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His article, ‘The term “Zanj” and its derivatives in a West African Chronicle’, is a model of its kind, carefully unpacking the possible meanings and nuances of a politically and ethnographically charged term that is no longer used in the sense in which it appears in the text (Tarik al-Fattâši, a chronicle of the Songhay Empire), but is important to proper interpretation of that text.

The historical significance of language studies: P. E. H. Hair

Hunwick is a historian, not a linguist, albeit a historian who is an expert on the Arabic language. Another historian writing in English who took a close interest in language but from a rather different perspective was the late P. E. H. Hair. He was interested in the study of West African languages from the point of view of social history, particularly the circumstances under which the languages were first documented. As he points out in his introduction to the 1963 edition of S. W. Koelle’s Polyglotta Africana, African language study as we know it today has its roots in the activities of Christian missions. No doubt the linguistic goals of many missionaries went no farther than the requirements of practical evangelizing, but a major aim of the British Church Missionary Society’s linguistic activity in the mid-nineteenth century was also to ‘demonstrate the essential humanity of Africa’s tongues, . . . and thus serve as a final argument in the humanitarian campaign against the African Slave Trade’, that is, language study was an important weapon in the political and moral battles of the nineteenth century. The missionary Koelle himself said that ‘the genuine humanity of the Negroes can be proved in various ways: and one of them is philological’.


3 Sigismund Wilhelm Koelle, Polyglotta Africana (London: Church Missionary Society, 1844). Reprinted (1963) by the University of Sierra Leone, with a historical introduction by P. E. H. Hair.

4 Koelle, Polyglotta Africana, p. 7.

5 Koelle, Polyglotta Africana, p. 10.
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One aspect of the history of any language is the history of the external circumstances of its use: at the most basic level, where it has been spoken, when, and by what kind of community. Another focus of Hair’s interest in language and language study was to use the earliest records of West African languages to answer these questions, thereby contributing to an understanding of population distribution in earlier times and especially the impact of it on European contact. To continue with the case of the *Polyglotta*, Hair’s interest was not aroused merely by the fact that a German missionary working in mid-nineteenth-century Freetown took the trouble to compile a list of almost 300 words in more than 190 languages from all over West Africa. Koelle not only performed this linguistic task with remarkable success, but he obtained detailed information on each speaker’s place of origin, other names for the language and its speakers, the names of its neighbours, the distances separating them, and how long ago the speaker had left home and by what route (many of the speakers were former slaves or captives who had been released in Freetown). The result is a remarkable compilation of evidence concerning the geographical distribution of languages, peoples and settlements throughout West Africa in the first half of the nineteenth century. The re-publication of the *Polyglotta Africana* in 1963 was followed by a series of papers, published mainly in the *Sierra Leone Language Review* and in *African Language Studies*, a periodical of London University’s School of Oriental and African Studies, in which linguistic specialists identified the various languages and discussed the linguistic and historical significance of the material.

Identification of a language can have more historical significance than one might expect. Hair considered how early records of West African languages, even the briefest and most inadequate, can provide important evidence for the presence of a community at a particular time and place. He points out, for example, that the French Africanist scholar Delafosse concluded in 1914 that material on the Soninke, Malinke, Songhay and Fula languages found in mediaeval Arabic texts indicates that these languages were recorded in places where they are still spoken today. Dalby and Hair considered one isolated African word occurring in a Portuguese traveler’s description of a voyage to the west coast in 1456, in an attempt to determine just how far along the coast he may have reached. They did this by identifying the language

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1 He recorded many of them for the first time and in several cases provided the only documentation available until very recently.
2 Hair, ‘The contribution of early linguistic material to the history of West Africa’.
3 Dalby and Hair. *“Le Langage de Guymet”*.

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or at least the group of similar languages the word came from, and concluded that it was probably the word for ‘elephant’ in a language of the Atlantic language family spoken on the northern shore of the Rio Jaba estuary. Rather more successful was the identification by the same authors of a list of more than 80 words in a 1540s French manuscript as a Kru language, probably Kra. The identification provides evidence that Kra was spoken at that time on the coast of Liberia, where it or a language very like it is still spoken today.

Lest it be thought that these conclusions are only to be expected, sometimes the results of such a study are quite different. Farther east along the coast and a few hundred years later, T. E. Bowdich provided a considerable amount of information about languages on the Gold Coast in the early years of the nineteenth century, including a short wordlist of a language which he labelled ‘Adampe’, spoken at Ningo, a few miles east of Accra. The spelling ‘Adampe’ in European writings generally refers to the people and language called Adangme (or Dangme). Ningo is Adangme-speaking today and probably has been since its foundation several hundred years ago. However, Bowdich’s list is not from that language at all, but from a Guang language similar to those now spoken in Larhe and Abiriw, hill towns some miles north of Ningo, or in the Awutu area west of Accra. This is best explained by reference to the tradition that Guang-speaking people from Akuapem were active in trading with Europeans through Ningo. It may be evidence of their prominence in this trade relative to the Adangme-speaking locals.

Occasionally, someone has collected words from a language that is no longer spoken at all. Debrunner found traces of languages once spoken in the hill area in the Ghana-Togo border region, that by mid-twentieth century were remembered by only a few people. The communities speaking these languages were apparently destroyed by local wars that scattered their populations. This area today has a large number of languages spoken by communities of only a few thousand. This evidence of extinct, vaguely remembered languages reinforces other evidence that the region went through turbulent times in the nineteenth century.

Old wordlists also provide evidence concerning the economic activity

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of the people who spoke the language. The mere fact that a language was recorded is significant; Dalby and Hair point out that Kra words were written down because the language happened to be spoken in the part of the coast most important to the European pepper trade. It was therefore useful for visiting traders, and a significant proportion of the words recorded are related to that trade. One could make similar observations elsewhere on the coast. It is thus no accident that the early vocabularies from the Gold Coast are of Akan (Fante dialect), the commercial language of Elmina and other centers of the gold trade.

Historians of West Africa have thus been interested in language as the medium of historical sources, and in recorded language because it can indicate whether or not a political and economic community has existed continuously in a particular place. They have also been interested in language as a phenomenon in cultural history. The historian may tackle these linguistic problems either directly or in co-operation with a linguist, as in the joint work of Dalby and Hair.

Both textual criticism and the consideration of old wordlists require a combination of linguistic and historical skills, but do not depend heavily on the more specialized techniques of linguistics, although they may be helped by them. The discipline of linguistics, particularly the sub-discipline known as ‘historical linguistics’, studies how languages change over time. It does this through close examination of a language’s internal structure, and by comparing it to other languages. The findings of such studies, especially when associated with evidence from other disciplines (such as botany or archaeology) expand the resources available to the historian in any field, but are potentially crucial for historians working in areas where written records are limited. Jan Vansina, writing on Central Africa, regarded modern vocabulary studies as the most historically revealing of linguistic contributions, and the third chapter of his Paths in the Rainforest consists of social reconstruction based mainly on this kind of evidence. In West Africa, however, the potential of this line of thought has so far been mainly attractive to linguists and anthropologists, whose work we review later in this chapter.

The contribution of linguistics to our knowledge of the past in West Africa may often seem to fall into the domain of pre-history, rather than history, if pre-history is taken to signify the study of the past before textual documentation (written or oral) is available. But the dividing line is neither clear nor constant, and the general thrust is to push back the beginnings of what can be considered ‘historical’. We now turn to the main focus of this chapter, the contribution of ‘linguistics proper’ to history.

The methods of historical linguistics

The historian does not need to be an expert in linguistics, any more than an archaeologist needs to be a chemist in order to use C14 or thermo-luminescence techniques for dating. But in both cases, some basic understanding of the principles involved is required if a student of the past is to use the findings of another discipline intelligently. This includes understanding the limitations of these findings. Each topic will therefore be introduced with a short review of the linguistic principles involved. The linguistic sub-disciplines most relevant to historical problems can be divided into two categories: (i) historical comparative linguistics, or the reconstruction of past forms of related languages and the classification of these languages according to their most recent shared form, giving their ‘genetic classification’; and (ii) contact studies, or study of the ways in which languages have influenced each other. Particularly important is the study of the distribution of names for cultural goods among languages, regardless of their genetic classification.

The historical problems on which these techniques can shed light include principally pre-historic settlement, prehistoric migration patterns, and certain aspects of culture history and pre-history, particularly the sources and spread of diffused cultural items and practices. Less directly, such studies shed light on past power relations, since the weak are usually influenced by the powerful, and not vice versa. If the linguistic criticism of documents, indeed of sources generally, is an old tradition in historical studies and has been carried out as much by historians themselves as by linguists, the use of the findings of linguistics proper to reconstruct various aspects of cultural and political history has mainly been the province of linguists with a historical bent, or of historians using linguists’ interpretations. Africanists in particular have been very conscious of the value of inter-disciplinary collaboration.

[Note that 'genetic' here refers to genesis, common origins, not genetics and genealogy.]

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in this area, as witnessed by the volumes edited by Dalby\textsuperscript{16} and by Ehret and Posnansky\textsuperscript{17}, and by Nurse’s article,\textsuperscript{18} that explain one discipline to another. We shall consider first the significance of diachronically oriented linguistic classification, and then the application of contact studies.

The comparative method and genetic classification

Briefly, the ‘comparative method’ technique in linguistics is to compare words of the same or very similar meaning across languages. If a pair of languages turns out to have a number of words that are clearly related in both sound and meaning, the set of similar words is further investigated to see whether the sound structures of the pairs of words differ from each other in a systematic manner. Systematic difference means that there should be several pairs of words with the same meaning that show the same difference in sound. For example, the Ga and Adangme languages of Ghana have numerous words that are virtually identical in sound and meaning except that wherever Ga words have the sound /f/, Adangme words have /p/ (for example, Ga \textit{fee} = Adangme \textit{pee} meaning ‘do, make’; Ga \textit{fo} = Adangme \textit{po} meaning ‘cut’; Ga \textit{fu} = Adangme \textit{pu} meaning ‘bury’). Where this situation of systematic differentiation exists, we think that the only reasonable explanation is that the words of both languages are derived from a common source. If a number of such ‘comparative series’ can be detected, especially if they involve most of the languages’ sounds, and the words include what might be called the basic vocabulary of both languages, we deduce that the languages as a whole are derived from a common source: an ‘ancestor language’ spoken at some time in the past and which lives on in the modern languages. The technique excludes as evidence words that are similar in sound but not meaning, and vice versa. It also excludes words that are very similar in sound and meaning but unique. For example, the fact that the English pronoun \textit{we} strongly resembles a pronoun with the same meaning and almost identical sound in several Ghanaian languages is not proof of a common source for English and these languages, because no other words can be found that show the same kind of resemblance in sound, that is, with /m/ as the first consonant, and meaning.\textsuperscript{19} Such occasional resemblances can easily be due to chance or borrowing from other languages, but it is very unlikely that systematic correspondence involving many sounds and words of the languages could be accidental.

The implication of the ancestor language hypothesis is that one or normally both of the ‘daughter’ languages, the languages compared, have introduced their own changes into the common ancestral language. To take the example above, either Ga has changed \textit{p} to \textit{f}, or Adangme has changed \textit{f} to \textit{p}, or the ancestral precursor of both of them (the ‘proto-language’) used another sound in these words and they have both changed it. Classification is possible when at least three languages are related by such systematic differentiation, and it is determined that two languages but not the third have made the same alteration in the ancestral language. This ‘same alteration’ is referred to as a common innovation. Again referring to the Ga-Adangme case, Ga has changed the ancestral \textit{p} to \textit{f} while Adangme has not. On the other hand, all the Adangme dialects (the major ones are Ada and Krobo) have made the common innovation of shortening words with double vowels to one vowel, so that, for example, the word for ‘woman’ is \textit{yo} in Adangme but \textit{yoo} in Ga, and ‘river’ is \textit{pa} in Adangme but \textit{fna} in Ga. Within Adangme, however, the Ada dialect has made its own unique changes to the tone system, with repercussions in the grammar, while the Krobo dialect has not. This allows us to draw the following diagram, a ‘family tree’ of the Ga-Adangme language group.

\textit{Proto-Ga-Adangme}

\begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}
  \node (Ga) at (0,0) {Ga};
  \node (Ada) at (1,0) {Ada};
  \node (Krobo) at (2,0) {Krobo};
  \node (Adangme) at (1,1) {Adangme};
  \draw (Ga) -- (Adangme);
  \draw (Ada) -- (Adangme);
  \draw (Krobo) -- (Adangme);
\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

The branching process may be repeated ad infinitum, and there may be not just two but three or more branches at the same level. This in essence is the foundation of the genetic classification of languages. Note also that the principle of common (and exclusive) innovation closely resembles the principle of cladistic classification used in biology, which is no accident since they both arise out of theories of evolution established during the past 200 years. In both disciplines, the principle results in an either-or, bi-unique classification: a language belongs either to the Ga group or the Adangme group (or neither) but it cannot belong to both, or to one for some purposes and the other for other purposes. The principles of systematic differentiation and common innovation together distinguish scientific, historically oriented language comparison

\textsuperscript{16}Dalby, \textit{Language and History in Africa}.
\textsuperscript{17}Christopher Ehret and Merrick Posnansky (eds), \textit{The Archaeological and Linguistic Reconstruction of African History} (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982).
\textsuperscript{19}In this case there is also \textit{mi} or \textit{nina} as an address term for ‘mother’, but this is certainly a recent borrowing.
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descended from the community that spoke that proto-language. When the proto-language divided into two or more languages, the community that spoke it must have divided, each new community speaking one of the 'daughter' languages. Thus one sometimes sees references to the 'Proto-Akan' or 'the Proto-Gur', signifying a community whose members were the ancestors, both linguistic and biological, of the Akan or Gur language speakers of today.

Actually, we know that, to a considerable extent, the hypothesis of a former unified community composed of the direct ancestors of a corresponding modern linguistic community is a fiction. Large numbers of people, including communities that today speak English or Spanish, have recent ancestors who certainly did not speak those languages, but belonged to different language communities. Even in situations where many individual ancestors of a community spoke the same language, it is unlikely that all of them did. The reason why this is unlikely is that individual human beings are capable of learning new languages, and whole communities can undergo language shift, in other words, give up one language in favor of another.

Languages spread therefore in two ways: by assimilation of groups that originally spoke other languages, and by migration, when speakers of a language move to occupy a wider (or different) area. Blench cites Hausa as an example of the former, Fulfulde as an example of the latter. Quite often the two modes combine; if speakers of one language spread through and settle in a populated area, eventually outnumbering the previous inhabitants, the latter may eventually be linguistically assimilated, that is, shift to the new language. This seems to be the pattern, for example, in parts of the Akan-speaking area of Ghana, and also accounts for the spread of Ga eastwards along the Ghanaian coast.

On the other hand, when the earliest Niger-Congo dispersions occurred, for example when the speakers of proto-Mande first appeared in West Africa and eventually divided into western and eastern communities, it is quite likely that they were spreading into and populating virtually uninhabited lands, which makes it much more likely that these were indeed migrations of small communities.

Relevant to geographical language spread is the economy principle in migration theory. If we look at a map of linguistic distribution,

Historical applications

These purely linguistic findings provide historians with food for thought in two related spheres: migrations of peoples and the dating of these migrations. But theorizing on these topics rests on a further set of postulates having to do with the relationship between a language and its speakers. It can normally be assumed that a language may be identified with a community that speaks it, and vice versa. From a historical perspective, it tends to be assumed that just as a language is a continuation of a proto-language, its community of speakers is also

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22 Arabic belongs to the Semitic branch of Afroasiatic, and the Berber languages and Ancient Egyptian constitute additional branches.


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such as is found in Greenberg, it is evident that a family of related languages generally occupies a continuous area, and that neighbours tend to be classificatory relatives. When a language spreads and eventually divides, barring some special circumstance, it usually does so over a continuous area. Therefore, if we are interested in where a particular language community or group of communities might originally have come from, we look for the location of the closest linguistic relatives. The case of Fulfulde (Fulani) provides a striking instance of the importance of this principle. As Greenberg pointed out, this language was long classified as Hamitic (an earlier name for Afroasianic), for reasons that had more to do with racial and cultural stereotyping than with any linguistic evidence. The language is also spoken in communities spread over a huge area, from the Atlantic to the Nile, usually among neighbors speaking entirely different languages. Greenberg made a major contribution to the destruction of racism in both linguistics and history by conclusively establishing that Fulfulde is closely related to Serer-Siin and Wolof, and belongs to the same northern subgroup of West Atlantic (now called simply Atlantic), the most western branch of Niger-Congo. Its homeland is therefore to be found in the west, probably in Senegal, from which it spread eastwards, in nomadic migrations associated with a pastoralist culture, apparently reaching present-day northern Nigeria in the eighteenth century.

The case of Fulfulde is especially dramatic. On a more local scale, if close linguistic relatives are generally also neighbors, this tends to support theories of the gradual process of division into separate communities, where migrants do not migrate very far. Boahen applied this principle of gradual division to the work of linguists such as Stewart and Painter to propose that communities speaking Akan dialects are the modern representatives of a proto-community that arose and then spread within its present area in south-central Ghana. Using

the same basic principle, Owens, in a detailed dialect study, traces the spread of Arabic into Nigeria from southern Egypt via the central Sudan, and examines the implications of this spread for population movements in the area.

A corollary of the above principle is that the more uniform a linguistic area is, the more recent the spread of the language or language group. It is noticeable, for instance, that there is far less dialect variation in the eastern part of the Akan-speaking area than in the western. This supports other kinds of evidence that the Akan, with their language and particularly speakers of the Ashanti dialect, spread eastwards with the expansion of the Ashanti empire, for example into Kwahu and across the Volta. The Chadic languages are extremely diverse, but the Hausa language extends comparatively uniformly over a very large area lying west of all its relatives. This is a sign that Hausa has expanded relatively recently into areas where no Chadic language was spoken before.

When a language is not adjacent to its closest relatives, it is clear that there has been a real population movement, although it may not always be clear what kind of community moved. The Anufu language (also known as Chakoshi) is spoken in and near Samsamne Mango in northern Togo and across the border into Ghana, and is surrounded by languages belonging to the Gur branch of Niger-Congo's closest relative. However, it is clearly Anyi, a language of the southern border area of Ghana and Ivory Coast where it borders its very close relatives Nzema and Bawule, and the slightly more distant Akan, all of which are part of the Kwa branch of Niger-Congo. It is therefore not surprising to find that Chakossi speakers have a tradition of arrival in their present area from the southwest, in the service of a Mamprusi king.

The actual words compared to reach a genetic classification may provide important clues as to where the proto-language was originally spoken and thus the area from which its daughters and their speakers dispersed, as well as about the culture of those speakers, and may even indicate an approximate dating for the dispersal. It can be shown, for instance, that the proto-language, on the evidence of its descendents, languages must have had words for 'slave' and 'market', then we can deduce that these social phenomena must have been known to the

2 Greenberg, Languages of Africa.
2 See also W. A. A. Wilson, 'Atlantic', in John Bender-Samuel (ed.), The Niger-Congo Languages (Lanham, MD and London: University Press of America, 1989), pp. 81-104. Wilson points out that the older attitude to the classification of Fulfulde dies very hard among non-linguists, including African scholars.
2 Adu Boahen, 'The origins of the Akan', Ghana Notes and Queries, 9 (1966), pp. 4-10.
2 For the composition of the Kwa group of languages see J. M. Stewart, 'Kwa', in Bender-Samuel, Niger-Congo Languages, pp. 217-45.
speakers of the proto-language. Similarly, if the vocabulary of the proto-language had words for savanna animals and plants, but not forest animals and plants, it is more likely that the language was spoken in savanna country than in the forest. On this principle, Manessy\textsuperscript{31} points out that the vocabulary of Proto-Central Gur reflects a neolithic agricultural society located in a wooded savanna country containing a large river and that used the bow and arrow, made pottery, cultivated rice and okra, brewed beer, and raised small cattle. The Oti-Volta branch of Central Gur, a branch that includes such languages as Moore (the language of the Mosi of Burkina Faso) and Dagbani (of the Dagomba of Ghana), retains more of this ancient vocabulary in the northeastern part of the present area in which Oti-Volta languages are found than in other areas. Since this is also the area that fits the flora and fauna named in this vocabulary, Manessy suggests that Proto-Oti-Volta was most probably spoken there, in the northwest of the present Republic of Benin in the upper basin of the Oti River.

At the Proto-Central Gur stage metallurgy was unknown; that is, no vocabulary for its use could be reconstructed. Saddle horses were not known either, nor kings apparently, at least the type of kings historically identified with these cultures. By the time of Proto-Oti-Volta, however, all these cultural 'items' were known to its speakers.\textsuperscript{32} Since the first archaeological evidence of iron working in West Africa dates from about 250 BC at Nok in northern Nigeria, Manessy further suggests that Proto-Oti-Volta must have become a language distinct from other Central Gur proto-languages after the arrival of the conquering horsemen who founded the Mosi-Dagomba states, which were in existence well before the early fourteenth century when the Mosi (or Moshie) sacked Timbuktu. Manessy thus arrives at an approximate earliest period for the westward movement of the groups speaking Oti-Volta languages. The date of the Mosi invasion of Timbuktu (1333) gives an approximate latest date, putting the Oti-Volta dispersion and westward movement rather firmly into the mediaeval period.

Dating is, of course, a major problem in West African mediaeval history and pre-history. Genetic classification of a group of languages may allow us to infer a relative chronology of the geographical and social differentiation of the speaker population, but it rarely provides dates of any precision. The most ambitious attempt at a linguistically based dating method is known as lexicostatistical glottochronology:\textsuperscript{36} 'lexicostatistical' because it is based on statistical manipulation of comparative wordlists, that in some ways is similar to the traditional comparative method of historical linguistics; 'glottochronology' because it purports to deduce from these manipulations the number of centuries that have elapsed since any two languages diverged from their common ancestor. Glottochronology claims empirically that after one hundred years a language will retain an average of 74 per cent of its 'core' vocabulary, the core vocabulary consisting of about 200 basic, supposedly culturally neutral words.

This method enjoyed considerable vogue in the 1960s\textsuperscript{37} but is now largely in disfavour, at least as a method for dating the break-up of a proto-language. Statistical problems apart, there seems to be no way of establishing that the 74 per cent retention of core vocabulary per century is valid for West Africa, especially since the standard wordlist used for the purpose is itself problematic. The method continues to be used for producing approximate genetic classifications, but dating of linguistic divisions must rest on non-linguistic evidence.\textsuperscript{38}

In their model paper, Cononn and Maison\textsuperscript{39} show how several kinds of linguistic evidence can be used to evaluate oral history in a case where related oral histories make incompatible claims. The time depth of the divisions that must be accounted for is considerably less than in the case of either Proto-Gur or even Proto-Oti-Volta, where the time of split is much too far in the past to be reflected in oral history. The particular problem concerns the likely homeland of the Lower Cross group of languages and their speakers. The Lower Cross languages, which include Efik (the language of Calabar) and Ibibio, are spoken in south-eastern Nigeria at the mouth of the Cross River close to the ocean and the Cameroon border, and are a division of the Cross River languages. The Cross River languages in turn are a branch of Benue-Congo, one of the major branches of Niger-Congo. The oral histories of the area indicate arrival from the north towards Igbo country, from the west near the Niger delta, or from the east, across the Cameroon


\textsuperscript{33} For a thorough discussion of the historical and cultural significance of this vocabulary see Klaus Beyer, \textit{Pferde, Schwerter und Macht: eine historisch-vergleichende Studie zu Kulturvorderfeldern in den Oti-Volta-Sprachen}, \textit{Gur Monographs} Vol. 2 (Cologne: Rüdiger Koppe Verlag, 1998).
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border. These histories cannot all be true, and the authors are concerned to decide among them.

First, the languages of the particular area are all Lower Cross languages, thus each other’s closest relatives. Second, there is no linguistic evidence that any of the communities speaking Lower Cross languages have undergone language shift. This negative evidence consists of the fact that if there had been shift, at least some of the languages would be expected to show traces of the languages the people had shifted from, but they do not. Therefore, it is likely that they all emigrated from a single homeland. Third, the closest relatives of the Lower Cross languages are the Upper Cross languages, spoken immediately to the north, and not languages spoken to the east in Cameroon. Finally, the vocabulary that can be reconstructed for Proto-Lower Cross includes words for ‘forest’, ‘yam’, ‘palm oil’, and ‘hoe’ but not ‘sea’, ‘swamp’, or names of salt water fishes, as would be expected of a language that developed inland. However, words for ‘river’, ‘canoe’, and ‘swim’ can be reconstructed. The ancient vocabulary therefore points to an inland, riverine environment, such as exists just to the north of their present habitat. The authors therefore conclude that the cradle of the Lower Cross languages can be posited as north of their present location, that an origin on the coast to the east is highly unlikely, and that some group members probably came from the west in their migration from the north. They also suggest that lexicostatistical vocabulary retention rates (as discussed above) may be used to establish a relative chronology of migration, so that the language with the lowest percentage of the common vocabulary (namely Obolo) probably left the homeland first. However, actual dating depends on documentation and hypotheses concerning what impelled the people to move in the first place. If this migration was precipitated by Igbo expansion, then it may have begun in the fourteenth or fifteenth century. Early European documentation indicates that some Lower Cross people were in their present location by the beginning of the fifteenth century, although the migrations were not complete. For example, the Efik did not move into the Calabar area until the sixteenth century or even later.

Languages in contact: the spread of words and things

The studies examined so far have been based on data derived from internal developments in the languages. Yet a large part of the vocabulary and structure of any language does not come from its ancestral forms, but has been added in later times. Very often, structural modifications and vocabulary additions take place under the influence of other languages. The most obvious result is loanwords or borrowed words, when a language acquires new words by adopting them from another language. This can only happen if the languages are in contact, and languages, being immaterial things, can only be in contact when someone speaks two or more of them.

Bilingualism implies contact between persons of different communities. As a general rule, contact between communities that results in one group affecting another in important ways is not symmetrical. If one community has influenced the political system or the agricultural practices of another, the chances are that the influencing community had a more elaborate, or more successful, at least more powerful political or agricultural system than the groups that received the influence. These differences have consequences for vocabulary acquisition; people learn the language and borrow the words of people who are more powerful than themselves. To take an English example, the words ‘cow’ and ‘sheep’ are old common Germanic words inherited through Old English, but ‘beef’ and ‘mutton’ were taken from French in late mediaeval times. Those words refer to the animals strictly as prepared for eating, and reflect the influence of French culture in culinary matters, and indirectly its political and military power as well.

Historical applications

In recent years a number of studies have used linguistic contact phenomena, especially loanwords, to trace patterns of cultural diffusion in West Africa that often have implications for political, social, and cultural history. Such studies often combine documented history with the findings of linguistics. Greenberg used both written and oral sources to examine the social historical implications of Arabic loans in major languages of northern Nigeria. An early historical essay was Wilks’ 1962 examination of Mande words in Akan as a way of showing that the Akan polities had been influenced by Mande at an early stage.


Connell and Maison, ‘A Cameroun homeland for the Lower Cross languages?’, p. 82.
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Wilks' suggestions are reviewed and extended by Dakubu in a paper that confirms that Mande cultural influence must indeed have been far reaching.

More recently, Reichmuth examined Songhay loanwords in Yoruba. He concluded that the nature of these loanwords, which include both political and cultural terms related to war, horses, trade and Islam, reflects intensive social interaction and confirms the importance of Songhay contact for the Yoruba area at an early stage in its political development. These words, moreover, point to the Dendi variety of Songhay as the main dialect involved in the contact. Dendi was a trade language of the Borgu area, which in turn functioned as a centre for the eastern diffusion of Mande cultural influence. Reichmuth attributes these loanwords, and thus the political and social influences they reflect, to the period of the rise of Oyo after the sixteenth century.

The combining of documentary and oral data in word studies that incorporate linguistic data with those of other disciplines is particularly evident in a number of recent studies of plant and animal names. One vexed question has been the path of the introduction of maize into Africa, especially West Africa. It is a given that the ultimate source is the New World, but a number of its local names, like miyar, point to the north and east, including Egypt, and not directly to the Atlantic coast. Pasch considered the names for maize over the whole of Africa, and concluded that it appeared in different places at different times and by various routes, and that it was introduced into the lower Nile valley from North Africa and then spread westwards into the western savannah, and south from Lake Chad, although it was introduced independently into Nigeria and Cameroon from the coast. She also points out that crop names often reflect cultural associations that do not necessarily match actual geographical sources. Much of Pasch's data is derived from historical accounts.

Blench, Williamson and Connell discuss the same problem with specific reference to Nigeria, and take the argument a considerable step further. They point out that there is remarkably little early mention

of maize on the West African coast, even though the Portuguese would seem to be the logical intermediary with the Americas. They consider the historical and anthropological documentation, and make a detailed comparison of the names for maize in several hundred Nigerian languages, reducing them to twenty base forms. They come to the conclusion that, 'In the south of Nigeria, there is almost no trace of a Portuguese introduction . . . , and that, 'Excluding the single case of Iseki, all names for "maize", even those on the sea-coast, refer directly or indirectly to a northern origin.' The names reflect diffusion from farmer to farmer, and also spread through trade. The most important route through which maize arrived in Nigeria was from the north via Borno (consonant with Pasch's findings), although it also spread along the Niger River, and in some places arrived from the east (Cameroon) or west (Benin). It reached the sea coast from northern Yorubaland and then spread eastward. We may note (the authors do not) that it is commonly assumed that the establishment of trade with Europe on the coast of West Africa meant that the northern link was completely overshadowed as a source of major cultural innovation, which from then onwards came from Europe. The saga of maize in southern Nigeria demonstrates that the assumption is mistaken.

In a series of papers published together, Blench uses a wide range of evidence, including linguistic, to reconstruct the history of animal husbandry in Africa. Even though he rates the value and precision of linguistic data for this purpose rather low, it nevertheless makes an important contribution in some areas. For example, on the basis of the spread of the Hausa term for 'pigeon', which is probably ultimately borrowed from Tuareg (a Berber language), he suggests that the practice of pigeon keeping was brought across the Sahara. The terms for 'donkey' are particularly revealing. The donkey was domesticated in Africa from the wild ass that was once common across North Africa and the Horn. Names of ancient origin are found in the languages of those regions (Berber, Cushitic, Omoic), as well as Chadic and Semitic, thus all branches of Afroasiatic. The implication is that these names may well extend back to Proto-Berber and Proto-Cushitic, for example,
which makes them very ancient indeed, but not as far back as Proto-Afroasiatic itself, since each branch has a distinctive term. This suggests that different peoples in the areas where the wild ass existed domesticated it separately. However, the Chadic branch is an exception: it shares a name for 'donkey' with the Cushitic languages and a number of Nilo-Saharan languages (Mbay, Kanuri) that are spoken on the southern edge of the Sahara, between the Chadic and Cushitic areas. The wild ass was never indigenous to the southern edge of the Sahara, only the north. This suggests that the donkey arrived in the Chadic-speaking area from the east, perhaps brought by Cushitic speakers, although in other more western parts of the Sahel it was introduced across the Sahara from the Berber north.

Whether the pig was domesticated in Africa or introduced as domesticated is debatable, according to Blench, who points out that the Portuguese terms that have led some to regard it as entirely a Portuguese introduction are of very limited geographical distribution. The most widespread name by far points to an 'early spread of the domestic pig, from the Nile to other regions of Africa both east and west', to the west at least as far as Burkina Faso and northern Ghana. These data suggest that pig-keeping culture in West Africa is probably ancient to a degree not previously suspected.

One of the interesting outcomes of these linguistic investigations is that they seem to underline the long-standing importance of what Blench calls the 'inter-Saharan corridor'. Movement from east to west, from Ethiopia and the Sudan into the Lake Chad basin, seems to have been a major route for the introduction of innovative cultural goods into West Africa from ancient times, through the mediaeval period and into recent historical times. The feeling among many linguists is that an east-to-west pattern accounts for the distribution of the major Niger-Congo families across West Africa. As the Mande family is the most distantly related of the Niger-Congo languages, Welmers put forward the idea that it moved westwards first. Manessy, as we have seen, posits a cradle to the east of the present areas in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana for both Gur as a whole and for a later descendant, Proto-Oti-Volta. An ultimate eastern point of origin for the Kwa languages also seems reasonable, although there have certainly been reverse movements more recently, for example the probable eastward spread of Akan already mentioned.

We have seen that linguistics can provide evidence related to the migration of people and to the migration of objects used by people. The evidence may support broad hypotheses reaching far back to ancient times, but it may also provide valuable evidence concerning small-scale movements and developments of the more recent past. It must be emphasized that the possibilities have by no means been fully exploited. The area is vast, and it is linguistically extremely complex. As linguistic knowledge becomes more precise and detailed, and the documentation of individual languages improves, there is every reason to expect that the contribution of linguistics to African history will grow.

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61 William E. Welmers, 'Niger-Congo, Mande', in T. Sebeok (ed.), Current Trends in Linguistics Vol. 7: Sub-Saharan Africa, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1971), pp. 113-40. 62 It must be said that considerable doubt has recently been voiced (but not as yet published) on the validity of the hypothesis of common origin for the group of languages known as 'Kwa' of south-eastern Côte d'Ivoire and the southern halves of Ghana, Togo and the Republic of Benin (but not Nigeria, see Stewart, 'Kwa', in Bendor-Samuel, The Niger-Congo Languages). It may well be that there is no 'point of origin' to be determined. This, however, only pushes the question of the diffusion of languages into the area back in time and makes it more complicated. Many would still regard an ancient movement from east to west as likely.

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Recommended Reading


Dakubu, M. E. Kropp (1997) Korle Meets the Sea, a Sociolinguistic History
The past in the present: living with the ancestors

Who are the Kanté around here?
Are there any Kanté here?

These questions were asked by a bard (jeli) of the Maninka people of Northeastern Guinea. Performing away from home in a village where he was unable to recognize everybody in the audience, the jeli was being careful not to embarrass or offend anyone whose family name was Kanté. The epic narrative on which the jeli was basing his performance describes events that are alleged to have occurred in the first half of the thirteenth century, but the people of Manding societies still identify closely with characters of that era whom they believe to be their ancestors. The jeli asked if there were any Kanté present, because in Manding epic tradition the king of Soso, Sumaworo Kanté, was defeated in a climactic battle that led to the foundation of the Mali Empire. Prior to asking these questions, the jeli had been describing the battle but suddenly said,

I will stop here.
I cannot describe the rest.

1 Within the broad Mande family of languages, the branch called ‘Manding’ includes, among others, the Maninka (Guinea and Mali), Bamana (Mali), Dyula (Côte d’Ivoire), and Mandinka (Gambia). These terms describe both the people and their languages, which have a high degree of inter-intelligibility. The core area or ‘heartland’ of the Mande peoples which lies in southern Mali and northeastern Guinea, is called ‘Manden’.