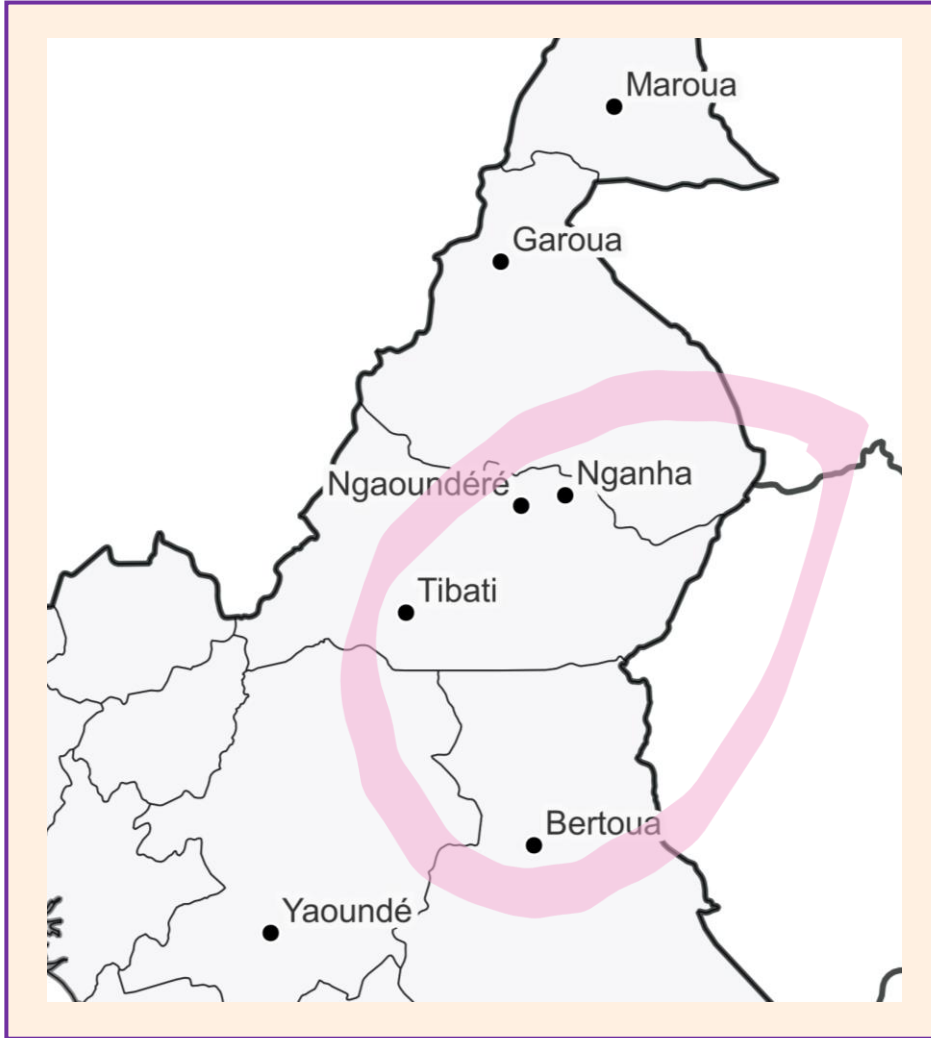


# A Grammar of Mbum, an Adamawa Language of Northern Cameroon

The African continent is home to hundreds of languages, almost 300 spoken in Cameroon alone. Some of these languages and language families have received little scholarly attention, such as the so-called Adamawa family. In recent years, however, this understudied group of languages has sparked considerable academic interest: research projects have been initiated in various institutions around the world (Germany, France, Nigeria, Cameroon, USA,...) and a number of scholars have intensified their research. Mbum is a language traditionally classified as belonging to the “Adamawa” family. Like many languages in this group, whose internal classification is highly controversial, Mbum lacks a detailed grammatical description.

Keywords: descriptive linguistics, reference grammar, Cameroon, Adamawa languages



Map of Cameroon.

## Contextualization of Mbum

Mbum is spoken in some areas of Cameroon, like in and around Ngaoundéré, Tibati, Bertoua, but also in Chad and the Central African Republic (especially in the border region). There are many dialects, some of which are not necessarily mutually intelligible. In and around Nganha alone, there are thought to be around 50 000 speakers (Markgraf 2012: 93).



Preparing *makala* in Nganha, April 2023.

## Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful for the support my research has received from the Mbum-speaking community of Nganha. I thank the Belaka, his family and the mayor for welcoming me so warmly to the village, my main collaborators Fabilou Hassirou, Mamoudou Gunnjal and Nabilou Belaka for their unwavering support and endless elicitation sessions, and Mohamadou Saliou and many other speakers for their time, patience and advice. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Klaus Beyer, who initiated and facilitated my studies in Mbum, as well as to Nico Nassenstein, Pascal Boyeldieu, Daisuke Shinagawa, Makoto Furumoto, Seunghun Lee, Frank Kögler, Ulrike Zoch, Friederike Vigeland, Sören Zimmermann and many others for their valuable advice and discussion of my data. I am grateful to the GAHP, the GSHS and the Sulzmann-Stiftung for their financial and ideal support of my studies related to this project.

## Research aim

This project aims to contribute to the endeavors of pushing knowledge on Adamawa languages further by working on a comprehensive and up-to-date grammatical description of the minority language Mbum. I focus on a variant spoken in the village of Nganha and the nearby town of Ngaoundéré, which is strongly influenced by the lingua franca Adamawa-Fulfulde. The reference grammar is meant to help resolve classificatory ambiguities, contribute to language documentation and local preservation efforts and be of practical use to the speaker community. Further, the project aims to include the West African language in current academic discourse and to increase scholarly interest in Adamawa languages.



The main language consultants with children from a Quartier in Nganha, April 2023.

## Structure of the dissertation

For reasons of comparability and accessibility, the reference grammar follows a “traditional” structure, taking into account all levels of linguistic description: phonology, morphology, and syntax. The phonology chapter should be the most comprehensive chapter since Mbum is a tone language and shows many interesting peculiarities in its phonology and tonology. The appendix features an extensive word list, along with illustrative text samples such as a transcribed song, a riddle, and a short story. Additionally, the appendix comprises brief portraits of the main language consultants.

## Methodology

The approach taken in this study is empirical, working with data collected during research stays in Cameroon. In collaboration with Mbum speakers, word lists and grammatical questionnaires were elicited and recordings of more “natural” speech situations were taken. The collected data is transcribed phonetically, interlinearized and analyzed in the light of current linguistic theories. For this purpose, linguistic software tools such as FLEx and PRAAT are used.

## Exemplifications of data

In Mbum, prefixes can be used to derive nouns from other nouns with a related but different reference. The noun *ma* for ‘mother’ is productively used as a prefix and attached to nouns to derive a word from the same semantic field, but with the characteristic of being long in shape:

### Augmentative: *ma*- ‘mother’

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| a) <i>mā</i> : ‘mother’ + <i>mbām</i> ‘rain’ | <i>mā</i> - <i>mbām</i> ‘lightning’        |
| b) <i>mā</i> : ‘mother’ + <i>mbi</i> ‘water’ | <i>mā</i> - <i>mbi</i> ‘river’             |
| c) <i>mā</i> : ‘mother’ + <i>kpù</i> ‘tree’  | <i>mā</i> - <i>kpù</i> ‘trunc (of a tree)’ |

The noun *gūn* for ‘child’ can be used as a prefix to express both the smallness of a referent (diminutive) or whole-part-relations:

### Diminutive: *gūn*- ‘child’

- |  |                                       |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| a) <i>gūn</i> ‘child’ + <i>sòŋ</i> ‘body’  | <i>gūn</i> - <i>sòŋ</i> ‘small body’  |
| b) <i>gūn</i> ‘child’ + <i>mbi</i> ‘water’ | <i>gūn</i> - <i>mbi</i> ‘small river’ |
| c) <i>gūn</i> ‘child’ + <i>pāk</i> ‘house’ | <i>gūn</i> - <i>pāk</i> ‘small house’ |

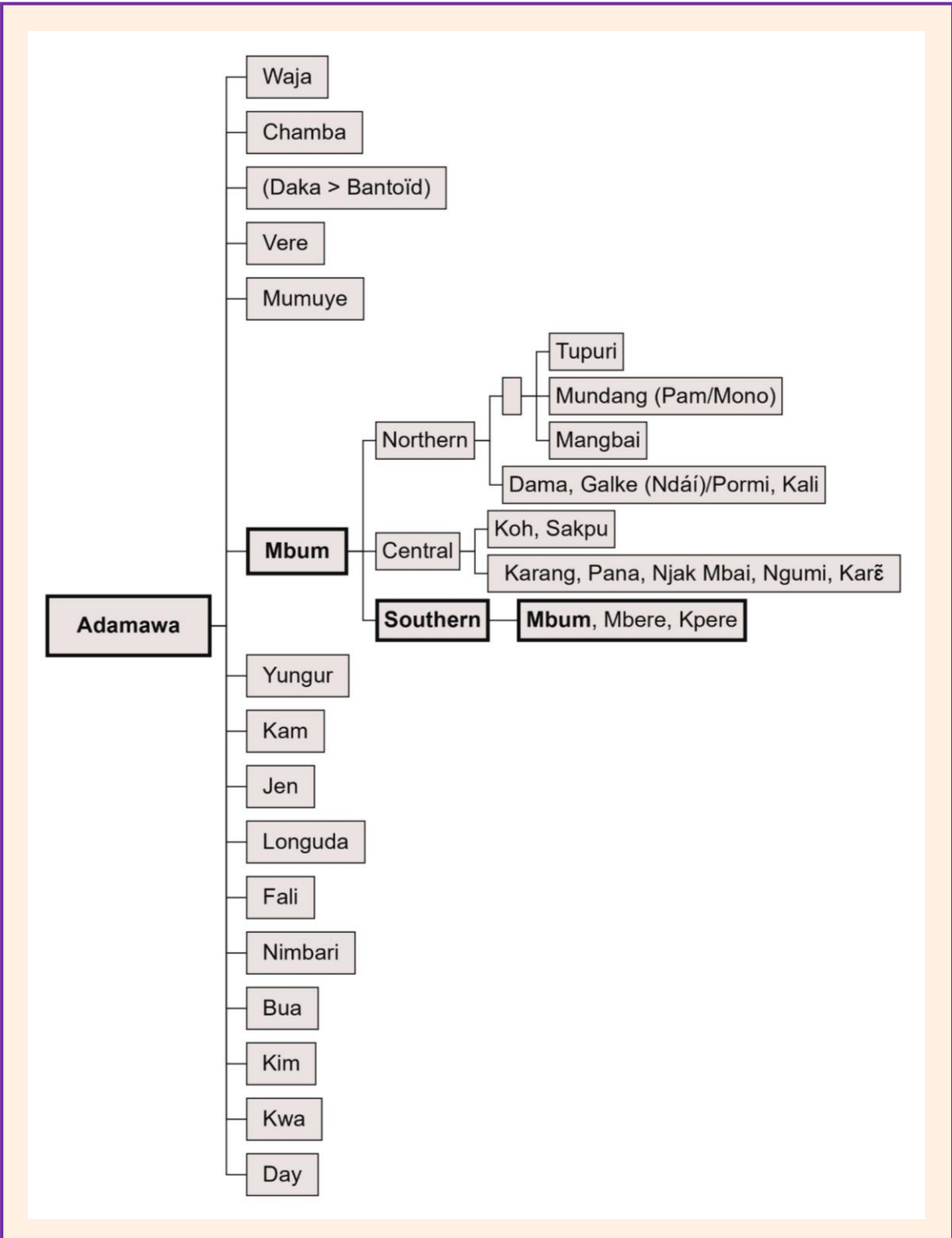
### Whole-part-relation: *gūn*- ‘child’

- |  |                                   |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| a) <i>gūn</i> ‘child’ + <i>ndòk</i> ‘hand’ | <i>gūn</i> - <i>ndòk</i> ‘finger’ |
| b) <i>gūn</i> ‘child’ + <i>vòk</i> ‘foot’  | <i>gūn</i> - <i>vòk</i> ‘toe’     |

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Classification of “Adamawa” languages according to Boyd (1989).