

## A REVISION OF THE INDEX OF NIGERIAN LANGUAGES

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The linguistic diversity of Africa has long presented a challenge to both scholars and governments. Nigeria alone has over 400 languages, approximately a quarter of the total spoken on the whole continent. All the major language phyla of Africa are represented, except the Khoisan group. The central and southern parts of the country are regions of fragmentation and intermingling of different families — a situation that is partly responsible for the extreme linguistic diversity and complexity.

It is sometimes said that many of the types of speech are not really languages but only dialects, and it is not always easy to make the distinction between the two. Linguists often use lexicostatistical testing to establish the boundary; that is, they compare a standard list of words (100 to several hundred) in the two types of speech. If less than 80% of the words in these lists are clearly either related or the same, the two are said to be different languages. Using this definition, there are indeed 400 languages in Nigeria, and perhaps as many as 2,000 dialects.

It is also often said that languages spoken by only a few speakers are "not important". This may be true socially and politically, but to linguists all languages are important no matter who speaks them. In fact, certain languages, such as Ogori, Mambila or Samba Daka are of particular interest, because they are difficult to classify, and may represent the surviving traces of an ancient group of languages that have become almost extinct. Minor languages may therefore play an important role in the reconstruction of the cultural prehistory of Nigeria.

A understanding of the classification, location and importance of individual languages is also relevant to the formulation of a national language policy. Before selecting languages for creation of orthographies and teaching materials, it is necessary to know their current situation: where they are spoken, how many speakers there are and what literacy materials are available. This will eventually determine what is taught in schools and broadcast on radio and television.

Although there had already been a number of detailed studies, no comprehensive listing of Nigerian languages was published until 1976 (Hansford *et al.*, 1976). The accompanying map was published separately

in *Savanna* with the same date and authors. The classification of the languages was largely based on a widely circulated mimeo document prepared by Professor Carl Hoffmann in 1973, classifying the languages of Nigeria. This was included as an appendix to the *Index of Nigerian Languages (INL)* published in 1976, which estimated the total as 394 and made available for the first time the names and locations of many languages with a small number of speakers. Possibly the most significant tribute to the usefulness of the *Index* is the speed with which it has become out of date, both in terms of languages enumerated and their classification.

As a result of this, a second edition of the *INL* is in preparation, to take into account research in the period 1976-86. It is being edited for the Nigerian Bible Translation Trust, Jos, by Dr David Crozier, and should appear in 1987. The purpose of this article is to summarise the development of the classification of Nigerian languages, and the work that has taken place over the last decade.

#### HISTORY OF THE CLASSIFICATION OF NIGERIAN LANGUAGES

The first attempts to place the languages of present-day Nigeria into related groups were in the early nineteenth century. Of these, the most important was probably that of Koelle (1854) whose extensive collections of wordlists from freed slaves in Sierra Leone enabled him to recognise the unity of the language groups called today Nupoid, Jukunoid and Edoid, among others. For a more complete review of this early material, see Hair (1967) and Williamson (forthcoming a, b).

Thomas, who was government anthropologist in Nigeria from 1907-1911, assembled a fairly comprehensive list for the old "Northern Provinces", published in Meek (1925). Talbot (1926) undertook a comparable exercise in Southern Nigeria. Both these classifications drew much of their data and ideas from Thomas' earlier fieldwork in Nigeria. Thomas (1914) published a summary of his field data on Southern Nigerian languages, and continued to collate wordlists from the whole country after his return to England. Much of his collection has remained in manuscript form in the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

Subsequent to the publication of his first book, Meek began to work more deeply on linguistic surveys, and included (Meek, 1931 a,b) many wordlists of otherwise unstudied languages, which have remained the only record until recently.

The work of Meek and Talbot resulted in the recognition of larger language families. Thomas, in common with most other scholars at that period, viewed Bantu as a wholly separate phylum; virtually all other languages were gathered into a single phylum — Sudanic. Some of the subdivisions of Sudanic have remained broadly valid, but the family contained too many languages to be more than marginally useful. The classification adopted in the 1920s is, broadly speaking, as follows:

Table 1. Nigerian languages in the classification of Thomas &amp; Talbot

Family Name	Examples
<b>SUDANIC</b>	
West Sudanic	Yoruba, Igala; Bini, Urhobo; Ewe, Igbo, Ijo; Bali, Bajumbo; Mande (Busa, Shanga); Nupe, Jenjo, Jukun Koro
Middle Zone	Volta: Bariba, Laru, Lopa Semi-Bantu: a large number of the Plateau languages including Afo, Reshe, Duka, Kamberi, Kuteb, Birom, Ganawuri, Rukuba Also included Seyawa and Zul
Adamawa ("pre Semi-Bantu")	Chamba Daka, Chamba Leko, Vere, Koma
Central Sudanic	Kanuri; a large number of Chadic and Adamawa languages including Tera, Sura, Longuda, Hausa, Mumuye, Cham, Yungur and Buduma
<b>SEMI-BANTU</b>	
Ekoi	Ekoid Bantu
Bafumbum-Bansaw	Bafut, Nso, Fumbum
Ibibio	Abuan, Ibibio, Efik
Orri	Yala, Ukele, Yache
Munshi	Tiv
<b>BANTU</b>	Bankal, Jarawa, Mbula
Thomas was unable to classify Zarma and Fulfulde.	

By modern standards this leaves much to be desired; the failure to distinguish Chadic languages from the other groups and the inclusion of Kanuri in Central Sudanic seem to be erroneous. However, in view of the fragmentary materials these authors were working with, their achievement was remarkable.

The most important classificatory work in the next few years was by Westermann (1927). He set up a language phylum called "Western Sudanic" which included the language families that compose modern Niger-Congo. His important studies of particular branches such as Nupe, Ewe, Yoruba and other groups of south-central Nigeria did much to establish the outlines of the internal groupings of modern Benue-Congo.

The next major advance was the work of Greenberg, who began publishing classificatory studies of African languages in the 1950s. This culminated in his book *The Languages of Africa* (1963), which can be said to have laid the foundations for the modern language-map of the continent. Greenberg's view of the classification of Nigerian languages is summarised in Table 2.

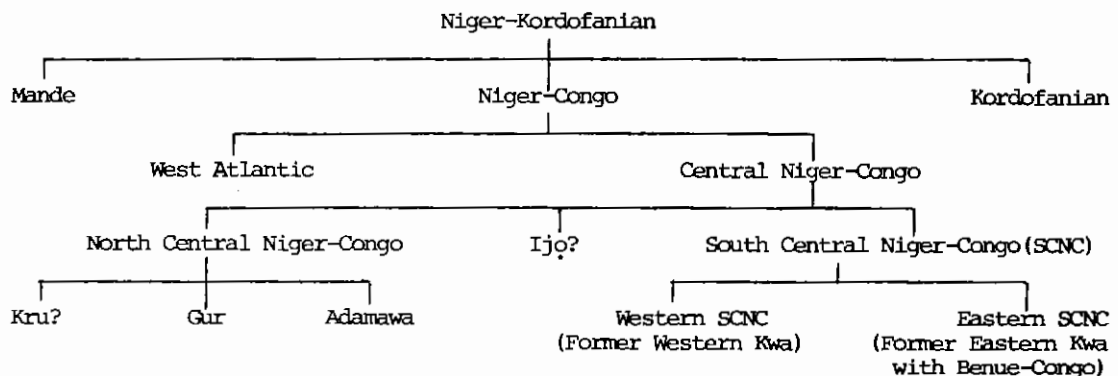
Table 2. Languages of Nigeria and adjacent regions in Greenberg's classification.

Superfamily or Phylum	Examples
<b>NIGER-CONGO</b>	
West Atlantic	Fulfulde
Mande	Busa
Gur	Bariba
Kwa	Yoruba, Nupe, Igbo, Idoma, Bini, Ijo. Also Kru, Akan and Ewe (outside Nigeria)
Benue-Congo	Kamberi, Katab, Birom, Jukun, Efik, Bokyi, Tiv, Mambila and all Bantu languages
Adamawa-Eastern	Chamba, Mumuye, Waja, Yungur, Longuda
<b>AFROASIATIC</b>	
Chad	Hausa, Angas, Sura, Bacama, Kilba
Semitic	Shuwa Arabic
<b>NILO-SAHARAN</b>	
Saharan	Kanuri
Songhai	Zarma

It was essentially this division of languages that was adopted for the first edition of the INL in 1976. Much of Greenberg's classificatory work has remained valid; in particular, his assignment of Chadic to an Afroasiatic superfamily and his delineation of Songhai and Kanuri as co-ordinate branches of Nilo-Saharan.

In Greenberg, the families of Niger-Congo were co-ordinate branches, i.e. they were considered to be primary branches of the proto-language. However, there has since been a major revision in this field, the first stimulus to which was probably the seminal article by Bennett & Sterk (1977). This undertook to reclassify the whole of Niger-Congo, and to provide an internal structure. Their results are summarised in Fig.1.

Fig.1. Niger-Congo in the classification of Bennett &amp; Sterk (1977)



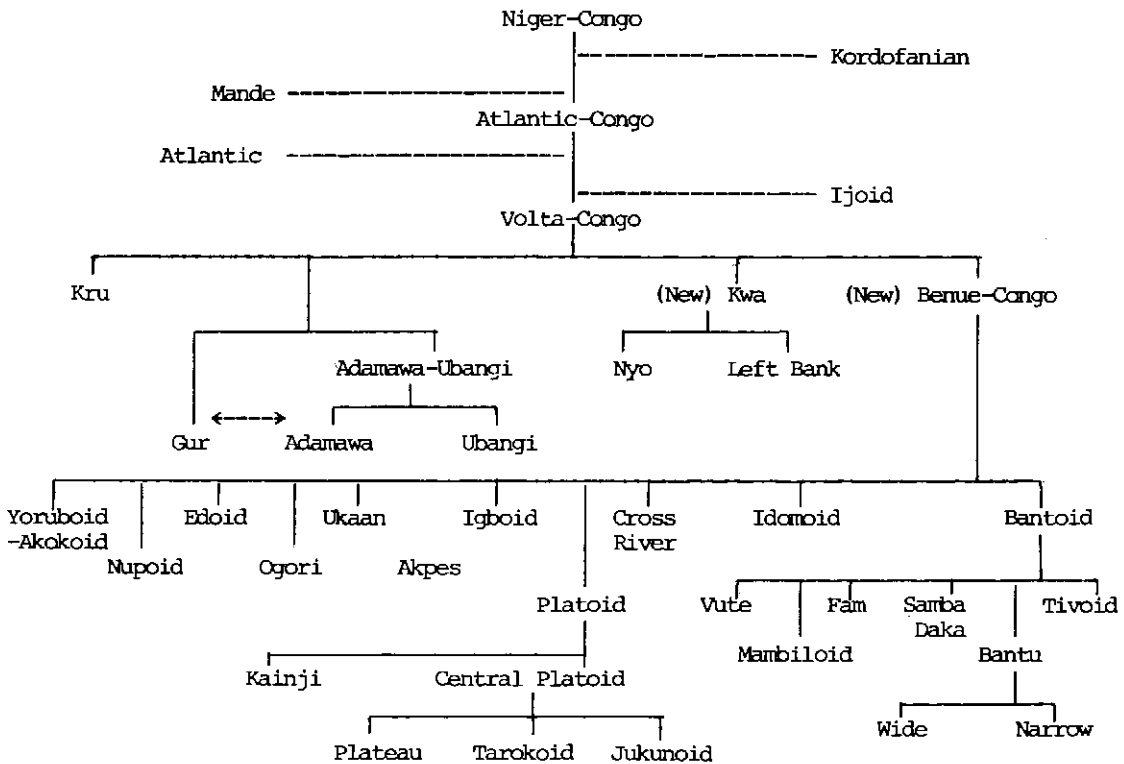
Bennett & Sterk expressed reservations about the place of Ijò and Kru; they considered Ijò might form a branch of South Central Niger-Congo, while Kru might be a co-ordinate branch of Central Niger-Congo.

The most significant developments of this model were:

- a) the recognition of a special relationship between Kru, Gur and Adamawa languages which have systems of noun-class suffixes;
- b) the treatment of Ijò as an isolated group;
- c) the breaking down of the frontier between the Old Kwa (which had included Yoruba, Nupe, Igbo) and the older Benue-Congo (with Kam-beri, Tiv, Efik and Bantu languages). This boundary was dramatically delineated in the first edition of the INL with red Kwa and blue Benue-Congo languages dividing Southern Nigeria between them.

Many of these elements have been adopted in the current classification of Niger-Congo. The justification for this is to be published in a new book (Bendor-Samuel, forthcoming) and will form the basis of a new classification of Niger-Congo in the revised INL. The classification to be used is given in Fig.2.

Fig.2. The present classification of Niger-Congo



The most striking feature of this new classification is the elaborate internal subdivision of the New Benue-Congo. This is illustrated in Map 1. The traditional sub-groups, such as Yoruba, Nupe and Igbo, have been retained, with the suffix "-oid" to indicate that they

represent a group of related languages. The Plateau languages have been re-assigned to new groups and the separateness of Kainji languages, such as Kamberi, Duka and Gure, is recognised.

Another important feature is the realisation that certain languages or dialect clusters, such as Ogori or Ukaan, form isolated groups. In the past, these have normally been assumed to form part of the neighbouring language group, but with improved linguistic data this has become untenable.

Another example is the case of Samba Daka, spoken south of Yola in Gongola State. This is a large language cluster that has traditionally been treated as part of the Adamawa family, following Greenberg. However, Bennett (1983) pointed out that this was based on proximity rather than solid lexical evidence and that Samba Daka would be better classified with Benue-Congo. More detailed comparisons suggest that it should be treated as a co-ordinate branch of Bantoid.

The classification of Bantoid languages, such as Tiv and Mambila, remains doubtful and as many versions exist as scholars who have examined this problem. The special status of Mambila, and languages such as Vute and Konja (spoken on the Nigeria-Cameroun border) has become apparent in recent years, and their role in the genesis of the Bantu languages remains to be determined.

#### SUMMARY OF CHANGES IN THE REVISED INDEX

The previous section has described the revisions of classification that have necessitated extensive redrawing of the boundaries of linguistic groups. However, the INL has been updated in a variety of ways which are indicated below. A major source of new information is the research conducted for the *Atlas linguistique du Cameroun* (Dieu & Renaud, 1983) which reported a number of languages spoken in border areas that have never been previously reported. Also, more detailed work on already known languages such as Mumuye (Shimizu, 1979) has shown that, far from being single languages, these are complex language clusters.

##### *a) The first recording of previously unknown languages:*

Although linguists have been working in Nigeria for many years, a number of languages have remained concealed, often because they have been mistakenly classified as dialects of a larger language. Those that have come to light in the past decade include:

Name	Location	Classification
Ogoi	Niger Delta	Cross River: Ogoni group
Fam	Southern Gongola State	Benue-Congo: Bantoid
Mom Jango	Central Gongola State	Adamawa: Vere-Duru group
Okorogbana	Cross River State	Cross River: Mberbe group
Dong	West-Central Gongola State	Benue-Congo: Tarokoid?
Kami	Niger State	Nupoid: Dibo group
Tiba	Central Gongola State	Unclassified
Kapya	Southern Gongola State	Jukunoid: Yukuben group
Bele	Bauchi State	Chadic: Bole-Tangale group
Daza	Bauchi State	Unclassified. Chadic?
Si	Plateau State	Benue-Congo: Kainji

*b) The (re-)classification of languages known to exist:*

Name	Former classification	New classification
Buru	Unknown	Tivoid
Koma	Unknown	Adamawa: Vere-Duru group
Defaka	Unknown	Ijoid
Tita	Unknown	Jukunoid: Wurbo group
Eloyi	Plateau	Idomoid
Samba Daka	Adamawa	Benue-Congo: Bantoid

*c) The recording for Nigeria of languages first described outside Nigeria:*

Name	Location	Also found in
Gbaya	Southern Gongola State	Central African Republic
Wimbum	Mambila Plateau	Cameroun
Nsq	Mambila Plateau	Cameroun
Sorko	Niger State	Mali
Aja	Lagos State	Benin Republic
Mabas	Northern Gongola State	Cameroun
Dzodinka	Southern Gongola State	Cameroun

*d) Languages which were never, or are no longer, spoken in Nigeria:*

Name	Former location	Present location
Kutin	Gongola State	Cameroun
Patapori	Gongola State	Cameroun
Kolbila	Erroneous listing	Cameroun
Nyamnyam	Erroneous listing	Cameroun

Many questions remain to be resolved. The most important is to confirm or remove the many languages that have been reported by name only. Schuh (1978) was able to show that certain Chadic languages referred to by Temple (1922) were still spoken in Bauchi State. Blench (1984) reported a number of unrecorded "Wurkum" communities, such as Kunshenu, Kwonci, Kwoode, Munga, Pitiko and Yam, whose languages are not yet investigated. The first edition of the INL included eight pages of queries; only a small proportion of these have now been resolved.

Much descriptive work remains to be done, and only the creation of soundly-based dictionaries and grammars can assist in solving the problems of this complex of languages. Although it seems likely that the broad outlines of the internal subdivision of Niger-Congo are now adequate, many more refinements will be added as each family is investigated in greater depth.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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