



A sociolinguistic survey of the Gbe language communities of Benin and Togo Gbe language family overview

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Abstract

This paper presents a tentative classification of the Gbe language varieties (Kwa language family), spoken in the southeastern part of West Africa. Given the chaining pattern of the Gbe cluster, this paper also discusses whether the individual Gbe speech varieties should be considered and classified as dialects of one larger language, or as closely related but distinct languages, or as member languages of a Gbe macrolanguage. To date no satisfying solution is available.

Further, this paper serves as an introduction to the 10-volume series “A sociolinguistic survey of the Gbe language communities of Benin and Togo,” represented in a series of reports published in SIL Electronic Survey Reports: [Kpési](#) (Durieux-Boon et al. 2010), [Ayizo](#) (Hatfield and McHenry 2010), [Kotafon](#) (Hatfield et al. 2010), [Xwela](#) (Henson et al. 2010), [Xwla](#) (Henson and Kluge 2010), [Ci](#) (Henson 2010), [Defi](#) (Johnson 2010), [Saxwe, Daxe, and Se](#) (Johnson 2010), [Tofin](#) (Schoch 2010), and [Gbesi](#) (Schoch 2010).

1. Introduction

The Gbe language varieties belong to the Kwa language family which in turn belongs to the Volta-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo phylum. These varieties are spoken in the southeastern part of West Africa and spoken by more than 7.5 million speakers (rough estimate based on population data compiled by Lewis 2009¹). Expanding westwards from southwestern Nigeria, the Gbe communities occupy large areas in southern Benin, Togo, and southeastern Ghana.

A major purpose of this paper² is to present a tentative classification of the Gbe language varieties (Kwa language family), spoken in the southeastern part of West Africa. Given the chaining pattern of the Gbe cluster, this paper also discusses whether the individual Gbe speech varieties should be considered and classified as dialects of one larger language, or as closely related but distinct languages, or as member languages of a Gbe macrolanguage. The classification proposed here is based on the findings of a synchronic lexical and grammatical study of 49 Gbe varieties (Kluge 2005, 2006), and the comparison of these findings to the results of two comparative studies (Capo 1986, 1991, and Stewart 1994).

The synchronic study was conducted in the context of a larger literature extensibility study of the Gbe continuum. Among the Gbe varieties, five have thus far undergone language-based development on a larger scale: Aja, Ewe, Fon, Gen, and Gun.³ A sociolinguistic study of the language continuum was conducted to assess whether and to what extent the existing literacy efforts could extend to the remaining communities, or whether additional language-based development programs in some of the remaining communities would be beneficial.

Section 2 presents the classification and clustering of the Gbe speech varieties, according to findings of the diachronic and synchronic analyses, as well as a comparison of these findings. Section 3 discusses the problems of classifying the varieties of a language continuum within the dialect-language dichotomy. Section 4 presents the classification of Gbe as a macrolanguage and discusses various problems with this classification. In Section 5, an alternative classification for the Gbe language

¹The population data provided by Lewis (2009) are taken from a variety of primary sources as of dates varying from 1991 to 2006. Thus the population in 2009 would be greater than 7.5 million.

²The author wishes to express her gratitude to Ted G. Bergman of SIL International for his helpful comments and suggestions on this paper.

³In addition, a fair number of other Gbe varieties, such as Saxwe, have undergone development on a smaller scale.

continuum and its components is proposed that avoids the dialect-language dichotomy and therefore better serves the characteristics of the Gbe continuum with its chaining pattern. Section 6 gives a brief introduction to the sociolinguistic literature extensibility study conducted among twelve Gbe varieties. In Section 7, the main points of this paper are summarized. The paper closes with a list of references.

2. Classification and clustering of Gbe

As a cover term for the Gbe language continuum, the term “Ewe” was used by Westermann (1927, in Stewart 1989) and Greenberg (1966:8). This term refers particularly to the varieties spoken in Ghana, where it has been generally accepted as a proper name, since Ewe dialects but no other Gbe varieties are spoken there. Elsewhere the term has not been accepted, and other terms have been employed, such as “Aja,” “Ewe-Fon” or “Foja” (Fon-Aja); however, none of these has been widely accepted. (See Capo 1986:29ff., 1991, Duthie and Vlaardingerbroek 1981:3, and Stewart 1989:229f.)

Therefore, the Fourteenth West African Languages Congress at Cotonou in April 1980 adopted Gbe, the term for “language/dialect” in all of these varieties, as a cover term, since all these varieties suffix *gbe* to their ethnonyms such as *Aja-gbe*, *Fon-gbe*, *Gen-gbe*, etc. (Capo 1986:29ff, and Stewart 1989:229f.). This term was further promoted by Duthie and Vlaardingerbroek’s *Bibliography of Gbe*, published the following year (1981, in Stewart 1989:230).

Stewart (personal communication, reported in Williamson and Blench 2000:29), revising his 1989 classification which was based on Bennett and Sterk (1977, in Stewart 1989), proposes the following classification for the Gbe language varieties:

- Niger-Congo, Atlantic-Congo, Volta-Congo, Kwa, Gbe

Capo’s (1986) comparative study of Gbe, which he began in 1971 and which was published under the title *Renaissance du gbe*, focuses on the phonological and morphophonological characteristics of the Gbe varieties. In a more recent publication, *A comparative phonology of Gbe*, Capo (1991:15) discusses his reconstruction of the consonant and vowel systems of Proto-Gbe from a sample of 19 Gbe varieties. Based on four innovation sets, he arrives at the internal classification of Gbe into five major branches, which are, according to their geographical location from west to east—Ewe, Gen, Aja, Phla-Phera, and Fon. Listed according to their geographical location from west to east, the following varieties are assigned to each of these clusters (see Table 1).

Table 1: Classification of Gbe varieties (Capo 1986:101, map 1b)

Ewe cluster		Gen cluster	Aja cluster	Phla-Phera cluster	Fon cluster
Adan	Kpelen	Agoi	Dogbo	Alada	Agbome
Agu	Peci	Anexo	Hwe	Ayizo	Arohun
Aveno	Towun	Gen	Sikpi	Kotafon	Kpase
Awlan	Ve	Gliji	Tado	Saxwe	Gun
Dayin	Vhlin			Tofin	Maxi
Fodome	Vo			Toli	Weme
Gbin	Waci			Xwela	
Ho	Wance			Xwla	
Kpando					

In his review of Capo (1991), Stewart (1994) questions one of Capo's four sets of phonological innovations and arrives at an alternative internal classification of Gbe into two major clusters, that is, Eastern and Western Gbe, with a further subdivision of Western Gbe into Ewe and Central Gbe (see Table 2).

Table 2: Stewart's (1994:178) alternative internal classification of Gbe

Western Gbe		Eastern Gbe
Ewe	Central Gbe – Gen – Aja	Fon Phla-Phera

A more recent classification of the Gbe varieties is suggested by Kluge (2005, 2006, 2007). This classification is based on a synchronic analysis of word and phrase lists elicited in the early 1990s for 49 Gbe varieties.⁴ Conducted in the context of a larger literature extensibility study on Gbe, the main objective of this analysis was to explore how the investigated varieties might be treated as clusters and to establish priorities for further sociolinguistic research. The findings of the synchronic analyses suggest a grouping of the Gbe varieties into three larger clusters, that is, Western, Central, and Eastern Gbe, with three subclusters each for the Western and Eastern Gbe clusters.

⁴The synchronic analysis involved both a quantitative and a qualitative analysis. The word lists were analyzed by means of the inspection method (Gudschinsky 1955). To assess the effects of different similarity judgment criteria, two different similarity judgment criteria sets were applied to the elicited data to identify similar lexical items. This qualitative part of the analysis resulted in the computation of two lexical similarity percentage matrices: word-list computation 1 (WLC-1) is based on a first criteria set which disregards differences in the morphological structure, and word list computation 2 (WLC-2) is based on a second, more rigorous, criteria set which does not disregard such differences.

The qualitative analysis of the phrase lists focused on the identification of different strategies employed by the respective Gbe varieties to express relevant grammatical features, as well as judgments as to whether or not these strategies are similar (Wiesemann 1989, personal communication reported in Kluge 2008). Subsequently, these similarity judgments were quantified and a similarity matrix was computed (PLC). In the final step of the analysis, all three similarity percentage matrices were analyzed by means of multidimensional scaling (MDS) to explore the relative relationships and clustering of the Gbe varieties as indicated by the computed MDS plots. (For more details see Kluge 2005, 2006.)

Table 3: Kluge's (2007) alternative internal classification of Gbe

Western Gbe	Central Gbe	Eastern Gbe
Ewe Gen Northwestern Gbe	Aja	Fon Eastern Phla-Phera Western Phla-Phera

The comparison of the findings from the synchronic lexical and synchronic grammatical analyses, as well as the comparison of these findings to the results of Capo's (1986, 1991) and Stewart's (1994) diachronic genetic studies indicate substantial agreement in terms of the relative relationships of the Gbe varieties investigated. However, there are also some significant differences regarding the classification of some of the varieties involved.

The findings of the synchronic analyses correspond to Stewart's classification in that they suggest three major groupings of Gbe varieties, that is, Western, Central, and Eastern Gbe. In contrast to Stewart (1994), however, the Gen varieties are grouped among the western Gbe varieties.

The synchronic analysis findings also correspond to a large extent to the results of Capo's (1986, 1991) comparative study, as shown in Table 4. From left to right, Table 4 displays the clustering of the Gbe varieties according to the findings of the different analysis approaches. The "WLC-1" and "WLC-2" columns display the findings of the synchronic lexical analysis, while the "PLC" column shows the results from the synchronic grammatical analysis.⁵ The fourth column displays the classification of the Gbe varieties according to Capo's (1986, 1991) comparative study.

⁵See Footnote 4 for more details.

Table 4: Clustering of the Gbe varieties according to the findings of Kluge’s (2005, 2006, 2007) synchronic lexical and grammatical analyses and Capo’s (1986, 1991) diachronic study

[illegible]

Legend: WLC-1 = Word-list computation 1, WLC-2 = Word-list computation 2, PLC = Phrase-list computation

Ewe Gen N-w. Gbe Aja Fon Phla-Phera varieties

Varieties are marked with **two colors** for which the findings indicate possible alternative groupings

Although the findings of Capo's (1986, 1991) diachronic analysis do not suggest three large groupings such as Western, Central, and Eastern Gbe, the following correspondences are noted. All of Capo's Ewe and Gen cluster varieties are included in the proposed Western Gbe cluster. Likewise, the Aja

⁶Ap = Aplahoué, Az = Azovè, Gb = Gboto, To = Tohoun.

⁷Bold, small caps for the Agu, Aveno, Be, Togo, Vo, Wance, and Wundi varieties indicate their possible grouping within a distinct fourth cluster.

⁸In Kluge (2007, Table 4), Xwela is erroneously listed within the grouping of western Phla-Phera varieties.

⁹In Kluge's (2005, 2006, 2007) synchronic analyses and in Lewis (2009), Kpési is listed as "Kpesi." In Kluge (2007, Table 4), the color for highlighting Kpési is orange rather than red, incorrectly suggesting an alternative grouping within the Gen rather than within the Ewe cluster.

¹⁰N-w. Gbe \equiv Northwestern Gbe.

varieties are included in the indicated Central Gbe cluster. Furthermore, all of the Fon and Phla-Phera cluster varieties are included in the suggested Eastern Gbe cluster.

In addition, and in contrast to Capo (1986, 1991), the synchronic analysis findings suggest a third subcluster each for the Western and Eastern Gbe clusters. For the western Gbe varieties, this third cluster is preliminarily referred to as “northwestern Gbe:” it comprises a number of western Gbe varieties which Capo classifies as components of the Ewe cluster. For the eastern Gbe varieties, the synchronic analysis findings suggest the grouping of the Phla-Phera varieties into two distinct clusters—Western and Eastern Phla-Phera.

Regarding the clustering of the 49 Gbe varieties within the suggested subgroupings, as displayed in Table 4, the findings suggest high levels of agreement between the synchronic lexical and the grammatical analyses (Kluge 2005, 2006). The discrepancies between both analyses refer to nine western Gbe varieties and five eastern Gbe varieties.

1. Western Gbe

a) Kpési

Kpési is indicated as a Gen cluster variety, according to the lexical analysis findings. In contrast, the grammatical analysis findings suggest Kpési as a component of “northwestern Gbe,” while at the same time suggesting a possible alternative grouping of Kpési within the Ewe cluster.

b) Agu, Aveno, Be, and Togo

For the Agu, Aveno, Be, and Togo varieties, the findings for the lexical and grammatical analyses suggest their grouping within the Ewe cluster. At the same time, however, the findings for one of the two word-list computations (WLC-1) indicate possible alternative groupings, (1) within the Gen cluster, or (2) together with the Vo, Wance, Waci, and Wundi varieties in a distinct fourth cluster.

c) Vo, Wance, Waci, and Wundi

For the Vo, Wance, Waci, and Wundi varieties, the findings of the grammatical analysis suggest their grouping within the Ewe cluster. In contrast, the lexical analysis findings indicate their grouping within the Gen cluster. At the same time, however, the lexical analysis findings for WLC-1 indicate a possible alternative grouping of these varieties together with the Agu, Aveno, Be, and Togo varieties in a distinct fourth cluster.

2. Eastern Gbe

a) Gun

For Gun, the findings of the lexical analysis suggest the grouping within the Eastern Phla-Phera cluster. At the same, however, the findings for one to the two word-list computations (WLC-1) indicate a possible alternative grouping of Gun within the Fon cluster. Likewise, the grammatical analysis findings suggest the grouping of Gun with the Fon cluster.

b) Gbesi and Gbokpa

The Gbesi and Gbokpa varieties are indicated as varieties of the Fon cluster, according to the grammatical analysis findings. In contrast the lexical analysis findings suggest Gbesi and Gbokpa as components of the western Phla-Phera cluster. For Gbokpa, the lexical analysis findings also suggest a possible alternative grouping within the Fon cluster.

c) Kotafon

For Kotafon, the findings of the grammatical analysis and for one of the two word-list computations (WLC-1) suggest the grouping within the Fon cluster. In contrast, the findings for the second word-list computation (WLC-2) indicate Kotafon as a component of the Western Phla-Phera cluster with a possible alternative grouping within the Fon cluster.

d) Xwela

Xwela is indicated as a Phla-Phera cluster variety according to both the lexical and the grammatical analyses. More specifically, the lexical analysis findings suggest the grouping of Xwela within the Western Phla-Phera cluster. In contrast, the grammatical analysis findings indicate Xwela as an Eastern Phla-Phera variety.

The levels of agreement between the findings of the synchronic analyses and Capo's (1986, 1991) diachronic study are somewhat lower. More specifically, for the western Gbe varieties, the findings of both synchronic analyses suggest the grouping of the Gbin, Ho, Kpelen, and Vhlin varieties within a distinct third cluster. This grouping concurs with the distinct geographical location the farthest north of three of the four varieties, namely Gbin, Kpelen, and Vhlin; Ho is located farther south. In contrast, Capo indicates all four varieties as components of the Ewe cluster. In addition, the lexical analysis findings suggest the grouping of the Vo, Waci, and Wance varieties within the Gen cluster, whereas Capo lists these varieties among the Ewe cluster varieties.

For the eastern Gbe varieties, discrepancies between the synchronic and diachronic approaches occur with four varieties, namely Alada, Ayizo, Gun, and Kotafon. With respect to Alada and Ayizo, the findings of both synchronic analyses suggest their grouping within the Fon cluster, whereas Capo (1986, 1991) lists them among the Phla-Phera varieties. For Gun, the findings of the synchronic grammatical analysis and of Capo's analysis suggest its grouping within the Fon cluster. In contrast, the lexical analysis findings indicate Gun as a component of the eastern Phla-Phera cluster. The findings for one to the two word-list computations (WLC-1), however, suggest a possible alternative grouping of Gun within the Fon cluster. Concerning Kotafon, the findings for the grammatical analysis and WLC-1 suggest its grouping within the Fon cluster, whereas Capo classifies Kotafon as a Phla-Phera variety. The findings for the second word-list computation (WLC-2) support this classification, while at the same time suggesting a possible alternative grouping within the Fon cluster.

In evaluating the levels of agreement and disparities between the synchronic lexical, synchronic grammatical, and diachronic approaches, Kluge (2007) raises the question of how the different approaches should be weighted and what conclusions can be drawn in terms of the ways of investigating and classifying dialects in a linguistic continuum. In light of the different purposes these various approaches are serving, Kluge (2007:211) concludes that it is not necessary to set these different approaches in opposition to each other. Instead,

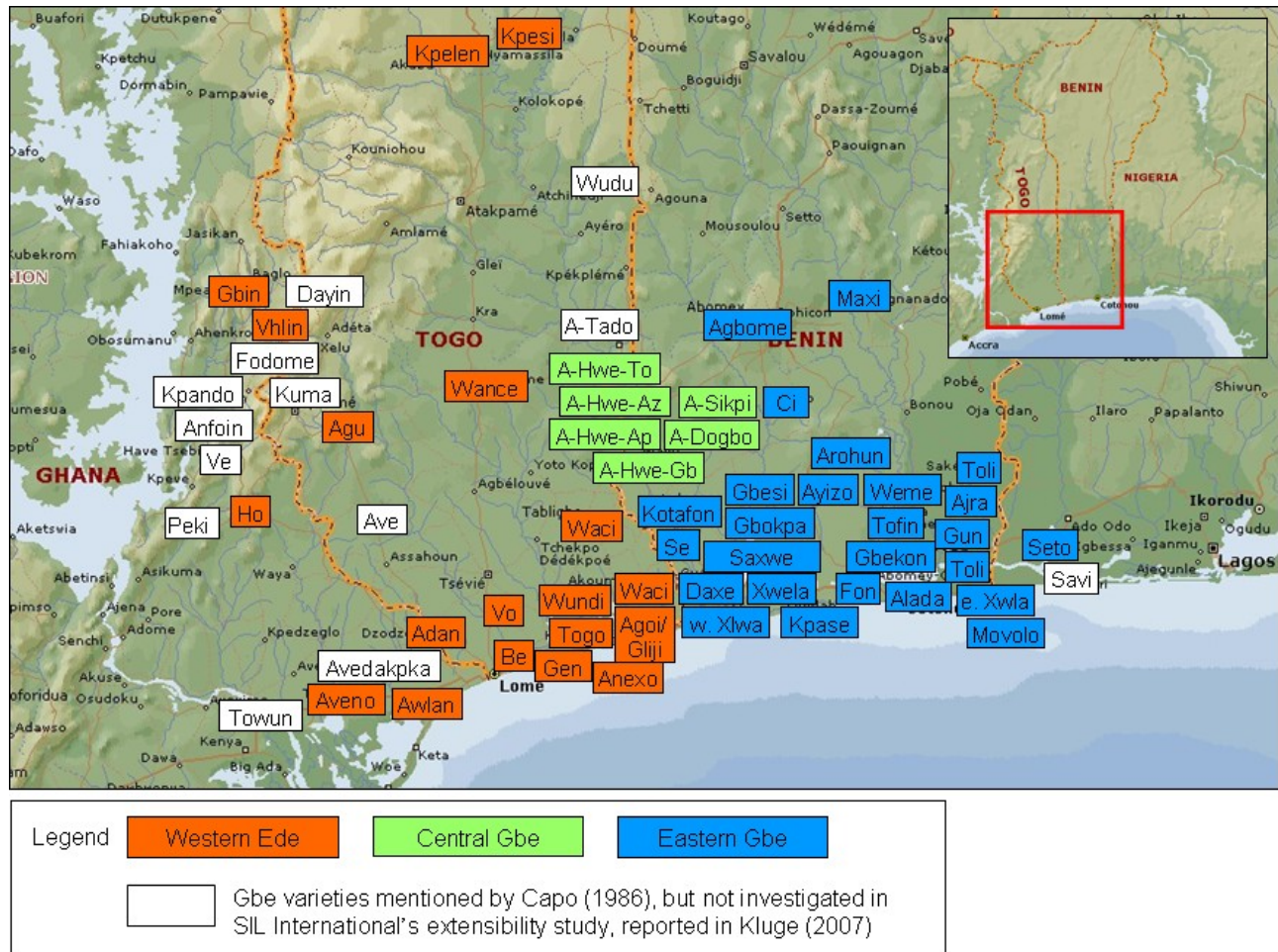
in employing a multifaceted approach to linguistic data interpretation different, even contrasting, outcomes may be used to inform focused in-depth sociolinguistic research. Such research would in turn directly influence language program development decisions as to the extensibility of already existing literature to the remaining speech communities of a language continuum.

Such a multifaceted approach to linguistic data interpretation seems useful in the context of larger extensibility studies, such as SIL International's study on Gbe, reported in Kluge (2007) and discussed in Section 6. This approach poses problems, however, when trying to classify speech varieties within a language continuum, such as Gbe, that is when trying to decide which speech varieties should be listed as languages and which speech varieties considered dialects of these languages.

3. Classification of Gbe: Problems with the dialect-language dichotomy

The map of the Gbe language area, in Figure 1, displays the geographic location for the entire cluster with the Gbe communities situated in a contiguous arrangement from the southwestern corner of Nigeria across southern Benin and Togo to southeastern Ghana. One would suspect a chaining pattern in which the individual Gbe speech groups have contact relationships with the other Gbe groups surrounding them which results in the linguistic similarity of adjoining groups. A first descriptive analysis of the computed Gbe similarity matrices (see Kluge 2005) confirms this in most cases: between adjoining dialects, the investigated Gbe speech forms are, overall, marked by relatively small lexical differences whereas between Gbe varieties at opposing ends of the chain differences are greater.

Figure 1: Map of the Gbe language area (based on Microsoft Corporation 2002)^a



^aThe map displays the geographical locations of the Gbe varieties taken from both Capo (1986, 1991) and Kluge (2007). The clustering is from Kluge's (2005, 2006, 2007) synchronic lexical and grammatical analyses.

This chaining pattern raises the question as to how to classify the individual components of the Gbe cluster. Should they be regarded and classified as dialects of one larger language "Gbe," or as distinct, albeit closely, related languages. Moreover, there is the question of how to deal with the disparities between the synchronic lexical, synchronic grammatical, and diachronic approaches, resulting in different groupings for a fair number of Gbe varieties.

When considering whether different speech communities are distinct languages or dialects of the same language, not only linguistic but also nonlinguistic factors need to be considered. As Hymes (1974:123) points out, "what counts as a language boundary cannot be defined by any purely linguistic measure. Attitudes and social meanings enter in as well." Hence, two aspects need to be considered when distinguishing dialects from languages: (1) intelligibility due to structural cohesiveness, and (2) socio-political, cultural, and historical affinity. Both of these aspects are taken into consideration, for example, by the *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009:9) which maintains that two "related varieties are normally considered varieties of the same language if speakers of each variety have inherent understanding of the other variety at a functional level" and/or share "a common literature" or "a common ethnolinguistic identity with a central variety that both understand."

Distinguishing dialects from languages in terms of their intergroup intelligibility and affinity is especially applicable when considering language groups for which one speech variety can be identified as the “main dialect” (Brown 1998) or transdialectal standard, with which the remaining varieties of the language group have an intelligibility and ethnolinguistic relationship. For language continua, however, the situation may be less straight forward. Typically, here adjacent dialects are intelligible to each other while intelligibility decreases as the distance between dialects along the chain increases. Hence, the speakers of dialects at opposite ends of the chain will not understand each other “*at first encounter ...* due to the dissimilarities between their respective language systems,” as Karam (2000:126) observes. Furthermore, following Brown (1998:29), in “some language chains and continua there are no dominant dialects around which others are clustering.” In situations such as these, the different speech communities of a language continuum may acknowledge that neighboring speech varieties are very similar to their own variety; at the same time, however, they maintain distinct ethnolinguistic identities. This pertains especially to language continua that have not yet undergone large-scale language development efforts.

Among the identified Gbe clusters, four have thus far undergone language-based development on a relatively large scale. Literacy materials and literature are available in two Aja varieties (Hwe and Dogbo), in Ewe,¹¹ in Gen and in two varieties of the Fon cluster, (Fon and Gun). None of these development and standardization efforts, however, appears to be of such magnitude that one of these varieties could serve as the “main dialect” (Brown 1998) or the transdialectal standard. This would mainly be due to the fact that there is no one variety that is inherently intelligible to all the others nor is there the required common ethnolinguistic relationship or common literature (for more details see Section 6).

Hence, the question presents itself whether the individual speech varieties of the Gbe continuum can be classified within the framework of the dialect-language dichotomy and whether it is even useful or desirable to impose this framework onto the components of a language continuum.

In Benin, for example, Fon is a well known Gbe variety and has undergone language-based development on a relatively large scale. A number of Benin’s Gbe communities understand Fon well and could function well using Fon as their standard. Hence, these varieties could well be considered as dialects of Fon. There is, however, a gradual decline in understanding for the Gbe varieties geographically farther away from the Fon language area, until Fon is no longer functional as a standard for literature. These Gbe varieties cannot be considered dialects of Fon, given their lack of understanding and also given their lack of ethnolinguistic identity with Fon. However, if they were classified as separate, this could very well be resisted by those neighboring Gbe communities who have marginal functionality in Fon and whose speech varieties were classified not as distinct languages but “only” as dialects of Fon. The same applies to Aja, Ewe, Gen, and Gun and the Gbe varieties in their immediate neighborhood. The total number of languages within the Gbe group would be overcounted, however, if the speech varieties of each Gbe ethnicity were to be classified as a distinct language. Likewise, the number of Gbe languages would be undercounted, if, instead, all Gbe speech varieties were considered as dialects of either Aja, Ewe, Fon, Gen, or Gun. (Bergman 2009, personal communication)

¹¹According to Capo (1986:16), standard Ewe is based on Awlan, spoken along the coast in and around Keta, in Ghana’s Volta region. In addition, Ewe also takes into account features of related speech varieties situated further north. Following Duthie (1988:92), these related varieties are Amedzofe and Peki.

The problem faced in attempting to classify the Gbe speech varieties is typical for language continua for which as yet no “main dialect” or transdialectal standard has emerged, such as it eventually did with, e.g. French or German.

One attempt of dealing with the complexities of classifying speech varieties within a language continuum is the notion of “macrolanguages,” introduced in the 2009 edition of the *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009:9).

4. Classification of Gbe as a macrolanguage with member languages

Macrolanguages are defined “in the standard as ‘multiple, closely related individual languages that are deemed in some usage contexts to be a single language ...’ ... based on the shared heritage and identity of the speakers or other common features such as a common writing system and literature.” Hence, “individual languages that comprise a macrolanguage must be closely related, and there must be some domain in which they are commonly viewed as comprising a single language.” This “conceptualization of language” allows one to “represent the fact that linguistic varieties function simultaneously as both individual units and within a larger functional matrix” (Lewis 2009:9). While this approach provides an alternative to the more traditional approach that views languages as discrete linguistic units, a number of problems remain with respect to the Gbe continuum.

First, the definition of a macrolanguage as a set of “closely related individual languages” does not address the question of how to group and classify the individual speech varieties of the Gbe continuum. This definition still requires a classification of the varieties of the Gbe continuum within the dialect-language dichotomy, a requirement that is problematic as has been discussed in Section 3).

Related to this is the issue of subgroupings within macrolanguages. The findings of Kluge’s (2005, 2006) synchronic analyses, and their comparison to Capo’s (1986, 1991) and Stewart’s (1994) comparative studies, suggest three major distinct clusters—that is, Western, Central, and Eastern Gbe, two of which can be divided into further subgroupings. In contrast, none of the 55 macrolanguages listed in the *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009) is comprised of more than two layers—that is, a macrolanguage is comprised of several “member languages;” there are no subgroupings. If this taxonomy was to be applied to the Gbe continuum, the Gbe macrolanguage would be comprised of three member languages—Western, Central, and Eastern Gbe. In consequence, however, the number of Gbe languages would be undercounted.

If a more complex taxonomy was to be applied with Western, Central, and Eastern Gbe as distinct groupings within the larger Gbe macrolanguage, the question would still remain, however, how to group the individual Gbe varieties within each of these major clusters—whether for example Western Gbe would consist of two, three, or four subgroupings and which Gbe varieties would be assigned to each of these subgroupings.

Second, the requirement that there must be “some domain” in which the member languages of a macrolanguage “are commonly viewed as comprising a single language” is problematic. This refers to socio-cultural factors (shared heritage) as well as ethnolinguistic (shared identity) and sociolinguistic factors (shared literacy and literature).

Socio-cultural factors do not support the notion of a single Gbe macrolanguage in terms of a shared heritage. Among the identified major Gbe groupings, that is, Aja, Ewe, Fon, Gen, and Phla-Phera, three

evolved around three ancient kingdoms (Capo 1991:2): Aja, Ewe and Fon. The Aja kingdom was centered on its ancient capital Stádó (today's Tado in Togo's Moyen-Mono préfecture, near the border to Benin). From here the rulers of the Ewe and Fon kingdoms are thought to have migrated in the fifteenth century, the Ewe to the west and the Fon to the east. The Ewe kingdom developed around its ancient capital Wancé (today's Notsé in Togo's Haho préfecture), and the Fon kingdom around its ancient capital Alada (today's Allada in Benin's Atlantique département). Several Phla-Phera communities, such as Xwla and Ayizo) are also thought to have migrated from Stádó, but as early as the eleventh century. In contrast, the Gen are said to have originated from today's Ghana and to be ethnically Fante (from Elmina in Ghana's Central Region) and Gã (from Accra, Ghana's capital). Although the communities acknowledge their common Tado origins, this shared socio-cultural heritage does not appear to be of such significance that "Gbe" could be viewed "comprising a single language," as defined by Lewis (2009).

Likewise, the Gbe speech communities lack a common ethnolinguistic identity. As has been discussed in Section 2, "Gbe" as a cover term is an artifact, adopted in 1980 during the Fourteenth West African Languages Congress. While, over the years, this term has gained recognition in academia, none of the speech communities involved recognize "Gbe" as a shared, larger ethnolinguistic identity. Likewise, the proposed subgroupings Western, Central, and Eastern Gbe are artifacts, employed by Stewart (1994) and Kluge (2005, 2006) as convenient labels for the internal classification of Gbe. Again, none of the Gbe speech communities recognizes these larger groupings as their common ethnolinguistic identity.

Further, sociolinguistic factors do not support the notion of a single Gbe macrolanguage in terms of a shared literacy and literature. As has been mentioned in Section 3, four of the identified Gbe clusters have thus far been targeted for language-based development on a relatively large scale, that is Aja, Ewe, Fon, and Gen. The findings of a sociolinguistic literature extensibility study suggest, however, that none of these efforts is of such magnitude that one of these varieties could serve as the transdialectal standard or the "main dialect" (Brown 1998) for the entire Gbe continuum. Neither could one of these varieties serve as the transdialectal standard for the proposed Western and Eastern Gbe groupings, that is, Ewe or Gen for Western Gbe and Fon or Gun for Eastern Gbe. For the Central Gbe cluster, however, Aja seems to be a workable solution for the literacy needs of the different Aja communities (see Tompkins and Kluge 2002). (For more details see Section 6).

An alternative might be to classify the five speech varieties that have already undergone language-based development on a larger scale as distinct macrolanguages, that is, Aja, Ewe, Fon, Gen, and Gun. This solution, however, is also problematic. For Aja, the findings of a sociolinguistic study suggest that the Aja varieties best be considered as dialects of a larger Aja language. Hence, Aja could be classified as a distinct language, but not as a macrolanguage since it is comprised of a set of dialects and not of a set of closely related individual "languages" (see Tompkins and Kluge 2002). Further, it is problematic to classify Fon, Ewe, and Gen as macrolanguages although each of them provides a "common writing system and literature" for different groupings of Gbe varieties. Whereas in Ghana, Ewe dialects, but no other Gbe varieties, are spoken and therefore Ewe is the one Gbe variety preferred for literacy and literature, the situation in Benin and Togo is different. The Gbe varieties spoken here cannot necessarily be assigned to a Fon, Ewe, or Gen macrolanguage on a one-to-one basis. As the findings of a sociolinguistic literature extensibility study on Gbe suggest, a fair number of these varieties could benefit from literacy in more than one of these "standards" (see Section 6). Finally, the classification of Gun as a distinct macrolanguage is problematic, since the findings of Capo's (1986, 1991) comparative

study and of Kluge's (2006) analysis synchronic grammatical analysis suggest that Gun groups together with Fon within the Fon cluster.¹²

In summary, neither socio-cultural factors (shared heritage), ethnolinguistic factors (shared identity), nor sociolinguistic factors (shared literacy and literature) support the notion of a single "Gbe" macrolanguage, as defined by Lewis (2009). Neither do these factors support the notion of a single "Western Gbe" and single "Eastern Gbe" macrolanguage, nor the notion of Aja, Ewe, Fon, Gen, and Gun as distinct macrolanguages.

Furthermore, the macrolanguage concept still poses problems with respect to the classification of speech varieties within a language continuum, such as Gbe. That is, the macrolanguage concept still requires decisions as to which Gbe speech varieties should be listed as languages and which speech varieties should be considered dialects of these languages.

5. Classification of Gbe outside the dialect-language dichotomy

The discussion so far has highlighted the problems of classifying the speech varieties of the Gbe language continuum. These problems appear to be due to three features of the Gbe continuum. First, the melding nature of the individual Gbe varieties makes it difficult to decide which Gbe speech varieties should be listed as languages and which as dialects of these languages and to assign some of these varieties to specific clusters. Second, even though the Gbe speech communities share common origins, this common socio-cultural heritage does not appear to be significant enough that "Gbe" could be viewed as a single language or macrolanguage. And third, no transdialectal standard has emerged with which the remaining varieties of the language group would have an intelligibility and ethnolinguistic relationship and which could provide shared literacy and literature.

These problem faced in attempting to classify the Gbe speech varieties seem to be typical for language continua that have not yet undergone large-scale language development efforts (another example would be the Ede language continuum, discussed in Kluge 2010).

Given that to date no satisfying solution is available, this paper tentatively submits the following classification for the Gbe language continuum and its components (Table 5). This classification refers to Gbe as a "continuum" and to its components as (speech or language) "varieties." These terms are outside the dialect-language dichotomy and neutral and consequently better serves the particularities of the Gbe continuum with its chaining pattern in terms of intergroup intelligibility and affinity.

¹²The findings of Kluge's (2005) synchronic lexical analysis indicate Gun as a component of the eastern Phla-Phera cluster. At the same time, however, the findings for one to the two word-list computations (WLC-1) also suggest a possible alternative grouping of Gun within the Fon cluster.

Table 5: Classification of the Gbe varieties outside the dialect-language dichotomy

Niger-Congo, Atlantic-Congo, Volta-Congo, Kwa, Gbe continuum

Western Gbe varieties (Ewe, Gen, and Northwestern Gbe)

Adan	Ho
Agoi/Gliji	Kpelen
Agu	Kpési
Anexo	Togo
Aveno	Vhlin
Awlan	Vo
Be	Waci
Gbin	Wance
Gen	Wundi

Central Gbe varieties

Aja (Dogbo, Hwe, Sikpi, Tado, Tala^a)

Eastern Gbe varieties (Fon, Eastern Phla-Phera, and Western Phla-Phera)

Agbome	Kpase
Ajra	Maxi
Alada	Movolo
Arohun	Saxwe
Ayizo	Se
Ci	Seto
Daxe	Tofin
Fon	Toli
Gbekon	Weme
Gbesi	Xwela
Gbokpa	Xwla-eastern
Gun	Xwla-western
Kotafon	

^aFor Tado and Tala see Tompkins and Kluge (2002).

This classification displays the identified three clusters of the Gbe continuum—Western, Central, and Eastern Gbe. For the Western and Eastern Gbe clusters the proposed classification also lists the identified subgrouping—Ewe, Gen, and Northwestern Gbe for the Western Gbe cluster, and Fon, Eastern Phla-Phera, and Western Phla-Phera for the Eastern Gbe cluster. While most Gbe varieties can be classified within one of these subgroupings, a fair number of Gbe varieties cannot be assigned (see Section 2). Hence, the proposed classification lists the individual Gbe varieties within these three major clusters but does not attempt a further subclassification at this point.

The above classification avoids the dialect-language dichotomy. This classification, however, poses immediate problems to systems of language identifiers, such as ISO 639 (ISO 639/Joint Advisory Committee 2007), the *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009), and others faced with having to decide which speech varieties to list as languages.

6. Sociolinguistic literature extensibility study of the Gbe language continuum

A predominantly sociolinguistic rather than mainly linguistic approach was taken for a larger literature extensibility study of the Gbe language continuum, which was conducted by the Togo-Benin branch of SIL International in the 1990s.

Among the Gbe varieties, five have thus far undergone language-based development on a larger scale: Aja, Ewe, Fon, Gen, and Gun. The overall goal of the literature extensibility was to assess whether and to what extent these already existing literature and literacy efforts could extend to the other Gbe communities.

The first phase of this study constituted the above mentioned elicitation of word and phrase lists among 49 Gbe communities of Benin and Togo (Kluge 2005, 2006, 2007), together with the administration of sociolinguistics community questionnaires. The main objectives of these elicitations were: (1) to obtain a rough estimate of the computed degrees of linguistic similarity between these varieties, (2) to explore how these varieties might be treated as clusters, and (3) to establish priorities for further sociolinguistic research.

Following this first phase, Rapid Appraisal (RA) sociolinguistic surveys were carried out among twelve varieties of the Gbe continuum. The purpose of these surveys was twofold: first, to assess whether and to what extent existing literature and literacy efforts in Aja, Ewe, Fon, Gen, and Gun could extend to these Gbe communities, or whether additional language-based development programs in some of these communities would be beneficial, and, second, to gather data that would help determine the nature and extent of SIL International's possible involvement among these communities. More specifically, the evaluation of literature development needs was to be based on the factors of dialect intercomprehension, language vitality, and language attitudes. The main research techniques used were interviews and group comprehension testing.

A major focus of this study was to investigate extensibility of already existing materials to those varieties that are components of a cluster which has not yet undergone widespread language-based development. Hence, six varieties of the Phla-Phera cluster were surveyed, that is Ayizo, Kotafon, Saxwe, Tofin, Xwela, and Xwla. In addition, five Gbe varieties were surveyed that are not included in Capo's (1986:101) internal classification of Gbe, that is, Ci, Daxe, Defi, Gbesi,¹³ and Se. Finally, Kpési, the northern-most Gbe variety was included in the study, given its location along the northern periphery¹⁴ of the Gbe language area.¹⁵

Group comprehension testing (Rapid Appraisal Recorded Text Tests – RA-RTTs) (see Stalder 1996a,b) was conducted among all twelve Gbe varieties. Depending on the subclassification of the surveyed varieties within Gbe and further given their geographical locations, RA-RTTs in Ewe, Fon, Gen, and/or Gun were administered. Overall, the group comprehension test results show high levels of comprehension for the RA-RTTs in question.

¹³Although Gbesi is not included in Capo's (1986:101) classification of Gbe varieties, it is marked as a Phla-Phera variety on the linguistic map of Gbe (Carte 1b).

¹⁴The Kpelen communities, also situated along the northern periphery of the Gbe language area, have thus far not been included in the literature extensibility study reported here.

¹⁵A more in-depth survey of the Aja communities had been carried out earlier (see Tompkins and Kluge 2002).

Community attitudes towards ongoing literacy efforts in Ewe, Fon, Gen, and/or Gun, as well as general language attitudes towards these varieties are, overall, positive, even though the surveyed communities expressed preference for literacy in their own speech varieties.

With respect to language vitality, there are, for the most part, no indications of language shift in the survey communities. The exceptions seem to be the Ayizo and Kotafon communities with some indications of shift towards Fon. For both speech communities, the data suggest, however, that Ayizo and Kotafon are used in all village domains.

The exception from these patterns appears to be the Saxwe and Daxe speech communities. The Saxwe have only partial comprehension of both Fon and Gen (no comprehension testing was conducted among the Daxe and Se speech communities). Furthermore, a successful Saxwe literacy program is already in place in parts of the language area and the Daxe expressed positive attitudes toward Saxwe literacy. These findings suggest that the Saxwe literacy program currently in place is the best solution for the literacy needs in the Saxwe and Daxe speech communities and ideally be expanded to cover the entire language area.

In summary, the findings of the literature extensibility study suggest the following. None of the existing development and standardization efforts in Aja, Ewe, Fon, Gen, and/or Gun seems to be of such magnitude that one of these varieties could serve as the transdialectal standard for the entire Gbe continuum. This would mainly be due to the fact that not all of the Gbe varieties have the required inherent intelligibility and ethnolinguistic relationships. However, already existing literature and literacy efforts in Aja, Ewe, Fon, Gen, and/or Gun could be workable solutions for the literacy needs in the surveyed speech communities, depending on their geographical location and linguistic classification, and provided there is adequate institutional support. For the Saxwe and Daxe communities the best solution might be literacy in Saxwe.

The findings of these studies are presented in a 10-volume series, published in SIL Electronic Survey Reports, “A sociolinguistic survey of the Gbe language communities of Benin and Togo:” [Kpési](#) (Durieux-Boon et al. 2010), [Ayizo](#) (Hatfield and McHenry 2010), [Kotafon](#) (Hatfield et al. 2010), [Xwela](#) (Henson et al. 2010), [Xwla](#) (Henson and Kluge 2010), [Ci](#) (Henson 2010), [Defi](#) (Johnson 2010), [Saxwe, Daxe, and Se](#) (Johnson 2010), [Tofin](#) (Schoch 2010), and [Gbesi](#) (Schoch 2010).

7. Summary

This paper has discussed two approaches to classifying the speech varieties of the Gbe language continuum, namely the clustering of the Gbe varieties within the dialect-language dichotomy and the classification of Gbe as a macrolanguage. For both approaches a number of problems have been identified and discussed:

1. The melding nature of the individual Gbe varieties which makes it difficult to decide which Gbe speech varieties should be listed as languages and which as dialects of these languages, and to assign some of these varieties to specific clusters
2. The lack of a strong common socio-cultural heritage
3. The lack of a common ethnolinguistic identity
4. The lack of a common literacy and literature

The identified problems appear to be rather typical for language continua that have not yet undergone large-scale language development efforts, hence making a satisfying classification difficult if not impossible.

Given these problems, this paper has presented an alternative classification for the Gbe language continuum and its components that avoids the dialect-language dichotomy and therefore better serves the characteristics of the Gbe continuum with its chaining pattern. It is acknowledged, however, that this classification poses direct problems to systems of language identifiers, such as ISO 639 (ISO 639/Joint Advisory Committee 2007), the *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009) and others faced with having to decide which speech varieties to list as languages. To date no satisfying solution is available.

Following these discussions, the findings of a sociolinguistic literature extensibility study of the Gbe language continuum have been briefly discussed. The findings of this study are presented in detail in the 10-volume series “A sociolinguistic survey of the Gbe language communities of Benin and Togo,” published in SIL Electronic Survey Reports.

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