Basaá [básáː] 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><strong>Plosive</strong></td>
<td>p</td>
<td>t</td>
<td></td>
<td>k</td>
<td>k&lt;sup&gt;ʷ&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>g&lt;sup&gt;ʷ&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Affricate</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>k&lt;sup&gt;ʰ&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Implosive</strong></td>
<td>b</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prenasalized</strong></td>
<td>m&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>n&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>n&lt;sup&gt;ɹ&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
<td>g&lt;sup&gt;ɡ&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nasal</strong></td>
<td>m</td>
<td>n</td>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>η&lt;sup&gt;ŋ&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>η&lt;sup&gt;ŋ&lt;sup&gt;ʷ&lt;/sup&gt;&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tap</strong></td>
<td>f</td>
<td>r</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fricative</strong></td>
<td>ɸ</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>s</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>γ&lt;sup&gt;χ&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>η</td>
<td>h</td>
<td>h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Approximant</strong></td>
<td>w</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lateral approximant</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<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-ãńã] ‘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 /β r χ/, and before non-sonorants or in pre-pausal position the lenited sounds /β r χ/ are voiceless. The voiced fricatives /β y/ and the voiced tap /ɾ/ can appear word-initially only when they begin a grammatical morpheme (a prefix) such as [βí-tãm-b] ‘CL8-shoe’. In the pre-pausal position only, /s/ and /h/ are in free variation, as in [móm-õh] ~ [móm-õs] ‘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 [dólà], 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 [ɓás] ‘salt (CL9)’, [ɓɔŋɡé] ‘children (CL2)’ and [ɓôrɔl] ‘to start’. The implosive can also occur word-internally when it is morpheme-initial, as in [kár-ɓá] ‘to pride oneself’, when preceded by a sonorant. After a vowel, the implosive is realized as a fricative /β/. The following illustrate:

kár-ɓá ‘to pride oneself’
tên-ɓá ‘to attach oneself’
hèl-ɓá ‘to turn oneself’

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

Vowels

Basaá has seven phonetic vowels /i e ɛ u 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

sí ‘earth (CL9)’ síː ‘to ache’
jé ‘(they) are’ jéː ‘his’
sé ‘to grind’ sěː ‘to collect palm wine’
sú ‘face (CL9)’ sůː ‘to tease’
só ‘antelope (CL9)’ sóː ‘to enjoy (food)’
sá ‘to dry up (a river)’ sáː ‘to spread (something)’

Vowels followed by a sonorant

lím ‘to be silent’ píl ‘debt (CL9)’
léṃ ‘beast (CL7)’ běn ‘to bend’
lém ‘habit (CL7)’ kěj ‘iron (CL7)’
bűm ‘inheritance (CL7)’ kúr ‘a blow (CL7)’
hóm ‘to hang around’ hól ‘to sharpen’
móm ‘to calm down’ hɔ̀ ‘to annoy’
bám ‘to shout’ dʒáŋ ‘to disappear’

Vowels followed by an obstruent

níphi ‘to steal’ jíχ ‘widow/-er (CL7)’
bephi ‘to beat’ héχ ‘to block’
kɛphi ‘to tattoo’ léʃ ~ léh ‘to miss’
huφi ‘to be short of’ bűχ ‘word (CL7)’
pɔphi ‘to be clean’ lós ~ lóh ‘courage (CL7)’
pɔphi ‘to gain weight’ hɔχ ‘to swim’
kahphi ‘to share’ bəs ~ bəh ‘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).

Front vowels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VERB</th>
<th>APPLICATIVE</th>
<th>MEANING OF APPLICATIVE FORMS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/a/</td>
<td>/e/</td>
<td>sál  say-ɛl ‘to work with’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/e/</td>
<td>/ɛ/</td>
<td>pẹφ  pẹβ-ɛl ‘to blow with’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɛ/</td>
<td>/i/</td>
<td>hɛχ  hɛj-ił ‘to block for’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/i/</td>
<td>(no change)</td>
<td>mɪl  mɪl-il ‘to swallow with’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Back vowels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VERB</th>
<th>APPLICATIVE</th>
<th>MEANING OF APPLICATIVE FORMS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/ɔ/</td>
<td>/o/</td>
<td>pɔr  pɔr-ɔl ‘to talk for/to’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/o/</td>
<td>/u/</td>
<td>hʊl  hʊj-ʊl ‘to sharpen with’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/u/</td>
<td>(no change)</td>
<td>tʊχ  tʊj-ʊl ‘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.
The syllable template of Basaá is (C)V(C) or (C)V:. Onsets are not required in Basaá and codas are not prohibited. Syllables cannot have coda consonants when the nucleus is a long vowel.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CV</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>CVC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sú</td>
<td>‘face (CL9)’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pà</td>
<td>‘machete (CL7)’</td>
<td>‘to clear bush’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ðɛː</td>
<td>‘to eat’</td>
<td>‘to grow (plant)’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lɔː</td>
<td>‘to come’</td>
<td>‘ear (CL9)’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CV</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>VC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pèː</td>
<td>‘viper (CL9)’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kɔː</td>
<td>‘skin (CL9)’</td>
<td>‘to hate’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hɔː</td>
<td>‘to cost’</td>
<td>‘to make’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lɔː</td>
<td>‘to pass’</td>
<td>‘to cry’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Syllabic nasals**

Basaá 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 /ŋ/. A vowel-initial noun has a syllabic nasal prefix that is a velar nasal /ŋ/.

**INITIAL SEGMENT**  
**SYLLABIC NASALS AS CLASS PREFIXES**
- bilabial: m̐-pék ‘CL3-bag’  
- alveolar: n-tɔmbá ‘CL3-goat’  
- palato-alveolar: n-ŋɔbɔ ‘CL3-mortar’  
- velar: n-ŋɔ ‘CL3-head’  
- vowel: n-ŋ ‘CL3-creator’

**INITIAL SEGMENT**  
**SYLLABIC NASALS AS TENSE MORPHEMES**
- bilabial: mɔŋɡɛ̀ ‘the child speaks Basaa’  
- alveolar: mɔŋɡɛ̀ ‘the child takes a wife’  
- palato-alveolar: mɔŋɡɛ̀ ‘the child has bought doughnuts’  
- palato-alveolar: mɔŋɡɛ̀ ‘the child eats doughnuts’  
- palato-alveolar: mɔŋɡɛ̀ ‘the child has died’
velar  màŋgè à ñ-7kè í 6óm  ‘the child is going to market’
       màŋgè à ñ-kòř  ‘the child has dried up a lot’
       ñgándák
màŋgè à ñ-pɔ  ‘the child has drunken’
màŋgè à ñ-ní: sù  ‘the child has smiled’
vowel  màŋgè à ñ-àŋ kàːt  ‘the child has read a book’

Phonotactics
Basáá 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/tʃ/χ/, 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 subsequent positions (C₂,C₃,C₄) only allow a limited set of consonants. When a Basáá word has four consonants, the maximum number in a prosodic stem, the last consonant is one of /n/ y χ h/; if the fourth consonant is stem-final, then it can only be /χ/. A prosodic stem can have maximally four consonants (Hyman 2003). The following word list below is based on this phonotactic restriction in Basáá. High tone is marked with an acute accent and low tone is marked with a grave accent. The tilde (~) means free variation. When a noun does not have an overt noun class prefix, the noun class is indicated in parentheses. The bolded Cₙ indicates the position of the consonants illustrated in each list.

C₁V…3
pàr  ‘to pick’
bèn  ‘to bend’
bi-támb  ‘CL8-shoe’
mìbú  ‘grey hair (CL10)’
móm  ‘to calm down’
wɔ:  ‘arm (CL3)’
þò  ‘to make palm oil’
nà:  ‘sister-in-law (CL1)’
hòl  ‘to sharpen’
jí  ‘knowledge (CL7)’
kó:  ‘to fall down’
agog:  ‘gun (CL9)’

3 To our knowledge, there is no official and widely accepted writing system for the Basáá 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 Cameroonian 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 Basáá, it does not have an official status. The state-of-the-art is that there is no consensus about the writing system of Basáá. Thus, we decided not to provide spellings of Basáá 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 Basáá.

2 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).
Transcribed passage

mbèβi nì hàŋgá:
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-an] ‘Wish’. If present, this form would violate the phonotactics of Basaá. Our speaker, however, confirmed that there is no such imperative form in Basaá.
mbēbī mábérā nī hāŋgā: bā i bā pēhmmbā
wind upside with sun AGR be discuss
The North Wind and the Sun were arguing

kēl já́ ra ūp; lijī ndjē à qwē: ūgūj īlā: nūnū
day one for know who AGR have strength pass this.one
one day about which of them was stronger

häuser jē: ūnē nū mūr à bi’tīhū ā bāx à hē: bā korigi mbēbη
then stranger man AGR arrive he be he wearing coat rain
when a traveler came along wrapped up in an overcoat

bā nōylά lē i nweř ā mībōŋ īkēn mūr lē ā hējā
they arrange that the one AGR make stranger man that he take.off
They agreed that the one who could make the traveler take off

korigi jē: ūnē à qwē: ūgūj īlā: nūnū
cloak his the.one AGR have strength pass this.one
his coat, would be considered stronger than the other one.

wē: mbēbī i bhōhō nī ūgūj lībīm ī bēlā
Then wind AGR blow with strength quantity it be.able
Then the wind blew as hard as he could

ūdí kē: jō ī bē: ī hōŋox jāx mūr à sūryē korigi jē:
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

i bōl lē tē: mbēbī i bītīmb ī wā: hōŋ
till that till wind AGR be.tired it stop blow
and at last the wind gave up trying

hāngā: hō hī bójīrō: bāj i nī ūgūj
sun it AGR start shine with strength
Then the sun began to shine hot

i bōl lē tē: īkēn mūr ā hējā korigi jē:
till that till stranger man AGR take.off coat his
and right away the traveler took his coat off

häuser jē: ūnē mbēbī mábérā i bi’iñe:bē le hāngā: hī ńlēl jō ūgūj
then wind upside AGR accept that sun AGR pass it strength
And so the North Wind had to admit that the Sun was stronger than he was

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References


