

Towards a reconstruction of Proto-Jarawan

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Jarawan peoples are reported to have migrated into Nigeria from Cameroon ~300 years ago (Ballard 1971; Mohammadou 2002), though not all accounts agree on the details (cf. Abubakar 1980). Recent work by Green (forthcoming) comparing Jarawan numeric systems argues that they may have done so in more than one wave and at a significant time depth from one another.

This paper reports on ongoing comparative work focused on the Jarawan languages with the goal of reconstructing Proto-Jarawan. The reported outcomes are based on a large-scale study of 450 lexical items gathered from 23 Jarawan varieties, totalling approximately 5,000 words. Given the scarcity of research on Jarawan and the piecemeal nature of available resources, this is by-far the most comprehensive comparative Jarawan database that exists. Via this list and the Comparative Method used in Historical Linguistics, we propose Proto-Jarawan reconstructions and view them alongside other reconstructions concerning languages spoken nearby, allowing us to assess potential innovations vs. retentions between Jarawan and other language groups, as well as Jarawan-internally.

We build upon earlier work and illustrate several challenges faced in this reconstruction effort. Among these are large scale erosion of material from the right edge of stems, with different outcomes characteristic of particular sub-groups. We also find apparent innovation of noun class prefixes, sometimes involving double prefixation, as well as further adjustments to word shape in some languages that obscure cognacy. Consider, for example, forms of ‘knee,’ which we analyze as cognate with Proto-Grassfields **lúl* and Proto-Lower-Cross **ε-lɔŋ*. Evidence of this cognacy is clearest in now extinct Cameroonian Jarawan languages, Nagumi *luŋgo* and Mboa *molu*, but in extant languages, we find forms like *kuluŋ*, *ɲkunu*, *kúl*, and *kɔŋɔl*, illustrating that what was once C1 (*luŋgo*) now appears word-internally (*kuluŋ*), word-finally (e.g., *kul*, *kɔŋɔl*), or perhaps even lost altogether, depending on one’s analysis (*ɲkunu* _).

Other challenges faced pertain to the relatively few items available from the aforementioned Cameroonian languages, which appear to have been greatly affected by contact with other Chadic, Adamawa, and Bantoid languages before they were recorded by linguists. Furthermore, some words in the Jarawan Jaku-Gubi and Lame clusters (spoken in Bauchi State Nigeria) are cognate with Bantoid languages spoken hundreds of miles away, which could not reasonably be innovations due to *in situ* contact, calling into question the suitability of the “majority rules” principle often invoked in reconstruction. Consider, for example, Jaku *tɪmɔ̀ŋ* ‘sew,’ compared to Proto-Grassfields **túm* and other forms like *soro*, *sol*, *sor*, and *zwɔr* found in other Jarawan sub-groups.

The analysis that we present sheds important light on these languages that are yet poorly understood by linguists and, in turn, forces us to re-examine certain standard methodological assumptions that underlie the Comparative Method.