
<NOTE>***Pan paniscus*, Sometimes a Linguistic Issue.***Jacky Maniacky**Linguistics Service**Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium*

The question of how to name *Pan paniscus* is not new. It is indeed the subject of an article in PAN¹, which reminds us how inappropriate the term of "bonobo" is when compared to those used by people living in the areas where *Pan paniscus* is found. It also concerns the potential consequences such an incoherence can have on scientific research and on projects to protect the species. With this article, I intend to support the term of "elya" from a pure linguistic point of view.

Locutions such as the debated "dwarf/pygmy chimpanzee" or "gracile chimpanzee" are used to name *Pan paniscus* other than by a strict, scientific denomination. However, nowadays the most common term is undoubtedly "bonobo", suggested by Tratz & Heck²: they wrongly claimed it to be an "indigenous" name. This term is now said to originate from a misspelling of "Bolobo"³, a village on the bank of Congo river in the Bandundu region (DRC). The first specimens sent to Europe were reportedly found there. In Tiene (Fig. 1), the language spoken in Bolobo, "elya" is the word for chimpanzee⁴. This term, and related ones, are also found in Bolia⁵, Ntomba⁶ and other languages of the Mongo variety⁷.

In Africa in general, and DRC in particular, there is a large diversity of languages. However, *Pan paniscus* can only be found in a few places. Consequently, the expected number of languages which have a specific word for *Pan paniscus* is also limited. The available data is not always mentioned specifically with the meaning '*Pan paniscus*' but most frequently 'chimpanzee'. Nevertheless, it appears from a comparative analysis that there is an obvious correlation between the localisation of the languages using the "elya" form and the distribution map of *Pan*

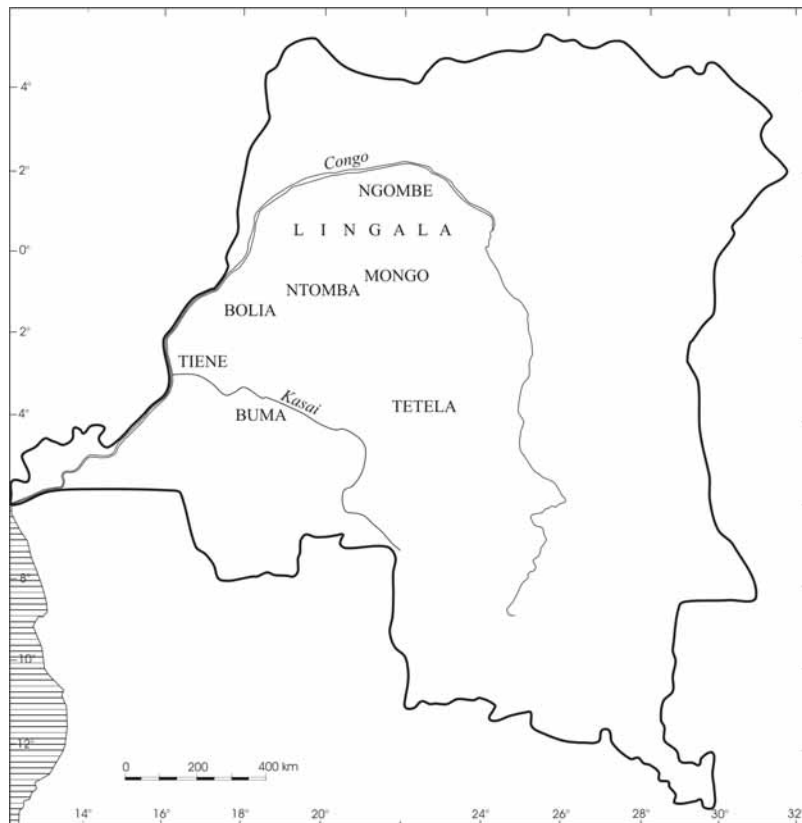


Fig. 1 Some ethnic groups of DRC

paniscus. The link between "elya"-type and "*Pan paniscus*" is also reported in a fieldwork note⁸. I would not forget that another term, "mokomboso"-type, is found to designate "chimpanzee" in that area: in Lingala⁹, Buma¹⁰, Ngombe¹¹ (Fig. 1), etc... In Mongo⁷ (Fig. 1), it is clearly indicated as a borrowed word. Finally, Tetela¹² (Fig. 1) has words for 'chimpanzee' completely different from the two main types mentioned above. All these prove that when necessary, there is a linguistic difference between *Pan troglodytes* and *Pan paniscus*. Such an observation relativizes the value of the word "discovery", which scientists

have abused when designating African realities.

Some remarks have to be made about the use of the word "elya" for *Pan paniscus*. First, the spelling: "y" is voluntarily used instead of "i" to avoid "diaeresis" as said in linguistics. In other words, there is a distinct pronunciation of vowels "i" and "a"; thus on two syllables, almost the way it would be if the word were "eliya". For what concerns number (singular / plural), the whole languages of the target area belong to the Bantu linguistic group. The plural is done by modifying the prefix (the beginning of a word) accordingly. Thus for "elya", the plural is "bilya". I would prefer the use of the singular form, although I think that a tendency will develop itself naturally in the field and in the

texts to show what will be adopted as a plural form in languages such as English. However, the same way latin words usually keep their plural form of origin in English or French, we can reasonably imagine the same for words of Bantu origin.

Finally, I would like to counter those who wish to establish a link between "elya" or "bilya" with words meaning "to eat" or "food" in the languages spoken where *Pan paniscus* can be encountered, and who find therefore the use of "elya" or "bilya" as unsuitable. For a non-experienced ear, the words involved might seem related to each other. Although this might have been the case, neither a zoologist,

Tab. 2 Words for 'chimpanzee' compared to words for 'eat' and 'food'

	'chimpanzee'	'eat'	'food'
Tiene	kedyā	olɛ	?
Bolia	elyā	lɛ	ilɛ yomba e ndēi
Ntomba	elya eya	le	yomba
Mongo	ejā	-lɛ -lā	tōma ɛ lɛwā

an ecologist, nor a linguist should judge it. Without entering a deep, linguistic explanation, it is easy to show the difference between words for *Pan paniscus* on one hand and those for "to eat" or "food" on the other (Tab. 2).

Although tones (marked by an accent on vowels and enough to dissociate words otherwise identical) are the same, one may notice the variation of consonants and vowels from a meaning to another. For a given language, differences at the beginning of the words are not taken into account, as they are structural differentiate nouns from verbs for instance.

I have brought here some linguistic arguments to demonstrate the convenience of the use of 'elya' to designate *Pan paniscus*. Of course, this will not disrupt pure zoological establishments. But taking such issue into account is crucially important for local research and actions, notably for what concerns sustainable development. Besides moral injury, neglecting or misusing local denominations of fauna (or flora and local knowledge in general) can only be detrimental to scientific research. It may lead to a lack of profound knowledge about the distribution of species, their feeding, habitat and behaviour.

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