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The Languages of Ghana

Edited by
Mary E. Kropp Dakubu



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First published in 1988, this book provides an easily accessible handbook of knowledge about the languages of Ghana; their geographical distribution, their relationships with each other, the social patterns of their use, and their structures. Besides the general introduction, it contains chapters on each of the individually recognised families of languages spoken in Ghana: Gur, Volta-Comoé, Gbe, Ga-Dangme, Central-Tongo and Mande. An additional chapter outlines the use of non-indigenous languages in the country.

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Contents

List of abbreviations	<i>page</i> ix
 Chapter One: Introduction <i>M. E. Kropp Dakubu</i>	
1. Origins and purpose of the book	1
2. The principles and terminology of classification	2
3. The language groups of Ghana	6
4. The terminology of structure	8
5. The terminology of language in social life	9
6. References and further reading	11
 Chapter Two: The Gur Languages <i>Tony Naden</i>	
1. Introduction	
1.1 Gur	12
1.2 Language names	13
1.3 Multilingualism	13
1.4 Geographical distribution	14
2. Language groupings	
2.1 Relationship amongst languages	15
2.2 The Gur family	15
2.3 The Grusi languages	16
2.4 The Oti-Volta languages	17
2.5 Complications	19
3. Language characteristics	
3.1 Language samples	20
3.2 Form of description	21

Contents

3.3	Sound systems	23
3.4	Sentence types	24
3.5	Word forms	34
4.	Language use	
4.1	Inter-communication and multilingualism	38
4.2	Dialect variation	40
5.	Language list	41
6.	References and further reading	47

Chapter Three: The Volta-Comoé Languages

1.	Introduction <i>F. A. Dolphyne</i>	50
2.	The Central Comoé (Tano) languages	52
2.1	Language and dialect	53
2.2	Sociolinguistic aspects	55
2.3	Linguistic characteristics	57
3.	Guang <i>M. E. Kropp Dakubu</i>	
3.1	Introduction	76
3.2	Classification	78
3.3	Sociolinguistic aspects	79
3.4	Linguistic characteristics	81
4.	References and further reading	85

Chapter Four: Ewe *A. S. Duthie*

1.	Introduction	
1.1	Name	91
1.2	Area and population	91
1.3	Uses	92
2.	Phonology	
2.1	Segments	93
2.2	Basic syllable structure	94
2.3	The nucleus	94
2.4	First margin	95
2.5	Second margin	95

2.6	Tone	95
2.7	Changes of syllable in context	96
3.	Grammar	
3.1	The sentence	96
3.2	The clause	97
3.3	Particles	97
3.4	The verbal phrase	98
3.5	The nominal phrase	98
3.6	The adverbial phrase	98
3.7	Grammatical word classes	99
3.8	Lexical word classes	100
4.	Bibliography	100

Chapter Five: Ga-Dangme *M. E. Kropp Dakubu*

1.	Introduction	102
2.	Historical relations, and mutual intelligibility	103
3.	Dialect variation	105
4.	Structure	
4.1	Phonology	106
4.2	Grammar	107
5.	Sociolinguistic aspects	
5.1	Ga and Dangme as second languages	115
5.2	Second languages of Gas and Dangmes	116
5.3	Status in public life	116
6.	References and further reading	117

Chapter Six: The Central-Togo Languages

1.	Introduction <i>M. E. Kropp Dakubu</i>	119
1.1	Linguistic classification	121
2.	Aspects of the sociolinguistic situation	
2.1	Status and use of the local languages	122
2.2	Multilingualism	123

Contents

3. Structural features of the Central-Togo languages	
<i>K. C. Ford</i>	
3.1 Phonetics and phonology	126
3.2 Morphology	140
3.3 Syntax	143
4. References and further reading	153

Chapter Seven: Mande Languages 155

1. <i>Bisa Tony Naden</i>	
1.1 The Bisa people	156
1.2 The Bisa language: general	156
1.3 The Bisa language: characteristics	157
1.4 Further reading	159
2. <i>Ligbi M. E. Kropp Dakubu</i>	
2.1 Geography	160
2.2 The language	161
2.3 Bibliography	162

Chapter Eight: Other Languages Used in Ghana

<i>M. E. Kropp Dakubu</i>	163
1. European languages	164
2. African languages	166
3. References and further reading	171

Maps

Languages of Ghana	inside cover
Central-Togo languages	118

List of Contributors	173
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Index	175
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List of Abbreviations

<i>ADCILNA</i>	<i>Actes du deuxième colloque international de linguistique négro-africaine.</i> ed. J. H. Greenberg. Dakar.
<i>AHCSLAO</i>	<i>Actes du huitième congrès de la société linguistique d'Afrique occidentale,</i> ed. M. Houis. Abidjan.
<i>ALS</i>	<i>African Language Studies.</i> School of Oriental and African Studies, London.
<i>Anth. Ling.</i>	<i>Anthropological Linguistics.</i> Bloomington, Indiana.
<i>AUA</i>	<i>Annales de l'université d'Abidjan.</i>
<i>AVP</i>	<i>Archiv für Vergleichende Phonetik.</i>
<i>BGL</i>	Bureau of Ghana Languages.
<i>BSOAS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies,</i> London.
<i>CAW</i>	<i>Comparative African Wordlists</i> series, University of Ghana.
<i>CLN</i>	<i>Collected Language Notes</i> series, University of Ghana.
<i>CTL</i>	<i>Current Trends in Linguistics,</i> ed. Sebeok <i>et al.</i> Mouton.
<i>CUP</i>	Cambridge University Press.
<i>GILLBT</i>	Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation.
<i>GNQ</i>	<i>Ghana Notes and Queries.</i>
<i>IAI</i>	International African Institute, London.
<i>IAS</i>	Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana.
<i>IJAL</i>	<i>International Journal of American Linguistics.</i>
<i>IL</i>	<i>Institute of Linguistics.</i>
<i>JAL</i>	<i>Journal of African Languages.</i>
<i>JWAL</i>	<i>Journal of West African Languages.</i>
<i>LJH</i>	<i>Legon Journal of the Humanities.</i>
<i>MBAB</i>	<i>Mitteilungen der Basler Afrika Bibliographien/Communications from the Basel Africa Bibliography.</i>
<i>MIO</i>	<i>Mitteilungen des Institutes für Orientforschung.</i>
<i>OUP</i>	Oxford University Press.
<i>PGL</i>	<i>Papers in Ghanaian Linguistics,</i> University of Ghana.
<i>RR</i>	<i>Research Review,</i> IAS, University of Ghana.
<i>SAL</i>	<i>Studies in African Linguistics,</i> University of California at Los Angeles.
<i>SIL</i>	Summer Institute of Linguistics.
<i>SLLR</i>	<i>Sierra Leone Language Review.</i>
<i>SOAS</i>	School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.
<i>THSG</i>	<i>Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana.</i>

List of Abbreviations

UCC	University of Cape Coast, Ghana.
UCLA	University of California at Los Angeles.
WALC	West African Languages Congress.
WALDS	<i>West African Language Data Sheets</i> , ed. Dakubu. Vol. 1, Accra, Vol. 2, Leiden.

Chapter One

Introduction

M. E. Kropp Dakubu

1. Origins and purpose of the book

In June of 1980 the Linguistic Circle of Accra decided that the time was ripe to produce a book on language and language use in Ghana. The book should serve as a text on the subject for university students of linguistics and the social sciences, and at the same time be useful as a general reference handbook for those who may not have any background in linguistics, but need basic information on the linguistic situation in any part of Ghana. This book has resulted from that decision.

Unfortunately, the present work is not nearly as comprehensive as the one the Circle originally envisaged. For a variety of practical reasons, we have had to limit ourselves mainly to accounts of the languages traditionally regarded as indigenous to Ghana, with only a brief account of languages that are not Ghanaian in origin but are nevertheless important in Ghanaian life. It has also not been possible to include any comprehensive treatment of language use or language policy on either a national or a regional basis. Instead, we have concentrated on the internal relationships and general structure and usage patterns of individual languages and language

The Languages of Ghana

groups. However, most of the authors mention the status of the various languages they discuss as languages of literacy, and indicate whether or not the various languages are of strictly local use or wider.

Each chapter is intended to reflect the current state of knowledge and the character of current work in the language group concerned. We have therefore not attempted to make the chapters uniform in style and approach, leaving these matters largely to the judgment of the contributors. As part of the book's function as a handbook, it is also intended that it should be possible to use each chapter independently, as a source of information on a specific language or language group. The user who reads the book straight through may note that a certain amount of repetition has resulted. For the same reasons, bibliographies of each language group immediately follow the chapter on that group, and this has inevitably resulted in repetition of a few items. We feel that if it has made the book easier for a wider range of people to use, the loss in elegance is not too high a price to pay. The non-specialist user will find that general information on location, speakers, relationships, literacy, etc. is included in sections labelled 'Introduction', 'Language Use' and the like, while the more technical information on sound systems and grammar is to be found in the sections on linguistic structure.

2. The principles and terminology of classification

We have tried to keep technical language in this book to a minimum, but it cannot be eliminated entirely. The reader will get most from this book if a few basic terms and concepts are understood. This starts from the very organization of the book: the languages of Ghana have been grouped into chapters according to their genetic, that is, historical-comparative relationships with one another. By *genetic* we mean here relationships which show that two or more languages are the survivals of a single language that was spoken in the past. Languages are subject to a continual process of change, due to many factors, such as the movement of population that causes

groups of speakers of a language to have reduced contact with one another; to the tendencies of people to ‘simplify’ the pronunciation and grammar of their language, and at the same time to introduce new complications; to the effects of different influences from outside on different dialects of a language. By studying the systematic differences and similarities within a set of languages, and thus the changes they have undergone, it is possible to build up a ‘family tree’ picture of their relations, showing how the *parent language*, that is the *ancestor language*, progressively divided, with branches and sub-branches representing intermediate parent languages, until we come to the languages and dialects actually spoken today. Languages related in this way are sometimes called sister languages, and the words they preserve from the ancestor language are called *cognates*, or *corresponding forms*.

The ‘systematic differences’ from which the picture of the relationships among the languages is built up are especially systematic differences in the sound structure of words. The following list of words from several dialects of one language, Akan, demonstrates what we mean by systematic differences or sound correspondences. The examples are taken from Dolphyne (1976).

	‘live’	‘tear’	‘head’
Asante	<i>ti</i>	<i>ti</i>	<i>etire</i>
Akuapem	<i>ti</i>	<i>tiw</i>	<i>eti</i>
Fante	<i>tsi</i>	<i>tsiw</i>	<i>itsir</i>
Agona	<i>kyi</i>	<i>kyiw</i>	<i>ekyi</i>

What we first notice in this list is that the first consonant is *t* in Akuapem and Asante but *ts* in Fante and *ky* in Agona. This is true not just in one word, but in three, while in every case the vowel that follows it is the same in all the dialects. More words could be added, to show the same regularly patterned variation. It is the fact that Fante has *ts* and Agona has *ky* in place of Akuapem and Asante *t* in a long list of comparable words of the same meaning, and not just in one or two, that leads us to conclude that these words once had a single pronunciation, but that slight changes have been introduced into the speech of different places, so that the Akan language now has several dialects. In a similar way, the fact that Asante has no *w* at

The Languages of Ghana

the end of the verb 'tear' as the others do, and that Fante and Asante have an *r* in the word for 'head' but Agona and Akuapem do not, can be shown to be regular. The words for 'live', 'tear' and 'head' are therefore cognates, words inherited from the parent Akan language from which all the varieties of Akan spoken today are descended. By analyzing lists of this kind, we arrive at a theory of how closely or distantly dialects, languages, and whole groups of languages are related to each other. More details of correspondences between languages in the various groups are given in the chapters that follow.

To clarify the idea of a family tree, we may examine a simple case, using the Volta-Comoé group of languages to which Akan belongs. Figure 1 shows the relationship between the Akan dialects and some of the other languages and dialects of the group.

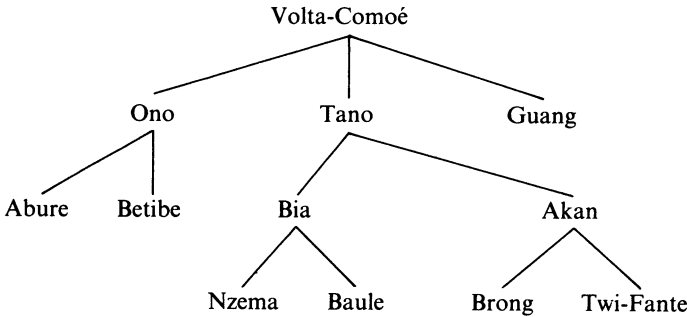


Figure 1: A linguistic family tree

This tree diagram, which shows only a few of the languages and groups involved, states that at one time, (perhaps about 4000 years ago) there was a single language, from which are descended all the Guang languages, Akan in all its dialects, Nzema, Baule and all the similar languages and dialects such as Ahanta and Aowin, and also two small languages of the Ivory Coast called Abure (or Abouré) and Betibe. We cannot know what the people who spoke this language called it, so the term 'Volta-Comoé' has been invented, as a geographical description. The diagram then says that this single

language divided into three, probably because its speakers scattered over a wide area. Once again, we cannot know what they were called, except that Guang (or Guan or Gwa or Gbanya) seems to be an old traditional name, and so may have been used by the speakers of that original ancestor. 'Ono' is the name of a small lagoon near which Betibe and Abure are spoken, and the Tano river is geographically central to both the Akan and the Bia languages; some prefer the term 'Central Volta-Comoé' for this subgroup. The Bia is also a river, more or less central geographically to the languages descended from *Proto*, (i.e. 'original') Bia. Thus each point on the diagram represents a language, which developed from the language above it and is itself the ancestor of the languages that radiate below it. Chronologically, the tree is to be read from top to bottom: Volta-Comoé was spoken first, then at a later period it was replaced by Ono, Tano and Proto-Guang, and then later still Proto-Ono was replaced by Abure and Betibe, Proto-Tano was replaced by Proto-Bia and Proto-Akan, and Proto-Guang was replaced by the ancestors of the modern Guang dialect groups (see Chapter 3 for more details). Proto-Bia has since then been replaced by several dialects, including Nzema and Baule, and Proto-Akan by the various Akan dialects (see Chapter 3, part 1 for details).

The names used for the various intermediate ancestor languages are convenient labels also for the group of languages descended from them. Thus Nzema and Baule are referred to as the Bia languages, which are a branch of the Tano group of languages, which is a branch of the Volta-Comoé group. We have thus arrived at a *sub-classification* of the languages of the Volta-Comoé group.

This kind of classification has many advantages. It reflects the lines of historical continuity among the languages, which is interesting in itself. Because it reflects the descent of the various languages through a chronological sequence of shared ancestors, it also to some extent reflects how similar they are to each other. Nzema and Baule, for example, are in many ways noticeably more like each other than Nzema and Akan. This advantage of the classification is rather limited, however, because there can be other striking similarities or differences with languages outside the group that have nothing to do with common descent. For example, in many ways the phonetics (that is, the sounds) of Gonja, a Guang language, re-

The Languages of Ghana

sembles the phonetics of non-Volta-Comoé languages to the north more than the phonetics of Akan, and similarly the phonetics of another Guang language, Nkonya, shows special resemblances to the phonetics of its neighbour Ewe. Ga has words very similar to Akan words that are not found in its closest relative, Dangme. Such divergences from their relatives are usually traceable to strong influences on the divergent language from the neighbouring language or languages that it has come to partially resemble.

A very important advantage of the historical-genetic method of classification for the organization of a book like this one is that it is exclusive, with no overlaps. A language cannot belong at the same time to more than one sub-group of the same group or sub-group. Thus, Awutu and Akan are both members of the Volta-Comoé group, but since Awutu is sub-classified as Guang, it cannot possibly be also a member of the Tano group, and so can never be said to be more closely related genetically to Akan than to another Guang language. Since the sub-classifications on principle do not overlap, it is convenient to organize the discussion of the languages of Ghana according to their genetic affiliations, and the chapter headings reflect these affiliations.

3. The language groups of Ghana

All the languages indigenous to Ghana are ultimately related, for they all belong to branches of the Niger-Congo family, a huge family of genetically related languages, one of four in Africa, that stretches from Wolof in Senegal to Zulu in South Africa. At this depth the relationships can be quite distant, however, and there are several major branches of Niger-Congo.

Within Ghana, the main linguistic distinction more or less corresponds to a distinction between the north, where languages belonging to the Gur branch of Niger-Congo are spoken, and the south, where the languages are Niger-Congo, but not Gur. The geographical distinction is only approximate, however, for there are Gur languages (Deg, Nafaanra, Kulango) spoken fairly far south in western Brong-Ahafo, while some Guang languages, for example, Nchum-

buru, Gichode, Nawuri and especially Gonja extend far into the north, even though their closest Volta-Comoé relatives are in the south.

Only one chapter of this book is devoted to the Gur languages of Ghana. This is mainly due to the unsatisfactory state of knowledge about these languages, and the small number of people qualified to write about them. Partly, however, it is because most of the Ghanaian Gur languages belong to Central Gur, and are a fairly well defined unit. This is not the case with the other languages. In the tradition of Westermann-Bryan and Greenberg, the Ewe, Central-Togo (e.g. Avatime, Buem), Volta-Comoé and Ga-Dangme groups have been classified together as sub-groups of one major branch of Niger-Congo, called 'Kwa'. It has also been suggested that these four constitute a 'Western Kwa' subgroup. However, the subclassification of these language groups and their relationship to the Gur languages and to the Benue-Congo languages (which include the Bantu) has recently been called into question, and we are not in a position to make definite statements about the relative degrees of relationship among them. On the other hand, Volta-Comoé, Gbe (Ewe) and Ga-Dangme each constitute well-defined groups, and we have found it convenient to make them separate chapters. The internal unity of the Central-Togo group has also been questioned recently (see Chapter 6, part 1.1), but for the organization of this book we have retained the traditional grouping. The Mande group is another sub-group of Niger-Congo, and it appears that it is much less closely related to the others, including Gur.

In sum, the relationship between the Mande, Gur and 'Kwa' languages is thought to be something like this:

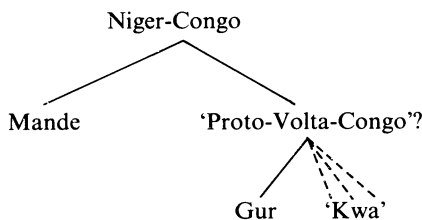


Figure 2: The relationship between Mande, Gur and 'Kwa'