"Kru Revisited, Kru Revealed"

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Following of a considerable lapse in our research*, this study will attempt to "revisit" proto-Kru in an attempt to confirm and advance our thinking on the shape of Proto-Kru phonology, morphology, syntax, pragmatics, and basic lexical items.

The discussion re Kru's classification within Niger-Congo has been long but inconclusive: is it an isolate (Westermann and Bryan, 1952; Welmers, 1979) or a branch of Kwa (Greenberg, 1963)? Or is it rather to be grouped with other branches of NC, such as Gur (Bennett and Sterk, 1977) or Mande (Vydrine, 2004)? Williamson and Blench (2000) tentatively place Kru as a separate branch in North Volta Congo, pending further research.

A major sub-division separates the family into two parts, Eastern and Western (Delafosse, 1904; Marchese, 1979; 1989). Internal groupings and the position of a few isolates remain tentative.

Phonology

Previous findings (Marchese, 1979; 1989) suggest a basic proto syllable *CV, with most roots reconstructing to *CVCV. All current CCV can be traced to *CVCV. Current CVV lexical items may (or may not) be traceable to *CVCV.

The Kru proto vocalic system probably contained 9 oral vowels. In Eastern Kru, these are grouped into two sets, showing a basic ATR distinction, with a functioning vowel harmony system, linking to other branches of proto NC. In the Bete cluster of Eastern Kru, a series of central vowels has been innovated, seemingly from both front and back vowels, in some cases giving rise to 13 distinctive vowels (Marchese, 1979; 1989; Goprou, 2011). In languages of the West, some 9 vowel systems give way to 7. Vowel harmony exists in some form in a few Western languages. Significantly, many Western languages attest distinctive nasalized vowels (though reduction in contrasts also occurs), a feature absent in most Eastern Kru languages. Was this series of nasalized vowels innovative in this sub-group or present in proto-Kru, giving rise to nasal consonants (Stewart, 1983; Bole-Richard, 1985; Vydrine, 2004)? William's proposal of NC vowels (1989) pushes strongly in favor of the later.

A standard proto consonant system, with voiced-voiceless stops (p t k kp, b d, g, gb) is proposed. Present-day distinctive labialized and palatalized consonants c, j, ny, kw, gw, ngw are all clearly reflexes of proto alveolar or velar *C + high back or high front vowel + vowel. There is strong support for a proto bilabial implosive ɓ (contra Kaye, 1981), while the alveolar implosive ɗ is probably a reflex of *l. The reconstruction of a lenis-fortis resonant consonant series for some stage is imminent, with clear reflexes in Eastern Kru: ɓ l y ɣ w (Marchese, 1979). Proto-Kru certainly had as no *r. Fricatives f, v, s, z are attested at the Eastern proto stage. Innovative h (from *s) has developed in a Western Kru sub-group.

Several Kru languages (Eastern Daloa Bete, Lakota Dida, Kouya; Western Nyabwa, Wobe, Grebo, Tepokru) attest four tones, and others three (Klao, Godie, Neyo). In 4 level languages, there is a tendency 4→ 3 (Koopman et Sportiche, 1982; Marchese, 1982). It would appear that proto Kru thus had four tones. Williamson (1989) proposes a proto level two tone system for NC. No known such system presently exists in Kru, though the role of depressor consonants has been attested. A likely scenario at some stage might be therefore 2→ 4 → 3. All grammatical tone, especially prominent in Eastern Kru, can be traced to loss of V or CV segments.

Word order, syntax, etc.

- Kru languages show characteristics of OV languages, but reflect features of languages evolving to SVO. OV features include N followed by qualifiers, nouns and verbs followed by derivative suffixes, GEN N, postpositions. VO features include the now standard SVO word order. Reconstruction to OV may pre-date Kru's split from other branches.
- Kru languages are sequencing (long chains of clauses) rather than attesting serial constructions.
- Proto pragmatics include front-shifting for focus and a topic-comment, "thème-rhème » structure.

Morpho-syntax

Many nouns and verbs show clear *CVCV structures. The following are speculations about the Proto Kru nominal and verbal systems.

Nominal

- There are clear remnants of a noun class system, expressed through suffix. Noun class agreement in pronominal forms is attested across the family to this day. Class suffixes can be reconstructed for human, large animal, liquid mass, long thin objects, possibly round objects, etc. Some classes show singular-plural alternates.
- Suffix-marked plurals (and some singulars), with its source in a proto class system, has given rise to a number of, at times, very complex plural systems. Many Eastern languages have developed what can only be called a kind of phonological agreement system.
- Post-nominal qualifiers and quantifiers can be reconstructed for the family: demonstratives, numerals, and possibly adjectives. Post-nominal definite markers are innovative, with two main sources: demonstratives or class suffixes.
- Postpositions are derived from noun body parts, certainly from a GEN N source
- A proto-associative marker *a can be reconstructed for the family. There appears to be a proto distinction between alienable and inalienable (Saunders, 2009).
- GEN N and/or compound nouns gave rise to postpositions, possessive pronoun sets, etc.

Verbal

- Proto-Kru verbs are uniquely suffixing (no subject marking on verb)

- Imperfective-perfective aspect was basic to proto-Kru, marked at some stage both pre- and post-verbally. The post-verbal suffix reduces to tone in many languages and disappears in others. The pre-verbal particle has disappeared in many languages, but has given rise to a set of imperfective subject pronouns in a few languages.
- Proto-Kru knew no or a very limited number of temporal markers, possibly recent and/or remote past at best. Current systems range from zero tense markers to up to seven innovative forms (Klao).
- Derivative verbal suffixes (changing valency, many Bantu-like) can be reconstructed: instrumental, beneficial, causative, transitive, passive, etc. (Egner, 2006)
- Innovative auxiliaries (temporal, modal, negative) derived from verbs "have", "come", "let go", on a SVO scenario : S V OV-NOM → S AUX O V (NOM reduced to tone or nothing)
- Mode: probable evidence of a proto subjunctive (from third person imperative?)
- Able to reconstruct adjectival predicates "to be/become red", "white", "black".

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