

Morphosyntactic parameters and the internal classification of Benue-Kwa (Niger-Congo)

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Based on lexical comparison and the “law of large numbers”, Greenberg (1963) proved the unity of Niger-Congo and its major subgroups. Subsequently, however, neither lexicostatistics nor analyses of sound change have greatly refined this picture, especially as concerns Niger-Congo’s largest subgroup. Benue-Kwa (so labeled by Givón 1975) includes Westermann’s “Kwa”, Guthrie’s narrow “Bantu” and everything in between: the rest of ‘wide’ Bantu plus Plateau, Kainji and Cross River. Attempts at subdivision, culminating with Williamson (1989), are renounced by Williamson & Blench, who restore the default view of Benue-Kwa as a “dialect continuum” (2000, 17f.). The failure of lexicostatistics reflects the method’s inability to exclude borrowing or allow for sound change (Bennett 1989), and the thinness of most existing lexical collections. But a fallback to prior classifications is equally untenable: “Bantu” itself is irremediably fuzzy (Nurse & Philippson 2003, 5), and pace Williamson’s “New Kwa”, Stewart (1994, 176) observes that Àkán has more sound correspondences with Proto-Bantu than it does with Àkán’s supposed New Kwa sister, the Gbè cluster.

Taking a hint from Greenberg (1970), maybe typology can point to a viable internal map of Benue-Kwa (BK). This talk reviews four potentially independent parameters (1); briefly notes their descriptive content; and considers if their apparent clustering is accidental.

- (1)a. *A finite eventive predicate with minimal inflection allows a present perfect reading in addition to a past (preterite).*
- b. *Aspectually unrelated events are excluded from a single clause.*
- c. *Minimal finite inflection is an aux/proclitic particle as opposed to a suffix or root-borne tone pattern.*
- d. *At least three surface tones contrast on roots of the same category (as opposed to two tones plus downstep).*

Each description in (1) is binary, indeed privative. None is macro-parametric on the scale of Baker (1996), or micro *à la* Kayne (2005). Each can be restated with inverted ‘markedness’ value, but none can be defined away (Déchaine & Manfredi 2001; Manfredi 2003, 2005). Parameters (1a) and (1c) are illustrated in the minimal contrast between (2) and (3) and their glosses. The predicates are cognate (cf. *óji :: obì* ‘kola’); both roots are intrinsically accented (H), but in Ìgbo a finite root necessarily loses its accent and can be suffixed, whereas in Yorùbá it keeps its intrinsic accent, is never suffixed, and is preceded by a pitch accent.

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|-----|---------------------------|-----|-----------------------------------|
| (2) | Ìngìgè jù-rù Ige. | (3) | Ìngìgè é bí Ìgè. |
| | N. ask.FIN-CL I. | | N. FIN ask I. |
| | ‘Ìngìgè asked Ìgè’ (Ìgbo) | | ‘Ìngìgè (has) asked Ìgè’ (Yorùbá) |

The surprise is not the existence of the list in (1), but the claim that all four descriptions correlate in their distribution across the supposed Benue-Kwa continuum:

- (4)a. BK1 (4 minus settings): {Àkán, Èdó, Ìgbo, ‘Bantu’...}
- b. BK2 (4 plus settings): {Gbè, Yorùbá, [Nupe], [Ìdomà]...}

With caveats and gaps—e.g. available sources don’t determine the status of Nupe with respect to (1a), or of the Ìdomà cluster with respect to (1b)—the generalization is that only minus values of (1a-d) are returned in the clusters labeled BK1, and only plus values in BK2; other combinations of features being represented by few if any Benue-Kwa languages at all.

Taken at face value, (1) and (4) have other consequences. Including Àkán in BK1, reinforced by Stewart’s observation cited above, means that BK1 is geographically non-contiguous, in contrast to BK2 which is spatially compact. If so, demography will treat (4b) as the likely innovation, with (2a) archaic—confirming long held views about ‘erosion’ of segmental morphology in western Bantu (Voorhoeve 1967; Hyman 1976). The correlation of (1c) and (1d) has also been understood in historical terms, with the loss of suffixes and other edge syllables causing augmentation of tonal contrasts on roots (Hyman 1979; Williamson 1993)—a prosodic compensation effect. Synchronically, the tonogenesis prediction can be refined by distinguishing root and phrasal contexts: so-called prefixes, understood as phrasal clitics, predictably bear reduced tonal contrasts/show greater prosodic redundancy, as opposed to root syllables; this is most dramatically reflected in the systematic exclusion of H tone from prefixes throughout Yorùbá and Gbè (cf. literature cited by Manfredi 1995, 2004).

Perhaps the linkage of (1c) and (1d) in the evolution of BK2 reflects accidental/parochial phonetic changes ('erosion'), as suggested by the theory of 'floating' tones, rather than a deep structural constraint on pitch accent. Nevertheless, it is difficult to deny a higher-level implicational relationship, mediated by UG, underlying the correlation with the other two generalizations (1a-b). If (1a) and (1b) were just "semantic parameters" *alla* Chierchia (1998), nothing would force them to correlate with morphophonology. Thus the less accidental the correlation in (1)—and it holds over hundreds of languages, hundreds of millions of speakers and half a continent—the more likely that the clustering of all four innovations in BK2 is mediated by syntactic restructuring with two faces: on one side, elimination of suffixes and consequent prosodic enrichment of roots (1c-d); on the other, a change in phrase-structure configuration bringing the finite verb morphosyntactically 'closer' to tense (1a-b). If surface phonological erosion was the remote trigger, UG necessarily intervened at some moment in the history of BK2 to enforce an abstract relationship between (non)suffixation and syntactic (non)locality. At that point, the motor of change from BK1 to BK2 became UG itself.

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