

# "Why Ukaan is Hard to Classify"

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## 1 WHAT IS UKAAN?

Ukaan (ISO 639-3: kcf), refers to a cluster of four dialects spoken in five villages in the Akoko hills of south-western Nigeria (see Table 1). Ukaan is also known as AIKA, an acronym made up of the initial letters of the villages where Ukaan is spoken, i.e. Ayanran – Işẹ – Kakumo – Auga (Abiodun 1999, Elugbe 2001).

**Table 1: Ukaan dialects and their locations in the Akoko region (Salfner forthcoming)**

Dialect	Village	State	Longitude	Latitude
Igau	Auga	Ondo	7°33'16.26"N	5°54'59.28"E
Ayegbe	Işẹ	Ondo	7°31'11.56"N	5°55'15.06"E
Ikaan	Ikakumo	Ondo	7°34'59.22"N	6°0'17.98"E
Ikaan	Ikakumo	Edo	7°31'43.73"N	6°1'0.82"E
Iino	Ayanran	Edo	7°28'51.13"N	5°57'53.06"E

Ukaan has been of considerable interest for historical linguists because of its uncertain classification. The main questions are where in Benue-Congo Ukaan is located, whether it has a particularly close relationship to the neighbouring dialect cluster Akpes and/or to Edoid, and whether it has a particularly close relationship to either Eastern or Western Benue-Congo, or is a distinct subgroup of Benue-Congo.

While Ukaan has uncontroversially been accepted as a Benue-Congo language, its place within Benue-Congo has been controversial. It has been variously classified as a distinct branch of a flat Benue-Congo family tree (Lewis 2009, Williamson 1989), as part of Western Benue-Congo (Blench 1989), as part of Eastern Benue-Congo (Blench 1994/2005, Connell 1998, Williamson and Blench 2000), as a co-ordinate branch of Eastern and Western Benue-Congo (Bankale 2008, Ohiri-Aniche 1999), or as a branch of Edoid (Abiodun 1999, Agoyi 2001, Elugbe 2001).

Until very recently, most of the research that had been conducted on Ukaan was done expressly for the purpose of language classification. Despite similar data collection methodologies, similar wordlists, and sometimes even working with the same speaker, researchers have come up with different classifications. Recently, there have been major strides in linguistic documentation of Ukaan, including Abiodun (1999) working on all dialect and Salffner (2010), Borchardt (2011) and Kelsey (2007) working on the Ikaan dialect. With a deeper understanding of Ukaan, it is now possible to better evaluate previous classifications.

Given the current underdetermined state of Benue-Congo subgrouping, we will not propose our own classification here. Instead, we will explore the reasons behind the chequered history of Ukaan classification and suggest avenues for efforts at Benue-Congo reconstruction.

## 2 OVERVIEW OF PREVIOUS CLASSIFICATIONS

The earliest classifications of Ukaan group it together with Akpes as an Akoko or Akokoid language (e.g. Voegelin and Voegelin 1977). Many of these early classifications are inaccessible and thus difficult to evaluate (cf. Salffner forthcoming). The special grouping of Ukaan with Akpes based on lexical evidence alone is suspicious given the close proximity of the languages in Akoko. Later researchers noticed striking similarities between Ukaan and Eastern Benue Congo language groups such as Cross River (Connell 1998) and Kainji-Platoid (Ohiri-Aniche 1999), leading Williamson & Blench (2000) to classify Ukaan as an independent branch coordinate with Central Nigerian and Bantoid-Cross. Recent contact cannot explain these lexical similarities, but it is also not yet certain if these are simply shared inherited items or if they are shared lexical innovations. Using a 180-word vocabulary list, Blench (1994/2005) tentatively groups Ukaan in Bantoid-Cross coordinate with Cross-River and Bantoid.

**Table 2: Lexical comparison (based on Connell 1998, Elugbe 2001)**

Gloss	Cross River	Ukaan	Akpes	Edoid
'bone'	* <i>ś-kpó</i> (PLC)	<i>ò-xwó</i>	<i>ó-hwè</i>	* <i>ghu</i>
'ear'	<i>ù-lóm</i> (PLC)	<i>ú-rhûg</i>	<i>à-sùkù</i>	* <i>gu-chɔGɪ</i>
'work'	<i>ù-tóm</i>	<i>ù rhú</i>	<i>ì sùm</i>	<i>ú-θòmì</i> (Iyayu)

The most recent publications, however, which have all been based on data collected by the authors themselves seem to have settled on Ukaan as being related to the Edoid languages (Abiodun 1999, Agoyi 2001, Elugbe 2001, Elugbe 2011). These classifications point out similarities with Edoid but cannot be considered conclusive since they do not demonstrate

that the similarities must be due to a shared subgrouping with Edoid rather than to common inheritances from Proto-Benue-Congo. For instance, the lexical items in Table 2 show that Ukaan sometimes seemingly patterns more closely with Cross River ('bone'), sometimes with Edoid and Akpes ('ear') and sometimes the form appears to be shared across groups ('work'). Note, however, that the Ukaan voiceless 'r' (orthographic 'rh' in Table 2) shows different correspondence patterns in the words for 'ear' and 'work', which means that these putative cognates are suspect.

### 3 WHY HAS UKAAN BEEN HARD TO CLASSIFY?

Currently, the number of classifications of Ukaan is inversely proportional to the amount of available data. While lack of data on Ukaan has surely contributed to its difficult classification, the comparisons themselves have been tentative rather than exhaustive. Limited data on Ukaan has, of course, contributed to the difficulty in classifying it for the usual reasons, e.g. that polymorphemic words are misidentified as monomorphemic. However, the limited data can not only be attributed to a limited amount of fieldwork, but also to the sampling issues, the lack of documentation of neighbouring languages and the methodological issues which we discuss below.

#### 3.1 Sampling

##### 3.1.1 Small number of lects

The lack of data on Ukaan comes not only from the fact that there has been relatively little research on the group until recently, but also because the number of distinct lects in the group is small. This leads to Ukaan being significantly undersampled compared to Bantoid, for instance. Even if all Ukaan lects do become well-documented, Ukaan may still be more difficult to classify due to this sampling issue.

##### 3.1.2 Variation between lects and working with one lect only

There is considerable variation between the lects, as shown in Abiodun (1999) using the Ibadan 400 wordlist. While Abiodun still argues that the lects are mutually intelligible, participant observation and discussions with speakers from all villages during a sociolinguistic survey by Salfner in 2006 showed that in fact not all dialects are mutually intelligible.

The implication for historical linguistics would be that a classification of Ukaan cannot be done based on one dialect only, as attempted for example in Williamson (1989) but based on data from all dialects, as done by Abiodun (1999).

### 3.1.3 Variation between speakers and working with one speaker only

The lack of data on Ukaan is made worse by the fact that much past research on Ukaan was based on only one speaker per lect. In addition, it seems that many researchers who worked on Ukaan, especially those working on the Ikaan lect, have worked with the same speaker. The Ikaan lect, however, shows quite a wide range of variation between speakers for some sounds and for some phonological processes. For example, what is likely to be a voiceless alveolar approximant in its underlying form is pronounced not just as a voiceless alveolar approximant, tap or trill but also as a clear voiceless alveolar fricative, as an apical postalveolar fricative and potentially other varieties. The speaker that at least Elugbe (2001), Abiodun (1999) and Oyetade (1996) were working with has a very s-like pronunciation, which is at the extreme fricative end of the varieties of the speakers and not typical or representative for the community or the lect as a whole.

Short-term research conducted with a single speaker can lead to a poor understanding of Ukaan phonology. Misconceptions about Ukaan phonology may be compounded in language comparisons involving other little-known languages or language groups such as Akpes and Oko, which may also show variation between speakers.

## 3.2 Underdescribed neighbouring languages and missed loan words

Given the high level of linguistic diversity in Akoko region where Ukaan is spoken, any classification of Ukaan must address the issue of contact in detail. Many of the distinct subgroups of Western Benue-Congo are represented by languages in the immediate vicinity of Ukaan: Akpes, Oko, small languages of the Edoid group, and all of the subgroups of Defoid, i.e. Akokoid, Ayere-Ahan, Yoruboid and Igala.

People living in Akoko are multilingual to a high degree and have been in contact with other languages for a long time. Yoruba, English and Epira (the main language of a migrant group), are spoken by many Ukaan speakers today, but many speakers also know neighbouring minority languages. Ukaan speakers may marry out or may live and work in a neighbouring village and thereby be in close contact with the other languages on a daily basis. Many of these languages in Akoko are little-known and underdescribed, including the local Yoruba dialect, which makes it difficult to spot potential borrowings from these languages.

Classifications based on lexicostatistics (without the use of the Comparative Method) are particularly subject to fluctuations based on the misidentification of loans as inherited items. For example, the Ikaan term for 'blood' is [ɔ̀dʒá] which looks like a potential isogloss grouping Ukaan with Nupe-Gwari: \*gya 'blood' vs. Igbiroid \*nyá (Bennett and Sterk 1977: 259). Other Ukaan lects, however, have forms with a palatal nasal \*ùjú<sup>n</sup> (Abiodun 1999:

321). The Ikaan form looks like it may have been due to Nupoid influence. Without data on more than one Ukaan lect, the Ikaan term may have been misidentified as an inherited item.

### 3.3 Methodological issues

#### 3.3.1 Unclear transcriptions and a rush to phonologise

Almost all previous classification work was done based on wordlists, often collected during one short trip from one speaker. Since often there is no phonological or phonemic analysis of the language available, the transcriptions of these wordlists would necessarily have to be phonetic transcriptions, but the level of transcriptions is rarely discussed by researchers.

Even when using a systematic phonetic transcription as in Elugbe (2011), there seems to be a rush to phonologise data. For example, in the comments on his transcriptions, Elugbe notes that Ikaan has non-automatic downstep after floating low, which he marks in his transcriptions, and that it also has automatic downstep after overt low, which he does not mark. In Elugbe’s data works with, there are indeed examples of LHL words where the second low is pronounced at a lower level, which would be typical of automatic downstep. However, working with longer phrases or even words with LHLH patterns reveal that there is no automatic downstep in Ikaan. What does occur however is phrase-final lowering of L, as shown in the stylised pitch tracks in Example (1) and discussed in Salffner (2010). Therefore, by working with short utterances and words only, the data he had did not allow Elugbe to spot this rare feature of Ukaan.

- (1) a. LHL<sup>1</sup>  
       èjímò                    ‘garden egg’                    — — —  
       b. LHLH  
       ùkpárùkpá                ‘butterfly’                    — — — —  
       c. LHLHLHL  
       ḍ-rán                    ḍwóg àrákpà                    — — — — — — —  
       3s.nfut-prepare    bean stew  
       ‘She cooked bean stew.’

Different analyses of underlying pitch could potentially lead to different reconstructions. However, Benue-Congo reconstruction is not yet at the point where tone correspondences play a large role.

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations in the examples are: L = low tone, H = high tone, 3S = third person singular, NFUT = non-future tense.

### 3.3.2 Comparison methods

Most of the classifications of Ukaan have been based on lexical comparisons without using reconstructions made using the Comparative Method, i.e. with sufficient regard to finding regular, repeated sound correspondences in lexical items. Most of the reconstructions have failed to show shared paradigmatic/grammatical forms. Those that have (e.g. Elugbe 2011) have not shown that the similarities are unique to the subgroup proposed. None of the subgroupings have been based on shared innovations apart from a few lexical isoglosses.

## 4 DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RECONSTRUCTIONS

A classification is only useful if it can help explain linguistic patterns. If the only patterns it can explain are the handful of lexical similarities that the classification itself was based on, then it is of limited value. Here, we will show several areas where Ukaan shows irregularities or unusual linguistic features. If these can be shown to have regular correspondences in other Benue-Congo languages, they may provide strong evidence for subgrouping.

### 4.1 Voiceless approximants

Ukaan is typologically unusual in having voiceless approximants, and in having weak evidence for a shared \*s phoneme. While voiceless /ɸ/ is found in Edoid, it is not clear that the phoneme comes from a single sound change shared by these groups. Some words with voiceless approximants have potential cognates with Cross River (Connell 1998: 24) but it is not known whether these are uniquely shared by these two groups. We will investigate cognates in a range of Benue-Congo languages for approximately twenty words containing /ɸ/ in Ikaan.

### 4.2 Underlyingly -m final words

In monomorphemic words in Ikaan, there are some words that underlyingly end in /m/. This /m/ does not surface in phrase-final position and before other consonants (Salffner 2010: 58). For instance, /ɪʃúm/ 'head' usually surfaces as [ɪʃú] but other terms such as /rõm/ 'learn' almost always surface with the final /m/, i.e. [rõm]. We will look for cognates across Benue-Congo for approximately twenty /m/ final words to see if there are other languages which contain cognate /m/'s.

### 4.3 Numerals

Numeral terms for Ikaan will be presented. There are a number of features of the numerals which are unusual. For instance, the word *òpú* 'ten' is the only word in the language with the consonant [p]. This [p] changes to [f] when the word is used as the modifier of a noun rather

than as an enumerative, e.g. *àjén â:fù* ‘ten wives’. The tonal patterns of the terms for ‘wá:’ ‘two’, ‘tá:s’ ‘three’ and ‘ná’ ‘four’ are atypical of the language as a whole, though there are a few nouns and the distal demonstrative that are also downstep-initial. We will present a table for the numerals 1-10 with comparisons from other Benue-Congo languages, and we will discuss whether Kainji-Platoid numerals are as close to Ukaan as has been argued (Ohiri-Aniche 1999).

#### 4.4 Noun classification

Ukaan noun classification has been presented as being very similar to that of Akpes (Elugbe 2011), therefore we will discuss the implications of the Ukaan noun class system for classification.

### 5 CONCLUSION

Any classification of Ukaan will be subject to critique based on the comparanda used and the methodology applied. Whether any new classification of Ukaan should be adopted should be based on more stringent criteria than have been applied in the past.

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Table 1: Ukaan dialects and their locations in the Akoko region (Salfner forthcoming)

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'work'	ù-tóm	ù rhú	ì sùm	ú-θòmì (Iyayu)