

## Chapter 1

# East Benue-Congo

John R. Watters

SIL International

Chapter one introduces this volume on East Benue-Congo (EBC) and the chapters addressing issues of nouns, pronouns, and verbs within specific branches and EBC as a whole. The chapter identifies the location of EBC and its branches as well as the external and internal classification of EBC. It situates EBC's likely original homeland and the geography of its probable expansion routes that led to the current location of its branches. It then provides a context for the chapters focused on noun classes in EBC in general and nominal affixes in Kainji and Plateau in particular, as well as the reconstruction issues they raise. It also notes certain issues related to Bantoid and to the presence of the Bantu languages within Bantoid, especially its dominance within Bantoid that has the potential of skewing historical analyses.

### 1 East Benue-Congo (EBC): its location

The category label 'East Benue-Congo' (or 'Eastern Benue-Congo') is a relatively recent one. It is widely known from Williamson & Blench (2000: 30-36) in their introduction to the language family 'Benue-Congo'. They report that Blench (1989) had actually proposed it a decade earlier in response to the reassignment of what had been Eastern Kwa languages into a "New" Benue-Congo, a reassignment proposed by Bennett & Sterk (1977). Blench proposed that the Eastern Kwa languages, now assigned to Benue-Congo, be given the title 'West Benue-Congo'. That left the original 'Benue-Congo' languages with the complementary title of 'East Benue-Congo'. This label represents the result of a process dating back to Greenberg (1963) and even earlier to Westermann (1927) and Johnston (1919/22). Westermann had given a set of West African languages the title 'Benue-Cross'. Greenberg (1963) then added the Bantu languages to Westermann's Benue-Cross,



expanding the set of related languages and assigning it the new name 'Benue-Congo'. These details and more on the historical process of categorization from Greenberg's proposed Benue-Congo to today's Benue-Congo are provided in Williamson (1989: 247-274) and Williamson & Blench (2000: 30-36).

A few points are worth highlighting and reiterating from this history about Benue-Congo and its relationship to the EBC of this volume. First, the content of the category 'East Benue-Congo' has not changed since Greenberg (1963) proposed it as 'Benue-Congo'. In fact, the category label referred to in much of the literature from Greenberg in 1963 until Williamson & Blench in 2000 was simply 'Benue-Congo' or 'Eastern South-Central Niger-Congo' from Bennett & Sterk (1977). For example, de Wolf's (1971) study *The noun class system of Proto-Benue-Congo* concerned the languages that are now being referred to as 'East Benue-Congo', a subset of the new, current Benue-Congo family.

Second, Greenberg made the decision, a radical one for its time, yet a reasonable one, that all the Narrow Bantu languages formed a subgroup within a subgroup of Benue-Congo. Greenberg's proposal is now generally accepted. This inclusion of the Bantu languages has not changed with the adoption of the label 'East Benue-Congo'. All Bantu languages are a subgroup of the Bantoid branch within EBC.

Third, Greenberg identified four branches within his Benue-Congo, namely, Plateau, Jukunoid, Cross River, and Bantoid (Greenberg 1966[1970]: 8-9). Plateau is sometimes referred to as Platoid (Gerhardt 1989). However, more recently Williamson & Blench (2000: 31) identified the Kainji languages as forming a fifth branch. The Kainji languages in Greenberg's and previous classifications was positioned as a Plateau subgroup, specifically formerly Plateau 1a, b. It now forms a fifth branch of the new EBC.

Fourth, Williamson & Blench (2000: 31-32) note that Shimizu (1975) and Gerhardt (1989) proposed that Jukunoid be included within Platoid. Another way to state their proposal is that Jukunoid is more closely related to Platoid than it is to Cross River or Bantoid. Williamson and Blench indicate this conclusion in their figure Figure 2.11 Williamson & Blench (2000: 31) by including Jukunoid as a branch of a larger genetic unit that includes the parallel branches of Kainji, three Platoid groupings, Beromic, and Tarok. This proposed grouping provides some internal structure to EBC, namely, a two-way division of the five EBC branches into what Williamson & Blench label 'Central Nigerian' (i.e. Kainji, Plateau with further elaboration, and Jukunoid) and 'Bantoid-Cross' (i.e. Cross River and Bantoid).

The simplified map in Figure 1 identifies the current general location of each branch of EBC. Two branches, Kainji (1) and Platoid (2) are found entirely within Nigeria. The other three branches, Jukunoid (3), Cross River (4), and Bantoid (5) are represented in both Nigeria and Cameroon, but the representation of Jukunoid (3) and Cross River (4) in Cameroon is minimal. Bantoid (5) in Nige-

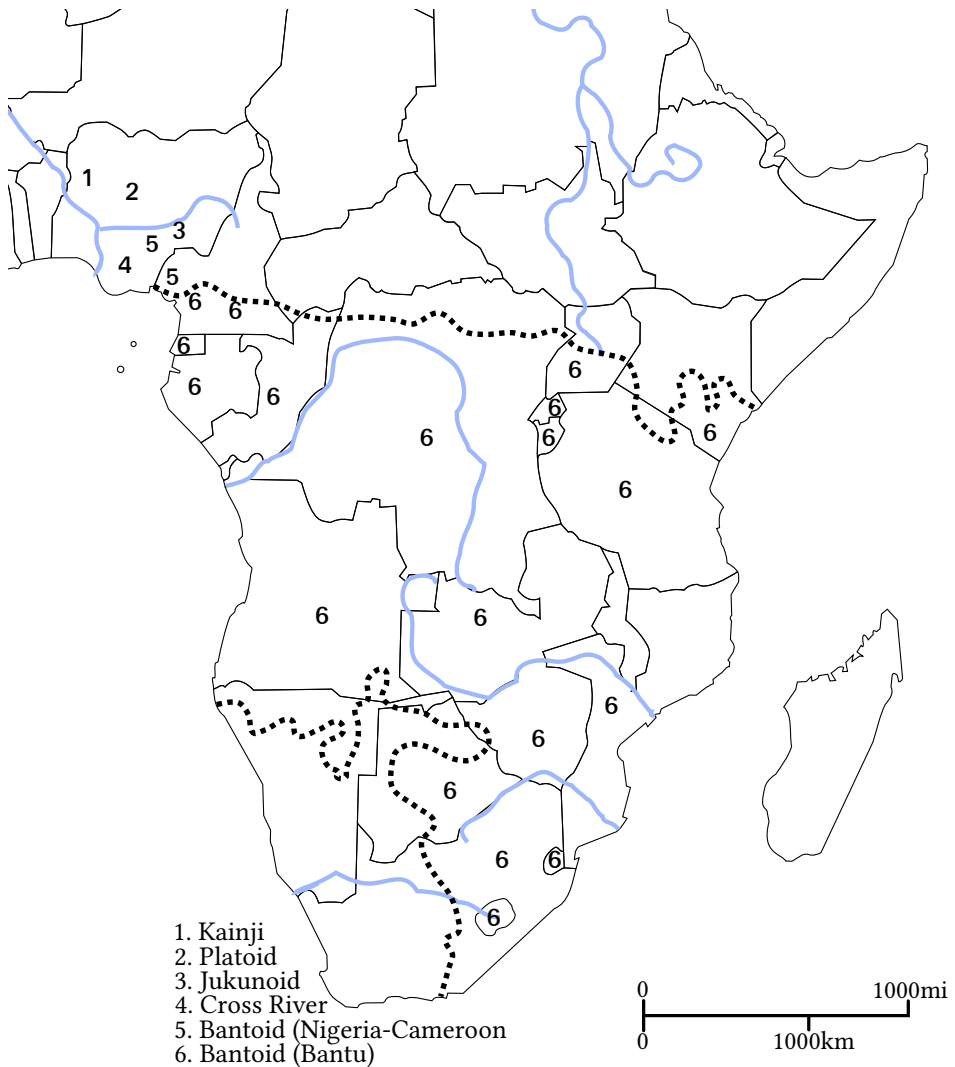


Figure 1: The locations of the five branches of EBC

ria and Cameroon, however, includes the following groups in both countries: Jarawan<sup>1</sup>, Dakoid<sup>2</sup>, Mambiloid, Tivoid, Beboïd, Grassfields<sup>3</sup>, and Ekoid. Nyang and Tikar are only found in Cameroon. Meanwhile, the Bantu group (6) within Bantoid is not found in Nigeria, but is found in Cameroon and multiple countries across central, eastern, and southern Africa, as the map shows. The Bantu languages are found between the dotted lines in Figure 1 that run across this central, eastern, and southern region of Africa. The Bantu group is the dominant group within Bantoid and even within EBC in terms of its geographic spread, the number of languages included, and the number of speakers involved. However, the map provides a helpful reminder that the size of a branch or a group or subgroup is not determinant in the process of comparison and reconstruction. The smaller branches must also be considered as being as potentially significant as a dominant group like the Bantu subgroup in reconstructing proto-Bantoid, proto-Bantoid-Cross, and proto-EBC.

The distribution of EBC branches strongly suggests that EBC originated in Nigeria. (See §3 for more details and references.) This conclusion derives from the assumption that where a language family is more fragmented and shows greater diversity, that is where the given language family likely originated. Diversification develops over time and so greater linguistic diversity in one region generally represents greater historical time depth than a more homogeneous region. Henrici (1973) and Heine (1973) demonstrated that the most diverse region in Bantu is its northwest region that borders on the other Bantoid groups in Cameroon. Building on that observation, the other EBC branches outside Bantoid represent even greater diversity, with Kainji and Platoid indicating significant time depth. This is seen in the modifications and reconfigurations of their noun class systems as shown by Blench (Chapter 3 & Chapter 4) in this volume.

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<sup>1</sup>Simons & Fennig (2018) report two Jarawan languages in Cameroon: Mboa is listed with 1,490 speakers in 2000, and Nagumi is listed as extinct.

<sup>2</sup>Boyd (1989: 182-183) was not convinced that Daka (Dakoid) was closer to Bantoid (represented by Vute, Mambiloid, Bantoid) than it was to some Gur languages. However, eleven years later Williamson & Blench (2000: 27) state that the inclusion of Dakoid within Benue-Congo "is now widely accepted". The most recent consideration of Dakoid being Bantoid is found in Blench (2012) in which the use of nominal suffixes is pointed out as a trait that Dakoid shares with Mambiloid.

<sup>3</sup>Of the 67 Wide Grassfields languages only two or three are also spoken in Nigeria.

## 2 EBC: its classification

Turning from the geographic location of the EBC branches and their possible relative time depths, Figure 2 summarizes the current understanding of the external and internal classification of EBC. Externally, EBC is a sister subfamily of the subfamily West Benue-Congo within the larger family of Benue-Congo languages. Internally, the five branches of EBC divide into two major units: Central Nigerian (Kainji, Plateau, and Jukunoid) and Bantoid-Cross (Cross River and Bantoid).

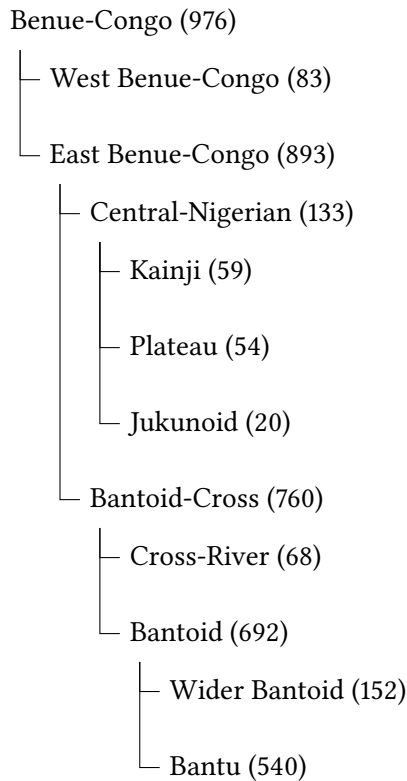


Figure 2: The external and internal classification of East Benue-Congo

To gain a sense of the number of languages involved in EBC, a proposed number of languages associated with the given unit in Figure 2 is provided from Simons & Fennig (2018). The Niger-Congo macrofamily is listed as the largest language family in the world in that it has the greatest number of listed living

languages: 1,539. Benue-Congo is the largest family within Niger-Congo, listed with 978 languages or 63% of all Niger-Congo languages. Of those 978 Benue-Congo languages, EBC is listed with 893, or 58% of all Niger-Congo languages and 91% of all Benue-Congo languages. Within EBC, Bantoid has 692 languages or 45% of all Niger-Congo and 71% of all Benue-Congo languages and is clearly the dominant grouping. Within Bantoid, the Bantu languages account for 78% of all Bantoid languages and more than one-third of all Niger-Congo languages. That leaves 153 Bantoid languages in the nine other Bantoid groups.

The EBC languages are distributed over an extraordinary land mass. They cover much of Nigeria from the northwest and north to the center and the east and southeast; all of southern Cameroon; and multiple nations of central, eastern, and southern Africa, as shown in Figure 1. The speakers of these languages number in the hundreds of millions.

It should be noted at this point that the classification within EBC, at the level of its branches and their internal groups, is still not fully settled. This is also true at the macro level of Niger-Congo. Various proposed groups have indeterminate boundaries with those that are considered most closely related to them. Both Blench (2006: 109-122) and Good (to appear) make this point emphatically. Many groups have a certain coherency, but it is still a matter of further research as to where the actual boundaries between groups lie and what linguistic features identify those boundaries. This includes the boundary between Bantu and the other Bantoid groups along the northwest boundary of Bantu Zone A. The use of trees and references to groups by name does not mean that the status of the group relative to other groups is well defined. What defines the boundaries is often unclear in part due to a lack of reconstructions of phonologies, morphologies, and lexicons. Given this uncertainty in classification, it may be more helpful in some cases to identify a core set (or sets) of languages within a given group that appear to bear a close genetic relationship to one another. Reconstruction of the phonology, morphology, and lexicon of such core sets could then be compared to other core sets, hopefully assisting in the comparative process and reconstruction of larger groupings and potentially identifying relevant boundary markers. However, for now, the impact of the imprecise nature of boundaries is that it will not always be easy to identify what is an innovation or what is a shared inheritance. Also, it may have to be accepted that the imprecise nature of classification of these languages will remain with us due to incomplete data sets, the methods used, and ultimately the linguistic histories of these languages.

### 3 EBC: likely origins and expansion

Williamson (1989: 269-272) and Blench (2006: 134) follow Armstrong (1981). They propose that the ancestral center of the Benue-Congo languages is likely located in the region of the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers. This location is indicated in Figure 3 as the “Benue-Congo Homeland.” The subsequent expansion from that location is mapped out in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Benue-Congo expansion from homeland to current locations

The proposal that the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers was the likely point of origin of East Benue-Congo is the most reasonable one despite the extraordinary current geographical distribution of the Benue-Congo languages (Figure 1). It is reasonable based on two assumptions.

First, it is the location that most easily allows for a shared origin of both the West Benue-Congo and EBC languages, providing a plausible point of origin. Whether there is a clear linguistic demarcation between the West and East sectors of Benue-Congo or not, the region around the Niger-Benue confluence provides the simpler explanation of their distribution in the absence of evidence to the contrary.

Second, the greatest linguistic diversity is found in the western region of EBC, that is, in Nigeria and Cameroon, whereas the Bantu languages further east do not display anything close to the same linguistic diversity even though they cover an exceptionally larger geographical expanse within Africa. Such diversity would indicate that speakers of Benue-Congo languages had been resident in the region of Nigeria and Cameroon well before the Bantu expansion began.

Figure 3 suggests the probable expansion routes of EBC people from the Niger-Benue confluence to their current locations. This multi-directional expansion was likely due to agricultural, ecological, economic, and social factors. It recognizes the two-way division of Benue-Congo into western and eastern areas. The ancestors of the West Benue-Congo largely migrated southwest of the confluence except for the Igboid, who crossed to the eastern side of the Niger, while the ancestors of the East Benue-Congo languages migrated northwest, north, and east of the confluence. The Kainji are distributed primarily northwest of the Niger-Benue confluence; the Plateau are essentially north of the confluence; and the Jukunoid are to the east, up the Benue River basin. The Bantoid-Cross likely also migrated east up the Benue River basin, but probably south of the river and the Jukunoid, settling in a region marked out by modern-day Makurdi, Wukari, and Gboko. Later the Cross River peoples migrated south into the Cross River basin and expanded along its western banks to the Atlantic coast, later crossing over to the eastern banks of the Cross River. Some of the Bantoid peoples stayed in the Bantoid-Cross homeland or spread out along what is now the Nigeria-Cameroon border. Others migrated further to the east into the mountains of Cameroon and then across the Cameroon Volcanic Line to the eastern slopes of the mountains of western Cameroon and eventually into the Sanaga River valley. From this last region Bantu began its expansion into central, eastern and southern Africa.

For some temporal perspective, Blench (2006: 126-138) discusses models of the Niger-Congo expansion. He proposes the beginning of Benue-Congo to be around 5500 BP, Bantoid to be around 4500 BP, and the Proto-Bantu period to 4000 BP. Ehret (2016: 106-116) dates Proto-Bantu to 3000 BCE, and provides further elaboration of the Proto-Bantu communities and their continuing expansion.

#### **4 EBC: nouns, pronouns, verbs**

This volume is the first in what will hopefully be a growing set of edited volumes and monographs concerning Niger-Congo comparative studies. This first volume addresses matters that are relevant to the entire EBC family as well as the particular branches of Kainji, Plateau, and Bantoid. The Jukunoid and Cross River



branches are not the subject of these chapters, but they will be addressed in the next volume concerning EBC. In the case of Bantoid, the particular focus is on Grassfields and Bantu though other Bantoid subgroups are referenced. The potential topics for comparative studies among these languages are numerous, but this volume is dedicated to the specific issues of nominal affixes, third person pronouns, and verbal extensions.

In terms of comparative studies, these chapters fall under various topics. Three chapters concern the wider issue of comparative morphology. In particular, they concern the morphology of noun class systems and the possibility of reconstructing the nominal affixes and concord elements of the proto-classes. Good's chapter addresses the issue of identifying the systemic attributes that make up Niger-Congo and EBC noun class systems. Blench's chapters on nominal affixes in Kainji and Plateau demonstrate the significant challenges that exist in reconstructing the nominal systems of these two EBC branches.

Three other chapters concern wider issues of reconstructing Bantoid. One of these issues involves the dominance of Bantu in relation to the nine other identified Bantoid subgroups. It is generally assumed that Bantu is the most conservative group within Bantoid as well as EBC. Yet, at the same time, Bantu certainly has innovated. So, to what extent can one assume that Proto-Bantu equals Proto-EBC, Proto-Bantoid-Cross, let alone Proto-Bantoid that most narrowly includes Bantu within its grouping? This is a tempting assumption to make, but it is a process of attribution that can be suspect. The relationships within Bantoid probably involve layering of units which involve both historical processes of retention and innovation as well as language contact and areal processes. The challenge is to know if a given phenomenon reconstructed at one level can automatically be attributed to the higher level available. This issue presents itself in Hyman's chapters on verbal extensions and nasal nominal prefixes. Finally, Hyman's other chapter on third person pronouns in Grassfields provides an excellent example of internal reconstruction within a subgroup in which the divergences are identified and validated as historical retentions in one case and innovations in the other.

## **5 Reconstructing nominal affixes of Proto-EBC: Kainji and Plateau**

Noun classes, with their system of nominal affixes and associated concord markers, are perhaps the major distinguishing feature of the Niger-Congo macrofamily as well as its branches like the EBC family. In order to reconstruct the noun

class system of Proto-EBC and each of its branches, reconstruction will need to start at the lowest levels within each branch, using the comparative method. As Campbell & Poser (2008: 162) write: “The comparative method has always been the primary tool for establishing these relationships.” It has served Indo-European studies well over the past century. As Hall (1950) notes for studying Proto-Romance, referencing Trager<sup>4</sup> for support, the comparative method is the best method in reconstructing Proto-Romance. Research began at the dialect levels of the Romance languages and was built up into larger and larger units until the forms of Proto-Romance were determined. Relative to the languages of EBC outside of Bantu, however, this method has been difficult to use in the past because of the lack of data. Access to each dialect level of most of these languages is simply not available, so using mass comparisons has been the common method. Yet, more language data is available today than forty years ago when de Wolf (1971) proposed a reconstruction of the noun classes of Proto-EBC (“Proto-Benue-Congo” at that time).

In this context, Blench provides valuable overviews of noun class systems in the Kainji languages in Chapter 3 and the Plateau languages in Chapter 4 of this volume. These branches are further away from Proto-Bantu and Bantoid, where our understanding of what may have been included in the Proto-EBC noun class system is clearer. They demonstrate how opaque a noun class system can become over time relative to more conservative contexts such as the Bantu and Bantoid ones. Along with the overview of noun class systems Blench provides an updated proposal for the comprehensive classification of these major subgroups. He also provides with each chapter a significant set of references, important material for future researchers.

In the case of Kainji (Chapter 3), a challenge to a straightforward comparative reconstruction of the Proto-Kainji noun class system presents itself. Blench points out that the Kainji languages and its subgroups are marked by significant diversity in noun class systems. This diversity suggests systems that have undergone various cycles involving analogical change, mergers, loss, and affix renewal. This means that it is highly unlikely that the full system for Proto-Kainji can be reconstructed. On the other hand, subunits of Kainji might lend themselves to

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<sup>4</sup>Trager (1946: 463) wrote concerning the change of emphasis in the study of historical linguistics: “It seems to me that historical linguists must now restate their tasks much more precisely. When we have really good descriptive grammars of all existing French dialects, we can reconstruct Proto-Francian, Proto-Burgundian, Proto-Norman-Picard, etc. Then we can reconstruct Proto-French; then, with a similarly acquired statement of Proto-Provencal, we can formulate Proto-Gallo-Romaic; next, with similar accurately developed reconstructions of Proto-Ibero-Romaic, Proto-Italian, etc., we can work out Proto-Romaic as a whole.”

some reconstruction and so provide possible insights when these are compared to the larger set of EBC languages. It would be important to do as much reconstruction as possible at the lower levels in order to provide as much comparative data as possible from Kainji.

Encouragingly, Blench notes that there is sufficient evidence for Proto-Kainji having classes 1/2 for persons, class 6a for liquids and some mass nouns, and a diminutive affix *\*kV-*. The class pair 1/ 2 *\*u-/\*ba-* is cognate with the Proto-Bantu *\*mu-/\*ba-*. The class 6a prefix *\*mV-* is cognate with a class prefix *\*ma-* found throughout Niger-Congo. The diminutive prefix *\*kV-* is likely cognate with the diminutive prefix *ke-* that is attested in Plateau languages (Blench p.c.) and with *kε-* in the Bantoid, Ekoid language Mbe (personal notes), suggesting it is likely a Proto-EBC diminutive prefix.

On the other hand, Blench is uncertain about the possibility of reconstructing a homorganic nasal prefix for Proto-Kainji. Such a prefix shows up in Bantoid languages as the prefix for noun classes 9 and 10.

He also notes that the vowels of CV- prefixes are often underspecified. A similar process is found elsewhere in EBC where the phonological or even phonetic quality of the prefix vowel harmonizes with the quality of the first vowel of the root.

An unusual proposal for Proto-Kainji is that it might have had class trios rather than class pairs. The three-way distinction would involve distinguishing singular, countable plural, and non-countable plural.

The major conclusion is that Kainji must have inherited a significant noun class system from Proto-EBC. At the same time, the Kainji languages appear to have experimented with that inheritance more vigorously than other major EBC subgroups and perhaps had more time to do so if they were the first group to separate from EBC. This diversity makes the reconstruction of the exponents of these classes, i.e. their nominal affixes and concord affixes, for the Proto-Kainji noun class system a challenge and will likely result in a limited, partial view.

In the case of Plateau (Chapter 4), the situation may be even bleaker for reconstructing Proto-Plateau noun class exponents than in Kainji. Blench notes in his concluding notes that “the connection with Niger-Congo noun classes remains tenuous.”

He does note evidence for a possible class pair referring to persons, the prefixes being *\*V-/\*bV-*, as well as a nasal class used with “liquids, mass nouns, and abstracts”. Both of these are relevant to Proto-EBC and the larger Niger-Congo macrofamily. The form of this nasal prefix in Proto-Plateau is uncertain, though *\*ma-* may be a possibility even if it is not common synchronically. Proto-Plateau

may also have had homorganic nasal prefixes, but their possible relationship to Proto-EBC is not clear because their likely semantic relationship is unknown.

The conclusion in the case of the Plateau languages is that noun classes were a definite feature of Proto-Plateau. However, what can be reconstructed as exponents of those classes is limited. As with Kainji, detailed reconstruction of some subunits of Plateau may be productive and serve as a substitute for identifying the exponents of Proto-Plateau.

Therefore, it appears likely that the results from further research on these two major subgroups of EBC will not make a determinative contribution to the reconstruction of Proto-EBC noun classes, but could play an important supportive role in confirming hypotheses about Proto-EBC as they develop. This challenge to detailed reconstruction of EBC noun class exponents raises the question as to whether there might be another way to gain insight into the EBC noun class system. This other way would be to look at the noun class system from a systemic perspective as opposed to the micro level of morphemes. Blench (p.c.) reminds me that the data available to de Wolf (1971) could not justify his reconstruction of the exponents of the noun classes of EBC but instead he was influenced by knowledge of Bantu. I will return to the influence of Bantu studies below in §7.

## **6 Noun class systemic topics in EBC**

Good (Chapter 2) offers a perspective of EBC noun class systems that focuses on their morphological properties. These properties will be noted two paragraphs below. Some might contest this perspective, contending that it is merely typological, with no relevance to the reconstruction of the Proto-EBC noun class exponents. However, I would suggest that a careful consideration of the points Good makes offers insights into reconstructing various features of the Proto-EBC noun class system. They can provide frames for understanding the architecture of the subsystems that may have been operating in the larger system.

Good notes that in the reconstruction of EBC noun classes, the focus is on discrete exponents of the noun classes that form pairings to mark number on nouns. However, these exponents are elements in a larger system involving the classification of nouns that is associated with a variety of morphosyntactic properties. The identification of these properties (see below) as they obtain to Proto-EBC is a valid and crucial research area in expanding our knowledge of Proto-EBC noun classes and their systems. The research on the properties of the Proto-EBC noun class system is not in opposition to detailed reconstruction, but is complementary. Given the less than sanguine conclusion about reconstructing exponents

in Proto-Kainji and Proto-Plateau above (see §3), system-based analysis could be helpful in expanding our understanding of Proto-EBC noun classes.

So what are some of these properties? In the case of Proto-EBC and its subgroups, the reduction of noun classes in individual languages or subgroups must consider areal influence and not simply language-internal structural processes. Context matters.

Within that context, there is the issue of kinds of affixes. Nominal prefixes are predominant, but there are EBC languages that have suffixes as exponents of a noun class as well. Even circumfixal elements are found. The possibility of prefixing, suffixing, and even circumfixal affixation needs to be accounted for in any full history of EBC noun classes. This includes the interplay of prefixes and suffixes according to the morphosyntactic context of the noun as seen in the language C'lela in Kainji. A given noun will have a prefix in one grammatical context but a suffix in another.

In terms of concord markers, several questions must be resolved. What are the domains of concord that are relevant to reconstructing Proto-EBC noun classes? What is the minimal set of domains within the concord system for Proto-EBC? How is concord with a given noun class indicated within the noun phrase, sentence, and discourse? Furthermore, how many series of noun class concord markers might there have been? Two seems to be the minimum, but there could have been more.

Finally, there is also the need to determine noun class identity and class pairing. Humans in classes 1/2 seems stable for many languages, but many of the other pairings are not so stable. To what extent did the Proto-EBC noun class systems have a non-canonical pairing structure for some classes? So while the past is viewed through the lens of the synchronic realities of current EBC languages, how much can be accounted for by the reconstruction of the Proto-EBC noun class system and how much can be accounted for by losses and innovations through time, remembering all the while that the Proto-EBC system is unlikely to have been a fully elegant, symmetrical, transparent system?

## **7 The long shadow of Bantu on Bantoid and potentially EBC**

### **7.1 Brief historical review**

Comparative and historical studies in EBC benefit from and are challenged by the coherence of the Bantu languages. They form one subgroup within Bantoid,

but it must be remembered that means they are also part of the larger EBC family. When Greenberg (1963) proposed that Bantu was actually a subgroup of Bantoid, he stepped into an existing division among scholars as to the relationship between the Bantu languages and the languages of West Africa. Some viewed the similarities between the two groups of languages as the result of accident while others viewed them as the result of a genealogical relationship, a shared origin.

Guthrie (1962) attempted to explain the "Bantuisms" of the West Sudanic languages by claiming that speakers of a language or languages related to Proto-Bantu had been absorbed into certain communities of West Sudanic speakers. This absorption (i.e. "contamination" or "mixed language") theory supposedly gave a sufficient account for the Bantuisms found in these languages. Guthrie specifically claimed that languages such as the Ekoid languages had only false reflexes of the Proto-Bantu forms of the noun class prefixes and concord elements (cf. Guthrie 1962.20 footnote 3). These languages were like Bantu but not Bantu, so he called them "Bantoid".

However, by 1971 Guthrie had slightly modified his position concerning the Bantoid subgroups such as Ekoid. His modification, however, was put in the most tentative, non-committal terms possible:

It may therefore be tentatively inferred that the Ekoid languages may to some extent share an origin with some of the Zone A languages [namely, Bobe and Yambassa], but that they seem to have undergone considerable perturbations. (Guthrie 1967-1971/1971.v.2.15 – brackets are mine)

This statement indicates that Guthrie was never able to shake himself free from his Bantu-centric point of view and see that the likely relationship between other Bantoid subgroups and Narrow Bantu involved a shared origin. In fact, he does not clarify for us how the genetic relationship could ever be "to some extent". In what way can one have a partial genetic relationship between two languages? This possibility would imply that the Bantoid subgroups had multiple genetic origins, an implausible state of affairs until demonstrated.

A different position was taken by Johnston (1919/22) and Westermann (1927) and Westermann & Bryan (1952), who viewed the shared "Bantuisms" as deriving from a common origin. To make his point, Johnston referred to them as "Semi-Bantu" languages. So when Greenberg (1963) classified Bantu languages with a multitude of other subgroups within the Benue-Congo family, he was motivated by genetic considerations and, as noted by Winston (1966), this limitation to genetic considerations was Greenberg's major contribution to the debate in African

language classification. Guthrie's classification by contrast was as dependent on typological considerations as on genetic ones (Williamson 1971:249).

## 7.2 Responses to Greenberg's proposal

A common response to Greenberg's proposal that the Bantu languages actually formed a subgroup within a subgroup of the EBC family was, for a number of researchers, to seek to validate this proposal. This involved research particularly in the 1960s to the 1980s.

Studies by Crabb (1965); Voorhoeve (1971); Hyman (1972; 1980a,b), and Hyman & Voorhoeve (1980), reviewed by Watters (1982), all made claims about specific language groups and their relation to Bantu. Voorhoeve and Hyman argued for a genetic relationship between the Mbam-Nkam languages of Cameroon and Bantu based on sound correspondences, cognate roots, and noun class correspondences. Crabb argued for the same relationship between the Ekoid languages and Bantu on the basis of 1) a high degree of common vocabulary with the better known Bantu languages, and 2) certain suppletive forms which appear to bear a relationship to Bantu roots and noun class prefixes which would be resistant to borrowing. Others pursued lexicostatistical studies that included at least some Bantu languages along with languages from the region to the northwest of Bantu: see Henrici (1973); Heine (1973), and Coupez et al. (1975). Their results supported the likelihood of a genetic relationship between Bantu and its northwest neighbors.

These studies were instrumental in further affirming Greenberg's proposal. In addition, many other studies and dissertations have been published that demonstrate a variety of proposed genetic relationships between a given Bantoid language or subgroup outside of Bantu and the Bantu subgroup itself, whether represented by an individual Bantu language or the Common Bantu of Guthrie or the Proto-Bantu of Meeussen (1967). Such studies continue to have their place of importance in the continuing discovery of relationships among the Bantoid subgroups and Bantu, but also the other EBC subgroups of Kainji, Plateau, Jukunoid, and Cross River and their relationships with Bantu and Bantoid.

## 7.3 Challenges in building an integrated view of Bantoid

The significant amount of research on Bantu languages over the past century has been an extraordinary benefit in researching the lesser known Bantoid languages. The proposed reconstructions by Guthrie (1967-1971; 1971); Meeussen (1967), and Bastin et al. (2002) of Proto-Bantu or Common Bantu forms have provided mul-

tiple suggestions as to the meaning and the role of forms in other Bantoid languages, both morphological and lexical.

In the midst of these benefits there is also a challenge. It is tempting, whether conscious or subconscious, to take a Bantu-centric view and begin conceiving Proto-Bantoid as being equivalent to Proto-Bantu, and even perhaps extending the temptation and conceiving Proto-EBC as being equivalent to Proto-Bantu. Bantu has received the attention of a multitude of linguists for more than a century and Proto-Bantu has been reconstructed in ways to which no other Bantoid subgroup can compare. Also, by comparison, Bantu languages are rich in verbal and nominal morphology in ways that are frequently minimal or non-existent in other Bantoid subgroups. They are also more numerous by far than the number of languages in other Bantoid subgroups. In fact, my impression is that the number of Bantu languages (more than 500) and the enormous amount of research done on Bantu languages over the past century set them apart from all language families of Africa.

It can be easy to treat Bantu statically and forget that Proto-Bantu and its own subgroups and individual languages have their own history of retentions, innovations and borrowings. So, in reconstructing Bantoid and EBC, caution has to be taken. Just because Bantu has a given feature does not mean it was also present in Proto-Bantoid or in Proto-EBC. It may have originated in Proto-Bantu. Within EBC and within Bantoid in particular, there likely is a layering of relationships that we still do not understand well. But let me offer a few examples of how this layering may be present and effect our claims about where a given feature was innovated. Care is needed not to attribute everything found in Proto-Bantu to Proto-Bantoid, and in Proto-Bantoid to Proto-EBC. The same holds in studying the subgroups of Bantoid and not inferring from one subgroup that a given phenomenon must be Proto-Bantoid. Here are some examples.

### **7.3.1 Tense in Bantu**

One example involves tense in Bantu. Bantu languages are rich in tense categories. Most Bantu languages have multiple past categories and multiple future categories. Among the other Bantoid subgroups in which tense is found, the more widely publicized are the Grassfields languages. At the same time, other Bantoid languages do not mark tense as a morphological verbal category. They are aspect-prominent like most languages in West Africa. This includes Bantoid subgroups such as Ekoid, Tivoid, and Nyang (Mamfe).

Nurse recognized that tense within Bantoid was not limited to Bantu but overlapped with some of the other Bantoid subgroups when he wrote:



[...]it would seem most likely in the present state of knowledge that tense was innovated within the community ancestral to today's Bantu languages (2.10.2(iv, vii)) (Nurse 2008: 282-283).

It was unclear whether it had been innovated within Bantoid or perhaps "at some level of Bantoid-Cross tree" (Nurse 2008: 282). A future volume in the Niger-Congo Comparative Series is in preparation to address this very topic.

However, the point I want to make here is that if Bantu as well as two or more adjacent subgroups in Bantoid also mark tense, it is easy to assume that tense was a Proto-Bantoid phenomenon. The explanation for those subgroups without tense is simply to claim that they lost their tense marking. However, one would expect to find residual forms pointing to antiquated tense markers, but these are not present.

For nearly forty years I assumed that historically the Ejagham language within Ekoid would have had marked tense categories even though there were no present-day marked tense categories (Watters 1981: 364-365). At the same time, I could not find any residual or fossilized forms to support this assumption, but the fact that Bantu marked tense and was closely related to Bantoid languages was sufficient for me to make the assumption. It was Nurse's excellent work on *Tense and Aspect in Bantu* (2008) that alerted me to the Bantu verbal realities and their contrast with the wider Niger-Congo verbal realities. It led me to reverse my assumption in 2012. This was spelled out in 2012 in what will appear as Watters (2018).

The fact is that some of the Bantu phenomena may be restricted to Bantu, some of them may be shared with some other Bantoid subgroups, and some may be inherited from Proto-Bantoid, Proto-Bantoid-Cross, or Proto-EBC. Because of the extraordinary amount of research that has been published on Bantu languages and because of their morphologically complex forms, it can be tempting to assume that Bantu has conserved what was once Proto-Bantoid and the rest of Bantoid has moved from an earlier synthetic mode to a more analytic one.

However, as is being noted and reiterated here, if what is found in Proto-Bantu traces back to Proto-Bantoid, does that mean that it also traces back to Proto-Bantoid-Cross and Proto-EBC and Proto-Niger-Congo? As we seek to better understand Bantoid, I would encourage caution in making strong claims for Proto-Bantoid, for example, until sufficient coverage on a given phenomenon has been achieved involving all or most all of the Bantoid subgroups. I would suggest we look for layering among the Bantoid subgroups as expansions proceeded from west to east and innovations were made along the way within sub-regions of Bantoid and not necessarily shared with those they left behind.

Watters (1989: 406-407) notes the contrastive hypotheses about Bantoid. Williamson (1971) and Greenberg (1974) accept a clear two-way split within Bantoid. However, Meeussen (1974) countered that it was too early to determine the internal structure of Bantoid and preferred to remain with a multibranch hypothesis since too little was still known as to the internal Bantoid relationships. Meeussen's suggestion resembles Blench (2015) noted above in §4. Up to the present, most of our judgments about the internal structure of Bantoid are based on lexicostatistics, and that will remain the case until more research on morphological and lexical reconstructions is achieved.

### 7.3.2 Synthetic and analytic structures: the verb

Turning to another example, Güldemann (2003: 183–187) raises the issue of Bantu word forms, morphology and their grammaticalization history.” Considering the verbal word in Bantu, the most complex word form in Bantu, in Bantoid, and in even EBC, the question that could be asked is: Did Proto-Bantoid, or Proto-EBC for that matter, originally have a fully synthesized verb much like that in Bantu, so that what most Bantoid groups present today is the result of a process they went through of isolating many or all of the morphemes, thus becoming analytic in structure? Or were the earlier forms more like those in most Bantoid groups, some verbal affixes but mostly analytic with isolated morphemes or clitics that were then synthesized in early Bantu or pre-Proto-Bantu? Güldemann argues that much of the Bantu verbal morphology can be shown to have likely derived historically from a more analytic structure with isolated morphemes.

An important interaction about these matters at the levels of Bantu, Bantoid, EBC, and Niger-Congo is that between Güldemann (2011) and Hyman (2011). Güldemann proposes that Bantu synthetic forms derive from more analytic forms found elsewhere in EBC. Hyman's response is instructive in his comments about possible historical recycling of morphosyntax, and the likely areal diffusion of more recent innovations along Güldemann's proposed “Macro-Sudan belt”. It is a sobering interaction that underscores the importance of *local* comparative research. Güldemann's hypothesis can provide a framework for further research, but it can also generate a healthy skepticism about macro-claims that do not have the benefit of systematic reconstructions of the given phenomenon at lower levels.

At the same time, Güldemann's proposal exemplifies the need to give the imagination freedom to look beyond Bantu and the related Bantoid groups to EBC and all its branches and even Benue-Congo at an even higher level, and ask questions such as: Where do the morphologically complex verb forms of Bantu best fit, as

a Bantu innovation or as Bantu retention, but if a retention, a retention of what historical level?

### 7.3.3 Verbal extensions in Bantoid

Another example involves verbal extensions. Hyman (Chapter 5) provides a valuable, detailed overview of verbal extensions in Grassfields and Bantoid. There are challenges in relating Proto-Bantu Zone A verbal extensions to verbal extensions in the other Bantoid subgroups. In Bantu, extensions such as causative, applicative, passive etc. mark the valency of the given verb. By contrast, in Bantoid languages they may mark either valence values or aspectual values. Hyman provides an excellent panorama comparing particular verbal extensions found in Grassfields with those in Bantu Zone A. He notes the semantic innovation of the Grassfields in reassigning extensions more aspectual values than the valence ones while next door valence values are commonly found in the Bantu Zone A languages. This overview serves as an excellent foundation for future comparative studies of verbal extensions in all Bantoid subgroups as well as languages of Cross River, Jukunoid, Plateau, and Kainji, in order to better understand how they may have been present at the level of Proto-EBC and each of its major subgroups. It also points to the difficulty of defining a clear boundary between Bantu and its Bantoid neighbors.

The questions I have raised above about the layering of evidence for innovation and retention relate to Hyman's article as follows: Just as it can be tempting to project Proto-Bantu onto Proto-Bantoid, it might be tempting to project Proto-Bantu plus Proto-Grassfields and other eastern Bantoid subgroups (e.g. Beboïd, Mambiloid, Tikar) onto Proto-Bantoid. The region within Grassfields where the largest number of contrastive verbal extensions are found outside of Bantu could be a region of innovation rather than retention, and those Bantoid groups to the west of Grassfields may instead better represent Proto-Bantoid with their reduced number of extensions and their –CV shape. However, Hyman notes that the direction of change for extensions is to begin as valency marking morphemes. They then change to primarily marking aspect with some residual valence functions that become lexicalized. Finally, they change to having only aspectual values. This suggests that these verbal extensions are Proto-Bantoid extensions and likely much older, having undergone this transition from valency to aspect marking. So the extensions are not a case of inappropriate projections of Proto-Bantu categories onto Proto-Bantoid. But this line of questioning may need to be used with each Bantu extension individually.

Turning to another topic raised by verbal extensions, Hyman's study provides a possible answer to the boundary issue between Bantu and the other Bantoid groups. His chart of extensions for Bantu Zone A languages and selected Bantoid languages gives evidence to support the claim that the presence and absence of the passive is a likely boundary marker (see Watters 1989: 416). The Sanaga River valley (or Bantu Zone A) serves as a boundary between those languages with a passive extension (i.e. Narrow Bantu languages) and those without a passive extension (i.e. the remainder of the Bantoid languages). These other Bantoid languages commonly use the third person plural verbal prefix but with non-specific reference to mark the passive notion. Another possible boundary may be the applicative, being present in Narrow Bantu but absent in the remainder of Bantoid. Hyman (p.c.) also notes the possible role of the applicative in this matter. For the passive and applicative in Bantoid other than Bantu, see Watters (1981: 360) for Ejagham in the Ekoid group and Watters (2003: 252) for the multiple languages in the Grassfields group.

#### **7.3.4 Nasal nominal prefixes in Bantoid & EBC**

To continue the topic of how Bantu can be an influence in analyzing other Bantoid subgroups and Bantoid as a whole, Hyman (Chapter 6) presents the matters of Bantu nasal nominal prefixes. He provides an important overview of the questions revolving around the presence and absence of nasal prefixes in Bantu noun classes 1, 3, 4, 6a, 9, 10, and their cognates. Class 6a generally occurs throughout Niger-Congo displaying a form cognate with *\*ma-* as the prefix, so this class is not the major focus. Hyman (1980a) covers similar details but using data that was available more than thirty years ago. More is known today, as demonstrated in Hyman (Chapter 6 of this volume) and Blench (2015).

The questions Hyman raises are numerous and complex. He provides the possible answers and their competing assumptions to these questions. In terms of research on Bantoid and, more widely, all EBC, it appears likely that Proto-EBC used oral vowels for these prefixes while Proto-Bantu used nasal consonants in a CV- structure: *\*mɔ-*, *\*mɪ-*, *\*ma-* (classes 1, 3, 4); or a homorganic nasal *\*N-* (classes 9, 10). Whatever may have existed in Proto-Niger-Congo or whatever may have happened across the Niger-Congo macrofamily in terms of having a full set of nasal nominal prefixes for cognates to Proto-Bantu noun classes 1, 3, 4, 6a, 9, and 10, it might advance our understanding if we could unravel the layers within Bantoid first, reconstructing the noun classes for each Bantoid subgroup, and then for Cross River and Jukunoid, and possibly then from possible insights from reconstructions of various subunits within Kainji and Plateau. A

place to start would be to reconstruct the nominal prefixes and concord affixes for each Bantoid subgroup. Even at this level it is not always straightforward. Good & Lovegren (2017) demonstrate that reconstructing nasal classes can be complicated even within what is clearly a dialect cluster.

Indeed, within Bantoid, subgroups vary relative to the presence of nasal and oral prefixes. For example, Grassfields is divided in this matter (Stallcup 1980: 55). Western Grassfields has oral prefixes in classes 1 or 3, and nasal prefixes on only some nouns in classes 9 and 10. This contrasts with Eastern Grassfields which has nasal prefixes in classes 1 and 3, and homorganic nasal prefixes on all nouns in classes 9 and 10. Leaving the Grassfields and going farther west, Hyman points to Tiv that does not have nasal prefixes in classes 1, 3, 4, 9, or 10 (Voorhoeve & de Wolf 1969: 52). Contrastively, also to the west, Proto-Ekoid likely had nasal prefixes in classes 1, 3, 4, 9, and 10 (Watters 1981; 1980; 2016). This uneven distribution of nasal prefixes in Bantoid subgroups does not clearly point to Proto-Bantoid having a full set of nasal prefixes. The layering of their presence suggests the possibility that the innovation started with some subgroups but not in others, and in the case of Grassfields, with its two-way division, it may involve different waves of migrations into the Grassfields. A first wave that became Eastern Grassfields possessed (or innovated?) the set of nasal prefixes while a later wave (or waves) that became Momo and Ring languages did not arrive with nasal prefixes. Only over the centuries of contact with Eastern Grassfields language they have begun marking some nouns in classes 9 and 10 with homorganic nasal prefixes.

One hypothesis put forward some forty years ago was that Bantoid could be divided into two groups, the Bane group and the Bantu group. In testing this hypothesis, Voorhoeve (1980, see also Watters 1982: 89) found that grammatical criteria and lexical criteria gave contradictory conclusions. He also discussed nasal prefixes in noun classes 1, 3, and 6, raising significant questions for any kind of definitive criteria for distinguishing Bantu and the other subgroups of Bantoid. Areal spreading of various features seems to have been involved.

### 7.3.5 Third person pronouns in Grassfields

Finally, Hyman (Chapter 7) provides a fascinating presentation of third person pronouns in Eastern Grassfields, Momo, and Ring (the two together form Western Grassfields), and their relation to Proto-Bantu forms. It is clear that Momo and Ring have innovated new forms for third person pronouns by using demonstratives and the noun ‘body’ as the sources for the innovations. In contrast, Eastern Grassfields maintains the original pronominal forms and these are closely related to Proto-Bantu forms.

This is the kind of comparative study needed for each subgroup or closely related subgroups on various topics. The goals in each case would be to determine the earliest forms and identify any innovations and what the sources of those innovations might be. Such studies would provide an excellent database for comparing Bantoid subgroups and assist in reconstructing the history of Bantoid.

Our understanding of the relationships between the groups of languages beyond the Bantu boundary is still at a rudimentary level. It is hoped that these six chapters will alert others to the challenges and motivate them to join the process of clarifying their history.

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