

Is Ubangian Branch a family among Niger-Congo languages?

Abstract: Ubangian was classified by Greenberg as Eastern member of the Adamawa-Eastern Branch (Eastern was renamed Ubangian by Thomas and Samarin). Nowadays the unity of Eastern branch is called into question after the relative failure of attempts in view to reconstruct a proto-Ubangian phonological system in the eighties and nineties (see Boyd and Moñino). This branch is reduced to its central languages, that is Banda-Yakoma-Sere-Mba; Zande and Gbaya-Manza-Ngbaka diverge too much from the others to be longer considered as Ubangian. This contribution will try to revisit the status of the languages classified as Ubangian inside Niger-Congo: Proto-Gbaya shows for instance more affinities with the Proto-Gur proposed by Manessy than with any of the Central Ubangian languages, or Adamawa ones. Is that due to an actual closer genealogic connection between these two groups, or to the fact that we compared two proto-languages reconstructed with the same "classical" methods? The answer will be possible only when we'll have reliable proto-languages for each little group of Niger-Congo languages, that we shall be able to compare each other. In the meantime, we shall apply the lexicostatistic method modernized by Starostin, without too much illusions but just to see if this method can bring some new lights to the history of the different languages considered as Ubangian. The Ubangian languages will be compared with some of the Adamawa branch, with the reconstructions of Proto-Bantu and with Proto-Gur.

Greenberg's classification:

- I. Congo-Kordofanian
 - A. Niger-Congo
 - 6. Adamawa-Eastern
 - A. Adamawa (14 subgroups)
 - B. Eastern (8 subgroups) :
 1. gbaya, manza, ngbaka
 2. banda
 3. ngbandi, sango, yakoma
 4. zande, nzakara, barambu, pambia
 5. ngbaka ma'bo, monzombo, gbanzili, mundu, mayogo, bangba
 6. ndogo, sere, tagbu, bai, bviri, feroqe, indri, togoyo, mangaya
 7. amadi (madyo, ma)
 8. mondunga, mba (bamanga)

Bennett's lexicostatistic method (1983), gives the following position to the Ubangian languages:

- I. Niger-Congo
 - A. Central Niger-Congo
 - c. North-Central Niger-Congo
 1. gurunsi (= 3 c,d,g of GREENBERG)
 2. tula-longuda (= 6A1, 6A10, 6A7, 6A9 of GREENBERG)
 3. boa-kula (= 6A13 of GREENBERG)
 4. gbaya, manza, ngbaka (= 6B1 of GREENBERG)
 5. Cameroon-Ubanguian (3 subdivisions):
 - 5a. chamba-namsi (= 6A2, 6A4, 6A5 of GREENBERG)
 - 5b. mangbei-mbum (= 6A6 of GREENBERG)
 - 5c. Oubanguian (4 subdivisions) :
 - ngbandi (= 6B3 of GREENBERG)
 - zande (= 6B4 of GREENBERG)
 - amadi (= 6B7 of GREENBERG)
 - groupe "kā" (= 6B2, B5, B6, B8 of GREENBERG)

Boyeldieu & Cloarec-Heiss (1987). Lexicostatistics & phonic correspondances (method W. Möhlig):

gbaya-manza-ngbaka	820				
zande-nzakara	79	539			
banda	109	115	721		
sango-yakoma	144	177	200	924	
ngbaka-monzombo	162	126	245	220	664
Subgroup	gbaya	zande	banda	sango	ngbaka
Nbr of languages compared	7	2	7	2	4

(Numerals in bold show internal average proximity of the languages of each subgroup; complete identity = 1000)

This table clearly shows that Gbaya and Zande-Nzakara have very few in common with other Ubanguian languages.

At the moment, the most reasonable position is given by Boyd (1989): inside the limits of Greenberg's Ubanguian, empirically taken as a provisional frame, we have three genealogical entities:

1. gbaya-manza-ngbaka (B1 of GREENBERG)
2. ngbandi-sere-banda:
 - a. ngbandi-sango-yakoma (B3)
 - b. sere-ngbaka-mba (B6, B5, B7 + B8)
 - c. banda (B2)
3. zande (B4)

Lexical affinities of Proto-Gbaya with Proto-Central Gur (Manessy 1979)

Manessy had previously reconstructed Proto-Gurunsi (1969) and Proto-Oti-Volta (1975), before comparing these two proto-languages together with Kurumfe, this new step in reconstruction he called Proto-Central. He gives 223 reconstructed items for Proto-Central : 62 are common to the three subfamilies Gu-OV-Ku, 105 to both Gu and OV, 39 to Gu and Ku, and 17 to OV and Ku.

I compared my 803 roots reconstructed for Proto-Gbaya with the 223 Gu-OV-Ku roots and obtained a total of 50 possible cognates between the two families : 20 of them characterize the whole Proto-Central family, 23 the Gu-OV set, 5 the Gu-K set and 2 the OV-K set. These 50 candidates to a genealogical link between Gur and Gbaya languages represent 22,4% of the compared roots. The same protocol applied to Proto-Gbaya and to "Ubanguian" languages gives the following results :

Proto-Gbaya-Zande	7,9%
Proto-Gbaya-Banda	10,9%
Proto-Gbaya-Sango-Yakoma	14,4%
Proto-Gbaya-Ngbaka-Monzombo	16,2%

So Proto-Gbaya has more genealogical affinities with Proto-Central Gur than with any of the so-called Ubanguian languages!

Proto-Gbaya / Proto-Central Gur (62 Gurunsi + Oti-Volta + Kurumfe) : 20 possible cognates

Proto-Gbaya	Proto-Central Gur	English	French
dàn	don	friend	ami, camarade
dáà	ca	father	père
sa	yi	to call	appeler
zÀ	ñen	night	nuit
£í	yi	face	visage
£i to suck/sucer	di	to eat	manger
£e	d yi	to enter	entrer
bú	po	white	blanc
ndàè	na	ox	bœuf
gøn	ko	to cut	couper
nø	ño	to drink	boire
bêm	bi	child	enfant
wŒŒ	van	leaf	feuille
górò	go	kola nut	kola
nár	na	four	quatre
dòm	•yU•	tail	queue
kor	ko	to dry	sécher
dÙkÙ£ Ì	kud	heel	talon
tòm	tum	work	travail
nám buffalo/buffle	nam	meat	viande

Proto-Gbaya possible cognates with 105 Gurunsi + Oti-Volta : 23

Proto-Gbaya	Gurunsi + Oti-Volta	English	Français
tè	tí	tree	arbre
ßàà, ßàkà	ßa, ßan	arm	bras

ɔo se casser	ko	to break	casser
dùngì, dònghè	dyUm	bat	chauve-souris
tÚ£ Í	to	elbow	coude
sÆk couper, tailler	se	to cut, sharpen	couper
gø	go	to bend	courber
•u puiser/draw from	•u	hollow	creux
yai	ñIn, ñI•	to	délier
£i	ni	water	eau
ñá	ña	younger brother	frère cadet
tí	ti	forehead	front
zÉ	ño	smoke	fumée
wá£á	nan	fruit	fruit
naa	na	mother	mère
zÍ	Ão	fly	mouche
£ín	yId, yI•	name	nom
kúì	çe	egg	œuf
náÑ	nan	foot	ped
kÒrá	kol	hen	poule
ki£i sphérique	ki•	round	rond
mbÁÑ	me•	dew	rosée
zù	‘yu	head	tête

Proto-Gbaya possible cognates with 39 Gurunsi + Kurumfe : 5

nÓ graisse, huile	nu	fat, oil	graisse, beurre
ñín	ye	tooth	dent
bâfâ	bad	male	mâle
lémbè, le£é	de•m	tongue	langue
sáp	ta	saliva	salive

Proto-Gbaya possible cognates with 17 Oti-Volta + Kurumfe : 2

£ítò	yi	two	deux
to	to	to grind	piler

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