

Supposing we have been completely wrong about the shape of early Niger-Congo roots?

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A common assumption about the shape of Proto-Niger-Congo roots is that stems were disyllabic. This is supported by a vision of Bantu-like roots for nouns with the canonical shape (C)V-CVCV. Even where noun-classes have been lost, stems are often disyllabic synchronically. Reconstructed roots (such as they are) in Westermann (1927) and Mukarovsky (1976-1977) are frequently one or two syllables. There are problems with this interpretation, connected with additional syllables which appear in citation forms, especially in languages without any traces of noun classes such as Dogon and Ijoid. If roots in these languages are cognate, then the additional syllables must be analysed as affixes or old compounds. If a cognate segment also shows up in a noun-class branch of Niger-Congo, then it is hard to know why it should not be reconstructed.

Another problematic issue in Niger-Congo reconstruction is vowel alternation between branches. In common roots like 'head' the basic form looks like #tV, but the vowel sometimes surfaces as a high back vowel and sometimes a high front vowel. Hence reconstructed proto-forms are given the shape *tui, *twi and similar. This is hard to account for by some regular process of sound correspondence, but explicable if both are descendants of a long form which included both front and back vowels.

This paper puts forward a radical alternative, that many early Niger-Congo roots were trisyllabic, CVCVCV, and that surface forms across the phylum can be accounted for by a variety of erosional pathways. The inspiration for this comes from the Ijoid and Dogon branches of Niger-Congo and in particular a paper by Kay Williamson (1979), where she touches on this idea for Ijò but never completely accepts it. Williamson (1992) also sets out cognates for some triconsonantal roots although it does not discuss the implications for reconstruction. Observing that a significant number of proto-Ijoid forms have to be reconstructed with a CVCVCV formula, she suggests that the medial consonants can be found elsewhere in Niger-Congo in segments otherwise discarded in proposed reconstructions. This is relevant to Bantu, which often appears to be particularly conservative. Mukarovsky's (1976-1977) 'Proto-Western Nigritic' forms purport to be Africa wide, but all too often reflect the segmental material in proto-Bantu, lacking evidence from languages westward. Mukarovsky did not admit Ijoid or Dogon into his canon, thereby overlooking crucial evidence.

The proposal advanced here is that in early Niger-Congo, triconsonantal roots were far more common than in most languages today, and that this reflected a language where tone had a low functional load, and which semantic classes were not marked morphologically. If so, then Dogon and Ijoid conserve some of these roots in a shape close to their original form, and most other branches have eroded the segments according to a variety of pathways, often finally becoming monosyllabic. An exactly similar route is characteristic of Sino-Tibetan, where the long forms of Nepalese languages become pervasive monosyllabism in Sinitic and other East Asian branches. Secondly, that these triconsonantal roots usually included a mix of high front and back vowels, and that as erosion occurred, either one could emerge as the stem vowel, but with the consequence that labialisation was often phonologically significant. Alternatively erosion could give rise to labial-velars, and front rounded vowels.

An additional feature of the triconsonantal roots reconstructed here is that the 'third syllable' in Dogon and Ijoid was often r/IV- (usually a back vowel) and this becomes NV- and then nasalisation

in other Niger-Congo languages. Furthermore, typical eroded forms of CVCV shape took on a life of their own and were then transmitted in parallel to forms which retained traces of the three original consonants. This partly accounts for the multiple versions of the same root proposed by Guthrie for Common Bantu. Harmony processes are pervasive in Niger-Congo and were certainly present from the period when Ijoid evolved, which accounts for vowel copying and assimilation in cognates in many languages. The interpretation of what looks like an old affix in both Dogon and Ijoid is uncertain, but it is possibly a definiteness marker.

Finally, is this ‘proto-form-stuffing’, to use a term adopted by Blust for Austronesian? Is this an attempt to account for all surface forms by simply positing long reconstructions? I would argue not, as these long forms are attested synchronically with cognate segments in at least two Niger-Congo branches. However, they inevitably make us think quite differently about the canonic forms of early Niger-Congo.