

# Imperial grammar and grassroots categories: why we should take what people say more seriously

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## 1. Introduction: imperial grammar

Books are written and conferences are held ‘about’ African languages for reasons that have little to do with Africa and much to do with the imperatives of academic careers. In particular there is an unhealthy emphasis on grammar and syntax at the expense of what else happens when people talk. For example, presentations on syntax continue to regularly omit tone-marking which is apparently ‘not necessary for syntax’. Example sentences exude a strange miasma of unreality, like marsh-lights, never heard before or again. Recent doctoral theses on East African Bantu seem to have as their explicit goal to solve some problem of their grammar which has been giving individuals (in Europe) sleepless nights. One of the most extreme manifestations of this is the reduction of sentences to the symbolism of formal logic. The purpose of this can be a subject for speculation, but its most likely function is as a gatekeeper, to deter all but the most hardy denizens of the seminar room. Certainly it nothing to do with either language or genuine verbal behaviour.

The consequence of this is that grammars (or books about syntax) get written according to a series of categories which focus strongly on external conceptualisations. What we put down in our notebooks arises from a sort of unconscious conspiracy between informant and informee. Like Freudian analysis, whatever the linguist/psychoanalyst imagines, it begins to feature in the dreams of the speaker. Within a short time, both become convinced that what they have jointly imagined ‘is’ the language. As a consequence, much that goes on in actual speech is not captured at all, or shovelled into a short section categorised as ‘other’ where the ‘exclamations’, ‘ideophones’, ‘particles’ in the hope they will go away. Hence the acceptability of publishing grammars based on the speech of single out-of-site informants. Hence the growth of separate conference series on ‘formal’ linguistics (Afroasiatic, Austronesian). The goal of this paper is a forlorn attempt to focus attention on some of the things going on in speech that are omitted from conventional grammars, to scour the landscape for a more sophisticated ethnography of language.

Put differently, this is a new version an old debate between the generalisers and the particularisers, typologists versus descriptivists. Clearly we need to be able talk about languages across genetic and geographic boundaries and so we need to believe in widespread structural categories that make this discourse possible. So far, so Chomskyan, the deep structure of language is embedded in the brain. But language could also be another sort of entity, a construct of found objects, cobbled together from a scatter of diffuse resources. Extending the notion of language to animals, from the photophores on the skins of Truk cuttlefish to the dancing of bees and the syntax of simian calls, language might also be made up from whatever is to hand when the need to communicate becomes imperative. Language in this version is a sort of beach, where all types of objects are washed up and brought together by being found on the sand.

If so, we will need to develop categories ‘bottom-up’ from actual languages, defining individual word-classes by what they do in speech and thereby embracing diversity. This paper<sup>1</sup> is an attempt to think through what sort of objects there may be out there, based on field research in Nigeria. It also makes some suggestions as to the methods we might use to elicit these types of data and what sort of categories we might place them in. It begins by thinking through the more familiar linguistic categories, such as phonology and morphology, and moves on the less well-defined objects such as ideophones. It then considers paralinguistic categories, such as parallel speech, greetings and the syntax of proverbs.

## 2. Phonology

Many descriptions of the phonology of African languages are summary in the extreme, based on a very small subset of the lexicon. This is because many languages have ‘rare’ phonemes or prosodic combinations which only occur in a few words. Rigwe, in Central Nigeria, is a good example. Preliminary accounts suggested that there were twenty-four underlying consonants with an unidentified number of combinations

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<sup>1</sup> The data in this paper draws on nearly thirty years of research in Nigeria; thanking everyone who assisted me in this period would be a lengthy task. But Jacob Bess, Mark Dingemans, Daniel Gya, Selbut Longtau, Marieke Martin and John Nengel deserve special mention, as well as the many development agencies that have unwittingly funded my travel. Thanks also to Anne Storch for inviting me to the meeting where the first version of this paper was presented and for passing on advance copies of work in progress. Since 2005, the Kay Williamson Educational Foundation has provided me with extra space to pursue this research.

with palatals and labials and three tones (Gerhardt 1969:127). But more recent accounts, derived from a much larger lexical database, nearly double the number of consonants, a different vowel system and four level tones plus downstep (Gya & Blench n.d.). Table 1 shows the consonants of Rigwe as presently understood.

	Bilabial	Labial-dental	Dental	Alveolar	Palato-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Labial-velar	Glottal
Plosive vl vd	p p <sup>j</sup> b b <sup>j</sup>			t d		c c <sup>j</sup> c <sup>w</sup> ɟ ɟ <sup>j</sup> ɟ <sup>w</sup>	k k <sup>w</sup> g g <sup>w</sup>	kp gb	
Nasal vd	m m <sup>j</sup> (m <sup>w</sup> )	(ɱ)		n		ɲ ɲ <sup>w</sup>	ŋ ŋ <sup>w</sup> ŋ <sup>wj</sup>	ŋm	
Fricative vl vd		f (f̥) v (v <sup>j</sup> )	ð ð <sup>j</sup>	s z	ʃ ʃ <sup>w</sup> ʒ ʒ <sup>w</sup>				h h <sup>j</sup>
Affricate vl vd	(ps)			ts ts <sup>j</sup>	tʃ dʒ dʒ <sup>w</sup>	tɕ tɕ <sup>w</sup>			
Flapped vd Trill vd	v <sup>2</sup>			r r <sup>j</sup> r <sup>w</sup> r r <sup>j</sup> r <sup>w</sup>					
Lateral				l l <sup>j</sup>					
Lateral-fricative vl				ɬ					
Appro vl vd						ɥ <sup>3</sup> j ɥ		ʌ ʌ <sup>j</sup> w w <sup>j</sup>	

Many of these combinations are extremely rare, only occurring once or twice, and it is impossible to prove their status by means of conventional oppositions. Rigwe vowels are shown in Table 2;

Vowels	Front	Central	Back
Close	i ii ĩ		u uu ũ
Close-Mid	e ee ě		
Open-Mid	ɛ ɛɛ ẽ		ɔ ɔɔ õ
Open		a aa ǎ	

In addition to this, Rigwe has four level tones, a large number of glides, downstep and ? upstep.

This exercise could no doubt be repeated for many languages. The varying accounts of the consonants of Sandawe come to mind (compare Elderkin 1983 and Hunziker et al. 2008). Phonology can be consistent and reduced, as in Papuan or Australian languages, but in Africa it often reflects the many waves of influence passing over a language, each leaving a small mark.

### 3. Morphology

Much the same applies to morphology; languages tend to have paradigms consisting of ‘core’ forms and outliers. Thus when we present an account of noun class pairings in Benue-Congo languages, there is usually a common pattern of singular/plural and concord. But once we expand the lexical database, more unusual combinations usually surface. Plateau languages in particular have pluralisation strategy wars (shades of Nilo-Saharan) where multiple strategies co-occur and speakers of different ages apply them differently, or multiple strategies are applied to one word. Synchronically, the number-marking strategies of Plateau languages can be classified as follows;

<sup>2</sup> /v/ in Rigwe language is not a labial-dental flap as described in the International Phonetic Alphabet (2005), but a bilabial flap. The use of this symbol is a temporary expedient.

<sup>3</sup> /ɥ/ and /ɥ/ are labial-palatal consonants rather than palatal.

- a) non-cognate plural affixes
- b) noun-class affixes, prefix, infix and suffix, alternating with zero or similar affixes
- c) consonant mutation
- d) labialisation or palatalisation, usually of C<sub>1</sub>
- e) stem-tone changes
- f) stem-vowel quality
- g) stem-vowel length changes
- h) partial or complete stem reduplication
- i) suppletive plurals

In addition, some languages are losing singular/plural alternation and concord. In the most diverse languages several strategies can co-occur, and it is common for two or more strategies to be marked on a single lexical item. The most extreme case may be the language Cara, spoken north of Jos, where all of these occur, although some only once or twice in the data available so far.

Why does rare morphology occur? In Plateau languages, the answer appears to lie in the marital system. Most of these groups were historically very small and practised linguistic endogamy. The woman moved in to the husband's compound, bringing her own language as well as learning a new one. A pervasive culture of multilingualism meant that she would teach her own language to her children, as well as that of her husband. Added to this, divorce was very common, and many women had multiple husbands from different ethnic groups (Muller 1982). Migration is very common, leading to territorial mixing of Plateau subgroups. Hence speakers are constantly assaulted by new strategies for number marking on nominals. They probably barely have time to absorb one set into the language before another one competes for their attention.

This is strongly reminiscent of another significant group of language, Eastern Sudanic. Many branches of Eastern Sudanic have ferociously complex noun morphology. Although it is possible to identify common elements, in languages like the Temein group, the way they are put together is completely unpredictable for individual words (Blench in press a). If Eastern Sudanic can be said to have a rule it is the combination of the conservation of unproductive morphology with moveable affixes. At this point grammar and dictionary merge.

#### **4. Parts of speech: verbs**

##### **4.1 What verbs are**

Verbs may appear to be an unproblematic category, but the forms speakers produce may reflect their expectations of the interaction. Linguists all too frequently come up with illustrations which turn out to be rather dissimilar to what people say. At one level, highly analytic languages such as Yoruba and Nupe have reduced almost all verbs to CV(N) and expressing things with verbs is all about serial constructions. These often come in long strings ('serial verbs'), some of which are structured or semi-structured collocations, which are hard to capture in dictionaries. Languages such as Igbo, where typical dictionary entries for verbs are monosyllabic can combine inflectional and extensional morphemes to produce lengthy words, combines these processes with verb serialisation (Emenanjo 1978). At the other end of the spectrum are the 'extreme verb' languages, particularly in Central Chadic, where complex affix chaining makes unpicking the eventual meaning challenging, as semantic shifting from the predicted meaning frequently occurs. This is often misrepresented in conventional grammatical descriptions, because of the difficulties of generalisation, making these languages appear more analytic than they really are.

To give an example of how this works, Table 3, Table 4 and Table 5 show the possible suffixes on Bura verbs, divided into three basic classes. The rules for combining these are not fully established, but they cannot be freely combined. Verbs now have a fairly fixed set of ordered extensions.

**Table 3. Prepositional suffixes on Bura verbs**

Extension	Underlying meaning	Extended meaning
<i>-bāla</i>	out, outside, around	thoroughly, completely
<i>-dza</i>	to the side of s.t.	
<i>-ha</i>	together	
<i>-hi</i>	down	on top of
<i>-mta</i>	away from	
<i>-nkār</i>	onto, on top of	
<i>-nkir</i>	under, below, beneath	
<i>-vi</i>	locative	
<i>-wa</i>	into, inside	substitutive, where s.t. replaces s.t. else

**Table 4. Affixes on Bura verbs marking number or degree of totality**

Extension	Meaning	Position
<i>-gi-</i> , <i>-gu-</i> , <i>-ga</i>	Completed action on multiple objects	Infix, final suffix
<i>-ha</i>	Intensive or repeated action on a mass of objects	Usually final suffix, can be in penultimate position
<i>-mya</i>	Completion of action on all objects (from standpoint of the subject).	Always final suffix
<i>-nkār</i>	Repetitive	Always final suffix
<i>-Vr(i)</i>	Action by a specific person	Always final suffix, often combined with initial syllable reduplication
<i>-(r)ar</i>	Partial or tentative action by subject	Always final suffix
<i>-tsa</i>	Partial action from standpoint of subject	Always final suffix

**Table 5. Suffixes marking grammatical function on Bura verbs**

Extension	Meaning
<i>-dzi</i>	Passive and middle voice
<i>-nta</i>	Causative, transitivity suffix
<i>-ta</i>	Completive aspect

Table 6 shows a basic Bura verb which clearly once had a more general sense of beating rhythmically but is now applied to dancing. The extended forms (omitting TAM markers, valency markers and other grammatical extensions show how a wide variety of meanings can develop.

**Table 6. A basic Bura verb and its extended forms and meanings**

Verb	Gloss
<i>batla</i>	To dance or keep step to music, beat rhythmically
<i>batlabāla</i>	To sharpen a piece of metal by beating it
<i>batlaha</i>	To sharpen by beating, to beat together
<i>batlaha</i>	To pound, or stomp with the feet, mud mixed for building
<i>batlimta</i>	To hammer a new mill stone until it is rough
<i>batlamya</i>	To tramp down by many footsteps; to wear down by much pounding
<i>batlinkār</i>	To do the job of sharpening or pounding over again
<i>batlinkir</i>	To beat on top of something
<i>batlawā</i>	To repair damage done to a sharpened knife or pitted stone

It is not uncommon in Bura for the ‘basic’ or simplex verb to be missing; its form and sense can now only be reconstructed.

A major question then becomes the degree to which these forms must be represented in the lexicon in order to have a complete description of the language. In North America, where similarly complex verb forms

occur, dictionaries tend to list all possible combinations of affixes, making for extremely fat dictionaries (see for example the 2000 page Haida dictionary of Enrico 2005). It can be debated how helpful this is; the reader never sees the underlying structure of the language, and can only work with its surface expression.

## 4.2 What verbs do

A striking aspect of verbs in African languages is the specificity of their meanings. Most dictionaries present a word like ‘pour’ or ‘cut’ as at best having a number of synonyms. However, when you explore a gloss it often has a series of very specific additional meanings. For example, in many languages directionality is important, whether you pour away from or towards the body, or whether you pour into or out on the ground. Or whether you pour liquids, sticky things or solids such as grains. Glosses like ‘cut’ show a similar lexical diversity. Table 7 shows the diverse verbs in the Nupe language corresponding to this meaning;

**Table 7. Nupe verbs within the semantic nexus of 'cut'**

<b>Nupe</b>	<b>Gloss</b>
<b>ba</b>	To cut; to hack;
<b>batú</b>	To cause to cease for the present; to cut short;
<b>dzwa</b>	To mince; to cut into small pieces;
<b>ká</b>	To cut; to strike (as with a sword)
<b>ke</b>	To be split; to be cut
<b>kyà</b>	To mince; to cut small
<b>ko</b>	To cut off; to fall off; to rot off
<b>là yěgū</b>	to cut a tribal mark down the centre of the forehead
<b>liǎ</b>	To cut off; to strip; to clip off;
<b>mú</b>	To clip; to cut; to shear, the hair
<b>sá</b>	To split; to cut; to divide
<b>sátà</b>	To cut a notch
<b>sáyé</b>	To cut tribal marks on the face
<b>tsú</b>	To cut open, as a gourd or tin
<b>zú</b>	To butcher; to cut (the throat)
<b>zì</b>	To cut bunches of bananas or palm kernels

Examples could be multiplied, but this is only to suggest that semantic ramification is unpredictable, and to get at the core concept of a language, we need to pursue meaning with more ethnographic attention to detail.

## 4. Expressives

### 4.1 Ideophones

A feature characteristic of languages worldwide, but particularly those of Africa, is ideophones, words of a distinct semantic type, which may fill one or many syntactic slots (Blench 2010). Ideophones could be considered a subset of sound symbolism, which also includes phonaesthemes and other methods of indicating qualities (for example alternations of  $\pm$  ATR vowels). This field is often referred to as phonosemantics and has a long history in Western philosophy. Ideophones (or ‘expressives’ in Asian terminology) have begun to be of more interest to the broader scholarly community (e.g. Hinton et al. 1994). The first clear reference to a class of ideophones in Africa was in the 1880s, where they are called ‘indeclinable verbal particles’ (McLaren 1886). Banfield & Macintyre (1915), whose documentation for Nupe is particularly rich, call them ‘intensitive adverbs’. Doke (1935) called them ‘a vivid representation of an idea in sound’.

Detailed studies such as Kunene (1978) on Southern Sotho suggest that some Niger-Congo languages may have thousands of such ideophones. Our understanding of the role they play in natural language (as opposed to elicited examples) is still very preliminary, although this is the subject of a current project by Mark Dingemans (forthcoming). Even so, you could record thousands of hours of natural speech and still not come up with common ideophones, because their contexts are highly situational (geographic, social, occupational etc.). As a consequence, there is still room for elicitation.

Related to this is the extent to which ideophones fall into multiple categories. The following sections suggest that we have rather glibly brought together different word types into a single class, in part because we don't take this type of word very seriously, a not untypical view from a culture where orality is a receding memory. I therefore propose overarching term used in the Asian literature, 'expressives' to group together all words somehow expressive of sensory experience, reserving 'ideophones' for a more specific subtype such as sound-symbolism. Expressives will need to be subdivided much more subtly, according to what they 'do' in sentences and the type of experience to which they can be applied. This section thus passes lightly over the established types of ideophone in favour of some classes which are less well-known.

The marginalisation of these word-classes of in our description of languages is really a statement about their impoverishment in our own. Listen to natural speech and it is rich in this type of word, as are stories, narratives, proverbs and other oral forms. Junod (1896:196-7), under *Adverbes descriptifs*, expresses this very well when he says '*Il suffit d'avoir assisté à quelques conversations de noirs, dans la liberté de la nature, lorsqu'ils n'étaient sous aucune contrainte pour avoir remarqué quelle prodigieuse quantité d'expressions de ce genre ils ont à leur commande....Il réussit à rendre par ces mots-là des nuances qu'un langage plus posé saurait exprimer.*' To give them such cursory treatment in our language descriptions carries with it a burden of ethnocentricity.

#### 4.2 Ophresiology

Many African languages have ophresaeathemes, words to describe very specific smells. A popular one in Nigeria/Cameroun is the 'smell of fresh dogmeat', admittedly not common in European contexts. These do not fill the same syntactic slot as ideophones and behave more like invariant nouns, as a complement to the verb 'to smell'. Nonetheless they appear to fill the same experiential slot as ideophones. Table 8 shows a sample of ophresaeathemes in the Kuteb language, a Jukunoid language spoken south of Takum in southwest Nigeria, which has a rich inventory of such terms;

**Table 8. Kuteb odour terminology**

<b>Kuteb</b>	<b>Gloss</b>
<b>nuŋ akoŋ</b>	'to produce a bad smell' (generally)
<b>ashwáe</b>	'smell of fermented cassava, guinea corn sprouts'
<b>aság</b>	'smell of fresh fish, raw dog meat'
<b>ará/arwá</b>	'smell of rotten eggs'
<b>kushiŋ</b>	'smell of soap or a dirty cloth'
<b>kusīnn</b>	'smell of a cobra or musk shrew'
<b>aŋham/kuŋham</b>	'smell of sour beer'
<b>kuyaŋ/kupí</b>	'smell of smoked meat, perfume'
<b>rika</b>	'smell of frying palm kernels'
<b>aruwub</b>	'smell of rotting mushrooms'
<b>icwu/kucwu</b>	'smell of day-old porridge or of a dead body'
<b>rikpankwer</b>	'smell that causes discomfort'
<b>kubyinkūn</b>	'smell of concentrated palm wine'
<b>nyinyiŋ</b>	'a sharp, acidic smell'

Source: Koops (2009)

Kuteb has sound-symbolic ideophones which have more usual morphological characteristics, including reduplicated syllables, but clearly the ophresaeathemes do not have these characteristics. A similar inventory of terms also occurs in Tarok, a Plateau language spoken north of Kuteb (Blench & Longtau 1995) and in the Bantu languages of Gabon (Hombert 1992).

#### 4.3 Insultatives

Across Central Nigeria, many Plateau and neighbouring languages have what may be called 'insultatives'. These are invariant adjectives that qualify or refer to body parts, focusing on their shape. They could also be considered 'body epithets', although they are not idioms in the usual sense. These are only used in insults or jokes and can be considered mild or strongly insulting according the culture. They do not resemble

ideophones morphologically in languages where this is marked and do not show concord in languages where this is normal for other adjective.

The εBoze language, an East Kainji language spoken northwest of Jos in Central Nigeria, appears to be particularly rich in these terms. Table 9 shows a sample of the terms applied to fat ('stout') people in εBoze;

<b>εBoze</b>	<b>Approximate sense</b>
<b>bompuru</b>	describes a fat, shapeless person
<b>bodondoro(η)</b>	describes a person who is naked and shapeless
<b>Borondos!</b>	exclamation at the sight of a hefty person
<b>gadarse</b>	describes a stout person
<b>galafangalafan</b>	describes the way a stout person walks
<b>gbanjfan</b>	describes a stout person or large object
<b>golshon</b>	describes a stout person
<b>kontoso</b>	describes a stout person
<b>lukuluku</b>	describes a person that looks young, healthy, and fairly fat
<b>zoote</b>	describes a fat and tall being

Table 10 shows some of the words describing tall and thin individuals in εBoze;

<b>εBoze</b>	<b>Approximate sense</b>
<b>colonpete</b>	describes a tall and shapeless person
<b>conkoron</b>	describes a very thin person
<b>conporon</b>	describes a tall person
<b>cooto</b>	describes a tall and shapeless person
<b>dogodogo</b>	describes s.t. tall (< Hausa ?)
<b>donkaran</b>	describes a tall person
<b>gadegade</b>	describes a very tall and thin object or being
<b>konkollo</b>	describes skeletal person
<b>kwagaga</b>	describes s.t. or s.o. who is tall and shapeless
<b>miligan</b>	describes a tall, slim person
<b>nyongoron</b>	describes a skeletal person
<b>sangaran</b>	describes a tall shapeless person
<b>solonpete</b>	describes a shapeless human person
<b>sonkoloŋ</b>	describes a tall, foolish and stupid-looking
<b>sonoron</b>	describes a tall and shapeless person
<b>vinaran</b>	describing a tall person
<b>wanayan</b>	describes anything unpalatable, sour, a slim person

Exactly why this lexical field is so developed in this language is hard to understand. Insultatives are found in many languages in this area, but they are usually more stereotyped and applied to different parts of the body. Moreover, there are some widespread ideas about what is insulting. For example, the notion that having 'deepset' eyes, like a patas monkey, is considered insulting in many languages across Central Nigeria, and yet the word used to express the notion of deepset is always different.

#### 4.4 Colour intensifiers

Central Nigerian languages (and probably many others) have class of colour intensifiers, corresponding to something like English 'deep'. We translate them 'very' or 'extremely' but it is not clear that they carry information about colour tone. Their function is rather to emphasise or underline the force of an utterance and they are thus more like conventional ideophones. Colour intensifiers are applied to qualify either stative verbs or pre-existing adjectives, depending on the language. They usually have no discernible etymologies and no relation to the segments of the basic verb. Where the language shows adjectival concord

they are invariant. Table 11 shows colour intensifiers in Mwaghavul, a West Chadic language spoken near Jos, Nigeria. Similar intensifiers are found in all neighbouring languages investigated.

**Table 11. Mwaghavul colour intensifiers**

Mwaghavul	Gloss
càf	extremely red
rap	black, dirty, dark (complexion)
bítbít	very black
tùp	black, dark, obscure
pyáá	white, fair
péngpéng	extremely white
pétpét	extremely white

Table 12 shows the colour intensifiers in Rigwe, a Plateau language spoken southwest of Jos around the town of Miango.

**Table 12. Rigwe colour intensifiers**

Rigwe	Gloss
běmběmbě	describes s.t. very black or dirty
gèlgèlgèl	describes s.t. shining
zǎùùù...	describes red
z <sup>w</sup> ùú...z <sup>w</sup> ùù <i>also</i> zèè...zèê	describes orange or red colour especially ripe fruits
zǎńzǎńzǎá	describes s.t. pure white

It is no accident that colour intensifiers only apply to ‘black’, ‘red’ and ‘white’, the key trilogy of colours that are fundamental in almost all African languages. Throughout Central Nigeria, only these three colours have basic terms which may be cognate across languages; all other terms turn out to be recent constructs.

## 5. Formulae

### 5.1 Greetings

Greetings in Africa are conventional expressions, often formulaic and usually expressive of social relations (Rolphs 1867). They are often uttered in a call and response format which is highly ritualised and often counter-factual. In egalitarian societies, they often constitute a fairly limited set, expressing occupation, time of day etc. However, in hierarchical, structured societies they can be very elaborated, reflecting nuances of the interaction. Like proverbs, they often use highly compressed expression and wayward syntax. A society where this is particularly important is among the Nupe of west-central Nigeria, which is characterised by both vertical hierarchy and strong occupational specialisation. A major expression of the hierarchical nature of Nupe society is the multiplicity of titles and the greetings that accompany them. Some of these greetings are not intelligible in Nupe and may be borrowings from other languages. However, others are short phrases which are in themselves allusive and poetic. Table 13 gives some examples of these;

**Table 13. Nupe ranks and appropriate greetings**

Rank	Equivalent	Greeting	Interpretation
nágenũ	royal family	lègĩ o dā bà Sòkó o	Your profit is with God
kúsódù	royal family	ewò nā tsò'dù nā	Lake that is as large as the Niger River
ndàèjì	local chief	èdù wo'bà à	The Niger River smells no filth
ndákó'tsu	local chief	èkó bé 'kù nyi	Rot ends up spoiling something old
ndákó'tsu	local chief	gí yizhè gāká bè ànfāni nyi	Eating the world [enjoying yourself] for too long will bring no advantage
nyǎgyà	local chief	lá dòkó cí'dù	Gallop the horse and alight by the Niger River
bàdekó	local chief	jī 'nyā nā ba wo nā	Do the dance that pleases you
mǎyǎki	war chief	gǎ áci u fé áci	He does as he says
soje	war chief	wō 'yà a gò zhí	[If] you capture a friend, endure his return
bídǎ	village chief	lá kùrù dī 'zhì	Take the stocks and lose the city

The meaning of many of these greetings is no longer known, but using them is still regarded as essential to fully participate in the Nupe system of social status, which in turn is alive and well, despite the economic and political changes which have challenged the older hierarchy (Blench in press b).

### 5.2 Oh! Ignored exclamations

Most African languages have a wide range of interjections or exclamations, but they have barely been studied. The study by Eastman (1983) for Swahili is a rare exception. To see the sort of muddled thinking these types of words induce, the list of 'interjectives' in the standard Shona dictionary (Hannan 1984) is a striking example. Apart from the eccentric strategy of listing interjections by English meaning, the (long) list in Hannan clearly mixes true interjections with sound-symbolic ideophones, imperative verbs, formulaic speech and other words whose grammatical function is hard to determine. Interjections are listed, usually with some distaste, in conventional grammars, along with conventional greetings. But they are of course highly diverse and rich in compressed meaning. Some can really stand alone, others act as pre- or post-utterance tags. Also they have a curious tendency to be readily borrowed. Table 14 shows some examples of Tarok exclamations with contexts of use;

**Table 14. Some examples of Tarok exclamations**

Tarok	Meaning/Use	Notes, Example
à	yes of agreement	<b>mmabu na u ba ki ivāñ do?</b> à. are you the one who brought the yams? Yes.
â	affirmative implying agreement with element of surprise	Always placed at end of a sentence. e.g. 'isn't it?' <b>unəm va ta ki i la nnənap, â?</b> This is the man whom we talked about, isn't it?
áiyéye	What a pity!	<b>áiyéye! upo wó va kuku na bet a?</b> I am sorry! So your father did die?
ámo dāk té	Oh no!	Women say <b>ámo rāk té!</b>
ámo té	Oh dear!	<b>ámo té! O ya nkun mi kat do?</b> Oh dear! You don't see poverty my not? i.e. Won't you take pity on me?
âr	What! How dare you!	Stand-alone exclamation used by the <b>uDudu</b> and <b>aMampele</b> grass masquerades but has now entered common speech.
áyám	Hey you!	<b>áyám bá</b> you (somebody) come! Et. thing plus vocative marker. It connotes a lack of familiarity or shows that the person's name has been forgotten.
bày	expresses contempt for the listener or frustration on the part of the speaker	<b>le a mi ka co, báy.</b> Go away from me!



**dè rèk'ì nu rè.**  
 mother happiness mouth road  
 lit. mother of happiness by the roadside.  
 Pretender or one who shows favour outside.

Collections of African proverbs are usually classified as ‘folklore’ or shunted to a remote appendix, and rarely analysed for what they tell us about the elasticity of grammar. But they clearly also express ideas about essentiality, core and periphery, telling us what the language can do away and still be understood.

#### 5.4 Idiomatic expressions

Idiomatic expressions are a curious mix of archaisms and innovation, persistent and ephemeral and are presumably common in all natural languages. They sometimes merge into slang, and are associated with sociolinguistic frontiers within and across societies. Idioms don't fit neatly into dictionaries or grammars; too long for a word, too short for syntax (which is anyway often quirky). There is a certain literature on idioms to do with body parts, but these are a small subset of the idioms in a given language. Body part idioms are also more structured and predictable than most others, often showing panafrikan symbolism (‘white heart’ etc.). Other types of idiom are more difficult to elicit and often do not turn up in texts. The following are examples of idiomatic expressions in Rigwe.

**̀̀ne ̀̀tò à nì ̀̀ndró rìfì**  
 person male he is pot water  
 lit. A man (male) is pot of water.  
 Having young men implies a brighter future.

**̀̀dzé tǎ́ wé k'wé ríná**  
 I cut only stick good.  
 i.e. I only keep good company

**̀̀wé tǎ́ níŋ 'jé 'zeèŋ dró**  
 you want me eat sorrel pot.  
 lit. You want to eat my sorrel in the pot.  
 i.e. You want to cheat me.

They have no meaning outside these formulae and do not draw on any established cultural metaphors. The literature is so weak in this area, that we are not yet in a position to develop any generalisations.

#### 5.5 Language games

Another source of exotic formulae is language games. Most cultures have traditional formulae that either follow established syntax but substitute impossible semantics (‘green ideas sleep furiously’) or else subvert syntax and even phonology. Tongue-twisters serve very much the same function in African languages as in Europe. Children challenge one another to say them as fast as possible without making mistakes. The following examples are from the Nupe language in west-central Nigeria;

**gbàrà 'bákó ba kábà bàgbá o**  
 agama lizard large male is on wall chief woodcarver euph.

**egi 'gbá lá egbà ba 'gbá 'gwa**  
 child woodcarver holds axe cuts woodcarver hand

Other language games, for example, metathesis of syllables or tone, merge into some types of parallel speech. A particularly charming form of tonal inversion is described by Simmons (1980) among the Ibibio, a Lower Cross speaking people of the Calabar region. By transposing tones in riddles, mildly obscene meanings are given to ordinary phrases.

## 6. Parallel speech

### 6.1 Arcane and ritual speech

Many languages have archaic and ritual forms which are applied in specific contexts. ‘Secret’ languages are common, often in the context of initiation or similar life-cycle ceremonies. Leiris (1948) may be one of the first detailed descriptions of a male secret language among the Dogon in Mali. Ittmann (1972) sketches the *liengu*, an intercultural language shared by several different ethnolinguistic groups in the region of Mount Cameroun and used by women who become ‘mermaids’. The Sierra Leone/Liberia region is particularly rich in complex and secretive symbolism (e.g. Murphy 1980; Bellman 1984). Power (2000) has reviewed the use of secret languages within female initiation cycles in Africa, which she relates to creating bounded communities, which in turn she gives a sociobiological interpretation. These languages are almost always substitution languages, where the grammar of the source language is retained and words are borrowed or periphrases constructed to indicate a specific item in the lexicon. Sometimes their lexicon can borrow from quite unrelated languages or else simply substitute new meanings for words already existing in the language. Interethnic languages like the Cameroun *liengu* or the Central African *labi* start to become alien when shared between languages which are only tenuously related.

Photo 1. Tarok masquerade, Langtang



The boundary maintenance these languages are supposed to promote is often not very effective. Indeed one aspect of these ‘secret’ languages is that they are not very secret. In fact, they are often known to non-initiates, which suggests their function is more that of theatre, to dramatise the barrier they theoretically represent. So they create boundaries by their status as ‘secret’ rather than their actual secrecy. Trade jargons are probably much more functionally secret, since they are actually intended to conceal the nature of transactions.

The Tarok of East-Central Nigeria have a powerful ancestor society, the *orim*, controlled by men. Those involved in the society speak in a substitution code, referring to certain classes of object with special terms. The main categories are;

- a) Food and drink items. These are used to indicate to women the food they should bring either for the dead, or to make good unacceptable behaviour
- b) Persons. These are coded ways of speaking about women when they are present at a masquerade
- c) Weapons. Used in discussing warfare and military matters.
- d) Household items. Used in discussions when women may be present
- e) Ritual items. Used to conceal meanings from men not fully initiated

As can be seen, these have different contexts of use. Words for persons can be spoken in front of women but they are not supposed to know their meaning. By contrast, the words for food and drink are spoken to women who evidently must know the meaning in this context as these are instructions about food they should bring. Other *orim* lexicon is intended to be used in front of uninitiated individuals to keep ritual matters secret. Table 15 shows a sample of Tarok *orim* vocabulary, with the literal translation, the item to which it applies and the ‘normal’ Tarok word for that item.

Table 15. Tarok orim vocabulary

Orim term	Literal translation	Meaning	Usual word
<b>n̄m̄on c̄ùtc̄ùt</b>	plucking <i>cutcut</i>	chicken	<b>ir̄ùgu</b>
<b>n̄pajilik̄and̄əŋ</b>	grass that likes growing in water	rice	<b>ik̄aba</b>
<b>ipa ijili k̄á nd̄əŋ</b>	one who puts his buttocks in the water	rice	<b>ik̄aba</b>
<b>n̄nəŋ fitfit</b>	something that smells <i>fitfit</i>	locust bean cake	<b>abai</b>
<b>aswal ipi</b>	tail of the rat	rizga <sup>4</sup>	<b>an̄ánjól</b>
<b>n̄mbal dílit<sup>5</sup></b>	something that sticks [in your mouth] <i>dilit!</i>	arrowroot <sup>6</sup>	<b>amwám</b>
<b>nt̄ácukút bà dama<sup>7</sup></b>	something you put in the mouth, <i>cukut</i> [i.e. very well]	white beniseed <sup>8</sup>	<b>ìlimpyár</b>
<b>ŋ̀gwàŋgwàŋ ta á bali</b>	shield that reaches 'Bali [town]'	local bread <sup>9</sup>	<b>n̄zəŋkəŋ</b>
<b>n̄mbáwú</b>	something that makes your face swell	Bambara nut	<b>afi</b>
<b>n̄dàpyáŋ</b>	something that refuses to be pulled <sup>7</sup>	goat	<b>ibál</b>
<b>àzhabar</b>	famished one [insultative]	porridge	<b>n̄kpàŋ</b>
<b>n̄ləfər</b>	something for libation	porridge	<b>n̄kpàŋ</b>
<b>àwàr</b>	something to be brought out of its husk	millet	<b>imàr</b>
<b>nḡgógók</b>	something that is sieved	beer	<b>nc̄è</b>
<b>ak̄əshár</b>	necklace for women	young girl	<b>ùyenbén</b>
<b>ik̄àmbàl pl. ik̄àmbàl</b>	roan antelope	woman	<b>ùcár</b>
<b>asha gidi+</b>	? Borrowed from unknown language	drum	<b>igangəŋ</b>
<b>il̄àk̄àŋ</b>	butterfly	blanket <sup>10</sup>	<b>ab̄arko</b>
<b>avàkci</b>	sheath for a sword or knife	house	<b>n̄zhí</b>
<b>ab̄ókcí</b>	shrine of <b>orim</b>	house	<b>n̄zhí</b>
<b>akum-ibyaŋ</b>	below the wild aroid	farm	<b>iràm</b>
<b>n̄dàp zəkzək</b>	one that pulls <i>zəkzək</i> from under Panjang <sup>11</sup>	farm	<b>iràm</b>
<b>àkùmànjàŋ</b>			
<b>mbal-pər</b>	fire ant	fire	<b>apər</b>
<b>n̄ngakci</b>	cornstalk sheath	knife	<b>ikpàl</b>
<b>agbəshì</b>	horn	stick	<b>idàri</b>
<b>icáng</b>	python	water	<b>ndəŋ</b>
<b>atámám</b>	the one of the mouth	tobacco	<b>atəba</b>
<b>ashílishili</b>	gourd	salt	<b>n̄màn</b>
<b>n̄kánjwàlàk</b>	something with a wide jaw	dog	<b>ivá</b>

<sup>4</sup> Small tuber, *Plectranthus esculentus*

<sup>5</sup> The **orim** word for arrowroot (**amwam**) appears in the generally used expression: **m̄bam diliti i lyat nḡgwangwang ni i ga ikum k̄a k̄a'wurm̄ayo** (=sticker of-*dilit* we make shield (with) so-that we go with to-Wurm̄ayo (a mythical town not known today))

<sup>6</sup> *Tacca leontopetaloides*

<sup>7</sup> **ba dama** is actually borrowed from Hausa! i.e. very much.

<sup>8</sup> *Sesamum indicum*

<sup>9</sup> Cereal dough roasted or boiled in leaves made from millet etc.

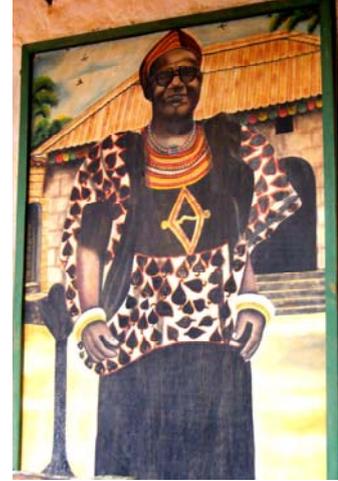
<sup>10</sup> 'Blanket' in this context is the cloth that covers the masquerade and so in turn stands for the masquerade itself

<sup>11</sup> The Chief masquerade Panjang has a variant name, Manjang

## 6.2 Respect language

The notion of a hierarchically-structured lexicon and grammar which reflects vertical authority relations in society is familiar from East and Southeast Asia; Japanese and Javanese are well-known examples. But a specialised lexicon reflecting vertical power relations seems to have been little studied in Africa. A well-known case is the Yemsa of southwest Ethiopia, described as having informal, respect and royal registers (Lamberti 1993). Western Nilotic languages, for example Anywa and Shilluk have royal registers, where there is simple word substitution using the existing lexicon, ‘clouds’ substituting for ‘eyes’ for example (Reh 1996: 163). Closer to West Africa, Storch (forthcoming) describes the royal speech registers of the Jukun of Wukari, where royal language, honorific language and ordinary daily speech all contrast. In this case, the registers seem to consist of poetic phrases with equivalent meanings, rather than lexical substitutions for individual items.

Photo 2 . The Fon of Bafut



In the Cameroun Grassfields, some chiefdoms have developed a replacement lexicon for particular strata of society. This is most highly developed in Bafut, where there are potentially four speech strata. Although small in geographical extent, these chiefdoms are characterised by elaborate political hierarchies, a highly distinctive material culture and a great diversity of languages (Knöpfler 2008). The Bafut social hierarchy may be broadly described as consisting of both ascribed and achieved levels, with a hereditary royal family and a nobility composed of wealthy and powerful individuals. Bafut society is also interpenetrated by secret societies at every level, mostly organised around masquerade dances. Table 16 shows the levels of authority in the Bafut social hierarchy;

Table 16. Bafut social hierarchy

Title	Gloss
Mfò	Fon
Ìkùm	Nobility
Àtaṅtso	Village Head
Tanikuri	Village leader

The replacement terms used to the Àtaṅtso and Tanikuri are very limited and are anyway merged, which creates a potential four-way distinction. Table 17 shows the respect terminology for objects and places;

Table 17. Bafut respect terminology for objects and places

English	Ordinary term	Fon	Noble	Chief
calabash	fitə̀ə, dàà, bà'á <sup>12</sup>	ká'á		
chair/stool	àlə̀ŋ	àbà̀rī		
compound	ndùgə̀	ntò'ò	ndùgə̀/ ābè̀è	ābè̀è
cup	ndṑŋ	ānṑ		
door	àbà'á	àbù'ù	àbù'ù	
dress	ətjə̀'ə̀	nvì		
food	ətjūgə̀/ətjù'ù	àkɔ̀ò	ndzòò	
grave	nìsjè	nìfùm		

A number of common body parts also have a replacement vocabulary. There is no evidence for similar words relating to princes, chiefs etc. Table 18 shows the respect terminology for body parts;

<sup>12</sup> All names for different kinds of calabash, i.e. their proper names

**Table 18. Respect terminology for body parts**

English	O sg.	O pl.	Fon sg.	Fon pl.
ear	àtōɲnè		mìrɛ̀dʒwòrè	
eye	nìlì'ì	mí'ì	bìtâm'fée	
foot	àkòrè		ntʃā'à	
hand	àbō			
head	àtū		àyóó	
mouth	ntʃù		ɲgè	
neck	ntōɲ		àmi	
nose	nìlúì		àlùmsè	

This vocabulary exists for other Grassfields chiefdoms but is apparently less-developed. Ntumgia (2003) give examples of royal vocabulary in the Limbum language spoken near Nkambe. In his description of Chufie' culture, Nkweti (1987) refers to the existence of a respect vocabulary and it proved possible to collect some examples of this in January 2010, shown in Table 19<sup>13</sup>.

**Table 19. Chufie' respect terms**

Gloss	Commoner	Royal	Literal translation
head	tùò	ɲjɔ̀ ɲgwò	thing of the village
eyes	lìì sg. mɛ̀ɲ pl.	páj hǒ ntʃò	stars
belly	pǒ	ɲkíàè ɲgwò	village drum
bed	kónɲ	pègá fũ̀ò/ kónɲ ɲgɛ̀	canoe of Fon/ bed of leopard
courtyard	sósɛ̀ɛ̀	tətɲ	
water	ɲkí	m̀bwá	cf. Ngwo <i>mwa</i> ,
house	ndógàè	ndzá'á jùú'ú	side of place
ill	wúɔ̀	mbíàè ntú'á	fish hook of palace
dead	kwú	múó pɲè	lost fire
yes	áè	m̀béè	
no	ɲgá	ɲgúá	

None of the actual terms encoded show any similarity with Bafut, and they all appear to be metaphorical expressions, except perhaps for 'yes' and 'no'.

## 7. Methods

### The deep ocean

The topics above hint at the diversity of verbal behaviour, but the object of this discussion is to emphasize that speech is like the deep ocean, we have hardly begun to document what is out there. Much is yet to be discovered and many languages need to be reinvestigated from these new perspectives. The question is then how to research this. To understand all the resources of speech, no one method will produce an ideal result. Standard elicitation practice will virtually ensure that much of the material described here is missed. Texts (even of natural conversation) will also not produce the complete mix since certain types of word have a habit of not turning up in texts (think how much we recognise in our own language which we would never say). Such a method might be called 'unstructured elicitation', which depends on a closer collaboration with informants than is often the case. The object is to try and establish as many categories as possible of potential words/expressions/verbal forms/sociolinguistic situations. And to encourage your co-worker to think of more as well as coming up with types of word or structure you hadn't thought of. Only some people can do this, and it is hard to determine who they are in advance.

<sup>13</sup> Thanks to Cameron Hamm and Clifford Mba, who drew our attention to this vocabulary and helped us collect this material.

How can the orientation of field linguists be changed? Going to the field without a fixed view of what is interesting might help. Listening to communities might help. If we must do linguistics through the medium of the doctoral thesis it would be helpful to have a broader range of topics on the agenda. We can produce a much enriched description of African languages by enquiring more widely. Even our view of familiar topics such as phonology and morphology has been constrained by sketchy approaches to the lexicon.

### Dialogue of the two worlds

Grammar is about generalisation, real verbal behaviour is full of exceptions that you ‘just have to know’. Languages are rich with exceptions, but the normalising process of grammar writing tends to iron these out (as does literacy). For some languages (or phyla) this overflows into morphology or phonology and becomes more evident (for example number marking in Nilo-Saharan). However, exceptionality is undoubtedly part of a sociolinguistic process, erecting barriers with other languages or between subsets of society. We often associate this principally with lexicon (cf. Oceania and Australia), but it occurs across the entire spectrum of verbal behaviour. Dictionaries and grammars are often kept apart on the shelves in case contagion might spread from one to another, and indeed it should.

### 8. Conclusions

Much of the material emerging from academia supposedly describing African languages is a travesty of what people say and do. It is as much top-down as the Latinate grammars written by priests in the Congo in the 17th century, albeit dressed up in postcolonial rhetoric. Languages are more complex and have many more categories than we would like; they cannot be easily packaged. Extended dictionaries could interface more directly with the grammars that some of us write. We will need better ways of talking about ‘intermediate’ speech behaviours such as idioms, which don’t fit neatly into either dictionaries or grammars. Probably we need to extend our concept of ‘parts of speech’ to a larger, more locally engaged category, a linguistically informed ‘ethnography of speech’. Methodologically, it would consist of folding text analysis and semi-structured elicitation into a series of feedback loops, working from hints in existing materials towards new categories. And similarly restructuring relations with informants.

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