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Transitions in Izere nominal morphology and implications for the analysis of Plateau languages

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1. Analysing nominal classification in Benue-Congo languages

All Benue-Congo languages are assumed to have had nominal classification based on alternating affixes; indeed this system is usually considered to go back to proto-Niger-Congo (Williamson & Blench 2000). However, the two major branches of Benue-Congo, East and West, show very different amounts of evidence for this proposition (Blench 1989; Williamson 1989). West Benue-Congo now only exhibits traces of nominal classification in a few languages (Gade, Oloma, Ukaan). Although it is generally conceded that historical reconstruction can recover some elements of the now-vanished system, the morphology of these isolated West Benue-Congo languages show very few resemblances to one another. East Benue-Congo, on the other hand, includes the Bantu languages many of which have very rich systems and which have historically been the inspiration for much of the literature on noun-classes. A reconstruction exists of the EBC noun-class prefixes although the evidence for these is best described as 'slight' (De Wolf 1971; Miehe 1991). The other branches of East Benue-Congo are more patchy, with virtually vanished systems in Mambiloid and Dakoid, only fragments in Cross River and rather rich morphology in Plateau and Kainji languages (see e.g. Gerhardt 1974, 1998, 1989).

Plateau languages in particular, show a range of variation between languages with no functioning noun-classes at all and plurals reduced to a single affix, and those with very elaborate systems. However, a distinctive feature of Plateau is that affix alternation is usually only one strategy among several and that languages with singular/plural affixes may simultaneously have other types of plural formation. To understand these systems, both diachronically and synchronically, a large sample of nouns is required, since many patterns are quite rare. The 'Bantu model' has acted to obscure the multiplicity of processes at work in Plateau languages by foregrounding affix alternation instead placing it in the context of an overall system. To illustrate

this, the paper takes the example of Fobor Izere, spoken near Jos in Central Nigeria, for which a dictionary of some sixteen hundred nouns is available[1] and for which there are some pre-existing analyses, both published and unpublished.

The present contribution[2] is intended to both describe Izere nominal morphology and to discuss its implications for the analysis of Plateau languages in general. The paper first gives some background on Izere and then describes the phonology briefly. It then establishes categories for the plural formations of Izere nominals and speculates on the sources of plurals with irregular features. Following that it classifies and exemplifies all the noun-class pairings in Izere. §6. considers the historical sources of this diversity and tabulates cases of common stem-tone changes. The following two sections describe briefly the other categories of plural in Izere, and the conclusion argues for a rethinking of the way Plateau noun-classes are analysed.

2. The Izere language

The Izere people, are known as Jarawan Dutse by Hausa speakers, live predominantly in Jos North, Jos South and Nauzu Local Government Areas of Plateau State and in Tafawa-Balewa and Toro Local Government Areas of Bauchi State in Central Nigeria (Nyam 1988). The name Jarawa is also applied to speakers of Jarawan Bantu languages, scattered through Bauchi State, but there is no connection between the two groups. Other terms found in the literature are Afizere and Izarek (e.g. Gunn 1953). Population figures are controversial and highly politicised, but Izere certainly has more than 50,000 speakers. Izere is considered to have five dialects, Ibor (Fobarza), Isum, Iganang (Wagana), Ifudere (Afudere) and Ikyo (Afucho) but Shimizu (1975) suggested that Icen and Firan also formed part of the Izere group. The dialect considered here is Ibor, spoken at Fobor, some 20 km. north of Jos.

Academic descriptions of Izere have essentially emanated from Hamburg and been published in the journal *Afrika und Übersee*. They includes Lukas & Willms (1961), Wolff & Meyer-Bahlburg (1979) and Gerhardt (1984), these last two focussing almost exclusively on verbal morphology. However, the Izere Bible Translation Project has created a rich mine of material, all unpublished. Lexical data compiled by Peter Grainger (n.d., a) was entered into a database set up by Richard Gardner as an adjunct to the translation and was later expanded with data collected by Ada Inyam and Bitrus Kaze. Frantz (1996) prepared a grammar sketch of Izere which explored the noun-morphology. Data used in the present paper came from an exercise in tone-marking, rechecking meanings and adding fresh lexical data, carried out by Roger Blench with the assistance of Bitrus Kaze in Jos, March 2000.

3. Fobor Izere phonology

The most detailed Izere has 27 consonant phonemes, 7 vowel phonemes and 3 level tones. Izere consonants are as follows:

	bilabial	labio-dental	alveo-lar	alveo-palatal	palatal	velar	labial-velar	glottal
plosive	*p b*		*t d*		*c ɟ*	*k g*	*kp gb*	
nasal	*m*		*n*		*ɲ*	*ŋ*	*ŋm*	
trill			*[r]*					
fricative	*ɸ ᵛ*	*f v*	*s z*	*ʃ ʒ*				*h*
affricate			*ts*					
approximant					*y*		*w*	
lateral approximant			*l*					

One of these sounds is definitely controversial. Analysed by Grainger (n.d., b) as /ɥ/, a voiceless labio-palatal semi-consonant and symbolised in the orthography as '*wh*'. The sound appears to be a partly released voiceless bilabial fricative /ɸ/ with some lip-rounding, an analysis in line with cognates in other Plateau languages. Gerhardt (1984) symbolises this sound as *hÿ*.

Izere has seven phonemic vowels:

	front	central	back
close	*i*		*u*
close-mid	*e*		*o*
open-mid	*ɛ*		*ɔ*
open		*a*	

There are no nasalised vowels in Izere. Initial sequences of C + front vowels are optionally palatalised and C + back vowels optionally labialised. Only in the case of /ɲ/ which is a distinct phoneme, is there a contrast between /ɲ/ and /n/ + front vowels.

There are five tones in Izere, three level and two contour tones (LM + HL). Contour tones occur in loanwords, words of potentially onomatopoeic names such as those of birds and where a tonally dissimilar VV sequence is being shortened[3]. As such these synchronic occurrences are probably transitional and Izere can be regarded as having an underlying three-height system.

HIGH	acute accent above the syllable	*kú*	to die
MID	unmarked	*fa*	to count
LOW	grave accent over the syllable	*mì*	I
RISING	circumflex over the syllable	*àbùlɔ̂k*	block
FALLING	hachek over the syllable	*àgɔ̀rɛ̌k*	bird sp.
		àmɔ̌ngɔ̀	creeper sp.

4. The notion of pluralisation in Izere

Like many Plateau languages, Izere not only pluralises nouns, but has a rich spectrum of other types of plurals, including verbs, adjectives and even ideophones. The notion of pluralisation is a key to many verbs, as the plurals, standing for iteratives, continuous or pluractionals exhibit a wide variety of morphological variation, some of which is carried over to nouns through the process of nominalisation (Blench n.d.). Pluralisation may thus be carried in many parts of the sentence, and Izere often eliminates redundancy by reducing the nouns with morphologically marked plurals.

Exactly which nouns are pluralised in Izere is hard to predict. Of a sample of ca. 1580 nouns, some 697 (44%) appear to have plurals. Salience is a key factor; almost all nouns connected with animates have plurals. Neither crops nor trees have plurals, nor inanimate landscape features or artefacts, nor most abstract quantities. Musical instruments have plurals together with common household objects such as brooms and ladders. Where it might seem inconvenient for a nominal not to have a plural it usually turns out that the common verbs used with it do have marked plurals. The other reason so many nouns lack plurals is because they 'already sound plural'; in other words a mid or high tone on the prefix vowel suggests to speakers plurality. Again the distribution of these is somewhat whimsical; for example, small ants seen in great quantities, birds moving in flocks or plants with luxuriant growth may be seen as naturally plural and not requiring a singular form.

Nominal plurals in Izere are formed in four ways;

a. affix alternation

b. stem-tone alternation

c. nominalisations of verbs copying stem and tones of the verb plural

d. suppletion

Affix alternation and stem-tone alternation are frequently combined producing a very large number of plural formations. Of the 697 nouns with plurals, once nominalisations are excluded, some 25% also show unpredictable changes in stem-tone. These are probably best explained using historical data not included in the present

no obvious analysis that will predict these combinations synchronically. Apart from these, c and d remain distinct and apply to a relatively small number of words.

5. Affix alternation pairings in Izere

5.1 The range of affix pairings in Izere

Izere has a relatively restricted set of segmental noun-class prefixes;

singular	plural
a-	*a-*
i-	*i-*
ka-	*na-*
ku-	
ri-	

ka- and *ku-* were probably allomorphs of one another historically, since there is tendency for stem-vowels following *ka-* to be front or central and those following *ku-* to be back. However, exceptions now abound suggesting class demerger in this case. A small set of nouns have only *na-* prefixes and although many do not have evidently plural meanings, the lack of affix-pairings suggest they should be analysed as morphologically plural. Table 1 shows the frequencies of different segmental prefixes, ignoring tone.

Table 1. Frequencies of singular noun-prefixes

prefix	number	percentage
a-	616	39.0
i-	372	23.6
ka-	109	6.9
ku-	298	18.9
na-	45	2.9
ri-	140	8.9
total	1580	100.2

However, almost every affix can bear a variety of tones, making the range of potential combinations very large. Some of these occur in only one or two examples, which could reflect mistranscription on the part of the author or idiosyncratic pronunciation of a speaker. However, the rarer cases below were rechecked and indeed some were first identified by Frantz (1996) using different informants.

The following tables give examples of the possible pairings so far encountered.

a-/a-

The *a-/a-* pairing is the only one which seems to have any semantic unity. Nearly all cases recorded can be categorised either human, animal or tools or artefacts made by humans. Examples of these categories also occur outside *a-/a-* however.

a-/á-

spider	*anaraŋ*	*ánaraŋ*
man	*anér*	*ánér*
early morning	*abóp*	*ábop*

à-/á-

bull	*àmùŋ*	*ámùŋ*
drummer	*àbíkɔ*	*ábíkɔ*
jackal	*àbɔ*	*ábɔ*
pigeon	*àbɔ̀p*	*ábɔ̀p*
block	*àbùlɔ̀k*	*ábùlɔ̀k*
young man	*àcàm*	*ácám*
weaver bird	*àcɔ̀k*	*ácɔ̀k*
father	*àdá*	*áda*
agama lizard	*àdàŋ*	*ádàŋ*

à-/a-

dog	*àgàbu*	*agábú*
chief	*àgɔ̀m*	*agɔ́m*
baboon	*àgbóòm*	*agbóòm*
large fly	*àbìrítiŋ*	*abírítiŋ*
herbalist, doctor	*àbòk*	*abók*
lazy person	*àcìŋ*	*acíŋ*
brown, large snake	*àdamàru*	*adamàru*
shepherds' stick	*àgbàdiŋ*	*agbádiŋ*

i-/i-

i- prefixes in the singular are always paired with *i-* plural prefixes and always rise only one tone higher than the singular prefix.

i-/í-

bud	*imóm*	*ímóm*
cheek	*ishí*	*íshí*
bird sp.	*izɔ́ɔ́*	*ízɔ́ɔ́*

ì-/i-

bedbug	*ìbì*	*ibí*
locust	*ìcáder*	*icáder*
rat	*ìcì*	*icí*
elephant	*ìzòòm*	*izóóm*
hoe	*ìyúrú*	*iyúrú*
tick	*ìzháàsh*	*izháàsh*
nose	*ìzóbòk*	*izóbòk*

There is one exceptional case of *ì-/ku-* pairing:

grasscutter	*ìbèp*	*kubép*

kV-/na-

When a *kV-* prefix is paired with *na-*, *kV-* can only be mid or high.

ka-/na-

ka- prefixes only permit mid or high tones, but *na-* prefixes can bear any tone.

ká-/na-

High tone prefix *ká-* can be paired with any tone in the *na-* plural form.

bead	*kánèŋ*	*nánèŋ*
night	*kátúk*	*nátùk*
branch (of trail)	*kárɛɛ̀r*	*nárɛɛ̀r*
axe	*kátɛ̀m*	*natɛm*
lie	*kábóròk*	*nabóròk*
forehead	*kátí*	*nàtì*
inside	*káyɛ̀ɛ̀r*	*nàyɛ̀ɛ̀r*
salvation	*káshésh*	—

ka-/na-

Mid-tone *ka-* is always paired with low tone *nà-*.

chin	*kader*	*nàder*
chest	*kafók*	*nàfók*
twin	*kafɛ́ɛ̀s*	*nàfɛ́ɛ̀s*
face	*kanyísí*	*nànyìsi*
finger	*kabánbɔ̀k*	*nàbànbɔ̀k*
calabash	*kakéréŋ*	*nàkéréŋ*
unmarried girl	*kanámàŋ*	*nàmánàŋ*
morning	*kadìdìŋ*	*nàdídìŋ*

kú-/á-

kú- is always paired with *á-* and the stem is always stable;

lake	*kúdúŋ*	*ádúŋ*
lip	*kúbèrnu*	*ábèrnu*
forest	*kúcì*	*ácì*
footprint	*kúnɛ*	*ánɛ*

ku-/a-

ku- can be paired with a mid or high *a-* prefix.

raincoat	*kupú*	*ápú*
maggots	*kumúrkur*	*ámùrkur*
animals' afterbirth	*kuké*	*áké*
leaf	*kufúmúŋ*	*afúmúŋ*
rib	*kukáfam*	*akáfam*
spear	*kukɔ̀n*	*akɔ̀n*
grave	*kurɛk*	*àrɛk*

The alternation *ku-/à-* in 'grave' appears to be a unique case.

When *ku-* is paired with *i-*, the tone of the plural prefix is always low.

kú-/ì-

bone	*kúkup*	*ìkùp*
wind	*kúwún*	*ìwùn*

Only two examples recorded.

ku-/ì-

This pairing demonstrates a fragmentary pattern in the pairing of MH/LL in several examples:

sun/day	*kunom*	*ìnom*
body	*kurɔm*	*ìrɔm*
type, kind, sort	*kuri*	*ìrì*
wound; sore	*kufór*	*ìfòr*
rope	*kudún*	*ìdùn*
tree sp.	*kufén*	*ìfèn*
side	*kukím*	*ìkìm*

ku-/na-

This rare pairing only occurs with long stems, although there appears to be no semantic unity.

clothing	*kúréskùtè*	*naréskùtè*
space bed and wall	*kukúruŋmɛɛn*	*nàkúruŋmɛɛn*
fur, hair	*kukúyɔŋ*	*nàkúyɔŋ*

Three cases make generalisations speculative, but it seems that the plural prefix must always be a tone lower than the singular, contrary to most other alternations where tone-raising is the rule.

rí-/a-

High tone *rí-* prefixes can be paired with *a-* prefixes bearing all possible tones;

hat	*ríbòŋ*	*ábòŋ*
hair tuft	*rídùk*	*ádùk*
goitre	*rígbɛ̀k*	*ágbɛ̀k*
arrow	*rífér*	*afér*
stomach	*ríbú*	*àbu*

ri-/a-

Mid tone *ri-* prefixes can be paired with Mid and High *a-* prefixes;

egg	*ritsi*	*átsi*
farm	*rikɔ*	*ákɔ*
foundation	*ribor*	*ábor*
eye	*rinyísí*	*anyísí*
knee	*rikúùr*	*akúùr*
mountain	*rifán*	*afán*
name	*riyérɛ̀k*	*ayérɛ̀k*

rì-/á-

abandoned homestead, ruin	*rìbòr*	*ábòr*

A single case recorded.

ri-/I-

hole	*ribóŋ*	*ìbòŋ*
brain	*rifu*	*ifu*

Only two examples recorded.

ri-/nà-

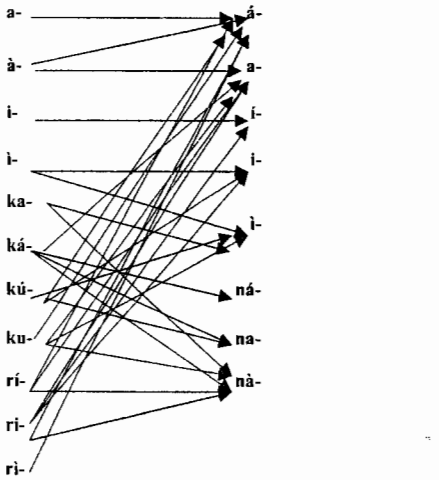
medicine	*ríkán*	*nàkàn*
African olive	*rifár*	*nàfàr*

Only two examples recorded.

5.2 The Izere affix system

Figure 1 shows noun-class pairings in Izere represented as a conventional affix net.

Figure 1. Noun-class pairings in Izere



It is evident from the thick clustering of arrows that Izere permits a large number of pairings and that individual prefixes support a wide variety of tones. Conventionally, tonally distinct prefixes are treated as of different historical origin and explained as reductions of the larger and more complex systems recorded for some languages in the region. This account may be true for some period in the distant prehistory of the language, depending on the complexity of the affix system we might wish to reconstruct for proto-Plateau. However, in recent diachrony, Occam's razor and the economy of explanation suggest that a simpler account is needed or at least something that concurs more directly with the synchronic situation.

As suggested previously, this diversity may be a consequence of parts of the Izere moving towards a system of tonal plurals. A word would then be perceived by speakers not as [affix + stem], but as an undivided unit, bearing a distinctive tone-pattern. The prefix is then incorporated into the stem for the purposes of making a tone-plural. If so, we should then expect to see emergent rules that generate word-tone alternations.

It may well be that the origin of a suprasegmental treatment of word-tone is indeed alternating prefixes with similar segments. In other words, if an *à-/a-* alternation arose through merger, the stem-tone of the plural could be raised by some sort of

according to a pattern. If this were generalised to other lexical items, a pattern of tone-plurals can begin to develop.

6. Analysing word-tone alternations in Izere

6.1 Is the system incipient or collapsing?

Izere demonstrates a huge diversity of pairings, both in terms of prefixes and in the stability or otherwise of stem-tones. Almost certainly this diversity is a consequence of the loss of other segmental prefixes whose tone remains to affect the stem. The data analysed here consists of those nouns where the stem-tone changes, since this constitutes the problematic set. Of the total dataset of nouns with plurals, some 25% have stem-tone changes. Another significant aspect of the dataset is that almost all the nouns are either humans, animals or plants suggesting that if it is correct that the stem-tone changes arose through eroded affixes then these would have marked classes with distinctive semantic content.

The hypothesis outlined above is that there are emergent patterns of tone-alternation, paralleling the erosion of affixes. One example of a low-level rule is given above, the pairing of MH and LL patterns on disyllabic words with *ku-/à-* prefixes. An alternative explanation, however, might be that the system is collapsing, i.e. tone-rules were more common in the past and that the system is being regularised to a prefix system so that the examples present synchronically are all that remain from a more thoroughgoing system. One reason discounting this explanation is the complete absence of systematic tone-opposition in any other Plateau language. Many languages have fragmentary patterns of stem-tone alternation, notably Berom, a language in intense contact with Izere, and always associated with a nominal affix system in the process of renewal. The high number of irregular cases in Izere also suggests a consequence of affix renewal begin regularised rather than a crumbling system of tone-alternation.

6.2 Examples of tone alternation patterns

The entire dataset was analysed for patterns of tone alternation and the tables in this section give examples where significant numbers of the same pattern occur. Many patterns occur in one or two nouns only; these will presumably be susceptible in principle to historical explanation without forming part of an emerging paradigm.

A-/A- pairings are by far the most common in terms both of exhibiting stem-tone change and fostering patterns of such change, which approximately reflects the overall frequency of nouns with *A-* prefixes (39%).

The most common pattern is LL→MH, occurring with both *à-* and *ì-* singular prefixes.

Pattern 1. LL→MH

àbòk	*abók*	herbalist, doctor	*ìbì*	*ibí*	bedbug
àcìk	*acík*	immediate younger sibling	*ìbìn*	*ibín*	drum (general)
àcìŋ	*acíŋ*	lazy person	*ìbòn*	*izhá*	goat
àfèk	*afék*	shepherd	*ìcà*	*icá*	grain
àgɔ̀m	*agɔ́m*	chief, king	*ìcek*	*icék*	chip off something
àkùr	*akúr*	witch/wizard	*ìcèn*	*icén*	small shaving knife with one sharp edge
àmàn	*amán*	parents-in-law	*ìcì*	*icí*	rat
ànàp	*anáp*	in-law	*ìfùn*	*ifún*	joint; knot; protective cover; lid
àŋàs	*aŋás*	daughter	*ìgàs*	*igás*	chisel
àtsèn	*atsén*	stranger, visitor	*ìkyɔ̀r*	*ikyɔ́r*	pointed stick for harvesting yams
àrùm	*arúm*	rich person	*ìmòs*	*imós*	elephant grass
àsàm	*asám*	slave	*ìŋmàk*	*iŋmák*	protective finger ring for archers
àtòm	*atóm*	messenger	*ìpɛ̀r*	*ipɛ́r*	part of a piece of cloth
àzhìk	*azhík*	trader	*ìrèm*	*irém*	tongue
àzɔ̀k	*azɔ́k*	noble			

Connell (p.c.) notes that all the lexical items that have cognates in Lower Cross languages, such as *àbòk* "doctor", *ìbìn* "drum" etc. have high-tone stems. This suggests that the high-tone on the stem is the conservative form and that the singular tone pattern was the consequence of a subsequent analoguos formation.

A comparable pattern occurs in trisyllables.

ìgbàràk	*igbárák*	rocky hillside
ìkpààr	*ikpáár*	shield
ìshààsh	*ishάásh*	soldier ant

Pattern 2 shows that LM→MH is clearly related:

Pattern 2. LM(M)→MH(H)

àfe	*afé*	owner, possessor
àgbok	*agbók*	wealthy, influential man
àfudaŋ	*afúdáŋ*	fellow; companion
àfufìrik	*afúfírík*	partner
àkumuŋ	*akúmúŋ*	widow
àtuk	*atúk*	beautiful person

Since Patterns 2 applies only to persons, the former presence of an affix denoting humans is likely. The prefix alternation *à-/a-* is dominant with +human nouns (e.g. Pattern 1) suggesting the merger of two classes. It may be that Pattern 1 and Pattern 2 should be united, in a rule stating that where the prefixes are *à-/a-*, tones in the plural stem are high regardless of those in the singular.

This pattern is precisely reversed with the *kV-* prefixes, where the tones go from MH→LL (rule 3). Compared with the overall frequency of these prefixes, the incidence of stem-tone change is low. In the case of *ka-/nà-*, either the tones follow Pattern 3 or they remain stable.

Pattern 3. MH→LL(L)

kafá	*nàfà*	belly
kafár	*nàfàr*	any small space
kafás	*nàfàs*	newness
kafóŋ	*nàfòŋ*	hollow object of any type
kakέ	*nàkè*	balsam tree
kasá	*nàsà*	house; compound
kakúm	*nàkùm*	silk-cotton tree
kanák	*nànàk*	crying, weeping

ku-/ì- pairings are always *ku-/ì-* and, with one doubtful exception, the plural is always L throughout.

kudún	*ìdùn*	rope
kufέn	*ìfèn*	tree sp.
kubɔ́k	*ìbɔ̀k*	hand, arm
kukím	*ikìm*	side
kukɔ́m	*ikɔ̀m*	dead body; corpse
kukpáár	*ikpààr*	herd
kuwénέŋ	*ìwènèŋ*	wedding
kuyɔ́rɔ́k	*ìyɔ̀rɔ̀k*	play, drama, game

It is notable that the semantic content of all *kV-* prefix nouns is much more wide-ranging, even in a small sample of nouns, suggesting either the merger of several

classes or more likely a class that never had semantic content (cf. Connell 1987 for Cross River).

ri- prefixes also follow Pattern 3 although these two cases are exceptions; the great majority of *ri-* prefixes are accompanied by stable stem-tones.

ribóŋ	*ìbòŋ*	hole, well
rifár	*nàfàr*	African olive

ri- prefixes seem to show no semantic unity. *kU-* and *ri-* are the prefixes used to create verbal nouns and this may explain the presence of abstracts as well as their semantic diversity.

Two other less common patterns occur only with *à-* prefixes. The first is tone-reversal, where the tone of the word is reversed in disyllables (Pattern 4):

Pattern 4. LH→HL

àkpé	*ákpè*	wicked person
àré	*árè*	indefinite male, fellow, chap
àvóŋ	*ávòŋ*	antelope
àzóí	*ázòì*	red-headed male agama lizard

Pattern 5 is LLM→MHH:

Pattern 5. LLM→MHH

àgàbu	*agábú*	dog
àgàfu	*agáfú*	dance of the elders
àkpàtɛk	*akpátɛ́k*	bachelor
àkùna	*akúná*	adulterous lover
àmùdɔn	*amúdɔ́n*	rival, enemy
ànìsak	*anísák*	maternal uncle
àrìdiŋ	*arídíŋ*	trading bag
àrìtek	*aríték*	bigger, senior, superior one
àrùron	*arúrón*	locust tree
àzàki	*azáki*	lion
àzhìzhi	*azhízhí*	worm

The Hausa loanword, *zàákì* 'lion', is interesting because it reproduces neither the vowel-length nor tone of the Hausa, suggesting long assimilation as well as recognition of the semantic content of this pattern of tone-alternation.

NA- plural prefixes

Some 99 nouns are recorded with *nA-* plurals and in the great majority of cases, the tone of *nA-* is lower than or equal to the stem-tone. Only 10% of *nA-* prefixes are

non-low and only four examples do not obey this rule. Of words with *nà-* prefixes, either the stem-tones are copied from the singular or they are converted to Low throughout.

The exceptions with *nA-* prefixes are as follows;

kánèŋ	*nánèŋ*	necklace bead
kárɛèr	*nárɛèr*	branch (of trail)
kákpòk	*nákpòk*	red-flowering silk-cotton tree
kabòn	*nabòn*	grandchild
kabáritis	*nabáritis*	small bed
kakaraŋ	*nakaraŋ*	point where two roofing sheets join
karɔ́rízhik	*narɔ́rízhik*	market
kashɔ́ɔ̀n	*nashɔ́ɔ̀n*	front, ahead
kasháam	*nasháam*	young castrated he-goat

Where the alternation is *ka-/na-* the stem tone always remains stable.

Apart from these patterns a large number of other single cases were identified, which seem to form no common group.

One generalisation applies across almost all prefix-stem combinations exhibiting tonal change; V prefixes generally raise stem-tones which may well be the effect of augments, no longer present in Benue-Congo but whose tone affects the tone of existing segments (Williamson 1993). Stem-tone raising is not confined to Izere, but is common in many other Plateau languages, notably Berom, Tarok and Eggon. This may either be an areal feature that has diffused or something that reflects an original feature of proto-Plateau. In contrast, CV-prefixes are either neutral to stem-tones or lower them. Evidence for CV lowering is more exiguous.

6.3 Prefix-tone change: leftwards assimilation or word-level tone rule?

Since the great majority of Izere noun-pairings occur with stable stems and fall into a limited number of patterns it seems likely that speakers are attempting to regularise its paradigms after numerous episodes of affix renewal. Some evidence for this comes from other dialects of Izere where otherwise similar stems have different prefixes (Regnier 1991). This explains the large number of single cases and the occasional single examples of prefix pairings. If this is so, then the prediction (or perhaps retrodiction) would be that in the recent past, Izere had both more prefixes and more tonal diversity. However, analogical processes suggested to speakers low-level tonal rules should be applied to small sets, possibly with some semantic

content. It is noticeable that the pairings based on *a-* appear to have restricted semantic content, where those relating to other prefixes seem to be much more varied.

If so, then a possible historical scenario can be outlined. Izere originally had a more complex system of nominal prefixes. As these began to disappear by erosion or merger, they left traces in stem-tones. Regularisation then created temporary rules with prefixes driving stem-tones. However, the emergence of singular/plural patterning suggesting to speakers new rules which reversed this process and stems began to drive the prefixes which were re-interpreted as part of the stem. Many Izere nominals lost all trace of singular plural opposition and the burden of plurality shifted elsewhere in the clause. Hence a series of low-level tonal rules began to emerge with some semantic content, enough to incorporate occasional loanwords such as 'lion' (see Pattern 5).

The use of tone-classes to categorise nominals, though commonly reported particularly in SE Asia, is apparently rare in African languages. Tone is analysed as a suprasegmental feature applying to the word, and all new lexical items adapted to these existing patterns rather than being analysed morphologically and thus assigned tones. Within Africa, in Ijoid languages all nominals can be assigned to one of five tone classes, although Ijoid retains no trace of affixes (Williamson 1965:28). Such systems are undoubtedly not basic to either Niger-Congo or Afroasiatic and presumably developed historically from different sources. For languages with affix alternation the process would involve re-analysis of the affix as part of the stem and assignation of tone on the basis of perceived suprasegmental patterns. However, the literature on how such a transition might occur seems to be very limited; if Izere undergoing this type of re-analysis its study should be of more general relevance as well as casting new light on the analysis of Plateau languages.

7. Nominalisations in Izere

Nominalisation is a productive process in Izere, and participle-like nouns can be created with the addition of the prefixes *ku-* and *ri-*. These prefixes are invariant between singulars and plurals. However, where the verb has an iterative or pluractional form, the nominal plural undergoes the corresponding change (Table 2).

Table 2. Sample stem changes in nominalised verbs reflecting plural verb stems

kubɛ́	*kubɛ́s*	coming
kunyím	*kunyís*	meeting
kuŋáràk	*kuŋáràs*	climbing, ascending
kurip	*kurísìm*	questioning, enquiry
kusónòŋ	*kususòk*	sitting
kusor	*kususòk*	staying
kuwhér	*kuwhísèk*	escaping
kuwúrúk	*kuwúrús*	emergence
rikpa	*rikpas*	falling
riku	*rikús*	dying
riwha	*riwhas*	satisfaction

8. Suppletives

Izere has a small number of suppletive plurals, all connected with persons except for the word for 'goat' (Table 3);

Table 3. Suppletive plurals in Izere

àbùkó	*anyákó*	old woman
afikap	*anerikap*	farmer
àkpátàŋ	*atáŋ*	thief
àkpàtɛ́k	*akpátɛ́k*	bachelor
àmìtèk	*aték*	man, husband
anerbiin	*anyíín*	woman
arɛ	*arɔ*	friend (Fobur)
ìbòn	*izhá*	goat
ìgon	*ìnòòn*	child

9. Conclusion

Like most Plateau languages, Izere can be seen as attempting to regularise its nominal morphology following a long episode of erosion. Izere speakers are commonly fluent in neighbouring languages and these provide an environment of contradictory influences. This analysis emphasises the importance of having a large sample of nouns in the analysis of Plateau languages, since many pluralisation strategies occur only rarely and the processes hypothesised here emerge from trends rather than absolute patterns. Previous analyses have been based on both small samples of nouns and on rather sketchy transcriptions of tone. Moreover, the influence of the Bantu system of nominal affixes has tended to make these systems seem more 'like' Bantu than is really the case. Given that Plateau and Kainji

languages are generally considered to represent earlier stages of Niger-Congo than Bantu, this is a topsy-turvy vista; there is no real evidence that an orderly system of alternating affixes should be reconstructed for Proto-Plateau or even Proto-East-Benue-Congo. The consequences of affix renewal are plainly seen in many Plateau languages and it is quite probable that the proto-languages were this uneasy equilibrium.

Tone-classes as suprasegmental features are rarely reported from Africa, but this may be because the systems rarely develop to full-term. The multiple influences on contiguous inland farming populations often act to divert such a radical transformation. It would be interesting to speculate that the relative isolation of Ijọ populations, fishing in the Niger Delta, which has allowed the languages to develop many other unique features within Niger-Congo also allowed the evolution of tone-classes.

Notes

[1] A multi-authored Izere dictionary is presently being circulated in Nigeria for comment. Copies are available from the present author as an email attachment.

[2] I would like to thank Richard Gardner and the Izere Bible Translation Team, especially Bitrus Kaze, for both access to existing unpublished literature and help in setting up the elicitation of the fresh material that forms the basis of this paper. I am also grateful to Bruce Connell & Kay Williamson who have both read it in some detail and made useful comments which were incorporated in the text.

[3] There is also evidence for VCV sequences reducing to VC and acquiring a contour tone.

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