

The Verb Classes in the East Saharan Languages

Sources: Jourdan, Notes grammaticales et vocabulaire de la langue daza.

Le Coeur, Grammaire et textes Teda-Daza.

Lukas, Die Sprache der Tubu in der Zentralen Sahara.

Lukas, A study of the Kanuri language.

Notes:

I. Examples are given, wherever possible, in the aorist tense in the Teda-Tubu languages, in the conjunctive in Kanuri; these tenses have no tense affixes.

II. As tone is not marked in Jourdan's and Le Coeur's material, and, moreover, is not relevant to the subject of this article, it is not marked here.

III. The orthography is that of the sources quoted.

Variation in the order of the elements composing the verb complex¹ — also, sometimes, of the words in the simple sentence — is not uncommon in African languages. In the main such variation consists in a change of order as between verb radical or stem (V) and elements denoting pronominal subject (S); other elements which may be involved are those denoting pronominal object (O), auxiliary verb (A) and formatives of derivative verbs (D) — not to mention elements denoting aspect, tense and number, which are not discussed here.

Variation in the order of elements more often distinguishes aspect (definite/indefinite, perfect/imperfect, etc.), i.e. the same verb can be conjugated with prefixes or suffixes — sometimes with separate sets of subject affixes, e.g.:

Barambu (Zande group):

nyə-li I eat VS: li-nyə I am eating SV

Masakin (Nuba Hills class languages), with separate sets of affixes:

yu-ri I drank VS: aki-yu I am drinking SV

and, best known of all, the Semitic languages, in which the imperfect is VS, the perfect SV.

Sometimes the distinction is between verb classes, i.e. some verbs are always conjugated with prefixes, others with suffixes: here, too, there may be separate sets of subject affixes, e.g.

Mararit (Tama group). Only a few class I verbs have been found:

I n-utt-ay I go out SV, aspect suffix;
II jaŋ-n-ey I sing VS, aspect suffix.

Kunama, with separate sets of subject affixes:

I go-di-ke we stayed VS, tense suffix;
II na-sasa-ke we told SV, tense suffix.

I ti-dir she killed SV; II duur-ta she visited VS

In the East Saharan languages variation in element order is of this second type, and involves the elements V, S, O, A and D.

There are three verb classes, but only two basic patterns of conjugation. In the Teda-Tubu languages there are two sets of pronominal subject elements, associated with these two patterns. The two sets of S elements show some resemblances to the self-standing pronouns and the possessive suffixes respectively, in the 1st and 2nd persons:

Pattern A (both S and O)	Self-standing ²	Pattern B	Possessive
1st pers. t (d)	tani, tarɛ	r	-nər
2nd pers. n	nta, narɛ	m	-nəm
3rd pers. zero	sigən, mərə	y (c)	-sən

The S elements (likewise O in series A) are identical in sg. and pl., plurality being shown by a separate, consonant, element which follows the verb radical on which the pattern is based.

Kanuri has only one series of S elements for 1st and 2nd persons, but with separate sg. and pl. elements: the 3rd person (series B) is identical in sg. and pl., plurality being distinguished by a separate, vowel, element. The sg. elements are:

1st pers. sk (Cl. II: in Cl. III combined with element n > ŋ + g)

2nd pers. m

3rd pers. Series A zero, Series B s (z)

Only singular examples are given here for the most part, as plurality does not affect the order of the elements; 3rd pers. pl. is occasionally given, where it is significant.

Simple verbs

Class I. This is, according to Lukas, the oldest verb class: it contains relatively few verbs, most of which are intransitive. Le Coeur, indeed, fails to recognise these verbs as constituting a separate class, but treats them as in the same category as the passive-reciprocal-reflexive derivative verbs (which he calls „conjugaison moyenne"). See below, p. 230.

The conjugation pattern of Cl. I verbs is:

S series A: pattern A based on V: S precedes V:

	1. 'die'			2. 'be ready'	
	Teda	Kreda	Central ³	Kashirda	
1	tə-nəs	da-nas	te-nas	dāfu (t+b)	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;"> S V S V V </div>
2	nə-nəs	na-nas	ne-nas	māfu, nāfu (n+b)	
3	nəs	nas	nas	bāfu (zero+b)	

3. 'enter'					
Teda	Daza (J.)	(Le C.)	Kashirda	Kreda	Central
1 tu-dus	duñs	dwuso	du-fudu	dosur	—
2 —	—	n-twuso	nu-fudu	n-tosur	—
3 tuñs	tuñs	twuso	zudu	zəro	tũso

Here the verb radical is much obscured by sound change. Lukas suggests a possible original radical *tumus, which would account for the nasalisation in some of the examples.

4. 'stand still'		
Kashirda	Daza (J.)	Central
1 duzzu	dəzo	duzzo
2 n-tuzzu	n-təzo	n-tuzzo
3 tuzzu	təzo	tuzzo

5. 'come'			
Kashirda	Daza(J.)	Teda	Central
1 te-ri	t-erre	ti-re	t-ire
2 ne-ri	n-erre	ni-re	n-ire
3 ri	erre	Ili	ire

'sit'			
Kashirda	Daza (J.)	Teda	
1 dū'uzzu, duzzu	(t+b)	t-wozo	tə-bəs
2 nū'uzzu, nuzzu	(n+b)	mozo	məs
2 buzzu		bozo	bəs

In Kanuri vestiges only of Cl. I remain. Five verbs have been found which have Cl. I behaviour in the 3rd person (1st and 2nd persons being conjugated as Cl. II). Of these five verbs Nos. 1 and 2 closely resemble Teda-Tubu 1 and 2: 3, 4 and 5 do not resemble Teda-Tubu 3, 4 and 5, but have identical or similar meanings:

1. 'die'	2. 'be mature'	Pattern A ind 3rd pers.	
1 (nu-ske)	(bafu-ske)	V	S
2 (nu-m)	(bafu-m)	V	S
3 nu	bafu	V	

3. 'enter'	4. 'remain, live'	5. 'come'
1 (gagə-ske)	(dəga-ske)	(isə-ske)
2 (gagə-m)	(dəga-m)	(isə-m)
3 gagə	dəga	isə

The 3rd pers. pl. of these five verbs is irregular; the irregularities, however, differ as between the verbs:

1. 'die' P. 3 so-nu, with the Cl. II S element (prefixed s- with plural vowel element). In the Teda-Tubu languages an entirely different (Cl. II) verb is used in the plural, e.g. Kreda P. 1 yat-ər, 2 yat-um, 3 c-atu.

- 'be mature' P. 3 baafu, with pl. element a embedded in the verb.
- 'enter' P. 3 gagagə, with reduplication. Lukas notes an alternative, in P. 3 only: tamu. This may well be cognate with Teda-Tubu No. 3.
- 'remain' P. 3 daga, with pl. element in the verb: also dagu and dogu.
- 'come' P. 3 isa, with pl. element as second vowel in the verb.

Additional note on Cl. I verbs in Kanuri

Although, in most tenses, the five Cl. I verbs are conjugated exactly as Cl. II verbs except in the 3rd person, in the past and future tenses they differ considerably from Cl. II verbs. Both these tenses are formed by prefixes: these prefixes are always identical in S. 1, 2, P. 1, 2, therefore only S. 1, P. 1, P. 3 are given here. The prefixes are:

	Cl. II		'die'		'be mature'		'enter; remain'	
	Past	Fut.	Past	Fut.	Past	Fut.	Past	Fut.
S. 1	ci-	ci-	ko-	co-	kar	car-	kar-	car-
S. 3	sə-	ci-	ko-	co-	kar-	car-	kar-	car-
P. 3	sa-	ca-	ko-su-	co-su-	kar-	car-	ka-sa-r-	ca-sa-r-

The alternative P. 3 form of 'enter' is P. ka-tamo, F. ta-tamo.

The verb 'come' is irregular in all persons:

Past:	ka-di-sko, ka-di-m, ka-dio:	ka-fe, ka-di, kafo
Fut.:	ca-də-sko, ca-də-m, ca-do:	ca-fe, ca-də-u, ca-fo

Class. II. In this class, sound change often obscures the elements in Teda-Tubu: in particular, the S element is often realised as sound change or as zero, especially in Kashirda.

The conjugation pattern is:

S series B; pattern B based on V; S follows V in 1st and 2nd pers., precedes V in 3rd pers.

	Teda 'leave'	'bear child'	'hit'	
1	səb-ər	bəs-ər	bab-ər	V S
2	səb-əm	bəs-əm	bab-əm	V S
3	yi-səp	yo-bəs	ce-bab	S V

	Kashirda 'leave'	'bear child'	'hit'	'go out'
1	sə-r	buss-ər	bā-r	rū-r
2	sə-m	buss-əm	bā-m	rū-r
3	səu	wussu	wau	cu-ru

	'say'	'see'
1	fad-ər	dud-ur
2	fad-əm	dud-um
3	fadu	dudu

	Kanuri 'seize'	'eat'	'swallow'
1	ta-ske	bu-ske	yində-ske
2	ta-m	bu-m	yində-m
3	sə-ta	zə-vu	sə-ndə (note elision of y)

The verb 'think, say' is a Class II verb, with radical n. The element V is realised as zero in S. 3, but retained before the plural element t in Teda-Tubu: it is realised as zero in both S. 3 and P. 3 in Kanuri:

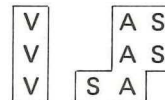
	Kashirda	Daza	Kanuri
S. 1	n-ər	n-ər	ŋ-ge
2	n-əm	n-əm	n-əm
3	yi	ye	sə
P. 3	yi-n- tu	ye-n- tu	sa

Class III. These verbs are formed by the addition of the Cl. II verb n, here termed 'auxiliary verb' (A) to the main verb: it is the auxiliary which is conjugated for person.

The conjugation pattern is:

S series B: pattern B not based on V (but on A): S follows V.

	Teda 'see'	Kashirda 'fasten'	'gather, collect'
1	la- n-ər	tu- n-ər	cam- m-ər
2	la- n-əm	tu- n-əm	cam- m-əm
3	la-yi	tu-yi	cap-ci



	Kanuri 'look at'	'beat'
1	wu- ŋ-ge	baŋ- ŋ-ge
2	wu- n-əm	baŋ- n-əm
3	wu-zə	bak-sə

Derivative verbs.

Derivative verbs are formed by the addition of an element D to the verb complex. There is thus scope for a wide variety of possible orders of the elements in the verb complex.

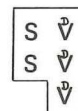
i) Applied

In Teda-Tubu the element D is k (g). In Kanuri it is variable: with Cl. II verbs yi, yi-r, yi-r-gə (yikkə), evidently composed of several elements, which are here designated as D¹ (y), D² (r), D³ (g): with Cl. II verbs g.

Class I. Little information is available on Teda-Tubu. Lukas gives two examples in Kashirda, from which it appears that the conjugation pattern is:

S series A: pattern A based on V: S precedes V: D infixes in V.

	'stand on' (Prog. tense)	'sit on' (Prog. tense)
1	duguzzə-ge (t+tuGUzzə-)	duguzzə-ge (t+buGUzzə-)
2	n-tuguzzə-ge (n+tuGUzzə-)	n-uguzzə-ge (n+buGUzzə-)
3	tuguzzə-ge (tuGUzzə-)	buguzzə-ge (buGUzzə-)

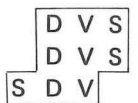


In Kanuri Cl. I verbs behave as Cl. II verbs in all persons.

Class II. In Teda-Tubu the conjugation pattern is:

S series B: pattern B based on V: S follows V in 1st and 2nd pers., precedes V in 3rd pers: D precedes V

	Kashirda 'say to' (Prog. tense)	'go out to'
1	ku-fad-ər-ge	ku-rū-r
2	ku-fad-əŋ-ŋe	ku-rū-m
3	gu-fadə- ge	gu-ru



In the 3rd pers., S is realised as sound change.

Kanuri has several variants of conjugation pattern, including one in which elements D both precede and follow V:

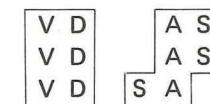
	'cheat' (< bu 'eat')	'pluck and put in' (< fərtə 'pluck')
1	yi-r-gə-vu-ske	yi-vərtə-gə-ske
2	yi-r-gə-vu-m	yi-vərtə-gə-m
3	sə- r-gə-vu	sə- vertə-gə

Class III. Here, as in the simple verb, the element A is realised as zero in the 3rd pers. sg., but retained before the pl. element t in Teda-Tubu: it is altogether lacking in Kanuri, with consequent difference in pattern.

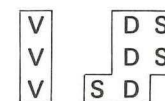
The conjugation pattern is:

S series B: pattern B not based on V (but on A in Teda-Tubu, on D in Kanuri): S follows V: D follows V.

	Kashirda 'fasten onto' (tu 'fasten')
1	tu-gə- n-ər
2	tu-gə- n-əm
3	tu-gə-yi
P. 3	tu-gə-yi-n- tu



	Kanuri 'inform' (no 'learn')
1	no- gə-ske
2	no- gə-m
3	no-zə-gə

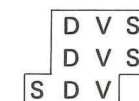


ii) Causative

Few examples of this derivative are available.

Class II. In Teda-Tubu Lukas gives one example, from Kashirda: the conjugation pattern is the same as that of Cl. II applied verbs: the D element is t: 3rd pers. S is realised as sound change:

	'throw out' (< 'go out')
1	tu-rū-r
2	tu-rū-m
3	du-ru



There is perhaps another causative, with D element k.

In Kanuri, Lukas states that 'a prefix tə- occurs, having a causative function, but this is rare': he gives no examples⁴.

Class III. In Teda-Tubu (Kashirda) the causative of Cl. III verbs is a compound construction, consisting of the causative of the Cl. II verb 'go out' (see above) suffixed to the main verb if the object is singular, of the simple Cl. II verb hət 'fetch out' suffixed to the main verb if the object is plural.

In Kanuri the compound element yitə (D¹ y, D² t) is prefixed to the applied form: the applied element is thus here D³. There are two variants in the 3rd person, so that the causative of a Cl. III verb may have Cl. III behaviour, as in the applied, or Cl. II behaviour (possibly by analogy with Cl. II applied which also has compound D elements):

	'inform'	Cl. III type	Cl. II type
1	yitə-no- gə-ske	D ¹ 2V	D ³ S
2	yitə-no- gə-m	D ¹ 2V	D ³ S
3	yitə-no-zə-gə	D ¹ 2V	S D ³

sə- tə-no-gə

iii) Passive-Reflexive-Reciprocal

The D element is t (d): it is always associated with Pattern A, and imposes its own pattern on all verbs⁵.

Class I. Most verbs being intransitive, no examples have been recorded.

Class II. The conjugation pattern is:

S series A: pattern A based on V (or, perhaps, on D): S precedes V: D precedes V.

	Teda 'be born' (Passive)	'hit oneself' (Refl.)
1	tə-də-bəs	te-de-bap
2	n-də-bəs	n-de-bap
3	tə-bəs	te-bap

	Kashirda 'be born'	'be hit' (Prog. tense)
1	dūsu (t+t+b)	day-ge
2	n-tūsu (n+t+b)	n-t-ay-ge
3	t-ūsu (t+b)	t-ay-ge

Kanuri. Having regard to the predominance of pattern A in Teda-Tubu, it seems reasonable to interpret the Kanuri Passive as having vestigial pattern A.

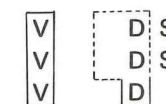
	'be seized'	'be eaten, or, cheated'
1	(tə-ta-ske)	(tə-vu-ske)
2	(tə-ta-m)	(tə-vu-m)
3	tə-ta	tə-vu

Class III. The conjugation pattern is:

S series A: pattern A not based on V (but on D): S follows V: D follows V.

	Teda 'be seen'	Kashirda 'be fastened'	(Prog. tense)
1	la-de-də-n	tu- də-η-ηe	V S D A
2	la-n -də-n	tu-n-tə-η-ηe	V S D A
3	la- də-n	tu- tə-η-ηe	V D A

	Kanuri 'be looked at'	'be beaten'
1	(wu-t -ske)	(bak-t -ske)
2	(wu-t -m)	(bak-t -m)
3	wu-t	(bak-t



Simple verbs with Object

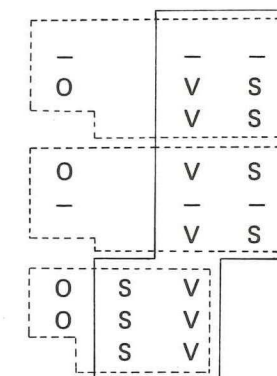
The pronoun object element forms part of the verb complex. In Teda-Tubu it is 1 t, 2 n, 3 zero, i.e. the same as S series A, associated with pattern A. Thus when the element O is added to verbs of Classes II and III the result is the superimposition of pattern A upon pattern B (Cl. I verbs being mainly intransitive, no examples with object have been recorded). In Kanuri the element O is 1 s, 2 nz, 3 zero. In all the languages sound change tends to obscure the elements: they can be most clearly distinguished in Teda. Note that in Kanuri S. 1 object sə + S. 3 subject sə > sə, and S. 2 object nzə + S. 3 subject sə > nzə.

Class II. The conjugation pattern is:

O series A: pattern A based on V: O precedes V:

S series B: pattern B based on V: S follows V in 1st and 2nd pers., precedes V in 3rd pers.

		Teda 'hit'
Subj. 1	Obj. 1	— ⁶
	2	nə- bab-ər
	(3)	bab-ər
Subj. 2	Obj. 1	tə- bab-əm
	2	— ⁶
	(3)	bab-əm
Subj. 3	Obj. 1	ti-yi-bab
	2	n-ce-bab
	(3)	ce-bab



		Kashirda 'hit'
Subj. 1	Obj. 1	— ⁶
	2	n- ā-r
	(3)	bā-r
Subj. 2	Obj. 1	t- a-m
	2	— ⁶
	(3)	ba-m
Subj. 3	Obj. 1	j- ay
	2	n-c- ay
	(3)	wau

		Kanuri 'seize'
		—
	nzə-	ta-ske
		ta-ske
	sə-	ta-m
		—
		ta-m
	sə-	ta
	nzə-	ta
	sə-	ta

Class III. The element A is realised as zero with 3rd pers. sing. subject in Teda-Tubu: it is rarely present in Kanuri. The conjugation pattern is:

O series A: pattern A not based on V (but on A): O follows V:

S series B: pattern B not based on V (but on A): S follows V.

		Teda 'ask'		Kanuri 'look at'				
Subj. 1	Obj. 1		—		—	—	—	—
	2	kər-nə-	n-ər	wu-nzə-	ske	V	O	A S
	(3)	kər-	n-ər	wu-	ŋ-ge	V	—	A S
Subj. 2	Obj. 1	kər-tə-	n-əm	wu-sə-	m	V	O	A S
	2		—		—	—	—	—
	(3)	kər-	n-əm	wu-	nə-m	V	—	A S
Subj. 3	Obj. 1	kər-ti-ye		wu- sə		V	O	S A
	2	kər-en-ce		wu- nzə		V	O	S A
	(3)	kər- ce		wu- zə		V	—	S A

Derivative verbs with object are built up on the same system: the element D precedes V in Cl. II, follows it in Cl. III.

A note on verbs in y in Kanuri

Lukas subdivides Cl. II verbs into those which do not, and those which do, begin with y-. The mere fact of their beginning with y- is not sufficient to warrant the grouping of these verbs into a sub-class (IIa) since Cl. III verbs may also begin with y (e.g. yil- 'shout', yir- 'throw away'): the elision of y after 3rd person prefix s is unimportant, being a simple phonetic phenomenon (y is likewise elided after any prefix, e.g. the past and future tense prefixes and the object prefixes). What distinguished this sub-class of verbs is the irregularity of the 3rd person pl., usually involving reduplication, but sometimes with other features as well:

	'drink'	'carry'	'breed'	'buy'
S. 1	ya-ske	yatə-ske	yarga]ə -ske	yivu-ske
3	s-a	s-atə	s-arga]ə	c-ivu
P. 3	sasa	sasatə	sasalga]ə	casavu

Greenberg⁷ has recognised the 'verbs in y-' as a separate class, and argues that

- 1 a) verbs in y- form 'a small group ... with divergent inflection':
- b) the causative prefix is tə-, more often in the form yitə-;
- c) when yitə- is prefixed 'practically all verbs become verbs in y- in their inflection' (i.e. become Cl. IIa verbs);
2. In Maasai and Lotuho [also in Teso] there are two verb classes: I, not beginning with i, II, with initial i. The causative element is t. Class I verbs 'become' Cl. II verbs in the causative, prefixing it- [actually i+t+vowel, e.g. Maasai -rem 'pierce', causative -i-ta-rem];
3. These two processes are comparable.

This argument prompts the following comments:

1. yitə- is not the only derivative prefix in y: the applied has yi-, yir-, yirg-.
2. The attaching of any of these prefixes to a verb stem obviously produces a 'verb in y', but not necessarily a Cl. IIa verb.
3. The applied forms of Cl. II verbs are in Cl. II: there are no irregularities in 3rd person pl. (P. 3 of the verbs given on p. 15 is: sa-r-gə-vu, sa-vərtə-gə).
4. The prefix yitə- forms causatives of Cl. III verbs: it is prefixed to the applied form. There are two variants of the causative in the 3rd person: in one, the verb is clearly a Cl. III verb and is conjugated exactly like the applied, with prefixed yitə- (see p. 230); in the other variant, there could perhaps be said to be a change of verb class.

Note: the Maasai, etc. forms might be interpreted as: Cl. I > Cl. II, t + vowel being infixed in the Cl. II stem (-iTArem). Infixation is, of course, found in the Teda-Tubu applied form of Cl. I verbs, but not in Kanuri, and not in the causative.

Greenberg is thus right only insofar as there is one construction in Kanuri in which causatives of Cl. III have Cl. II behaviour (but not Cl. IIa), but this has no specific connection with initial y.

An inconclusive conclusion

The kaleidoscopic complexities of the East Saharan verb class system do not seem to be paralleled elsewhere in Africa. Of those languages in which order of elements varies according to verb class, the nearest resemblance is to be seen in the Cushitic languages (Bedauye, Saho and Awiya, and to a lesser extent Somali) in which there are two verb classes. In these languages not only does the order of V and S vary (see p. 224), but in derivative verbs the position of D also varies.

Thus in the Saho causative (element D is s):

I s-bala	'show' (bala 'see')	D V
II kor-is	'cause to ride' (kor 'ride')	V D

The Passive-Reflexive-Reciprocal element D is t, as in East Saharan:

I (Reflex.) ta-bala	'see oneself'	D V
II (Reflex.-personal) aab-it	'do for oneself'	V D

It is also perhaps worthy of note that Reinisch⁸ suggests that Cl. II verbs in Bedauye are formed with the verb an 'be'; Roper⁹, however, suggests the verb 'say', a Cl. I verb with radical n-y.

In both the Cushitic and the East Saharan languages denominative verbs are in the class with element order VS: Cl. II in Bedauye, Cl. III in East Saharan.

There is a remarkable similarity between the object elements in Teda-Tubu and those in the Tegali-Tagoi group of class languages spoken in the Nuba Hills. These are: 1. t, 2. n, 3. zero, identical in sg. and pl., plurality being shown by a separate element, e.g. Rashad (with self-standing pronoun subject preceding):

ŋə tə-gam 'you me-caught'; ŋi nə-gam 'I you-caught'

No other points of resemblance between Tegali-Tagoi and East Saharan have been found.

Anmerkungen

1. i. e. word consisting of verb radical or stem, with various affixes.
2. From several languages.
3. i. e. dialect of Borku recorded by Nachtigal and quoted by Lukas.
4. Other than an 'irregular causative of a Cl. IIa verb' (see below, p. 232).
5. It might, indeed, be a Cl. I verb in its own right, here functioning as an auxiliary; however, it has not been found as a simple verb.
6. See Reflexive (p. 230).
7. The Languages of Africa, pp. 132–133.
8. Die Beɗauyesprache in Nordost-Afrika.
9. Tu Beɗawie.

Norbert Cyffer:

Versuch einer Beschreibung der tonalen Verhältnisse im Kanuri von Maiduguri

1. Klassifikation und gegenwärtiger Forschungsstand
2. Die Töne des Kanuri
 - 2.1. Die „diachronischen“ und die „synchronischen“ Toneme
 - 2.2. Der Mittelton
 - 2.3. Der steigende Ton
 - 2.4. Lexikalische und morphotaktisch bedingte Töne
 - 2.4.1. Vom Basiston des Nominal- bzw. Verbalstammes unabhängige Tonmuster
 - 2.4.2. Vom Basiston des Verbalstammes abhängige Tonmuster
3. Zusammenfassung/Résumé

1. Klassifikation und gegenwärtiger Forschungsstand

Das Kanuri wird von etwa einer Million Menschen im Gebiet um den Tschadsee (Nigeria, Niger, Kamerun, Tschad) gesprochen. Bei den Randgruppen der Kanuri besitzt es die Bedeutung einer Verkehrssprache, ist aber durch die schnelle Verbreitung des Hausa nicht mehr in der Expansion begriffen. Die Gefahr, daß das Kanuri einmal vom Hausa verdrängt werden wird, wie es bei anderen Sprachen der Fall ist, ist nicht vorhanden, da die Kanuri auch heute noch auf ihre Eigenständigkeit, Tradition, Kultur und vor allem Sprache beharren¹. Es gibt in Nigeria Kanuri-Rundfunksendungen, und Bekanntmachungen der lokalen Behörden werden auf Kanuri und Hausa verbreitet. Problematisch ist eine unkomplizierte, jedoch den Anforderungen gerechte orthographische Schreibung. Ein 1966 von der UNESCO unternommener Versuch, für die Gebiete mit Kanuriverbreitung in allen vier Ländern ein gemeinsames Alphabet zu erstellen, ist bis jetzt ohne sichtbaren Erfolg geblieben. In Nigeria hat sich der Dialekt von Yerwa² (Maiduguri) zum Standardkanuri entwickelt. Die erste große Arbeit über das Kanuri ist bereits 1854 von S.W. Koelle erschienen³. Die heute bedeutendste Arbeit ist J. Lukas' „A study of the Kanuri language“⁴. Lukas, der zum ersten Mal die Tonhöhen voll berücksichtigte, hat auch die bahnbrechende Arbeit über die Klassifikation des Kanuri und der mit ihm verwandten Sprachen geleistet. Auf dem XI. Deutschen Orientalistentag in Marburg, 1950, schlug Lukas den Begriff „ostsaharanische Sprachfamilie“ vor⁵. Greenberg hat Lukas' Klassifikation voll übernommen, benutzt jedoch den Begriff „saharanische Sprachen“ und ordnet sie der „nilo-saharanischen Familie“ unter⁶. Zu den saharanischen bzw. ostsaharanischen Sprachen gehören u. a. Kanuri, Tubu, Teda, Zaghawa und Bideyat, das Verbreitungsgebiet erstreckt sich innerhalb des Dreiecks Tibesti im Norden, Wadai im Südosten und Bornu (Nordostnigeria) im Südwesten⁷.

Die Relevanz der Tonhöhen ist innerhalb der saharanischen Sprachen unterschiedlich. Sowohl Lukas für das Tubu⁸ als auch Tucker und Bryan⁹ bestätigen, daß – vom Kanuri und Zaghawa abgesehen – der Ton in den anderen saharanischen Sprachen eine untergeordnete Rolle spielt.