

NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN THE CLASSIFICATION OF BANTU LANGUAGES AND THEIR HISTORICAL IMPLICATIONS

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1. INTRODUCTION

The "origin of the Bantu" is one of the most widely debated and controversial questions of African ethnography and has at various times engaged the attention of linguists, archaeologists, historians and anthropologists. Because the Bantu form a relatively tightly knit group of languages whose interrelations appear to be far easier to elucidate than the languages of West Africa, historians and others have often been tempted to correlate the subdivisions of the group with population movements. As the source of Bantu languages is generally argued to be in southwest Adamawa, new data on Bantu and related languages is important to the reconstruction of the broader ethnolinguistic history of the region.

The definition of "the Bantu" comes from a variety of sources, most importantly the work of the linguists MEINHOF (1906) and later GUTHRIE (1969-71). GUTHRIE in particular established an alphanumeric zoning of Bantu languages still widely used even by those who dissent strongly from his methods and conclusions. The logic is relatively clear; he named the northwesternmost language in his sample, Lundu, in southwestern Cameroon, as A10 and continued towards eastern and southern Africa.

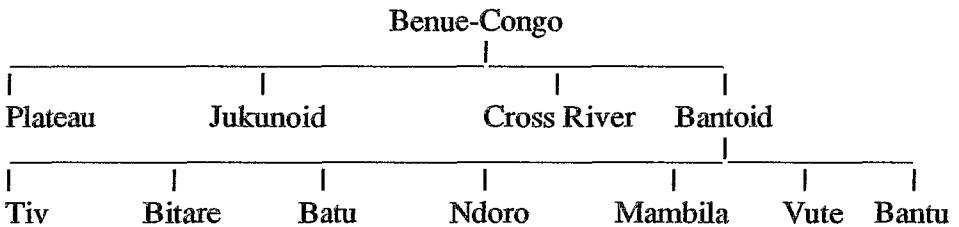
African linguists have a poor record in distinguishing typological comparability from genetic affiliation and this is certainly true of early writings on Bantu. It was pointed out as early as 1886 that a wide range of West African languages exhibited noun-class features analogous to those classified as "Bantu" (JOHNSTON 1886). JOHNSTON later went on to produce an extensive study of Bantu and "Semi-Bantu" pointing out these connections without clarifying the implications for genetic relationships or

(*) This paper is a synthesis of a great variety of unpublished field materials collected by myself and others over many years. In addition, it represents the historical output of a linguistic investigation developed jointly with Kay WILLIAMSON over a long period. I should particularly like to thank the following who have contributed through discussion and by making available field materials: Kay WILLIAMSON, Robert HEDINGER, Tom COOK, David ZEITLYN, Raymond BOYD, Richard FARDON and Jean-Marie HOMBERT.

otherwise (JOHNSTON 1919, 1922). WESTERMANN (1927) mentioned but did not explore the links between "Western Sudanic" [Niger-Congo] and Bantu. GUTHRIE, similarly, considered the problem briefly in his excursus "Bantuisms in non-Bantu languages" (GUTHRIE 1971,4:107-111) but concluded that the links with languages such as Efik were so reduced as to be of little importance historically.

The work of GREENBERG first appeared in the early 1950's, but was first synthesized in book form in 1963. In this work, GREENBERG regarded Bantu as merely a branch of Benue-Congo, i.e. the group of languages of southern and eastern Nigeria. He says "the Bantu languages are simply a subgroup of an already established genetic subfamily of Western Sudanic" (i.e. Niger-Congo, broadly speaking) GREENBERG (1963:32). His classification can be represented graphically as follows:

Figure 1
GREENBERG's model of the classification of Bantu



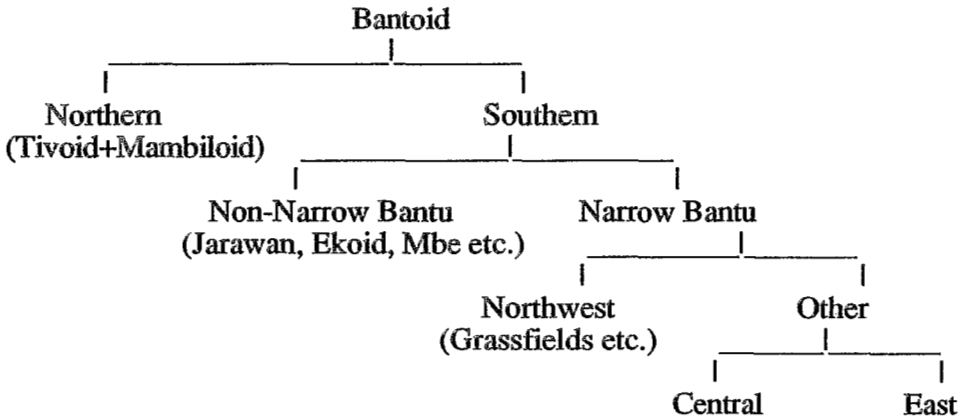
GREENBERG further stated "Supposedly transitional languages are really Bantu" (op. cit., 35). In other words, many languages without the features supposed to define Bantu are in fact genetically affiliated to Bantu.

The evidence for GREENBERG's views remained, exiguous nonetheless, his hypothesis, that Bantu is simply a "subgroup" of Benue-Congo, is now broadly accepted by scholars. However, since the 1960's, data on the vast and complex array of languages in the "Bantu borderland" has become available making such a simple "co-ordinate branch" model inadequate to understand the linguistic ethnohistory of the region. There is little agreement about the relationship between the "Narrow Bantu" as defined by GUTHRIE and others and the large number of related languages with Bantu-like features. In BOUQUIAUX *et al.* (1980) a great variety of new evidence is presented for linguistic features of particular subgroups of Bantu, with an especial focus on Cameroon.

In a recent study of Niger-Congo, WATTERS (1989) has given a detailed account of various classifications of Bantu and Bantoid. He presents a "compromise" model (Figure 2) more as a stimulus to future research than as a substantiated synthesis.



Figure 2
 "Compromise" model for Niger-Congo volume WATTERS (1989)



This paper presents a more elaborated "tree" of the Bantoid languages based on recent field research and to draw out some of the historical implications.

2. "BANTU" AND HISTORICAL MODELS OF ITS GENESIS

The relatively clear links between Bantu languages, like those within Polynesian, have made it a subject for historical speculation since the pioneering work of BLEEK in the late nineteenth century. VANSINA (1979, 1980) and HINNEBUSCH (1989) give a comprehensive history of these debates and the details of the narrative need not be repeated here. From the point of view of historians, debates about the Bantu languages have two foci:

- (a) The "homeland" of the Bantu
- (b) The historical implications of words reconstructed for Proto-Bantu.

(a) The Bantu homeland

Like Polynesia and unlike elsewhere in the world, few scholars have questioned the correlation between the expansion of the languages and some sort of population migration. The identity, or even the existence, of aboriginal populations in the Zairean rain-forest remains uncertain, but the expansion of the Bantu has been broadly identified with the migrations of hunter-farmers.

For reasons that are still unclear, GUTHRIE (1969-71, 1970) favoured a region in the southeast of the Congo basin as the "nucleus" for the

expansion of the Bantu. Such a hypothesis depended on the assumption that the historical links with West African languages were unimportant. As we have seen, no other major scholar has agreed with this and it is likely that it was only taken seriously because of GUTHRIE's prestige as a Bantuist. The whole story of the publication, dissemination and eventual discrediting of GUTHRIE's work has been told in some detail by FLIGHT (1980, 1988) and VANSINA (1979, 1980).

GREENBERG (1964, 1972) reaffirmed his original hypothesis and this was later expanded by WILLIAMSON (1971). Broadly speaking, the languages most closely related to Bantu were all in the region of the Cameroon Grasslands. The links with West African languages were accepted with the implication that Bantu grew directly from similar languages within West Africa. The striking systems of noun-classification that initially seemed to set Bantu apart were seen to exist in fragmentary form all over West Africa. The Cameroon Highlands were therefore assumed to be the "cradle" of the Bantu.

A problematic aspect of the "Bantu homeland" debate is whether these subgroupings, language-branchings etc. represent genuine migrations of human populations or merely examples of language shift. This paper takes the fairly radical view that this is irrelevant; if a group of languages is spoken in a defined geographical zone, then either an actual human population has immigrated or else an elite group has acquired sufficient influence as to induce the sort of major cultural perturbation implied by radical language-shift. In the context of West Africa, where populations have been in flux for more than ten millennia, these two possibilities would appear to be archaeologically indistinguishable.

(b) Historical implications of reconstructed Bantu vocabulary items

Bantu studies seem to have caught the historical imagination of scholars at a relatively early date and many linguists who have studied Bantu have put forward hypotheses about the implications for prehistory. Indeed, GUTHRIE first announced the "results" of his Bantu studies in a lecture with a historical focus. Essentially the proposals relating to reconstructed vocabulary items grow from the same set of presuppositions as Indo-European studies -that the potential to reconstruct a lexical item indicates its presence in the epoch when the proto-language was spoken.

Early proponents of this view in relation to Bantu were GUTHRIE himself (GUTHRIE 1970) and DALBY (1975, 1976). A denser and more specialised investigation was undertaken by MARET & NSUKA (1977) in relation to iron-working. Most recently, J-M. HOMBERT (1988) has explored the possibility of reconstructing mammal names in proto-Bantu.

The most problematic aspect of this work is that these authors have been ensnared by GUTHRIE's model of "Bantu". In other words, they did not look systematically beyond Bantu, however defined, for external cognates. For example, the stem **-tud-* "to forge" discussed by GUTHRIE

is recorded in Ewe as *tù* (MARET & NSUKA 1977:51) arguing that it is an ancient Niger-Congo root to be reconstructed back as far as proto-Volta-Congo and thus certainly pre-dating iron technology. The root has clearly undergone a widespread semantic shift and is thus an unreliable indicator of the culture of the proto-Bantu.

The only position it is possible to take at present on the "culture" of the proto-Bantu, however defined, is a healthy scepticism. Many of the roots that have been reconstructed for proto-Bantu are ambiguous in their reference. Others, such as those connected with fishing (GUTHRIE, 1970 and DALBY, 1975, 1976) have West African cognates, arguing for a still greater antiquity of fishing. What were argued to be statements about 'the Bantu' prove to be only generalities about Niger-Congo speakers.

3. METHODS OF GENETIC CLASSIFICATION

In view of the importance of these proposed changes it is appropriate to review the methods used to arrive at them. Just as the substantive groupings of languages have changed, methods have not remained static. The evolution of classification techniques is almost as important as the expansion of actual data. Broadly speaking, developments during this century can be characterised as a gradual realization that typological criteria, no matter how persuasive their similarities, are not relevant to genetic classification. WILLIAMSON (1985) provides an elegant demonstration of how closely related languages can rapidly develop extremely diverse noun morphologies.

In the 1950's, GREENBERG made explicit the method of "mass comparison", the piling up of sound-meaning correspondences. Despite numerous criticisms, this has proven its merit over time. Nonetheless, there are problems with the method, as SCHADEBERG (1981) has pointed out. In a thoughtful discussion of the classification of Kadugli, he underlines the importance of a more established standard of what constitutes sufficient evidence. Where the pool of lexical items is very large (and Niger-Congo contains 1000+ languages) it would be surprising if some correspondences could not be unearthed.

Although lexicostatistics had been used on a number of specific groups within Niger-Congo (e.g. SAPIR 1971 for West Atlantic) it was not applied to the group as a whole until BENNETT & STERK (1977). This is somewhat surprising, as by that date so many doubts had been raised about the technique that its career was in its final stages. Lexicostatistical exercises tend to give ambiguous results and they are no longer generally regarded as a reliable tool for establishing the genetic unity of a language group. As it was, the Niger-Congo subgroupings BENNETT & STERK proposed contain some illegal moves by the established rules of lexicostatistics; very low cognacy figures were used and nodal points were supplemented throughout by the use of isoglosses or shared innovations.

More recently, the use of shared innovations has become a dominant, although not uncontested, methodology. The general theory is that any significant linguistic change that has occurred, whether lexical, phonological or grammatical, in the hypothetical form of the proto-language will be reflected in the daughter languages, unless these have innovated in turn. At a nodal point, there will be innovations only found on one side of the divide. In addition, the proposed feature or item must be a genuine innovation and not merely a shared retention.

In the case of Bantoid, where languages can be closely related, its virtue is that it provides a model for the gradual splitting from the central "tree" of the various branches. However, the search for shared innovations entails certain methodological difficulties:

(a) The task of searching "external" languages to ensure the proposed isogloss does not occur outside them is potentially infinite; simple inspection of major wordlists may prove inadequate.

(b) Often, terms on wordlists used in West Africa are lexical items for which proto-Niger-Congo reconstructions exist. Thus, to find that two languages share /mi/ for the 1st person singular pronoun, or /bi/ for "black" only establishes that they are both PNC. The more recondite lexical items that can be expected to show regional innovations are often absent from summary sources.

(c) Dendritic models, with all the synchronic lects descending from a unitary source, may not correspond to historical reality. In many cases, an innovation occurs in a number of branches of the proposed grouping, while more ancient roots are retained elsewhere. This suggests that lexical items can be preserved as doublets; two terms may co-exist over a long period with one or the other rising to the surface of the lexicon gradually.

(d) The long-term proximity of the Bantu languages, and their similar phonological systems, makes it both likely that they contain ancient loan-words or areal features and that it will be difficult to establish this.

The consequence of (a) and (b) is that all results remain provisional, until our knowledge of the lexicon and grammar of African languages improves substantially. Point (d) suggests that even apparently sound isoglosses may be rejected in the light of more sophisticated lexical analysis.

Often there are no distinctive isoglosses, that is found in all daughter-languages and nowhere else. As individual families innovate, isoglosses appear to support a wide variety of possible groupings. As a result, the only convincing evidence for a genetic grouping is a *cluster* of features. This may seem to be a reversion to "mass-comparison" -however, the significant difference is that for a proposed innovation to define a subgrouping, it should not occur outside that subgrouping.

4. A NEW PROPOSAL FOR THE GENETIC CLASSIFICATION OF BANTOID

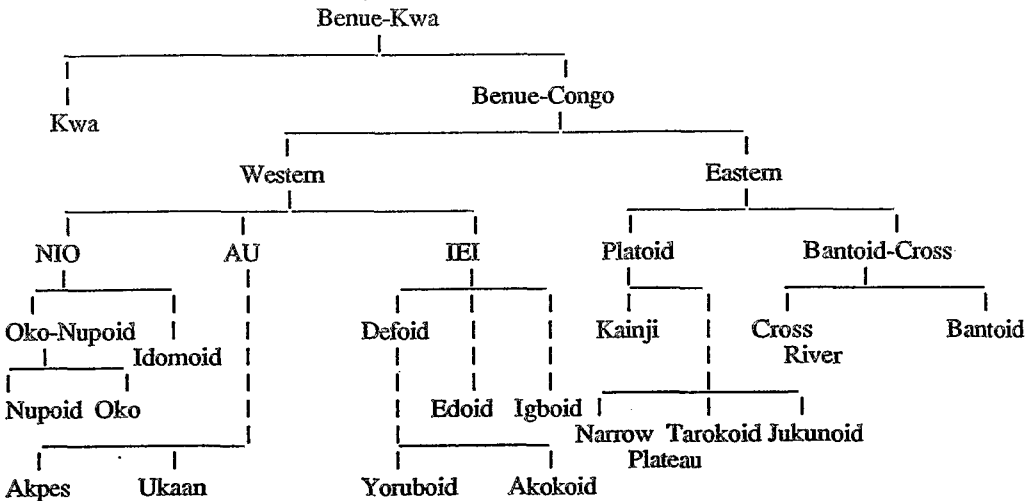
This paper proposes a historical tree to show where Bantu and Bantoid languages fit into Benue-Congo. The subclassification of Bantoid has been worked out jointly between BLENCH and WILLIAMSON and a paper giving evidence for the strictly linguistic hypotheses will be submitted for publication soon.

The stimuli for these new models come from three sources:

- (a) A redefinition of Benue-Congo proposed by WILLIAMSON and others in a new volume on Niger-Congo (BENDOR-SAMUEL 1989)
- (b) New data on previously unreported languages in S.W. Adamawa
- (c) Improved data on many Cameroonian languages.

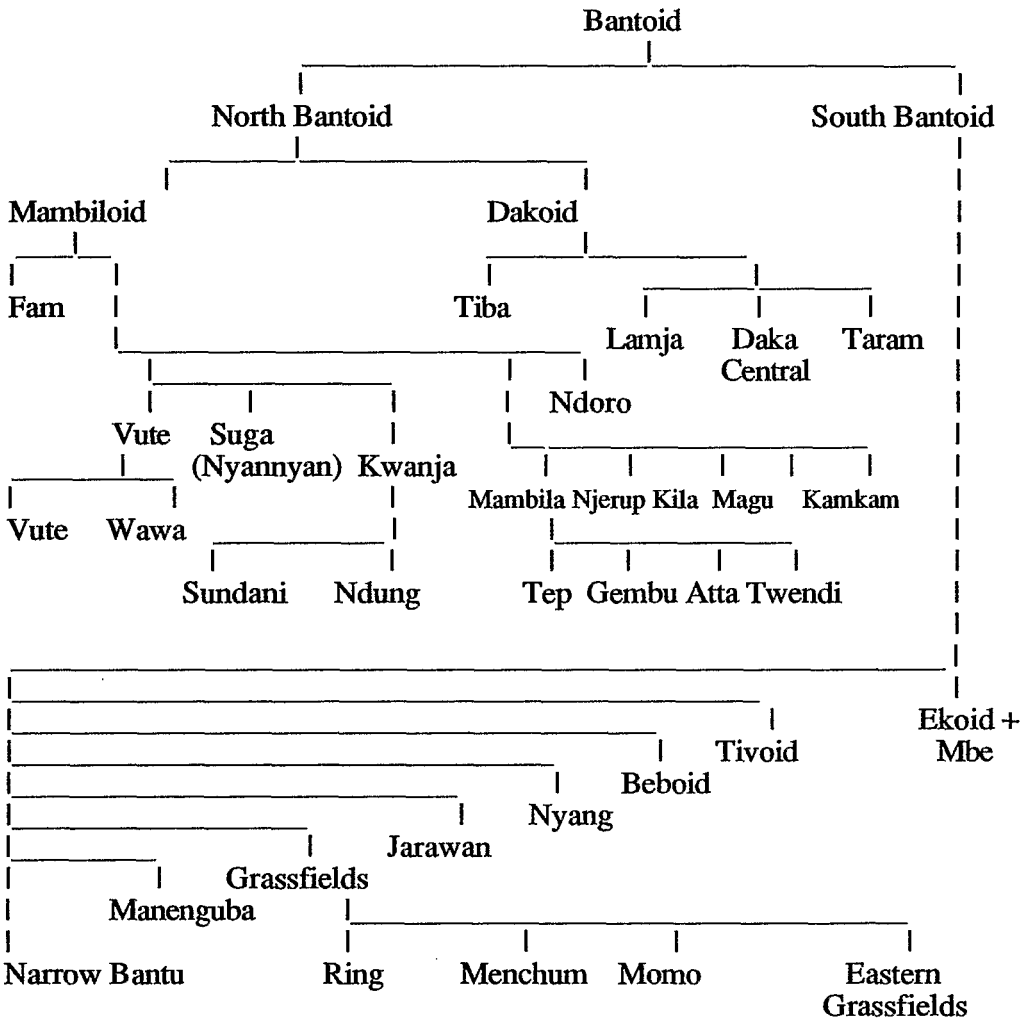
To set Bantoid in context, Figure 3 shows a proposed internal classification of Benue-Congo (BLENCH, forthcoming). A notable feature of this model is that "Eastern Benue-Congo" corresponds after a fashion to GREENBERG's older circumscription of Benue-Congo. Bantoid has been adopted as a high-level term to cover all languages ancestral to Narrow Bantu.

*Figure 3
Proposed new internal classification of Benue-Congo*



In the case of Bantoid, BLENCH (1984) gives a general geographical data from a language survey in southwestern Adamawa. BLENCH and WILLIAMSON (1987) give a preliminary report on a new analysis of recently available data. Figure 4 illustrates the proposed "tree" for Bantoid which emerges from these investigations. The accompanying Map marks the general location of the languages discussed in the text. Excluding Narrow Bantu and using a rather loose definition of "language", about one hundred and twenty languages make up Bantoid.

Figure 4
Internal classification of Bantoid



Notes

1. Ndemli & Tikar (WATTERS & LEROY : 1989) have not been situated in the absence of data, but presumably should be near the Grassfields branch.

2. The unity of Tivoid is best described as uncertain. Classification was based upon data from Esimbi and Tiv -but the lexicostatistic table quoted in WATTERS & LEROY (op. cit.) suggests that this may be a weakly defined family.

The significant new features of this model are:

- a) the hypothesis of a primary split between Northern and Southern Bantoid
- b) the establishment of a "Dakoid" branch. Samba Daka is a cluster of languages that include Lamja, Nnakenyare, Dirim and Taram. GREENBERG had previously classified these languages as Adamawa-Eastern, but BENNETT (1983) pointed to the inaccuracy of this and suggested that a Benue-Congo affiliation was more appropriate.
- c) the placing of a number of newly reported languages -Fam, Njerup, Twendi, and Tiba
- d) a proposal for an internal "tree" for the evolution of Bantu.

Within this perspective, "Bantu" can no longer be defined by typological characteristics - Bantoid languages may or may not share the features of "Narrow Bantu". This is essentially the interpretation of GREENBERG's somewhat casual remark about transitional languages.

5. HISTORICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW GENETIC CLASSIFICATION

If this model approximates to the phylogeny of the Bantu languages then it also has historical implications. These can be summarized as follows:

1. The Dakoid languages, far from being marginal Adamawa languages, become a key indicator of early stages in the development of Bantoid. Like Mambila, they are virtually devoid of traces of a developed system of noun-classification. Dakoid languages are spoken substantially to the north of the grassy uplands implied by GREENBERG's model. The centre of the dispersal of North Bantoid may therefore be in the subhumid savannah forest north of the Mambila Plateau.

2. Ekoid and Mbe are situated in the forests north and west of the Oban hills in present-day Cross River State in Nigeria. This makes sense when combined with the hypothesis of a Bantoid-Cross grouping. Presumably therefore, the original Bantoid nucleus was somewhere in the region of the

river Katsina Ala. The division into North and South reflects corresponding movements away from the dispersal point.

3. The westwards expansion of Tivoid and later Beoid languages at some later period effectively broke the link between the South Bantoid nucleus and the North Bantoid languages.

4. The speakers of Mambiloid probably began to diversify in the forest lowlands and the isolated language Fam, far to the west of main body of Mambiloid, is probably a relic of this period. Ngoro is likely to have been the next language to split away since it is extremely widespread. The Suga, Kwanja and Vute grouping appears to have formed on the eastern slopes of the grassy uplands of the Mambila Plateau.

5. The ancestral speakers of Dakoid languages probably moved northwards up the eastern flank of the Shebshi mountains. It is likely on historical grounds that the Daka movement onto the grassy plateaux of the Shebshi is relatively recent, although the most divergent member of Dakoid, Tiba, is found exclusively on these plateaux.

An intriguing implication is that there may have been an early interface between Chadic languages and Bantoid. Today, the northernmost Daka-speakers about Bata territory. This would explain a number of apparent coincidences between Bantu and Chadic roots, e.g. the word for 'ten' and "wild pig" (Hausa *gadu* /PB **gudu*).

6. THE ETHNOLINGUISTIC HISTORY OF ADAMAWA

Turning to a more speculative mode, these new hypotheses can suggest a revised perspective on the ethnolinguistic history of the Adamawa region. A series of tentative proposals are as follows:

1. BENNETT (1983) has shown that it is difficult to substantiate a convincing distinction between the Gur and Adamawa languages. It seems likely that an original population of Gur-Adamawa speakers once stretched in a wide band from modern-day Burkina Faso to Western Chad across Northern Nigeria.

2. Expanding North Bantoid speakers from the Katsina Ala region passed east of the Shebshi mountains as far as their northern extremities.

3. The Gur-Adamawa-speakers were then fragmented by Chadic populations coming from the north.

4. North Bantoid must have split relatively early into Dakoid and Mambiloid to account for their internal diversity. However, their present-day geographical separation is apparently the result of the later westward expansion of the Samba Leeko.

5. Cultural interchanges presumably took place between Chadic and Bantoid speakers at an early date. This would explain Chadic loanwords in Dakoid and Bantu proper, most strikingly the word for "ten".

7. CONCLUSION

The development of dendritic models for the evolution of Bantu is potentially an important step forward both in terms of the linguistic characterisation of this ill-defined area and because of its historical implications. It should be emphasized that the work reported here is very much a preliminary study and considerably more lexical data is required to complete the study. In particular, internal 'trees' have yet to be developed to characterise individual families and common loan-words detected and tracked as they circulate in the region. Only then will it be possible to present to archaeologists a coherent schema for the linguistic prehistory of the region that could be set beside excavated evidence.

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