

George Starostin (*Russian State University for the Humanities / Russian Presidential Academy*)

**Once more on the genetic affiliation of Krongo-Kadugli (Kadu) languages:
the basic lexicon perspective**

Among the various African language groups whose wider affiliation remains questionable or completely mysterious, the Krongo-Kadugli languages of the Nuba mountains have long occupied quite a prominent position. Sharing various typological features in common both with various «Nilo-Saharan» groups of the Macro-Sudanic belt and with their close geographical neighbours of the Kordofanian family, they are clearly at best very distantly related to anything (Blench 2006), and it is not surprising that intuitive assumptions and tentative hypotheses on their ancestry made by Africanists over the last half-century vary significantly, depending on the type, amount, and quality of data taken into consideration.

The two major competing hypotheses, each of which has its further subvariants, are «Niger-Congo» and «Nilo-Saharan» affiliation. The former was originally advanced by Greenberg (1966), who regarded Kadu as the most divergent branch of Kordofanian, and strongly supported by Ehret (2000), who prefers to relate Kadu to Niger-Congo as a whole, without any specific Kordofanian sub-filiation, based on a small group of basic lexical roots that allegedly pair up well with lexical roots reconstructible on intermediate or top levels of Niger-Congo.

The major alternative was first presented by Thilo Schadeberg (1981), whose extensive fieldwork and analytical research on these languages led him to the conclusion that they share far more in common with «Nilo-Saharan», and that the Niger-Congo links are better explained through late period convergence processes. This idea was later endorsed by G. Dimmendaal (1987), R. C. Stevenson (1991), and M. L. Bender (1997), but since «Nilo-Saharan» itself remains a much more controversial taxon than Niger-Congo, it is clear that such an endorsement cannot be taken too seriously either until definitive evidence has been presented for «Nilo-Saharan» (and Kadu languages are shown to conform with this evidence), or until Kadu languages are shown to be related to a specific non-controversial subset of Nilo-Saharan.

In a brief, but comprehensive overview (Blench 2006), R. Blench compares some typological, lexical, and grammatical features of Kadu not only to «Niger-Congo» and «Nilo-Saharan», but also to Afro-Asiatic, and concludes that no definitive judgement may be pronounced, but still leans towards a «Nilo-Saharan» affiliation, eventually compromised by long periods of convergence and even linguistic «metatypy» that took place between Kadu and its Afro-Asiatic, Kordofanian, and possibly other Niger-Congo neighbours. He also discusses the possibility that certain morphemic links between Kadu, Niger-Congo, and «Nilo-Saharan» may be interpreted in terms of an original «Niger-Saharan» unity, of which Kadu may have been a separately divergent branch, although this hypothesis is even more speculative than any of the others.

Although some comparison of the basic lexicon of Kadu with Niger-Congo and Nilo-Saharan data has already been performed, beginning with Schadeberg 1981 and culminating in an extensive survey by C. Ehret (1995), all of these comparisons suffered from methodological flaws that reduced, if not completely eliminated, their effectiveness. On the Kadu side, comparanda were drawn from individual languages rather than Proto-Kadu (this is particularly typical of Ehret's comparison, which is totally focused on the Krongo language that represents only one of the subbranches of this small family). On the other side, comparanda could be randomly drawn from any subset of «Nilo-Saharan» or Niger-Congo languages, even though «Proto-Nilo-Saharan» reconstructions are virtually non-existent (Ehret's own NS reconstruction remains highly controversial), and Proto-Niger-Congo reconstructions used in comparisons vary in quality. This not only means that data could be cherry-picked to match any intuitively preferable hypothesis, but

also raises the risks of mistaking the results of recent linguistic contacts for archaic markers of genetic affiliation.

As part of my ongoing study on mid-level and deep-level genetic relations between the various language families of Africa, I have conducted a preliminary survey of the basic lexicon of Krongo-Kadugli languages along with a first attempt at the reconstruction of the Proto-Krongo-Kadugli Swadesh wordlist. This not only leads to a better formalized and transparent lexically based classification of this group, but also allows for a more reliable comparison with other families. Such a comparison has also been conducted, between Kadu and all the potential constituents of the «Nilo-Saharan» macrofamily as well as several constituents of Niger-Congo (most notably Kordofanian languages and Bantu), based on formal rules of phonetic similarity and some additional considerations on the historical phonology of Kadu.

Results of the comparison show that, while the methodology is insufficient to definitively place Krongo-Kadugli within any larger linguistic subset, there is a strong and hardly accidental lexical signal which indicates that Kadu's nearest relative may be the Central Sudanic family (a generally non-controversial grouping within «Nilo-Saharan»), or possibly a somewhat larger cluster that also involves a few smaller taxa such as the Maba languages of Chad. All the other signals are incomparable in strength, and should probably be explained as results of later contacts (e. g. with Kordofanian) or accidental resemblances. In any case, «smart lexicostatistics» (combined with a more thorough distributional and etymological analysis) speaks strongly against any possible Niger-Congo affiliation of Kadu, and the entire case seems to be an excellent example of how deeper linguistic analysis allows to distinguish between convergence and genetic ancestry.

References:

- Bender 1997: Lionel M. Bender. *The Nilo-Saharan Languages: A Comparative Essay*. München – Newcastle: LINCOM Europa.
- Blench 2006: Roger M. Blench. The Kadu languages and their affiliation: between Nilo-Saharan, Niger-Congo and Afro-Asiatic. // *Insights into Nilo-Saharan Language, History and Culture*. Ed. by Al-Amin Abu-Manga, Leoma Gilley, & Anne Storch. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, pp. 101-127.
- Dimmendaal 1987: Gerrit J. Dimmendaal. Krongo: Between Universal, Areal and Genetic Norms. // *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics*, 9, pp. 161-177.
- Ehret 1995: Christopher Ehret. Do Krongo and Shabo belong in Nilo-Saharan? // *Actes du Cinquieme Colloque de Linguistique Nilo-Saharienne. 24-29 août 1992*. Ed. by Robert Nicolaï & Franz Rottland. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, pp. 169-193.
- Ehret 2000: Christopher Ehret. Is Krongo After All A Niger-Congo Language? // *"Mehr als nur Worte...": Afrikanistische Beiträge zum 65. Geburtstag von Franz Rottland*. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, pp. 247-267.
- Greenberg 1966: Joseph H. Greenberg. *The Languages of Africa*. Bloomington, Indiana University; Mouton & Co., The Hague.
- Schadeberg 1981: Thilo C. Schadeberg. The Classification of the Kadugli Language Group. // *Nilo-Saharan: Proceedings of the First Nilo-Saharan Linguistics Colloquium, Leiden, September 8-10, 1980*. Ed. by Thilo C. Schadeberg & M. Lionel Bender. Dordrecht & Cinnaminson: FORIS Publications, pp. 291-305.
- Stevenson 1991: Roland C. Stevenson. Relationship of Kadugli-Krongo to Nilo-Saharan: morphology and lexis. // *Proceedings of the Fourth Nilo-Saharan Conference. Bayreuth, Aug. 30 – Sep. 2, 1989*. Ed. by M. Lionel Bender. Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag, pp. 347-369.