Ghana-Togo-Mountain languages: a socio-cultural, a typological or a genetic grouping?
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by Felix K. Ameka

ABSTRACT: This article provides a synoptic view of research that has been carried out over the centuries on the fifteen languages that are spoken in the Ghana-Togo hills of West Africa with an outlier in Benin. It traces the dilemmas and opportunities the languages offer for historical, descriptive and theoretical linguistics. It highlights some of the developments in the recent investigations that have taken place and concludes with an overview of the articles on GTM languages in the issue.

1　Introduction

Studies of the languages spoken in three more or less geographical clusters along the Ghana-Togo-Mountain (GTM) ranges, with an outlier (Anii or Bassila) across the Togo-Benin border (see Map 1), began with the work of Rudolf Plehn (1898) who made the following observation and prediction:

> "Von allen Seiten nun dringen auf diese kleinen Sprachinseln mächtige absorbirende linguistische Einflüsse ein, und es ist nur eine Frage der Zeit, wann die ersteren den letzteren völlig erliegen werden." (Plehn 1898: 109)[1]

However, despite the influences and intrusions from the surrounding bigger languages, Ewe and Akan, the languages have remained resilient and have been maintained over the last one and a quarter century. Not surprisingly, some features present in the languages are contact-induced, for instance, the logophoric pronoun in Avatime, or the plural marker in Logba (see e. g. Ameka 2006 and Dorvlo 2014). The influence of Ewe on Ikposso, one of the bigger GTM languages spoken in Central Togo and just across the Ghana-Togo border, for example, has led to the language losing its active noun class system. The nominal prefixes have no grammatical function or effect anymore (see Eklo 1987, Afola-Amey 2002 and Soubrier 2013). Recall that the GTM languages have been defined as the group of languages with an active noun class system, and hence referred to as the class languages of Togo (Westermann & Bryan 1952). Thus contact introduces divergence among the languages in the features that could define them typologically.
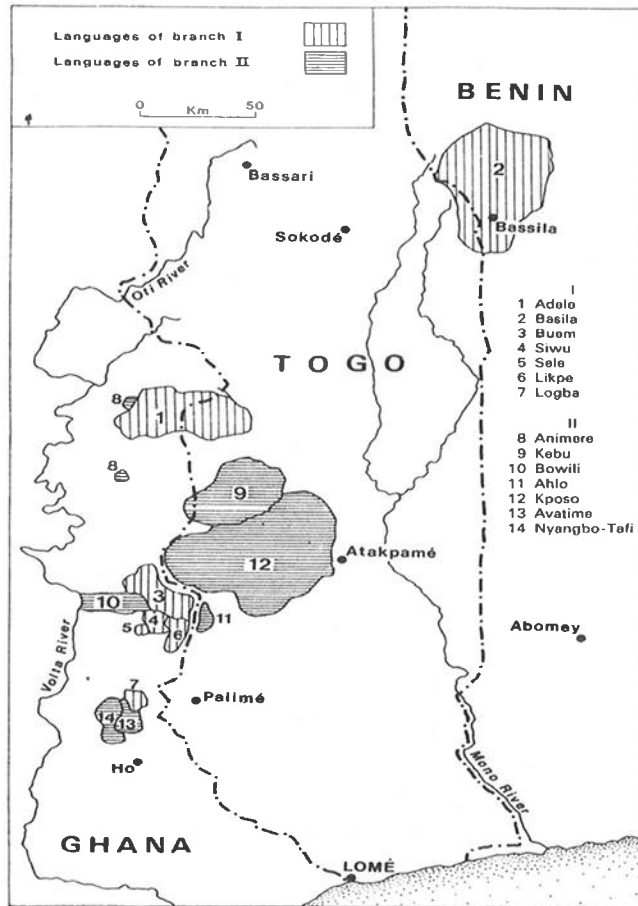
Distribution of the Central Togo Languages
(Source: Bernd Heine, *Verbreitung und Gliederung der Togorestsprachen*
Dietrich Reimer Verlag, Berlin, 1968)

Moreover, recent investigations show that one of the languages, Animere, which has had varying reports over the years (Heine 1968), is still used by at least a small community of people, even though its inter-generational transmission is very limited. It is one language belonging to the group where the speakers are shifting to a bigger GTM language, namely, Adele. There is interest among the older people to transmit the language to the younger ones (see Ring 2006). The current documentation and description by Bryan Gelles of the University of Florida, Gainesville, is likely to serve as a catalyst for this (James Essegbey p.c.).

2   A steeplechase through GTM studies

Since the days of Plehn, these GTM languages have posed challenges to researchers and scholars of different persuasions. Their genetic status and relations to other languages, their linguistic structures and their pre-history and formation have remained an enigma and a fascination. The first two or three decades of the last century saw giant Africanists providing foundations for the description of these languages (e. g. Funke 1909–1911, 1920, Struck 1912, Westermann 1903, 1922, Wolf 1907).

The next spurt of research activity on these languages happened in the late 1960s and early 1970s where the tradition of descriptive and comparative linguistics occurred. Bernd Heine (1968) established the group of languages as a genetic group subclassified into NA (= I on the map) and KA (= II on the map) languages. There were comparative wordlists published around the time (Kropp 1967) and new descriptions based on principles of modern linguistic theory also appeared (see e. g. J. Allan 1973, Chr. Allen 1974, Ford 1971, 1973, Höftmann 1971). The late 1980 s saw a sociolinguistic survey of the use of the bigger languages as linguae francae in the Ghanaian communities, as well as a grammatical description of one of the dialects of the undoubtedly biggest GTM language, Ikposso (Eklo 1987). A year later an overview of the structural features of the languages also appeared (Kropp Dakubu & Ford 1988).

In the mid 1990s Russell Schuh and Ian Maddieson conducted some studies on the phonetics of Avatime (Maddieson 1998) and on the phonology and noun class system of Avatime (Schuh 1995a, b).

The challenge to the genetic unity of the GTM languages that was adumbrated in the work of Jan Bennett & Patrick Sterk (1977) was crystallised in John Stewart's (1989) presentation of 'New' Kwa. The two branches – i. e. NA and KA – were assigned to two different subgroups of the New Kwa. The NA languages were said to belong to Tano and the KA languages to the Left Bank. From the beginning of the present century this proposition has received more attention from Roger Blench (2001, 2009) who argues that the GTM languages do not constitute a genetic group but may be a "typological grouping masquerading as a genetic unit" (Blench 2009: 19). While Blench (2009) and Kay Williamson & Roger Blench (2000) accept the KA and NA subgroups of the GTM languages as established by Heine (1968) and allotted to different branches of Kwa, they propose that the two branches probably independently branched out of Proto-Kwa. Similarly, Maddieson (1998: 155) asserts that "[T]his [i. e. the GTM group] is a socio-cultural and

geographic rather than a genetic group". The database upon which such claims are based at the beginning of the century was limited to comparative wordlists and some of the descriptions mentioned above. As Ameka (2002: 90) observed:

> "All these claims are based on very little empirical evidence from the languages. We do not as yet have a full documentation of some of the languages […]. There is therefore an urgent need for the linguistic documentation of the languages of the group. This is not only of interest to linguists but also to the questions of the pre-history, contact and classification of the languages of the area."

Figure 1 shows the current classification of the languages which follows the two groups proposed by Heine in 1968. The figure also shows the understanding of the subgroupings among the languages. The representation of the classification presented is from Williamson & Blench (2000: 29). Some of the names of the languages used by these authors have been modified, and Nyaṅgbo and Tafi are treated as separate languages. Over the years the languages have been referred to with different names and these have also had alternative spellings. In some cases the languages are more known by the external names they have. In some other cases the terms for the people have been used to designate the language. Table 1 summarises some of these names providing a guide to the autonyms used.
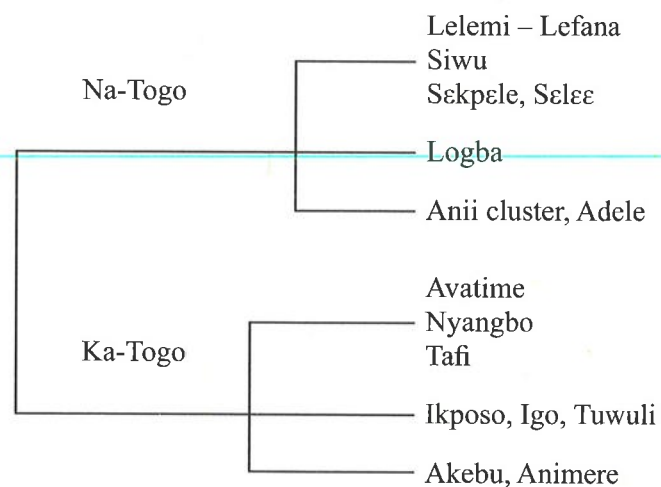
The subgroups indicated as I and II in Map 1 correspond to Na-Togo and Ka-Togo in Figure 1. These groups are also sometimes designated as NA and KA groups or as NA-GTM or KA-GTM (see Table 1).

Table 1: Names for the languages and people and subgroup labels

SUBGROUPS	MAP 1 NAMES	OTHER NAMES	PEOPLE	LANGUAGE AUTONYMS
I (Heine 1968)	Buem	Lelemi-Lefana, Buɛm	Balɛmi, Bafana	Lɛlɛmi, Lɛfana
Mo (B&S1977)	Siwu	Akpafu-Lolobi	Mawu	Siwu
Na-Togo (W&B2000)	Likpe	Likpe, Sekpele	ɔkpɛlé, PL bakpɛlé	Sɛkpɛlé
NA-GTM	Sele	Santrokofi	Balɛɛ	Sɛlɛɛ
	Logba		Akpanawo	Ikpana
	Basila	Akpe, Gisida, Bassila, Baseca, Winji-Winji, Ounji-Ounji	Anii	Anii
	Adele	Bedere, Gadre	Bidire	Gidire
II (Heine 1968)	Avatime	Afatime, Sideme, Sia	Kedanema	Sìyà(se), Sideme
Tu (B&S1977)	Nyangbo	Nyagbo	Batrugbu	Tutrugbu
Ka-Togo (W&B2000)	Tafi	Tegbo, Tɛgbo	Bagbɔ	Tɩgbɔ
KA-GTM	Kposo	Kposo, Akposo, Akposso, Ikposo	Akpɔsɔ	Ikpɔsɔ
	Ahlo	Ahlon, Achlo, Anlo, Ago, Ahlõ, Ahonlan, Ahlon-Bogo, Ahlɔn	Ogoebi, PL Bogo	Igo
	Bowili	Wuli, Tora, Bowili, Liwuli, Siwuri, Bawuli, Tuwili, Bowiri	Bawuli	Tuwuli
	Kebu	Akebou, Kebu, Kabu,Kegberike, Ekpeebhe	Akebu	Gəkəgbə
	Animere	Anyimere, Kunda	Benimbere	Animere

Figure 1: Classification of the GTM languages

(Figure 1 shows:)

Na-Togo
- Lelemi – Lefana
- Siwu
- Sɛkpɛle, Sɛlɛɛ
- Logba
- Anii cluster, Adele

Ka-Togo
- Avatime
- Nyangbo
- Tafi
- Ikposo, Igo, Tuwuli
- Akebu, Animere

Since the beginning of the present century there has been intense work on several of the languages (see e. g. Storch & Koffi 2000, Ameka 2002, Harley 2005). A catalyst for this is a series of workshops organised under the auspices of the Southern Ghana-Togo-Mountain Languages Project at Leiden University, 2003–2013.[2] The first ever workshop dedicated to these languages and the related Guang languages was held in August 2006 at Ho in the Volta Region of Ghana near the locations where the GTM languages are spoken. At this first workshop, a Working Group on GTM Languages was formed. The group is open to all researchers and community members and serves as a support group for the description and documentation of the GTM and related Guang languages. The histories of the GTM groups are tied with those of the Guang languages speaking communities hence the workshops and the Working Group are extended to researchers and community members from those groups as well. Some of the Guang languages and groups that have been represented in the workshops are Nkonya, Efutu, Lɛtɛ (Larteh) Foodo and Gikyode.

Apart from the workshop, the GTML Working Group also uses e-mail communication for discussions. Some of the issues that have been recently discussed include questions of the ethnonyms and their construction – e. g. the recent adoption of Sideme for Avatime –, the labelling of noun classes and the potential for uniformisation and the cultural history of red rice in the GTM area (Teeken 2015).

Several members of the group have generated a lot of research on the languages in recent times. Let me just focus on the doctoral dissertations that have been produced since the beginning of the century on these languages: Afola-Amey 2002 on Ikposso Litime; Harley 2005 on Tuwuli; Anderson Starwalt 2008 on ATR harmony in, among others, Ikposso and Foodo; Dorvlo 2008 on Logba; Akrofi Ansah 2009 on Lɛtɛ; Dingemanse 2011 on Siwu ideophones; Bobuafor 2013 on Tafi; Soubrier 2013 on Ikposso-Uwi; and 2014 has seen three dissertations: Agbetsoamedo 2014 on Sɛlɛɛ; Morton 2014 on Anii tonology and tense aspect; and van Putten 2014 on Avatime information structure. In 2015, Dalalorm, a native speaker of Sɛkpɛle, submitted his dissertation on a description of that language. Two dissertations on serial verb constructions have been passed in 2016: Rebecca Defina on Avatime and Nana Ama Agyeman on Efutu.

In the context of the exchange of ideas and making research on these languages available, members of the Working Group publish their findings in special editions. The first collection of papers appeared in 2009 as a combined issue of The Journal of West African Languages.

3   Overview of the GTM articles of the volume

The present issue is another of such collections. It continues the tradition of exposing the contributions of the GTM and Guang languages to the debates in the comparative historical and typological studies of the Kwa languages of West Africa. The issue opens with Kropp Dakubu's article arguing for the validity of a Kwa genetic group based on an examination of how the protolanguage of subgroups within Kwa relate to the more established Potou-Tano group proposed by Stewart (2002). Kropp Dakubu finds that the six sound correspondences suggested by Stewart as constituting the change from proto Potou-Tano-Bantu to proto-Tano fit very well with proto Gbe, and proto GTM together with proto-Potou-Tano on the one side and proto-Ga-Dangme on the other. She concludes that this suggests genetic status of Kwa can be confirmed.

Three of the contributions focus on tense and aspect. Deborah Morton examines the temporal and aspectual interpretation of eventive and stative clauses in Anii, a NA-GTM language spoken across the Togo-Benin border. She shows that, as has been noted for other West African languages, when unmarked, eventive clauses receive a past temporal and a perfective aspectual interpretation and stative clauses have a present temporal and imperfective aspectual reference. When marked with the imperfective marker /tɪ/, however, eventive clauses have non-future imperfective interpretation whereas stative clauses have a present habitual interpretation.

Rebecca Defina also looks at the semantics of tense, aspect and mood markers in Avatime, a KA-GTM language of Ghana. She shows that the language has no marker which has an inherent specification of tense. She concludes that while earlier studies portrayed the language as if it were a tense-prominent language, Avatime like other Kwa languages is better viewed as an aspect-prominent and mood-prominent language.

By contrast, Mercy Akrofi Ansah demonstrates that for Lɛtɛ (Larteh), a Hill Guang language (as opposed to a GTM language), present and past tenses are distinguished by different tonal patterns, whereas future is morphologically marked by a prefix. This future prefix is a grammaticalised form of the verb 'come'. Hence this language may be tense-prominent.

The importance of tone in signalling grammatical meanings in these languages is also evident in the contribution by Yvonne Agbetsoamedo on standard negation in Sɛlɛɛ, a NA-GTM language. In fact this language is unique among all the languages in the expression of tense. As far as we know, it is the only GTM language that has a four tense system distinguishing a before-today past from a today past as well as a future and a

present that is unmarked (see Agbetsoamedo 2014, Harflett & Tate 1999). When it comes to standard negation also Sɛlɛɛ is unusual among the GTM languages in a number of ways. It uses three strategies to form the negative of declarative affirmative sentences. One of these strategies involves polarity tone: the change of a non-high tone on a verbal affix to a high means a change from affirmative to negative. Moreover some tense-aspect forms are also either just affirmative or just negative. In addition there is a dedicated negative marker. Many of the GTM languages tend to use only one strategy for negation.

A remarkable thing about the current collection is that it contains two articles on Anii, a language which has not received much attention for over forty years. Apart from the article by Deborah Morton on tense-aspect, Ines Fiedler's contribution examines focus constructions. Fiedler draws attention to the asymmetry in focus marking between subject and non-subject constituents – a phenomenon that has been observed for several other Kwa and West African languages. A related asymmetry also observed for other Kwa languages is the use of different strategies for term focus vs. predicate focus.

Another topic of both areal and typological interest is whether a class of adjectives can be identified in all languages (e. g. Dixon 2004). In her contribution, Mercy Bobuafor notes that this can be done for the GTM languages. She shows for Tafi, a KA-GTM language of Ghana, that like its closest geographical neighbours Nyagbo and Logba (and also Ewe) there is a very small sub-class of underived non-ideophonic adjectives; maximally three members. The adjective class has two other strata – a largish set of ideophonic words and a group of derived adjectives productively formed from property denoting verbs by reduplication. Like in other GTM languages the adjectivals, like other qualifiers, are not targets of agreement within the noun phrase. Moreover, they are only used attributively and have to be morphologically marked in order to be able to function as noun phrase heads or adverbials. Again, like in most other Kwa languages, qualities are predicated of entities through the use of property verbs and other verbal constructions.

These studies advance our knowledge and understanding of features such as tense, aspect and mood; negation and information structuring as well as the techniques used in describing properties of entities in specific GTM languages and thereby of the group. In addition, Dakubu's essay in particular takes us a step further in our quest for resolving the "Kwa-problem" as Greenberg (1963) characterised it.

Notes

[1] From all sides these small linguistic islands are being invaded by absorbing linguistic influences, and it is only a question of time before the former will be replaced by the latter. [Translation by Mark Dingemanse]

[2] This project was funded by the Netherlands Science Foundation (NWO) under its Endangered Languages Programme (ELP) through a grant awarded to F. K. Ameka. The project focused on Nyagbo, Tafi and Logba (see e. g. Bobuafor 2013, Dorvlo 2008, and Essegbey 2009, 2010a, b).

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