

Dear Colleagues,

Four days of our Congress is not enough to reconstruct the Proto-Niger-Congo. Our highly condensed program will not suffice even to discuss all the relevant problems and perspectives of this reconstruction. And besides, the initial idea of the Congress has been to concentrate our efforts on the concrete results of the reconstruction work, instead of general discussions. In the meantime, we need such a discussion too, and its results may be of interest to both Niger-Congo (NC) specialists and students, as well as our colleagues working in other fields of linguistics.

I would like to suggest, in this relation, to the participants of our Congress (but also to other renown specialists in the field who, for different reason, could not participate) to answer a set of questions dealing with some cardinal problems of the Proto-Niger-Congo reconstruction. I have formulated tentatively ten questions; I hope, your critics and suggestions will help me to optimize the questionnaire.

I suppose that one page per question might be enough. Certainly, each scholar may answer only those questions which seems to him/her the most interesting, or to answer all of them. The January 1, 2013 might be a reasonable deadline for receiving your answers

Publication of these answers might be a considerable input into the Niger-Congo comparative studies and into the comparative linguistics in general.

Here are my tentative questions.

1. In which domain do you see the major difficulties in Niger-Congo reconstruction: phonology, morphology, vocabulary, other? Why? Apart from the small number of specialists working in the field, what are the main obstacles in the progress of this field of study?
2. What is your forecast for the nearest NC perspectives? What kind of results in this field can we hope to reach within five years?
3. What can we do just now for the NC reconstruction? Do you see some urgent priorities in the strategy of NC reconstruction? And what are the major gaps? How could we boost our NC discoveries?
4. What is really special about NC as compared to Indo-European reconstruction (apart from such self-evident factors as the large number of languages; greater time depth; low level of description for numerous languages...). What is the reason for the many failures to apply the classical historical comparative method to NC languages?
5. Which components of the historical comparative method do not work in the NC field? Which components are underexploited?
6. What are the particular complications in the application of the historical comparative method to your languages? What are the main difficulties concerning the localization of your languages within NC?

7. What are the main difficulties of application of lexicostatistics to your languages? Please add 10 notions to the Swadesh 200-word list that are especially stable in your languages. Which 5 notions from the Swadesh 100-word list are not relevant to your branch of Niger-Congo?
8. Did Proto-Niger-Congo ever exist? If so, when and where? To avoid personal responsibility for this “direct” question, you may stay anonymous in its publication – just try and make a guess.
9. Please cite the five most important publications in the field of NC comparative studies. Please cite the five most important publications (including yours) in comparative studies of your group/family of languages.
10. Please give an advice to a crazy student who is willing to get involved in the historical comparative study of Niger-Congo languages.

If you find the idea of this questionnaire interesting, please, give your revealing critic of the questions (what is to be added? what is to be removed?).

I am sure that a collection of the answers to this questionnaire could result in a useful publication that might be interesting for publishers and that could appear quickly enough.

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