Basaá [ɓàːsaː] is spoken by 282,000 people in the forest area located in the South, Centre and Littoral regions of Cameroon (based on 1982 Ethnologue record; Lewis 2009). Basaá is a narrow Bantu language in the Niger-Congo language family, and it is classified as A43 (Guthrie 1967–71, A43a in Maho 2009). The ISO code of Basaá is bas (Lewis 2009).


Examples in this paper come from two sources: Hyman (2003), and the first author, who is a native speaker of the Basaá language. The accompanying recordings for this article are of a male Basaá native speaker in his thirties, recorded on a Marantz PMD661 Field Recorder using a head-worn microphone (Shure WH-30 XLR).

**Consonants**
The phonetic chart of Basaá consonants shows that the voiceless plosives do not have voiced counterparts, except for the labialized velar. Among the voiceless fricatives, all but /s/ and...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bilabial</th>
<th>Alveolar</th>
<th>Post alveolar</th>
<th>Palatal</th>
<th>Velar</th>
<th>Labialized velar</th>
<th>Uvular</th>
<th>Glottal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plosive</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>t</td>
<td></td>
<td>k</td>
<td></td>
<td>k&lt;sup&gt;w&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>g&lt;sup&gt;w&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affricate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>tʃ</td>
<td>φ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implosive</td>
<td>b</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prenasalized</td>
<td>mːb</td>
<td>nːd</td>
<td>nːφ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasal</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>n</td>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>η</td>
<td>η&lt;sup&gt;w&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tap</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>r</td>
<td></td>
<td>η</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fricative</td>
<td>φ</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>s</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>γ</td>
<td>χ</td>
<td>h</td>
<td>h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximant</td>
<td>w</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lateral approximant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
/χ/ have voiced counterparts. Prenasalized stops and nasals occur at all places of articulation, as do fricatives. The velar /ŋ/ appears as an initial as a prefix before vowel-initial roots, as in [ŋ-ànè] ‘CL1-chief’. Words exemplifying each of the consonants will be found in the ‘Phonotactics’ section below.

Plosives and fricatives in Basaá are in complementary distribution. Voiceless stops /p t k/ occur only word-initially. In intervocalic position, the stops undergo lenition to /ɾɣ/, and before non-sonorants or in pre-pausal position the lenited sounds /ɸχ/ are voiceless. The voiced fricatives /β χ/ and the voiced tap /ɾ/ can appear word-initially only when they begin a grammatical morpheme (a prefix) such as [βì-tâmb] ‘CL8-shoe’. In the pre-pausal position only, /s/ and /h/ are in free variation, as in [móm-ôh] ~ [móm-ôs] ‘to console’.

Basaá also has taps, approximants and palato-alveolar affricates. The voiced alveolar plosive /d/ only occurs as part of a prenasalized stop /nd/, and so do other voiced plosives. Other Basaá sources (Lemb & de Gastines 1973) employ an orthographic 〈d〉 in the position of the tap /ɾ/. Loanwords such as ‘dollar’, however, are produced by Basaá speakers as [dolà], with a /d/. The voiceless tap /ɾ/ is an uncommon sound, but appears in pre-pausal position.

The implosive /ɓ/ occurs in the initial position of a morpheme as in the words [bás] ‘salt (CL9)’, [bɔŋgɛ] ‘children (CL2)’ and [bɔrɔl] ‘to start’. The implosive can also occur word-internally when it is morpheme-initial, as in [kàr-ɓa] ‘to pride oneself’, when preceded by a sonorant. After a vowel, the implosive is realized as a fricative /β/. The following illustrate:

kàr-ɓa ‘to pride oneself’
tèŋ-ɓa ‘to attach oneself’
hèl-ɓa ‘to turn oneself’

hó-ɓa ‘to cover oneself’
há-ɓa ‘to put (clothes) on oneself’
hî-ɓa ‘to avoid oneself (from a dangerous situation)’

Vowels

Basaá has seven phonetic vowels /i e ɛ u o ɔ a/, and each vowel may be short or long. All short vowels can be followed by a sonorant or an obstruent in monosyllabic words. Long vowels, however, cannot be followed by any consonant in a syllable. The contrast in the phonological quantity in Basaá is based on differences in vowel length without additional qualitative differences.

1 We agree with a reviewer’s point that voiceless plosives /p t k/ in the syllable-final position have widespread variation in Basaá. In the absence of a systematic study, we leave an exact description of this variation to future research.
Short vowels and long vowels

\( \text{sí} \) ‘earth (CL9)’  \( \text{sí:} \) ‘to ache’
\( \text{jé} \) ‘(they) are’  \( \text{jé:} \) ‘his’
\( \text{sé} \) ‘to grind’  \( \text{sé:} \) ‘to collect palm wine’
\( \text{sú} \) ‘face (CL9)’  \( \text{sú:} \) ‘to tease’
\( \text{só} \) ‘antelope (CL9)’  \( \text{só:} \) ‘to enjoy (food)’
\( \text{sá} \) ‘to dry up (a river)’  \( \text{sá:} \) ‘to spread (something)’

Vowels followed by a sonorant

\( \text{lím} \) ‘to be silent’  \( \text{píl} \) ‘debt (CL9)’
\( \text{lém} \) ‘beast (CL7)’  \( \text{bén} \) ‘to bend’
\( \text{lém} \) ‘habit (CL7)’  \( \text{kéj} \) ‘iron (CL7)’
\( \text{búm} \) ‘inheritance (CL7)’  \( \text{kúr} \) ‘a blow (CL7)’
\( \text{hóm} \) ‘to hang around’  \( \text{hól} \) ‘to sharpen’
\( \text{móm} \) ‘to calm down’  \( \text{hó} \) ‘to annoy’
\( \text{bám} \) ‘to shout’  \( \text{dáŋ} \) ‘to disappear’

Vowels followed by an obstruent

\( \text{níφ} \) ‘to steal’  \( \text{jíχ} \) ‘widow/-er (CL7)’
\( \text{béf} \) ‘to beat’  \( \text{héχ} \) ‘to block’
\( \text{kéf} \) ‘to tattoo’  \( \text{lês} \sim \text{lêh} \) ‘to miss’
\( \text{húφ} \) ‘to be short of’  \( \text{húχ} \) ‘word (CL7)’
\( \text{pőφ} \) ‘to be clean’  \( \text{lôs} \sim \text{lôh} \) ‘courage (CL7)’
\( \text{pɔφ} \) ‘to gain weight’  \( \text{hóχ} \) ‘to swim’
\( \text{káf} \) ‘to share’  \( \text{bàs} \sim \text{bàh} \) ‘salt (CL9)’

Vowel raising

Basaá has two major vowel processes: vowel syncope and vowel raising. The vowel raising occurs when a verbal extension such as an applicative is added to a verb stem. Low vowels in the stem become mid vowels, and mid vowels become high vowels. High vowels do not undergo any changes. For a phonological analysis of this vowel raising, see Schmidt (1996) and Mutaka & Bitjaa Kody (2000).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Front vowels</th>
<th>VERB</th>
<th>APPLICATIVE</th>
<th>MEANING OF APPLICATIVE FORMS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/a/ to /e/</td>
<td>sál</td>
<td>sél-él</td>
<td>‘to work with’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/e/ to /e/</td>
<td>pēφ</td>
<td>pēβ-él</td>
<td>‘to blow with’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/e/ to /i/</td>
<td>hέχ</td>
<td>hý-il</td>
<td>‘to block for’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/i/ (no change)</td>
<td>mil</td>
<td>mil-il</td>
<td>‘to swallow with’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back vowels</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɔ/ to /o/</td>
<td>pôr</td>
<td>pór-ôl</td>
<td>‘to talk for/to’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/o/ to /u/</td>
<td>hól</td>
<td>hûl-ûl</td>
<td>‘to sharpen with’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/u/ (no change)</td>
<td>tûχ</td>
<td>tûy-ûl</td>
<td>‘to play with’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tone

Basaá has two register tones: high and low, and two contour tones: rising and falling. Minimal pairs with register tones over two syllables (HL or LH sequences) can also be found. Each row in the following table represents a minimal tonal contrast in Basáá.
Basáa also has a grammatical downstep process triggered by an L tone between H tones. The present tense is marked with a nasal H and a floating L tone: the H tone in the verb [ʤɛ] ‘to eat’ is downstepped in the present tense [à ŋ́ dɛ́ ] ‘she eats’.

**Syllable structure**

The syllable template of Basáa is (C)V(C) or (C)V:. Onsets are not required in Basáa and codas are not prohibited. Syllables cannot have coda consonants when the nucleus is a long vowel.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CV</th>
<th>VC</th>
<th>CVC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sú ‘face (CL9)’</td>
<td>ù ‘night (CL9)’</td>
<td>kóp ‘chicken (CL9)’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pà ‘machete (CL7)’</td>
<td>é ‘to clear bush’</td>
<td>púr ‘forest, bush (CL9)’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dʒɛ ‘to eat’</td>
<td>ð ‘to grow (plant)’</td>
<td>lém ‘to become extinguished’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lɔ ‘to come’</td>
<td>ó ‘ear (CL9)’</td>
<td>bòl ‘rot’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CV</th>
<th>VC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pɛ: ‘viper (CL9)’</td>
<td>é: ‘tree (CL7)’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kɔ: ‘skin (CL9)’</td>
<td>ð: ‘to hate’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hɛ: ‘to cost’</td>
<td>ó: ‘to make’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lɔ: ‘to pass’</td>
<td>ë: ‘to cry’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Syllabic nasals**

Basáa has syllabic nasals that are homorganic with the place of articulation of the following consonant. The syllabic nasals occur as class prefixes in nouns or as tense morphemes in verbs. In terms of tone, syllabic nasals are assigned an L tone. When a noun begins with a palato-alveolar sound, the syllabic nasal is realized with /n/. A vowel-initial noun has a syllabic nasal prefix that is a velar nasal /ŋ/.

**INITIAL SEGMENT**  **SYLLABIC NASALS AS CLASS PREFIXES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bilabial</th>
<th>Palato-alveolar</th>
<th>Velar</th>
<th>Vowel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m-pék ‘CL3-bag’</td>
<td>n-tómá ‘CL3-goat’</td>
<td>n-kɔŋ ‘CL3-land’</td>
<td>ñ-ò ‘CL3-head’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m-bɔŋ ‘CL3-creator’</td>
<td>n-sán ‘CL1-father’</td>
<td>ñ-kwé ‘CL3-basket’</td>
<td>ñ-àn ‘CL1-chief’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**INITIAL SEGMENT**  **SYLLABIC NASALS AS TENSE MORPHEMES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bilabial</th>
<th>Palato-alveolar</th>
<th>Velar</th>
<th>Vowel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m-ŋɛ ‘the child speaks Basáa’</td>
<td>n-ŋɛ ‘the child eats doughnuts’</td>
<td>n-ŋɛ ‘the child has bought doughnuts’</td>
<td>n-ŋ ‘the child has died’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alveolar</th>
<th>Palato-alveolar</th>
<th>Velar</th>
<th>Vowel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m-ŋɛ ‘the child speaks Basáa’</td>
<td>n-ŋɛ ‘the child eats doughnuts’</td>
<td>n-ŋɛ ‘the child has bought doughnuts’</td>
<td>n-ŋ ‘the child has died’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Phonotactics

Basaá consonants demonstrate unusual phonotactics with respect to their occurrence within a prosodic stem (a combination of a root and suffixes, but not including prefixes). Most consonants in the chart can appear in stem-initial position. Voiceless fricatives /f f x/, however, cannot be the first consonant in a stem. The set of consonants allowed in a prosodic word substantially decreases in positions located further away from the left edge of the prosodic stem. The first position of a prosodic stem (C1) allows the largest contrast, but when a noun does not have an overt noun class prefix, the noun class is indicated.

Prosodic stem in this paper is different from the term ‘macro stem’, which is a morphological unit that refers to a part of verbal complexes that encompasses an object marker (optional), the verb root, verbal suffixes and the final vowel (Downing 2006). To our knowledge, there is no official and widely accepted writing system for the Basaá language, except a transliteration system used in the Bible based on French or English writing systems. The writing systems, however, are not uniform and they differ from one another depending on the version of the Bible whether it is translated for the Catholic church or for the Protestant church. Some recent work by linguists (such as Hyman 2003) and the Language Committee prefer a transcription system based on General Alphabet for Cameroon Languages (AGLC) devised by the late Prof. Maurice Tadadjeu. While the orthography in Lemb & de Gastines’s (1973) dictionary is commonly regarded as the standard for writing Basaá, it does not have an official status. The state-of-the-art is that there is no consensus about the writing system of Basaá. Thus, we decided not to provide spellings of Basaá words in this paper. It is our hope that the current work can inform future work on the development of an official writing system of Basaá.

\[\text{velar} \quad \text{məŋgɛ à h-1kɛ í bɔm} \quad \text{‘the child is going to market’} \]
\[\text{məŋgɛ à h-kɔɾ} \quad \text{‘the child has dried up a lot’} \]
\[\text{n̥ə́ndək} \quad \text{‘the child has drunken’} \]
\[\text{məŋgɛ à h-nɔ} \quad \text{‘the child has smiled’} \]
\[\text{vowel} \quad \text{məŋgɛ à h-āŋ kâːt} \quad \text{‘the child has read a book’} \]

\[\text{paŋ} \quad \text{‘to pick’} \]
\[\text{bɛ́n} \quad \text{‘to bend’} \]
\[\text{bɛ́l-tu mb} \quad \text{‘CL8-shoe’} \]
\[\text{mɓu} \quad \text{‘grey hair (CL10)’} \]
\[\text{mɔ́m} \quad \text{‘to calm down’} \]
\[\text{wɔ́} \quad \text{‘arm (CL3)’} \]
\[\text{tʃɔ́} \quad \text{‘to make palm oil’} \]
\[\text{n̥a} \quad \text{‘sister-in-law (CL1)’} \]
\[\text{hɔ́} \quad \text{‘to sharpen’} \]
\[\text{jı́} \quad \text{‘knowledge (CL7)’} \]
\[\text{kwe} \quad \text{‘to fall down’} \]
\[\text{ŋgə́} \quad \text{‘gun (CL9)’} \]

\[\text{túm} \quad \text{‘size (CL9)’} \]
\[\text{sɔ́} \quad \text{‘be permeable’} \]
\[\text{n̥ò} \quad \text{‘to rain’} \]
\[\text{n̥di} \quad \text{‘but’} \]
\[\text{l̥à} \quad \text{‘to lick’} \]
\[\text{r̥-n̥ɔ́} \quad \text{‘CL13(PL)-finger’} \]
\[\text{dʃɔ́} \quad \text{‘to bury’} \]
\[\text{n̥dʃɛ́} \quad \text{‘who’} \]
\[\text{kɔ́} \quad \text{‘foot (CL9)’} \]
\[\text{ɣ̥ɔ́} \quad \text{‘his’} \]
\[\text{n̥wɔ́} \quad \text{‘spouse (CL1)’} \]
C₁VC₂V

kòbá ‘past (CL9)’ tòrè ‘to wake up’
tì̀mì̀ ‘to destroy’ kùjè ‘to switch on’
bòmá ‘meeting (CL7)’ sèyà ‘equal (in age) (CL7)’
bìná ‘bask (CL7)’ bòNASA ‘brain (CL1)’
mbòdò ‘coconut (CL9)’ bápà ‘drug (CL9)’
kùlè ‘spice (CL7)’ sùhà ‘to put down something’

C₁VC₂(-C₃V)
kèfì ‘to tattoo’ nòdò ‘daughter (CL7)’
kéβ-nà ‘to tattoo each other’ pil ‘debt (CL9)’
sòm ‘to buy’ hór ‘to annoy’
ðúm ‘inheritance (CL7)’ kè ‘iron (CL7)’
lès ‘to miss’ hé ‘to block’
kùn ‘to choose’ hénà ‘to block each other’
d̃an ‘to disappear’ lè ‘to miss’
ndèg ‘to hang’ kòfi-nà ‘to receive’
mù ‘man (CL1)’

C₁VC₂C₂V...
táyè ‘to pass’ bòmádà ‘to pull’
kéysè ‘exam (CL7)’ sèhà ‘to tremble’
káysè ‘to punish’ pàyà ‘business (CL7)’
bám-nà ‘to shout at’ sályà ‘Work!’

C₁VC₂VC₃

nòy-òp ‘to bathe’ pór-òs ~ pór-òh ‘to talk to’
líkòr ‘thinness (CL5)’ jùyùr ‘to destroy’
sòmb-ò ‘Buy!’ múm-òs ~ múm-òh ‘to console’

C₁VC₂C₃VC₄

tínlènè ‘to detach with’
tínlèrh ‘Detach!’
tínlàhà ‘to make someone detach’
sèblènè ‘to call at’
èmlènè ‘to dream about’
ânlà ‘to tell each other’

C₁VC₂C₃VC₄

kèblè ‘to give food’

Transcribed passage

mbèbí nì làngá:
wind and sun
The Wind and the Sun

4 Greenberg (1951: 818) reports that the imperative suffix -ak in Basa [sic] undergoes nasal harmony; the imperative of /tam-ak/ is [tam-aj] ‘Wish’. If present, this form would violate the phonotactics of Basáá. Our speaker, however, confirmed that there is no such imperative form in Basáá.
They agreed that the one who could make the traveler take off his coat, would be considered stronger than the other one.

Then wind AGR blow with strength quantity it be.able
Then the wind blew as hard as he could

but as him it be AGR blowing also man AGR closing coat his
but the harder he blew the tighter the traveler wrapped his coat around him

till that till wind AGR be.tired it stop blow
and at last the wind gave up trying

Then the sun began to shine hot

And so the North Wind had to admit that the Sun was stronger than he was

Acknowledgements

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References