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Niger-Congo Person Markers: Testing the Kinship with Morphology

Abstract

Ever since Westermann and Greenberg put their famous Niger-Congo claim to the genetic classification of the languages of Sub-Saharan Africa, the hypothesis has been mostly tested by means of lexicostatistics and/or discovering typological glosses between the language families. In the domain of morphology, the only subsystem which came under the scope of detailed comparative research was nominal classification; this approach proved substantial results to the overall Niger-Congo linguistics.

Personal pronouns and, wider, person markers give another good opportunity to test proposed kinship between language families placed under the Niger-Congo umbrella. Relatively stable as any basic lexicon items, they might be even more reliable for comparison if treated not as individual lexemes, but as complex paradigms. The paradigmatic similarity significantly decrease the chance of borrowing and might become a solid argument in favour of the common origins of languages even after 8-10 millennia of separation, as other language families of the world show.

The proposed comparative analysis encompasses over 700 individual idioms belonging to all large language stocks of West and Central Africa claimed to be Niger-Congo by origin. The reconstruction is made by means of consecutive stages: from the proto-language of a group to that of a family and up to the hypothetic Niger-Congo proto-language. Both by its scale and its strict adherence to the comparative method, this will be the first research of the kind in the Niger-Congo linguistics of the last half a century.

The preliminary results of the research will show that Niger-Congo looks valid from the pronominal perspective. The major language families, such as Benue-Congo, Kwa, Gur, Kru, Ubangi, and Adamaua, all share forms and meanings within the pronominal paradigm which are best explained by their common origin. However, a number of substantial changes appear to be necessary in the Niger-Congo classification. The status of the Atlantic family as a genetic stock should be reconsidered; the Niger-Congo origins of Ijoid and Mande are not fully supported by pronominal evidence.

The data from this analysis should lead to further research in other subsystems of morphology.