

# **Niger-Congo Language Macrofamily: ASJP vs. Current Genealogical Classifications**

Abstract of the paper submitted to ALP-I

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The Niger-Congo macrofamily of languages is one the largest unities of genetically related languages. Since Greenberg [1963] first proposed his idea of genetic relationship between various language stocks of Western, Central and Southern Africa, few linguists would challenge the very idea, but many have argued that Greenberg's approach to "mass comparison" is far from being ideal. Later comparative research on Niger-Congo utilised a number of other methods, including the typological comparison and the classical comparative method. However, while the results of the former may well be seriously affected by language contact and areal convergence, the latter is not so easy to implement because of the huge number of languages (1,532, according to Ethnologue.org) and scarce language data.

The methods of lexicostatistics and glottochronology, dealing with the basic lexicon of the compared languages, seem especially useful as an assistance for researching the relations between the lects of large and less-studied macrofamilies such as Niger-Congo. Dozens of languages here are only known by wordlists, and many of them consist of less than 100 items. Disputes on their genetic affiliation lack evidence and are therefore not fruitful, seriously decreasing the level of probability of many classification hypotheses introduced from time to time.

Lexicostatistic research has not encompassed all Niger-Congo yet; one of the good examples is [Vydrin 2009] for the Mande family. The ASJP Tree of Lexical Similarity is the first lexicostatistic research covering roughly all Niger-Congo.

The objective of the paper to be presented during ALP-I is to compare the current approach towards the genetic classification of the Niger-Congo languages with the trees of lexical similarity generated by the two close methods of ASJP automation. The basic genetic tree we are taking for this comparison is [Segerer 2008], which is a detailed modification of the one in [Williamson & Blench 2000]. The diagram of the genetic tree is given on page 3. In the coming paper, we will analyse both the upper level

classification of Niger-Congo and the position of sub-families within the major language stocks of the macrofamily.

We identified the following major differences between the tree provided by the NJ method of ASJP, and this genetic tree.

1. The differences on the upper level.

- proximity between Ijoid and South Atlantic languages;
- a huge distance between Ubangian and Adamaua languages;
- unification of Kwa, Kru and partly Ubangian languages into one branch with Igboid languages, traditionally considered as part of Benue-Congo;
- a common branch of Dogon and North Atlantic (Pular, Sereer) languages;
- unification of Senufo and some Kainji (Benue-Congo) languages;
- inclusion of the Adamaua languages into Benue-Congo.

2. Some of the differences on the sub-family level.

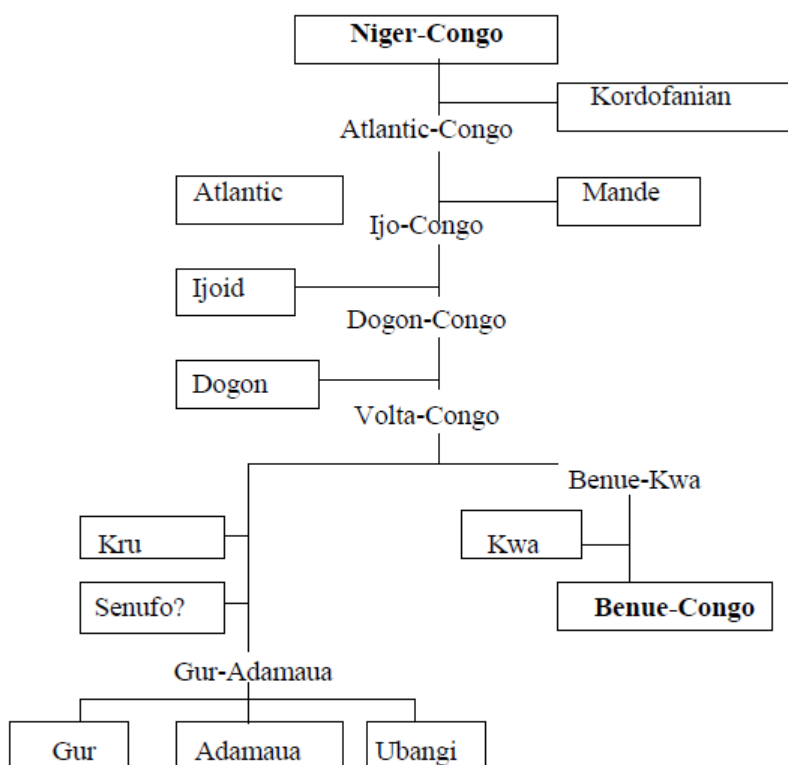
- separation of Atlantic languages into at least three distinct families not specifically related to each other;
- identification of South-Western Mande languages as the first branch separated from Proto-Mande; their relative proximity with South Mande as opposed to Western Mande;
- the exclusion of the Boki group of the Cross River family (East Benue-Congo) into West Benue-Congo;
- the exclusion of Kenyang from Bantoid (East Benue-Congo);
- unification of Cross River languages with Ekoid, traditionally considered as a branch of Bantoid (East Benue-Congo);
- strong unification of Bantu A languages with the Bamileke group of Bantoid.

It is interesting that some of the above ideas (as well as some others, to be specified in the coming paper) were already suggested by scholars in the past decades, and the ASJP evidence may require them to be reconsidered.

Other points do also need verification or at least consideration: these are concerned the genetic affiliation of the isolate languages of West Africa (e.g., Mpre) and isolates within certain languages families (e.g., Oko, Akpes, and Ukaan in Benue-Congo).

Some of the results of the ASJP calculations may seem weird (like the exclusion of Adiokru, a Kwa language, into a separate Volta-Congo branch) but need to be verified analysing the lexical data used by the machine.

The Tree of Lexical Similarity provided by ASJP should be treated as a useful tool for considering both language relationship and language contact in pre-historic Africa.



## REFERENCES

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