

Western Beoid and African language classification

Scott Farrar
University of Washington
farrar@u.washington.edu

Jeff Good
University at Buffalo
jcgood@buffalo.edu

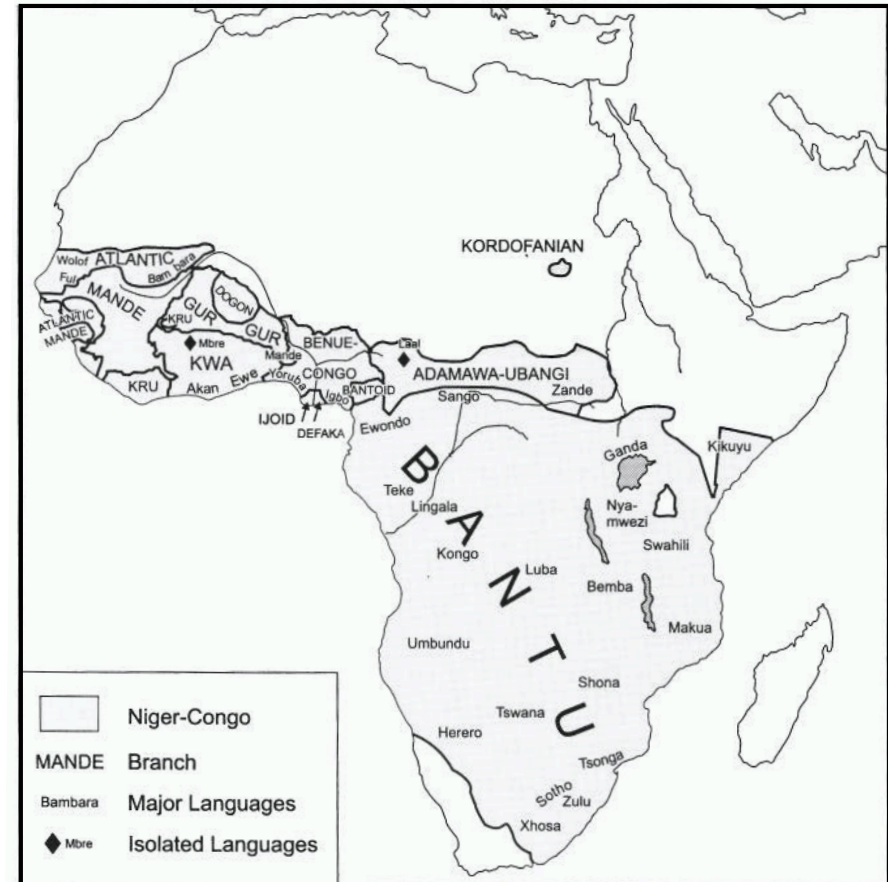
1 Introduction¹

- [1] Greenberg's (1966) proposals classifying African languages into four major families have become relatively widely accepted.
- [2] However, the extent to which they should be understood as a genetic classification as opposed to a reference classification remains unclear.
- [3] ... it is sometimes suggested that Niger-Congo is merely a typological and not a genetic unity. This view is not held by any specialists in the phylum... (Williamson and Blench 2000:11)
- [4] This would definitely seem to overstate the case, most strikingly with respect to the classification of Mande languages (see, e.g., Mukarovsky (1977:4–6)).
- [5] As more and more descriptive data become available on more and more African languages, there is increasing need for some objective inter-linguistic framework within which these data may be classified and compared. . . Unfortunately, no such ideal classification has been available for the languages of Africa as a whole, and in recent years descriptive linguists have tended to use Greenberg's "genetic" classification as a frame of reference within which to locate the languages they are describing. Although most of these linguists have not concerned themselves with testing the validity or otherwise of Greenberg's classification, their unqualified acceptance of it in print has lent a certain "respectability" to his classificational units. This acceptance is potentially misleading to non-linguists, especially historians, and has helped obscure the fact many of these classificational units have never been scientifically established. (Dalby 1971:17)
- [6] ... scholarly inertia reinforces mistakes, which are thereby perpetuated indefinitely, effectively forestalling any re-examination of the facts. (Childs 2003:47)
- [7] In this talk, we will present results of recent research on the proposed Western Beoid subgroup of languages in light of the above.

¹ This work was supported by the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology Department of Linguistics and two National Endowment for the Humanities Documenting Endangered Languages Fellowships.

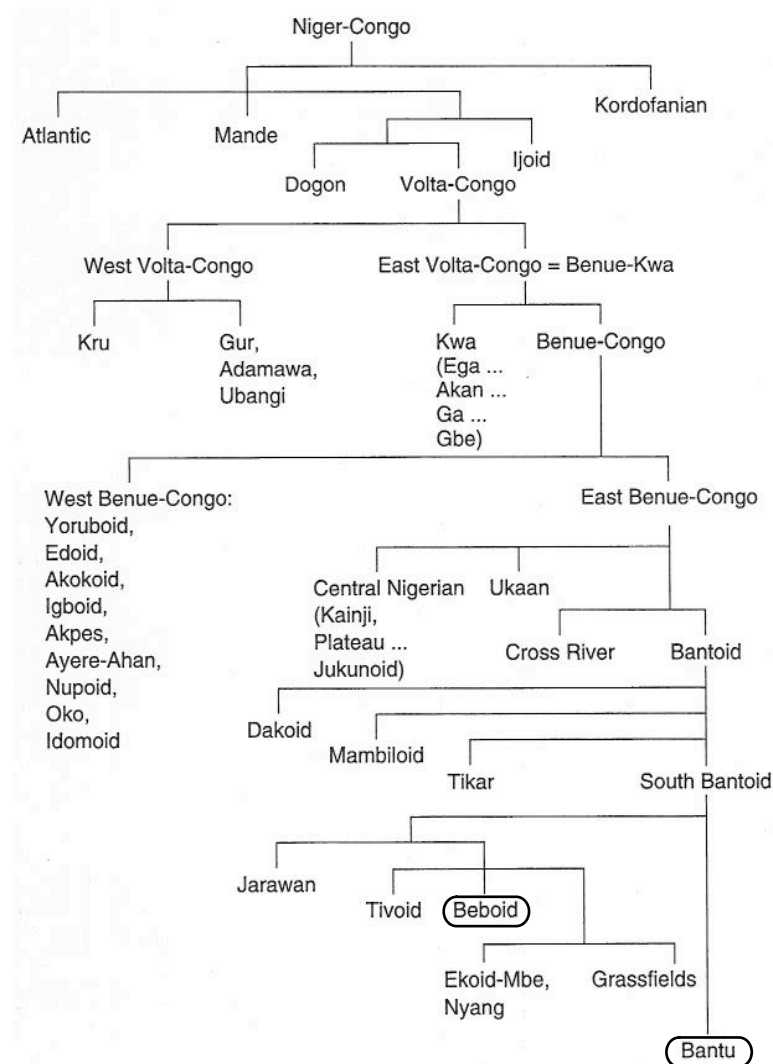
2 Western Beoid background

- [8] The Niger-Congo language family (Williamson and Blench 2000:12)



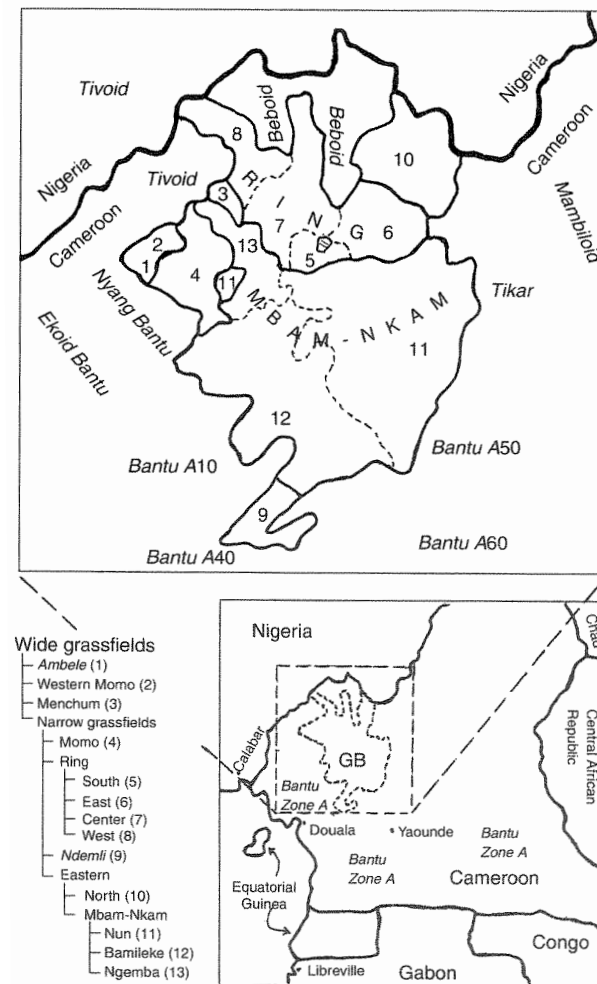
- [9] Western Beoid languages are currently classified within the non-Bantu Bantoid group of Niger-Congo.
- [10] This seems reasonable given the presence of (reduced) Bantu-like noun class systems in all of the languages—and, it is also in line with their geographic location.

[11] Niger-Congo classification (adapted from Schadeberg (2003:155))



[12] Beoid languages are currently considered to be among Bantu's closest relatives, giving them a pivotal position within Benue-Congo.

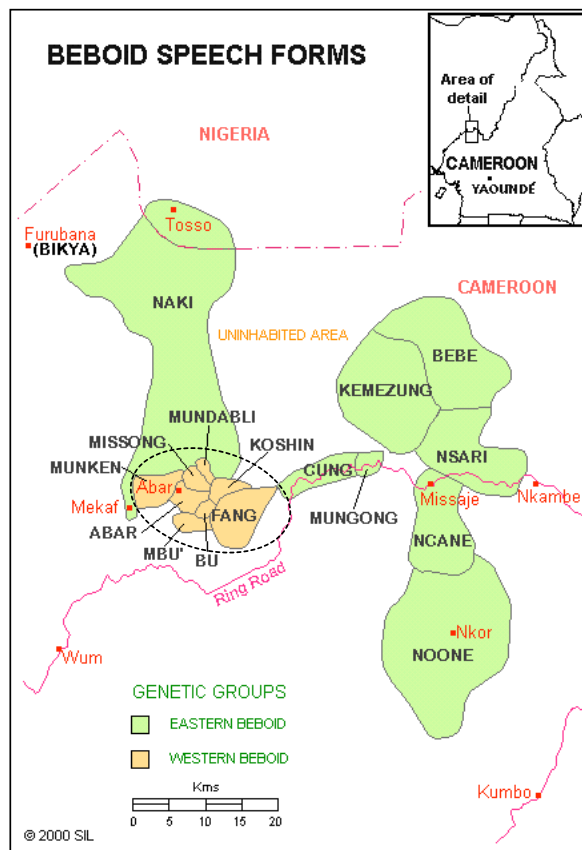
[13] The Grassfields area (Watters 2003:226)



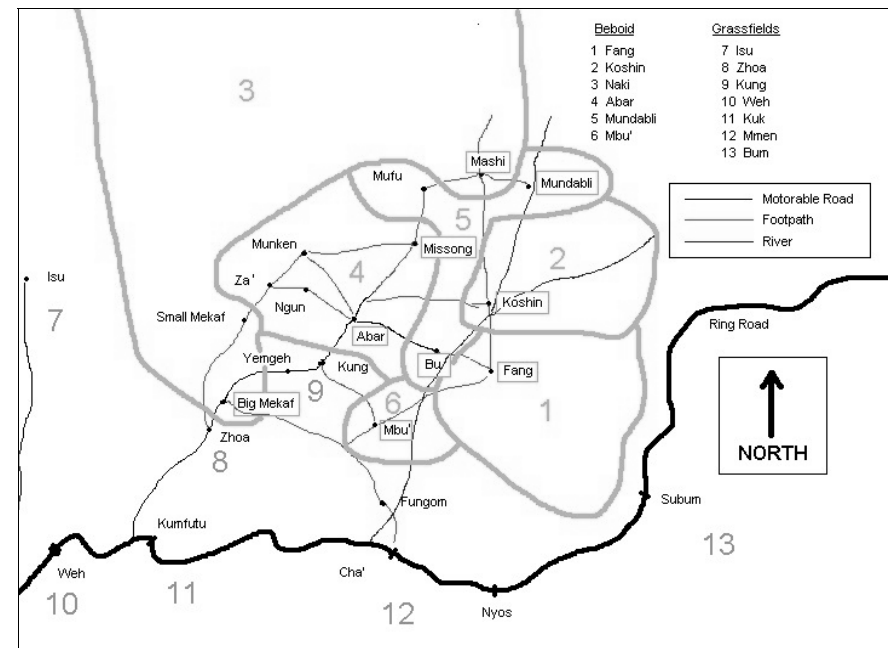
[14] The Beoid group of languages is spoken in the Grassfields region of Cameroon, in the Northwest Province.

[15] These languages lie in what has been termed the "Sub-Saharan Fragmentation Belt" (Dalby 1970:163), due to the diversity of lineages found in the area.

- [16] Stallcup (1980:44) points out that Grassfields area lies within the most fragmented part of this belt.
- [17] The hilly terrain of the area appears to have fostered linguistic diversity, and Stallcup (1980:44) has further suggested that this area has historically been a zone of refuge for displaced groups from adjacent areas.
- [18] No thorough study of population movements in the area has been made. However, oral histories of groups currently in the Western Beoid area indicate that population shifts have been common (Hamm et al. 2002:7).
- [19] The current Beoid classification (adapted from Hamm et al. (2002:28))



- [20] The current Western Beoid classification (Hamm et al. 2002:25) (boxes indicate villages visited during the latest SIL survey of the region)



- [21] The Western Beoid area is approximately half the size of Chicago, with a population of perhaps around 10,000.
- [22] Beoid (according to the Ethnologue)
- [a] Eastern: Bebe [bzy], Cung [cug], Kemezong [dmo], Naki [mff], Ncane [ncr], Noone [nhu], Nsari [asj] (see Brye and Brye (2002))
 - [b] Western: Abar [mij], Fang [fak], Koshin [kid], Mbu' [muc], Mundabli [boe]

3 History of (the name) Beoid

- [23] The name *Beoid* initially appears in Hombert (1980), the first published survey of the entire group of languages.
- [24] Before this, the term *Misaje* (the name of a town) was used for some of the Eastern Beoid languages, and the term *Fungom* (the name of a subdivision) was used for the Western Beoid languages (among others).

- [25] The names *Eastern Beoid* and *Western Beoid* used to transparently reflect geographic distribution. However, Naki has recently been reclassified as Eastern Beoid, rendering the names somewhat opaque.
- [26] Despite its widespread adoption as a classificatory label for a dozen or so languages, no publication has ever presented evidence for the group in terms of shared innovations.
- [27] The languages are all related at some level, showing many Bantu retentions.
- [28] Although it is possible to reconstruct features of a “Proto-Beoid”—as Hombert (1980) does for the noun class system—this is not good proof that it is a valid genetic unit.

4 Sociohistorical background

- [29] Eastern Beoid speakers generally appear to view their languages as related to each other (see Brye and Brye (2002)).
- [30] Furthermore, Naki speakers’ oral history unambiguously portrays their present distribution as being the result of recent movements.
- [31] Therefore, while it is not proven that all the languages currently classified as Eastern Beoid are a genetic unit, it seems a reasonable hypothesis.
- [32] The Western Beoid situation is quite different:
- [a] Speakers do not recognize any Western Beoid unity in linguistic terms.
 - [b] Speakers do not recognize any Western Beoid in historical terms.
 - [c] Speakers do not recognize any linguistic or historical connection with the one Eastern Beoid language they are in close contact with: Naki (and the Naki have similar attitudes).
- [33] These facts must be placed against a sociolinguistic backdrop of a *lack* of antagonism and frequent intermarriage among these groups.
- [34] Two additional issues:
- [a] Standard mutual intelligibility questions are not good diagnostics for relatedness in this area.
 - [b] The oral history of many of the groups in the area quite explicitly treats them as being intrusive in recent times.

5 Noun class systems

- [35] **Note: All results here are tentative, please do not cite without permission.**
- [36] Previously published noun class lists (largely in agreement with these) for Bù, Koshin, and Missong can be found in Hombert (1980). Mufu, Munken, Ngun, and Za’ have no published data available to the best of our knowledge.
- [37] The first element in each pair represents the prefix, the second the concord; tones only marked in those cases where primary exponent of noun class is tone.
- [38] Noun classes listed in singular/plural pairs, with some class “repetitions”; numbering conventions attempt to follow standard Bantuist conventions where possible.

[39]

MBU’ [muc]					
SINGULAR			PLURAL		
1	Ø-	w-	2	a-	b-
5	Ø-	y-	6	a-	y-
5	Ø-	y-	7a	kə-...-lə	k-
7	kə-	k-	8	bə-	b-
9	˘-	y-	10	˘-	y-
19	fə-	f-	26	N-	m-
6a	N-	m-	—		

[40]

FANG [fak]					
SINGULAR			PLURAL		
1	N-	w-	2	bə-	b-
3	w-	w-	4	y-	y-
3	w-	w-	13	tə-	t-
5	Ø-	w-	13	tə-	t-
7	Ø/kə-	k-	8	bə-	b-
9	˘-	y-	10	˘-	y-
19	fə-	f-	26	mə-	m-
6a	N-	m-	—		

[41]

KOSHIN [kid]					
SINGULAR			PLURAL		
1	Ø-	w-	2	bə-	b-
3	w-	w-	4	y-	y-
5	Ø-	w-	13	tə-	t-
7	kə-	k-	8	bə-	b-
9	˘-	y-	10	˘-	y-
19	fə-	f-	26	N-	m-
6a	N-	m-	—		

[42] **Ji Group [boe]** (“Mundabli”)²

[a] MUNDABLI					
SINGULAR			PLURAL		
1	Ø-	w-	2	bə-	b-
3	w-	w-	4	y-	y-
5	Ø-	w-	7	Ø-	k-
7	Ø-	k-	8	Ø-	b-
9	`-	y-	10	`-	y-
19	fə-	f-	26	mə-	m-
6a	N-	m-	—		

[b] MUFU					
SINGULAR			PLURAL		
1	Ø-	w-	2	bə-	b-
3	w-	w-	4	y-	y-
5	Ø-	w-	6	Ø-	y-
5	Ø-	w-	7	Ø-	k-
7	Ø-	k-	8	Ø-	b-
9	`-	y-	10	`-	y-
19	fə-	f-	26	mə-	m-
6a	N-	m-	—		

[c] BÙ ³					
SINGULAR			PLURAL		
1	Ø-	w-	2	bə-	b-
3	w-	w-	4	y-	y-
3	w-	w-	7a	kə...-tə	k-
5	Ø-	w-	7a	kə...-tə	k-
7	kə-	k-	8	bə-	b-
9	`-	y-	10	`-	y-
19	fə-	f-	26	mə-	m-
6a	N-	m-	—		

[43] **Fən Group [mij]** (“Abar”)⁴

[a] ABAR					
SINGULAR			PLURAL		
1	u-	w-	2	bwi-	b-
3	u-	w-	4	i-	y-
3	u-	w-	26a	(mwi-)N-	mwi-
5	i-	y-	26a	(mwi-)N-	mwi-
5	i-	y-	7	ki-	k-
12	kə-	k-	8	(b)i-	b-
12	kə-	k-	29	(mwi-)N-	mwi-
9	i-	y-	10	í-	y-
19	fi-	f-	26	(mwə-)N-	mwə-
6a	N-	mwə-	—		

[b] MISSONG					
SINGULAR			PLURAL		
1	u-	w-	2	ba-	b-
3	u-	w-	4	i-	y-
5	i-	y-	6	a-	w-
5	i-	y-	7a	kə...-lə	k-
7	ki-	k-	8	bi-	b-
9	i-	y-	10	í-	y-
19	fi-	f-	26	muN-	m-
6a	aN-	m-/w-(?)	—		

[c] MUNKEN					
SINGULAR			PLURAL		
1	u-	w-	2	bə-	b-
3	u-	w-	4	i-	y-
5	i-	y-	6	a-	N-
5	i-	y-	7a	ki...-lə	k-
7b	a-	k-	8	bi-	b-
9	i-	y-	10	í-	y-
19	shi-	sh-	26	(mə)N-	m-
6a	(mə)N-	m-	—		

[d] NGUN					
SINGULAR			PLURAL		
1	u-	w-	2	bə-	b-
3	u-	w-	4	i-	y-
3	u-	w-	7	kə-	k-
5	i-	y-	7	kə-	k-
7	kə-	k-	8	bi-	b-
9	i-	y-	10	í-	y-
9	i-	y-	7	kə-	k-
19	fwi-	f-	26	N-	m-
26a	a-	m-	7	kə-	k-
6a	N-	m-	—		

[e] ZA'					
SINGULAR			PLURAL		
1	u	w-	2	bə-	b-
3	u-	w-	4	i-	y-
3	u-	u-	6	a-	w-
5	i-	y-	6	a-	w-
7	kə-	k-	8	bi-	b-
9	i-	y-	10	í-	y-
19	shi-	f-	26	N-	m-
6a	m-	m-	—		

² The label *Ji* is mnemonic for the fact that these speech varieties, currently called Mundabli in the Ethnologue, all share a root like *ji* for ‘dog’, apparently not otherwise found in Western Beoid.³ The name of this village is not usually written with a low tone. This is done here in order to avoid confusion with the speech variety of a nearby village named Bú, which does not speak a Western Beoid language.⁴ The label *Fən* is mnemonic the fact that these speech varieties, currently called Abar in the Ethnologue, all share a root like *fən* for ‘mouth’, apparently not otherwise found in Western Beoid.

[44] **Some observations**

- [a] Fən varieties all share the noteworthy feature that they retain the vowels in the prefixes for classes 3/4 and 9/10.
- [b] Mundabli and Mufu are much closer to each other than Bù (see also Hamm et al. (2002:12))—it seems increasingly likely that Bù should be considered a separate language.
- [c] Circumfixal class 7a crosscuts apparent genetic boundaries.
- [d] The presence of class 13 in both Fang and Koshin is noteworthy since it is not found elsewhere in Western Beboïd.
- [e] Mbu' appears to be the most divergent within Western Beboïd.
- [f] **The noun class systems do not obviously point to the existence of a genetic Western Beboïd unit.**

[45] The Proto-Eastern Grassfields and Proto-Western Grassfields noun class and concord systems as reconstructed by Hyman (1980b:182) (adapted)

CLASS	PROTO–EASTERN GRASSFIELDS		PROTO–WESTERN GRASSFIELDS	
	PREFIX	CONCORD	PREFIX	CONCORD
1	Ñ-	ù-	ù(n)-	ù
2	bà-	bá-	bá-	bá-
3	Ñ-	ú-	ú-	ú-
4	—	—	í-	í-
5	lí-	lí-	í-	í-
6	(=6a)	(=6a)	á-	gá-
6a	mà-	má-	mà-	mà-
7	à-	í-	kí-	kí-
8	bí-	bí-	bí-	bí-
9	Ñ-	ì-	ì(n)-	ì
10	Ñ-	í-	í(n)-	Cí-
13	—	—	tí-	tí-
19	fà-	fá-	fí-	fí-

[46] One can make various links between Western Beboïd languages and Grassfields languages, but not consistent ones

- [a] The Fən group shares with Proto–Western Grassfields noun classes 3/4 and 9/10.
- [b] Fang and Koshin share with Proto–Western Grassfields class 13.
- [c] Two Fən varieties, Misson, Munken, and Za', along with Mbu', show distinct class 6 forms similar to what is found in Proto–Western Grassfields.
- [d] Munken shows a class 7/8 pattern bearing similarities to Proto-Eastern Grassfields (as well as some Western Grassfields languages Hyman (1980a:255–257)).

[e] Consonant mutations of the sort seen in the Ji group, Fang, and Koshin are attested in some contemporary Ring (Western Grassfields) languages—for example, Mmen, Kom, and, apparently incipiently, in Aghem. (See Kießling (2008+).)

6 Conclusion

[47] There may be a Western Beboïd—but, at present, it must be considered only to be a working hypothesis. Western Beboïd appears to be a family by “inertia”.

[48] However, it is useful as a reference classification for a group of understudied languages in a geographically compact area.

[49] Exhaustive reference classifications for African language classification too often come to stand in for genetic classifications.

[50] There are problems not only with the large subgroups, but also the small ones.

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