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Why Reconstructing Comparative Ron is so Problematic

Roger M. Blench

1. Introduction

The Ron languages are Chadic languages spoken in region SE of Jos. They are usually classified as West Chadic, sub-Branch A, together with Hausa and languages of the Ngas group. The usual languages listed for the group are Daffo-Butura, Bokkos, Monguna, Mangar, Sha, Mundat, Karfa, Richa, Fyer, Tambas. Published material on these languages is extremely limited, the main sources being Jungraithmayr (1970) and Seibert (1997). Seibert (1997) contains a bibliography of other publications, many of which prefigure book-length studies. These are listed in the bibliography for the sake of completeness. Some of these languages have no published literature at all and even their locations on language maps are inaccurate. Population sizes also appear to be very uncertain; the recent *Ethnologue* (Grimes 2000) contains a concatenation of very old figures and estimates submitted as part of recent survey work. The classification that appears in such sources as Blench & Crozier (1992) should definitely be described as guesswork.

Since then, a considerable amount of new data has been collected, but virtually none of it is published. It seemed appropriate to begin the task of reconstructing proto-Ron; this paper is intended to be a first step in that direction. Comparative lexical data is available for all the Ron languages, although the quality is somewhat uneven. The following account¹ draws heavily on the wordlists compiled by Uwe Seibert and to a lesser extent, lists compiled by the present author for neighbouring languages.

The Ron languages have excited some interest in Afroasiatic scholars because they seem to retain forms that can be identified in other branches of Afroasiatic (Rabin 1982) and because some morphological features, such as the so-called 'broken' plurals, are reminiscent of Semitic (Jungraithmayr 1965). The accuracy of these claims will not be discussed here; the primary task is to present a convincing account of the group as a whole.

The 'Kulere' Ron (i.e. Richa Tof and etc.) have also been the subject of considerable ethnographic research conducted by Barbara Frank culminating

¹ This paper was first presented at the Biennial International Colloquium on the Chadic Language Family - July 5 - 8, 2001, in Leipzig and has benefited from comments from those present. I would particularly like to thank Uwe Seibert both for making available the original data and for going through this paper carefully and making comments, all of which I have incorporated.

in her 1981 monograph *Die Kulere* (see also Frank 1974a,b, 1976, 1978, 1981a,b, 1982, 1983, 1990, 1995). Other ethnographic references are; Temple (1922), Meek (1925), Ames (1934), Gunn (1953), Mohr (1960). An important recent unpublished source is CAPRO (n.d.) which summarises past ethnography and present situation of the Ron peoples. An important caveat needs to be entered about many of the ethnographic sources; they repeat oral traditions which link together linguistically quite distinct peoples. For example, the Richa (=Kulere) are said to come from Pyem and to include Horom and Bo-Rukul. These latter three languages are all Benue-Congo and as such unrelated to Ron, although there is obviously significant cultural contiguity.

The paper begins by presenting a table of known Ron lects with locations and population figures. It then describes the likely phonology of proto-Ron based on comparison of existing lects. This leads to the analysis of some morphophonological processes affecting Ron languages, concentrating in particular on the absence of regular sound-correspondences. It suggests the reason for this irregularity is to be found in a variety of interactions with now assimilated Plateau languages and gives some examples of borrowing between Ron and the encapsulated languages, Horom and Bo-Rukul, as well as other possible Benue-Congo loans into Ron. A final section looks at the evidence for classification of Ron lects and proposes a genetic tree of the Ron group based on lexical isoglosses.

2. Location, history and sociolinguistic situation

2.1 Nomenclature and population

Table 1 lists all the known Ron lects, with alternative names and population estimates as well as location, to the extent that these are known. Figure 1 shows the locations of the lects of Ron discussed in this paper as well as neighbouring non-Ron languages.

There has been considerable pressure for a literacy programme since the early 1980s. An alphabet book was published in 1985 and an Alphabet chart in 1995, representing the lect here called Daffo-Butura. Several issues of a newsheet in this lect have been published in Jos and attempts have been made to include different Ron lects. However, work on a bible translation is all but stalled at present due to a dispute as to which lect should be used for the translation.

2.2 Linguistic and geographical context

The Ron languages are almost all spoken on the Jos Plateau, although there are some pioneer settlements on the plains below at the southern end of the escarpment. Berom and Izere are spoken to the north and northwest of Ron and Mwaghavul to the northeast. Languages related to Mwaghavul, Chakfem and Mushere, are spoken to the immediate east of the Ron. West of the Ron

are a scatter of Plateau languages, notably Toro, Alumu-Təsu, Hasha, Rindre and Ayu down the escarpment, while southwest is a Jarawan Bantu language, Mama. Not all of these languages are well-described, so the mutual influence with the Ron group cannot always be fully analysed.

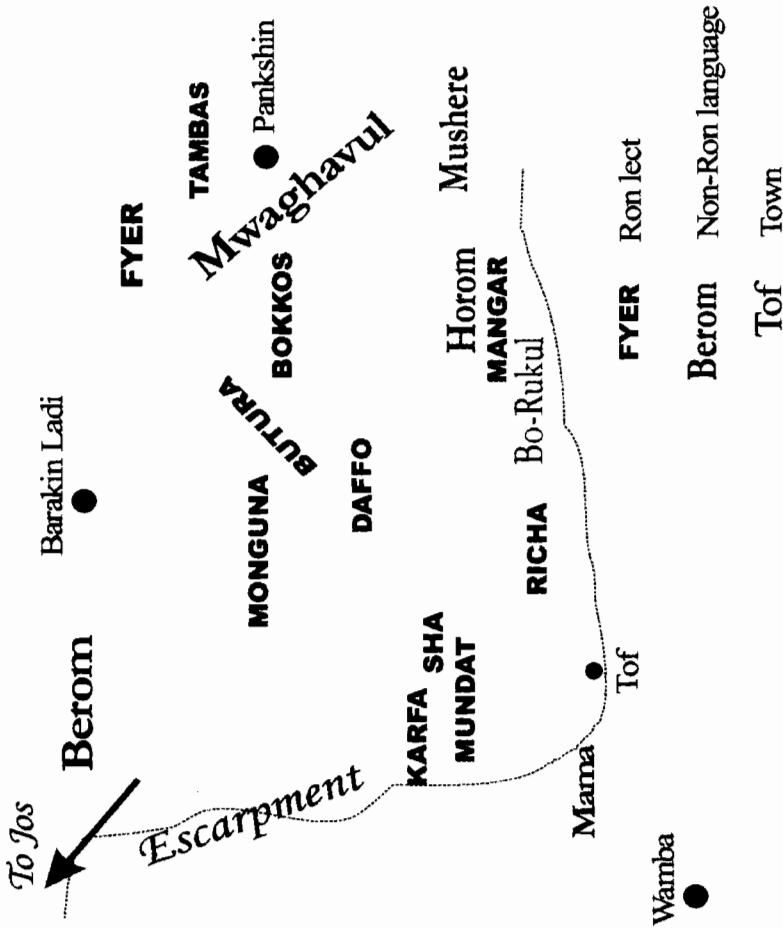


Fig. 1. Geographical location of the Ron languages

Reference name	Other names	Population	LGA	District, Village
Daffo-Butura	Lis Ma Run	115,000 (1995)	Bokkos, Barakin-Ladi and Mangu LGAs	Hottom, Maiduna, Hurum, Fanga, Kandik, Faram, Mandung, Mayi & Josho
Bokkos	Alis I Run, Ron, Challa	inc. with Daffo-Butura	Bokkos, Barakin-Ladi and Mangu LGAs	
Monguna	Shagawu, Shagau, Nafunfia, Maleni	20,000 (1995)	Bokkos, Barakin-Ladi and Mangu LGAs	
Mangar		?	?	
Sha		3,000 (1998)	Bokkos LGA	Sha district
Mundat		1,000 (1998)	Bokkos LGA	Sha district, Mundat village
Karfa		800 (?)		
Richa	Kulere, Tof, Korom Boye, Akandi, Akande, Kande	15,570 (1990)	Bokkos LGA	
Fyer		20-30,000 (1999)	Mangu LGA	Fyer District.
Tambas		8,000 (1999)	Pankshin LGA	

Table 1. Ron-speaking populations in Plateau-State (Nigeria)

Apart from these languages around the boundaries of Ron, there are two, possibly three, languages spoken within the Ron area. These are Horom and Bo-Rukul (Mabo-Barkul) spoken in three villages east of Richa. Jungrathmayr (1970) refers to another non-Ron language, spoken at Mwach, southwest of Richa. The existence of this language remains unconfirmed. Horom and Bo-Rukul are related to one another, although not closely.

Horom, however, is definitely related to Fyem, a language spoken near Barakin Ladi. The isolation of Horom and Bo-Rukul strongly suggest that they are survivors of a larger group of Plateau languages that once occupied this entire region. Indeed, these now-vanished languages will be invoked as one explanation for the internal lexical diversity of Ron.

2.3 Internal classification of the Ron group

The most recent classification of the Ron group is by Seibert (1997:6) who proposes the following alignments:

Northern	Fyer, Tambas
Central	Bokkos, Daffo-Butura and Monguna
Western	Sha, Mundat and Karfa
Southern	Richa, Mangar

This classification was admittedly impressionistic.

Although the sources treat Mangar and Monguna as dialects of Daffo-Butura, and Tambas as very close to Fyer, the data hardly supports this. In the following analysis, all Ron lects are treated as distinct, and indeed a new classification (section 6) is proposed that only partly supports existing hypotheses. Trying to classify and reconstruct Ron presents a considerable challenge. The Ron languages have evidently spread recently and indeed migration traditions link together the present-day communities. Despite this, they are internally very diverse and even developing a coherent account of sound-correspondences has proved to be very difficult. The reasons for this remain a subject for speculation. Crucially, there is every indication that the expanding Ron languages have overwhelmed and largely assimilated pre-existing Benue-Congo speaking communities. The paper gives a short account of the sociolinguistic situation of two of these, Horom and Bo-Rukul, and their hypothesised relation to other Plateau languages. Individual Ron languages exhibit undergone complex contraction processes, probably by analogy with Plateau languages that no longer exist. They have also acquired nasal and V- prefixes that look to be more typical of Plateau than Chadic.

3. Phonology

3.1 Vowels

Proto-Ron probably had five phonemic vowels:

	Front	Central	Back
Close	i		u
Close-Mid	e	(ə)	o
Open		a	

The status of the /ə/ is highly uncertain, and it is probably a centralised allophone of /i/. It is transcribed as heard in the Tambas data. Some lects also have a phonetic high central vowel /i/, but again this likely to be an allophonic variant. All Ron languages permit long vowels, symbolised by doubling. Minimal pairs where the tone is static are quite rare, making it likely these should be treated as VV sequences rather than as a true long/short opposition.

3.2 Consonants

Proto-Ron had at least the following consonants:

	Bi-labial	Labio-dental	Alveo-lar	Alveo-palatal	Palata-l	Velar	Labial-velar	Glottal
Plosive	p b		t d		c j	k g	(kp) (gb)	ʔ
Nasal	m		n		ɲ	ŋ		
Trill			r					
Fricative		f v	s z	ʃ				h
Approximant					y		w	
Lateral			l					
Implosive	ɓ		ɗ					

Prenasalised consonants are common in the Ron languages, with Daffo permitting mb, nd, nj, ng, mgb, nv and nz. Similar inventories are probable for the other Ron lects. The affricates /ts/ and /dz/ occur in the data but are nowhere consistent across lects and will be treated as allophones of the palatals.

The labial-velars are exceptional for Chadic although typical of the surrounding Niger-Congo languages. They occur in all the Ron languages except Fyer and Tambas. Moreover, although lexemes exist where labial-velars are cognate with one another across the other Ron lects, there are no regular correspondences with Fyer or Tambas cognates. This strongly suggests that Fyer and Tambas are the most conservative lects and that the point at which the others split away from them was marked by dense interactions with Benue-Congo languages.

Labialisation, palatalisation and labial-palatalisation are all possible prosodies. Table 2 shows the attested possibilities in Daffo-Butura.

Consonant	Labialisation	Palatalisation	Labial-palatalisation
p	+	+	+
b	+	+	—
mb	+	+	+
ḃ	+	—	—
d	+	+	—
nd	+	—	—
k	+	+	+
g	+	+	—
ŋg	+	—	+
gb	+	—	+
f	+	+	+
v	+	+	+
nv	+	+	—
h	+	+	+
s	+	+	+
ʃ	+	+	+
m	+	—	+
l	+	+	+

Source: expanded from Seibert (1997:13) with additional field data

Table 2. Labial and palatal prosodies in Daffo-Butura

This intensive use of these prosodies and their combination is extremely common in the surrounding Plateau languages and provides yet more evidence for the significant influence of these on the Ron languages. Some Ron lects permit stems with palatalised consonants in final position, probably as a transitional product of the erosion of final -V.

3.3 Tones

All attested Ron languages have three level tones as well as combination tones and this can therefore be posited in Proto-Ron. Tones have significant grammatical functions as well as lexical –for example making plurals or deriving verbs from nouns.

4. Processes affecting Ron languages

4.1 Morphological processes affecting Ron languages

The most striking aspect of Ron morphology is widespread erosion of quite long stems. Erosion seems to occur from either direction and can be combined with extensive intervocalic consonant loss. Most present-day forms (except those borrowed into proto-Ron) are best derived from a canonical CVCVC form. Where these are still present they show useful cognates with other Chadic languages². Table 3 gives some examples:

to laugh		to dream	
Bokkos	mùsas	Daffo-Butura	sunan
Hausa	yí mùrmùshíí ‘smile’	Karekare	súúnà
Diri	mes	Guruntum	sunì
Tera	mósó	Ngizim	sùwán (n.)
Gidar	mas	Dghwede	swàná
Zime Batna	màsà	Kabalai	suwón
Mubi	gàmàsé	Birgid	sóónà (n.)

Table 3. Conservative CVCVC forms retained in Ron group languages

² Data on comparative Chadic is principally from Jungraithmayr and Ibriszimow (1995) and to a lesser extent from Kraft (1981). Data on Plateau languages is either from my own field data or from the Benue-Congo comparative wordlist (Williamson and Shimizu 1968; Williamson 1973).

However, presumably under the influence of Plateau languages, Ron languages tend to shorten such forms, first to CVCV or CVVC, then to CVC and finally to CV, often with a final glottal stop signifying an eroded final consonant. They also erode from the front, losing C_1 and making cognates more difficult to judge. Table 4 shows some examples of this occurring between Daffo-Butura and Fyer:

Gloss	Daffo-Butura	Fyer
find	ɗus	es
forehead	maán	aan
goat	wò'	oó
grandfather	wâɟ	aás
kill	h'ek	ek
receive	mât	at

Table 4. Initial consonant erosion in Ron

These shortening processes may also be responsible for what otherwise appear to be unusual sound-correspondences. For example for “to call”

Daffo-Butura	Bokkos	Mong-una	Mangar	Sha	Mundat	Karfa	Richa	Fyer
lal	lay	lal	hâl	hâl	àyal	yâ:l	lay	yal

Simply comparing Daffo-Butura with Fyer, which makes sense in terms of initial consonant erosion suggests that /l/ corresponds to /h/ and /y/. However, it more likely that proto-Ron was *lahyal and the reduction processes were as follows:

Language	proto-form	→	→	→
Daffo-Butura	*lahyal	lahal	laal	lal
Fyer	*lahyal	layal	ayal	yal
Sha	*lahyal	lahal	ahal	hal

The falling tone in Sha and Karfa also suggests that the original tone was *láhyàl and that the tones coalesced after a long internal vowel became short.

Another example posits a different initial consonant in order to reach the synchronic results; cf. “to hear”

Daffo- Butura	Bokkos	Mon- guna	Mangar	Sha	Mundat	Karfa	Richa	Fyer
halay	halí	hal	syel	salây	saláy	sâ:l	sel	hwali

The following table shows the proposed routes to reach the synchronic witnesses.

Daffo-Butura	*falay	halay						
Bokkos	*falay	halay	hali					
Monguna	*falay	halay	hali	hal				
Mangar	*falay	salay	sayal	syal	syel			
Sha	*falay	salay						
Mundat	*falay	salay						
Karfa	*falay	salay	sayal	saal				
Richa	*falay	salay	sayal	syal	syel	sel		
Fyer	*falay	halay	hali	hwali				

All the Ron languages are undergoing contraction, and the formulae are at present unpredictable, leading to unexpected pseudo-correspondences.

4.2 Phonological processes affecting Ron languages

One of the more perplexing aspects of analysing Ron lects is the absence of true sound correspondences. Indeed it has not so far proved possible to extract even one regular correspondence between lects that applies in more than a few scattered cases. On the other hand, initial consonants can sometimes be quite persistent, especially when they draw on the fund of common Chadic. Table 5 shows some examples where the same consonant is retained in the initial slot (non-cognate forms are given for completeness; a blank indicates a lacuna in the data).

However, when C_1 changes between lects, detecting the pattern is more difficult. Finding comparative examples is made more difficult by the instability of roots. Even within a large lexical sample, cognate sets that are conserved across all Ron lects is quite rare. Table 6 gives some examples for comparative sets for /tʃ/ and /s/ illustrating how these vary from one lexical set to another.

Even within comparable phonological contexts there is a marked lack of regularity. A probable reason for this is the readiness with which words adopt affixes or form compounds. These compounded forms affect the quality of initial consonants; when contraction occurs in turn correspondences are left looking irregular.

English	Daffo-Butura	Bokkos	Monguna	Mangar	Sha	Mundat	Karfa	Richa	Fyer	Tambas
breast	fóf	fóf	fóf	fóf	fwóf	cici	cici		fúf	fuf pl. fufweʃ
fall	fur	fur	fûr	fuy	fuú	fûr	fu:r		ràngín	
water	ham	ham	àyín	ham	ham	hâm	hâm	aàm	ham	ham
five	hára	hára	hára	táwòn	há-á	há:rá	həra	há:rá	háwá	aya
share out	kar	kar	kar		kâr	kár	hawî	kar	kaar	
tongue	lís	alís	alés	lís	alés	àlifi	àlɔʃ	alúʃ	lés	les pl. leses
die	mot	mot	môt	môt	môt	mot	mət	mot	mot	
sheep	tàmo	tutwi	tumó	tàmbò	sukuf	tomo	tomo	timbang	tàngwáʃ	baduro pl. badure
year	wíl	wil	wíl	yíl	wúl	wuli	wil	awúl	wél	wel pl. wele
I	yín	yín	yín	yîn	yin	yí	yîn	yin	yín	

Table 5. Initial consonant retention in Ron lects

English	Daffo-Butura	Bokkos	Monguna	Mangar	Sha	Mundat	Karfa	Richa	Fyer	Tambas
	s									
urine	sar	ʃár	njár	zâw	zòú	njàùr	nzyar		zar	sar
cough	ʃèm	tor	ʃèm	ʃêm		sêm	sʷemíky			
they	sín	sín	sín	yisín	sî		mi	yís	són	
know	sun	ʃáŋɪ	s'en	sunzáh	s'en	ɪŋgê	ŋg'et	s'en	sum	
	c									
we (incl.)	cán	kán	njá	yân	gyân	gyál	yígyân	yɪŋgyân	kán	
chicken	càân	ʃukóòr	caán	caán	matèl	kukét	kikwʷét	kôd	kùkwè	kukut
food	ca	cwá	wudéŋ	tsyá		ca	ca			

Table 6. Correspondences of /tʃ/ and /s/ across the Ron languages

5. *The influence of surrounding or assimilated languages*

5.1 Benue-Congo

Ron has evidently been influenced by Benue-Congo at various levels, both at a higher level, where wholesale lexical borrowings seem to have been present in proto-Ron, and more sporadically through borrowings from individual neighbours and interaction with the pre-Ron Plateau languages.

The most obvious phonological influence are the presence of labial-velars in languages other than Fyer-Tambas and the widespread use of labialisation and palatalisation for lexical distinctions.

Evidence for the languages allegedly assimilated by Ron expansion is confined to Horom and Bo-Rukul, and Table 7 shows some of the proposed lexical links with commentaries on the wider Benue-Congo and Chadic cognates.

Many more cases can be adduced where single Ron lects seem to have borrowed a Niger-Congo root from an unknown source.

5.2 Chadic

Although the Ron languages about Mwaghavul today there is surprisingly little evidence for the influence of Mwaghavul, or indeed other Chadic groups such as Kofyar and Goemai, on modern-day Ron. This suggests that contact between the two is relatively recent. The interpretation of the data also depends on the view taken of the internal structure of the Ron group. For example, if, as argued in this paper, Fyer and Tambas are conservative, then in the following case they simply retain the older Chadic root and the other Ron languages innovate.

Gloss	Fyer	Tambas	compare
bark of tree	ndàrà̀m	dà̀rà̀m pl. daramef	Mwaghavul də̀ram , Yiwom diləm but also probably Karekare ?idàm

Alternatively, the other languages retain the older root and Fyer-Tambas borrow from their nearby Chadic neighbours. However, documentation for the relevant Chadic languages is quite exiguous; there is no long wordlist for Mwaghavul and Chakfem-Mushere is almost unknown.

Lang.	Gloss	sg.	pl.	Commentary
Horom	Night	fwat	—	Some version of this root should be reconstructed for proto-Ron, possibly #mafulul . cf. Tamba fo t, Daffo-Butura fúlúl , Bokkos fwo' , Richa máfòě . It may be that the stem has been extended inside Ron, since external Chadic cognates such as Kir fút , or Sakwun vɔt seem to reflect shorter forms. However, cognates of this root are found in Benue-Congo languages remote from Chadic, e.g. Jukunoid (e.g. Wase afwi) and Tivoid (Abon E-fu).
Horom	Moon/ Month	u-fel	ba-pel-e	A Niger-Congo root. cf. Mangar, Sha, Mundat, Richa #fen with only Karfa toor retaining the widespread Chadic root #tar .
Rukul		u-fye	i-fye	
Horom	Sun	uwi	—	Ron languages largely retain #fat , a widespread Chadic root. However, Daffo-Butura and Bokkos have °wè which is probably cognate with local Plateau terms, especially if the proto-form was #gbwe . cf.
Rukul		uwei	—	Fyem wíí , Bo wéi , Cara we , Berom gwei .
Horom	Corpse	dù-fùn	á-fùn	Occurs throughout Ron but not a reflex of any common Chadic root. Attested in many Benue-Congo languages e.g. Kwanka pun , Berom rěvín , Vute fín , Nizaa fún and thus a probable loan into proto-Ron. Tsagu has vúnè but this is isolated and thus also likely to be a loan from a Benue-Congo language.
Horom	Leg, Foot	u-fol	a-fol	Attested in Fyer furù , Tamba fur as 'leg' but in other Ron lects as 'thigh' providing another isogloss separating these two languages from the others. Widely attested in Benue-Congo cf. Fyem ěufór , Bo fol . perhaps cf. Njerep fólò 'thigh', Ayu ihol , Doka o-fere , Njerep fólò 'thigh'. See discussion in BCCW, 55.
Rukul		i-fwɔl	a-fwɔl	Probably borrowed at the proto-Ron stage.

Horom	Crocodile	njorom	i-njorom	Ron has haram or something similar throughout, a reflex of the older Chadic # karam e.g. Dera kàrà̀m , Hona kirà̀ja . However, Fyer has 'ḡ hòròm and Tambas wòròm which shows the nasal prefix and back vowel characteristic of Plateau. The most likely explanation is that the Chadic root was borrowed into pre-Ron from Chadic where it acquired both a palatal C ₁ and a nasal prefix. Fyer and Tambas then borrowed this form and the other Ron languages retained a weakened form of the original Chadic root.
Rukul		̀̀-jòròm		
Horom	Build (House)	lò		Occurs in parts of Ron, e.g. Fyer là̀t , Richa là̀s , Karfa l̀̀s but not a Chadic root. A likely borrowing from pre-Ron. cf. Fyem lò , Berom l̀̀k , Kwanka lok and Irigwe nò .
Horom	Burn	fwasa		Occurs scattered in Ron, e.g. Daffo-Butura, Tambas fàf , Fyer fwaf but a widespread Plateau root e.g. cf. Horom fùf , Berom fwúf 'burn food', Fyem fùf , suggesting borrowing into Ron.
Horom	Divide (share out)	kara		Common Ron # kar but a widespread Niger-Congo root cf. Plateau # kap and discussion in BCCW. Probably a loan into proto-Ron.
Horom	Hunt	fár		Across Ron, e.g. Bokkos far , Karfa wá̀r . Widespread in both Chadic and Benue-Congo. cf. Fyem fufwá̀r , Hasha far , Tesu fla , Tarok fá̀r 'to be a good marksman' but also Chadic Tangale para (n.), Ngizim bá̀rá̀ , Hausa fá̀rá̀wtá̀á̀ . Clearly borrowed at an early phase of interaction beten the two groups.

Horom	Sew	tolo		cf. Daffo, Bokkos tor , Fyer sol , Monguna sôr but no external Chadic cognates. Widespread but scattered in Plateau, e.g. Berom tolo and Fyem twol , Jarawan Bantu #soro and thus likely to be a loan into Ron.
Rukul	Cheek	guri	a-guri	Widespread in Ron but perhaps not proto-Ron as Karfa retains ɲgɔŋ which has external Chadic cognates. cf. Daffo kukurí , Mundat gororo , Mangar gwuyi which may thus be borrowings from a proto-Ron form reflected in Rukul.
Rukul	Throat	wororo	a-wororo	cf. Mundat màgòrɔŋ , Bokkos worɔŋ , Richa wur all versions of a widespread Niger-Congo root for 'throat' #goro . Evidently borrowed into proto-Ron before weakening of the initial velar. Rukul could thus be a borrowing from Ron, despite its cognacy with Niger-Congo forms.
Rukul	Hair	afel		Cognate with Fyem ɟikén but most Ron lects have related forms e.g. Daffo swé , Mangar ɟwáy , Richa ɟúkùl . Similar roots are widespread in Chadic which is likely to be the source. cf. Goemai ɟyulka , Kirfi ɟukka , Bata ɟéwé .
Rukul	Heart	abwi		Neither of the Ron roots for heart, #ko and #abuy have clear Chadic cognates, hence they may be borrowings from pre-Ron. cf. Sha, Richa abúy , Fyer ɟwíí
Rukul	Elephant	ididàm	i-didàm	Although #didam is throughout Ron excluding Fyer-Tambas, this has no external Chadic cognates and was probably borrowed into pre-Ron. cf. also Hasha didar 'hippo'

Rukul	Bow	ndar	a-ndar	Occurs in Daffo-Butura ndâr and Richa andâr . A Niger-Congo root, usually with initial t- is not otherwise found in Chadic. Horom has u-ta which is a direct reflex of Niger-Congo #ta . The nasal prefix is typical of Plateau and the voicing of C ₁ may have arisen under its influence. Probably a loan from pre-Ron into Ron and borrowed back into Rukul in this form.
Rukul	Blow (flute etc)	fufwo		Attested throughout Ron except for Fyer-Tambas as fur/fud etc. Although external Chadic forms #fat could be cognate, #fur is so widespread in Niger-Congo that it is likely this is a borrowing into Ron after the split-off of Fyer-Tambas.

Table 7. Lexical interaction between Horom, Bo-Rukul and Ron lects

6. Internal classification of the Ron group

As noted in 2.3, published evidence for the internal classification of the Ron group is so far lacking. This section presents a preliminary hypothesis. Several examples have been given in the course of the paper for the distinctiveness of Fyer-Tambas. Table 8 notes some of the key lexical evidence.

Gloss	Fyer	Tambas	Commentary
bark of tree	ndàrà̀m	dà̀rà̀m pl. daramɛf	only F-T retains this Chadic root
elephant tooth	nanjina há̀ngor	há̀ngwì pl. há̀ngwì	all other Ron languages have #didam all other Ron languages lose the initial h-
thigh	dúdús	dudus pl. duduses	only F-T retains this Chadic root
vein	p'èr	per pl. pə̀pə̀r	only F-T has this root

Table 8. Evidence for the distinctiveness of Fyer-Tambas

In addition, Fyer-Tambas is lacking the labial-velars characteristic of the other branches of Ron, which are likely to have been borrowed from Plateau at this stage.

Seibert's Central group, combining Daffo-Butura-Bokkos-Monguna (DBBM) is supported by a small number of isoglosses. Daffo-Butura and Bokkos share a great deal more in common than Monguna which might equally be argued to fit with Sha. Table 9 sets out the evidence for a Central group in Ron.

Gloss	Daffo-Butura	Bokkos	Monguna	Commentary
ask (question)	lúl	lúl	lul	in this form, confined to DBBM
count, read	mbí'	mbe'	mbi'	confined to DBBM
help	búm	búm	bum	in this form, confined to DBBM
jump	fis	pís	fis	confined to DBBM
lick	lok	lok	lo'	confined to DBBM
say	ni	ni	ne	confined to DBBM

Table 9. Evidence for the distinctiveness of Daffo-Butura-Bokkos-Monguna (DBBM)

There seems to be no clear evidence for Seibert's Western group in its entirety, but Mundat and Karfa clearly share innovations that set them apart from other Ron languages (Table 10):

Gloss	Mundat	Karfa	Commentary
breast	cici	cíci	all other Ron languages have #fuf
hole	àpùk	apulúk	this root is unique to M-K
she	múy	mûy	this root is unique to M-K
leopard	ɲgafá	ɲgafá	this root is unique to M-K
stick	ʃo	ʃó	this root is unique to M-K
fire	wûʃ	wof	only M-K has retained this Chadic root
say	fá	fa	this root is unique to M-K

Table 10. Evidence for the distinctiveness of Mundat-Karfa

In one case, the word for 'salt' **wuj**, the same root is shared with Sha but salt is a common trade item on the Plateau and this is probably just an areal feature.

In the case of Seibert's Southern group, the evidence is sparse (Table 11):

Gloss	Mangar	Richa	Commentary
grind	ɲiɲ	ɲiɲ	cognate forms in other Ron languages
sky	dʒifit	difit	though see Mundat zifit

Table 11. Evidence for a Mangar-Richa grouping

As an exercise, a similar amount of evidence can be adduced for a Sha-Mangar grouping (Table 12):

Gloss	Sha	Mangar	Commentary
place	mun	mun	different roots in other Ron lects
call, summon	hâl	hâl	only these lects have initial h-

Table 12. Evidence for a Sha-Mangar grouping

Given the amount of internal loans that characterise the Ron languages, evidence this sparse should be regarded with some scepticism.

The internal fragmentation of the Ron languages may therefore be greater than suggested by previous authors. Figure 2 is an attempt to place the languages in a tree following from the present research. However, the uneven quantity and quality of data, especially for Sha, Richa and Tambah, may amend these conclusions.

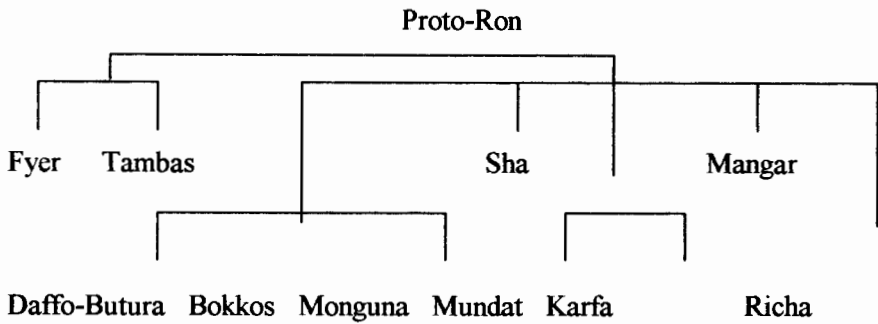


Figure 2. The Ron languages: tentative genetic classification

7. Conclusion

The Ron languages still remain poorly known, despite their relative accessibility, and most recent data remains unpublished. A series of innovations support the distinctiveness of the group in opposition to other nearby Chadic languages. Despite the availability of data on all languages, reconstruction is still an elusive goal, partly because of the surprising internal diversity of the group, even though their diversification appears to be very recent. A key element in this diversity appears to be lexicon and perhaps phonology derived from assimilated Plateau languages in the area of their expansion. Some innovations that define languages of the Ron Group are borrowings from Benue-Congo. Indeed, one feature of the Ron group is the absence of regular sound-correspondences; reconstruction of the proto-consonant inventory is possible only through retained consonants, i.e. those which are essentially the same in all languages.

These features of Ron are exceptional within regional Chadic languages; correspondences of South Bauchi languages are much clearer (cf. Shimizu 1978). The Ron languages represent a case of very rapid language change and diversification and illustrate the importance of understanding substrate languages in interpreting such events. The Ron languages are what Oceanists would call 'innovation-linked' as opposed to 'innovation-defined' (Pawley & Ross 1999); although distinctive innovations scattered across the group make their separateness easy to accept, defining the group by innovations that are found in every lect is more problematic.

To proceed with Ron, the next steps are to develop the comparative vocabulary listing so that more parts of speech are included and to complete the lists where the data is fragmentary. Increased material on Horom and Bo-Rukul is essential to the analysis of potential substrate languages. The main task, however, is careful detective work with etymologies to try and distinguish true cognates from look-alikes and borrowings through morphological analysis. Chadicists are urged to take part in this agreeable enterprise.

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