phrases modifiers generally follow their head (3).

(1) *bē-kīn-ní*                      *ā-ērì*                      ‘The guests eat.’  
 Cl.2-guest-DEF      SC-eat

(2) *bè-yín-ní*                      *à-ērì*      *bù-tsúq*                      ‘The monkeys eat the banana.’  
 Cl.2-monkey-DEF      SC-eat      Cl.15-banana

- (3) *ké-gbī n-áràp* 'clear sky'  
Cl.18-sky NOM-clear

Bèzèn has a reduced noun-class system with an elaborate system of number coding prefixes in nouns (4). Frequently, a change of the root vowel could be observed as part of the number marking process (5). Only relics of a former agreement system seem to remain, e.g. animate nouns trigger agreement with numerals (6). There are also traces of agreement with verbs, adjectives and independent possessive pronouns.

- (4) *kī-sīn* *ē-sīn* 'yam'  
Cl.9-yam Cl.10-yam
- (5) *ù-yún* *bè-yún* 'monkey'  
Cl.1-monkey Cl.2-monkey
- (6) *bè-yún* *bā-tār* 'three monkeys'  
Cl.2-monkey AGR2-three

In syntax, verbal serialisation features prominently (7).

- (7) *è-zī ē-rāy-ē kīkīār bē-hún émí è-zī é-kìbì ērè*  
SC-take NP-things-3POSS all put-in LOC SC-take SC-cover ground  
'[She] took all her things and put them there, took and covered them on the ground.'

## The team

The team unites linguists and anthropologists from both Cameroon and Germany and includes: Dr. Evelyn Fogwe (PI, Buea), Prof. Roland Kießling (PI, Hamburg), Dr. Pius Akumbu (Buea), Dr. Robert Akoko (Buea), Emmanuel Tabah, M.A. (Buea), Jude Nformi Awasom, M.A. (Buea), Pamela Sama B.A. (Buea), Viktoria Kempf, M.A. (Hamburg).

## Abbreviations

3poss	Third Person Singular Possessive
LOC	Locative
NOM	Nominalizer
Cl.1	Noun Class 1
SC	Subject Concord

## References

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