

Dialect Variation in a Minority Language: The Case of Bena

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1. Introduction

Studies of minority and under-documented languages often present such languages as largely homogenous and pay relatively little attention to variation. Language descriptions may list names of dialects and often give a few cursory notes about the characteristics of such dialects, but descriptions rarely go into significant detail regarding observed dialect variation. Even when the presence of such variation is recognized, it may be ignored for practical reasons, such as the need to do basic linguistic description (which may be muddled by too great of a focus on variation), or a lack of time and resources to devote to a study of variation.

This paper presents a case study of dialect variation in Bena, a minority language spoken in Tanzania. Data presented here was collected during a survey of the Bena-speaking area in 2009. I first give some background information on the Bena language, where it is spoken, and previous accounts of Bena dialects. I then give an overview of the survey methodology and discuss some of the phonetic, tonal, and lexical variation observed. I note that perhaps the most interesting generalization that can be drawn from the analysis is that variation is considerable and it is impossible to draw distinct dialect areas which are clearly differentiated from one another. This is followed by a discussion of some of factors which contribute to the variation, including the existence of two different prestige varieties, language and dialect contact, and the influence of the national language, Swahili.

2. The Bena language: speakers and dialects

Bena is a Bantu language (G63) spoken in southwestern Tanzania. Muzale and Rugemalira (2008) estimate the Bena speaker population to be 592,370. The *Ethnologue*'s estimate is similar, at 670,000 speakers (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2013). It is possible, however, that these numbers are somewhat inflated because of difficulties in defining exactly what constitutes a Bena speaker. Estimates of speaker population also do not define how fluent a speaker must be in order to be categorized as a speaker and often make the assumption that a person who is ethnically Bena is also a Bena speaker. This is not necessarily the case, particularly in urban areas where many Bena children grow up speaking very little (if any) Bena. (Language shift due to the influence of Swahili is also taking place in rural areas, though not as quickly.)

The *Ethnologue* (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2013) lists 126 living languages currently spoken in Tanzania. With approximately 600,000 speakers, Bena is one of the larger minority languages.¹

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Swahili and English are the national languages of Tanzania, though in many (particularly rural) parts of Tanzania few people speak English with a high degree of fluency. Swahili is the language of commerce, business, and primary education, and most Tanzanians speak Swahili along with one, two, or more minority languages. Most Bena speakers, even in very rural areas, are minimally bilingual in both Bena and Swahili.

The vast majority of Bena speakers live in the district of Njombe, within the Iringa region of Tanzania:



Figure 1. Njombe district of Tanzania

At the center of the Njombe district is the town of Njombe, an urban area with a mixed population of Tanzanians belonging to different ethnic groups. In the more rural areas outside of Njombe town, however, the population is largely Bena. Informal estimates by various ward leaders generally put the ethnic Bena population within their wards as greater than 90%. In addition to the Bena living in the Njombe district, a smaller group of Bena emigrated to the Ulanga and Kilombero districts in neighboring Morogoro Region during the latter part of the nineteenth century (Culwick 1935, Monson 2000). This group is often referred to as the “Bena Manga.” There are also numerous Bena speakers who have emigrated to other parts of Tanzania.

Several sources related to Bena language and/or culture list Bena dialects. According to these studies, Bena has between five and seven different dialects. Nurse (1979), a short grammatical sketch of the language, lists six dialects. Chaula’s (1989) analysis of Bena phonology lists seven varieties of Bena. Nyagava (1999), a history of the Bena people, divides Bena into six dialects (based on historic clans). He also discusses a seventh group which is not included in his original clan listing and describes them as a group who moved to the Ulanga Valley in neighboring Morogoro Region. It is not clear whether Vakinamanga constituted a separate clan, or was made up of people from one or more of the other six clans. Hongole (2002), a short Bena language primer, lists five dialects. Finally, Muhewa et al (2005), a grammatical sketch of the language, list seven dialects.

None of these works goes into any detail regarding the listed dialects, and it is not clear how well these lists correspond to one another. Furthermore, some sources name dialects after geographic areas and others use clan names for dialects (and some mix the two approaches). The following table

¹ Lewis, Simons, and Fennig (2013) list 30 Tanzanian languages with speaker populations greater than a quarter million. Bena ranks 11th in speaker population. Muzale and Rugemalira (2008) place Bena at 13 in a ranking of speaker population of Tanzanian languages.

summarizes the dialect lists given in previous studies. Where it is known that the names used by different authors refer to the same dialect, these dialect names are placed in the same row:

Nurse (1979)	Chaula (1989)	Nyagava (1999)	Hongole (2002)	Muhehwa et al (2005)
Lupembe	(Ki)lupembe		Twangabita	(Va)twangabita
Matumbi	(Ki)lembula		Vangaveta	(Va)ngaveeta
Maswamu				Maswaamu
		(Va)kilavugi	(Va)kilavugi	(Va)kilavuungi
Sovi	(Ki)sovi	Sovi	(Va)sovi	(Va)soovi
Masakati	(Ki)masakati	Masakati		
		Nyikolwe	(Va)nyikolwe	(Va)nyiikolwe
Masitu	Mavemba	Mavemba		(Va)maveemba
Namanga	(Ki)ulanga	(Va)kinamanga		
		(Va)fwagi		

Table 1. Bena dialects as listed in previous sources.

Informal discussions with Bena speakers revealed that most are aware of dialectal variation and usually seem to divide the Bena-speaking area into between three and five dialectal areas. Speakers are most aware of dialectal differences in areas that are geographically close to where they live. Thus speakers who divide the Bena area into three dialects usually divide it into “people who talk just like us,” “people who live reasonably near us but don’t quite talk the same,” and “everybody else.” Some older Bena associate dialects with historic clans, but this usually only happens when they are asked to specifically give names for the dialects. (See Nyagava 1999 for a discussion of Bena clans.)

3. The present study: Methodology

This paper presents results from a survey conducted throughout the Bena language speaking area during the fall of 2009. The first portion of the survey was done in cooperation with members of SIL International, as they happened to be doing data collection in the area at the same time. The survey had two major goals: the first of these was to assess the vitality of Bena and to determine the extent to which increasing use of Swahili is affecting Bena. The second goal of the survey was to clarify the dialect situation discussed in Section 2 above; this goal is the focus of this paper.

The initial phase of data collection (the portion done in conjunction with SIL) had two stages. First, we visited eleven different ward offices throughout Njombe District, to obtain permission for the survey, to ask some general questions about the sociolinguistic situation and ethnic composition of the area, and to determine which villages to visit. Ward leaders in each area then assisted us in making arrangements with village leaders for data collection. Following these initial preparation visits, we chose thirteen villages throughout the area. Villages were chosen after consultation with ward leaders, based on a combination of factors, including willingness of village leaders to participate, accessibility, and ethnic make-up. (In general, we preferred villages that were further from major roads and that had higher concentrations of ethnic Bena.) Approximately a month after completion of the joint survey with SIL International, I visited an additional four villages in order to fill in some geographic gaps and to collect data at a few representative sites slightly closer to main roads. Figure 2 maps the location of the 17 villages visited in the survey. (Note that the urban center of Njombe was not included in the survey, as it is populated by Bena people from all over the Bena-speaking area as well as by people from other ethnic groups.)

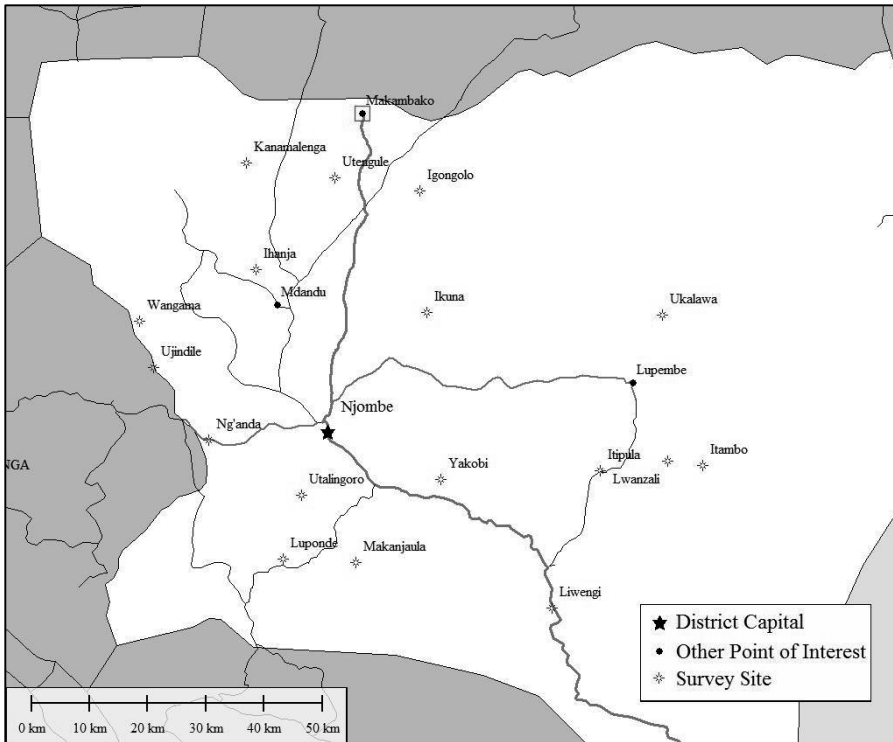


Figure 2. Locations of Bena dialect survey sites.

Among the 17 villages visited, 178 speakers participated in the survey. They ranged in age from 19 to 100.² 75 were female; 103 were male. From each participant, basic demographic information was collected, including age, gender, birthplace, major areas lived, education, occupation, and languages spoken by mother and father, etc. For most this was done through an oral interview conducted in Swahili (or in a few cases, in Bena, with the assistance of a translator). Some participants preferred to fill out a paper questionnaire themselves. 75 participants also answered questions about language use, for example, “When I talk with my parents I speak _____” (Bena only, Swahili only, Bena and Swahili, other). Other questions related to language attitudes (e.g. “Do you think speaking Bena is important?”) and participants’ perspectives on prestige varieties (e.g. “Where is the best Bena spoken?”) General questions regarding language attitudes, language vitality, and perceptions of similarities and differences between dialects were repeated in both individual interviews and group sessions, in order to learn from both individual perspectives and group discussion. In some locations, participants were given copies of a map of Njombe District and were asked to indicate dialect areas on the map along with salient features of those dialects (similar to the task described by Preston 1999). In most cases, the map served as a stimulus for more detailed discussion about Bena dialects. Considerations of time precluded this from being done at each site, though in every site informal group discussions took place regarding dialect areas.

Word and phrase lists were also collected in each village. Three lists were collected: a short word list of 110 words (collected at all 17 sites), a longer word list of 300 words (collected at 10 sites), and a list of 27 phrases and sentences (collected at each site). Participants were given the word or phrase in Swahili and were asked to provide the equivalent in Bena. Data collection included two additional tasks, geared towards somewhat more naturalistic data. In the first, participants were asked to introduce themselves in Bena and talk briefly about themselves. Then, in each village, 2-3 speakers were asked to narrate Mercer and Marianne Mayer’s (1975) picture book *One Frog Too Many* (Berman and Slobin 1994). This was usually done in front of an audience, often including a number of children.

² Ages were self-reported. Some individuals estimated their age.

4. Results

This paper focuses primarily on data collected in the word and phrase lists, as well as responses to questions in individual and group interviews. From the word and phrase lists, data points were extracted for comparison across sites. Only variables that showed variation were analyzed. (In other words, if a particular form was the same at all sites, it was not included in the list.) Types of variables included phonetic variables, variation in verbal tone melodies for particular verbal inflections, first person plural pronouns (no other person showed the considerable variation that was exhibited by first person plural), and lexical variables. In all, 31 different variables were analyzed.

For each variable, variant forms were plotted on a map and individual isoglosses were drawn for each variable. Isoglosses were then layered on top of one another (Carver 1987). Reliance on isoglosses does have a number of shortcomings, as isoglosses rarely line up neatly, they do not represent nuanced, gradual changes well, and they tend to mask variation (Chambers and Trudgill 1998, Milroy and Gordon 2003). However, this method was applied here because it does allow one to get an overall understanding of larger dialect areas, particularly with a limited data set. With respect to the Bena data, most variants did cluster geographically, though as will be discussed below, different variables varied considerably in terms of their geographic distribution. Where possible, generalizations were drawn from bundles of isoglosses that largely converged on the same geographic areas. The following section discusses each category of variable in more detail and gives some examples of the distribution of variants. Due to space constraints, the following sections include examples of each type of variation, but do not provide comprehensive lists.

4.1. Phonetic variation

Several phonetic variables showed considerable variation among survey sites. In general, most of the phonetic variation included slight differences in place of articulation (e.g., some areas would use a palatal fricative where others would use an alveopalatal fricative). Perhaps among the most distinctive was variation in word-medial and stem-initial <k>.³ (Speakers living in the eastern portion of the Bena-speaking area used a [k^h] where most others used an [h]). Informal conversations with speakers regarding Bena dialects revealed that phonetic variation (in particular, the [h] vs. [k^h] distinction) is also particularly salient for speakers, and they were often aware of variant pronunciations in different dialect areas. Phonetic variables are summarized in Table 2 below:

Variable	Variants		
<dz>	[ts]	[ts]/[cç]	[tʃ]
Word-medial/ prefixal <k>	[k ^h]	[h]	[x]
<ky>	[ʃ]	[ç]	[cʃ]
<y>	[j]	[ɟ]	

Table 2. Phonetic variables

Speakers also felt that the phonetic variables were among the most important to them, as they have a direct impact on the way the language is written. Phonetic variants also tended to cluster more tightly together than did other types of variants, and in general, isoglosses based on phonetic variables were easier to define.

Based on phonetic variation alone, survey sites seem to generally fall into three dialect areas: an eastern cluster, a single village at the far western end of the Bena area, and the remaining villages in between. Phonetic isoglosses are shown in Figure 3 below:

³ Angled brackets < > enclose the orthographic spelling of the variable, while square brackets [] indicate its phonetic value.

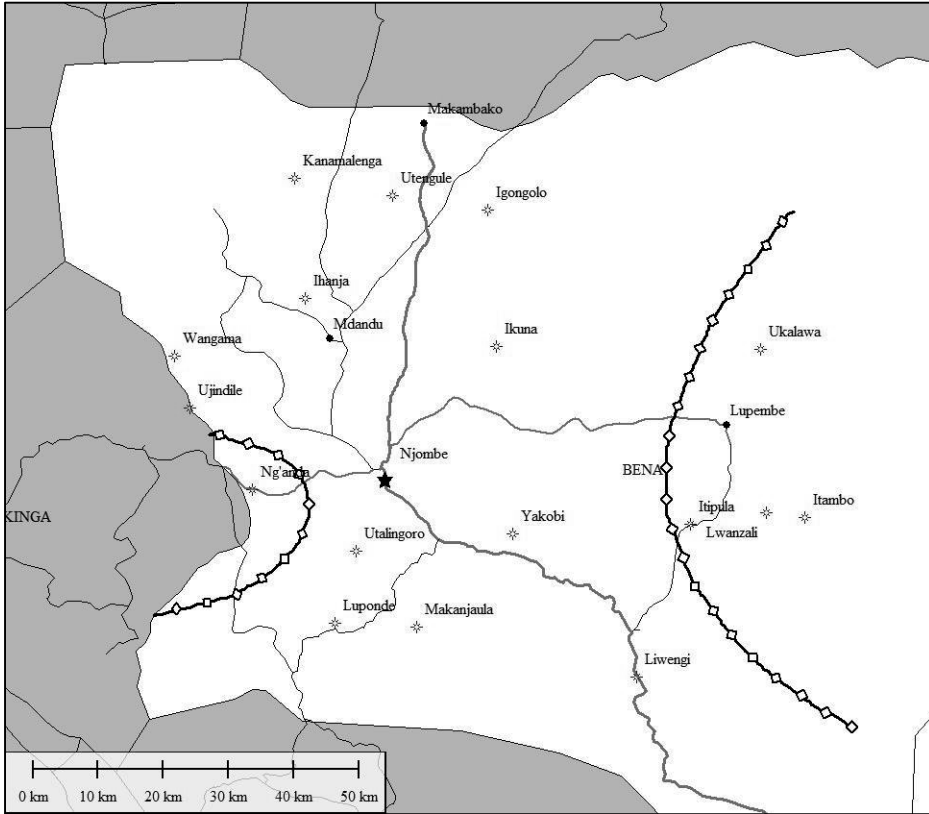


Figure 3. Phonetic isoglosses.

4.2. Variation in verbal tone melodies

Bena falls within a category of Bantu languages that have “predictable tone systems” (Odden 1988). Morae may be either High-toned or toneless and each word is assigned a single High tone. With respect to verbs, Bena exhibits a system whereby various tense-aspect configurations have different verbal tone melodies. There are several different verbal tone patterns (named according to the mora in the verb which carries the High), including pre-stem initial high (PSI), macro-stem-initial high (MSI), antepenultimate high (APU), and penultimate high (PU). (See Morrison 2011 for a more complete discussion of verbal tone in Bena.) Though all of the survey sites visited throughout the Bena-speaking area had similar underlying tonal systems (verbal tone melodies characterized by a single High per word), tone melodies exhibited by particular tense-aspect configurations differed considerably among villages. Table 3 summarizes the various verbal tone melodies exhibited at different sites.⁴

⁴ Because a full tonal analysis, using several verbs of contrasting syllable structures, was not possible at every village site, in some cases it was difficult to distinguish, for example, between an antepenultimate tonal melody and a macro-stem-initial melody. Where this is the case, both possibilities are indicated.

Variable	Variants					
3SG present perfective ('s/he buys')	<i>iigútsa</i>	PU	<i>iigutsa</i>	PSI		
3SG past perfective ('s/he got')	<i>aapátile</i>	APU	<i>aapatile</i>	PU		
1SG recent past perfective ('I arrived this morning')	<i>ndifiíhe/ndifiíke</i>	MSI	<i>ndifihile</i>	MSI/APU	<i>ndifixile</i>	PSI
1PL remote past perfective ('We gave her yesterday')	<i>tuháampeeliye</i>	PSI	<i>tukaampéeliye/tuhaampéeliye</i>	MSI/APU	<i>tukaampeeliye/tuhaampeeliye</i>	PU

Table 3. Variation in verbal tone melodies

As with phonetic variants, verbal tone melody variants tended to cluster together geographically. However, widespread generalizations based on shared isoglosses were more difficult to draw on the basis of verbal tone. As the map in Figure 4 shows, the isoglosses for each variant occurred in slightly different places. The far remote past perfective showed a north-south split, and the present perfective sectioned off a northeast corner of the Bena area from the remainder. As with phonetic variables, the recent and remote past perfective forms show a rough east-west split; however the split is somewhat different for each, and both are different from the east-west split found with phonetic variables.

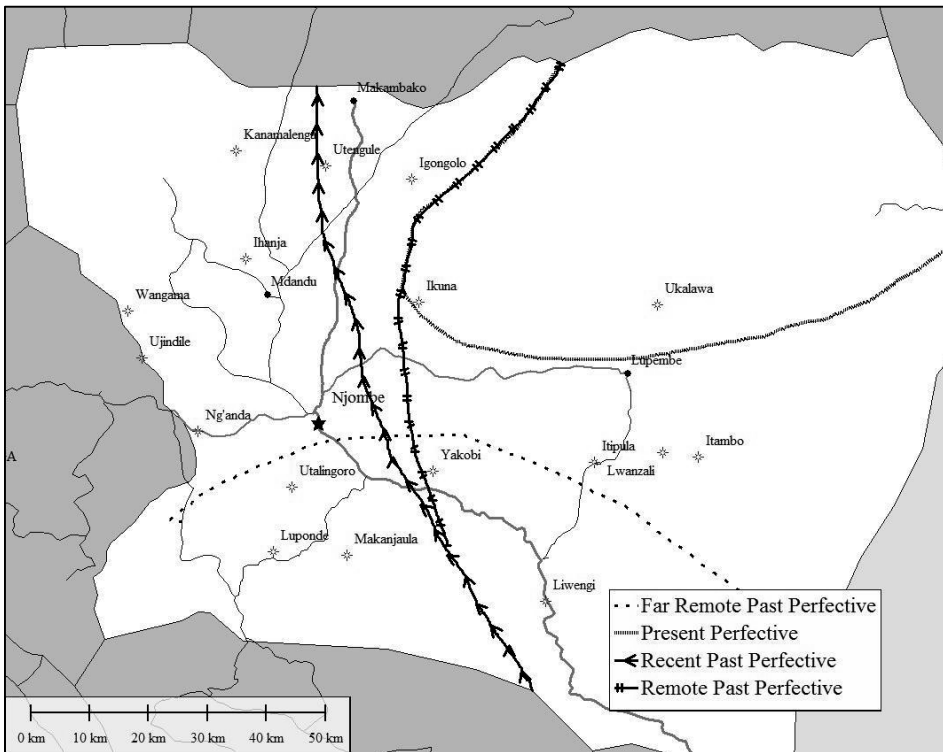


Figure 4. Variation in verbal tone melodies

4.3. Variation in first person plural pronouns

Pronouns and agreement markers for first person plural also showed considerable variation across survey sites. Informal discussions with speakers revealed that, as with phonetic variation, variation in first person plural forms was quite salient. (“They use *uneefwe* over there, but we use *uhweehwe*, etc.”) Interestingly, none of the other persons showed much variation at all. It may be that variation occurs in

first person plural more so than in other persons because the first person plural can be used as a marker of local identity, however this is only conjectural. As summarized in Table 4, variation in first person plural forms was observed in free-standing personal pronouns, subject agreement markers, and in possessive pronouns:

Variable	Variants				
1 PL pronoun	<i>uneefwe</i>	<i>yuufwe</i>	<i>uhweehwe</i>	<i>ufweefwe</i>	<i>uneehwe</i>
1PL subj. prefix ⁵	<i>tu-/t-</i>	<i>tu-/tw-</i>	<i>ti-/t-</i>	<i>ti-/tw-</i>	
1PL possessive	<i>yeesu</i>	<i>yiisu</i>	<i>yiitu</i>		

Table 4. Variation in first person plural forms

As with other types of variation, variant forms of first person plural markers clustered together geographically, but each variable showed a different distributional pattern.

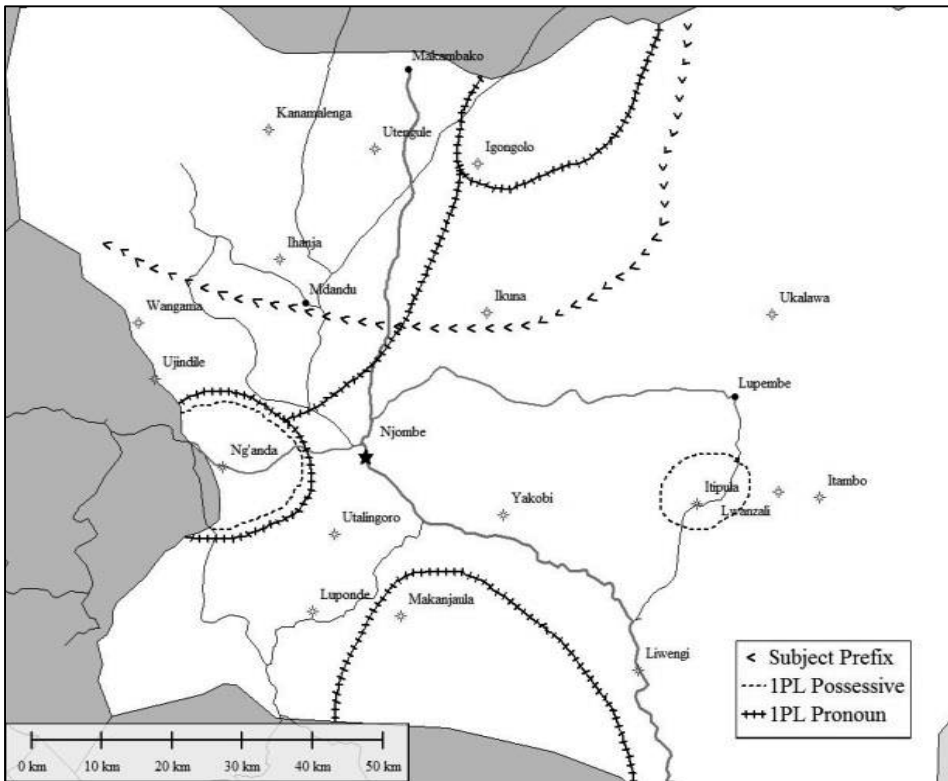


Figure 5. Variation in first person plural forms

4.4. Lexical variation

Lexical items showed the most significant variation. Some examples of lexical variables are summarized below in Table 5:

⁵ Forms before the forward slash are used before consonants; those following the slash are used before vowels.

Variable	Variants		
‘to return’	<i>huvwuya</i>	<i>hupiluha</i>	<i>hugomoha</i>
‘small’	<i>-debe</i>	<i>-dodo</i>	
‘morning’	<i>lukeela</i>	<i>milawo</i>	
‘sweet potato’	<i>amayawo</i>	<i>amatoosani</i>	<i>mangamba</i>
‘later’	<i>pambele</i>	<i>pembele</i>	
‘today’	<i>ileelo</i>	<i>neeng’uli</i>	

Table 5. Lexical variables

Unlike other variable types, it was nearly impossible to draw any generalizations on the basis of lexical variation. Though variants tended to cluster together geographically, it was common to find numerous outliers to such clusters. Further, unlike other variable types, there was often considerable variation in the lexical form chosen for any single variable. For example, there were several survey sites where speakers used both *-debe* and *-dodo* for ‘small’ and others where both *lukeela* and *milawo* were given for ‘morning.’ In other areas, however, choice of a particular form was consistent, and speakers often indicated significant awareness of lexical variation as a marker of dialect.

While a study of lexical variation among Bena dialects is an interesting exercise, and while several lexical variants did show geographic distributional patterns, a focus on variation among lexical items does not contribute significantly to a better understanding of the Bena dialect situation. It is quite likely that some of these lexical items are borrowings from neighboring languages. The observation has been made by numerous scholars that lexical items are among the least stable and most subject to change, at least in comparison to other types of linguistic structures (van Coestem 1988; Winford 2010). For these reasons, though variation in lexical items was included in the analysis, no clear dialect groupings resulted from the analysis of lexical items.

5. Proposed dialect areas

As shown above, there is considerable variation in the distribution of dialect isoglosses, and it is impossible to draw clear-cut lines on the basis of the data from the survey. However, some of the variation can certainly be attributed to geographic patterns of distribution, and some generalizations can be made that seem to indicate the validity of approximately six dialect centers, summarized in Figure 6 below:

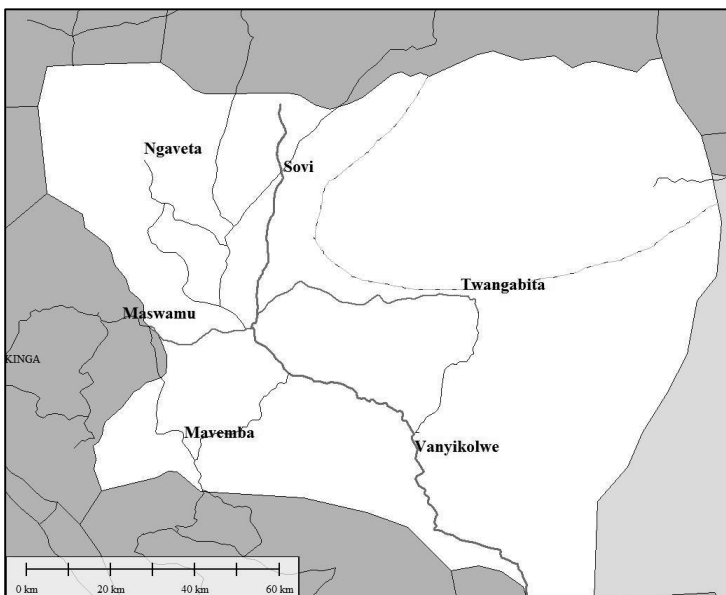


Figure 6. Bena dialect areas

Note that in Figure 6, lines are not drawn to demarcate dialects. This is intentional and is intended to be illustrative of the fact that dialect areas are blurry and some features are mixed among dialects. Dialect differences largely do not seem to prevent speakers from understanding one another. When questioned about issues of intelligibility, speakers also indicated that the different Bena dialects are largely mutually intelligible, and most did not report difficulties in understanding speakers from other areas, although some speakers from the extreme eastern areas did indicate that they had trouble understanding Bena coming from the extreme west.

Table 6 is an attempt to rectify the dialect areas proposed here with those listed in previous sources:

Dialect	Area	Nurse (1979)	Chaula (1989)	Nyagava (1999)	Hongole (2002)	Muhehwa et al (2005)
Twangabita	E	Lupembe /Masakati	Kilupembe/ Kimasakati	Masakati	Twangabita	Vatwangabita
Ngaveta	NW	Matumbi	Kilembula	Vafwagi ⁶	Vangaveta	Vangaveeta
Maswamu	W	Maswamu	Kimaswamu	Vakilavugi	Vakilavugi	Maswamu/ Vakilavuungi
Sovi	N	Sovi	Kisovi	Sovi	Vasovi	Vasoovi
Vanyikolwe	SE			Nyikolwe	Vanyikolwe	Vanyiikolwe
Maveemba	S	Masitu	Mavemba	Mavemba		Vamaveemba
Bena-Manga	Ulanga Dist.	Namanga	Kiulanga	Vakinamanga		

Table 6. Comparison of dialect areas proposed here with those listed in previous sources

Most of the dialect areas proposed here map to those listed in other sources with a one-to-one correspondence. However, there are several exceptions where this analysis collapses multiple dialects from another source into a single dialect. This was done because, on the basis of data collected in this survey, there did not seem to be a good reason to break these areas down further. Rectification of previous sources with the existing analysis was complicated by the fact that none of these studies give any details about Bena dialects (beyond listing their names) and some of the distinctions between varieties listed in other sources are not immediately apparent. However it is possible that these represent finer-grained dialect areas and that further data collection in additional locations would validate these divisions.

A seventh dialect (“Bena-Manga”) is listed in Table 6 that does not appear in the dialect map. The Bena-Manga emigrated to neighboring Morogoro Region during the latter portion of the twentieth century. For logistical reasons, it was not possible to include the Bena-Manga in the sociolinguistic survey, and efforts to find Bena-Manga speakers living in the district of Njombe failed. Therefore it is impossible to draw any concrete conclusions about the variety spoken by the Bena-Manga, though speakers living in the eastern portion of the Njombe district (the area bordering on the Morogoro region) indicate that the Bena spoken by the Bena-Manga differs considerably from that spoken by the Bena living in the district of Njombe. This fact, combined with the passage of time since the emigration of the Bena-Manga, makes it plausible to assume that Bena-Manga constitutes a seventh dialect.

6. Accounting for variation

The observation that Bena survey data points do not create neat bundles of isoglosses which can then be easily demarcated into clear dialect areas is not surprising. Dialectologists have long observed that classification of dialect areas can be a very difficult, particularly in the absence of hard-and-fast

⁶ Nyagava (1999) only mentions Vafwagi in passing with no details about where the Vafwagi clan is located. Process of elimination led me to posit that Vafwagi may correspond with the Ngaveta dialect, though this hypothesis is extremely tenuous

geographic boundaries such as mountains and rivers (Saussure [1916] 1966; Moulton 1968; Kretzschmar 1996, Chambers and Trudgill 1998). This is related to any number of factors including the population mobility, language and dialect contact, the presence of other types of variation related to age, gender, etc., and numerous other factors.

Therefore while the presence of significant variation in the Bena dialect situation is not particularly unexpected, it is worth investigating the factors contributing to the variation. One of the potential explanations for the variation in the dialectal data is the existence of two different prestige varieties of Bena. One question that was asked of speakers during discussion sessions addressed prestige varieties and where “proper Bena” was spoken. The two most common answers were the village of Mdandu (in the northwest) and the village of Lupembe (located in the far east of the Bena-speaking area). (See Figure 2 for the locations of these two villages.) Historically, Mdandu was the cultural center of the Bena-speaking area. Near Mdandu was *Nyumbaniitu* (literally ‘dark house’) which was the location of a sacred grove and the home of the Bena chief (Nyagava 1999). Lupembe, on the other hand, was the center of early twentieth century missionary activity. The first Bena orthography (from which current orthographies are largely derived) was based on the variety of Bena spoken in Lupembe, and a Bible translation (British and Foreign Bible Society 1914), hymnal (Dayosisi la Kusini 1914), and alphabet book (Anon. 1914) were all printed in the variety of Bena spoken in Lupembe. Further, missionary schools that used the alphabet book were established throughout the Njombe district; many older Bena speakers living throughout the Bena-speaking area attended these schools as children. Thus older speakers in particular, regardless of where they live, are often familiar with eastern dialects of Bena and tend to cite the Bena spoken in and around Lupembe as the prestige variety.

It is common for speakers of other (non-prestige) varieties to accommodate to one of these two prestige varieties. Speakers living in the western half of the Bena-speaking area identified Mdandu as the location where “good Bena” was spoken and they tended to accommodate towards the dialect spoken in that area. For example, one of my regular consultants was from Ng’anda (in the far western end of the Bena-speaking area) and spoke the Maswamu dialect. One particularly salient feature of that dialect is pronunciation of orthographic <k> as [x]. When this individual was speaking with two of my other consultants, who were from Kidugala (much closer to Mdandu), she would often use [h], which is the variant used in the Mdandu area. The reverse was not the case; the [x] pronunciation was not used by speakers of the Maswamu dialect. Similarly, in the village of Utalingoro (in the south-central area), there was considerable variation among speakers in the pronunciation of orthographic <k>. Some pronounced it as [h], while others used [x]. A similar situation was observed in the east. In Lupembe (the other area cited as speaking “good” Bena), orthographic <k> is pronounced as [k]. In the village of Itipula (also in the eastern half of the Bena-speaking area), there was considerable variation in the pronunciation of orthographic <k> as [x] or [k].

Another factor contributing to the variation within the dialectal data was language and dialect contact. There is significant contact between speakers of different dialects, particularly in areas along main roads. This results in a lot of dialect mixing. This is why it is impossible to characterize the Bena spoken in and around the town of Njombe as belonging to a particular dialect. Furthermore, in areas toward the outer edges of the Bena-speaking area, it is common for Bena speakers to interact with speakers of other languages, such as Hehe to the north or Kinga to the west. Thus, for example, northern Bena is significantly influenced by Hehe. In fact, speakers who do not live in the north criticize northern speakers for speaking *Ihibena ihya Vahehe*, or ‘Bena of the Hehe.’

A final reason why it was difficult to draw distinct dialect areas is dialect leveling due to the influence of Swahili. In Tanzania today, Swahili’s role as a national language is having a considerable impact on the structure of minority languages. (See, for example, Mkude 2004, Msanjila 2004, and Yoneda 2010 for descriptions of the impact of Swahili on other Tanzanian languages.) With respect to Bena, Swahili’s influence is causing shifts in tonal patterns and vocabulary, as well as morphological and syntactic structures, particularly among speakers in younger generations. For example, among younger speakers it is common to hear words pronounced with penultimate stress (a feature of Swahili), rather than Bena’s tonal melodies. As differences in tonal melodies are one feature that distinguishes some dialects from one another (see section 4.2 above), use of a penultimate stress pattern effectively levels that distinction. A detailed discussion of the ways in which Bena is being

influenced by Swahili is beyond the scope of this paper, but is an area for further, more systematic research.

7. Conclusion

This paper has provided a case study of dialect variation in a minority language in Tanzania. As discussed, variation within Bena is considerable and quite complex. Some variation can be attributed to geographic factors; however it is impossible to draw clear-cut dialect boundaries. Instead, an approach identifying fuzzy dialect areas, while noting the significant blurring of lines between areas, seems to be preferable. This situation is not unique to Bena or to minority languages in Tanzania. However, what is interesting is the complex combination of factors contributing to the variation. These factors include historical facts regarding centers of cultural and missionary activity as well as sociolinguistic factors related to prestige varieties, dialect and language contact, and influence of the national language. This paper has not investigated other types of variation due to gender, age-graded phenomena, education levels, register, or other factors. It is likely that these factors also have a considerable impact on language variation and choice within Bena and such analysis is an area ripe for future research.

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