

# DEFAKA AND IJO: A REASSESSMENT OF THE IJOID RELATIONSHIP

Bruce Connell

(York University, Toronto & University of Kent, Canterbury)

William Bennett

(Rutgers University, New Jersey)

Inoma Essien, Ebitare Obikudo, Ozo-mekuri Ndimele

(University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria)

Akin Akinlabi

(Rutgers University, New Jersey)

# A. Background

## 1. Introduction

- a dearth of comparative work
  - willing acceptance of hypotheses based on scant evidence
- the Ijò anomaly
  - a geographical isolate, surrounded by Benue-Congo languages
  - a structural ‘isolate’ in two striking respects:
    - SOV word order
    - sex-gender distinction in its pronominal system

## 2. The Ijoid Hypothesis

- Jenewari (1983): ‘Defaka: Ijọ’s closest linguistic relative’
  - Ijoid replaces Ijọ on the Niger-Congo classification
- the comparative evidence:
  - a) substantial lexical similarity between Ijọ and Defaka, even when obvious borrowings are excluded
  - b) grammatical similarities:
    - SOV order
    - modifying elements precede the noun
    - tense markers follow the verb
    - sex-gender pronominal system

c) sound correspondences

Df = Ijɔ

-a- = -e- (found in two lexical items)

-s- = -r- (two items)

l- = d- (three items)

ɔ̃- = d/d (two items)

Jenewari acknowledges the evidence of sound correspondences is weak, in light of the lexical similarities but that,

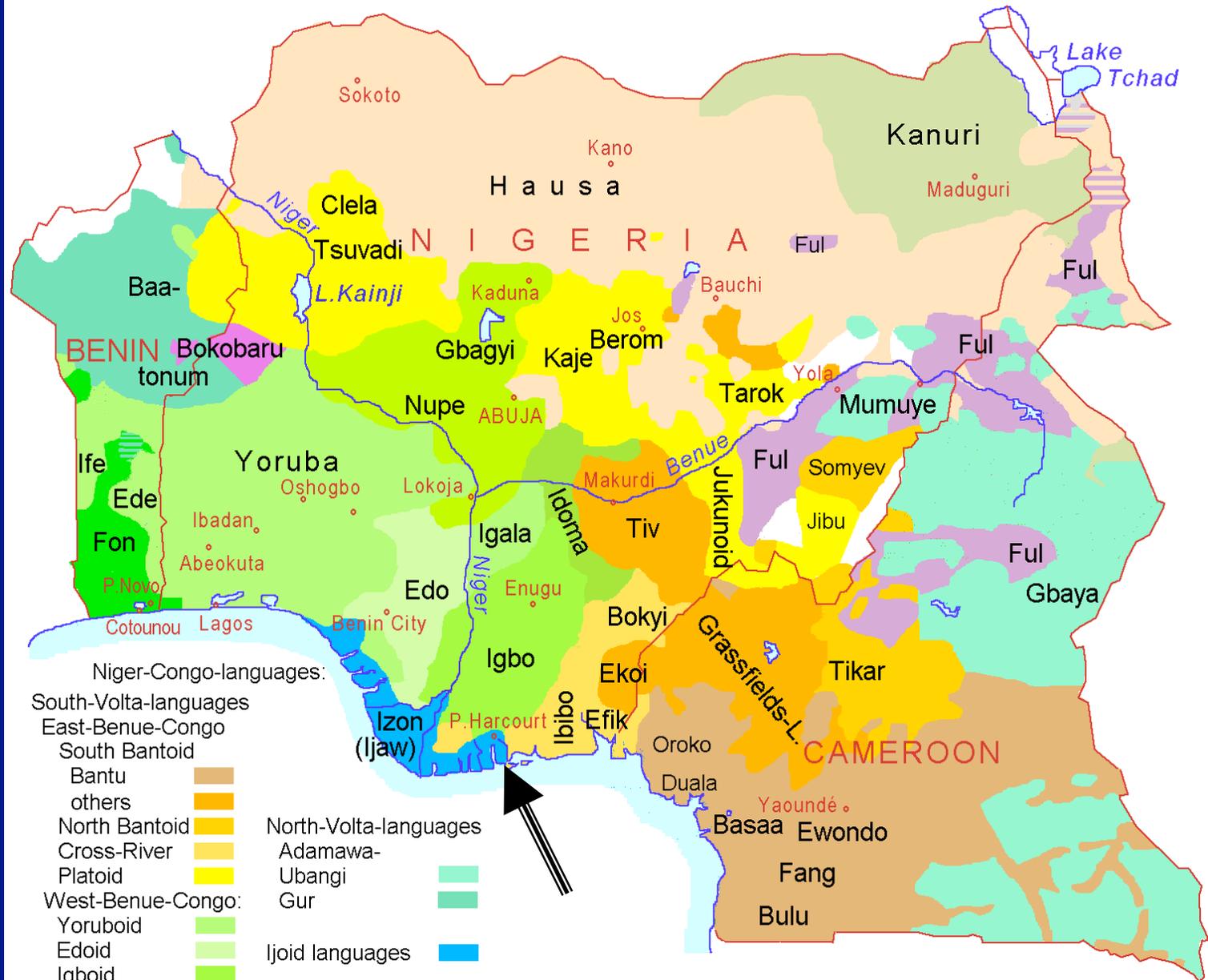
“these lexical and grammatical similarities, taken as a whole” lead to the conclusion “that Ijɔ is the closest linguistic relative of Defaka, although the relationship is a remote one” (1983: 35).

### 3. Further work

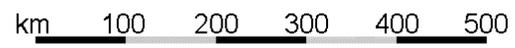
Since Jenewari (1983) no further comparative has been carried out to test (or bolster) the Ijoid hypothesis, yet it has become part of the accepted ‘wisdom’. Just two subsequent studies of Defaka have appeared in print, Shryock, Ladefoged & Williamson (1996/97) and Williamson (1998); in the latter, the proposal is accepted uncritically: “Jenewari’s demonstration of the Defaka/Ijò relationship is convincing” (1998: 153). The thrust of Williamson’s article is to explore some of the vocabulary found in Defaka which is not found in Ijò and the implications it holds for our understanding of the history of the Niger Delta.

## 4. Defaka

- spoken in one ward of Nkoro town (eastern Niger Delta region of Nigeria) and in an outlying hamlet
  - perhaps as many as 50 fluent and 100 other less fluent speakers
  - intergenerational transmission in just one or two families
- possibly the last remnant of a language group that once dominated the region from the eastern Niger Delta to the estuary of the Cross River
- Nkoro (Eastern Ijo) is the primary language of all Defaka
  - no Nkoro learn to speak Defaka
  - Nkoro is itself threatened



- Niger-Congo-languages:
- South-Volta-languages
  - East-Benue-Congo
  - South Bantoid
    - Bantu
    - others
  - North Bantoid
  - Cross-River
  - Platoid
  - West-Benue-Congo:
    - Yoruboid
    - Edoid
    - Igboid
    - Nupoid
    - Idomoid
    - Kwa Group
  - North-Volta-languages
  - Adamawa-Ubangi
  - Gur
  - Ijoid languages
  - Atlantic languages
  - Mande languages



Afro-Asiatic languages      Nilo-Saharan languages

## 5. Documenting Defaka [AFN] and Nkɔ̀rɔ̀ [NKX]

As part of a project to document both Defaka and Nkɔ̀rɔ̀ we have collected considerably more data, both lexical and grammatical, than was available previously for Defaka. It is therefore possible to reconsider the classification of Defaka as a part of Ijoid, not only because the new evidence available to us requires that we test again this hypothesis, but also because we consider that a well-grounded account of the genetic relationships of a language constitute an important part of the documentation of that language.

## 6. Weaknesses in Jenwari's evidence

- the lexical evidence includes a considerable number of items that are apparently unique to Defaka
- the grammatical evidence is subject to the interpretation of having been borrowed
  - e.g. its pronominal system is almost identical to that of Nkọrọọ, suggestive of borrowing
  - the SOV characteristics of Defaka and Ijọ show some interesting differences
    - Defaka not as strictly SOV in its details as suggested, e.g. certain modifiers follow nouns: ɔ́ígà sî ‘house twenty’; ɔ́ígà kòkò ‘house all’
- the lack of evidence of sound correspondences (despite claims of lexical similarity), generally accepted as the *sine qua non* to establish genetic relationship.

## B. New evidence bearing on the Defaka – Ijò relationship

None of the perceived weaknesses in Jenewari's evidence show Defaka is not Ijò's closest relative; yet our early impressions resulted in increased skepticism.

Systematic examination of the data now underway, though far from complete.

### 7. Lexical evidence

- lexicostatistics: a standard 100-word Swadesh list was used, from which 89 words were available for comparison between Defaka and Proto-Ijò, using reconstructions available in Williamson (2004).
  - a cognacy rate of 41.5% was found. Cognacy rates ranging from the mid 60s to mid 90s are reported for Ijò as a whole (Lee & Williamson 1990)  
(no further comment at this point)



## 9. Sound correspondences between Proto-Ijò and Defaka

- no further support for the sound correspondences proposed by Jenewari
  - Defaka -a- = Ijò -e- a possible exception
- other correspondences have been found; data examined includes our own field notes (CAWL 1,700 wordlist), Jenewari (1983) and various unpublished materials of Kay Williamson, most importantly her Proto-Ijò (P-I) reconstructions.
  - Williamson's reconstructions are accepted for the present purposes, though with some reservations.
- transcriptions here standardized to follow IPA conventions; nasality marked below the vowel

## 9.1. Defaka /w/, /Ø/ = P-I \*/f/

Gloss	Defaka	Proto-Ijọ	Proto-Ijoid
<i>co-wife</i>	wàà (~ àlà)	*fara (3)	**wàrà
<i>drag</i>	wùwò	*fɔ̄gɔ fɔ̄gu fɔ̄no (3)	**wùṅò
<i>leak (vi)</i>	wìrè	*ifiri (1)	**ìwìrì
<i>eat</i>	éé	*fi (2)	**fí
<i>roast</i>	òò	*fɔ̄ɪ/fɔ̄ɪ (1)	**fòì
<i>salt</i>	óó	*fɔ̄y (2)	**fóú
<i>soup</i>	árúá	*fɔ̄lɔ (2)	**fólúó
<i>stink</i>	òrùò	*furu (3)	**fùrùò
<i>excrement</i>	ìjà	*afija (1)	**àfjà
<i>fly (vi)</i>	jéè (-ma)	*ifɔ̄ɪ (5)	**ífóì
<i>hot, become</i>	òrò	*ɔ̄firi (3)	**òfòrì

- Proto-Ijoid (P-Ijd) reconstructions are tentative (\*\*)
- in the absence of a conditioning environment that would lead to a split, a contrast in P-Ijd that has merged in P-I is indicated
- instances of P-I \*w are several
  - typically involve nasality, so possibly P-Ijd \*\* $\eta^w$
  - of the few that don't, f ~ w is found in Ijọ lects in at least one word, fọ́jí ~ wọ́jí 'swell'.
  - typically don't have cognates in Defaka, or the Defaka form is an obvious borrowing.
- similarly, instances Defaka /f/ exist; these again are either obvious loans or don't have cognates in Ijọ

## 9.2. Voiced labial stops

- numerous cognates between Defaka and P-I contain voiced labial stops
  - four sets of correspondences: P-I \*b = Defaka b
  - P-I \*ɓ = Defaka b, mb, ɓ.

Gloss	Defaka	Proto-Ijọ	Proto-Ijoid
back	òbò	*ɔbu (1)	
pig, bush-pig	èbè	*ɔbi (?)	
dog	èbèrè	*obiri (1)	**òbìrì
goat	óbórí	*oɓori (2)	**óɓórí
elephant	bìlà	*ɓila (1)	**ɓìlà
vagina	tàbéé	*teɓi (1)	**tèɓé
ask	bǐè, ɓǐè	*ɓii (1)	**ɓii

agree, believe	m̀bìrà	*beberj (1)	
drink	m̀bú	*bou (2)	
order (vt)	m̀bé (~àmà)	*be (1)	
doctor (trad.)	bó'tó-báí	*birɪ-bɔ (2)	**bútú-
ear	bàsì	*berɪ (1)	**bè̀sì
fill	bájà	*bej (-ma) (2)	**bɛ́
honey	bémí	*bemɥ (1)	**bè̀mú
mouth	béé	*birɪ (2)	**bípí
head	tóbò	*tɪbɪ (2)	**tíbí

- P-Ijd reconstruction problematic; P-I reconstruction of \*b is unsafe
- a possible length contrast?
- possible indication of different periods of contact between Defaka and Ijọ

### 9.3. Defaka /-t-/ = P-I \* -r-

- a few items suggest this correspondence; but cf Jenewari's -s- = -r-

Gloss	Defaka	Proto-Ijọ	Proto-Ijoid
doctor (trad.)	ḡó <sup>+</sup> tó-ḡáí	*ḡiri-ḡo 2	**ḡútú-
three	táátó	*taaru 2	**táátó
forget	ḡàtà(-mà)	*ḡara 2	**ḡàtà
name	îtà	*ire 2	**îté

### 9.4. Vowel correspondences

- complex set of front – back and back – front correspondences
- Defaka has six or seven vowels, no [ATR] harmony (P-I, 5 + 5)
- Defaka vowels have lowered relative to P-I, P-Ijd

### 9.5. Tone correspondences

- tone between Defaka and P-I is fairly stable

## 10. Conclusions

- the hypothesis that Defaka is Ijọ's closest linguistic relative receives additional support from our research; on-going investigation should continue to buttress this, and at the same time clarify some outstanding questions, e.g. regarding the extent of borrowing between Ijọ, Defaka and neighbouring languages.
- the implications for our understanding of the history of the Niger Delta and the adjoining areas are unclear; e.g. some of Williamson's (1998) suggestions concerning loans from Defaka (or Defakoid) are compelling, but appear incompatible with a chronology and set of migrations that link Defaka to Proto-Ijọ.

## References

- Connell, B. & K. B. Maison (1994). A Cameroun homeland for the Lower Cross languages? *SUGIA (Sprache und Geschichte in Afrika)* 15, 47–90.
- Jenewari, C. E. W. (1983). *Defaka: Ijò's closest linguistic relative*. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press.
- Jenewari, C. E. W. (1989). Ijoid. In Bendor-Samuel, J. (ed.) *The Niger-Congo Languages*. Lanham: University Press of America, 105-118.
- Lee, J. D. & K. Williamson (1990). A lexicostatistical classification of Ijò dialects. *Research in African Languages and Linguistics* 1, 1–10.
- Shryock, A., P. Ladefoged & K. Williamson (1996/97). The phonetic structures of Defaka. *Journal of West African Languages* 26, 3–27.
- Williamson, K. (1986). Niger-Congo: SVO or SOV? *Journal of West African Languages* 16, 5–15.
- Williamson, K. (1998). Defaka revisited. In Ejituwu, N. C. (ed.) *The Multi-disciplinary Approach to African History*. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press, 151–183.
- Williamson, Kay. (2004). Proto-Ijoid reconstructions. Unpublished ms.

## Acknowledgements

Research funded by the NSF (DEL Program)

Grant ID 0553971, Documenting Defaka [afn] and Nkoroo [nkx]  
awarded to Akinbiyi Akinlabi and Bruce Connell

