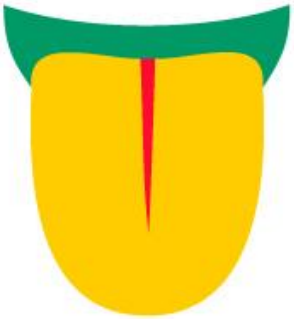
COMPARATIVE NIGER-CONGO



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Abstracts

A transdisciplinary review of linguistic, archaeological and genetic evidence for the origins and expansion of Niger-Congo

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Niger-Congo is the world's largest language phylum. It incorporates more than 1500 languages spoken across the African continent, except Northern Africa. Although the earliest stages of Niger-Congo's development are not well understood, its purported origins date back to between ~20,000 and 12,000 years ago. This time frame overlaps with the earliest phases of West Africa's repopulation during the African Humid Period. Despite the significance of this period, few attempts have been made to identify where and when Niger-Congo originated and how it became Africa's largest phylum. Our talk reviews the current state of linguistic, archaeological, and genetic evidence related to the emergence and spread of Niger-Congo speakers across and from West Africa. Despite serious methodological and empirical incompatibilities between datasets from different fields, our transdisciplinary approach to these questions does allow for juxtaposing some interesting new insights which situate the ultimate origins of Niger-Congo in West Africa south of the Sahara.

Comparative reconstruction of Proto-Niger-Congo class markers

John Merrill (Princeton University)

Recent proposals by Güldemann & Fiedler (to appear) and Merrill (2018) argue that the Proto-Niger-Congo (PNC) noun class system made use of markers with a higher degree of independence from adjacent noun roots than is found in most descendent languages, and which were not originally grouped into neat singular-plural pairs. This idea contrasts sharply with hypotheses which assume that the PNC class system resembled the Proto-Bantu system, with around 16 or fewer paired classes (Williamson 1989, Hepburn-Gray 2020). Those advocating for the new position have focused on the typological properties of the system, rather than reconstructing the class markers used in it. In this talk I present a preliminary reconstruction of the PNC class markers, based on comparison of some of the most conservative and diverse class systems found in the daughter languages. I reconstruct around 30 class markers which are attested in multiple NC subgroups, and suggest that considerably more may have been present in PNC. Classes are proposed as cognate between groups if they have compatible form and meaning. Shared meaning is based on the meaning of the nouns which commonly co-occur with the class marker—e.g. the **gɪ class (see (1)) is commonly used with animals between the size of a dog and cow. Building off of Merrill (to appear), regular sound correspondences between Atlantic groups and Bantu can be used to make principled determinations of cognacy between class markers in these groups, rather than relying simply on surface similarities. For example, the same consonant correspondence seen in two markers **bo and **bu is seen also in a number of roots with PNC **b (see (1)). Note also the identical vowel correspondence in **bo and **ko.

The NC subgroups I consider are nine Atlantic groups, Bantu, and Gur[1]. I will justify why it is very important to consider multiple class systems from the Atlantic region, while additional groups outside of Atlantic are less important for reconstruction. In short, there is massive diversity of class inventories between Atlantic groups (and when each is compared to e.g. Bantu), whereas there is much greater uniformity in the pool of classes used in "Volta-Congo" groups like Bantu and Gur (see (2)). Still, it must be stressed that numerous additional groups both within and outside of Atlantic must be taken into account in order to increase the accuracy of the PNC reconstructions. It is hoped that the reconstructed inventory of class markers shown here will serve as a useful point of comparison for those class systems which have not been considered for the present reconstruction.

Finally, I argue for a number of notable properties of the PNC class system:

- PNC class markers show no restrictions on what consonants or vowels can appear in them, and many have a CVC shape.
- Class markers can be "mixed and matched" with noun roots as long as their semantics are compatible, such that it is not possible to reconstruct a noun root conjoined with a single obligatory class marker.
- Despite the large number of markers, and typological similarities to recently-grammaticalized class systems seen e.g. in South America, it seems that no lexical grammaticalization source can be identified for PNC class markers, suggesting that PNC was not still in the process of adding new markers to the system.

[1] Incorporation of the Gur class system is preliminary, as there is no Proto-Gur reconstruction, and the class markers reconstructed in Miehe et al. (2012) are not based on regular correspondences independently established in roots.

- Morphosyntactic number was not encoded in class markers, and relatively few markers had semantics associated with count plural nouns. Classes used for mass nouns often develop into plural classes in daughter languages.

(1) Some reconstructed PNC class markers and roots

PNC		*Fula*	*Sereer*	*Wolof*	*Bainunk*	*Biafada*	*Pajade*	*Tenda*	*Joola*	*Manjak*	*Balanta*	*Limba*	*Bantu*
**gɪ	dog-sized animals	-ge		j-	ji-	ji~ju-	ci~cu-	*jə-					*ji~N-
**ko	paired body parts	-ko			ki-		ko-	*xo-	*ka-	ka-		ku~o-	*ku-
**bo	abstract, mass		fo-	b- ?	bi-	bwa-	po-	*(w)o-	*fa-			hu~o-	*bu-
**bʊ	round (body parts)			b-	bu-	bu-	pə-	*(w)o-	*fu-	pə-	f-	hu~o-	(†)*bu-
**bVd	'rot/be ripe'	woor	foor		bur	bwəl	pər	*wə̰r		puutr̰			*bòd
**but	'belly/intestines'		o-fud	but-it	*Ko.* a-bbú	bu-bur	kum-pətɛ	*wə̰tt		pə-pəs			
**bot	'toad'			mbott				*fa-wo̰r	*e-fool		(mfôl)		*N-boto
**ʈab	'sting'								*taf	tap	saf	thahi	

(2) Percent of cognate classes between groups in this study

	Fula-Ser.	*Cangin*	*Wolof*	*Bain.-KK*	*Biaf.-Paj.*	*Tenda*	*Bak*	*Bijogo*	*Limba*	*Gur*
Cangin	22%									
Wolof	22%	16%								
BKK	16%	19%	32%							
BP	18%	17%	26%	33%						
Tenda	29%	20%	18%	31%	38%					
Bak	15%	14%	19%	25%	22%	26%				
Bijogo	13%	15%	17%	20%	18%	18%	21%			
Limba	16%	11%	13%	23%	25%	22%	21%	36%		
Gur	24%	17%	18%	31%	32%	29%	25%	30%	35%	
Bantu	28%	22%	15%	34%	28%	29%	25%	30%	35%	74%

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The noun class system of Ndunga (“Ubangi”, Mbaic) from a Niger-Congo perspective

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Ndungalɛ is a small-scale Mbaic language spoken by nearly 5,000 people to the southeast of Lisala, in the Mongala province, in northwestern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Mbaic is a putative “Ubangi” genealogical pool, a formerly hypothesized genetic unit which is nowadays considered by most scholars as a geographic label uniting subgroups whose internal genealogical relations are not well understood (see Tucker and Bryan 1956; Moñino 1988; Güldemann 2018: 213-223 for an overview of the status of each Ubangi subgroup). The Mbaic genealogical pool comprises four geographically highly dispersed and lexically divergent languages all spoken in northern DRC, namely Ndungalɛ, Mbane, Dongoko and aMãlo. The strongest piece of evidence in favor of the genealogical unity of Mbaic is the reconstruction of a suffixal gender system of the Niger-Congo type (Pasch 1986), a feature absent from all other Ubangi genealogical pools (see also Bokula 1982). It is questionable, however, whether this proto-system is undisputable evidence for a Niger-Congo affiliation, given that very few Proto-Mbaic nominal class forms show a possible historical relation with other Niger-Congo reconstructed nominal class forms (see Güldemann 2018: 218-219 for a discussion).

In this talk, we provide a new analysis of the noun class system of Ndungalɛ based on first-hand fieldwork data collected in July-August 2024 within the framework of the ERC-funded CongUbangi project (https://www.congubangi.ugent.be/). First, we flesh out the formal relations between nominal class forms and agreement patterns in Ndungalɛ according to the proposal of Güldemann and Fiedler (2019). Second, we show in what ways this noun class system is similar to and deviates from the Niger-Congo prototype, by considering comparative data from undisputed Niger-Congo subgroups such as Benue-Congo (de Wolf 1971), Atlantic (Creissels 2014, 2024), Gur (Miehe et al. 2012) and Kwa (Manessy 1987; Snider 1988).

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The noun form classes *-ṭe/i* and *-(n)ṭe/i* of Kulaal and their (probable) cognates across Benue-Volta

Ulrich Kleinewillinghöfer (Bua Group)

The reconstruction of the Proto-Bua nominal classification (BKL 2023) is largely, but not only, based on the evidence of Kulaal, the only Bua language which has preserved a functioning noun class system with grammatical agreement (AGR), nominal affixes, and noun form classes (NF). The general/principal nominal suffix of the largest plural AGR class KI in Kulaal (< proto Bua *ɟi) is reconstructed as *-i. However, in Kulaal the plural class KI also contains three distinct nominal suffixes, noun form classes (NF). Two of them are built with the suffixes *-ṭe/i and -(n)ṭe/i,* and thus with morphemes that are apparently unrelated to the main class morphemes, i.e. AGR KI and the general/principal suffix *-i. Each of the two suffixes *-ṭe/i* and *-(n)ṭe/i* are only attested with a small set of nouns, which respectively combine 'plurals' with a peculiar semantic. One set contains a small number of '**plurals**' of trans-numeral nouns, **masses** and **liquids,** their respective 'singulars' being in AGR class mɛ (< Proto-Bua *mɛ), representing the wide spread proto noun class *ma (PB, PBC, Proto Gur). The second small set of nouns which form their plurals with the distinct nominal suffix, or NF *-(n)ṭe/i* in Kulaal consists of several **body parts**, and the plurals of 'sun', 'road' and 'song'.

Such findings for a Bua language where noun class and agreement systems are on the verge of extinction may not be very extraordinary nor surprising. However, what is remarkable and in the focus of this presentation is, that these two (N)CV suffixes are seemingly cognate in form and meaning to NF morphemes found elsewhere in noun class languages across 'Benue-Volta'[1] with comparable morphology, semantics, and function. Furthermore, in all languages where probable cognates occur[2], the assumedly cogante suffix morphemes, are likewise phonologically distinct from the respective AGR markers and recurrently[3] also dissimilar to the principal nominal affixes of the respective plural noun class which harbours them. Captivating is on top, that the particular plural noun class appears to be generally cognate to one and the same wide-spread plural class reconstructed as *i (or class 4) for Proto-Gur (Miehe et al. 2012), and *i for Proto-Benue-Congo (De Wolf 1971).

The paper presents data from several noun class languages in support of the proposition, that the NF ***-ṭe/i*** and ***-(n)ṭe/i*** in Kulaal are evidently part of the common morphological heritage of Benue-Volta.

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[1] 'Benue-Volta' stands for a morphologically defined unit comprising noun class languages of 'Adamawa' and 'Gur'.

[2] Particularly in Gəmme-Vere (Samba-Duru), in the Ɓəna Laala-Cluster, in Tula-Waja, and several Gur languages

[3] An exception is Roɓma where the respective plural class has three distinct suffixes or NF of which none could be identified as the principal one.

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Kam as an isolate within Niger-Congo?

Jakob Lesage (Humboldt Universität)

Kam has traditionally been viewed as an outlier within the Adamawa group of Niger-Congo languages and up to now its genealogical position has been unclear. This paper presents comparative morphological evidence from pronouns, as well as paradigmatic patterns in lower numerals and lexical sets, to argue – strongly but without controversy – for Kam's inclusion withing Niger-Congo.

Comparative data from Benue-Congo, Mumuyic, Gbe, Potou-Akanic, Gbayaic, and Fula-Sereer point to a possible shared innovation with Mumuyic (and some other "Adamawa") languages; the presence of a yí or rí-element in the third person plural human pronoun. A few potential shared lexical innovations with Mabia and Mumuyic are also noted, though these remain more suggestive and less definitive. A search for regular sound correspondences does not yield more promising results.

A more confident classification will require more reconstruction of Niger-Congo subgroups, stricter cognacy judgments grounded in regular sound correspondences, and the inclusion of a broader sample of Niger-Congo subgroups and vocabulary (beyond the basic lexicon).

In the meantime, two hypotheses seem worth considering: (1) that Kam's divergence from other branches is so ancient that any shared innovations have been obscured by semantic shifts and borrowing, and current similarities like those with Mumuyic reflect more recent contact; or (2) that the shared feature(s) with Mumuyic hint at a closer genealogical relationship, potentially reviving a reworked version of the Adamawa hypothesis with implications for Baa and Mbumic. The latter, however, would require a much stronger set of shared isoglosses to address ongoing skepticism toward the coherence of Adamawa as a group.

Mande and Bantu comparison in the Niger-Congolese perspective

Konstantin Pozdniakov & Valentin Vydrin (LLACAN: CNRS – INALCO/EPHE)

Joseph Greenberg's hypothesis on the Mande family belonging to the Niger-Congo macrofamily gained general acceptance during the second half of 20th century. However, it was questioned in the last decades in authoritative publications by Güldemann and Dimmendaal, and in the most prestigeous reference databases (WALS, Glottolog) the Nigero-Congolese affiliation of the Mande family is not mentioned.

We have compared Proto-Bantu reconstructions from the database *Bantu Language Reconstructions* with our preliminary Proto-Mande reconstructions. Our study has reliably proven the Mande-Bantu relationship. The proof is based on the following arguments:

– in the basic vocabulary, the average cognacy rate of contemporary Mande languages with Proto-Bantu is higher than the rate of other families whose belonging to the Niger-Congo macrofamily is uncontested;

– in the basic vocabulary, distribution of roots by their stability in Mande family displays a strong positive correlation with their distribution in the other Niger-Congo families;

– in the basic lexicon, Proto-Bantu and Proto-Mande are considerably closer to each other than contemporary Bantu and Mande languages;

– phonetic correspondences between Proto-Bantu and Proto-Mande are not only regular, but also proportional, which excludes their fortuitous character.

We have identified 176 potential pairs of Mande-Bantu cognates. We have also considered data from other language families included by Greenberg into the Niger-Congo family, especially reconstructions of taxa of various levels (Proto-Fula-Sereer, Proto-Akanic-Potu, Proto-Benue-Congo, Proto-Central Gur, etc.). This has brought to 202 the number of comparative series containing Mande roots and their cognates in other Niger-Congo families, and this list can be considered as a pilot version of the lexical stock of Proto-Niger-Congo.

Historical relations between clefts, focus markers, and relative clauses in Guro and other South Mande languages

Natalia Kuznetsova (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan)

This talk will discuss possible historical relations between copulas, focus markers, and relative clause markers in South Mande languages, focusing on Guro. In Guro, the identificational copula (appearing also in clefts), one of the focus markers, and one of the relative clause markers are part of a cluster of homonymic markers *lɛ̄*. This cluster also includes the possessive marker, the quotative marker, and the conjunction 'that'. However, a comparison with other South Mande languages (N. Kuznetsova 2023) shows that the latter three units are most likely of different origin, while the identificational copula *lɛ̄*, the focus marker *lɛ̄*, and relative clause marker *lɛ̄* apparently originate from the same source.

The question, which has been touched upon in several recent studies on Mande languages, is which of these functions is historically primary. Currently, there is no consensus on this. For example, it has been argued for Dan-Gweetaa (Vydrin 2017: 512), Gban (Fedotov 2017) and Tura (Idiatov & Aplonova 2017) that the identificational / presentative copula (or marker) might go back to a focus marker. For Kla-Dan, Makeeva (2013, 2017), on the contrary, suggested a shift from cleft sentences containing a copula with predicative function to a monoclausal structure with a non-predicative focus marker. The second hypothesis is also in line with general evolutionary tendencies in African languages observed by Sumbatova (1999).

In more recent works, Creissels (2022: 16), with a reference to Idiatov (p.c.), suggested that, in Mande languages, the "evolutions involving copulæ and focus markers are not necessarily unidirectional and may go in cycles", or that both can "originate from the same source, such as a demonstrative, rather than from one another". In turn, Khachaturyan (2023), on the example of Mano, proposed that both predicative and non-predicative functions may have been present in the units in question from the beginning and were being actualised in speech by co-optation to particular pragmatic contexts.

Based on my field elicitation data (2005-2021) and on published corpus data (O. Kuznetsova 2022), I argue that, at least in Guro, the development has been rather from cleft sentences containing the identificational copula *lɛ̄* with predicative function towards the non-predicative focus marker *lɛ̄* and the non-predicative relative clause marker *lɛ̄.* In particular, Guro synchronic textual data (to be demonstrated in the talk) show several steps of the development of certain cleft sentences into relative constructions, then into monoclausal constructions, and further to non-predicative presentational markers, e.g.:

(a) *X *lɛ̄, è cī bɛ̄.* <X IDCOP 3SG.SBJ DCOP this/DEF> 'It is X, which is here.' (*lɛ̄* = predicative identificational copula in a cleft sentence) →
(b) X *lè cī bɛ̄.* 'It is X, which is here.' (reduced cleft) / X *lè cī bɛ̄, …* 'X, which is here, [he/she/it…]' (relative construction) →
(c) X *lè bɛ̄.* 'It is X here.' (monoclausal construction) / X *lè bɛ̄, …* 'X here, [he/she/it…]' (reduced relative construction) →
(d) X *lɛ̌.* 'This is X.' (*lɛ̌* = presentational copula <PCOP_DEF>) / X *lɛ̌, …* 'This X, [he/she/it…]' (*lɛ̌* = non-predicative presentational marker <PRES.DEF>).

I will also show that, in general, cleft sentences are understudied for South Mande (and possibly also for other Mande) languages, and, therefore, the potential predicative function of some attested focus markers might have remained unnoticed. For example, for Mano, the predicative function of the focus marker is explicitly stated only by Khachaturyan (2023), but not in earlier descriptions. Further comparative studies, therefore, are needed on clefts in South Mande

languages and beyond in order to establish mutual transformations and/or contextual co-optations of copulas, focus markers, and relative clause markers with more certainty.

Abbreviations:

3 — 3rd person, DCOP — existential copula in dependent predications, DEF — definite, IDCOP — identificational copula, PCOP_DEF — presentative definite copula, PCOP_PROX — presentative proximate copula, PRES — presentational

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Reconstructing intermediate stages of change in verbal synthesis in Niger-Congo

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Niger-Congo (NC) languages vary in the degree of verbal synthesis, i.e., the amount of material bound to the verb root (e.g. (1)). This has led to the often-discussed question as to whether to reconstruct synthetic predicates, as done for Proto-Bantu by Meeussen (1967) (2) (but more recently challenged as being a later development; Bostoen 2022), with subsequent breakdown in broader NC (see e.g. Hyman 2004 for Kwa). An alternative idea is that Narrow Bantu synthetic structures arose via univerbation from earlier split predicate constructions (3), as said to be attested synchronically in Northwestern Bantu (NWB) and West/Central African NC languages (Nurse 2007, Güldemann 2022).

While the general picture of a cline in syntheticity is clear, NC languages must have passed through intermediate stages, the details of which remain to be understood. In the absence of written records that can be used to trace this development diachronically, I discuss case studies from NWB/(non-Bantu) Bantoid languages which are situated on the proposed cline between the analytic Kwa and synthetic Bantu types and expected to instantiate such intermediate stages synchronically. I focus specifically on the boundedness of inflection (INFL) to the verb stem, i.e., on whether INFL is split from the verb in a split predicate structure.

I first review how the literature has been muddied by a misleading binary classification of analytic *vs* synthetic constructions (or, less accurately, languages; *cf* Ledgeway 2012:12-15), rather than identifying intermediate stages. This false dichotomy arises in part by the nature of writing conventions through which data are made available: authors face a binary choice in deciding whether or not to use whitespace between INFL and the verb stem. Orthographic wordhood decisions are known to vary between authors, even for the same language, which is said to reflect different research traditions as much as actual differences in the degree of syntheticity (Nurse 2008:169-70, Anderson 2016:524-5 fn4, i.a.). However, classifications often end up relying on the orthographic word, both for Africanist historical research (e.g. Güldemann 2022, who acknowledges it on p.389 as an "important caveat"), and in larger-scale typological work (e.g. Grambank; Lesage & Hübler 2017). Similarly, the term 'STAMP-morph' (Anderson 2012 *et seq.*) has been applied with variable definitions (compare Anderson 2016, Rolle 2022, and Garvin et al. 2021) and often without providing the necessary evidence to show separation from the verb. I argue that these terminological issues can bias comparative approaches non-trivially, especially regarding the idea of split predicates as an areal feature of the Macro-Sudan Belt (Güldemann 2011, Anderson 2016; *cf* Rolle 2022:171-4).

Proponents of synthetic→analytic change have focused more on verbal extensions than the INFL/verb boundary (Hyman 2004:87). In this talk I therefore continue by investigating the hypothesis that an intermediate stage of change consisted of reduction of the verbs' phonological domain, which in turn fed the creation of a syntactic word boundary between INFL and the verb stem. To do this, I compare evidence for phonological *vs* syntactic wordhood, presenting a case study of the Mbam languages of Cameroon (spoken at the classificatory borderline between NWB and Bantoid). Preliminary fieldwork results show mismatches in wordhood, but not in the direction predicted by the hypothesis. Equally, 'split predicates' in modern-day Mbam varieties differ from the ones reconstructed in (3b), e.g. in the nature of the preverbal object (Kerr 2024) and in phonological phrasing, which suggests that present-day NWB structures are not (completely) conservative. I conclude with discussion of other sources of evidence—prominence of the verb stem and maximality restrictions—which seem to pattern heterogeneously within NWB/Bantoid languages. These results call for

more complexity in the reconstruction of NC verbal forms than the idea of a smooth cline in syntheticity between Kwa and Narrow Bantu with drift between the two.

(1) **Analytic predicates in Kwa *vs* synthetic predicates in Narrow Bantu**

a. Mo mú ìwé wá fún ẹ.
I take book come give you
'I brought you a book.' (Yoruba (Kwa); as glossed in Hyman 2004:73)

b. Ke-tla-lo-ba-mo-kwal-êl-êl-a.
SM.1SG-FUT-OM.11-OM.2-OM.1-write-APPL-APPL-FV
'I will write it to them for him.' (Tswana (Bantu); Cole, 1955:432, adapted)

(2) **Synthetic predicate structure reconstructed for Proto-Bantu by Meeussen (1967)**
Pre-initial+Subject+TAMP+Object+Verb root+Derivation/TAMP+TAMP+Post-final
(Meeussen, 1967:108-111, adapted)

(3) **(Split) predicate structures reconstructed for Proto-Bantu by Güldemann (2022)**

a. i. [SBJ-STEM] ii. [OBJ-STEM] iii. [INF-STEM]
b. i. [SBJ-AUX] [ø STEM] ii. [SBJ-AUX] [SBJ- STEM] iii. [SBJ-AUX] [OBJ- STEM]
iv. [SBJ-AUX] [INF- STEM]
(Güldemann 2022:392)

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Genitive – Noun order in Niger-Congo

Dmitry Idiatov & Mark Van de Velde (LLACAN: CNRS - INALCO/EPHE)

There is a clear areal pattern within Niger-Congo regarding the mutual ordering of a genitive modifier (Gen) and the nominal expression it modifies (N). In a large central zone stretching from Liberia to Benin the order is overwhelmingly Gen N, whereas we find the inverse N Gen ordering at the Eastern and Western periphery. Although this distribution suggests that Gen N order is an innovation, we propose instead that the N Gen ordering found at the peripheries is innovative and that Proto Niger-Congo is more likely to have had Gen N order, in as far as this is reconstructable. Our claim is based on two kinds of indications. The first is the existence of head-final compounds in Proto Bantu, such as **gòndà* 'forest' (< 'house' *dá* 'of tree' *gòn*), which are arguably retentions from a pre-Proto Bantu stage. The second is the existence of a synchronically attested pattern of change that can easily explain the recurrent emergence of N Gen orders out of an original Gen N construction. What remains to be explained is why such changes have not taken place in a vast central domain of the Niger-Congo languages.

Limba verb extensions in Niger-Congo pPerspective

Larry M. Hyman (University of California, Berkeley)

It has long been accepted that morphology provides an, if not the most important criterion for establishing linguistic relatedness. In the case of African languages, the presence of noun classes has been central in establishing Niger-Congo (NC) affiliation and subgrouping, while their absence has caused certain scholars to doubt whether languages without noun classes should be excluded from NC. In this talk I look at the other widespread morphological criterion, derivational verb extensions, in the Tonko dialect of Limba, a typologically "Atlantic-like" language spoken in Sierra Leone. While Pozdniakov, Segerer and Vydrin (2019) tentatively treat Limba as an independent branch of NC, the question is whether the verb extension system can help in determining where it fits into NC. To do this we must overcome at least three problems: (1) While it is clear that a "core" of NC as far West as Gur has verb extensions that are cognate with those reconstructed for Proto-Bantu, the two NC extremities ("Atlantic" and "Kordofanian") show considerable divergent variation. (2) The shortness of extensions, which may consist of only a vowel or a consonant, makes it hard to determine if certain resemblances are accidental. (3) In contrast to noun classes, whose properties represent a NC near-uniqueness, phonetically and functionally similar verb extensions are also found in other African language families and indeed throughout the world. The full extension system of Limba-Tonko will be presented and evaluated from a NC perspective.

La reconstruction du proto-Joola

Guillaume Segerer (LLACAN: CNRS – INALCO/EPHE)

Les langues du groupe Joola sont connues pour être grammaticalement assez homogènes (en particulier en ce qui concerne la morphologie: classes nominales et extensions verbales) et lexicalement plutôt diverses. Ce dernier point pose évidemment des problèmes pour la reconstruction lexicale. Ainsi, pour le sens 'cœur', la documentation accessible fournit les 12 termes suivants : *e-sigir*, *ɛ-luŋ*, *hʊ-kɔnk*, *ɛ-tɪxɪŋ*, *e-jund*, *ɛ-kəʈ*, *i-holihol*, *ho-noo*, *degdeg*, *tuuf*, *hu-rɤɤ*, *ɛ-dɛdəkɪn* (sans parler des cas de polysémie 'coeur / foie'). Le premier terme cité est de loin le plus fréquent, et celui dont la distribution est la plus large, ce qui en fait un bon candidat pour une reconstruction.

A ce jour, la seule tentative de reconstruction du proto-Joola est à mettre au crédit de A. Barry, dans sa thèse de 1987. Toutefois, les reconstructions proposées ne concernent que l'inventaire phonologique. Tout reste donc à faire en ce qui concerne le lexique et la morphologie, sans parler de la syntaxe, globalement peu décrite pour les langues du groupe. En outre, Barry a travaillé à partir d'une liste fermée d'environ 200 items recueillis par lui-même dans 21 villages de Casamance. Cette méthode, si elle permet une certaine homogénéité des données, efface virtuellement tous les cas de changements sémantiques puisque seuls sont comparés les termes ayant exactement le même sens. Enfin, cette courte liste permettrait au mieux de reconstruire environ 200 items lexicaux, ce qui n'est même pas possible compte tenu de la variation dialectale au sein du groupe Joola. J'ai donc décidé de prendre en compte l'ensemble des données lexicales disponibles.

L'exposé présentera l'état actuel de l'entreprise de reconstruction, ainsi que ses limites : à l'aide de RefLex, qui contient près de 56000 entrées de 85 sources (Joola + Bayot, dont il sera un peu question), j'ai annoté environ (le travail est toujours en cours) 1700 séries lexicales, ce qui permet de dégager des correspondances phonétiques régulières, mais aussi des cas plus complexes. Dans l'histoire récente, les populations de langues Joola ont occupé un territoire relativement restreint, où les contacts n'ont sans doute jamais cessé, ce qui a eu une influence importante sur les processus de dialectalisation, rendant les frontières plus floues. Néanmoins, il paraît raisonnable, et il est possible, de proposer des reconstructions lexicales pour quelques dizaines, voire centaines de notions.

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Reconstructing Proto-NW Kainji

Rebecca Paterson (Princeton University)

The Kainji languages are the northwestern most of all East Benue-Congo languages. Their lexical, phonological and morphological diversity is reminiscent of the complexity across Benue-Congo, including the entire Bantu domain stretching into Southern Africa (see McGill 2009; McGill & Blench 2012; Harley 2012; Mort 2012; Paterson 2019; Blench 2018). However, Kainji languages are wholly contained within Nigeria and surrounded by languages of other stock. The currently available data show that Kainji displays great internal diversity; their lexical similarity is as low as 20% based on cognates from a 200 wordlist (McGill & Blench 2012). In this talk I present developing work on a historical-comparative reconstruction of the sound system and noun class affixes of Northwest Kainji (NWK), a low-level group within Kainji, based on published sources and unpublished manuscripts sources and data from fieldwork conducted since 2005.

Despite poor knowledge and the unpublished state of most data, assertions have been made about how Kainji fits into our collective understanding of Benue-Congo, particularly regarding noun classification systems. De Wolf (1971) reconstructs Proto-Benue-Congo noun classes but only includes data from two Kainji languages; Hepburn-Gray (2020) reconstructs Proto-Niger-Congo noun classes but only discusses Kainji data from two other Kainji languages. Making claims based on such limited amounts of data from a key subgroup within Benue-Congo hinders our understanding of Niger-Congo's internal structure (which is at present (a) still largely unknown and/or (b) groups are not supported by historical-comparative evidence).

Several researchers have approached Kainji languages from a comparative or historical-comparative perspective (e.g., Regnier 1992/2003; McGill 2009; McGill 2012; Bacon & Bird 2016; Bacon 2016). However, these preliminary results have not been systematically published, and they do not include data from all Kainji languages for which data now exists. The most comprehensive and ongoing effort to date is Blench's (2012-2020; updated 2025) unpublished manuscript (443 pages) which organizes lexical data from across all Kainji subgroups and includes many terms for flora and fauna in the region with data from distributed sources. Pozdniakov (2018) provides a reconstruction of Proto-Kainji numerals.

The NWK languages, currently identified as əd-Gwamhyə [bga], əd-Wuri [bga], d-Mba [bga], and Tidama'un [dam, moribund], C'Lela [four varieties under the ISO 639-3, dri], Ụt-Ma'in [seven varieties with internal diversity under the ISO 639-3, gel], ụs-Saare [uss], and ụt-Hun [uth], are unified by their characteristic use of consonant (only) noun class prefixes, featuring a transitional central vowel to ease pronunciation (Blench 2020). For example, as shown in (1), all extant NWK languages have a noun class prefix likely cognate with the Proto-Benue-Congo **li-* (de Wolf 1971) and the Proto-Bantu agreement marker **dí* (Meeussen 1967).

(1)	**Code**	**Autonym**	**Class 5**	**Agreement**	**Example**	**Gloss**
	gel	Ụt-Ma'in (Ror)	*ɘrᵊ-*	*dɛ*	*ɘ̄rᵊ-íːs*	'CM-eye'
	dri	C'Lela (Dabai)	*dᵊ-*	*dɘ*	*d-ìsɘ́*	'CM-eye'
	uth	ụt-Hun (Rijau)	*ɨɾ-*	*de*	*ɨrᵊ-jíʃ*	'CM-eye'
	uss	ụs-Saare (Dukku)	*ɨɾ-*	*de*	*ɨ̀rᵊ-íːs*	'CM-eye'
	bga	əd-Gwamhyə	*əl-*	?	*əl-iʃi*	'CM-eye'

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Tones, Aspects, and Tense in Edoid

Ronald P. Schaefer (Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville) & Francis O. Egbokhare (University of Ibadan)

Tonal expression of temporal reference in West Africa's Edoid languages has received some attention, especially in studies of Bini by Amayo (1975, 1976). He advanced what can be called the Amayo Principle (AP) whereby SUBJECT PRONOUN and VERB elements are assumed to be lexically toneless and to receive tonal expression in a clause from other grammatical categories.

We extend Amayo's study by examining published data available for Yekhee, North Ivie, Bini, and Esan of Northern Edoid as well as Degema and Engenni of Southern Edoid. No study exhibits an exclusive focus on tone and its temporal reference function. In fact, one gets a distinct impression that investigators often assume an isomorphic relation between temporal categories in Edoid and those of their English translation. Bertinetto (2003) warns against making this assumption. We argue that temporal interpretations in the Edoid literature provide little evidence for the category tense other than English translation. The data available suggest that most Edoid languages exhibit forms and meanings more consistent with aspect: perspectival aspect (Dik 1997, Boland 1999) in before-verb position and viewpoint aspect in after-verb position (Comrie 1976). Relevant perspectival categories are completive, perfect, habitual, progressive, and prospective, while dominant viewpoint categories are perfective and imperfective. For each of the six languages we illustrate the completive in (1), where a four-tier representation indicates surface level in brackets, underlying level in forward slashes, interlinear gloss, and English translation.

Our analysis reveals that sample languages diverged from the AP along three lines. There is complete rejection of the AP by the two southern Edoid languages, Degema and Engenni, and the northern language Yekhee. For each, tonal values for subject pronouns and verbs are assigned in the lexicon. Partial rejection is evident in northern Edoid Bini and North Ivie. Each specifies a lexical tone for subject pronouns but a toneless condition for verbs. Yet a third pattern is shown by Esan, also of the northern area. It treats both subject pronouns and verbs in the lexicon as toneless. No language specified tone in the lexicon for verbs but not for subject pronouns.

Overall, there was a tendency for segmental morphemes to code prospective, progressive, and perfect, while a tonal morpheme alone coded completive and habitual, the latter less often than the former. When characterized in terms of a completive/non-completive distinction, Edoid favored tonal exponents for completive significance but segmental and tonal exponents for non-completive. Such coding asymmetry is summarized in Table 1.

A final point of comparison concerns the conflation of marking patterns among the different perspectival aspect categories. Three conflation patterns are evident, as indicated in Table 2. One never finds conflation of completive with any non-completive perspectival aspect.

It is when tone as a grammatical feature undergirds temporal reference that we encounter a geographic divide within Edoid. Languages from northern and central areas tend to have low tone on a subject pronoun when languages from the southern area tend to have a high tone. Likewise, when verbs in the southern area exhibit high tone, verbs in the northern areas show low tone. This is most pronounced for the non-completive categories habitual, progressive, and prospective.

We conclude by outlining tonal and segmental features of temporal reference in Emai, also Edoid. It abides the AP. But it contrasts with the other six languages in its use of an underlying tonal polarity complex, i.e. { }, in preverbal position to articulate tonal values, not only for

past, present, and future but also for temporal distance (proximal vs. distal). In (2) we illustrate proximal present and distal past and their accompanying viewpoint aspects, imperfective and perfective, respectively. Each tense-aspect pair tends to attract a distinct temporal adverb.

(1) a. [*ɔ̌* *zɛ́* *ébè*] North Ivie
/ ɔ̀ ˊH zɛ ˊH ébè /
3SG=CMP read-PFV book
'He read a book.'

b. [*ɔ̌* *dɛ́* *àkpà*] Yekhee
/ ɔ̀ ˊH dɛ́ àkpà /
3SG=CMP buy cup
'He bought a cup.'

c. [*ɔ̀* *tɔ́n* *ɔ́kà*] Esan
/ ɔ ˋL tɔn ˊH ɔ́kà /
3SG=CMP roast-PFV maize
'He roasted maize.'

d. [*ɔ̀* *dɛ́* *èbé*] Bini
/ ɔ̀ dɛ ˊH èbé /
3SG buy-PFV book
'He bought a book.'

e. [*ɔ̀* *kótú* *n* *ɔ́yì*] Degema
/ ɔ́ ˋL kótú n ɔ́yì /
3SG=CMP call= PFV 3SG
'She called him.'

f. [*ɔ̀* *wá* *úgyó* *nà*] Engenni
/ ɔ́ ˋL wá úgyó nà /
3SG CMP look.for stone =PFV
'He looked for the stone.'

Table 1. Designation of perspectival aspects as tonal, segmental or both

	TONE	SEG
CMP	6	0
PFT	2	2
HAB	4	2
PROG	1	5
PROS	1	5

Table 2. Conflation of tonal patterns among perspectival aspects in Edoid

ASPECT CONFLATION		LANGUAGE
habitual & progressive		North Ivie, Degema, Engenni
progressive & prospective		Bini, Esan, Degema
completive & perfect		Engenni

(2) a. [*ɔ̀* *ɔ́* *dùmɛ̀* *émà*]
/ ɔ {ˋL ˊH} ɔ dumɛ -ˋL émà /
3SG PRX PRS pound-IPFV yam
'She is pounding yam.'

b. [*ɔ́* *↓dúmɛ́* *émà*]
/ ɔ {ˊH ˋL} Ø dumɛ-í émà /
3SG DST PST pound-PFV yam
'She pounded yam.'

Dogon: Evidence of Niger-Congo affiliation

Abbie Hantgan, Vadim Diachkov, Promise Dodzi Kpoglu, Lora Litvinova, Aurore Montébran & Fabian Zuk (BANG Project: ERC / LLACAN, CNRS)

This presentation examines a dual-evidence approach—lexical and morphosyntactic—to reassess the classification of Dogon languages and their potential affiliation with the Niger-Congo phylum. While typologically distinct from canonical Niger-Congo languages (Güldemann 2018), proposed Proto-Dogon nonetheless displays evidence that its pronominal system may derive from an earlier Niger-Congo stage. Our reconstruction of Proto-Dogon pronouns reveals stable forms for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person, including animate/inanimate distinctions, echoing earlier observations about Niger-Congo correspondences.

Figure 1. *Reconstructed Proto-Dogon pronominal paradigm with animacy distinctions*

	animate singular	inanimate singular	animate plural	inanimate plural
1st	**mí*	---	**mì-bé/*mì-jé*	---
2nd	**ǒ*	---	**é / *o̩+#_#*[Pl]	---
3rd	**(V)-ná*	**ko̩*	**bé / *bo̩*	**jé*

These forms provide internal cohesion across Dogon varieties and reinforce the idea of a genealogical link to Niger-Congo. Phonological correspondences across core vocabulary as seen in Figure 2 show regular sound patterns that may further support historical connections.

Figure 2. *Examples of stable lexical forms across Dogon varieties*

	***i**	Bankan Tey	Nanga	Tommo So	Jamsay
a.	‘1Sg’	í	i̱i̱	mí	mí
b.	‘water’	níì	níì	díí	níí
c.	‘tooth’	ɲìr̃ɛ́	ìnɛ́	ìnú	ìr̃é
d.	‘face’	gìrè nûm	gìrè nɔ̀ɔ́	gìrè m̀bùló	ɟire pa̰ra

However, the syntactic structure of the Dogon languages—marked by extensive use of converbs (i.e. adverbialized verbs) and verb chains grammaticalizing into TAM markers—poses a typological outlier. We argue that such divergence does not preclude genealogical affiliation. Instead, we explore possible diachronic scenarios, such as substrate influence or syntactic drift, to explain the shift in branching directionality and TAM structures, similar to processes observed in neighboring Mande languages.

To account for the paradox between the parallels between Niger-Congo groups in the lexica of the Dogon languages, yet with divergent morphosyntax, we propose a hierarchical model for evaluating historical linguistic signals. Drawing on notions of pertinacity in phonological and syntactic systems (Dresher & Lahiri 2005; Plank & Lahiri 2015), we argue that typological features, far from being random, may act as diachronic diagnostics.

While clear evidence of Niger-Congo-like noun class morphology remains absent, and further exploration is needed, we contend that the exclusion of Dogon from Niger-Congo is increasingly untenable. We support this claim with comparative and computational phylogenetic modeling of the Dogon family, offering a provisional internal classification and showing areas of potential convergence with more-established Niger-Congo subgroups such as Oti-Volta and Benue-Congo.

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Early Dogon I-Metathesis: (on how *i* moved out and what it means for the family)

Fabian Zuk (BANG Project: ERC / LLACAN, CNRS)

The phylogenetic classification of the Dogon languages of central Mali has represented a longstanding problem in African Linguistics, not only in regards to the larger Niger-Congo family (to which it is presumed to belong) but also with regards to its internal classification. In this talk I provide comparative evidence for the reconstruction of three Proto-Dogon etyma meaning ‘person’, ‘tooth’ and ‘iron’. The data is partially summarized in (1).

(1)

	Gloss	Ampari	Bondu So	Yorno So	Tebul Ure
a.	‘person’	*ntá*	*nǒː*	*ìnɛ́*	*ɲɛ̌*
b.	‘tooth’	*ɲìnì*	*ìnɔ̌:*	*ɛ̌n*	*ǐn*
c.	‘iron'	*ina*	*ínó-ŋgó*	*ɛ́rⁿɛ́*	*índɛ́*

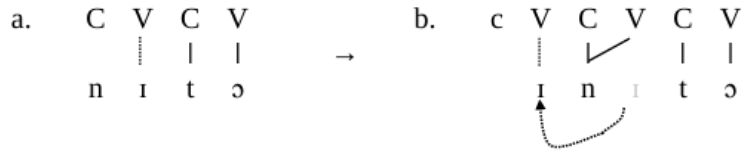
Though these roots show significant variation, they also share a similar, generally vowel-initial phonological shape, and an internal nasal consonant or nasal complex. By establishing correspondence sets across the attested consonants, and taking into consideration frequent phonological phenomena among the Dogon languages, notably intervocalic lenition and vowel harmony, it is possible to propose Dogon internal reconstruction: *intʊ ‘person’, *iŋnO ‘tooth’ and *inta ‘iron’. When additional Niger-Congo languages are taken into account (2), the Dogon forms in (1) appear to have undergone a metathesis of the first syllable. In fact, Dogon internal evidence suggests that the pre-metathesis form should also be reconstructed for Proto-Dogon.

(2)

	Language	Source	‘person’	‘tooth’	‘iron’
a.	Proto-Dogon	Zuk (*in prep*)	***nitʊ**	***ɲinO**	***ɲita**
b.	Proto-Bantu	BLR3	***ntʊ̀**	***-jínò**	***jèdà**
c.	Proto-Upper Cross	Dimmendaal (1978)	***nɛ̀d**	?	?
d.	Proto-Benue-Congo	De Wolf (1971)	***neto**	***nino**	-
e.	Proto-Oti-Volta	Eddyshaw (2024)	***nìt-wà**	***ɲìn-rì**	n/c
f.	Proto-Fula-Sereer	Pozdniakov (2022)	***ʔiin**	***ɲiɲ**	***njɛlɛm**
h.	Wolof	RefLex, *various*	**nit**	n/c	n/c

Through application of the comparative method and a reasoned approach to phonological processes in the historical grammars of the proto-language, it is shown that later Dogon languages conspired to eliminate ill-formed *NiCV sequences inherited from Pre- and Proto-Dogon. We believe this is through metathesis as demonstrated in (3), though an alternative analysis through syncope + prothesis has yet to be discarded.

(3) Proposed metathesis of *NiCV → iNCV in later Dogon



If confirmed through additional case studies and further exploration of the data, the proposed metathesis in Dogon would not only demonstrate its genetic descendance from Niger-Congo, but provide an additional analytical tool to understand the relations between distantly related reflexes.

Suppletive kinship terms in the Bantu language family: A typological and historical anaysis

Jens Fleischhauer (Heinrich-Heine-University, Düsseldorf)

Numerous Bantu languages exhibit irregular morphology in the area of pronominal possession of kinship terms. This includes specific affixes for possessor marking, which are only used with kinship terms (cf. (1) from Gĩkũyũ). But it also includes suppletive noun stems whose form varies depending on person – and sometimes also number – of the pronominal possessor (cf. (2)). This form of irregular morphology represents an alienability split which, however, does not exist in all Bantu languages. In a (convenience) sample of 36 Bantu languages[1], 24 have suppletive stems for 'mother' and 'father', 12 do not.

The phenomenon of suppletive stems in the Bantu family has also been mentioned by other authors (e.g., Van de Velde *to appear*), but it has not yet been systematically investigated. My language sample shows that when Bantu language has suppletive stems, there are usually three distinct forms –depending on the person of the pronominal possessor (as in Gĩkũyũ; (2)). In the only typological study of suppletive kinship terms to date, Baerman (2014) shows that this pattern of suppletion is hardly attested in Papuan languages. This raises the question of whether the Bantu languages show different preferences in the formation of suppletion patterns than Papuan languages or whether this difference can possibly be explained differently.

In the talk, I argue that most Bantu languages with suppletive kinship terms have three distinct stems synchronically, but that the stems for 2SG.POSS and 3SG.POSS go back to a common Proto-Bantu form **is*- or **s*-, to which possessor markers were suffixed. This assumption is supported by the fact that all languages in the sample that exhibit suppletion have phonologically very similar forms. For instance, IkiHa *so* 'your father' and *se* 'his/her father' (Harjula 2004: 201-202) would thus diachronically be *s-o* 'father-2sg.POSS' and *s-e* 'father-3SG.POSS', respectively. Gĩkũyũ *tho* (2b) is a reflex of *so* and only occurs with the possessor suffix *-guo* '2SG.POSS', which shows that *-o* has been reanalyzed as being part of the stem. With regard to the Bantu languages, which have no suppletive stems – for 'mother', 'father' or both noun –, I argue for a regularization process that has led to the reduction of irregular forms. We can observe this in Gĩkũyũ, for example, where the same form was used for 'mother' in the context 1/2SG.POSS, i.e., a suppletive form was removed (3). The direction of the regularization prosses, as I will show in the lecture, is not arbitrary, but, for instance, forms of 1SG are transferred to the context 2SG but not vice versa.

My contention is that Proto-Bantu had two suppletive stems each for 'mother' and 'father', one for the context of 1SG.POSS and one for the context of 2 and 3SG.POSS. Actual evidence for the existence of the possessor suffixes *-O* '2SG.POSS' and *-e* '3sg.POSS' can be found in Old Swahili (Miehe 1979). The modern form has no (more) suppletive forms. Suppletive forms are, however, attested for the modern language, e.g., Johnson's Standard English-Swahili Dictionary (1939) still lists the form *nyoko* for the meaning 'your mother'. But, according to informants, it is now used as a swear word.

In terms of suppletion patterns, the Bantu languages thus turn out to be more similar to the Papuan languages in Baerman's sample than first assumed: they exhibit an ego-based split, which is also the most frequent suppletion type in Baerman's sample.

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[1] The sample includes the following languages: Kinyarwanda, Eton, Zulu, Mituku, Gusii, Xhosa, Ewondo, Runyoro-Rutooto, Yeyi, Shambala, Northern Ndebele, Digo, Mina, Gĩkũyũ, Kimeru, Chimpoto, SiLuyana, Luvale, Herero, Chitumbuka, igiHa, Simbunda, Oshivambo, Luganda, Swahili, Silozi, Ekoti, Chasu, Makwe, Makonde, Zimba, Cuwabo, Lubukusu, Northern Sotho, Chichewa, Shona. The data were either collected from grammars or elicited from native speakers.

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Language data

(1)
a. *mama*
1.uncle
'my uncle'

b. *mama-guo*
1.uncle-2SG.POSS
'your uncle'

c. *mama-we*
1.uncle-3SG.POSS
'his/her uncle'

d. *i-buku ri-a-kwa*
5-book 5-ASSOC-1.SG.POSS
'my book'

e. *i-buku ri-a-ku*
5-book 5-ASSOC-2.SG.POSS
'your book'

f. *i-buku ri-a-ke*
5-book 5-ASSOC-3.SG.POSS
'his/her book'

(2)
a. *baba*
'father' (i.e., my father)

b. *thoguo*[2]
'your father'

c. *ithe*
'his/her father'

(3)
a. *maitu*
'my mother'

b. *maitu-gwo*
mother-2SG.POSS
'your mother'

c. *nyina*
'his/her mother'

[2] Also *tho-guo* is segmentable, there exists no stem *tho* in the language.

Grassfields innovations: birds and other words

Jeffrey Wills (Ukranian Catholic University, Lviv)

Since Stallcup (1980), the major features dividing Eastern Grassfields (EGB) and Western Grassfields (WGB) have been listed as some noun class differences and the replacement of three lexical items: ‘water’, ‘bird’, and ‘thing’. Despite initial appearances, in the latter two cases, it is demonstrated that the new forms are cognate with the old forms and that the differences are due to morphological and phonological changes rather than lexical replacement. The paper illustrates the general problem of identifying cognates in languages with diminutive class markers.