

The Defaka – Ijo relationship revisited

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Jenewari (1983) presents evidence and argumentation for a connection between Defaka and the Ijo language cluster to the effect that Defaka is Ijo's closest relative and giving rise to Ijoid as a language family within Niger-Congo that places Defaka as a branch of Ijoid cognate with all other Ijo languages. Jenewari's classification is reasonable given the evidence available at the time, and it is now the accepted wisdom, maintained and supported in such subsequent publications as Childs (2003), Jenewari (1989), Williamson (1989), Williamson (1998), and Williamson & Blench (2000).

Defaka is an endangered language spoken by approximately 200-300 people in the villages of Nkoroo and Iwoma Nkoroo in the eastern Niger Delta region. The primary language of daily use among ethnic Defaka is Nkoroo, the language of the surrounding community and itself a language under threat. Both of these languages are the object of investigation in context of a documentation project, that has allowed considerably more data to be collected than was available to earlier researchers. This substantial database now permits a new look at the earlier classification, using the comparative method as its principle technique, to re-evaluate the Ijo – Defaka connection and establish whether it is indeed Ijo's closest linguistic relative' or is a language isolate that has accrued Ijo -like characteristics through centuries of contact.