

“Atlantic groups as primary branches of Niger-Congo”

Being the largest African language family in terms of languages, speakers, and geographical area, questions surrounding the history of Niger-Congo (NC) are some of the most important in establishing the broader history of language in Africa. Two related questions are of particular importance: 1) What is the structure of the NC family tree, and 2) Where was the NC homeland. The status of the “Atlantic” languages spoken in the northwest of the NC area is of particular importance in addressing these two questions. There are existing proposals both in support of a unified Atlantic subgroup, and suggesting that the various groups within the Atlantic area are in fact no more closely related to each other than to e.g. Bantu—however these proposals rarely go beyond a preliminary hypothesis or set of surface observations. If Atlantic is a unified subgroup of NC, there are a number of potential explanations for the modern geographic position of the modern languages. If on the other hand “Atlantic” represents multiple primary branches of NC, co-ordinate with a unified Volta-Congo subgroup containing most remaining NC languages, it is extremely likely that the Proto-Niger-Congo homeland was near the area where the modern Atlantic languages are spoken. I argue that various established groups within Atlantic do most likely represent primary branches of Niger-Congo. More concretely, I find there to be no compelling evidence for subgrouping all of these groups together in a unified “Atlantic” node, nor even for smaller subgroups consisting of three or more established groups. The established Atlantic groups that I examine are: Fula-Sereer, Cangin, Wolof, Bainunk-Kobiana-Kasanga, Biafada-Pajade, Tenda, and Bak. I compare all of these with Bantu, with some additional evidence from other Benue-Congo languages. I present evidence from sound change, lexicon, and noun class to assess whether any evidence exists for subgrouping various Atlantic groups together. In doing so, I propose cognates for both lexical roots and noun class markers between subgroups, supported by regular sound correspondences, and tentative reconstructions of the original forms of these morphemes. In the realm of sound change, I show that there are no shared changes that would support the unification of these Atlantic groups to the exclusion of Bantu. For lexical roots, when examining widespread, reconstructable roots, there are not significantly fewer found in Bantu than in most Atlantic groups. I present numerical data to show that based on lexical evidence there is no justification for singling out Bantu as an outgroup when compared with the Atlantic groups - this despite the geographic proximity of the Atlantic groups, which would favor higher degrees of lexical similarity. Finally, in the realm of noun class there is no evidence of shared innovations that would justify a unified Atlantic subgroup. The diversity in noun class systems is just as great among Atlantic groups as when compared with Benue-Congo. The noun classes found in Atlantic groups that do not appear in Benue-Congo are not distributed across groups in a way that can be explained as

involving Atlantic-specific innovations. In addition, there are a large number of classes which are confined to individual Atlantic subgroups, and are unlikely to be the result of innovation. I conclude that the evidence argues strongly against a unified Atlantic subgroup, and is best accounted for by assuming that the languages in the Atlantic region represent multiple primary branches of Niger-Congo. As such there is a strong case to be made that Proto-Niger-Congo was spoken in the northwest, near where the Atlantic languages are now spoken.