

THE BENUE-GONGOLA-CHAD BASIN - ZONE OF ETHNIC AND LINGUISTIC COMPRESSION

H. Jungraithmayr and R. Leger

Introduction

It is a well-known fact that northeastern Nigeria is probably unique as a meeting point of the three greatest African linguistic stocks, i.e. Niger-Congo, Hamitosemitic (Afroasiatic) and Nilo-Saharan. As to the period and length of their presence in this area, there are good reasons to think that since about 4-3000 B.C., Niger-Congo languages like those present today on the Plateau as well as south of the Bauchi road and in the southeastern corner only as well as the non-Chadic Ningi languages (Buta, Kuda, Chamo) of Benue-Congo extraction (which however are in the process of dying out) - have dominated the whole territory between the Benue river in the south and the Chad Basin in the north and northeast.

According to certain hypotheses, based mainly on paleo-anthropological evidence and proposed by French Africanist prehistorians (cf. CORNEVIN, 1964: 30) even large parts of the pre-arid Sahara up to the 3rd millenium B.C. are believed to have been populated by negroid peoples (cf. STRIEDTER 1978: 269) who can be presumed to have spoken languages of the Niger-Congo stock.

The other major stock, Hamitosemitic or Afroasiatic, presently covering almost the whole of northern and eastern Africa - as the so-called Berber, Chadic and Cushitic languages - must have penetrated into the territory in question including northern Cameroon and southern Chad at a time when living conditions in what is today the Sahara desert started to become unbearable for man. Thus, we have indeed two possible ways of explaining the compressed coexistence of ethnic groups speaking Niger-Congo and Hamitosemitic languages as presently found in northern Nigeria:

a) the two stocks which represent completely different language types already coexisted in North Africa before 3000 B.C. and have thus been compelled to take refuge together to more southerly regions; in such a case the present ethnic-linguistic distribution in northern Nigeria could be in a certain sense a reflection of the situation that existed some 3-5000 years B.C. some 2000 km further to the north;

b) the two stocks, Niger-Congo and Hamitosemitic, were originally far apart from each other, i.e. Hamitosemitic north of and along the northern shores of Mega-Chad - by which term we name the original great lake today reduced to perhaps a twentieth of its original size -, with Niger-Congo, however, south of and along the southern shores of the great lake. In this case, a section of the speakers of Hamitosemitic languages, today labeled as 'Chadic', would have migrated towards the south and thus encountered the Niger-Congo-speaking communities already present in these southerly regions. In the area southwest and southeast of Lake Chad, water resources, mainly through the tributaries of the lake, the Yobe river, the Chari and the Logone, were still abundantly available at that time, so that both passages to the south, to the west and to the east of the lake, were probably equally attractive to the migrants in their search for better living conditions. Let us assume that those sections of the early Chadic speakers that took the western route were first concentrated in the region south of the lake, but later on started diverging into groups which migrated to the west and southwest, ultimately laying the foundation for groups like the Bole-Tangale in the present-day Bauchi State and Angas-Sura-Ankwe in the Plateau State. Others, especially the Bade-Ngizim group, though also following the western route, do not seem to have ever reached the central area situated immediately south of the lake but rather to have "stopped their migration in the western shore area of the Lake from where they were later on driven away towards the west/southwest by the Kanuri." (JUNGRAITHMAYR, 1991a: 67).

The Chadic languages and their distribution

From a very general and typological point of view the present-day Chadic languages numbering some 150 may be divided into five sections each displaying characteristic features of its own; the following scheme gives a rough idea of their distribution:

CHADIC

| Branches: | Far West | Middle West | Centre | | Middle East | Far East | |
|------------------|----------|--|--|------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|--------------------|
| | | | West | East | | | |
| <u>Groups:</u> | Ron | (Hausa) Bade-Ngizim Bole-Tangale Sura-Gerka N. Bauchi S. Bauchi | Tera Bura-M. Higi Bata-B. Lamang Sukur Mandara Daba Gidar Mafa-Mofu | Masa Sumray-Miltu | Kotoko Musgu Kuang-Kera Nanceere-Gabri Mubi-Toram Sokoro | Mokilko Dangla-Migama | |
| <u>Features:</u> | | Ablaut (apophony) | | | | Ablaut (apophony) | |
| | | Gender (in noun and pron.) | | | | Gender (in noun and pron.) | |
| | | Some 30 consonants | | Up to 90 consonants | | Some 30 consonants | |
| | | Stable 5 vowels | Stable 7 vowels | Floating vowels | | Stable 7 vowels | Stable 5 vowels |
| | | Consonant and vowel length | | No cons. and vowel length | | Consonant and vowel length | |

In northeastern Nigeria we are mostly concerned with the so-called 'Middle West' languages - and their speakers - which have been exposed to influences from 'Nigritic' Benue-Congo and Adamawa languages to varying degrees, and with the western subsection of the Central Chadic languages spoken in the northern Cameroon-Nigeria border area, e.g. Bura-Margi, Tera and to a certain extent also with Bata-Bachama. It is assumed that "the on-going pressure triggered by expansive forces in the centre seems to have caused secondary migratory movements within the areas between the western Central and the 'Middle West' languages, that is for instance between the Bura-Margi and Tera groups on the one hand and the Bole-Tangale languages on the other. Thus, the Tangale - together with their immediate relatives, Pero, Piya, Kushi, Widala and Nyam - were pushed deep into the area of Adamawa languages which exerted a very strong influence on them, thus creating a special type of 'interferential' Chadic" (JUNGRAITHMAYR, 1991a: 67f.), i.e. Chadic languages displaying a particularly high amount of non-Chadic interferences or admixture.

If we accept the hypothesis, generally well known as the basic principle of the Italian school of 'Neolinguistica', according to which the peripheral languages usually preserve more archaic stages of development than the Centre which would generally constitute the

preferred zone of innovation, the Middle West languages being situated half way between periphery and centre may be said to carry a number of features not common neither to the peripheral nor to the central languages.

When analyzing the distribution of roots, we observe that the highest density of roots is to be found in the western branch, i.e. in Far West and Middle West languages where more than three fourths of the total number of those roots occur. We then assume that density of root occurrence and intensity of historical events in a given area are in a certain way correlatable with each other, whereby it is implied that centres of intensive events create new ideas and new cultural features, which in turn bring forth new terms and special expressions for the new concepts and ways of life; linguistically speaking, double-lexicalization, lexical replacement, proliferation of loanwords, a tendency towards faster change of cultural and linguistic fashion which again would bring about phenomena like 'création lexicale' etc.

"The high number of roots - 229 out of 286 - shared by the West marks this branch, i.e. the area of its distribution, as being full of cultural and linguistic contacts and interferences which will have accelerated the pace of change and will thus have contributed to the increase and expansion of the cultural and lexical inventories." (JUNGRAITHMAYR, 1991a: 72). It is worth noting that even the number of languages in this zone between the Plateau in the west, the Benue river in the south, the Biu-Mandara mountains in the east and Lake Chad in the northeast is exceptionally high, i.e. for Chadic alone 100, in other words 2/3 of the entire number - although the area covered by these 2/3 of the Chadic languages is only approximately 1/4 -; plus some 40-50 non-Chadic languages, all from the Niger-Congo stock: in the west and southwest Benue-Congo, in the southeast Jukunoid and Adamawa languages. "Thus it is not only the area with the highest 'root-productivity' but also the region with the greatest linguistic diversity" (JUNGRAITHMAYR, 1991a: 72). Oral traditions and other records tell us that various ethnic/linguistic shifts and displacements have taken place in this area, e.g. the Bade, Gamergu, as well as probably also the now extinct Sao, Auyokawa and Mober were either displaced from the western and southwestern shores of the lake or were even annihilated by the Kanuri who conquered present day Borno less than a millenium ago. Certainly, such North-East-South-West migrations and conquests triggered other movements which eventually led to the penetration of the mountainous Plateau region by the Angas-Sura-Gerka groups, the westward expulsion of the Bole-Tangale-speaking groups by the Tera (Central branch), and the intrusion southward of the Tangale-Pero-Piya-Nyam groups deep into Adamawa and Jarawan Bantu-speaking peoples situated today south of the Gombe-Bauchi road.

In general it may thus be said that the Benue-Gongola-Chad Basin displays several linguistically evolutionary and innovative features in phonological, morphological and lexical respects, which will now be elaborated in more detail. Catchwords are "reduction and reorganisation of the pronominal systems", "abandonment of aspect stem apophony", "development of new phonological systems", "lexical replacement of a number of archaic terms and/or addition of newly acquired vocabularies". This intense linguistic vitality could well be the reflection of a particularly turbulent social and cultural/historical past, which has left its mark on this region over the past 3-5000 years.

The Bole-Tangale Language Group (BT)

Let us now take a closer look at these languages spoken in the wider Gongola basin. In this region, which roughly stretches from Potiskum southwards to the Benue river and eastwards from the Biu and Longuda mountains to the Jos Plateau, more than 40 languages, belonging to different language families, are found. In this naturally defined area, a zone of ethnic and linguistic compression has emerged from various migrations of peoples into the area in the past. Here, the majority of peoples speak Chadic languages, whose southern, western and eastern offshoots meet languages of the Niger-Congo stock. Through the close geographical proximity of different languages within this area, a great number of cultural contacts and linguistic interferences have taken place. This fact has led to a high degree of mutual influence on nearly all linguistic levels. For some Chadic languages the consequences of it are the formation of characteristic features, which will be discussed for the languages Kwami, Kupto, Tangale, Kushi, Widala and Piya, all members of the Bole-Tangale group. The choice of these particular languages has been made because of two reasons: firstly they are spoken in different geographical areas and secondly some of them share neighbours, belonging to different language families. The two "northern" representatives, Kwami and Kupto, are found in the lowland and surrounded by or in contact with other Chadic languages, namely Bolanci and Tera. The "southern" exponents, Tangale, Kushi, Widala and Piya are situated in and at a mountain-chain north of Benue, where they form (together with Pero) a language continuum. They are bordered by Adamawa and Jarawan Bantu languages, like Awak, Tula, Waja, Bangwinji, Burak, Lo, Bambuka, Jen and Kulung.

Some characteristic features of the BT languages:

For those Chadic languages, their distinctive features will now be exemplified, thus getting also a better picture of their historical development. Taken into consideration are mainly typological features, which often depend directly or indirectly on each other.

1. The sound system

The northern languages display relatively "traditional" or "classical" sound systems, while the sound systems of the southern languages are fairly enlarged or inflated. Kwami and Kushi serve as examples, where we have 28 versus 37 consonants, or Kupto and Tangale, where respectively 5 and 9 vowel systems are found. For the latter we can take for granted that it is a heritage from the neighbouring Adamawa languages, most probably from Waja (cf. KLEINWILLINGHÖFER, 1990: 94f.). Examples for the vowel systems of Kupto and Tangale (cf. JUNGRAITHMAYR, 1991b: 22) are:

| | Kupto | Tangale |
|-----|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| /a/ | màglà "trad. God" | analala "potter, pot-maker" |
| /e/ | tèrè "moon" | kendem "beans" |
| /E/ | -- | kEbE "greediness" |
| /i/ | físhí "sun" | siigit "grass sp." |
| /I/ | -- | slpZlp "light rain" |
| /o/ | kóãóm "crocodile" | tolyo "squirrel" |
| /O/ | -- | dOgOn "dream" |
| /u/ | túlúm "hyena" | pugum "blindness" |
| /U/ | -- | mUlmUl "stout" |

2. The pronominal system

There is an extension in the pronominal system of the southern languages. An example of this is Widala, with a second series (with the morpheme -n) in the subjunctive (mood), and with a second or even third form of the subject pronoun of the 3rd person singular and plural. Compare here Kwami (cf. LEGER, 1988: 202) and Widala:

| | Kwami | Widala |
|-----------|--------------|----------------|
| Singular: | | |
| 1. | nì | nè / nèn |
| 2. m. | kè | khè / khèn |
| 2. f. | shì | shì / shìn |
| 3. m. | yì | cákú / cákún |
| | - | péemò / péemòn |
| 3. f. | tè | tè / tèn |
| | - | mòtò / mòtòn |

Plural:

| | | |
|----|-----|----------------------|
| 1. | mìn | mùnù / mùnùn |
| 2. | mà | mè / mèn |
| 3. | yìn | cùnù / cùnùn (<Ha.?) |
| | - | píimè / píimèn |
| | - | yèelè / yèelèn |

3. The grammatical gender

All languages display grammatical gender. Nevertheless an increasing "gender-levelling" (Genusnivellierung) in favour of the feminine category can be observed in the southern languages, which may be complete, whilst in the northern languages the distribution of masculine and feminine gender is almost equally balanced (60:40%). Examples:

| | Kwami | Kupto | Kushi | Piya | Widala |
|----------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|---------------|
| "elbow" | kùngìli (m) | gùnkùlli (m) | gùlùl (f) | gùlí (f) | gùgùl (f) |
| "knee" | pùrùm (m) | fúrim (f) | vùrùm (f) | bùrmì (f) | vùlùm (f) |
| "saliva" | ?íllé (m) | | ?íllék (f) | ?èlèt (f) | ?èléc (f) |
| | ?èlèk (f) | | | | |

4. The nominal plural

The increasing scope of the category of feminine gender goes along with a decrease of nominal plural marking. In Kwami for example 4 types of possible plural formation exist, in Kupto 3 and in Kushi, Piya and Widala none, i.e. only the suppletive type (for human beings) is found. Examples:

Kwami

?ànjè - ?ànjè-shíná "star"
 yáabé - yéppín "hen, chicken"
 múu - míyá "human being, person"
 kúmíyó - kùmáyà-shíná "co-wife"

Kupto

fóhó - fóhó-láy "mouth"
 músó - mússén "co-wife"
 búu- - ?àná- "possessor of"
 --

Kushi

nîlò - mèmé "human being, person"

Piya

míyá - lèenyá "person"

5. The verbal plural

A verbal plural form, which exists in the northern languages in the perfect tense, i.e. in the perfective aspect, is extended in the southern languages

to all verbal paradigms, which means, verbal plurality appears in the imperfective aspect as well. This feature can be explained through the fact, that the disappearance of the nominal plural is compensated for in the verbal system. Examples here are:

Kwami

màad-áy "to talk, say" -- perf. pl. màad-án-gò

tàl-áy "to like, desire" -- perf. pl. tàl-án-gò

Kupto

?àbb-éy "to climb" -- perf. pl. ?ább-à / ?àbb-án-ù / ?àbb-àn-úukò

yìmm-éy "to think" -- perf. pl. yímm-à / yìmm-án-ù / yìmm-àn-úukò

Kushi

jùun-àni "to squat down" -- cit. pl. jùjùun-áni

tùum-àni "to kneel down" -- cit. pl. tùtùum-àni

Piya

cùg-ánni "fall down" -- cit. pl. cùkìr-ánni

cwàr-ánni "to decrease" -- cit. pl. cwàcìr-ánni

Widala

cònd-áni "to wait" -- cit. pl. còndìr-áni

?ìll-áni "to stand up" -- cit. pl. ?ìlly-áni

6. The verbal classes

There is an increase of verbal classes in the southern languages, which show up to 4 classes as in Widala; on the other hand, only 2 classes appear in Kwami and Kupto (LEGER, in press). Tangale differentiates 2 classes, which however can be further subclassified (JUNGRAITHMAYR, 1991b: 43). Examples:

Kwami

Class I

transitive verbs

verbs of motion

Class II

intransitive verbs

middle verbs

Kupto

Class I

transitive verbs

intransitive verbs

Class II

intrans. verbs + ICP

middle verbs

Widala

Class I

verbs of state

Class III

middle verbs

Class II

verbs of motion

Class IV

trans. / intrans. verbs

7. *The subjunctive paradigm*

There is an extension of the subjunctive paradigm in the southern languages. In Widala and Piya for example we have 3, in Kushi 2 different subjunctive paradigms; Kwami and Kupto know only one. Examples:

Kwami

kè shùm-é "may you (m) beat."

Kupto

kè wùtt-é "may you (m) work."

Kushi

mà nàw-ì / nàw-ù "may you (pl) touch."

Widala

cìn fùää-ìná / fùää-à / fùääù "may you (f) wash."

Piya

mèn mùn-à / mùn-ù / mùn-ì "may you (pl) give."

8. *The intransitive copy pronoun*

With exception of Kwami, all languages have the so-called "Intransitive Copy Pronoun" (ICP), which copies the person, number and gender of the subject onto an intransitive verb stem (cf. NEWMAN, 1974: 23). Examples:

Kupto

wùn rìw-wù "they have entered."

Piya

nè ?ílligée-nò "I stood up."

Widala

tè mùrán-rò "she has died."

Kushi

shìnù nèshàa-jú "they have taken a rest."

9. *The middle voice*

Both groups - and here Tangale seems to be an exception - have middle (voice) verbs, but their number increases considerably in the southern group. Some examples of middle (voice) verbs are:

Kwami

mòndáy "to forget"; tàndáy "to touch, taste"; ?àmbáy "to climb, start"; ?ìnnáy "to regard" (for further examples see LEGER, 1989: 68-69).

Widala

pàmmáni "to thank, swear"; màyánnì "to ask"; mùnánì "to allow"; ?àyáni "to carry on the back".

10. *The syntactical order*

In Kwami and Kupto there is a strict syntactical order, namely subject - verb - object (SVO). Except in the subjunctive mood, this syntactical order can be freely altered in the southern languages to a verb - object - subject (VOS) order, as in Widala and Piya. Examples:

Kwami

yìn tìrá tákàrdà / -- "they have written a letter."

Kupto

yì âértù shóofí / -- "he has cut a tree."

Piya

cìnù âìrgò ?ìndè / âìrgò ?ìndè (nòl) cìnù "they have beaten a dog."

Widala

cùnù âìrów ?ìndè / âìrów ?ìndè cùnù "they have beaten a dog."

To sum up, the following general statement can be made:

The southern languages, exposed to a non-Chadic environment, show a great number of innovations, like inflation of their pronominal systems and "gender-levelling". The northern languages, which are surrounded by Chadic neighbours, are more conservative in the sense, that they have retained more common Chadic patterns, like gender or "plain" sound systems.

In spite of the remarkable linguistic differences between the various Chadic languages, and in spite of the intervening Chadic neighbours they presently have, it does not mean that it is necessarily true that their speakers never lived together. Oral traditions of the above mentioned groups explicitly point out, that they came from the east to their present

settlements (LEGER, 1991: 78f.). Strong arguments and repeated references, based on recorded texts, refer to a place of a former home, which presumably was Shani on the Gongola or the surroundings of Shani. If we consider the most important factor for the colonization of an area, which was a purely physical one (relief, rainfall and availability of water, vegetation and soil), then ideal conditions were given through the river Hawwal and its fertile valley. This area may also have served as a region of a common "Sprachbund", from which the various migrations took off. Thus it can be taken for granted, that peoples who speak the same language or related languages - as in our case - have had a common historical origin and constituted a single population in the past. The problem is the time when this "Sprachbund" existed (or came into being), and not so much the different stages or waves of the various migrations. Regarding the separation between the northern and southern groups, it may be argued that the northern groups started to leave the place, and this occurred most probably before the arrival of "Adamawa speakers". With the advent of the "Adamawa speakers" a linguistic upheaval may have started, that affected the remaining groups. After that, the peoples of the "southern" groups left, still remaining united for a certain period of time, before another separation took place, which brought them in or near their present settlements. An argument for this theory is, that Tangale has most of the typological features in common with all the other "southern" languages, with the exception of the above mentioned vowel (harmony) system, which it shares with other neighbouring Adamawa languages. One reservation, however, has to be made; languages are usually transmitted vertically from one generation to the other, and if we exclude language shifting, i.e. a group of people adopt the language of another group, then language history and population history go together (cf. NEWMAN, 1969/70: 217f.).

Conclusion

In concluding, we wish to emphasize the fact that so far our investigations have concentrated on documenting large bodies of data covering a number of linguistic units in an area which - as we hope to have demonstrated - displays a highly complex linguistic and ethnic structure. Our aim in the above remarks is essentially to throw out a challenge. In order to be able to interpret this situation in terms of the historic development of this zone of compression, further investigations are required, particularly regarding linguistic interference between Chadic and Niger-Congo languages in the south, as well as between Chadic and Nilo-Saharan languages, particularly Kanuri in the north-east and Songhay in the north-west. Ultimately, questions like the following are at stake: To what extent did the numerous Chadic languages preserve their original Hamitosemitic heritage? What is the impact of the Niger-Congo and

Nilo-Saharan languages on individual Chadic languages in the respective border areas?

In this context, detailed comparative studies between Chadic and Adamawa on the one hand, Chadic and Jukunoid and Chadic and Jarawan Bantu on the other hand as well as Chadic internal research, are urgently required.

Note: Thanks are due to Professor M.E. Kropp-Dakubu, Accra, who kindly went through the manuscript and thus improved the English text.

References:

- CORNEVIN, R., & M. CORNEVIN (1964): *Histoire de L'Afrique des origines à nos jours*. Paris.
- JUNGRAITHMAYR, H. (1991a): Centre and periphery - Chadic linguistic evidence and its possible historical significance. S.Pilaszewicz, E. Rzewuski (eds.) *Unwritten Testimonies of the African Past*. Warsaw, 61-92.
- JUNGRAITHMAYR, H. (1991b): *A Dictionary of the Tangale Language*. Berlin.
- JUNGRAITHMAYR, H. (in press): On vowel systems in Chadic - a typological overview. *Folia Orientalia*, Cracow.
- KLEINWILLINGHÖFER, U. (1990): Aspects of vowel harmony in Waja and Tangale-Waja common vocabulary. *Frankfurter Afrikanistische Blätter* 2: 93-106
- LEGER, R. (1988): *Eine Grammatik der Kwami-Sprache (Nordostnigeria)*. Unveröffentl. Dissertation. Frankfurt am Main.
- LEGER, R. (1989): Mediale Verben im Tschadischen? - Eine Fallstudie anhand des Kwami. *Frankfurter Afrikanistische Blätter* 1: 65-72.
- LEGER, R. (1991): Grammatische Analyse einer Herkunftserzählung der Kupto. *Frankfurter Afrikanistische Blätter* 3: 78-93.
- LEGER, R. (in press): Verbal classes in some southern Bole-Tangale languages. *Proceedings of the Symposium on Language Use and Language Change in the Lake Chad Area*. Maiduguri 2.-9. Oct. 1991.
- NEWMAN, P. (1969/70): Linguistic relationship, language shifting, and historical influence. *Afrika und Übersee* 53: 217-223.
- NEWMAN, P. (1974): *The Kanakuru Language*. Leeds.
- STRIEDTER, K. H. (1978): Felsbilder als Geschichtsquellen. *Sahara - 10.000 Jahre zwischen Weide und Wüste*. Köln.