

Plural verbs in the languages of Central Nigeria

Workshop on pluractionality

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Plural verbs in Africa

- Plural verbs occur throughout most of Africa and have certainly been recorded in Niger-Congo, Afroasiatic and Nilo-Saharan language phyla
- Nonetheless, their distribution is very patchy which may be related to broadly to the incidence of verb morphology; where verbs have derivational morphology, plural verbs can occur.
- Branches of phyla which have lost morphology, such as West Benue-Congo, can only develop plural verbs through suppletion, which does occur, but is very rare
- This talk will cover languages where verbal plurals have been lexicalised; languages with productive extensions marking frequentative or iterative, such as Bantu are not considered
- As a consequence most attention is give to morphology but examples of syntax are found in the source papers

Plural verbs in Central Nigeria

- ❖ Central Nigeria is a sort of 'heartland' for systems of plural verbs; all languages have them and they are very different from one language to another
- ❖ This is in part because a number of language families with residual systems have come into intensive contact and influenced and reinforced each other's systems
Central Nigeria is a region where morphologically marked plural verbs are extremely common, although the linguistic literature yields few descriptions. Strikingly, plural verbs strategies cross boundaries of both language families and phyla. The uses of plural verbs can be categorised as follows;
 - 1. Describing an action repeated many times (iterative)
 - 2. Describing an action with multiple subjects (distributive)
 - 3. Describing an action with multiple objects (distributive)
 - 4. Describing an action conducted over a long time (durative) (sometimes merging with imperfective)
 - 5. Describing the intensity of an action

Any combination of these

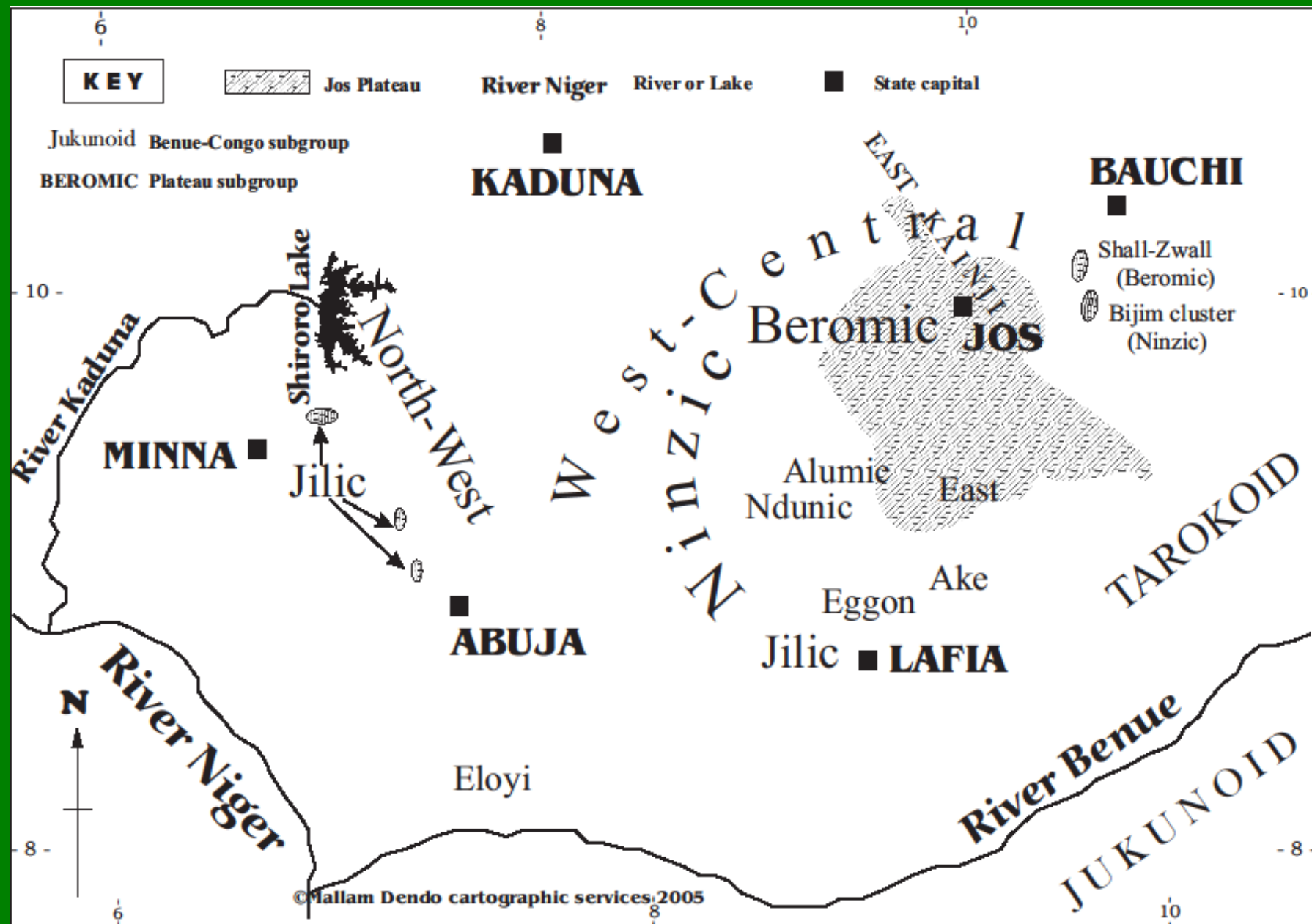
How do you subclassify types of plurality?

- The literature is full of different terms to describe these verbs and sophisticated distinctions between plural and pluractional etc.
- At least for many languages dealt with here, this is to make the impoverished descriptive literature carry more weight than it can bear
- Unless you actually test each verb individually with a range of informants *it is simply not possible to assert the range of application of individual verbs*

Languages of Central Nigeria

- The languages of Central Nigeria fall into two major phyla, Afroasiatic and Niger-Congo
- Afroasiatic is represented by West Chadic languages, of which the most well-known is Hausa, and the Benue-Congo languages, most characteristically Plateau and East Kainji
- Further east are the Adamawa languages which have also show verbal plurality and to the south, Nupoid, for which plurality is reported for Gbari but not elsewhere in the family
- We know that these families have undergone extensive interaction in the past and although they are likely to have inherited the concept of plurality from earlier stages of the phylum, there is no doubt that the synchronic forms are the result of direct and indirect borrowing

Languages of Central Nigeria



Materials presented here

- The materials presented here are extracted from a series of datasets of varying completeness on languages of Central Nigeria all of which are available for download from my website They present data samples from a range of languages, focusing of particular aspects of morphology
- A failure to realise the significance of plural verbs often means that verbal plurality is not recognised in grammatical descriptions and not clearly listed in dictionary-type materials
- Unlike nouns, verb pairings (or more) are not quickly available to informants. Therefore we cannot be sure that we have complete lists for any given language
- Suppletion is fairly common, and therefore whether a quite different root is the 'plural' of a singular can be disputed. This probably relates to semantic ramification common with some types of verbs such as 'cut' or 'pour'.

Threatened morphology

- Pluractional forms are threatened in many languages; i.e. younger informants do not know them or only know them passively
- The reasons are disputed; is it part of general trend towards simplification of morphology among increasingly urbanised youth?
- Or is it that 'you don't speak the language properly until you are xx years old'?
- Perversely, semantic shifts and suppletive plurals are probably conserved better than those with predictable meanings (clearly you can speak and be understood without using them)
- But it seems likely much of the data recorded here will not be recoverable in a couple of decades although the languages will still be spoken

Background to Mwaghavul

- ❖ Mwaghavul is a West Chadic language formerly known as Sura
- ❖ Its closest relatives are Ngas, Goemai etc.
- ❖ It is spoken in Plateau State, Nigeria. The major towns are Mangu and Panyam
- ❖ There are probably ca. 200,000 speakers
- ❖ Part of its system of verbal plurality is inherited from Afroasiatic; the 'internal –a- plural' which occurs in both nouns and verbs and is attested in various branches of AA
- ❖ The second element is plurality
- ❖ The third is borrowing (apparently of morphemes) from neighbouring Benue-Congo languages

Mwaghavul inherited internal plural formation

s.	pl.	Gloss	Chadic internal –a-
cùt	cwàt	to hit	*cu-à-t
dùgùn	dwaghan	to annihilate	*du-a-g-a-n
dùgùr	dwaghar	to block, debar, prevent	*du-a-g-a-r
dūgun	dūwagan	to have sexual intercourse	*dū-a-g-a-n
dut	dwat	to be diminutive, dwarf	*du-a-t
kìn	kan	to defecate, to urinate	*k-a-n
kìḃin	kìḃan	to mix things up, juggle	*kìḃ-a-n

Mwaghavul suppletive plural formation

s.	pl.	Gloss
bák	biyan	to pound condiments in a mortar
ḡàl	jwal	unite, fix, join
ḡwot	fwo	to release, drop
can	saa	to cut
ḡés	nan	be big in size
kóón	lìyòòn	to dismantle a house, to be taken apart, to be stripped out, to be lost (teeth)
teer	yem	to spend the night
tèn	vwáp	to press s.t. down with the foot

Mwaghavul borrowed plural formation

sg.	pl.	Gloss	Notes
ḡéé	ḡak	to dissect, cut open	BC formation *-Vk
cèt	cìcèt	to cook	BC high-vowel reduplication
dul	di-res	to pull	BC formation *-Vs
shaṅ sár	shwat sár	to slap s.o.	BC sg formation –Vṅ? (But what is *-Vt?) & neutralisation with sár
túṅ	twaas	to touch	BC sg formation –Vṅ? Combination BC –Vs & Chadic internal –a-: *tu-a + -as?
yàà	yak	to catch, hold	BC formation -Vk

εBoze background

- ❑ ***εBoze is an East Kainji language spoken some 10 km northwest of Jos. There are probably 10,000 speakers some of limited competence***
- ❑ ***East Kainji languages are some of the most poorly known languages in Nigeria. There are probably ca. 20, although they are all quite closely related (we think)***
- ❑ ***The West Kainji languages have complex plural verb morphology, but the present evidence is that East Kainji affixes are reduced***
- ❑ ***Moreover, there is less evidence for borrowing from neighbouring languages than the other groups discussed here.***
- ❑ ***This may be consequence of poorer coverage***

εBoze plural verb morphology I

- εBoze verbs plural extensions typically refer to;***
 - Plural subjects***
 - Plural objects***
 - Iteratives***
- Ca. 50% of εBoze verbs appear to have these extensions, although the existence of an extension appears to be unpredictable. They are not well-known and it often takes time to recall them during elicitation***

εBoze plural verb morphology II

- ***Broadly speaking, in transitive verbs the plural extension refers to multiple objects and with intransitives to plural subjects***
- ***The use of iteratives is not predictable***
- ***Singular/plural stems are always cognate, there are no suppletive plurals presently recorded, although these occur in Plateau languages***

εBoze plural verb morphology III

Examples of pairings I

sázá	sázáza	bark
ruma	rumsa	bite
wùri	wùrsí	blow
pínjù	pínjujù	boil
kwa	kwíjá	buy
tìsá	tìsə □ zà	call to
zəkè	zəsé	carry

εBoze plural verb morphology IV

Examples of pairings 2

mɛ́ɛ́	mɛ́fɛ́	catch
gbàré	gbàràsé	cut down
wənə	wíjù	die
rìzì	rízízì	fall over
gəsə̀	gəsùgəsu	dig
bìñja	bìñjija	fill
yɔ̀ó	yɔ̀òsɔ̀	give birth

εBoze plural verb morphology V

- ❖ All of these appear to derive from an original affix, either ZYV- or -SV where ZY is a palatal affricate and S is an unspecified fricative and the V is either –a/ə or copies the stem.***
- ❖ The suffix -SV can either follow the stem, or replace the final –CV syllable.***
- ❖ The most unpredictable element is the vowel of the affix unless the stem vowel is -a-***
- ❖ These pluralising elements occur in other areas of the lexicon, notably ideophones***

Background to Berom

- ❖ Eastern Berom is a Plateau language spoken North of Jos in central Nigeria
- ❖ There may be up to a million speakers, but Berom is quite dialectally diverse and not all the forms discussed here occur in other dialects
- ❖ Berom has a very large number of plural verbs with many different subtypes and categories
- ❖ The surface pairings that occur today are to be explained by the addition, erosion and re-affixing of fossil verbal extensions which have been semantically bleached so that they now only indicate plurality.
- ❖ No case exists synchronically of verbs where the productive application of more than one affix is permitted.

Surface processes in Berom plural verb morphology

Process	1	2	3	4	5	6
Suffix addition	-sV(m)	-(V)s	-ta	-ro	ŋ	
Affix insertion	-s(S)-					
C2 voicing change	g/k	k/g	p/b			
C1 alternation	y/t	b/m				
C2 alternation	r/s	r/b	t/y	t/r	g/s	r/t
C3 alternation	k/s			k/t		

❖ And;

❖ Suppletion

❖ Tone change

Berom-Izere verb cognates with comparable morphology

Berom			Izere		
sg.	pl.	Gloss	sg.	pl.	Gloss
bárák	básák	throw e.g. stones aimlessly	bárák	bárás or barak	throw
gaŋ	gaŋas	push	gaŋ	gáás	push
kaŋ	kaŋas	separate two fighters (people or animals)	kam	káás	separate out, differentiate, disperse

Berom three-way systems

Iwata	to pierce just once	a Iwata hε <i>he pierced him just once</i>
luga	to pierce	luga yèná bá <i>pierce it with a knife</i>
ló	to pierce many times	a ló ná bare <i>he pierced it with a spear</i>

rot	to bite	rot kyit ó <i>bite the yam and eat</i>
royo	to throb with pain	kwón ó hé royo <i>it is painful</i>
roros	to bite habitually, sting	beṅàs bé roros bèmat <i>soldier ants bite people</i>

Is this somehow linked to three-way systems of nominal classification?

❖ Although Niger-Congo nouns usually show two-way oppositions for number (alternations of CV affixes) there are persistent traces of three term systems as found widely in Nilo-Saharan

❖ Thus;

A beer beer beers

Ear of grain cereal head field of cereal plants

❖ The central term is the unmarked form

❖ This idea seems to be somehow similar to verbs, both in Berom and in Vagla (a Gur language)

Izere nominalisation of plural verbs

- ❖ A language such as Izere has a characteristic Niger-Congo system of nominal affix alternation; the root remains static and the V/CV prefix marks number. Prefix tone is driven by the root

Singular	Plural
a-	a-
i-	i-
ka-	na-
ku-	
ri-	

- ❖ Gerunds in Izere are made through the addition of the two singular prefixes ku- and ri- to the verb stem and are not subject to alternation

Izere nominalisation of plural verbs

- ❖ As a consequence when the gerund refers to plurality in some way, the stem changes and the prefix is invariant, as in the examples below

kusónòṅ	kususòk	sitting
kusor	kususòk	staying
kuhywér	kuhywísèk	escaping
kuwúrúk	kuwúrús	emergence
rikpa	rikpas	falling
riku	rikús	dying
rihywa	rihywas	satisfaction

Fyem: an incipient 'system' of plural verbs?

- ❖ The Fyem language appears to have an incipient system of plural verbs being regularised. There are morphologically marked distinctions between number of subjects and event numbers
- ❖ The unmarked form appears to a single subject performing a single action.
- ❖ Some verbs distinguish;
 - ❖ Plural subjects
 - ❖ Single subject and multiple actions
 - ❖ Plural subjects and plural actions
- ❖ Data testing remains woefully incomplete

Some Fyem paradigms

- ❖ The table below gives a examples of the paradigms of verbal plural morphology. It is no accident these refer to verbs early in the English alphabet...

Gloss	One person (once)	Many people (once)	One person many times	Many people many times
Come	ʃe	ʃyen	ʃes	ʃesen
Add to	daŋkà	nanìnkà	nasən	nasən
Ask a question	we	won	wonas	wonas
Ask/beg for something	kət	kətin	kətini	kətini

Concluding

- ❖ Central Nigeria is an area of great diversity and remains largely undescribed but which undoubtedly results from interaction of languages through marriage systems and extensive bilingualism
- ❖ There do appear to be any obvious semantic drivers motivating the choice of verbs to have/retain plural morphology
- ❖ Evidence for direct lexical borrowing is quite limited, despite the Berom-Izere example. In most cases it is more the idea of plurality and sometimes the morphemes
- ❖ Generalisations about what plural verbs 'do' are doomed to failure due to the multiplex and diverse systems
- ❖ This research also has practical consequences' for written materials. Do you represent conservative speech given the predominant audience for literacy are the younger generation?
- ❖ Much analysed and raw data can be downloaded from my website...

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