

**Did the Category “Adjective” Exist in Proto-Kru?**  
**Lynell Marchese Zogbo**  
**University of the Free State**

For decades, linguists studying Niger-Congo languages have noted the small size and irregular behavior of the grammatical class called “adjective”. In the Kru language family, while the majority of adjectival notions are expressed by adjectival verbs exhibiting the full gamut of verbal properties, there is indeed a restricted class of what can be termed “true adjectives”, expressing such notions as physical shape and size as well as color. Citing data from over 12 languages from both Western and Eastern Kru, in this paper, we set out to explore how Kru languages express adjectival notions, with a view to examining the question: did the category ‘adjective’ exist in Proto-Kru? Possible scenarios and mechanisms for syntactic change, including nominal constructions as a source of current adjectives, will be explored.

As in many language families in Niger-Congo, there is no single way to express adjectival notions within Kru. All Kru languages employ a number of strategies, including:

1. verbs with adjectival meaning,
2. verbal constructions with nominal complements,
3. ideophones,
4. relative clauses,
5. what appears in most languages to be a class of ‘true’ adjectives.

Strategy (1), adjectival verbs, is by far the most common and frequent means of expressing adjectival notions. Many languages have well over twenty such verbs covering a wide semantic range (“to be white”, “little”, “dry”, “smart”, “stupid”, “straight”, etc.). It is fairly easy to reconstruct proto forms for both Eastern (E) and Western (W) Kru, and then to propose Proto Kru forms, for example:

- \*kpe ‘to be black’ (EKoyo kpe/WNyabwa kpè/WWobe kpe)
- \*plu ‘to be white’ (EKouya'pɔlv/ WTchien Krahn 'plu/WNyabwa 'plu)
- \*za(n?) ‘to be red’ (EKoyo za / EGodie zλ/W Nyabwa zaan)

Several of these verbs co-occur with verbal particles (most often derived from noun body parts), with repetitive cycles of particle formation producing a variety of adjectival nuances:

Wobé (Egner)

- nmə...‘i ‘to be good’ (good in the eyes)
- nmə...-jri i ‘to be beautiful’ (good in the eyes eyes)
- nmə...-cIe ‘i ‘to be handy’ (good with fingers eyes)

Strategy (2), verbal constructions with nominal complements, for example a transitive locative “be at” (“be at dirty”), the verb ‘have’ (“have dirtiness”), or ‘do’ (“doing + ideophone/abstract behavior”), may also be partially reconstructable for Proto-Kru (and perhaps Niger-Congo?).

While strategies 1-4 are fairly straightforward both synchronically and diachronically, it is not surprising that strategy (5) raises considerable difficulties both on a synchronic and diachronic level. Within Kru, “true adjectives”, appearing in post-nominal position (N ADJ NUM DEM), are few in number and show little homogeneity. They are typically divided into subclasses based on agreement and/or plural markings. The irregularity in this grammatical class leads us to ask two crucial questions:

- Was there an “adjective” category in proto-Kru which “disintegrated” over time, leaving behind odd-behaving remnants? or
- Was proto-Kru “adjective-less”, i.e. are the current “adjectives” products of other mechanisms?

It is indeed possible that Proto-Kru had “true” adjectives, exhibiting, as other branches of Niger-Congo, extensive noun class agreement. If this is the case, then Eastern Kru languages would present the oldest NP paradigms, such as:

Godie (Marchese) Noun + Adjective + Demonstrative		
nyūkpō kádō nō	‘this big (great) man’	(ōhuman class)
bùtu kádv nṽ	‘this big house’	(ṽclass, including liquids)
mīē kádē nē	‘this big animal’	(ē class, large animals)
nmlə kádā nā	‘this big bird’	(a class, rice, birds, etc.)
ḡìtī kádī nī	‘these big houses’	(īclass, non human plural)
nyūkpà kádvā nṽā	‘these big (great) men’	(wā/vāclass, human plural)

Following this scenario, all Western Kru would have lost class agreement in adjectives, except for some lexical items where class has reduced to singular/plural agreement.

While the above scenario seems very plausible, the morphological structure of some “true adjectives”, as well as their tonal behavior, suggest other possible scenarios. In many languages in both Eastern and Western Kru, adjectives may undergo tonal lowering (marked below by -), similar to the lowering in compound noun structures:

Tchien Krahn (Sauder)		
‘yu -gbolo’	child young	nyo -bholv’ man old

Another intriguing fact is that many current adjectives are either reduplicated forms and/or end in LV/NV/DV syllables, suggesting another possible compound structure: adjectival verb + pro-form (or lexical nominal such as “thing”). Is it possible that present day adjectives exhibit nominal qualities because they are, in fact, reanalyzed compound nouns?

NOUNVERB-PROFORMNOUNADJ			
bhutu	na-nv→	bhutu	nanv
‘housebeautiful-one’		‘a beautiful house’	

Such a scenario for adjective development would paint a very different picture for the Proto Kru noun phrase than in the first instance (\*N ADJ QUANT). These are questions we hope to explore and further develop in this paper.