

THE UKAAN LANGUAGE: BANTU IN SOUTH-WESTERN NIGERIA?

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1. Introduction

The Ukaan languages, are spoken around Auga and Kakumo, directly south of Kabba near the Niger-Benue Confluence in Nigeria (Map 1). Ukaan has until recently been known only from a wordlist given in Jungraithmayr (1973). However, two unpublished papers give substantially more lexicon and some morphological information (Abiodun, 1989 and Ohiri-Aniche 1999). This paper¹ presents some of this lexical data together with an analysis of the possible sources and external links of the lexicon.

These documents reveal that there are at least three distinct languages spoken in the Ukaan towns. Auga, Ikaan and Ishe have widely different lexemes for many items of basic vocabulary. Although the standard of transcriptions vary in the sources, there is some evidence of regular correspondences in cognate items.

2. Phonology and Noun-class pairings

The only phonological description of Ukan is from Abiodun's (1989) account of the Ikaan dialect. Ukaan has a nine-vowel system of what may be described as a 'classic' Benue-Congo type with paired + and -ATR vowels, lacking only an additional central vowel.

Table 1. Vowels of Ukaan (Ishe dialect)

Front	Central	Back
i		u
ĩ		ũ
e		o
(ɛ) ɛ		(ɔ) ɔ
	a	

Source: Abiodun (1989)

Ukaan is notable for its highly structured noun-class system. This has some elements in common with the more fragmentary systems of neighbouring Edoid languages such as Oloma (Schubert & Elugbe 1976). In particular, the use of concord prefixes on higher numerals is a rather distinctive feature not generally found in EBC languages.

All nouns take a V- prefix. All non-central vowels can be used as noun-prefixes. The ±ATR vowels always correspond the same plural prefix. There are only two plural noun prefixes, a- or i-/ĩ-. This is very similar to the situation that obtains in some Edoid and Central Delta languages. The correspondences are as follows;

No	sg.	pl.
1.	i-/ĩ-	a-
2.	u-/ũ-	a-
3.	e-/ɛ-	i-/ĩ-
4.	o-/ɔ-	i-/ĩ-
5.	o-/ɔ-	a-

The numbers are simply for convenience and are not intended to suggest correspondences with Bantu.

¹I would like to thank Kay Williamson (†) for making available some of the data quoted in this paper and for valuable comments on an early draft. I have noted my debt to Chinyere Ohiri-Aniche in the text. Ludwig Gerhardt and Klaus Schubert helped me to go over the data and suggested new cognates subsequent to presentation in Hamburg.

Examples;

No.	sg.	pl.	gloss
1.	ì-sum	à-súm	head
	ì-jọ	à-jọ	yam
2.	ù-wọ	à-wọ	hand
	ù-fá	à-fá	leaf
3a	è-wur	i-wur	hair
3b	ẹwí	ì-wí	goat
4a	ò-rùm	ì-rùm	tail
4b	ò-jén	à-jén	woman
	ò-kọ	ì-kọ	door
	ò-kàf	à-kàf	guest

The a- plurals in class 4 apply only to a small set of human nouns. There are some loose semantic associations with noun classes, as shown below;

- 1a there are most of the body parts and other inanimate objects such as ‘fire’ and ‘hill’.
- 1b vegetable foods such as yam and melon are dominant along with miscellanea such as ‘year’ and ‘knee’.
- 2a liquids and miscellanea (farm, thorn, hand, iron)
- 2b food, tobacco
- 3a animals, insects, miscellanea
- 3b predominantly fauna
- 4a,b underlyingly a human class, although with miscellanea

At least in some cases it is clear that the semantic unity of classes is diluted by the analysis of loanwords as having V- prefixes. For example, Yoruba *okù* ‘rope’ was borrowed into the ‘human’ class on the basis of its o-initial.

The concord system is relatively simple as the vowel and tone of the noun-prefix is copied precisely in front of numerals and adjectives, which always follow the noun.

3. Comparative Ukaan wordlist

A comparative wordlist is presented here with comments on cognates, lookalikes and loans occurring in other languages. Following the wordlist is a provisional hypothesis concerning the prehistory of Ukaan.

Numerals and adjectives take class prefixes and these are therefore shown with a preceding dash.

Key to Abbreviations of data sources

Abbreviation	Reference	Lect	Comment
A	Abiodun (1989)	Ikaan	
I	Ibrahim (n.d.)	Auga	Tones doubtful. No plurals
J	Jungraithmayr (1973)	Ishe	
O	Ohiri-Aniche (1999)	Ikakumɔ	

Gloss	Form	S	Comments/Parallels
Person	ɔ́ní /à-	O	Extremely widespread. Reconstructed by Westermann to PMC
Male (n.)	ò-yòh'wírɪh /à-	O	Compound inc. next
Man	ò-wérɪh	A	cf. surprisingly, Ijọ owěi
Woman	ò-yén à-	O	Lower Cross
Child	ò-ǰú /à-	O	
Mother	è-níó /i-	A	Extremely widespread. Reconstructed by Westermann to PMC
In-law	è-rhó /ɪ-	A	
Friend	ò-hím	A	
Guest	ò-kàǰ	A	
King	ò-yìkàǰ	A	
Thief	ò-cééǰ	A	
Doctor	ò-níté /à-	A	
Head	ìcú	O	Identical with Akpes, but related roots also found in Edoid, e.g. Ukue ú- kòmi . However, this looks like a weakening of the more widespread # <i>itu</i> root.
Ear	ì-ǰúm /à-	A	
	ú-rhó'g /á-	O	cf. some SW Edoid languages e.g. Urhobo ò-rhó
	u-sùk /a-	J	resembles Akpes forms e.g. Ikaram asuk . These are presumably weakenings of the widespread Niger-Congo root -to, attested in Akokoid as u-to . Williamson (p.c.) proposes #- tɔki for the PMC form.
Eye	ì-ǰi /à-	A	Apart from the final vowel, forms similar to this are found in all the languages of the area. cf. Akokoid-Oge iju , Yoruboid Oba ojù , Ahan éje
Nose	ò-kó'ò /à-	O	This is so unlike other languages of the region that it is tempting to connect it with common roots for 'throat, neck'.
	ɔ-kókò'n /a-	J	This obviously resembles the previous form, but a k/r correspondence is unusual to say the least. The first kɔ may be an assimilated prefix. perhaps kí-kò'n
Mouth	ò-ɲmó /à-	O	Resembles Akpes forms rather generally, e.g. Akunnu onu
Tooth	óyí /á-	O	Westermann reconstructed -ni as tooth for PMC but the presence of a palatal may be diagnostic of Benue-Congo. There are similar forms to the Ukaan throughout Plateau but also in Idomoid.
Tongue	è-mú /i-	O	This might be the widespread Benue-Congo root #lem with the loss of the initial lateral. e-lemu to ɛɛmu to ɛmu
Leg	è-yúm /i-	J	Unlike neighbouring languages
	ú-kǎí /à-	O	There is some sort of EBC root with k-, much compounded. This form most closely resembles Upper Cross, e.g. Ikom kè-ká'í . See also Reshe
Thigh	ù-wè /à-	J	
	ì-hó /à-	O	
	urɛr	?	
Knee	uses	?	
	ìhúrù /à-	O	Presumably weakened from widespread kurɔŋ forms. Comment on weakening k-h
Sole	ì-ǰé	A	
Hand	ù-wó /à-	O	Common Benue-Congo root with /b/ in C ₁ slot but comparable weakened forms found in Akokoid and Yoruboid
Fingernail	ì-ǰǰ /à-	O	
Belly	ì-mí /à-	O	Exceptional within the area though BCCW cites Edoid Atte eremi . More convincing, however, are Kainji-Basa ame and Cross River Ukele e-me . In many cases it seems as if an initial prefix has become part of the stem. cf. Jaku ím . Note also Igboïd ímé (N.B. a Benue-Congo root?)
Stomach	awusu	?	

Gloss	Form	S	Comments/Parallels
Neck	ð-hó /i- é-lòk /i-	O J	Cf. Akpes ðhó and Yoruba Metathesis of common #koro root?
Breast	í-ŋmâ /à- ima	O ?	Perhaps resembles some Akpes e.g. Esuku imgbin (see next) Resembles many neighbouring languages, e.g. Ahan emũ and Yoruboid omũ
Navel	ò-kpódù /i-	O	cf. Arigidi ekpò but also forms in Nupoid such as Nupe koro .
Chest	ekwaji	O	
Buttocks	akpak	?	
Penis	ècès	?	
Vagina	efor	?	Resembles Akokoid. e.g. Arigidi ehó
Hair	é-wúrù /i- è-wùrh	O A	Apparently an Ukaan innovation but perh. cf. Akokoid ‘head’
Beard	ewu	?	cf. Hair
Heart	èrùrùk	O	cf. Akokoid Oyin okuruge although this is exceptional within Akokoid
Liver	ì-fín /à-	A	
Skin	èh ^w é!rhé è-hwé /i- ewul	O J ?	
Flesh	è-nóm /i-	J	cf. widespread nam- roots for meat,
Body	isin	?	cf. Arigidi <i>iji</i>
Bone	ò-γwó /i-	A	cf. forms in neighbouring Edoid languages.
Saliva	àdòrú asó	O ?	
Urine	uyeni	?	
Faeces	àyǐ	?	
Blood	òdǎà ù-nyó uyen	O J ?	=next
Meat	èná	O	Old Niger-Congo root
Fish	é-ǰíǰí /i- eses	O A	This is usually thought to be a Bantoid-Cross innovation. <i>efi</i> and similar forms in Upper Cross.
	è-nómémó /i- è-náhu	J I	‘animal of water’
Bird	è-kâ /i-	O	These forms are best explained by assuming that the meanings ‘bird’ and ‘guinea-fowl’ have become reversed. This then corresponds to Bantoid-Cross #- <i>kanga</i> while the word for guinea-fowl is simply the old root for ‘bird’ something like #-non-
Chicken	è-ékàn è-kòkò /i-	A O	Similar forms in Edoid, but related forms are widespread across the West African savanna (Williamson, forthcoming)
Guinea-fowl	è-nóŋr	A	See under bird.
Vulture	è-wúl	J	? a weakened form of widespread <i>gulu</i> forms
Dog	è-ŋwú /i- è-hú	O A	
Cow	è-nā	A	Niger-Congo root cf. ‘meat’ see BCCW
Goat	è-wí /i-	A	Similar forms throughout North-Central Edoid (Elugbe, 1986:138) but this weakening of the more widespread root with /b/ in C ₁ can happen independently.
He-goat	è-fín /i-	A	
Sheep	è-rhágú	A	Seems to resemble Hausa <i>raago</i> ‘ram’ but perhaps via another language.

Gloss	Form	S	Comments/Parallels
Pig	è-kùrù /i-	A	This is a widespread Central African base form e.g. Kordofanian Orig <i>kàdirú</i> Bantu CB #-gùdú wild pig Semitic Sudan Arabic <i>kadruuk</i> See Blench (1994) for further discussion
Antelope sp.	è-wì	A	
Monkey	è-wán	A	?weakening of kan?
Squirrel	è-tùò /i-	A	
Bat	è-fabwè	A	? cf. Ika <i>úsú</i>
Rat	è-hú	A	
Rat-large	è-fú	A	cf. Nupe <i>etsú</i> 'rat'
Snake	ùfùrháà	O	
Frog	è-dúú	A	
Tortoise	è-rè	A	
Crab	è-fág	A	cf. kak?
Housefly	écó /i-	O	Reconstructed by RMB for PBC (#-ciN. House-fly) but usually with a final nasal
Bee	ò-rhó	A	
Cockroach	è-dà /i-	A	
Ant	è-fáfù /i-	A	
Ant-large	è-kískís /i-	A	
Louse	ù-nyá /à-	J	
Food	ù-jág /à-	A	An old PBC root
Fat	àyóró	O	
Oil	ubil	?	cf. Edoid <i>obì</i> . Discussed by Kay in World Archaeological Congress book under palm-oil
Salt	uka	?	
	ohuín	?	
Soup	ò-wóg	A	
	osom	?	cf. Akpes <i>osom</i>
Palm-wine	liné	?	
	òhíán	?	
Yam	ì-jó /à-	A	Old PBC root
Oil-palm	ò-jìd	A	There is a common root (e.g. Edoid) languages in this region with /d/ in the C ₁ slot. Possible metathesis? Check Kay's Muk. paper.
Sorghum	è-rhìn	A	
Melon	ì-ràwà	A	
Pepper	è-rhèr /i-	A	
Calabash	ò-kpó	A	
Tobacco	ù-támà	A	Recent loanword
Rope	ò-kó /à-	O	cf. Yoruba and Gbe languages. Almost certainly a loanword.
Pot	è-kèrè /i-	A	
Grindstone	ù-kóg /à-	A	
Matchet	ù-góró	A	
Axe	ù-dúgò	A	? cf. Edoid Uhami <i>édo</i> (although this is exceptional within Edoid)
Broom	ò-fígná /i-	A	cf. Nupe <i>èfígi</i>
Ladle	ù-kpákà	A	
Mat	ò-fén	A	cf. Nupe <i>efégi</i> (mat for doorway)
Door	ò-kó	A	cf. Nupe <i>yèkó</i>
Fire	iyá	O	
Smoke	èrhìd	O	
	è-sil	J	

Gloss	Form	S	Comments/Parallels
Ashes	ihūhú	O	? Weakened from Yoruba èrúrú ?
Water	òmó	O	cf. Cross River Bekwara ù-mó. Also Edoid
Rain	è-wù	J	
Cloud	è-wúl	J	
Tree	ò-hú /i- ɔ-kyéc /i-	O J	?Weakened koni root?
Seed	ihwê	O	
Leaf	ùfá /à-	O	cf. PLC *ú-fâŋ. This root reconstructed by me for PBC but closest cognates are Plateau, Cross River
Root	i-yím /a-	J	cf. Ekoid N. Etung i-yǎŋi /à-. Remarkably, this form even matches the noun-class pairing of Ukaan
Thorn	ù-jú /à-	A	cf. Ekoid N. Etung è-jòŋè /à-
Stone	è-kpò /i-	O	cf. Ijò Nembe ikpùtù but also scattered EBC forms such as Plateau Doka i-kpank or Kainji Surubu ri-kwag
	i-sá /à-	J	if =ta then very widespread.
Sand	ɔ-cê	O	cf. Ogoni, Igboid, C. Delta
Earth	i-ŋi	J	cf. Ekoid N. Etung ñ-sí /à-
Ground	ùrhá	O	
Road	ò-rèè /i-	A	This root seems to have genuine but scattered witnesses in Kainji, Plateau and Cross River. cf. Gokana èèrè, Kambari úúrè and Afusare i-rèn.
Path	ò-lèi /i-	J	
Town	i-kàf /à-	A	This form is so remote from any of the usual roots for ‘town’ that it is interesting to speculate whether it might be connected with Hausa kaasuuwaa ‘market’ widely borrowed into many EBC languages.
House	è-gwú	A	cf. Edoid Okpè òyvá
Farm	ù-há /à-	A	A PBC root meaning ‘bush’, ‘farm’, ‘forest’. Usually with /k/ in C ₁ slot but weakening also in Edoid
Mountain	èrhá /i- i-rhá /à- à-kpéw	O A J	
Sun	ìŋóŋó i-yáwif	O J	To judge by Koelle, related forms occur in Ekoid and Grassfields
Moon	òjó	O	Probably a loanword from Yoruboid. cf. Igala ócù
Star	ififí'rēi /à- i-ŋiŋum /à-	O J	
Night	àrá'hwó	O	
Year	ì-wág /à-	A	? isn't there a ka- root?
Egg	i-ŋè /à-	A	A widespread but scattered root in Gbe, Nupoid, Jukunoid and Ekoid
Horn	ì-kòŋ /à-	O	If /kp/ corresponds to /k/ then related forms are found across NW Edoid e.g. Ukue è-kpàni
	i-gó	I	
Tail	ò-rùm /i-	O	Probably a loan from Edoid. cf. Aoma ù-rùmù and others (Elugbe, 1986:226) KW notes widespread
Feather	àkpòr	O	
Hunger	ému	O	
Work	ò-rhò	A	cf. Ekoid è-róm ² /bè-. If weakened from tom- then widespread
Name	ìní	O	Probably an old PMC root as Westermann reconstructs -ni, although there was probably a velar in the C ₁ slot. This has been deleted in some languages of the region. cf. Degema i-ní.

²This may be a coincidence, as most Ekoid languages have /t/ in C₁ which corresponds to an old Niger-Congo root.

Gloss	Form	S	Comments/Parallels
Song	ùḡmò	O	
Word	ḡ-jàn	A	
Bathe	kó	O	
Bite	yǫ́mó	O	This is probably a weakening of the EBC root # lom . Other examples occur, e.g. Plateau kuCe nyumu and Ekoid yûm .
Blow	fùnù	O	
Bury	wùḡì	O	fr. bugi check Ogoni
Come	wàk	O	cf. Yoruba wá
Die	hwó	O	cf. Akpes hú. A weakening of common Edoid *ghu also occurring independently in Edoid, e.g. Okpe ultimately to ku
Drink	wú	O	Cf. Edo wō. A common weakening of forms such as ḡwɔ in various Edoid languages
	mḡ	J	Old Niger-Congo root meaning ‘to swallow’
	ítòl	I	
Eat	yé	O	A weakening of common Yoruboid ‘to eat’
Give	rèc	O	
	mèj		
Give birth	jó	O	cf. Akpes jóbañ
Hear	kpí	O	Nothing very close unless this preserves the original initial consonant that weakens to /p/ in Idoma and thence to /w/ elsewhere. The vowel is, however, also wrong, as it is normally a rounded back vowel.
Jump	tári	O	cf. Arigidi (Akokoid) tà
Kill	yú	O	A weakening of the widespread EBC root # wul which has occurred independently in Ekoid (Crabbe, 1969:75). This is a semantic shift from the more widespread # wu ‘to die’.
Know	bá	O	
Lie down	kùrà	O	?
Roast	tó	O	An old Niger-Congo root, common in Edoid and the Grassfields, though usually nasalised. Westermann (292) cites an Atlantic cognate
Say	hyóná	O	cf. Arigidi hě .
See	há	O	
	mḡ	J	mɔn. Edoid and Bantoid
Sit down	ḡmèé	O	
Sleep	kùrà	O	
Steal	céjì	O	
Swallow	mí	O	Old Niger-Congo root
Walk	féni	O	cf. Akpes ciñ -but this may be a semantic shift from PBC #ḡir- ‘to run’ KW disagrees. cf. LC/Ogoni
One	cíí	O	cf. W. Kainji e.g. cLela cin , but also Daka kin . A BC root (and probably older). Discussed in Williamson (1989:255).
Two	wáá	O	A weakening of the common ba- root. Cf. Upper Cross Nkukoli wâ but also occurs in Plateau
Three	táárh	O	Cf. Dakoid Mapeo tára but also throughout Plateau and Kainji
	asa	J	resembles Akpes e.g. Daja isa
Four	náíí	O	Cf. Upper Cross Umon ónáí and related forms but na- is widespread in Niger-Congo
Five	tóòn	O	Cf. Dakoid Mapeo túúná but this is also common Akokoid e.g. Arigidi itɔn . Close to original PMC. cf. Ijo
Six	-rhàdá	O	Frozen rh- prefixes occur on higher numerals in SWE and NW Edoid languages (Elugbe, 1986:145). cf. for example Uvbię é-rhà
Seven		O	
Eight		O	

Gloss	Form	S	Comments/Parallels
Nine	-rháhùfì	O	
Ten	òpú	O	#kop roots occur throughout EBC but lose the initial velar in West Kainji languages. cf. for example Basa opo .
Big	ùgbá dídíbók	O	
Long	ùdíh	O	
Small	àti	O	
Red	wáwárh	O	
White	háhárh	O	
Black	-rírí	O	cf. W Kainji cLela rimi
Hot	túétùè	O	
Cold	uriá'fì	O	
Full	wě	O	
New	yáwá	O	
Good	fó	O	
Dry	hóhó	O	#ho forms have scattered attestation throughout EBC -these are probably independent weakenings of the more common #ko forms.
I	ìhyèjì	O	
Thou	ìhyèrè	O	cf. Arigidi árè
We	ìhyèbò	O	
You pl.	ìhyèmó	O	cf. Arigidi ámó

The remarkable features of this list are two; the large number of cognates with an extraordinary variety of languages, and the quite specific resemblances to Cross River and Ekoid languages. The following section presents some hypotheses to explain this situation.

4. The Classification of Ukaan

What classifications of the Ukaan languages exist have generally placed them with Akpes and as part of West Benue-Congo, perhaps relating to Edoid (Williamson 1989; Blench 1993). However, analysis of the lexicon shows that Ukaan is a remarkable 'mixed' language with elements of the vocabulary showing parallels with a wide variety of Benue-Congo. Ohiri-Aniche (1999) seems to be the first person to suggest that Ukaan may have East Benue-Congo links, although in her conclusion she paradoxically retains the close association with Akpes. Ukaan has shared lexicon with Yoruboid, Edoid and Akokoid. Surprisingly, it seems to have almost nothing in common with Ayere-Ahan, directly to the north, or with the other isolate in the region, the Oko group.

To explain what seems to be a rather extraordinary situation there are three possible hypotheses;

1. That Ukaan is a single branch of Benue-Congo which diverged from the proto-language at the same level as East and West Benue-Congo. The parallels with different branches of Benue-Congo are explained as retentions from Proto-Benue-Congo differentially surviving in parallel branches. In other words, it is a relic of a branch that has otherwise disappeared.

2. That the parallels with EBC languages, especially Ekoid and Cross River, are evidence of its genetic origin. If this is the case, then two sub-hypotheses are possible;

- a) That the ancestors of the Ukaan migrated from somewhere in the region of present-day EBC, perhaps from the Cross River area, and that similarities with neighbouring languages in its present locale are recent loans.

b) That languages like Ukaan were once present in S.W. Nigeria but that the languages connecting Ukaan to EBC speaking regions have been assimilated.

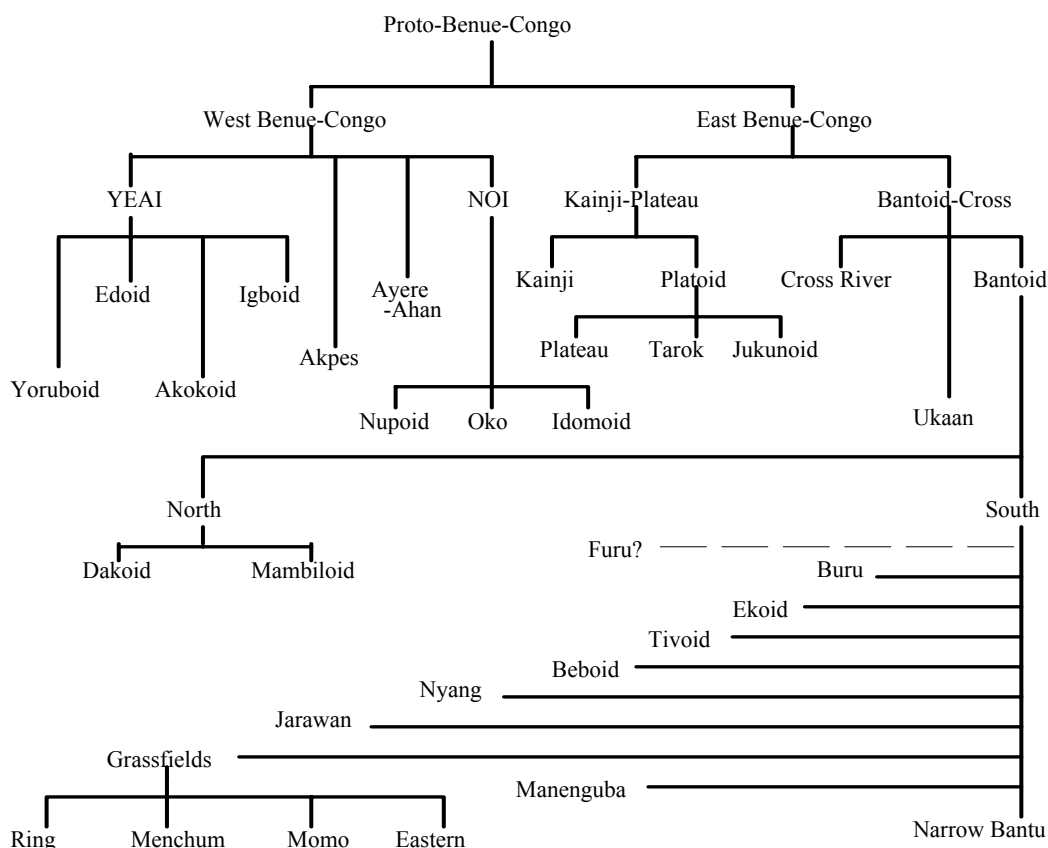
Hypothesis 1 is really only supported when a position that language mixing is an extremely unlikely process and most languages inherit their lexical stock from the proto-language.

Deciding between hypotheses 2a and 2b is by definition difficult, as 2b presupposes that the evidence for linking languages has disappeared. This paper will support 2a on the grounds of a ‘least moves’ model. All that is required is for one group of people to move a considerable distance for unknown reasons. This can easily be supported by contemporary ethnographic parallels, for example the dispersal of the Basa across a wide swathe of Central Nigeria. This does not require the disappearance of numerous postulated transitional languages.

Hypothesis 2a is best supported by the linguistic geography. Ukaan shares with the East Benue-Congo (i.e. Kainji, Plateau, Ekoid, Cross River languages) lexical items not in common with the languages that surround it today. Since it is unlikely to have acquired these by contact this suggests that its original genetic affiliation was with EBC.

The tentative hypothesis of this paper is that Ukaan branched off EBC somewhere near Cross River. In this case, the similarities with Ekoid have to be explained as loans. However, the reverse hypotheses could just as readily be supported in the present state of our knowledge. A Benue-Congo tree is shown in Figure 1. incorporating other results from recent research not discussed in this paper;

Figure 1. Revised Subclassification of Benue-Congo Languages



Based on Blench (1989, in prep), Blench & Williamson (1987) and Crozier and Blench (1992).

This sketch can only serve to indicate the importance of Ukaan and the high priority which must be placed on future work.

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