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The Ghana-Togo Mountain languages: Introduction

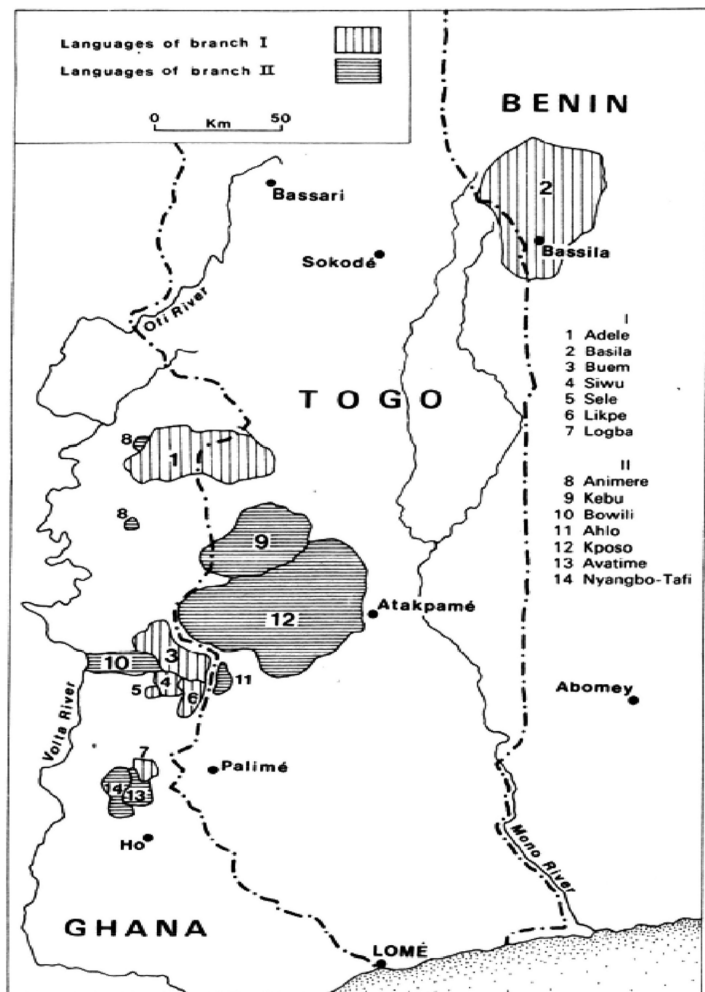
DOI 10.1515/stuf-2017-0012

1 Background

The present issue of *Language Typology and Universals* is devoted to studies of comparative, historical and descriptive typology of the Ghana-Togo Mountain (GTM) languages of West Africa. They are a group of fifteen languages spoken by groups or polities that inhabit the Akuapem-Togo-Atakora hills. The languages and peoples of these groups have continued to puzzle and fascinate researchers from myriad disciplinary perspectives. The hilly location as well as the geographical distribution of the groups cuts across low-level genetic affiliations. Their histories and the complexity of the origins of the different people intertwined with migration and settlement of segments of individual groups provide an interesting network of “allochthone” and “autochthone” dichotomies. This pattern has a significant socio-historical linguistic aspect: The majority incomers tended to acquire and adopt the language of the minority autochthones and appropriate hegemony over them. This seems to be what happened in the history of the Likpe, Nyagbo and Avatime, among others (Nugent 2005; Brydon 2008; Kropp Dakubu 2009).

The Akuapem-Togo-Atakora hills begin in southeastern Ghana ranging in a southwest-northeast line across the Ghana-Togo border and continuing eastward across the Togo-Benin border into the Niger Delta. These hills are significant for several reasons – geological, geographical, historical and ethnographic. They also seem to have served as a refuge zone for people fleeing wars and slave raids in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Nugent 2005). One of the languages, Basila (Anii), is the northernmost member of the group and is also an outlier spoken across the Togo-Benin border. The other languages spoken along and on both sides of the Ghana-Togo border are found clustered in three geographical groups in a north-to-south arrangement (see Map 1): Adele, Animere (North), Akebu, Ikposo, Lelemi, Igo (Ahlon), Tuwuli, Siwu (Lolobi-Akpafu), Seɛɛ (Santrokofi), Sekpele (Likpe) (Central) and Ikpana (Logba), Siya(ɛ) (Avatime), Nyagbo (Tutrugbu) and Tafi (Tɔgbɔ) (Southern). Each cluster of languages is

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Distribution of the Central Togo Languages
 (Source: Bernd Heine, *Verbreitung und Gliederung der Togorestsprachen*
 Dietrich Reimer Verlag, Berlin, 1968)

Map 1: Map of the Ghana-Togo Mountain languages.

Note: I = NA-GTM (Na-Togo) II = KA-GTM (Ka-Togo).

spoken in a highland area separated from the other clusters by a lowland area in which other languages such as Ewe (Gbe), Akan (Tano), or Nkonya (Guang) are spoken. Apart from the individual GTM languages being distinct from each other, they are as a group also distinct from these neighboring Gbe, Akanic and Guang languages. Furthermore, the GTM groups are known for the

cultivation, storage, consumption and ritual use of rice (Teeken 2015), and for ironwork (Pole 2010). These are not practices indigenous to the neighboring Ewe or Akan groups.

The study of the linguistic, historical and cultural heritage of the GTM languages has occurred in peaks over the centuries. A first significant peak occurred around the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. During this time, these languages were actively investigated by people like Plehn (1898), Christaller (1889) or Funke (1909, 1910, 1920) and Westermann (1927). Given their distinct features with respect to the neighbors, the languages came to be called *Togorestsprachen* “Togo Remnant languages” (Struck 1912). Another peak was reached in the late sixties and early seventies of the last century (see e.g. Höftmann and Ayitevi 1968; Kropp 1967; Ford 1971; Allan 1973). This period saw the publication of the most influential work on the classification and subgrouping of the languages by Heine (1968).

The most recent peak is the beginning of this century which saw renewed interest in these languages. One of the significant projects on these languages in this time is the “Southern Ghana-Togo Mountain languages: their linguistic and cultural heritage” project awarded to Felix Ameka by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) 2003–2013.¹ In the context of this project we launched a Working Group on the Ghana-Togo Mountain languages with members comprising native speaker language development workers and researchers all over the world working on these languages in different disciplines such as anthropology, history and linguistics. We also initiated a series of workshops held mostly in Africa. Selected papers from the first meeting in 2006 are published in a special issue of *The Journal of West African Languages* Volume 36, (2009) freely accessible at <http://main.journalofwestafricanlanguages.org/index.php/downloads/category/105-volume-36-number-1-2>.

The year 2008 was a double anniversary for GTM languages: it was 110 years since Plehn’s pioneering work and 40 years since Heine’s seminal genetic subclassification of the languages. Heine proposed that the languages be subclassified into NA and KA languages. To commemorate the anniversary the *Working Group on GTM Languages* held a workshop at The Bishop Konings Social Centre, Ho, Ghana, near the locations where the languages are spoken (August 2008). The theme for the meeting was: “KA- and NA-GTM, forty years on”. The majority of the papers in the present special issue originate from that

1 The researchers who worked on the project were James Essegbey (2003–2004) responsible for Nyagbo (Tutrugbu), Kofi Dorvlo (2003–2008) responsible for Logba (Ikpana) and Mercy Bobuafor (2006–2010) responsible for Tafi (Tɔgbɔ).

workshop.² Three researchers who have been working on these languages from that era – Bernd Heine, Kevin Ford and Mary Esther Kropp Dakubu, gave keynote lectures and these have been reworked and appear in the present issue. An earlier version of the paper by Mark Dingemanse was also first given there. The paper by Saskia van Putten was specially invited and the paper by Ameka and Essegbey had its origins in the final discussions held at the workshop.

2 The volume

In the first paper, Felix Ameka and James Essegbey draw on data that has become available on the languages over the years to show that they display a fair amount of typological diversity despite sharing some common features such as active noun classes and vowel harmony.

The next two papers are comparative historical in nature, one by Bernd Heine and the other by Mary Esther Kropp Dakubu (two keynote speakers at the workshop). They demonstrate convincingly that there are genetic relations among the languages. Kropp Dakubu engages in comparing the subclasses KA and NA to other units in the Kwa family such as Ga-Dangme. Heine focuses on the group of the closely related languages in the central cluster spoken in an area called Buem. He shows the cognates among these languages and argues that we have more information today making it possible to, in fact, draw more substantive conclusions about the genetic relations.

The next three papers provide in-depth studies of specific topics based on data from Avatime and from the two varieties of Siwu, Lolobi and Akpafu, all cast in a typological perspective. Saskia van Putten examines motion descriptions in Avatime and compares these with motion descriptions in other serializing languages. She explores whether the constructions are verb-framed, satellite-framed or equipollently framed. As is becoming more and more evident in motion event typological studies, the serializing languages do not seem to fall in the same type and they will have to be characterized in terms of the individual constructions they deploy.

Kevin Ford (also a keynote speaker during the 2008 workshop) in collaboration with Robert Iddah, a native speaker of Lolobi-Siwu, presents a thorough description of the tonal system of this variety of Siwu. Indeed the GTM

² A selection of the other papers are among the papers appearing in another special issue on the GTM languages in *Afrika und Übersee*.

languages have complex tonal systems and their analysis provides discovery procedures for the unlocking of the tonal systems of the other languages.

The final paper in the issue is on the other variety of Siwu spoken in places called Akpafu. Mark Dingemanse explores the typology of ideophones – marked words that depict sensory perception – in Siwu with an eye towards cross-linguistic generalizations about their integration into the linguistic system.

In 1898, Plehn predicted that it will not be long before the GTM languages would lose their distinctiveness and either become extinct or become more like their neighbors, Akan and Gbe. It is significant to observe that more than 100 years later all the languages Plehn talked about have not become extinct.³ Furthermore despite various contact-induced changes, they have remained distinct from their neighbors to which some speakers are shifting in structural typological terms. Seventy years after Plehn, Bernd Heine definitively showed the genetic relations among these languages. And more than forty years on from then the two subgroups proposed KA and NA have defied dissolution in spite of various attempts. The papers in this special issue reflect the resilience, the distinctiveness, the convergence and divergence among the Ghana-Togo Mountain languages. It is hoped that these studies will go a small way to unraveling the puzzles that these languages pose.

Acknowledgements: I thank the editors of *Language Universals and Typology* for the opportunity to use this forum to give wider exposure to these interesting GTM languages. I appreciate their enthusiasm, support and above all patience. I am indebted to the colleagues who served as referees for the individual papers. I am also very grateful to the contributors for their cooperation and their patience.

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³ This is not to say that no GTM languages have become extinct (see Kropp Dabuku 2009). The point here is about the languages which Plehn discusses.

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