Is Ubangian Branch a family among Niger-Congo languages?

Abstract: Ubangian was classified by Greenberg as Eastern member of the Adamawa-Eastern Branch (Eastern was renamed Ubangian by Thomas and Samarin). Nowadays the unity of Eastern branch is called into question after the relative failure of attempts in view to reconstruct a proto-Ubangian phonological system in the eighties and nineties (see Boyd and Moñino). This branch is reduced to its central languages, that is Banda-Yakoma-Sere-Mba; Zande and Gbaya-Manza-Ngbaka diverge too much from the others to be longer considered as Ubangian. This contribution will try to revisit the status of the languages classified as Ubangian inside Niger-Congo: Proto-Gbaya shows for instance more affinities with the Proto-Gur proposed by Manessy than with any of the Central Ubangian languages, or Adamawa ones. Is that due to an actual closer genealogic connection between these two groups, or to the fact that we compared two proto-languages reconstructed with the same "classical" methods? The answer will be possible only when we’ll have reliable proto-languages for each little group of Niger-Congo languages, that we shall be able to compare each other. In the meantime, we shall apply the lexicostatistic method modernized by Starostin, without too much illusions but just to see if this method can bring some new lights to the history of the different languages considered as Ubangian. The Ubangian languages will be compared with some of the Adamawa branch, with the reconstructions of Proto-Bantu and with Proto-Gur.

Greenberg’s classification:
I. Congo-Kordofanian
A. Niger-Congo
6. Adamawa-Eastern
   A. Adamawa (14 subgroups)
   B. Eastern (8 subgroups):
      1. gbayu, manza, ngbaka
      2. banda
      3. ngbandi, sango, yakoma
      4. zande, nzakara, barambu, pambia
      5. ngbaka ma’bo, monzombo, gbanzili, mundu, mayogo, bangba
      6. ndogo, sere, tagbu, bai, bviri, ferga, indri, togoyo, mangaya
      7. amadi (madyo, ma)
      8. mondunga, mba (bamanga)

Bennett’s lexicostatistic method (1983), gives the following position to the Ubangian languages:
I. Niger-Congo
A. Central Niger-Congo
   c. North-Central Niger-Congo
      1. gurunsi (= 3 c,d,g of GREENBERG)
      2. tula-longuda (= 6A1, 6A10, 6A7, 6A9 of GREENBERG)
      3. boa-kula (= 6A13 of GREENBERG)
      4. gbayu, manza, ngbaka (= 6B1 of GREENBERG)
      5. Cameroon-Ubanguan (3 subdivisions):
         5a. chamba-namsi (= 6A2, 6A4, 6A5 of GREENBERG)
         5b. mangbei-mbum (= 6A6 of GREENBERG)
         5c. Oubanguian (4 subdivisions):
            ngbandi (= 6B3 of GREENBERG)
            zande (= 6B4 of GREENBERG)
            amadi (= 6B7 of GREENBERG)
            groupe “kã” (= 6B2, B5, B6, B8 of GREENBERG)


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subgroup</th>
<th>gbaya-manza-ngbaka</th>
<th>zande-nzakara</th>
<th>banda</th>
<th>sango-yakoma</th>
<th>ngbaka-monzombo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>820</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nbr of languages compared</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Numerals in bold show internal average proximity of the languages of each subgroup; complete identity = 1000)
This table clearly shows that Gbaya and Zande-Nzakara have very few in common with other Ubanguian languages.

At the moment, the most reasonable position is given by Boyd (1989): inside the limits of Greenberg’s Ubanguian, empirically taken as a provisional frame, we have three genealogical entities:

1. gbaya-manza-ngbaka
   (B1 of Greenberg)
2. ngbandi-sere-banda:
   a. ngbandi-sango-yakoma
   (B3)
   b. sere-ngbaka-mba
   (B6, B5, B7 + B8)
   c. banda
   (B2)
3. zande
   (B4)

Lexical affinities of Proto-Gbaya with Proto-Central Gur (Manessy 1979)

Manessy had previously reconstructed Proto-Gurunsi (1969) and Proto-Oti-Volta (1975), before comparing these two proto-languages together with Kurumfe, this new step in reconstruction he called Proto-Central. He gives 223 reconstructed items for Proto-Central: 62 are common to the three subfamilies Gu-OV-Ku, 105 to both Gu and OV, 39 to Gu and Ku, and 17 to OV and Ku.

I compared my 803 roots reconstructed for Proto-Gbaya with the 223 Gu-OV-Ku roots and obtained a total of 50 possible cognates between the two families: 20 of them characterize the whole Proto-Central family, 23 the Gu-OV set, 5 the Gu-K set and 2 the OV-K set. These 50 candidates to a genealogical link between Gur and Gbaya languages represent 22.4% of the compared roots. The same protocol applied to Proto-Gbaya and to “Ubanguian” languages gives the following results:

- Proto-Gbaya-Zande: 7.9%
- Proto-Gbaya-Banda: 10.9%
- Proto-Gbaya-Sango-Yakoma: 14.4%
- Proto-Gbaya-Ngbaka-Monzombo: 16.2%

So Proto-Gbaya has more genealogical affinities with Proto-Central Gur than with any of the so-called Ubanguian languages!

Proto-Gbaya / Proto-Central Gur (62 Gurunsi + Oti-Volta + Kurumfe): 20 possible cognates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proto-Gbaya</th>
<th>Proto-Central Gur</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dàn</td>
<td>don</td>
<td>friend</td>
<td>ami, camarade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dàà</td>
<td>ca</td>
<td>father</td>
<td>père</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sa</td>
<td>yi</td>
<td>to call</td>
<td>appeler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zÀ</td>
<td>ñen</td>
<td>night</td>
<td>nuit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ëí</td>
<td>yi</td>
<td>face</td>
<td>visage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ëí</td>
<td>to suck/sucer</td>
<td>di</td>
<td>to eat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ëè</td>
<td>dyi</td>
<td>to enter</td>
<td>entrer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bú</td>
<td>po</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>blanc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ndàè</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>ox</td>
<td>bœuf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gom</td>
<td>ko</td>
<td>to cut</td>
<td>couper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no</td>
<td>ño</td>
<td>to drink</td>
<td>boire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bèm</td>
<td>bi</td>
<td>child</td>
<td>enfant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wÈÈÉÈ</td>
<td>van</td>
<td>leaf</td>
<td>feuille</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gòrò</td>
<td>go</td>
<td>kola nut</td>
<td>kola</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nár</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>four</td>
<td>quatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dòm</td>
<td><em>yU</em></td>
<td>tail</td>
<td>queue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kor</td>
<td>ko</td>
<td>to dry</td>
<td>sécher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dÈÈÈÈÈ</td>
<td>kud</td>
<td>heel</td>
<td>talon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tôm</td>
<td>tum</td>
<td>work</td>
<td>travail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nám</td>
<td>buffàlo/buffàle</td>
<td>meat</td>
<td>viande</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Proto-Gbaya possible cognates with 105 Gurunsi + Oti-Volta: 23

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proto-Gbaya</th>
<th>Gurunsi + Oti-Volta</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Français</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>tëè, ñà</td>
<td>tl</td>
<td>tree</td>
<td>arbre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bàà, bàkà</td>
<td>ñà, ñàn</td>
<td>arm</td>
<td>bras</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
¿o se casser  
doûgu, dôngê  
tûk Í  
sâk ko couper, tailler  
∧u puiser/draw from  
yai  
ēi  
nââ  
ti  
zê  
wâfâ  
naa  
zî  
ēn  
kùî  
nâñ  
kôrâ  
kîêi sphérique  
mbâñ  
zû  

ko to break casser

dyUm bat chauve-souris

to elbow coude

se to cut, sharpen couper

u to bend courber

ñîm, ñî to délier

ni water eau

ñâ younger brother frère cadet

ti forehead front

ñô smoke fumée

nan fruit fruit

na mother mère

ñô fly mouche

ñî name nom

ñî egg œuf

ñî foot pied

ñî hen poule

ñî round rond

ñî head tête

Proto-Gbaya possible cognates with 39 Gurunsi + Kurumfe : 5

nÎ fat, oil graisse, beurre

ñî tooth dent

ñî male mâle

ñî tongue langue

ñî saliva salive

Proto-Gbaya possible cognates with 17 Oti-Volta + Kurumfe : 2

yi two deux

to to grind piler

References


