

Noun Class Typology as Evidence of Genetic Relation in Africa

Since Greenberg's proposal of the Niger-Congo language phylum, the genetic validity of this hypothesized family of African languages has been controversial, being defined primarily by typological criteria rather than well-established cognates and sound correspondences at the highest levels of the family. By the traditional tools of historical linguistics, simple typological similarity is not enough to prove genetic relatedness, and most such typological properties have been rejected as evidence of such a relation, e.g. Hyman (2014) for systems of verbal extensions. And yet one typological property in particular is so striking that it continues to be put forth as evidence of genetic affiliation, even in the absence of cognate morphemes; namely, the noun class systems of these Niger-Congo languages. The Greenbergian argument is essentially that the typological properties of Niger-Congo noun class systems are so unique in the world's languages that they could not have arisen independently in unrelated languages, but must rather all be descended from a single proto-system. Welmers (1974: 184) makes this argument as follows: "Independent innovation or borrowing of such a complex element of morphologic structure seems incredible; it is surely more reasonable to suppose that Proto-Niger-Kordofanian had a noun class system to begin with." More recently Güldemann (2011) argues that these systems are "certainly inherited," stating, "After all, this feature was and is the best non-lexical diagnostic for genealogical classification in the Niger-Congo domain since Westermann (1935)." Schadeberg (2011) defends this argument as well.

Of course, within many established sub-groups, the class markers can be shown to be cognate, and in these cases a clearly legitimate argument for relatedness exists. In this paper the focus will mainly be on the class systems of Atlantic languages as compared to the genetically-coherent Benue-Congo noun class systems. When compared to each other and to Benue-Congo, the noun class systems of Atlantic languages do for the most part share a number of typological features, but the markers themselves show no clear indication of being cognate. In such cases, the burden is on the Greenbergian argument to show that the typological profile of these noun class systems is indeed so unique that it could only have arisen once in the history of language, and could not have been spread by areal diffusion. Otherwise, we must fall back on the traditional assumption of historical linguistics that typological similarity is not sufficient to prove relatedness.

I will argue that simply possessing a "Niger-Congo-like" noun class system, without demonstrating the cognacy of the classes, cannot be taken as an argument for genetic relatedness, as the defining characteristics of these systems are not unique enough such that they could not have been innovated in unrelated languages under areal pressure. The structure of this paper is as follows: we will first establish that many of the noun class systems in question do not make use of obviously cognate markers. We will then turn to the question of what exactly defines Niger-Congo noun class systems as a whole, and assess to what extent these properties are unique among the world's languages. It will be found that there are less typological properties in common between Niger-Congo noun class systems than is often assumed, and that for the properties that do exist, none are unique typologically. Finally, we will examine the potential ways in which noun class systems of the Niger-Congo type could have arisen in unrelated languages through areal influence.

References

- Güldemann, Tom. 2011. "Proto-Bantu and Proto-Niger-Congo: Macro-areal Typology and Linguistic Reconstruction." In: Hieda, Osamu, Christa König and Hiroshi Nakagawa (eds.), *Geographical Typology and Linguistic Areas: With special reference to Africa*, pp. 109–141. John Benjamins.
- Hyman, Larry. 2014. "Reconstructing the Niger-Congo verb extension paradigm: What's cognate, copied, or renewed?" In Martine Robbeets & Walter Bisang (eds), *Paradigm Change in the Transeurasian languages and beyond*, pp. 103-125. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Schadeberg, Thilo C. 2011. "The unique nature of the Niger-Congo noun class system, and a comparison of event participant marking in Bantu and Ebang (Kordofanian)." Paper presented at the Fourth International Conference on Bantu Languages, Berlin.
- Welmers, William Everett. 1974. *African Language Structures*. University of California Press.