

NIGER-CONGO NOUN CLASS AND AGREEMENT SYSTEMS
IN HISTORICAL AND ACQUISITION PERSPECTIVE

Katherine Demuth, UC Berkeley
Nicholas Faraclas, UC Berkeley
Lynell Marchese, San Jose State University

0. Introduction

This paper investigates noun classes and concordial agreement systems in Niger-Congo languages. It examines comparative language data from Cross River and Kru languages, noting overall characteristic directions of noun class and agreement system evolution in both families. It then focuses on problems which first language learners might face in the learning of a full class/agreement system, considering both spontaneous and experimental Bantu language acquisition data as well as evidence from Bantu languages in contact. Historical changes which have resulted in the leveling of gender and agreement distinctions in Niger-Congo in many ways parallel the various stages of acquisition of the system in languages which still maintain these distinctions. Findings from these comparative data sets provide important clues as to the nature of the linguistic change at work in the cases considered, as well as providing evidence for and against various theories of how those changes might have taken place.

1. Cross River Languages

The Cross River subbranch is divided into five groups: Bendi, Upper Cross, Lower Cross, Ogoni, and Central Delta, each of which typifies a different stage in the gradual disintegration of the prototypical Niger-Congo noun class and concordial agreement systems. The most conservative groups (Upper Cross and Bendi) preserve many of the original CV- prefixes as well as the gender and concordial systems which most probably existed in Proto-Niger-Congo. The most innovative groups (Lower Cross, and especially Ogoni) show limited concord and few if any gender-distinctions, with prefixes where they persist (many nouns in Ogoni are prefixless) typically taking the form N- or V-. In some groups (Central Delta and Bendi especially) old CV- prefixes are incorporated into noun stems.

In Upper Cross, Bendi, and Central Delta, many languages have complete concordial systems including pronominal, subject-verb, adjectival, determiner-demonstrative, and numeral concord. Numeral concord is, however, most often a relic. In Lower Cross and Ogoni only a few relics of concord have survived, including a few adjectival concords.

From the comparative synchronic data on Cross River languages we find a small range of consistent patterns by which gender/concord loss appears to be taking place. It is not just *any* gender which persists, but rather the human 1/2 and the non-human 9/10 classes which are the last to be lost. CV- prefixes are not simply omitted, but rather reduced to V- or N- or incorporated gradually into the stem with new prefixes occasionally added. The number of plural classes tends to collapse, becoming distinguished by one overgeneralized marker. Concord appears to be lost first with numerals and adjectives, while it is maintained longest with subject pronouns.

2. Kru Languages

Like Cross River languages, Kru languages represent a reduced version of a more extensive proto-system. While Kru languages are almost exclusively suffixing, noun class suffixes have all but disappeared through loss or coalescence with the noun stem. Again, we find more and less conservative Kru languages, Eastern Kru showing more preservation of the old system, and Western Kru showing more loss. As the result of coalescence in Kru languages, noun systems are becoming more regularized, with singulars being perceived as unmarked and plurals marked, a tendency observed both in Bantu [Stucky 1978] and in Lower Cross.

Despite this phonological coalescence and seeming "loss" of noun class suffixes, concord is extensive in Kru. In Eastern Kru languages, concordial agreement occurs on subject, object, possessive, interrogative, and relative pronouns, as well as on adjectives, demonstratives and definite markers, as seen in the Godié examples below:

- (1) $\text{p}\bar{\text{a}}\text{k}\bar{\text{p}}\bar{\text{c}} \quad \text{k}\bar{\text{a}}\bar{\text{d}}\bar{\text{c}} \quad \text{n}\bar{\text{c}} \quad \text{m}\bar{\text{l}}\bar{\text{a}} \quad \text{n}\bar{\text{u}} \quad \text{w}\bar{\text{a}}\bar{\text{t}}\bar{\text{c}}$ 'this big man drank cold water'
 man big this drank water cold
- (2) $\bar{\text{c}} \quad \text{m}\bar{\text{l}}\bar{\text{a}} \quad \bar{\text{c}}$ 'he drank it'

The gender distinction in subject pronoun systems is maintained longer than any of the other manifestations of concord in Kru. With one exception: all languages still maintain a singular human/non-human distinction throughout the pronoun set.

As class distinctions decrease, there appears to be a corresponding (though not absolutely predictable) decrease in concordial agreement. Though most languages do not retain adjective gender agreement, singular/plural distinctions are maintained on some adjectives. As in Cross River, numbers and definite markers seem to be lost first.

Kru languages thus represent a case where remnants of gender classes are preserved as coalesced nominal suffixes. While the productivity of nominal classification is minimal, the distinctions which are made correspond to the human classes 1/2a and non-human classes 9/10, similar to the most dominant class re-tentions in Cross River languages. Though the gender system is minimally functional, the agreement system is still productive, indicating a primacy of concord over nominal marking.

3. Bantu Language Acquisition Data¹

The language acquisition data from Bantu languages stem from a longitudinal study of spontaneous and natural speech from 4 Sesotho speaking children between the ages of 2 and 4 1/2 years old [Demuth 1983], a spontaneous/naturalistic Siswati study of 2 children between the ages of 18 months and 36 months, and an experimental study of 3 children 4 1/2 to 6 years of age [Kunene 1979].

From our current cross-linguistic knowledge of strategies that children em-

¹Acknowledgement and appreciation go to Dan Slobin and students for their contributions to this prediction process. I accept full responsibility, however, for the particular interpretations presented here. (KD)

ploy when learning a language [Slobin 1984], we have made several predictions about the kinds of phenomena we would expect to find in the acquisition of the Sesotho noun class system: (1) The learning of noun class prefixes might prove problematic as they are word initial, carry little semantic content, are usually found in unlengthened (and unstressed) position, and usually bear low tone. (2) children might try to collapse the number of singular/plural distinctions made, possibly taking the singular form plus prefix as the root and using only one plural marker, probably class 10. (3) class 9 nouns with \emptyset prefix and monosyllabic nominal stems + prefix would be assigned a singular marker of some sort, making them "fit the paradigm". (4) there would be a somewhat reduced number of gender distinctions in the agreement system initially, perhaps surfacing productively as class 9/10.

Upon considering spontaneous Sesotho language acquisition data we discover that only some of these predictions are upheld. Noun class markers were used with \emptyset -, V-, or CV- markers at the same stage of development, as illustrated below:

- | | | | |
|-----|----------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| (3) | (25.0 months): | -punko | -phoko |
| | | à-pókò | à-pókò |
| | | e-ponk | ma-punkə |
| | | (lè-phóqò) | (mà-phóqò) |
| | | 'green corn stalk' | 'green corn stalks' |

Thus, as with the various stages of loss or incorporation of nominal prefixes found in Cross River languages, children also progress through a stage where a single lexical item may be rendered with variable prefix shape, even in consecutive utterances in the same contextual and grammatical environment. Exceptions to this progression of appropriate nominal marking are found in the omission of class 5, 7, 8, and 10 prefixes (Sesotho $l\epsilon$, $s\epsilon$, (N)li and (N)li, when an adjunct (demonstrative, possessive, etc.) follows the noun, as seen below:

- | | | | |
|-----|------------------|--------|-------------------------|
| (4) | pò:kò | lánè | 'that green corn stalk' |
| | (lè-phóqò | lá-nè) | |
| | green corn stalk | that | |

Omission of these particular prefixes when the noun is used with an adjunct is a phenomenon also found in adult Sesotho speech and may represent an initial stage of prefix loss in progress in Sesotho.

Contrary to our hypothesis, class 9 nouns, which take a \emptyset prefix, are not overmarked with prefixes from other classes, and nouns from one class are rarely assigned to other classes, i.e. there is no collapsing of plural distinctions in singular/plural markings. This differs from the tendencies observed in Cross River, Kru, and Bantu languages in contact, where plural distinctions are frequently neutralized.

These findings contrast with experimental results from Siswati where children of ages 4 1/2-6 did collapse plural markings when the children were given novel word forms and Siswati nouns out of context and asked to provide the corresponding singular or plural form of the noun. Overgeneralizations occurred (1) toward the use of 9/10 class markings for classes 7/8 and 11/10 and (2) toward the over-

extention of class 2a, the human-relative (family relation) class marker, to classes 2, 4, and the liquid/mass class 14 and the infinitival class 15 (apparently analysed only as stems, as they have no singular/plural alternations). Thus older children tended to classify plural nouns into loose human/non-human classes. Independent evidence from Kituba [Mfwene 1972] and Spoken and Kinshasa Lingala [Bokamba 1983] document this same tendency for overgeneralization of the class 2a human-relation class marker for plural when the noun class system begins to lose gender distinctions. The most interesting result, however, is that these same children did *not* make these or any overgeneralizations in spontaneous speech, indicating a major difference in the nature of "natural" versus "less-natural" linguistic contexts.

The acquisition of concordial agreement is a gradual process which has already begun prior to 2 years of age, most notably with demonstratives and possessives. It continues till past the age of 3 when most subject concords and object clitics, demonstratives, possessives, relatives, adjectives, and some numerals are used with appropriate gender forms.

4. Conclusion

First language learners appear to focus not simply on nouns, but on entire nominal or verbal phrases where concord is of primary importance and nominal marking only secondary. This would account not only for the relative lack of marking errors for nouns in context on the part of Sesotho speaking children and for the primacy of concord not only in the order of acquisition, but also in its persistence in Kru and Cross River languages where productive gender marking has been lost. Noun and modifier may be conceived of as being a cognitive unit, with concord as the crucial unifying element. It is proposed that young language learners may adopt this unit as a basic learning construct, using concord productively while continuing to experiment with the correspondingly appropriate marking for nouns.

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THE INTONATION SYSTEM OF ISOKO

Shirley Donwa-Ifode
University of Port Harcourt

1. Introduction

Isoko is a Southwestern Edoid language spoken in the Isoko Local Government Area of the Bendel state of Nigeria.

It is a discrete level tone language with two level tones: high (H) and low (L) as stated by Mafeni [1969] and Elugbe [1977]. Both previous writers, without any discussion, mention the possible use of intonation in Isoko. Though Mafeni claims the existence of downstep and downdrift, Isoko has neither. Moreover, the phenomenon of final low tone raising discussed by Elugbe is a feature of the intonation system. In this paper we give a preliminary analysis of intonation in the language.

For an adequate understanding of the subject of this paper, it is necessary to make some basic observations about the tone system in general. In addition to the H and L tones, contour tones also exist at the phonetic level. They are derived from underlying sequences of level tones: a segmental and a floating. The floating tone that forms one end point of the contour may arise from segmental processes such as Elision, Glide Formation, etc. or they could be underlying floating tones which have purely intonational function. Amongst the justifications for the latter claim is the fact that contour tones are generally simplified, but where one end point of the contour is a feature of intonation, the simplification of that contour is blocked since it is likely to obscure the intonation signal. Consider for instance

- (1) ò|é 'yam'
ò|ê 'yam?'

A simplification of the contour tone on this final ê would yield a positive statement since, where it applies, all contours are simplified to (H).

The lexical function of tone is only prominent in the noun. The tone of the verb stem (Vs) is continually changing from one construction to another; our phonological analysis assigns no underlying tone to the Vs since there is evidence that it acquires its tone by polarisation.

We also postulate a process of tonal replacement. In its citation form the subject concord marker (a linker of the subject and verb phrase (VP)) bears a L tone. This L tone of the subject concord marker (Scm) does not undergo changes generally. However, in conditional and relative clauses at the beginning of a sentence, the L tone of the Scm is always replaced by a H. Compare examples (2a, b) with (2c).

- (2) a. ò ò na → ò ò ná 'he went'
he Scm go
b. ò ò tí na → ò ò tí nà 'he will go'
will