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The Niger-Congo Reconstruction Project and the Perspectives of Niger-Congo Comparative Studies

The international project “Towards Proto-Niger-Congo: Comparison and Reconstruction”¹ was initiated in 2010 by a group of scholars from Western Europe, Russia, and the United States, who gathered together as the Organising Committee with an ambitious task to present the first ever detailed and reliable comparative analysis of the largest language phylum of the world. The objective of the project is to publish a two-volume collective paper containing both the reconstructions of proto-languages for mid-range families within Niger-Congo (NC), and an attempt at the summary reconstruction of the NC proto-language.

The publication will be preceded by the Niger-Congo International Congress, to be hosted by the Center for African Linguistics, Languages and Cultures (LLACAN) in Paris in September, 2012. For this event, teams of scholars working on various families will gather together to present preliminary results of the accomplished work, and to elaborate a common understanding of what Proto-NC might have actually looked like.

The first volume of the collective paper is expected to be published in 2013 and to contain the analysis of the present-day state of the art in the comparison of the mid-level language families within NC, with the attempt to conduct respective proto-language reconstructions. This endeavour has gathered researchers from all over the planet, to cover approximately fifteen chapters of the projected volume. Derek Nurse (University of Newfoundland) and Koen Bostoen (Africa Museum, Tervuren) will organise the Bantu team. Jean-Marie Hombert (CNRS) and Larry Hyman (University of California, Berkeley) are coordinating the Bantoid-Cross section, to include input from such specialists as Bruce Connell, Jeff Good, John Watters and others. The Kru reconstruction is spearheaded by Ly-

nell Zogbo (ex-Marchese; United Bible Societies), who has already performed outstanding comparative research in this field. Yves Moñino (CNRS) is in charge of the Ubangi-Gbaya chapter. For the Dogon chapter, Jeffrey Heath (University of Michigan) and Kirill Prokhorov (Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, St.-Petersburg) have been invited to summarise the latest extensive results of the descriptive analysis of this family. Bruce Connell (York University) is heading the research in the Ijoid field. The Mande team is coordinated by Valentin Vydrin (CNRS — INALCO, Paris/Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, St. Petersburg) and is to include such researchers as Tatiana Nikitina, Dmitry Idiatov and the author of the present announcement. Konstantin Pozdniakov and Guillaume Segerer (CNRS) are sharing the responsibility for the various branches of what is usually called Atlantic. The Kordofanian issue will be taken up by Gerrit Dimmendaal (University of Köln), Nicolas Quint (CNRS) and others. Finally, the NC isolates deserve a separate chapter, to be provided by a team that is also led by Jean-Marie Hombert.

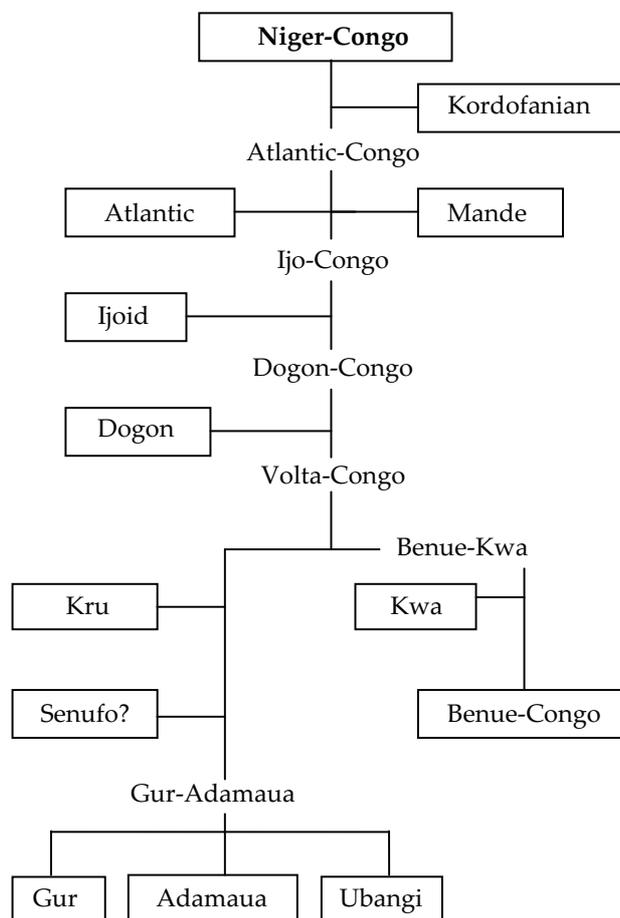
This first volume will be followed by the second one, with an analysis of Proto-NC proper; its publication is currently envisaged for no earlier than 2014.

It is, indeed, high time that such an effort be put forth. The projected publication is supposed to see the light precisely half a century after Joseph Greenberg's (1963) formal presentation of his hypothesis of a genetic relationship between ten language families of Sub-Saharan Africa (Atlantic, Mande, Gur, Kru, Adamaua, Ubangian, Dogon, Kwa, Benue-Congo, and Kordofanian) which he defined as NC (or Niger-Kordofanian). Ever since his work went into print, there has been no systematic attempt to either confirm or reject his conclusions. The author himself did not use the traditional comparative method as a tool for his pan-African linguistic theories (it was hardly possible at the time, when only a handful of Sub-Saharan

¹ The official Website for the project is located at <http://www.nigercongo.com>.

languages were even supplied with proper descriptions), but, instead, employed his well-known method of mass comparison that only allowed to draw a general sketch of the genetic classification. For nearly fifty years, Greenberg's ideas have been waiting for a re-examination by means of the strict comparative method.

Diagram 1. Niger-Congo languages (source: Segerer 2008)



Today, all of the instruments for such an analysis seem to be finally available. Within the last decades, the number of African languages discovered, studied and described has increased drastically. The level of scholarly interest for the particular families within NC varies greatly, but such phyla as Bantu, Bantoid, Kwa, Mande, and Dogon have seen a recent surge in publications, most of them being the result of extensive field work. The Mande family, for instance, does not have more than a dozen languages, out of about 70, that do not have at least a brief grammatical description. Unfortunately, the amount of reliable data on Kordofanian, Adamaua, some Benue-Congo (e.g., Kainji and Platoid) or Gur (particularly Senufo) languages remains rather scarce.

The quality of descriptive data has also improved. Fifty years ago, a great majority of papers examining

NC languages did not mark tones at all, which makes them barely usable for the purposes of studies in comparative morphophonology and morphology. Many grammatical descriptions were composed according to blueprints of classical European grammars, which led to misinterpretation of language facts for those African lects whose structure is sometimes as distant from that of European tongues as they themselves are from Europe. Nowadays, African linguistics worldwide can boast dozens of quality papers that provide detailed descriptions of phonology, tonology, and morphosyntax of languages south of the Sahara. These are not only limited to Bantu – by far the most popular subject for grammar descriptions in Africa – but also the rest of Benue-Congo (e.g., Kana (Ikoro 1996), Oko (Atoyebi 2010), etc.), Dogon (e.g., Nanga (Heath 2008)), Atlantic (e.g., Kisi (Childs 1995)) and other families.

Much of the gathered data have been studied from the typological point of view, and some of it are ready for further historical analysis. The results of the endeavour undertaken by Guillaume Segerer (2002–2010, online) to create a huge database on personal pronouns in NC and beyond are freely accessible on the Web, inspiring plenty of exciting comparative hypotheses. Research on the typology of African morphosyntax boosted by the pioneer work by Welmers (1973) has, since then, received additional important contributions from by Creissels (1991), Heine & Nurse (2000; 2008), Güldemann (2008) and others.

Comparative studies on “mid-range” families of NC have not, however, advanced to the same level as descriptive and typological scholarship. The farthest point was, without a doubt, reached by the Bantu school, which has demonstrated impressive results on both the reconstruction of Proto-Bantu and – to a slightly lesser extent – the internal classification of this largest subfamily within NC. While Guthrie's (1967–1971) classification is regarded more as a reference tool than a truly genetic grouping, some successful attempts on establishing the latter have also been made, most recently in (Nurse & Philippson 2003). Lexical, phonological and morphological reconstruction of Proto-Bantu has been a true success, despite the overwhelming amount of data to be taken into account.

For other “mid-range” families, such levels of success are still waiting to be achieved. Some progress is evident: comparative work done in Ubangian (Moñino 1985), Atlantic (Pozdniakov & Segerer 2004), Gur (Manessy 1975; Mieke 2004) and Mande (Kastenholz 1996; Выдрин 2006) has led to impressive results in the reconstruction of the respective proto-languages. In the Kru domain, it is the works by Lynell Zogbo (e.g., (Marchese 1979)) that are the most promising, and ma-

major steps forward in the reconstruction of Proto-Ijoid have also been done by Kay Williamson (ms.).

Group-level comparisons (e.g., Boyd (1974) for Adamaua, Shimizu (1971–1980) for Jukunoid, Capo (1991) for Gbe, etc.) also constitute important “intermediate” work. Nevertheless, we still lack almost any comparative research on such families and sub-families as Dogon, Kwa, some Benue-Congo, Kordofanian, and Adamaua.

Moving further up to Proto-NC *per se*, very little has been done so far. An attempt made by Hans Mukarovsky (1976–1977) to reconstruct what he called “Proto-Western Nigritic” can hardly be accepted as a contemporary approach. John Stewart’s effort (1976; 2002) produces a significantly more solid impression, even though he only used Bantu and Kwa data for his model of reconstructing Proto-NC. Kay Williamson (Williamson & Shimizu 1968; Williamson 1973) gathered extensive Benue-Congo lexical data for comparison, but, unfortunately, did not have enough time to turn it into an analysis that could probably have been the most successful individual effort in this field. Unfortunately, some recent attempts by Roger Blench to make far-reaching conclusions on NC (and even beyond) out of a few dozens of lexical roots (Blench, ms.) rather seem to be discrediting the idea of NC reconstruction than supporting it.

It is important to mention two collective volumes that effectively summarized the achievements of NC classification and description of the preceding decades, namely, (Sebeok 1971) and (Bendor-Samuel 1989). The latter publication was the last attempt to bring together most of the comparative linguists working on Sub-Saharan, and even today it still remains arguably the most cited book on NC ever since its publication. However, it only discusses issues of mid-range family reconstructions very briefly, and almost never touches on Proto-NC proper.

For over twenty years after that publication saw the light of day, no collective effort of such kind was made, and it is regrettable that the comparative study of African languages has lost much of its former stance. There are probably no more than a few dozens of scholars scattered across the planet that are now actively working on mid-range and long-range comparison of the NC languages. This lack of attention has occasionally generated thoughts that NC *cannot* be reconstructed in principle. Such skepticism is usually based on the following two arguments:

a) until we have duly reconstructed the protolanguages for *all* of Greenberg’s primary ten offshoots (and, possibly, most of the protolanguages for lower level groups as well), we cannot move on to Proto-NC — however, for at least

some of them the protolanguage does not seem to be reconstructible;

b) even if Proto-NC once existed, it is too remote from us chronologically to have a chance to be recovered.

Indeed, at least a few of Greenberg’s families are not, on any obvious level, connected with a well-shaped protolanguage. The Adamaua-Ubangian unity has been under serious question, and most specialists now agree they should be considered separately. The relationship between Benue-Congo and Kwa as branches of the NC dendrogram has been redefined several times, and their ancestral language should probably be reconstructed in common as Proto-Benue-Kwa. Within Benue-Congo itself, even more questions arise, because proposed chronological nodes such as West/East Benue-Congo, Central Nigerian, and Bantoid have not been properly proven. There is a serious problem with the Senufo languages and their status within (or beyond?) Gur, and a similar one with the Gbaya group *vs.* Ubangian. The term “Atlantic” seems to encompass at least three independent language families (Pozdniakov, p.c.), and this could also be the case with Kordofanian.

However, this does not, as some may suppose, automatically prevent the possibility of a protolanguage reconstruction for NC. It would certainly be of advantage if we had access to extensive grammars and dictionaries for all of the 1,500 languages of the NC macrofamily. Yet this is not a *conditio sine qua non* for the reconstruction of Proto-NC. The amount of language data at hand is much more demonstrative and in-depth than the one used two centuries ago to reconstruct Proto-Indo-European. Neither Schlegel or Bopp in the early 19th century, nor even the Neogrammarians half a century later possessed information about all the Indo-European languages, and it was not necessary for them to reconstruct Proto-Slavic, Proto-Iranian, or Proto-Italic in order to ultimately approach the protolanguage for the whole family. The first comparativists built a foundation based on their knowledge of four language groups within Indo-European, and their followers have contributed more data to it, one language group after another, that modified the reconstruction without completely reshaping it.

It is exactly this kind of attempt to construct a basic foundation for the NC reconstruction that is the aim of the project, mentioned at the top of this announcement.

The fact that at least some of the elements of Proto-NC can be reconstructed is much more evident today than it was at the time of Greenberg’s suggestions. This is evident both from the side of the basic lexicon, which provides quite a few reliable Proto-NC roots,

and of comparative morphosyntax. The best example of cognate morphology between families that are quite distant from each other (e.g. Bantu, Atlantic, and Kordofanian) is arguably the system of noun classes. The discovery of noun class relics in Mande has strengthened the idea of its affiliation within NC. The paradigm of personal pronouns seems to be one of the clearest proofs of genetic relationship, even though it has not, so far, been analysed in rigorous detail.

Going deeper than these first (and rather obvious) traces of kinship will by no means be an easy task. The NC macrofamily is chronologically deeper than Indo-European or Semitic, and possibly even deeper than the (generally more controversial) Nostratic. It is comparable in size with Austronesian, but far more diverse in both lexicon and language structure. Languages of West and Central Africa have been in contact and migration for thousands of years, with high degrees of convergence seriously complicating the task of differentiation between inherited data and borrowings. Finally, there is almost no historical background for the languages of Africa, with nothing like a Vedic tradition or a bunch of freshly discovered Pylos tablets to help trace diachronic language change.

What we have to deal with is a vast pile of word-lists, contemporary morphological evidence and typological surveys. Apart from the classical comparative method, any research dealing with such time depths should be armed by numerous auxiliary tools, such as diachronic typology and ways of integrating linguistic results with ethnological, anthropological, and genetic data. Taking into account the huge number of languages under discussion, it will be also important to apply a variety of statistical tests, including glottochronology; concerning the latter, the application of new, improved versions of M. Swadesh's original method actually looks quite promising (e.g., for Mande (Vydrin 2009)).

Whether all of this will be sufficient will become evident in the process; for now, it is necessary to initiate its first steps. It is, in any case, of tremendous importance for the entire field to present a serious summarization (and update) of the recent comparative work on various NC families, to produce, where possible, family reconstructions based on rigorous application of the comparative method, and then, combining data from both the reconstructions and the contemporary languages, to try to answer the most important questions: is there a Niger-Congo macrofamily? And if yes, what would its protolanguage look like?

We sincerely hope that the 50th anniversary of Greenberg's remarkable hypothesis will finally deliver these answers.

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