

REVIEW OF: SCHAEFER AND EGBOKHARE'S CLASS MARKING IN EMAI. CLASS MARKING IN EMAI. LONDON, UK: ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHING GROUP, INC, 2020.

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1. Introduction

Schaefer and Egbokhare take us on a magnificent journey in the Benue Congo phylum of the Niger Congo family of African languages. The purpose of this journey is to lead us to an understanding of the Noun Class (NC) system of Emai.

Emai is "...a North Central Edoid language of south-central Nigeria [with] about 25,000-30,000 people...in ten villages...located at longitude 6° east of Greenwich Meridian and latitude 7° north of the equator..." (Schaefer and Egbokhare 2020, 1).

The layout of the book follows the fascinating migratory trajectory of the Emai language within a paradigm of shift from a Bantu-like structure to a Kwa-like structure (terms taken from Hyman 2010, Good 2012). This journey leads from Niger Congo which Heine and Nurse present as being remarkable for an elaborate system of noun classification which marks singular/plural alternations with affixes (Heine and Nurse 2000:13); it proceeds from there to Benue Congo, looking closely at the distinguishing features of the east and west branches of the Family. The study then takes us to Edoid as a member of the Benue Congo family and then, specifically to Emai as a member of the Edoid family.

Schaefer and Egbokhare present a most compelling motivation for this research which, for the fact of its deep significance for this and future investigations, I would ask that you indulge an extensive quote from the book:

...Another avenue of investigation bearing on the broader issue of how Benue Congo evolved has been raised by recent archaeological and ethnographic investigation of West African forest states...In the instance of the Benin Kingdom and its Edoid –speaking populations, Portuguese explorers in the fifteenth century were impressed by Benin City's size and splendor far in advance of the 1897 British takeover... (S&E, 2020:3)

They noted further that Benin City as an urban center would require "...an interregional network of agricultural production, trade, exchange, as well as military defense..." the consequence of which would be linguistic interaction with Edoid-speaking populations outside Benin City. How these village vernaculars related to the Benin palace will require "...development and comparison of linguistic information beyond [identifying] basic vocabulary and cognate sets...". This book under review, then, takes the initial step of establishing such information. This is a laudable step that underscores the interdisciplinary relationship between History, Archaeology, Ethnography and Linguistics.

Let us proceed to review the book following its organizational scheme.

2. Benue Congo

2.1. East Benue Congo

S&E undertake an extensive review of the literature on Benue Congo. They establish that Benue Congo has two branches: east and west. The eastern branch, characterized by Bantu features can be found largely in East and Central Africa. A somewhat detailed discussion of grammatical agreement and declension sets (that is, nominal form class pairs) of this group was carried out by looking at Ganda, Tswana, Eton, Kongo, Kituba, with some reference to Swahili. An interesting

take-away from the discussion is the presentation of the semantic and morphological nature of Bantu Noun Class (NC). The literature establishes 13 Bantu NCs characterized morphologically and semantically thus:

Noun Class	Morphological Shape	Semantic Nature
1,2	*mu-/*ba-	human beings
3,4	*mu-/*mi-	...body parts, animals...
5,6	*mi-/*ma-	natural phenomena, body parts, animals, collective nouns, undesirable people...
7,8	*ki-/*bi-	body parts, tools, instruments, utensils, animals, insects, languages, diseases...
9,10	*N-/*N-	animals, people, body parts, tools, instruments...
12,13	*ka-/*tu-	augmentatives, derogatives, diminutives...

The discussion in this section is particularly important as it relates to the authors' goal of assisting "...those unfamiliar with Emai to understand the extent of reduction in its system of class marking" (S&E 2020:6). The point is that, it has been more or less settled that Bantu has been the most conservative of the Noun Class languages in terms of its Noun Class system and would therefore be a takeoff point in the comparison with Emai to show what the latter has discarded or conflated in the journey to the reduction of this inflectional morphological system. Individual languages reviewed (excluding Bantu) are Aghem (a Grassfield Bantu language in the Menchum division of the North West Region of Cameroon), Esimbi (a Tivoid language of South Western Cameroon), Cipu (a Kainji language spoken in Northern Nigeria) and Usakade (a language spoken in Cross River State in Nigeria and in the South West Region of Cameroon).

2.2. West Benue Congo

Williamson and Blench (2000:31) classify the following under West Benue Congo: YEAI (Yoruboid, Edoid, Akokoid, Igboid), Akpes, Ayere-Ahan and NOI (Nupoid, Oko, Idomoid). The specific languages reviewed by S&E are Yala (an Idomoid language spoken in North Central Nigeria), Igede (another Idomoid language), Gade (a Nupoid language spoken in Nasarawa State, Nigeria).

All of these languages were reviewed in relation to their Noun Class and declension system within the backdrop of proto Benue Congo declension set with the following semantic content:

Declension Set	Prefix	English equivalents for Proto Benue Congo noun stems
1	*ù-/*ba-	human beings, kinship, proper names, agentives
2	*li-/*a-	body parts, natural phenomena, time
3	*Ì-/*Í-	animals, place, artifacts, yam
4	*ku-/*a-	body parts, arm/hand, leg/foot, locations
5	*ki-/*bi-	outer layers, natural phenomena, liquid in nature, part/piece
6	*ku-/*Í-	time, place body part
7	*bu-/*a-	body part, tool, instruments, medicine, augmentative
8	*ki-/*a-	calabash
9	*bu-/*Í-	time day/night, sheep, tree/wood, augmentative, tree, diminutive
10	*ka-/*ti-	tree, diminutive
11	*ka-/*Í-	calabash, grasshopper, monkey, diminutive
12	*ú-/*ti-	body parts of head, tree/branch/thorn, instruments, place
13	*ú-/*Í-	time month/moon, rainy season, natural phenomena, liquid, pestle, fire, snake, body parts of head, place path/road
14	*lu-/*Í-	sun, knife
15	*ma-	liquid, palm oil, beer, salt
16	*li-	rainy season, day, charcoal, honey, verbal noun of activity

17	*ɪ̃-	abstract time earth/ground, groundnut, firewood, hunger, infinitive
18	*a-	fluid, dew, excrement
19	*bu-	witchcraft, emotional terms, pain, abstractions
20	*ka-	earth, dust, mud, spirit, ghost, God, locative, temporal
21	*bi-	war/quarrel

S&E discuss the phonological shape of the proto Benue Congo noun prefix. They note a preponderance of CV and V shapes for the nominal prefix. In terms of phonetic content, the prefix form may cover two or more declension sets (as in Usakade, for instance, where o- represents the singular form of declension sets A and C, u- represents D, E and F, e- represents B and G while i- captures the singular form of declension set H and I).

A very interesting observation that can be gleaned from the discussion of vocalic form of the phonological shape of the noun class prefix is one that drives me to suggest a development of the synchronic vowel systems that are obtained in languages of the Benue Congo family. Most of the Benue Congo languages exhibit five vowels: i, e, o, a, u (Nupe), or seven vowels: i, e, e, o, o, a, u (Edo Bini, Yoruba), i, i, e, o, a, u, u (Igbo). I suggest that the proto vowel system of Niger Congo, from the evidence of the vocalic form of the NC prefix contains three vowels: i, u, a (cf. S&E, 2020:10-12); this system was expanded by a lowering process which affected some high vowels to produce a five-vowel system i, e, o a, u (cf. S&E, 2020:13). Indeed, a synchronic evidence of this vowel lowering can be found in Okpe (Hoffman 1973, Halle and Clements 1983, Oyebade 1998) where some half close vowels behave like close vowels in the phonology. I think that the innovation of vowel Harmony provided the impetus for the development of the seven-vowel systems, moving in different directions.

3. Class Marking in Edoid

S&E move on to a discussion of noun class marking in Edoid starting from proto Edoid. Reviewing the literature, they point out that Elugbe, posits seven prefixes for nominal form class. These prefixes are Vowel Harmony driven. Elugbe, in addition, posits nine declension sets pairing singular/plural with three neutral classes.

S&E note that there is asymmetry in the phonological form and assignment of prefixes: of the nine prefix positions, four of them are occupied by two prefixes (o:o; u:u) the remaining five are represented by unique prefixes. The plural forms manifest the polyplural phenomenon of Maho (2003): nine plural positions are occupied by only two prefixes: i,i; a:ə.

A careful review of the proto Edoid literature led S&E to the conclusion that "...the evolution of PE [Proto Edoid] from Proto Bantu was primarily one of reduction in form" (S&E, 2020:63).

S&E proceed to discuss the class markings in some individual Edoid languages. The languages reviewed are Degema (spoken in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria), oḷoma/Ogbe (in Igara, Edo State of Nigeria), North Ivie (in the North Eastern sector of Igara), Ibillo (in the Okpamheri cluster of Northern Edoid), concluding with Bini (Edo).

The summary of S&E's review of Edoid is that, relative to Proto Bantu, the Ontological Categories delineated by the Noun Class markings are drastically reduced, ranging from "...a

reduced agreement system grounded to an animate/inanimate” in North Ivié to a limitation to a Human Ontological Category in Bini.

The phonological shape of the class markings is CV or V with a preponderance of V. They established a cline for a cross-Edoid agreement marking for adnominals, thus: demonstrative < numeral < adjective.

4. Class Marking in Emai

Fittingly, over 55% of the book is devoted to discussion of Emai class marking. This discussion ranges over class marking on nouns, the semantic character of class marking, to an extensive discussion of uninflected nouns. S&E present a comparison of the Emai class system to that of proto Benue Congo.

The interrogation of class marking in Emai proceeds from noun class marking through agreement marking (within the noun phrase, in subject-verb relation, on Emai pronouns), nominalization of Emai verb stems, class marking in compounds, to ideophone class marking.

S&E point out that only about 100 nouns display inflection for class, marking class and grammatical number. They identify eleven declension sets displaying partial noun class system as their limited use in grammatical expression show. One interesting point that they make regarding these nouns relate to their Ontological Categorization. Although conceding that, at first blush Emai declension sets do not reflect a coherent system, in the sense that each “...declension set does not align with stems reflecting a general semantic category...” (S&E, 2020:120), nevertheless, they insist that careful analysis of these class prefixes opens up an initial scheme of classification. Their thesis is that “...kinship terms constitute the lexical core for semantically structuring declension sets in Emai”. They present the interesting proposition that the Emai noun class system is “...framed by kinship types and a network of associations that radiate therefrom”. This interesting thesis, perhaps first suggested by Van de Velde (2006), is worth exploring in understanding the semantic categorization of languages with reduced class marking systems.

The majority of Emai nouns are uninflected, and S&E try to make sense of them by analyzing their structural and functional asymmetry. They discuss this uninflected set of nouns structurally in relation to their morphological shape: V-initial with –CV, –CVCV, –CVV, –CVCVV (with C-onset nouns), and –V, –VV, –VVCV, –VCV, –VCVV (with V-onset). The discussion threw up the instability of C₂ (in a –C₁V₁C₂V₂ template) in terms of its relative vulnerability to change than in C-onset nouns; on the other hand, C₁ is more prone to omission with V-onset nouns. This paradox, they admit to not having a solution to, concluding that, “for now, ..., this topic must remain open and await future investigation”. (S&E, 2020:127).

S&E conclude this investigation of Emai Class Marking with a general discussion of Retention, Reduction and Transformation in accordance with the light shown by this comprehensive and impressive study of Emai noun class marking.

5. Conclusion

S&E have not only provided a comprehensive view of Emai Noun Classification, a language which they have studied in detail over the years, producing a dictionary and a grammar, but they have opened up new vistas for new research. Some of these they point out on page 3 where they note that the comparative study of the syntax, morphology and lexicon of West Benue Congo languages have been largely shunned. Furthermore, they suggest that a more comprehensive assessment of the relation between noun class form and noun class function in Bini is called for. Another area of investigation is suggested on page 127. The thrust of all this is that this book is not just a resource material on Emai but indeed on Benue Congo and even Niger Congo.

This review cannot be concluded without pointing out some eminently forgivable oversights in the book. On the Preface page xxv, the publication date for Reader and Diamond are

switched one for the other; on page xxvi, although Harrison (2007) is mentioned, it is not included among the references; again, although Heine and Nurse (2000), and Mufwene (2010) are mentioned on page xxv, they are not reflected on the reference list. Finally, de Blois' publication is cited as 1070 on page 136 instead of 1970.

This resource material, I make bold to say, will be heavily cited in future investigations of morphology of the Benue Congo language family.

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