

# TOWARDS AN INTERNAL CLASSIFICATION OF THE LANGUAGES OF THE BURA-MARGYI GROUP

Carl F. HOFFMANN  
Universität Bayreuth

The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to or rather to remind us all of the fact that the Bura-Margyi group of Central Chadic shows a greater degree of internal diversity than seems to be generally realized and that there is a certain dichotomy between a western and an eastern branch within the group. This had been pointed out earlier (HOFFMANN, 1971) and Daniel BARRETEAU in his survey of Chadic languages (1978 : 302-303) retained this classification. But this internal bipartition of the Bura-Margyi group does not seem to be reflected in other recent classifications of Chadic such as NEWMAN (1977 ; cf. p.7) or JUNGRAITHMAYR and SHIMIZU (1981 ; cf. pp. 12 and 14). One might concede that maybe NEWMAN did not intend to go below the level of the group in his tree diagram and that JUNGRAITHMAYR and SHIMIZU did recognize the bipartition of the group in an indirect way by selecting their test languages (Bura and Margyi) in such a manner that both sub-groups were represented. At any rate, it seemed to be in order to review the situation once more and in doing so to present some actual evidence in support of this bipartition which so far I had claimed without giving proof for my view.

I shall start by presenting a classification of the Bura-Margyi group for those who are not so familiar with this particular section of Central Chadic which is geographically situated in north-eastern Nigeria close to the Cameroonian border.

### THE BURA-MARGYI GROUP

The Bura-Margyi group consists of the following branches and individual languages :

A. Western branch : Bura (with at least three dialects)

Nggwahyi

Kyibaku (Chibak, Chibbuk, etc.)

Putai (or West Margyi)

B. Eastern branch : Həba (or Kilba ; with at least two or three dialects)

South Margyi (as spoken at Wandī (Womdiu),  
Wuba (Uba), Hyildi (Hildi), etc.)

Margyi (with at least two and possibly more dialects)

There is published material in all of these languages. The Church of the Brethren Mission had very active mission work going on in this general area and a New Testament was published in Bura and the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles in Margyi. There were also a Hymn Book, a Primer and some Readers in both languages as well as some other publications. Amongst the latter are noteworthy a Bura-English vocabulary and an English-Bura vocabulary. There was also a small Hymn Book by another mission in Həba.

Some notes on these languages are contained in C.K. MEEK's *Tribal Studies in Northern Nigeria* (1931). More recently Charles H. KRAFT has published his three volumes of *Chadic Wordlists*. The languages that concern us here are contained in Volume II ("Biu-Mandara"). Some notes were collected by

Johannes LUKAS. The Kyibaku material was partially edited by myself (1955) and there is some unpublished Bura material. I myself collected material on Bura, Kyibaku, Həba (dialect of Gashala which differs slightly from that of Hong and Pella), Margyi and South Margyi (the dialect of Wuba) of which so far only my *Grammar of the Margi language* has been published. Recently Zygmunt FRAJZINGER and Russel SCHUH have done some work on Kyiabuku and Bura respectively.

Perhaps I should use this opportunity and sound a note of warning concerning the quality of some of the word lists in Charles KRAFT's work. In places they are both phonetically and lexically rather unreliable which is the more astonishing as Charles KRAFT had worked with the Church of the Brethren Mission for a number of years before he began collecting these word lists. Quite a series of faulty indications could have been avoided by a careful consultation of the mission's publications. I shall give only two examples of what I have in mind. The Bura list contains under no. 337 the word *susuma* and under no. 338 the word *yimi* supposedly meaning the verbs "eat" and "drink" respectively. Actually they mean "food" and "water" as a glance into the vocabularies could easily have shown. And mistakes of this kind are not exactly rare in these word lists. These two examples may suffice, as a detailed examination of the word lists would take too much time. Let me therefore rather turn to the evidence for the alleged bipartition of the Bura-Margyi group.

#### THE INDEPENDENT PERSONAL PRONOUN

A first piece of very obvious evidence for the existence of two branches within the Bura-Margyi group is provided by the system of the Independent (or Absolute) Personal Pronoun. The following table will show this.

		Bura	Nggwahyi	Kyibaku	Putai
Sg. 1.p.	:	iya (i)	iya	yæ	'iyæ
2.p.	:	ga (ə)	ga	gæ	ga
3.p.	:	tša	ja	dza	-
Du. 1.p.incl.	:	mwa	'uma	mwa	mwa
Pl. 1.p.incl.	:	mburu	mburu	muri	muri
	excl.:	yaru	yeru	yar	yə'a
2.p.	:	gyiri	gir ni	gəri	-
3.p.	:	da	dər	dar	-
		Həba	Wandi	Wuba	Margyi
Sg. 1.p.	:	naya	nayəw	nayau	nayə
2.p.	:	naga	nagəw	nagau	nagə
3.p.	:	naja	naja	naja	naja
Du. 1.p.incl.	:	nama	nama	nama	nama
Pl. 1.p.incl.	:	namən	namun	namən	namər
	excl.:	na'ya	na'ya	na'ya	na'ya
2.p.	:	nanyi	naxi	nahyi	nanyi
3.p.	:	nanda	nanda	nanda	nanda

As the above table shows, there is a principal difference in the morphological make-up of the Independent Personal Pronoun in the Western branch (upper series in the table) from the Eastern branch (lower series in the table). While in the Western branch the pronouns seem to consist primarily of the pronominal stem without any recognizable additional morpheme, the languages of the Eastern branch show essentially the same pronominal stem for the different persons, but have prefixed a common formative element *na-* to this pronominal stem which may be of demonstrative origin: cf. *na* "the one in question" in some of the languages. The *na-* prefix turns the pronominal stem into the independent pronoun. If on the other hand the personal pronoun is attached as a suffix to the verb phrase (as its subject), the mere pronominal stem is used without the *na-*. The same is true if a sentence or clause is introduced by an initial

conjunction which attracts the subject pronoun in its suffix form without the *na-*. Examples of this use of the mere pronominal stem are given in § 114 of my grammar of Margyi.

Unfortunately there are no examples available for the South Margyi dialect of Hyildi, but considering the general similarity between the South Margyi dialects of Wandī, Wuba and Hyildi, there can be but little doubt that the forms would more or less correspond to those of the other two dialects.

It may perhaps be pointed out that this kind of differences between the Western and the Eastern branch would not show up in the usual Swadesh type lexicostatistical assessment, as forms with and without the *na-* prefix would have to be counted as cognates, as the basic word stems are (presumably) cognate.

The examples from Bura, Kyibaku, Həba, South Margyi of Wuba and Margyi are my own, the others are from the KRAFT word lists supplemented by some additional material in those languages by the same investigators (Charles KRAFT and Steve LUKAS) that I received from the SIL, at that time in Jos.

### SUFFIX CONJUGATION

Another piece of evidence that supports the claim of a bipartition in the Bura-Margyi group is provided by the existence of verb forms with a suffixed subject pronoun already mentioned in the last paragraph in the Eastern branch vis-à-vis its absence in the Western branch.

In the Western branch the subject pronoun, with the single exception of the imperative 2.p.pl. morpheme, always precedes the verb stem. Quite a number of tense forms in the languages of Eastern branch, however, may have their subject pronouns either preceding or following the verb stem, depending on surrounding syntactic conditions. Presumably this

fact and the development of the longer form of the independent pronoun with na- are in some ways connected with each other, although the details are for the time being not at all clear.

### LEXICAL EVIDENCE

There is also a certain amount of other lexical evidence that points in the same direction, viz. towards separate branches within the Bura-Margyi group. We must distinguish two principally different types of evidence.

In the first type of evidence we find two etymologically unrelated word stems that are distributed one in the Western branch and the other in the Eastern branch thus attesting the separation of the two branches.

In the second type of evidence we similarly find two word stems distributed in the two branches respectively, but they are etymologically related or cognate. However, they differ from each other in some very prominent phonological feature (such as e.g. the presence or absence of metathesis, or the presence or absence of nasal epenthesis, etc.) or one of them carries an additional formative element besides the mere word stem which the other one does not carry or both of them carry different additional formative elements besides the mere word stem.

Again it may be pointed out that while the first type would also show up in a SWADESH type lexicostatistical count and bring down the cognate percentage (thus pointing to a differentiation between the two branches), the second type would again pass unnoticed, as words of this sort would have to be counted as cognate, even though they exhibit additional differentiating elements.

Some examples of the first group are :

	Bura	Nggwahyi	Kyibaku	Putai	
tail	kur	kuf(ari)	kufæ	kufæ/kut	
eye	nca	ca	ncæ/ntsæ	nja/njæ	
liver	mir	mida	midæ	mida	
mountain	gar	pəya	paya	pəya/paga	
river	hyaha	kyeha	kyagha	gweya	
sand	wiyaku	hashu	wuyahu	'wiyahu	
white	mwapu	mwapu	mwapu	(mungya/gəbaka)	
black	mənggəl	məngəl	mənggəl	mənggəl	
red	mamza	məmza	magza	mungza	
	Həba	Wandi	Wuba	Hyildi	Margyi
tail	shu	shu	shu	shiwu	shu
eye	li	li	li	li	li
liver	mbəla	mbəla	?	mbula	mbəl
mountain	mwa	məw	mau	maw	ngu
river	dəl	dəl	dəl	dəlu	dəl
sand	mishishu'wa	mushuwa	mishu'wa	mishu'wa	shishu'wa
white	pərtu	purtu	pərtu	purtu	pərtu
black	kyakyaru	kyakyaru	kyakyar	kyakyaru	kyangkyar
red	dəzu	dəzu	dəzu	dəzu	dəzu

Some examples of the second group are :

	Bura	Nggwahyi	Kyibaku	Putai
horn	təmbəl	təmbəl	təmbəl	təmbəl
tongue	kyanggyar	kanggyar	kanyar	kunyadu
skin	kəsəm	kəsəm	kuci	kwuci
tree	mfwa	fwa	fwæ	fwæ
come	si	si	si	si
bite	kala	kari...	kalæ	kari...

	Həba	Wandi	Wuba	Hyildi	Margyi
horn	tələm	tələm	?	tələmu	tələm
tongue	kyar	kyaru	kyar	kyaru	kyar
skin	ci	ci	ci	ci	əmci
tree	wa	wu	wu	wuu	wu
come	shili	(andəw)	shili	shildi	shili
bite	nggala	nggaliya	nggal	nggaldi	ngal

While the above examples are relatively clear-cut cases, it should not be concealed that at times there are other cases where the distribution is a little different and where the two branches within the Bura-Margyi group seem to become a little "fuzzy" at the edges where the two geographical areas meet. A few examples may illustrate such cases :

	Bura	Nggwahyi	Kyibaku	Putai
nose	kucir	kwicir	kucir/kutsər	pcir/mcir
heart	ɖəfu	ɖəfu	ɖəfu	ɖəfu
belly	kuta	kuta	kuta	huɖu
voice	kuraku	kuɖahu	kwuɖahu	kwuɖaku

	Həba	Wandi	Wuba	Hyildi	Margyi
nose	cir	cir	cir	ciru	mcir
heart	ɖufu	ɖufu	?	ɖufu	nguɖəfu
belly	ta	ta	(..)ta	ta/huɖu	wuɖu
voice	kuragu	ɖahu	?	ɖahu	ɖahu

In examples like the above we find instances where a language like Putai that normally seems to belong to the Western branch suddenly shows a word form that is similar to that of the neighbouring Margyi of the Eastern branch (nose), or where Həba that normally belongs to the Eastern group suddenly shows a word form similar to that of "neighbouring" Bura of the Western branch (voice). But on the whole it seems true to say that this kind of "fuzziness" of the two branches seems to occur in border languages where the geogra-



phical areas of the two branches meet. To that extent even this fuzziness may be regarded as an argument confirming the existence of two separate branches within the Bura-Margyi group.

### CONCLUSION

Although for reasons of available time only a small selection of the available evidence could be given in this paper, it is hoped that even this small sample shows convincingly that there are two distinct subdivisions within the Bura-Margyi group of Central Chadic, a western and an eastern one, and that both groups shows internal developments separate from each other in the areas of the lexicon, derivation and morphology.

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