Benue-Congo comparative linguistics faces a persistent dilemma: The genealogical relatedness of the languages of the group is not in doubt and, in at least some grammatical domains, reconstruction is even possible (see, e.g., De Wolf (1971)). However, arriving at clear-cut subgroupings has proven quite problematic at all levels of the family (Nurse and Philippson 2003a). For Bantu, for example, not only have numerous attempts failed to arrive at a generally accepted genealogical tree (Nurse and Philippson 2003b), but there has also been little progress in properly demarcating Narrow Bantu from the rest of Bantoid. Indeed, if we compare Benue-Congo to Indo-European, for example, it is striking how significant subgroups of the latter were so obvious as to never even have been explicitly argued for (Nichols 1996). Thus, recent work has put forth ideas like, “Bantu languages have the remarkable ability to act much more like a dialect continuum than as discrete and impermeable languages (Schadeberg 2003:158).”

If such a characterization is accurate, we should be able to locate the source of this pattern in the sociocultural features of communities speaking Benue-Congo languages. These features should not only be distinctive when compared against those of speaker communities of better-studied families like Indo-European (see Garrett (2006)) but also be connectable to observed high-level patterns of linguistic diversification. This paper reports on the results of a project examining social forces underlying patterns of language differentiation in a compact region found in the Cameroonian Grassfields known as Lower Fungom. It will be argued that the results of this research allow us to develop a model of language change that is consistent with the “dialect continuum” patterns of diversification seen in Benue-Congo and that the inability of comparativists to locate clear-cut subgroupings can be directly linked to the ideologies that govern the relationship between Benue-Congo speaker communities and their languages.

Seven languages are spoken in Lower Fungom’s thirteen recognized villages in an area about the size of Guernsey island (Good et al. 2011). While these languages can be reasonably classified as Bantoid, five do not have any established close relatives outside of the region, nor can they be straightforwardly shown to be closely related to each other. The linguistic picture is paralleled by an ethnographic one which shows considerable diversity in social organization across the region’s villages as well (Di Carlo 2011). The extreme language density of the Grassfields as a whole has long been recognized (Stallcup 1980). Lower Fungom represents an extreme within that extreme.

Linguistic, ethnographic, and historical evidence points to a dual-process model of the development of the region’s diversity. On the one hand, some diversity has clearly been “imported” as outside groups moved in as village-level units, bringing in their language and cultural traits more or less intact. On the other hand, some diversity appears to have been locally constructed as previously diffuse settlements of kin groups coalesced into autonomous, compact villages for purposes of defense. Processes of village-internal linguistic homogenization co-occurred with the rise of more marked linguistic differentiation among villages so that contrasting patterns of speech would better correspond to local political units.

It is the latter route to the development of diversity that is of particular interest since it suggests that languages of the region, rather than being conceptualized as markers of some fundamental “ethnicity”, are better understood as expressions of relatively ephemeral political identities. This interpretation is consistent with anthropological and historical investigation, which suggests that societies in this part of the world are structured primarily around largely autonomous kin groups whose political affiliations are inherently fluid and dictated by the power

This societal structure is associated with frequent fission of kin groups from higher-level communities and either their absorption into other communities or their establishment as a point of absorption for other groups, resulting in a “kaleidoscopic” pattern of social restructuring. Our key claim is that a prominent linguistic reflex of this dynamic is a kind of arborification wherein the Benue-Congo tree does not divide into clear-cut subgroups but, rather, reflects continuous mixing of linguistic features to reflect changing social realities. Moreover, in Lower Fungom, we have found that even in cases where we find a “clean” branching pattern, this cannot be interpreted as the result of grammatical and lexical “drift” triggered by the dispersal of formerly linguistically homogenous communities. Rather, it reflects historically shallow and semi-conscious attempts to produce unambiguous linguistic boundaries for sociopolitical ends.

The overall linguistic picture of Lower Fungom, therefore, cannot be fully captured solely via the well-known tree or wave metaphors as applied to language family histories. Rather, it seems to have been additionally impacted by the “magnetic” nature of the local societies (Kopytoff 1987:7). That is, political units (in our case single villages) tended to “repel” each other while simultaneously growing by absorption of fragments from other groups in an endless process of fission and incorporation. The linguistic reflex of these processes is a pattern of language differentiation marked by a kind of grammatical and lexical “mixing” that does not straightforwardly map onto a single tree.

The overarching conclusion that emerges, therefore, is one where the reason why subgrouping has proven difficult is that it is based on a model of arborification that assumes that language differentiation is primarily driven by dispersion, which, simply put, is inapt for Benue-Congo. This is not a completely new conclusion (see, e.g., Möhlig 1979)). However, by examining the processes of diversification in one small region (Lower Fungom) in detail, we can begin to connect the high-level observations to low-level social processes, thereby developing a principled account for why the profile of language change in the family appears to be so different from what is found in language families exhibiting more “canonical” branching behavior.

References