

Plural verb morphology in Fobur Izere

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REFERENCE TO THE AUTHOR**

N.B. Some examples are missing in one section.

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SYMBOLS

B b or p
C any consonant
N any nasal
S s or ʃ
V any vowel

1. Introduction: plural verbs

The East Benue-Congo languages constitute a very large family of languages spoken in Nigeria and Cameroon but extending through to the remainder of Eastern and Southern Africa, when the Bantu languages are included. They retain in various stages of completeness many features now ascribed to Niger-Congo as a whole, such as noun-classes marked by affixes with concord and verbal extensions (Williamson & Blench 2000). A feature whose present distribution is somewhat unclear is the 'plural' or 'pluractional' verb. Verbs have at least two morphologically distinct forms, one of which can be derived from the other by more or less transparent processes, except in rare cases of suppletion. Plural verbs occur in all four language phyla of Africa (Brooks 1991) although the way they are described varies from author to author, often making data hard to compare. They are a common feature both of East Benue-Congo languages and neighbouring Chadic languages. For Chadic, Newman (1990) has describe the operation of both nominal and verbal plurality, while Carnochan (1970) presents a detailed study of Bacama. Although there are clearly interesting questions relating to the proximity of these two analogous systems and their inter-relations, this must be reserved for a broader study. Plural verbs also exist in Nilo-Saharan (see Keegan 1999 for Mbay examples) and in Gur (see Crouch 1998 and Blench in press) and in Degema (Kari 2000).

Within East Benue-Congo, plural verbs have been described principally from Plateau and Cross River families. The first description of plural verbs may be Bouquiaux' (1970) account of Berom. Izere has been the subject of at least two partial accounts (Wolff & Meyer-Bahlburg 1979; Gerhardt 1984), McKinney (1979) characterised Jju and more recently Aron (1996/7) has described plurality in verbs in Obolo, a Cross River language as well as providing some references to extra-African literature. Unpublished data on Tarok (Blench n.d.) and Berom (Blench n.d.) is also available. This relatively weak documentation derives from the fact that plural forms are often poorly known by younger or urban speakers. Whether, as Aron (1996/7) seems to think, this is evidence that they are disappearing or alternatively have always been gradually learnt as speakers grow older remains to be determined.

The exact definition of plural verbs is more than a little confusing, in part because they are almost always in now fragmentary systems and because the emphases of their use do indeed vary from language to language. In Izere and Fyem they have been described as 'continuous'; in Jju (Kaje) and Berom as 'plural' verbs and in some other texts as pluractional (Newman 1990). Aron (1996/7) contrasts 'distributive' (where the subject or object can be plural) with 'iterative' where an action is performed many times. Their uses can be described as follows;

1. Describing an action repeated many times
2. Describing an action with multiple subjects
3. Describing an action with multiple objects
4. Describing an action conducted over a long time
5. Any combination of these

The iterative use of the plural forms was led some researchers to associate these forms with an imperfect; if an action is undertaken many times it is presumably incomplete and thus contrastive with a completed form. However, in most languages where the verbal system has been described, aspect and plurality are distinct.

As yet unpublished data on two Plateau languages suggest that these systems can be very rich. Hasha (=Yashi) probably has the most elaborate system of verb plurals yet recorded for a Plateau language, made all the more surprising by the apparent borrowing of its strategies from nearby Chadic languages¹. Every

¹ R.M. Blench, electronic ms. *The Hasha language and its affinities*. Hasha speakers seem to have borrowed from Sha, a neighbouring Ron language.

verb has a plural form, predictable from the singular through the application of rules for forming nominal plurals. Fyem has a quadripartite system, generating distinct forms for plural subjects and repeated actions and combinations of both of them².

The source of plural verb formation strategies is as yet unclear. In most languages so far studied, the diversity of forms suggests that these are remnants of a morphologically and semantically complex system that has undergone semantic re-ordering. The most likely hypothesis is that the verbal plurals are former semantically diverse verbal extensions that have undergone erosion and restructuring. However, the comparative evidence is not yet available to provide concrete underpinning to such a speculation. The existence of verbal plurals, such as those in Hasha, that are formed by analogy with the nominal system shows that the morphological routes to these formations can be diverse.

This paper describes the morphology of plural verbs in Izere, a Plateau language spoken north of Jos in central Nigeria. Izere is of particular interest because it is fully documented and the forms of morphological plurals are extremely diverse. The paper then proposes some speculative historical changes to account for present-day surface forms. It also charts common lexical items with Berom, which may account for some of the skewed morphology, and hypothesises more general explanations of such irregularity. I make no apology for this third attempt to make sense of Izere verbal morphology; considerably more data is available and it has been possible to check its context of use quite thoroughly. The paper begins with a statement of Izere phonology, since no up-to-date phonology has so far been published despite the manuscript materials prepared by Grainger (n.d.)³.

The Izere people, known as Jarawan Dutse by Hausa speakers, live predominantly in Jos North, Jos South and Nauzu Local Government Areas of Plateau State. 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. Izere borders on the Berom language, also Plateau but from a distinct group, as well as Irigwe and Ce [Rukuba].

2. Izere phonology

There are 29 consonant phonemes, 7 vowel phonemes and 3 tones (tonemes) in Izere. Izere consonants are as follows:

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Alveolar	Alveopalatal	Palatal	Velar	Labial-velar	Glottal
Plosive	p b		t d		c j	k g	kp gb	ʔ
Nasal	m		n		ɲ	ŋ	ŋm	
Trill			[r]					
Fricative	ɸ	f v	s z	ʃ ʒ				h
Affricate			ts					
Approximant					y		w	
Lateral Approximant			l					

² R.M. Blench, electronic ms. *The Fyem language and its affinities*.

³ I should like to thank Richard Gardner and the staff of the Izere Bible Translation Project, Jos for making available all physical and electronic manuscripts associated with the project. The source of data for the present paper was the database of the Izere lexicon, which I received in 1999. Restructuring it as a dictionary, I then revised it with the assistance of Bitrus Nyama in March 2000, adding much new data and marking tones.

One of these sounds is controversial. Analysed by Granger 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 confirmed by 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	

/ɛ/ and /ɔ/ are symbolised e and o in the orthography. There are no nasalised vowels in Izere. Sequences of two similar vowels are not treated as long vowels. Initial sequences of C + front vowels are optionally palatalised and C + back vowels optionally labialised. /ɲ/ which is a distinct phoneme, and there is therefore a contrast between /ɲ/ and /n/ + front vowels.

There are five tones in Izere, three level and two contour tones. However, the contour tones occur in loanwords, words of potentially onomatopoeic names such as those of birds and occasionally where a tonally dissimilar VV sequence is becoming shortened. As such these synchronic occurrences are probably transitional and Izere can be regarded as having an underlying three-height system.

HIGH	marked with an acute accent above the syllable	kú	to die
MID	unmarked	fa	to count
LOW	marked with a grave accent over the syllable	mì	I
RISING	marked with a circumflex over the syllable	àbùlôk	brick
FALLING	marked with a hachek over the syllable	àgòrěk	bird sp.

3. Plural verbs in use in Izere

3.1 Determinants of plurality

Izere has a complex system of plurality, with nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs and ideophones all exhibiting morphologically marked plurals (Blench 2001). Many categories of plural have numerous empty sets. About half the nouns have plurals but plurals are more fragmentary in the other parts of speech. Blench (2001) speculates that plurals exists in a dynamic equilibrium; noun or verbs commonly used together only need mark plural on one of them. If both mark plurals then one or the other tends to disappear. It will be shown below that none of the Izere verbs with irregular morphology have plurals which suggests that there are phonological constraints on their presence.

3.2 How are plurals used?

The main use of plurals in Izere is following a plural subject. Thus;

MISSING

Also common is to indicate a repeated action or iterative;

MISSING

This type of use has caused the use of the term 'continuous' in some of the literature. Sometimes verbal plurals show meaning shifts associated with repeated action. Thus;

yîr	to catch, hold, injure in the leg	yísìṅ	to limp
kon	to rub	koron	to weed
rá	to touch	rás	to talk about s.o.
shím	to answer	shîsh	to echo
shínìṅ	to fill up	shîshìṅ	to change
shúmùṅ	to dip	shú	to soak

An extension of this meaning is to do something for a long time, although not necessarily repeatedly.

MISSING

However, plural verbs more rarely indicate actions that apply to many objects.

Finally it can be the adverbial complement that is plural.

MISSING

There is no morphological marking that determines which category of plurality is used with which verb. Some verbs can attract multiple plural categories, although not simultaneously.

3.3 Nominalisation and plural verbs

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 a plural form, the nominal plural undergoes the corresponding change (Table 1).

Table 1. Stem changes in nominalised verbs reflecting plural verb stems

sg.	pl.	Gloss
kubé	kubés	coming
kunyím	kunyís	meeting
kuṅáràk	kuṅáràs	climbing, ascending
kuríp	kurísìṁ	questioning, enquiry
kusónòṅ	kususòk	sitting
kusor	kususòk	staying
kuwhér	kuwhísèk	escaping
kuwúrúk	kuwúrús	emergence
rikpa	rikpas	falling
riku	rikús	dying
riwaha	riwhas	satisfaction

The tone changes in the plurals exactly mimic those of the verbs themselves.

3.4 Multiple plurals

As with Vagla, Obolo, Berom and Tarok, occasional verbs have two plurals, or at least there is a convergence between plurals of originally distinct forms. In the following case, two words of closely related meanings are distinct in the singular but identical in the plural.

sónòŋ to sit down **susòk** to sit down (many people)
sor to stay **susòk** to stay in different places

There is at least one case where verbs with two plurals seem to have converged;

rús to hit once **tsór** to hit repeatedly **tsósók** to hit repeatedly many times
sèès to shift s.t. **sérèk** to shift repeatedly **tsósók** to continue shifting or to shift s.t. for a long time

The existence of a template for multiple plurality in verbs is a key aspect of understanding the evolution of synchronic Izere plurals, because it suggests that an original plural can be re-analysed as a singular, necessitating the formation of a new plural. This can be represented schematically as follows;

CVCV CVCV+CV₁ CVCV+CV₂
CVCV+CV₁ CVCV+CV₂

The morphologising of this type of multiple plural can be seen in its most complete form in Fyem⁴, where different combinations of plurality are given distinct forms. Even in Fyem, this process is not always thoroughgoing with longer verbs tending to merge categories of plurality. The example below shows one case where a complete set of forms occur;

Gloss	One person	Many people	One person many times	Many people many times
to come	6e	6yen	6es	6esen

It is unlikely that the occasional examples that occur in other Plateau languages represent the erosion of a more complete system, as there seems to be little consistency between them. More likely they represent *ad hoc* fabrications generated by a strong underlying pressure for verbal plurality.

4. Classification of plural strategies in Izere verb forms

4.1 Frequency in plural verbs in Izere

By present count, Izere has some 508 verbs, if the variety of compounds with **tí** + complement are treated as single entries. The exact number depends on the extent to which homophones with radically different meanings are enumerated as distinct verbs. In the case of **tí**, I have counted seven verbs, but other analyses are possible. Some 154 verbs have distinctive plural forms, i.e. about 30%. This is higher than for most Plateau languages for which we have rich documentation, but about the same level as neighbouring Berom and almost identical to Obolo (Aron 1996/7:50).

⁴ R.M. Blench fieldnotes, Gindiri, 2000.

4.2 Verb morphology

The great majority of Izere verbs have the formula CVCVC, or its common transformation CVVC. The possible formulae are;

CV	
CVC	
CVVC	
CVCV	
CVCVC	
CVCCVC	very rare
CVCVCV	very rare
CVCVCVC	single case

Restrictions on –C in final position are strong, with only k, N, p, S as well as open syllables. The vowel quality in singular forms are always the same in all syllables. The following exceptions have been identified;

gòrdòk	to be twisty
hilyù	to be mentally defective
kaṅmék	to be busy dancing; to be proud of what you know
kutáám	to lose direction
nyíséj	to stop; stand

These cases probably have individual historical explanations; **gòrdòk**, for example, looks like an adverb or ideophone, where this canonical structure is quite common, **kutáám** might be a verb phrase whose components are no longer transparent.

Many nouns and verbs have two forms. Verbs of CVCVC structure either delete C₂ where it is a nasal or lose C₃ and assimilate the final vowel leftwards in the case of /r/ or /b/. Grainger (n.d., b) describes this as a dialect variation, but many speakers produce the two forms indifferently and it seems likely that it is an innovation that is slowly spreading. Thus;

CVnVṅ	→	CVVṅ	wónóṅ	wóón	to swallow
CVmVṅ	→	CVVṅ	tímíṅ	tíím	to tremble
CVrVṅ	→	CVVṅ	bírìṅ	bîṅ	to roll
CVrVk	→	CVVr	kpérèk	kpéèr	to pluck
CVbVk	→	CVVp	túbùk	tú(s)ùp	to stab

The case of **túbùk** is problematic, since the intervocalic /s/ heard in some speakers seems to contradict the route proposed above and suggest rather a metathesis of the final CVC syllable. Izere does not permit intervocalic /k/ in verbs and the /k/ therefore becomes a fricative.

The existence of a common verb formula CVVS suggests that this process formerly occurred here. Evidence for this comes from existing singular/ plural pairings. Thus;

	Expected	Actual sg.	Plural	
CVSVK → CVVS	**fòsòk	fók	fóòs	to hear, experience something
	**tesék	teék	teés	to reduce; decrease

CVVC verbs probably also undergo shortening to CVC while simplifying contour tones. These processes are invoked in the hypothetical stages of Izere singular/plural pairings outlined below.

A few extant verbs with the formula CVCV suggest this process is still incomplete in some words. Table 2 shows the CVCV verbs so far identified in Izere.

Table 2. Izere CVCV verbs

s.	pl.	Gloss
fěré	—	to degrade
kasa	—	to choose
kósó	kos	to spend the night
kúsè, túsè		to be present
kúsú	—	to wash
nàtò		to dance
wúsó	wúsòk	to spend the whole day

4.2 Morphological patterns

Izere plural verb morphology is best understood by assuming that their formation is work in progress. The C₂ deletion and leftwards assimilation of V₂ described above is gradually spreading through the language with forms for some words definitely accepted and others existing in both forms synchronically. Some verbs (perhaps more than identified here) have two distinct synchronic plural forms, either because speakers have identified different morphological processes at work and created different plurals accordingly or because they have borrowed a form from a neighbouring dialect or even a neighbouring language (e.g. Berom).

The morphology of Izere plurals is perplexingly various. The tables in §4.3 show some regular processes but many which seem to constitute single examples. Nonetheless, even in the single case examples in Table 20, the same processes are at work, but they are in different stages thereby producing results that cannot easily be tabulated.

Tone is generally conserved between singular and plural. In most examples, the tone is retained, but Table 18 gives some rather miscellaneous cases where the plural depends on tone-change. Since the tone changes form no regular pattern, the assumption is that the tones reflect now deleted extensional suffixes. Quality of stem-vowels are maintained in almost all cases. The exceptions are collected in Table 21 and they may point to the presence of a contrast of labialisation and palatalisation that no longer exists.

4.3 Classification of plural forms

All the verbs with distinctive plural forms were collected and arranged in sets according to morphological process (Table 3 to Table 17). However, a large number of verbs cannot be subsumed into these sets and are collected in Table 20.

Table 3 shows verbs which form plurals by the addition of -ŋ. The numerous homophonous verbs **tá** form a puzzle in Izere as no other verb has this range of meanings. The extent to which they are homophones that have converged as opposed to a single verb that has undergone semantic diversification can only be determined by more comparative work.

Table 3. Final -ŋ addition

kpe	kpeŋ	to rub
tá	táŋ	to overflow (of a river)
tá	táŋ	to sting, shoot, feed, dig
tá	táŋ	to sprout; germinate
tá	táŋ	to throw liquid at, to make a noise
tá	táŋ	to grasp
tá	táŋ	to fence
tá	táŋ	to raise

The likely source is an original CV suffix $-ŋV$ with the erosion of the final $-V$.

Table 4 shows verbs which form plurals by the addition of $-s$. As with Table 3, simple CV verbs have simple affixes.

Table 4. Final -s addition

bó	bós	to fetch
be	bes or tsees	to go
dí	dís	to see
kpà	kpàs	to fall
kú	kús	to die
nè	nes	to come from
nyé	nyés	to do, make
rá	rás	to touch
se	ses	to locate, find
té	tés	to dress up, fit, wear, give birth, become, spend (time), put
wha	whas	to be satisfied (with food)
yá	yás	to eat

The likely source is an original CV suffix $-sV$ with the erosion of the final $-V$.

Table 5 illustrates verbs where the final consonant alternates between $-k$ and $-s$. All the verbs have the same form $CVrVk$ where V_1 and V_2 are always the same. The tones are almost always HH or HL although plural tones are more varied.

Table 5. Final -k/-s alternation

bárák	bárás or barak	to throw
dorók	dóròs or dorok	to leave, migrate, rise, get up
fúruk	fúrùs or furuk	to jump
kárák	káràs	to open
kírik	kiris	to turn (body)
kórok	kóròs	to pour
ŋárák	ŋáràs	to climb, ride
sárák	sáràs	to tear
shérék	shésh	to tread on
tárák	táràs or tàràk	to spread out
túruk	túrùs	to punch, to land a blow
wórok	woros	to throw, fling
wúruk	wurus	to come out, go out
yírik	yíris	to destroy, demolish

The four alternative plurals exhibiting tone-change instead of consonant alternation illustrate one of the hypotheses of this paper, that where speakers are faced with competing models as the process of re-analysis gets under way, they do not always come up with the same answers. Table 18 shows verb plurals formed through tonal change; the majority of these have the formula CVrVK suggesting an emerging pattern.

	*I		*II		
s.	CVCV	→	CVCV_kV	→	CVCV_k
pl.	CVCV_kV	→	CVCV_sV	→	CVCV_s

Table 6 shows –Vk/VVs alternation and appears similar to Table 5. However, by the C₂ deletion rule, the plural forms were probably CVsVk until recently.

Table 6. Final –Vk/VVs alternation

fók	fòòs	to hear, experience something
nòk	nóó_s	to build
sák	sáà_s	to cause, keep, put, order, ask
tak	táá_s	to tell, to proclaim, to declare
tèék	téé_s	to reduce; decrease
tòk	tóò_s	to fetch

The proposed evolution of these forms is as follows;

s.	CV	→	CV_kV	→	CV_k
pl.	CVSV	→	CVVS	→	CVVS

Table 7 gives verbs where the plural is formed by deleting a –Vk suffix in the singular.

Table 7. Final -Vk deletion

basák	bás	seal, paste, mend
bísík	bís	to untie, unfold
fósók	fós	to peel (tree bark)
kpísík	kpís	to split a chunk off a larger part
mísík	mís	to sprinkle, pour away, waste, fling
súruk	sur	to shed leaves
tásák	tás	to pierce, winnow, sieve

The proposed evolution of these forms is as follows;

s.	CV	→	CVSV	→	CVSV_kV	→	CVSV_k
pl.	CVSV	→	CVS	→	CVS	→	CVS

Table 8 shows final –VVN/-Vs alternation although I have also include two cases of –NVN/-Vs alternation as this is likely to have been the original form before the loss of C₂ in the VVN forms.

Table 8. Final –VVN/-Vs alternation

béèn	bés	to bring
rèèr	rés	to lick

s.	CV	→	CVCV	→	CVVC
pl.	CVSV	→	CVS	→	CVS

A pairing that looks quite similar is the –NVN/-S alternation. However, it is simpler to explain this as an original CVCV root since in at least one case, **rom-**, there is widespread comparative evidence for /m/ in C₂ position.

fénéŋ	fés	to boil
rómóŋ	rós	to bite
wónóŋ	wəs	to swallow

The proposed evolution of these forms is as follows;

s.	CVCV	→	CVCVNV	→	CVCVN	→	CVCVN
pl.	CVCVSV	→	CVVSV	→	CVSV	→	CVS

Table 9 is one of the most complex alternations. The change from flat tone patterns (HH, MM) in the singular to contour patterns in the plural (HL, ML) argues for some type of metathesis in one of the number categories, not matched in the other.

/b/ and /p/ are in near complementary distribution in Izere with /b/ in initial and medial positions and /p/ in final positions. Only some rare cases of initial /p/ warrant setting it up as a separate phoneme but the devoicing of /b/ as it became word final would be quite normal.

Table 9. Final –bVk/sVp alternation

fábák	fàsàp	to fold or draw close to the body
fúbúk	fúsùp	to sip
kábák	kasàp	to share out
kóbók	kósòp	to loan, borrow
kúbúk	kusùp	to open
nabak	nàsàp	to lift up, stretch
túbúk	túsùp	to stab, pierce

s.	CV	→	CVBV	→	CVB	→	CVBKV	→	CVBVKV	→	CVBVK
pl.	CVBV	→	CVV	→	CVVSV	→	CVSV	→	CVSVBV	→	CVSVB

Table 10 shows stem-medial –rV- insertion and the change of final –C to a velar. The –rV was presumably a final extension in pre-Izere assimilated leftwards into the stem and producing the n/ŋ alternation in stem-final position.

Table 10. Stem-medial –rV- insertion

fan	fáràŋ	to rest
kòn	kòrɔŋ	to fight
kon	korɔŋ	to rub
man	máràŋ	to injure; hurt
men	mérèŋ	to lie down
rin	rírìŋ	to miss target
rón	róróŋ	to get tired
rún	rúrùŋ	to strap a child or something on the back

s. CV → CVNV → CVN → CVN → CVN → CVN
 pl. CVNV → CVV → CVVRV → CVRV → CVSVNV → CVRVN

Table 11 shows stem-medial –sV- insertion very similar to the –rV- insertion in Table 10 with comparable final -n/ŋ alternation, although in the single verb with final –m the bilabial is conserved.

Table 11. Stem-medial –sV- insertion

bún	búsúŋ	to break (wood, bones)
búr	búsúŋ	to break (wood, bones)
fám	fásàm	to close, cover
tén	téséŋ	to cut
whéèn	whésèŋ	to close
wón	wúsòŋ	to leave off; abandon

s. CV → CVNV → CVN → CVN → CVN → CVN
 pl. CVNV → CVV → CVVSV → CVSV → CVSVNV → CVSVN

Table 12 shows final -rV_k deletion. Izere, like many Plateau languages, shows a tendency towards unreleased final –k in stems and it is probable that this has occurred in the plurals, leaving the CV form. The original would thus have CV_k with a singulative extension r(V). The metathesis rule brings the suffix into the stem producing CV_rV_k.

Table 12. Final -rV_k deletion

cáràk	cá	to hit, pound, stamp
fírik	fí	to squeeze, milk, wring
kpérèk	kpe	to pluck (fruits)
nyórók	nyó	to press, hold down, test for ripeness

opposed evolution of these forms is as follows;

s. CV → CV_rV → CV_rV_kV → CV_rV_k
 pl. CV_rV → CVV → CV → CV

Table 13 shows a related process, final -r/-s alternation.

Table 13. Final -r/-s alternation

fér	fés	to kill
for	fós	to denude, to strip off bark

Table 14 shows final -r/-SVk alternation. The inclusion of two 'transitional' forms suggests a possible route for this alternation. Originally the form of the singular would have been CVrVk, reducing to CVVr and then CVr. These hypothetical stages are shown below;

Stage	sg.	pl.
Pre-Izere I	CVrVk	CVrVk-SV
Pre-Izere II	CVVr	CVk-SV
Pre-Izere III	CVr	CVSVk

The vowel change in the case of **tór** and **tsór** are discussed under Table 21.

Table 14. Final -r/-SVk alternation

cér	céshèk	to carry
nár	násàk	to surpass
ner	nésék	to bury, hide (object)
sor	susòk	to stay
tár	tásák	to shout; yell
tírik	tísik	to descend, to go down
tór	túsòk	to wait
tsér	tsésék	to look for, want, go after
tsór	tsúsók or tsósók	to beat
weér	wésèk	to proceed
whér	whísèk	to escape

Table 15, illustrating internal -n/-S- alternation, suggests that the singular may retain the original formula CVNVŋ and that an S suffix was assimilated leftwards.

Table 15. Internal -n/-S- alternation

cánàŋ	cáshàŋ	defeat in wrestling, argument
cénèŋ	céshèŋ	to put a load on the head
shíniŋ	shíshìŋ	to fill up
sònòŋ	sósòŋ	to insert
tónòŋ	tóròs or túsòŋ	to show

Table 16 shows final -N/-as alternation. The example of the alternate plural of **shán** suggest the evolution of this pairing. Thus;

Stage	sg.	pl.
Pre-Izere I	CVrVN	CVrVN-S
Pre-Izere II	CVVN	CVr-VS
Pre-Izere III	CVN	CVVS

Table 16. Final -N/-as alternation

bàràṅ	bàràs	to add
gaṅ	gáás	to finish
gaṅ	gáás	to push
gùṅ	gùùs	to collect, gather
kam	káás	to separate out, differentiate, disperse
nyim	nyíís	to meet
shán	sháshàṅ or sháàsh	to buy, receive
tóm	tóós	to send
tseṅ	tséés	to walk; go

Table 17 shows final -Vr/-sV_k alternation. The proposed route would be;

Stage	sg.	pl.
Pre-Izere I	CVrV _k	CVrV _k -S
Pre-Izere II	CVVr	CVVK-VS
Pre-Izere III	CVVr	CVSV _k

Table 17. Final -Vr/-sV_k alternation

raar	rásák	to be incapable
reer	résék	to cook
shéér	shéshèk	to hang up
tséér	tsék	to cut, slaughter

Table 18 lists all the cases where the only difference between singular and plural is tone-change. The changes are not all similar, but the words all fall into two patterns, CVrV_k and NVCVN

Table 18. Tone change

bàrák	bàrás or barak	to throw
berék	bèrek	to support
birík	bírik	to cancel, erase, postpone
burúk	burùk	to stir
dorók	dóròs or dorok	to leave, migrate, rise, get up
fúruk	fúrùs or furuk	to jump
nerèṅ	nérèṅ	to hide (oneself)
nyísèṅ	nyísèṅ	to stop; stand
shirik	shirik	to frighten, scare
tàrák	tàràs or tàràk	to spread out

Table 19 shows the few suppletive plurals in Izere;

Table 19. Suppletive plurals

be	bes or tsees	to go
sók	kók	to pick, take, take a wife
tí kpàk	nyé kpàk	to devour
rus	tsor	to groan in pain

rús to hit once **tsór** to hit repeatedly **tsósók** to hit repeatedly many times

Finally, Table 20 shows the unique singular/plural pairings. Hypothetical historical routes can be proposed for all of them along the same lines as those preceding the tables above, but each one will be slightly *ad hoc*.

Table 20. Unique singular/plural pairings

bòmòṅ	bòsòṅ	to learn, test, try out, teach
fébék	fésèm	blow
fíníṅ	fírìs or fírìk	to sun-dry
fúnúṅ	fúrùk	to grow new leaves (of plant)
fúnúṅ	fúrùk	to tether
gor	gósók	to pass
kóròk	kók	to pull, lead (animals)
kósó	kòs	to spend the night
káp	káás	to farm
rép	réés	to sell
kúnúṅ	kur	embrace, wrap, fold together
nò	nóós	to enter
nók	nyísék	to give
ṅaar	ṅa	to uproot
nyósóṅ	nyos	to pour away, waste
rímíṅ	rísìp	to kick
shímíṅ	shíshìp	to wake, rise up
ríp	rísìm	to ask
rúsòm	róós	to tie, bind, repair
séès or serek	sísèk	to move; shift
shòòr	shòṅ	to pinch
shésh	shíshék	to save s.o.
shoròb	shúshòp	to jump over; skip
shúmùṅ	shú	to dip
sónòṅ	susòk	to sit down
téméṅ	tém	to cut, to chop down
tép	tésèp	to blow (flute/whistle); crow (cock)
tómòṅ	túsòm	to push
tséém	tséméṅ	to sift
tsíbík	tsìp	to twist, dislocate, steer, drive car
tún	túrúṅ	to remove
vaṅ	varaṅ	to rub on pomade excessively
wók	wóròk	to deceive
whír	whí	to remove from, pull out
wúsó	wúsòk	to spend the whole of daytime
yír	yísìṅ	to catch, hold, injure in the leg
zímíṅ	zim	to fling; swing, wag

Table 21 lists the plural verbs that show stem-vowel alternation.

Table 21. Plural verbs showing stem-vowel alternation

sg.	pl.	Gloss
rúsòm	róós	to tie, bind, repair
shésh	shíshék	to save s.o.
shoròb	shúshòp	to jump over; skip
sónòṅ	susòk	to sit down
sor	susòk	to stay
tómòṅ	túsòm	to push
tónòṅ	tóròs or túsòṅ	to show
tór	túsòk	to wait
tsór	tsúsók or tsósók	to beat
whér	whísèk	to escape
wón	wúsòṅ	to leave off; abandon

It is evident that these alternations are predominantly o/u, with a single case of u/o and two examples of i/e. These look as if they reflect \pm labial and \pm palatal initials. Nominal and verbal plurals can be made in many Plateau languages by alternations between the presence and absence of palatalisation and labialisation of initial consonants (see Gerhardt 1983 for examples; Berom, Aten and Cara also exhibit this phenomenon, which is generally considered to have arisen through prefix incorporation. Thus in Aten the synchronic alternations are traced back to prior stages with conventional V-prefixes.;

sg.	pl.	Gloss	Hypothetical prior stage
hwáí	háí	bush, grass	**ú-háí / háí
lùl	ilyúl	nose	**lùl / i-lúl
nú	nunú	sore	**i-nú / u-nú

In Izere it is likely that the opposition was C/Cw and C/Cy in pre-Izere. Thus;

sg.	pl.	Gloss	Hypothetical prior stage
sor	susòk	to stay	**sor /swosòk
tór	túsòk	to wait	**tór /twósòk
shésh	shíshék	to save s.o.	**sés / shéshék
whér	whísèk	to escape	** whér / whyésèk

It is interesting to note that in Obolo, which forms at least some iteratives by initial syllable reduplication, the same options are available. Thus;

Singular	Distributive	Iterative	Gloss
nèṅê	nèéṅ	ninééṅ	repair
fóók	fǒn	fǔfón	borrow

5. Making sense of diversity

5.1 Historical origin

Any account of the historical sources of plural verb morphology must of necessity be highly speculative. But two elements seem to be in play here, verbal extensions and nominal plurals. Verbal extensions are best known from Bantu, although they are clearly a feature of Niger-Congo as a whole (Voeltz 1977). They

usually consist of V or commonly CV affixes, commonly suffixed after a verb, sometimes in complex and difficult to predict sequences.

Most Plateau languages only now have fossilised or very fragmentary extensions. In Tarok, for example, three likely and two less likely extensions have been traced⁵. These systems are richer in Kainji languages; tHun, for example has an elaborate list of verbal extensions resembling Bantu (Bendor-Samuel, Skitch & Cressman 1973). Moreover, in tHun (op. cit. 91) there are two verbal suffixes indicating plurality of action – r and –m. Speculating, the verbal extension suffixes of pre-Izere may have become generalised as a system of plural suffixes. Bequeathed to Izere, these have undergone a series of morphophonological changes within the cluster generating the present diversity.

5.2 Possible original affixes

If the lines of evolution proposed under Table 3 to Table 17 are correct then a series of suffixes, probably verbal extensions, were once attached to Izere verb stems. Table 22 suggest what these might have been and which tables suggest their existence.

Table 22. Proposed affixes and tables where they occur

Affix	Examples
-N	Table 3, Table 8, Table 15, Table 16
-S	Table 4, Table 5, Table 6, Table 8, Table 14, Table 11, Table 15, Table 16
-kV	Table 7, Table 6, Table 12, Table 14
-p/bV	Table 9,
-rV	Table 10, Table 12, Table 14

Nearly all the alternations given in Table 20 can also be analysed in terms of these same proposed affixes. If the scenario of multiple affix pile-up proposed to explain the synchronic situation is accepted, then all these individual items can explained by the same general processes.

5.3 Constraint analysis

Verb morphology in Obolo is surprisingly similar to Izere, with almost all singular forms permitting only one vowel quality and leftwards assimilation of V₂ a common process. Obolo places similar restrictions on word-final consonants, permitting B, N, k, l, t.

5.4 Interaction with Berom

Plateau languages have a long history of interaction, and are subject to intense borrowing processes, both lexical and morphological. Most of the languages with which Izere has presumably interacted are poorly documented and thus it is not yet feasible to analyse the effects of this interaction. However, in the case of Berom, a dictionary exists⁶, which documents the plural forms in some detail. Table 23 sets out all the cognates where the plural morphology is matched between the two languages.

⁵ R.M. Blench, electronic ms. *Tarok verb morphology*.

⁶ R.M. Blench, B. Dusu, H.Kuhn & Y. Pwol electronic ms. *Berom dictionary*.

Table 23. Berom-Izere verb cognates with comparable morphology

Berom			Izere		
sg.	pl.	Gloss	sg.	pl.	Gloss
bárák	básák	to throw e.g. stones aimlessly	bárák	bárás <i>or</i> barak	to throw
gāŋ	gaŋas	to push	gaŋ	gáás	to push
kāŋ	kāŋās	to separate two fighters (people or animals)	kam	káás	to separate out, differentiate, disperse
lōk	lōgōs	to build	nōk	nóós	to build
lèrē	lèsē	to hide, to bury	ner	nésék	to bury, hide (object)
nārā	nasa	to stretch out, to extend	nār	násàk	to surpass
sè	sesem	to get, find	sè	ses	to locate, find
tò	tòs	to give birth	té	tés	to dress up, fit, wear, give birth, become, spend (time), put
tè	tèsè	to put	té	tés	to dress up, fit, wear, give birth, become, spend (time), put
vó	vós	to catch, fetch, harvest	bó	bós	to fetch
wók	wogos	to hear, feel	fók	fóòs	to hear, experience something

The interest of these cognate forms is that Berom and Izere fall into very different subgroups of Plateau and such similarities do not arise from analogous morphological process. The direction of borrowing is hard to determine although more detailed analysis of Berom may establish which of these fall into regular patterns within Berom and are thus likely to come from Berom. However, it is clear that with such intensive borrowing in all areas of the lexicon, skewed morphology is likely to be regular, independently of language-internal processes.

6. Conclusion

The paper illustrates the highly irregular surface morphology of verbal plurals in Izere, and suggests that most of the observed pairings can be explained by relatively few processes, if it is accepted that these processes take place at different rates and produce different results because of speakers' competing analyses of individual lexical items. A further source of skewing is intense bilingualism with neighbouring languages. In the case of Berom, where documentation is good, cognate forms show that borrowing, probably in both directions usually includes the plural form rather than just the root. As a result this creates interference in regularisation processes, increasing the level of surface complexity. It is likely that if similar documentation were available for other neighbouring languages such as Irigwe, more details of this process could be observed.

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