Basaá 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>k&lt;sup&gt;w&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>g&lt;sup&gt;w&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affricate</td>
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<td>tʃ</td>
<td>φ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Implosive</td>
<td>b</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Prenasalized</td>
<td>m&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>n&lt;sup&gt;ɹ&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>η</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Nasal</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>n</td>
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<td>n</td>
<td>η&lt;sup&gt;w&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tap</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>r</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fricative</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>β&lt;sup&gt;n&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>s</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>γ&lt;sup&gt;n&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>χ&lt;sup&gt;n&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>h</td>
<td>h&lt;sup&gt;n&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Approximant</td>
<td>w</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lateral approximant</td>
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</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 /ptk/ 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 /ϕχ/ are voiceless. The voiced fricatives /βɣ/ and the voiced tap /ɾ̥/ can appear word-initially only when they begin a grammatical morpheme (a prefix) such as [βi-támb] ‘CL8-shoe’. In the pre-pausal position only, /s/ and /h/ are in free variation, as in [móm-ɔh] ~ [móm-ɔs] ‘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 [ɓâs] ‘salt (CL9)’, [ɓɔ:ŋgɛ] ‘children (CL2)’ and [ɓɔrɔl] ‘to start’. The implosive can also occur word-internally when it is morpheme-initial, as in [kàr-ɓà] ‘to pride oneself’, when preceded by a sonorant. After a vowel, the implosive is realized as a fricative /β/. The following illustrate:

kàr-ɓà ‘to pride oneself’
tɛŋ-ɓà ‘to attach oneself’
hèl-ɓà ‘to turn oneself’

hó-ɓà ‘to cover oneself’
há-ɓà ‘to put (clothes) on oneself’
hì-ɓà ‘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.

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1 We agree with a reviewer’s point that voiceless plosives /ptk/ 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
si ‘earth (CL9)’
jé ‘(they) are’
sé ‘to grind’
sú ‘face (CL9)’
só ‘antelope (CL9)’
sá ‘to dry up (a river)’

/s/ ı ‘earth (CL9)’
/s/ Ŭ ‘to ache’
/s/ ŋ ‘his’
/s/ ı ‘to collect palm wine’
/s/ ‘to tease’
/s/ ‘to enjoy (food)’
/s/ ‘to spread (something)’

Vowels followed by a sonorant
lim ‘to be silent’
lém ‘beast (CL7)’
lém ‘habit (CL7)’
lóm ‘inheritance (CL7)’
lóm ‘to hang around’
lóm ‘to calm down’
lóm ‘inheritance (CL7)’
lóm ‘to enjoy (food)’
lóm ‘to be permeable’
lóm ‘to dry up (a river)’
lóm ‘beast (CL7)’
lóm ‘to enjoy (food)’
lóm ‘to be permeable’
lóm ‘to spread (something)’

/l/ Ŭ ‘to be silent’
lém ‘beast (CL7)’
lém ‘habit (CL7)’
lóm ‘inheritance (CL7)’
lóm ‘to hang around’
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lóm ‘inheritance (CL7)’
lóm ‘to enjoy (food)’
lóm ‘to be permeable’
lóm ‘to dry up (a river)’

/l/ Ŭ ‘to be silent’
lém ‘beast (CL7)’
lém ‘habit (CL7)’

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).

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.
Syllable structure
The syllable template of Basáá is (C)V(C) or (C)Vː. Onsets are not required in Basáá 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></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ðžː</td>
<td>‘to eat’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lɔː</td>
<td>‘to come’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CVː</td>
<td>Vː</td>
<td>VC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>péː</td>
<td>‘viper (CL9)’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kɔː</td>
<td>‘skin (CL9)’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>həː</td>
<td>‘to cost’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lɔː</td>
<td>‘to pass’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Syllabic nasals
Basáá 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/.
velar  məŋgə̀ ɲ-1kè́ í bóm  ‘the child is going to market’
məŋgə̀ ɲ-kôr  ‘the child has dried up a lot’
ŋánǵdák
məŋgə̀ ɲ-ɲá  ‘the child has drunken’
məŋgə̀ ɲ-ɲí: sú  ‘the child has smiled’
vowel  məŋgə̀ ɲ-ǎŋ ká:t  ‘the child has read a book’

Phonotactics
Basàá 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, θ, 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 however, cannot be the first consonant in a stem. The set of consonants allowed in a prosodic stem (Cₙ) indicates the position of the consonants illustrated in the chart. When a Basàá word has four consonants, the maximum number in a prosodic stem, the last consonant is one of /n, ñ, 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 is based on this phonotactic restriction in Basàá. High tone is marked with an acute accent and a 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’  tún  ‘size (CL9)’
bèn  ‘to bend’  sõ:  ‘be permeable’
bì-tàmb  ‘CL8-shoe’  nõ  ‘to rain’
mìbú  ‘grey hair (CL10)’  nòfí  ‘but’
mòm  ‘to calm down’  lá  ‘to lick’
wõ:  ‘arm (CL3)’  rì-nõ:  ‘CL13(PL)-finger’
fjò:  ‘to make palm oil’  ðjò:  ‘to bury’
nà:  ‘sister-in-law (CL1)’  ñfè:  ‘who’
hôl  ‘to sharpen’  kò:  ‘foot (CL9)’
jì  ‘knowledge (CL7)’  yá-ì:  ‘fut.-come’
kʷò:  ‘to fall down’  ɠ̀wè:  ‘his’
ŋà:  ‘gun (CL9)’  ŋ̀wà:  ‘spouse (CL1)’

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).

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

Greenberg (1951: 818) reports that the imperative suffix -ak in Basa [sic] undergoes nasal harmony; the imperative of /tam-ak/ is [tam-ŋ] ‘Wish!’. If present, this form would violate the phonotactics of Basáa. Our speaker, however, confirmed that there is no such imperative form in Basáa.
The North Wind and the Sun were arguing

when a traveler came along wrapped up in an overcoat

Then the wind blew as hard as he could

but the harder he blew the tighter the traveler wrapped his coat around him

Then the sun began to shine hot

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

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References


