

THE PEDIGREE OF NATION
Historical Linguistics in Nigeria

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By

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INTRODUCTION

By now we can speak of a tradition of inaugural lectures in the University of Port Harcourt. I would therefore like to refer back to the first one given by Professor Alagoa, in which he stressed the interdisciplinary nature of history and the contributions made to it by other discipline including linguistics. Rather than address myself to whole discipline of linguistics, I have decided today to restrict myself to one particular area, *historical linguistics*, which is the area that feeds into history. I should explain that I am making no attempt to be comprehensive in my coverage either of historical linguistics (itself a vast subject) or of its application to Nigeria; I am attempting to give some of the results of the discipline rather than a survey of its methods, and to concentrate on those which seem of particular relevance to us in this part of Nigeria.

HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY EUROPE

Like many of the disciplines in this university, historical linguistics originated in nineteenth-century Europe. But, again like many of those disciplines, it owed much of its stimulus to sources outside Europe, in this case India.

The British and other Europeans did not go to India in the eighteenth century for reasons of scholarship; but scholars has greatly benefitted from what they found there. In India they discovered a flourishing and sophisticated tradition of grammatical analysis which was quite independent of the European one. (I use the word 'sophisticated' advisedly; students of this university who think linguistics is difficult should thank their lucky stars they are not studying under Panini, the greatest of the Indian grammarians.) To their great surprise, Europeans discovered that Sanskrit, the sacred classical language of India, and the modern Indian languages of the same group, were related to the European languages they already knew; the Romance languages such as French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian; the Germanic languages such as German, Dutch, English, and the Scandinavian languages; the Slavic languages such as Russian, and the classical languages of Europe, Latin and Greek.

The beginning of modern historical linguistics is usually dated to the famous statement made by Sir William Jones in 1786:

“The Sanskrit language, whatever may be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either; yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong that no philologer could examine the Sanskrit Greek, and Latin, without believing them to have sprung from some common source which, perhaps, no longer exists. There is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the Gothic and the Celtic had the same origin with the Sanskrit” (Robins 1967:134).

This statement was the first clear expression of one of the basic tenets of historical linguistics: that present-day languages are the varied developments or continuations of an older, original language, or proto-language. A proto-language, like any other language, differentiates into dialects, and these dialects, if left to themselves, gradually develop into independent languages, but so long as some original similarities between such daughter languages remain, and can be reliably distinguished from similarities due to chance or borrowing, they serve to trace the original that languages belong to families, each family descending from a common ancestor or proto-language. Such relationships between languages can be represented in the form of a family tree. Languages descending from the same proto-language are said to be related; when we can no longer trace such a common origin, we say they are unrelated, although it is likely that language only originated once in human evolution and therefore that all languages are ultimately related.

The idea of the Indo-European language family, as it eventually come to be known, stimulated the imagination of nineteenth-century European scholars,. In 1818, Rasmus Rask, a Dane, published the prize-winning

work in which he established the position of Icelandic within the Indo-European family and, more importantly, the methods by which relationship can be correctly determined. First, he observed that because words can easily be borrowed from one language to another,

grammatical agreement is a much more certain induction of kinship or of original identity, because a language which is mixed with another seldom or never takes over morphological changes or inflections from it' (Pedersen 1931 (1962):250-1).

Secondly, he pointed out that borrowing has little effect on what we nowadays call the basic vocabulary of language, which is therefore a reliable indicator of relationship:

'A language, however mixed it may be, belongs to the same branch of languages as another when it has the most essential, concrete, indispensable words, the foundation of the language, in common with it....' (Pedersen 1931 (1962): 251).

Thirdly, he formulated the principle of regular sound correspondences:

'When agreement is found in such words (i.e. basic vocabulary) in two languages, and so frequently that rules may be drawn up for the shift in letters (i.e. sounds) from one to the other, then there is a fundamental relationship between the two languages....'(pedersen 1931 (1962):251).

Nineteenth-century historical linguistics developed these three insights. A series of scholars, most of them German, compared the Indo-European languages and reconstructed either Proto-Indo-European or the intermediate proto-language of one of its branches. For example, Jacob Grimm made a comparative study of the Germanic languages and formulated the set of sound correspondences between Indo-European and Germanic which are traditionally known as Grimm's Law, although they

were in fact first pointed out by Rask. Thus, a large amount of knowledge was gradually built up.

In the earlier part of the century, scholars were impressed by the fact that sounds often corresponded regularly from one language to another, but not much disturbed when they did not; they tended to dismiss such cases as mere exceptions. In 1872 Karl Verner claimed that in historical linguistics one should not say 'No rule without exceptions' but rather 'No exception without a rule', and proved it elegantly in 1875 with a paper where he showed that a whole set of hitherto troublesome 'exceptions' to Grimm's Law could be accounted for by assuming different positions of the original accent as the cause of different developments. The second period of historical linguistics began in 1875 with the establishment of this as a principle: amid a good deal of controversy and clash of personalities, the Junggrammatiker, or Neo-Grammarians, led by Karl Brugmann, claimed that sound changes operate without exceptions. Apparent exceptions have to be explained either as due to the operation of conditioning factors which have not yet been discovered, or as the result of analogy, that is the tendency of regular formations to supplant irregular ones.

HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY WEST AFRICA

While Europeans had a special interest in Indo-European because it was the language of their ancestors, they also investigated the languages of the other parts of the world. With few exceptions, African languages were hardly known at all to the rest of the world by the beginning of the nineteenth century. By the end of the century, it was recognized that most North Africans spoke languages of what was then called the Hamito-Semitic family and is now, following Greenberg, usually known as Afroasiatic; that Southern Africa contained on the one hand the languages of the Bushmen and Hottentots, which are now, following Greenberg, known as the Khoisan family, and on the other hand the Bantu languages, whose close relationship makes them easy to recognize, and which extend through most of Central and much of East Africa. The relationship of the languages of a broad band running right across the middle of Africa, including all of West Africa, remained much more doubtful. This is

because the languages in this area, which has been called the Fragmentation Belt (Daily 1977), are both numerous and, in many cases, only distantly, or not at all, related. We will here concentrate upon the development of the classification of the languages of West Africa.

Fortunately, the study of West African languages was not pursued solely in Europe or by Europeans. The historian, Paul Hair (1962) has pointed out that Fourah Bay College in Freetown served as centre for the study of West African languages from 1800 to 1880, not only because it was the first institution in West Africa to provide post-primary Western Education but because Freetown contained among its population of resettled Africans, rescued from slavery, speakers of enormous numbers of West African languages. In 1828 Mrs. Hannah Kilham, a Quaker educationist, published a collection of thirty vocabularies of African languages, with the intention of giving children in the Freetown schools the chance to read their own home language before English; she also proposed a linguistic institute in England, where selected Africans could study their own languages, put them into writing, and prepare religious translations; unfortunately this was never put into practice (Hair 1967:6).

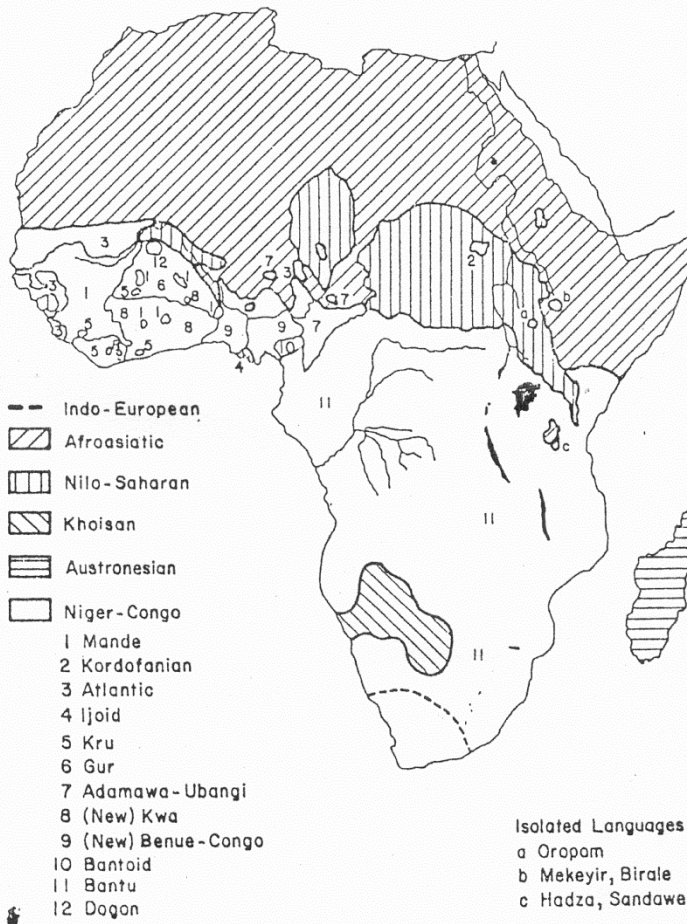
The most monumental scholarly work to emerge from Fourah Bay was that of S.W. Koelle, a German missionary working with the C.M.S. whose five years in Freetown resulted in a grammar and dictionary of Vai (a Mande language of Liberia and Sierra Leone), a grammar and specimens of literature in Kanuri, and the *polyglotta Africana* (1854). This is a massive piece of work; a collection of vocabularies, consisting of nearly 300 words and phrases in more than one hundred distinct African languages'. Koelle used a standard word list, transcribed in a standardized orthography, and added a short biographical note on each of his informants, indicating his name, approximate age, length of time in Freetown, original home, and the route by which he was brought to the sea; from these indications he compiled a map with extraordinarily clear indications of the positions of languages when it is recalled that it was drawn entirely from his informants' explanations. Europeans had almost no knowledge of the West African interior at that date.

Koelle's contribution to historical linguistics was not simply in making available information on a large number of related groups. In a number of cases his groups correspond to recognized modern groups: e.g. his 'North-West Atlantic' corresponds to the branch called 'West Atlantic' by Westermann and Greenberg and more recently 'Atlantic', and his 'Mandenga' to Westermann's 'Mandingo' and modern 'Mande'.

The most distinguished scholar to emerge from the first set of students at Fourah Bay was Samuel Adjai Crowther, who spoke Yoruba as his mother-tongue. He worked as the first African tutor at Fourah Bay, was ordained in 1843, and appointed Bishop of the Niger in 1964. Crowther made a major contribution to the study of Yoruba, but his linguistic work extended far beyond his own language. In 1841 he and J. F. Schon, who worked for decades on Igbo and Housa, were selected to accompany the Niger Expedition, which collected information about the languages spoken as far up the Niger as Egga in Nupeland. In 1854 he joined another expedition up the Niger and Benue led by Dr. William Baikie. (Contrary to popular opinion, Baikie's name is not the source of the local name in Rivers State for Europeans, *beke* or *beke*. Versions of the work in Nigerian languages are recorded in print prior to Baikie's voyage: Williamson 1984) both Crowther and Baikie published an account of the 1854 expedition, each with an appendix of linguistic information including vocabularies of some of the languages encountered.

Paul Hair, upon whose information (1962, 1967) this section is chiefly based, emphasizes two very important facts about the Niger Mission which was inspired and led by Crowther: first, it was staffed not by Europeans but by Africans who had grown up and been educated in Freetown, and whose parents in many cases came from what is now Nigeria; and second, it gave great attention to linguistic work. Crowther himself supervised the production of about fifty books and booklets in and on Nigerian languages (a more than professorial record). Apart from Yoruba, he published the first primer of Igbo in 1857 and the first vocabulary in 1882; the primer of Nupe in 1860 and the first grammar and vocabulary in 1864. Crowther expected published several works on and in Igbo and Ijo; W.E.L. Carew in Ibani; P. J. Williams in Nembe and Ebirá;

A Revised Map of African Language Families
 (Roger Blench, November 1986)



A.G. Coomber in Igala and Ebira; Archdeacon Henry Johnson in Nupe and Igbo; F.W. Smart, J. H. Spencer, and Archdeacon Dandeson Crowther (the Bishop's son) in Igbo.

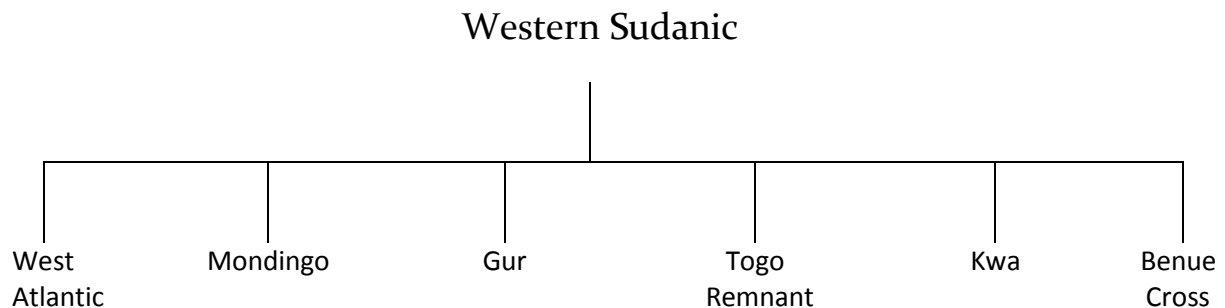
While none of these men was Bishop Crowther's intellectual equal, their output and enthusiasm were remarkable; Paul Hair (1967:89) concludes that, given their poor educational background, 'the linguistic work of the Niger Mission was extraordinary, and can be interpreted as a notable achievement of human endeavour'. It is sad that, instead of being encouraged, this work was disparaged and disrupted by heavy-handed European criticism of the Niger Mission in Crowther's old age, which eventually led to the formation of an independent Niger Delta Pastorate under Dandeson Crowther (Hair 1967).

CLASSIFICATION OF NIGER-CONGO FROM WESTERMANN TO GREENBERG

By the first part of the twentieth century, the classification of West African languages was becoming clearer. One of the major linguists involved was Diedrich Westermann, a German. In 1927 he set up a linguistic family which he called Western Sudanic, and pointed out that it was related to Bantu, although he did not make it clear exactly what form the relationship took. He divided the Western Sudanic family into six branches: West Atlantic, Mandingo, Gur, Togo Remnant, Kwa, and Benue-Cross, which occupied the greater part of West Africa. He was able to show that these languages shared a considerable amount of basic vocabulary, for which he proposed reconstructions, which clearly distinguished them from what we now call the Chadic languages, such as Hausa, and what we now call the Nilo-Saharan languages, such as Kanuri.

Classification of Western Sudanic

(Westermann, 1927)



The next great advance came with the work of Joseph Greenberg, an American. In a series of articles published from 1949-1954, collected in book form in 1955 and in a considerably revised form in 1963, he classified all mainland African languages into four major families

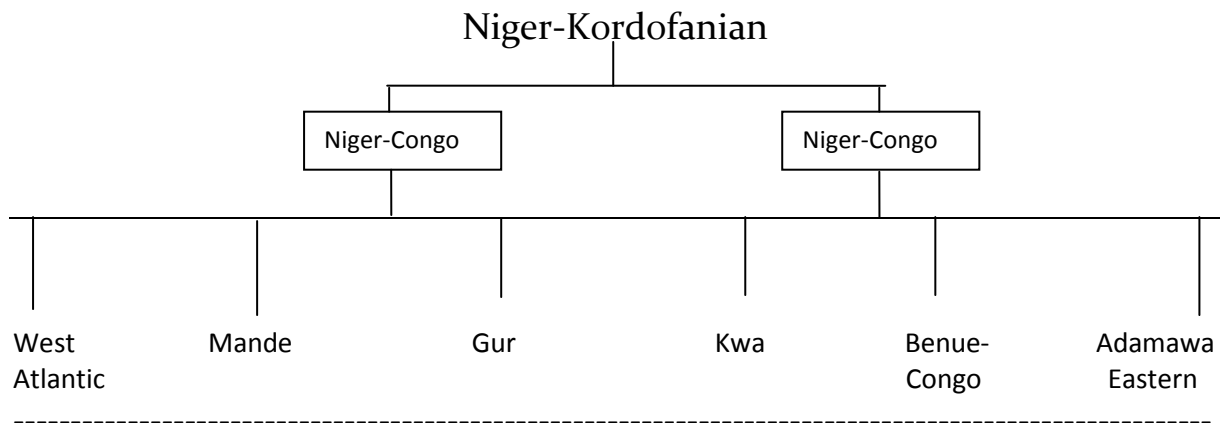
1. Khoisan
2. Nilo-Saharan
3. Afroasiatic
4. Niger-Kordofanian

The Khoisan languages are spoken only in Southern Africa and have no Nigerian representative. The Nilo-Saharan languages occupy much of Central and East Africa; Kanuri in Borno State and Zarma in Sokoto State represent different branches of the family. The Afroasiatic family (formerly called Hamito-Semitic), occupies most of North Africa and part of East Africa; Arabic belongs to the Semitic branch of this family, while Hausa is the largest members of the Chadic branch, which is located in West Africa. On the map, the Austronesian languages Malagasy have been added; the rest of the family is on the Eastern side of the Indian Ocean.

We shall here concentrate upon Greenberg's fourth family. Initially he called it Niger-Congo, from the two great rivers which flow mainly through lands where these languages are spoken; later he added to it at a higher level the Kordofanian languages spoken in Sudan (2 on the map) and re-named the enlarged family Niger-Kordofanian.

Classification of Niger-Kordofanian

(Greenberg, 1963)



Greenberg divided his Niger-Congo into six branches: West Atlantic (3 on the map), equivalent to Westermann's West Atlantic, but with the addition of Fulfulde, a language whose classification has been highly controversial; Mande (1 on the map), equivalent to Westermann's Mandingo; Gur (6 on the map), equivalent to Westermann's Gur; Kwa, equivalent to Westermann's Kwa plus Togo Remnant, but much greater in extent than the Kwa shown on the map, since it included all Southern Nigerian languages and some Middle Belt ones as far east as, and including, Igbo; Benue-Congo, equivalent to Westermann's Benue-Cross, but with the significant addition of the whole of Bantu as a subgroup; and finally Adamawa Eastern (7 on the map), a branch whose languages had not been considered at all by Westermann nor included in any other major family by previous writers.

Table 1

Some Common Words from Rivers State Languages Showing Linguistic Relationship

	<u>THREE</u>	<u>FOUR</u>	<u>FIVE</u>	<u>HEAD</u>	<u>TOOTH</u>	<u>COME</u>
IJOID						
Defaka	tátó	néín	túúno	tábo	nian	soo
Kalabari	tíréí	íní	sónó	síbí	áká	bó
Nembe	tíráí	inein	sónó	tíbí	áká	bo
Izon	taaru	nein/noin	sónron	tíbj	aka	bo
Bisani	táárú	ní	sónron	síbí	áká	bó
DELTA EDOID						
Epie	isâ	inî	isúónu	utomu	akun	yo, yi
Egena	ésaa-	ínii	íshoni	utomu	akú	yáo, yío
Degema	isáí	iní	isúwón	utóm	úkú	yií
IGBOID						
Ekpeye	bhito	bhinô	bhisê	ishî	izē	ja
Ikwere	ètọ	ènô	isne	risî	izē	bja
Ogbah	nwetoh	nwênôh	nwîsnô	isî	ezē	biah
Egbema	ìtọ	ìlọ	ise	ishi	eze	bja
Echie	tọ/àtọ	nnọ/ànọ	se/ise	ishi	eze	bja
Igbo	àtọ	ànọ	ise	isi	ezē	bja
OGONI						
Kana	tàa	nia	ò òò	ékóbee	dáa	lu
Gokana	taa	teni	vòò	tògó	dóa	dù
Ogwi	tàa	taale	ewo	bóo	dóo	du
Elemé	òtaá	ètaáíé	wòò	èbó	adáa	ju
CENTRAL DELTA						
Abuan	íraar	inya	ôogh	emú	ólâay	tué
Odual	íraar	inya	oogh	emú	alaay	tu, -ru
Kugho	ísar	inya	óoghó	emú	oḅuḅúra	-ru
Oghia	ísar	inya	awu	emu	alaay	tié
Bukuma	kîra	kîyon	ko	éemú	ónáí	tû
Obufom	ísar	inya	ooa	éemú	oaláin	tú
LOWER CROSS						
Obolo	ita	inî	gò	ibàt	ejerè	nǎ

Greenberg's results were achieved by a very simple method which he called mass comparison. Common words of the basic vocabulary are compared from as many languages as possible, and resemblances in form

and meaning will clearly show that the languages fall into different groups. Table 1 shows the method applied to a sample of Rivers State languages. It is obvious at a glance first that the languages within each group are much more similar to each other than to those in another group; and second, that in addition to the similarities within each group there are more deep-seated ones between two or more different groups. For example, the first root consonant of the various words for 'three' is almost always either a t or a s sound which can easily develop from a t, such as s or r, while that for 'four' is usually an n or gy; these are both old Niger-Congo words which have been retained by all the languages involved. On the other hand, with the word for 'five' the first three groups show a word with s (or t) followed by n, which is the old Niger-Congo word, whereas the last three groups show quite a different word; this second word is clearly a new introduction, or innovation, by the Delta-Cross languages to which the last three groups all belong.

Greenberg consistently used only linguistic evidence in classifying languages; he thus avoided problems due to fanciful comparison of names (such as, for example, the frequent assertion that 'Kana' must have originated from 'Ghana') or problems due to racist assumptions about the superiority of one way of life, such as cattle-keeping, to another, such as agriculture. Furthermore, he insisted that classification should be done before one considered such matters as migrations; the distribution of languages whose classification is known can suggest interesting ideas about the movement of peoples, but ideas about prehistoric movements cannot help us to classify languages.

Greenberg's ideas were disturbing to some older scholars, particularly the idea that the Bantu languages, which are spread over almost half of Africa, are merely to be classified as a subgroup of a subgroup of Benue-Congo. After a quarter of a century of discussion, however, his major conclusions have been accepted by most scholars. Now that his classification has become the prevailing orthodoxy, it is in its turn being replaced by more recent developments, which I will now summarize.

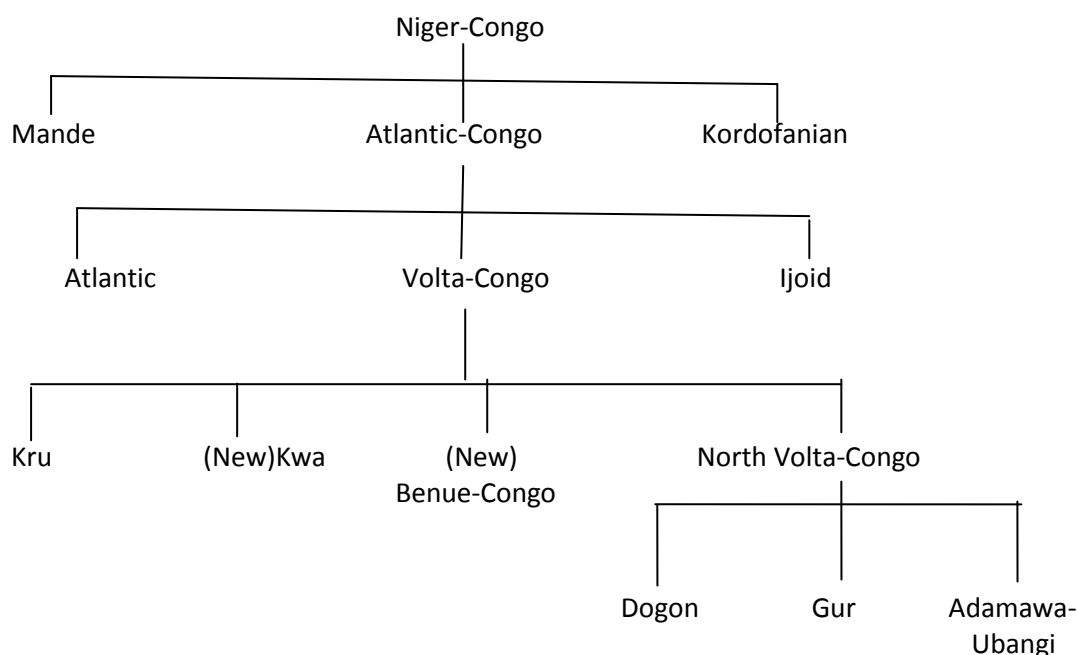
THE NEW CLASSIFICATION OF NIGER-CONGO

In 1977 Patrick Bennett, an American, and Jan Sterk, a Belgian who formerly lectured at the University of Calabar, published a paper in which they proposed a radical revision of Greenberg's Niger-Kordofanian. They based their classification chiefly on a lexicostatistic study of 50 languages representing most branches of Niger-Congo. Lexicostatistics is a method of calculating the percentage of cognates, or related words, on a standard wordlist collected for a number of languages. The higher the percentage of cognates shared by any pair of languages, the more closely related the languages are.

The Bennett and Sterk classification has been quite intensively discussed over the last decade. While some of their conclusions have been rejected, others appear to be valid and form the basis of a new classification which will be explained in a forthcoming book on Niger-Congo edited by John Bendor-Samuel. This classification also attempts to rationalize nomenclature for the family, following suggestions by John Stewart. Names for major branches are based upon permanent geographical features, like 'Niger-Congo' itself; all the branches which are directly ancestral to Bantu end in 'Congo', so that from 'Niger-Congo', one moves downward to 'Atlantic-Congo', 'Volta-Congo' and 'Benue-Congo'; names for more closely-related groups avoid geographical names that have been used at a higher level and instead use the suffixoid, which was introduced by Greenberg in the term Bantoid to mean 'the group of languages which includes Bantu' and in Jukunoid to mean 'the group of languages which includes Jukun'. Elugbe(1979) introduced Eloid, Akinkugbe(1980) introduced Yoruboid, and Armstrong (1981) Idomoid, for the groups which include Edo, Yoruba, and Idoma respectively.

Looking at the new classification in comparison with Greenberg's, it will be observed that Kordofanian has been demoted from a special status, so that the family now shows a ternary instead of a binary initial split. Thus, we can revert to the shorter, more familiar term 'Niger-Congo' for the whole family. The central node, Atlantic-Congo, also shows a three-way split into Atlantic (the former West Atlantic), Volta-Congo, and Ijoid. Ijoid is a branch consisting of the Ijo language cluster plus the tiny Defaka

New Classification of Niger-Congo
(Bendor-Samuel, forthcoming)



Language, recently described for the first time by Dr. Charles Janewari (1983) of this university. Whereas Westermann tentatively and Greenberg more definitely had classified Ijo as Kwa, Bennett and Sterk's lexicostatistic figures show clearly that it is quite remote from its neighbours and should be classified at a higher level.

Volter-Congo breaks into four branches. The first is Kru (spoken in Liberia and Ivory Coast), classified within Kwa by Westermann and Greenberg, but made a separate branch by Bennett and Sterk. The second is (New) Kwa, branch by Bennett and Sterk. The second is (New) Kwa, differing from Greenberg's Kwa by the removal not only of Kru and Ijoid but of the whole of Eastern Kwa, which has been re-assigned to Benue-Congo. (Conveniently, the linguistic boundary between (New) Kwa and (New) Benue-Congo roughly coincides with the western boundary of Nigeria. The third branch of Volta-Congo is the enlarged Benue-Congo. The fourth branch, North Volta-Congo, consists of the former Gur and Adamawa-Ubangi branches, which Bennett (1982) claims form a linguistic continuum; the Dogon language cluster of Mali and Burkina Faso probably also belongs here.

Just as Nigeria has languages representing three out of four of the African language families identified by Greenberg, so it has representatives of all branches of Niger-Congo except for Kordofaama, Kru and Dogon, Mande is represented by Busa, spoken around Lake Kainji Atlantic is represented by Fulfulde, whose speakers have moved in a great arc across West Africa from Senegal to Cameroun; Ijoid is wholly found near the coast of Nigeria (New) Kwa is represented by the Egun language of Lagos State, Gur is represented by the Batounun or Bariba Language of Kwara State; and Adamawa Ubangi is represented by a number of little-known languages, including Mumuye and the recently-publicized Koma, and Gbaya spoken in the north east of Nigeria in an area extending around Yola.

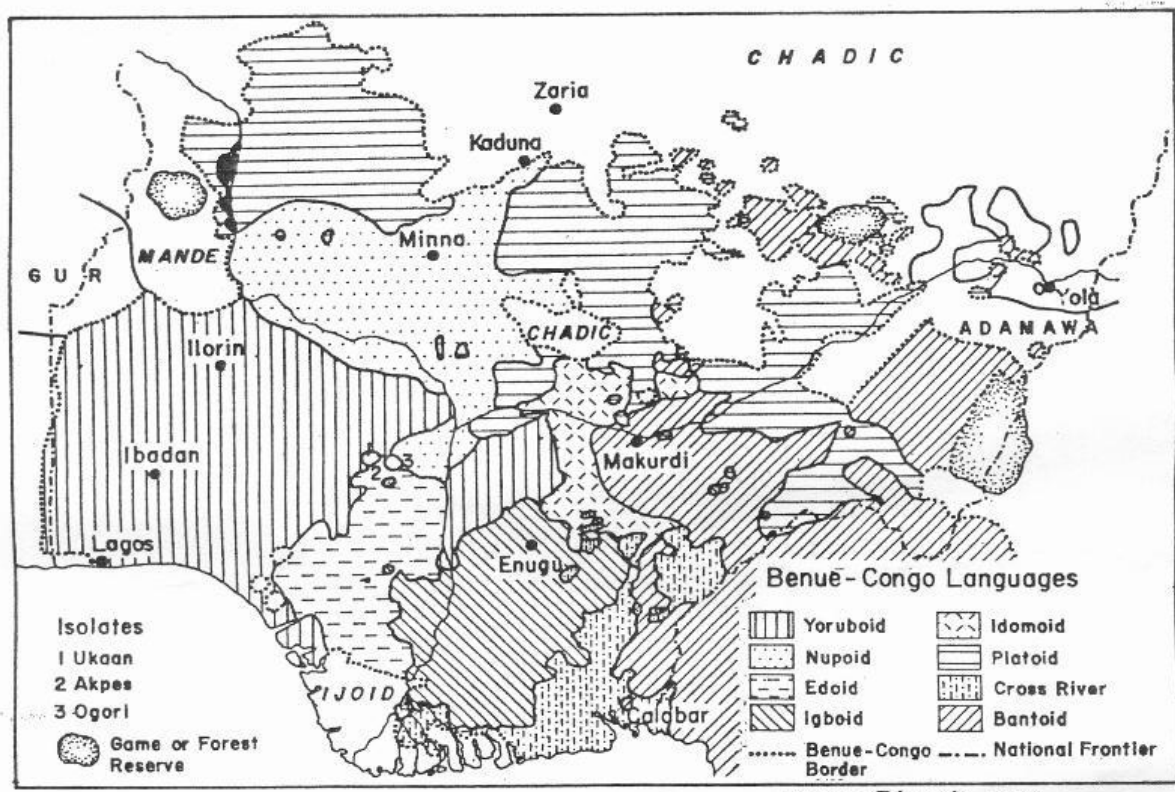
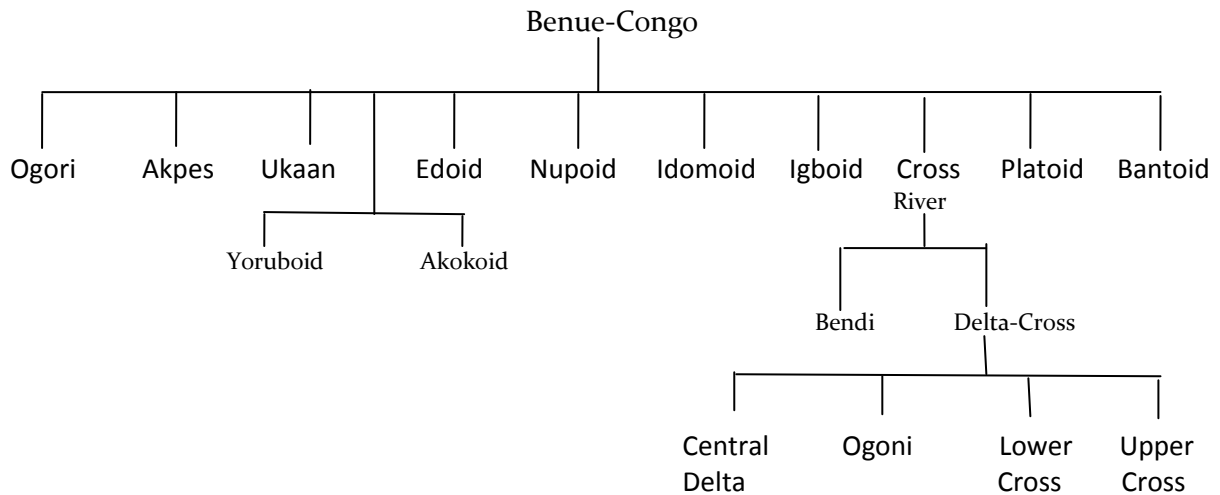
But the branch of Niger-Congo which is most extensively represented in Nigeria is Benue-Congo, and I would like to discuss it in more detail. Of the roughly four hundred languages spoken in Nigeria, more than two hundred are currently classified as (New) Benue Congo. According to the present state of our knowledge, they fall into eleven groups; knowledge is, however, very rapidly advancing in this area, and it may well be that we shall soon be able to combine some of these groups at a higher level and thus simplify our family tree.

The first three of the eleven, groups are tiny languages which appear to have no close relatives and are therefore listed as separate branches of Benue-Congo: Ogori, Akpes, and Ukaan, all spoken around the area where Bendel, Ondo, and Kwara States meet. The same area is the homeland of the Akokoid languages, named after Akoko area, whose nearest relatives are the Yoruboid languages, i.e. Yoruba, Igala and Isekiri. The next group is Edoid, i.e. languages closely related to Edo; Nupoid includes Nupe, Gbari, Ebira, and other languages around the confluence of the Niger and the Benue; Idomoid consists of Idoma and languages closely related to it, on both sides of the Benue; Igboid consists of Igbo and closely related languages, south of Yoruboid and Idomoid.

The last three groups are large and internally far more complex than the preceding ones; they correspond to Greenberg's original Benue-Congo, before the addition of his 'Eastern Kwa'. Cross Rivers is

subdivided into Bendi which comprises languages such as Bekwarra and Boxyi in the north of Cross Rivers State, and Delta-Cross which again

New Classification of Benue-Congo
(Bendor-Samuel, forthcoming)



divides into four subgroups; Upper Cross, which contain languages such as Lokee and Mbembe, Lower Cross, which contains the Efik-Ibibio-Anaang cluster as well as south smaller languages, including the Obolo or

Andoni language; the Ogoni group, including Kana, Gokana, and Eleme, and the Central Delta group, which includes Abua, Odual, Ogbia, Kugbo, Bukuma, Obulom, and others. Platoid is a larger and highly complex branch, extending across the northern boundary of Benue-Congo and subdividing into Kainji, which includes languages such as Kambari, spoken near Lake Kainji, and Central Platoid, which in turn divides into Plateau, containing many of the small languages spoken around Jos, and in Southern Kaduna State, Tarokoid, including Tarok and other languages east of Jos, and Jukunoid, spoken on both sides of the Benue, which was proposed as a separate branch of Benue-Congo by Greenberg but united with Tarokoid and Plateau by Shimizu (1975).

Finally, we come to Bantoid. This group was proposed by Greenberg to include not only the widespread Bantu languages but the groups of languages which are most closely related to it, such as the Grassfields and Ekoid Bantu languages; Tivoid, comprising Tiv and related languages; Mambiloid, comprising Mambila and Vute. Recently, Roger Blench and myself concluded that the Samba Daka languages until Bennett (1983) excluded them, together with Fam and Tiba, languages recently reported for the first time by Blench, also belong to Bantoid; they have therefore been included in Bantoid on the map.

FROM CLASSIFICATION TO PREHISTORY

If we can rely in general on the classification established in the preceding sections, what are its implications for prehistory? The first and simplest argument from similarity of language to common origin of people was expressed by Dr. Samuel Johnson in 1773:

There is no tracing the connection of ancient nations, but by language; and therefore I am always sorry when any language is lost, because languages are the pedigree of nations. If you find the same languages in distant countries, you may be sure that the inhabitants of each have been the same people; that is to say, if you find

the language a good deal the same; for a word here and there the same, will not do.' (Boswell 1785).

The argument needs qualification to allow for the possibility of language gift (Newman 1969/70); that is, for the case where a community gradually abandon the use of their own language in favour of another one. For example, the first language of the majority of U.S. citizens is English; it would be wrong to conclude from this that they are all descendants of the first speakers of English, the Anglo-Saxons who settled in England in the fifth century A.D.; but it is right to conclude that there must have been a continuity of speakers of English from that time to the present, from whom speakers of other languages had the opportunity of learning English.

A more sophisticated argument was explored by Sapir (1916), formalized by Dyen (1956), and applied to Africa by, for example, Greenberg (1963) and Ballard (1971). This argument is that the geographical spread of a language family can be studied in conjunction with its family tree to determine the homeland of the speakers of the protolanguage. We can reasonably assume that the homeland is in the area where the languages show the greatest differentiation, the result of having had a long period in which to diversify first into different dialects and then into different languages; conversely, areas where the languages are more closely related, have been more recently settled and have thus had a shorter period in which to differentiate from each other.

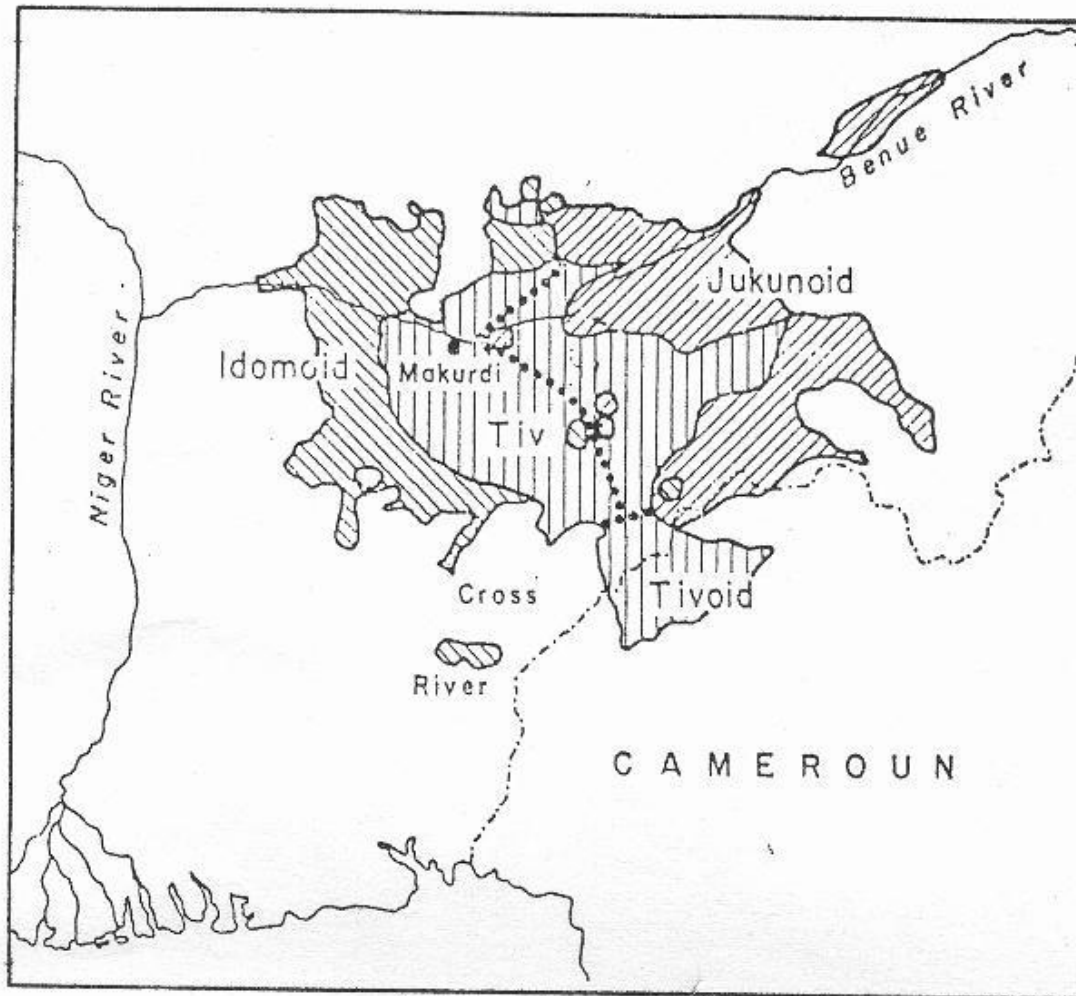
For example, the language map of Africa shows us that the southern third of Africa is chiefly populated by speakers of Bantu languages (11, on the map), which we already know to be closely related to each other and to be a subdivision of Bantoid (10 on the map). On the other hand, West Africa contains all the other branches and subbranches of Niger-Congo, with the exception of Kordofanian, and is therefore an area of very great diversity. Consequently, Greenberg (1963) concluded that West Africa is the homeland of Nigeria-Congo and that the Bantoid area, along the

Nigeria-Cameroun border, is s the immediate homeland or Bantu. The second conclusion was initially contested by Bantuists who did not accept or take into account the wider affiliations of Bantu (Guthrie 1962), but is now generally accepted by historians (Oliver 1979, Bouquiaux 1980).

The case of Bantu is a striking example of the fact that one language or group of languages may expand over a wide area and acquire millions of speakers, while another may remain confined to a small area with a few thousand or even a few hundred speakers. Given a model where languages gradually and regularly differentiate into distinct dialects and these dialects into language, we might expect that the world would be filled with languages of approximately equal size. This is obviously not the case. The expansion of a language can partly be explained by physical movement of its speakers into new areas, but also by the fact that people abandon their own languages to speak others which are more useful, as *lingua francas*, or are regarded as more prestigious. Thus, the more speakers a language has already, the more it is likely to gain, and the more likely it is that its small sister languages, originally adjacent to it, will die out as their speakers adopt the larger, more dominant language. To gain a true historical perspective, therefore, we have to minimize the distortions introduced by large, successful languages, and pay particular attention to small, obscure and dying languages.

To see the picture of Niger-Congo languages as they were before the Bantu expansion, we have to imagine the map of Africa with Bantu (11) reduced to a small area adjacent to Bantoid (10) on the first map. Niger-Congo then appears clearly as a West Africa-based language family, with the exception of Kordofanian (2), whose speakers appear to have moved far to the east.

A second clear example of a language spreading over a large area is Tiv. Ballard (1971) pointed out that Tiv shows very little dialect variation, in itself a sign of recent settlement, while it occurs between Idoma and Jukun, which both show considerable dialect variation and adjoin other languages of the Idomoid and Jukunoid groups respectively. The closest linguistic relatives of Tiv area the other small Tivoid languages, spoken to the south, e.g. Icheve, Otank, Emane and Evant spoken around the Obudu



The Spread of Tiv

Plateau, and others spoken in Cameroun. The linguistic evidence thus clearly suggests that Tiv has expanded from the south and intruded between the Idomoid and Jukunoid languages. The dotted line on the map suggests that before Tiv had expanded, the Tivoid languages must have occupied a relatively small area to the south, while Idomoid and Jukunoid were neighbours. (The actual course of the dotted line is, of course, purely hypothetical.) In this particular case, oral tradition supports the linguistic evidence; both the Idoma and the Jukun claim that they were neighbours before the arrival of the Tiv, and the Tiv claim that they once lived on a flat-topped hill called Swem, which it is hard not to identify tentatively with the Obudu Plateau.

Such detailed confirmation of the linguistic evidence by oral tradition is rare. Oral tradition is not normally reliable for more than a few handed

years, whereas linguistic evidence takes us back for thousands of years. For the older examples we shall now look at, we do not expect confirmation from oral tradition.

Let us now consider the branches of Benue-Congo in relation to their geographical position. We have seen that three tiny isolated languages, Ukaan, Akpes, and Ogori, are spoken at the junction of Ondo, Bendel and Kwara States, and that this same area contains the Akokoid languages, which are the nearest relatives of Yoruboid. Following our techniques of imagining the situation before large languages expanded, we realize that the Yoruboid homeland must be located adjacent to the Akokoid one, in the same general areas. Elugbe (1979) discusses the likely homeland of the Edoid languages and concludes that it must have been in the hilly north-western area-adjacent to those of the groups we have already discussed. Thus, five of our eleven groups of Benue-Congo have homelands which can be traced to the south-west of the Niger-Benue confluence. Immediately north of the confluence, we find the Nupoid group (the extension of Ebira South of the confluence can be shown to be recent (Ballard 1971:298). Eastwards we find Idomoid straddling the Benue, and Igboid spread across the Niger to the South. Forming an outer ring around these we have the highly-differentiated Cross Rivers to the south-east, Bantoid further east, and Platoid to the north. The central focal point for all the groups appears to be the Niger-Benue confluence Armstrong (1981:21) has observed that:

‘the Atlantic litoral is occupied by a line of Niger-Congo languages that are deeply divided from each other, rather like the distal ends of the spokes of a wheel. The hub of the wheel would seem to be the Central Niger and Benue Vallies’.

We thus suggest that the homeland of Benue-Congo is around the Niger-Benue confluence, and that all the groups have spread out from there.

Where did the speakers of Proto-Benue-Congo come from? Horton, in an unpublished seminar paper (1982), has suggested that many of the migrations within West Africa have followed riverain routes. Given that most other Volta-Congo branches are spoken north-west of Benue-Congo, and given a homeland at the Niger-Benue confluence, it seems very natural to assume that the speakers of Proto-Benue-Congo reached the confluence by paddling down the Niger.

We may still go a step or two further back in time. We noted above that the Gur and Adamawa Ubangi branches have been grouped together as North Volta-Congo; this means that they must have shared a homeland. On the map, they are now separated chiefly by Benue-Congo. We may consider it likely, though it cannot be proved, that Gur and Adamawa were once spread continuously across the Congo which broke the connections and absorbed some of the intermediate links.

The geographical position of Ijoid, which we noted is now thought to branch of the family tree at an earlier point than Volta-Congo, now becomes significant. It is situated at the very end of the great River Niger, thus suggesting that its speakers have travelled right down the Niger from the heart of West Africa at a time before either North Volta-Congo or Benue-Congo had expanded into their present positions. A third group who seem to have followed the same route are the speakers of Busa which, as noted above, is a Mande language. It is related most closely to the Bisa language of Burkina Faso, and once again we assume a migration southwards along the Niger, this time stopping at Bussa Rapids, now drowned, in Kainji Lake.

Finally, we should note the extremely irregular distribution of Platoid along the northern fringe of Benue-Congo, where it is intimately intertwined with West Chadic, one of the four branches of Chadic in the Afroasiatic family. Fleming (1981) proposed on the basis of lexicostatistic comparison that Chadic was most closely related to the Berber branch of Afroasiatic, and that as desiccation set in the Sahara, Chadic speakers moved south while Berber speakers adapted to desert conditions. Following our usual procedure of imagining the map without the large languages, we leave aside Hausa and observe that there is deep divergence

(lexicostatistic percentages as low as 20%) among the West Chadic languages (Fleming 1981) which are found near Jos (in the large white area on the map inset between two groups of Platoid). The divergence is greater than that between their Platoid neighbours (percentages around 30%; Gerhardt and Jockers 1981) and we therefore conclude that at least in this area Platoid speakers met Chadic speakers established before their own arrival. Extensive borrowing between Chadic and Benue-Congo has been documented (Hoffmann 1970, Wolff and Gerhardt 1977), more recently, Hausa has spread and speakers of some Platoid languages have shifted to speaking Hausa.

HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS IN NIGERIA TODAY

As the classification of languages becomes more reliable and its implications for prehistory become clearer, historical linguistics in Nigeria moves steadily into providing in depth reconstructions of the various groups, following the principles of the Neo-Grammarians but with the sophistication developed by a century of application to various language families. The first Ph.D in Linguistics at the University of Ibadan, and also in Nigeria, was in comparative Jukunoid, by Kiyoshi Shimizu, a Japanese, in 1971, published in 1980; this was followed by one on Edoid, by Ben Elugbe, of the University of Ibadan, a revised version of which is shortly to appear from the University of Port Harcourt Press, and one on Comparative Yoruboid, by Femi Akinkugbe, now of the University of Lagos. Another work on comparative Igboid is in preparation in this university, while three M.A. students are also undertaking comparative topics in smaller groups. Good historical work is also being done at the University of Ilorin under the direction of Dr.H.C. Capo. The forthcoming book edited by John Bendor-Samuel, which will be the authoritative work on Niger-Congo for some years, has two Nigerian contributors and others who are, or have been, working in Nigeria.

In short, we have in Nigeria a lively and internationally recognized tradition of historical linguistics whose results, as I have tried to show in a compressed form, are of the utmost relevance and interest not only to historians but to all Nigerians who are interested in the study of their

people's origins and of the rich and complex mosaic of languages and cultures within Nigeria.

From the study of historical linguistics, we learn that the enormous complexity of Nigeria's languages has developed from a small number of original proto-languages, and thus that below the surface differences lie old and deep-seated similarities which point to common origins. Even where the different language families cannot be shown, at present, to have a common origin, as with Chadic and Niger-Congo, thousands of years of interaction have resulted in widespread borrowing and language shift, both of which show evidence of mutual accommodation. Thus it is not just recently, but for millennia, that Nigerians and their ancestors have been working out the theme of 'Unity in Diversity'.

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