

Book Review

Denis Creissels, *Le malinké de Kita: Un parler mandingue de l'ouest du Mali*. Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe, 2009.

Le malinké de Kita is Volume 9 in the Mande Languages and Linguistics (Langues et Linguistique Mandé) series, edited by Raimund Kastenholtz and published by Rüdiger Köppe. It is a description of a West Manding dialect spoken in the Kita area of Mali, intended primarily for linguists who do not specialize in Mande studies and may not be familiar with any other Manding language. The grammar consists of 27 chapters, an index, a lexical sample, and a glossed text with translation.

From the very first pages it becomes obvious that the book is an excellent reference source. In spite of its being relatively short (only 214 pages, excluding bibliography and supplementary materials), it covers a surprisingly wide range of topics starting with syllable structure and ending with discourse connectors. It is very well organized, easy to navigate, and written in a lucid, engaging style.

Malinké is a relatively well-studied language, for which considerable amounts of linguistic material exist. Even in the case of well-described Mande languages, however, a general linguist would need to work hard to make use of the available sources: many older descriptions have limited scope and do not provide glossed examples, and some rely on arcane terminology or are cast in non-transparent or outdated theoretical frameworks. The major challenge of writing a Malinké reference grammar was therefore not to collect and analyze new data, but rather to make what was previously available accessible to the linguistic community at large. *Le malinké de Kita* meets that goal with success. It is comprehensive, aiming to cover – or at least touch upon – all significant aspects of phonology and morphosyntax; all examples are glossed and adequately explained; and no familiarity with any specific theoretical framework is expected of the reader.

Le malinké de Kita is an excellent example of a traditional language description, and does not seek to break with the tradition in any way. It does not build explicitly on a large corpus of naturally occurring examples, reports no quantitative data, and does not pay much attention to methodology (such as elicitation vs. observation techniques). Examples come mostly from secondary sources, primarily from doctoral

dissertations by Keita (1985) and Diabaté (1990). As it is, the book describes all important aspects of Malinké grammar in a succinct, but coherent and insightful way, and is destined to become a major source of Manding data for general linguists and typologists.

Le malinké de Kita is particularly remarkable in two respects. First of all, it conveys a deep understanding of the historical mechanisms that make the language “the way it is”: diachronic processes and comparative data from other dialects are invoked throughout the book to explain seemingly arbitrary rules and lexical exceptions. Secondly, the grammar has a strong lexical orientation, and contains a wealth of information both about individual lexical items (some of which are included in the index along with linguistic terms) and about lexical splits in the behavior of certain semantic and morphosyntactic classes (see, for example, the discussion of differences between individual kinship terms or clan names with respect to the marking of definiteness, pp. 95-96).

The grammar adopts a special simplified system of representation of tone: while traditionally, tone is marked syllable by syllable, in *Le malinké de Kita*, only changes in tone are noted, i.e. tones are left unmarked unless different from the preceding tone.

More generally, the grammar presents a detailed, meticulous study of Malinké tonology. It builds on the idea, going back to Creissels & Grégoire (1993), that Manding tone systems are best treated in terms of an opposition between a marked and an unmarked element (typically, the low tone is marked). The present study makes a further important step in the analysis of Malinké tone by adopting an underlying level of representation, in the tradition of autosegmental tonology. This move adds to the descriptive power of the account, making it possible, among other things, to distinguish sequences of syllables where each syllable is associated with its own underlying low tone from sequences of syllables that are associated with a single underlying low tone.

In order to mark that distinction, Creissels adopts a special notation for the underlying (“lexical”) forms: low tone is indicated by underlining, which may mark a single vowel (if the low tone is associated with a single syllable) or extend to two or more syllables (if the low tone is associated with a sequence of syllables). Lexical forms are introduced in text by vertical lines: |form|.

Some further specific sections of the grammar deserve special mention, since they either present a new perspective on a previously known problem or uncover new issues that are of interest from the typological point of view. For example, *Le malinké de Kita* includes an original treatment of clitics, which rarely receive systematic

attention in the study of Mande languages. In his classification of clitics, Creissels relies on their phonological interaction with adjacent words and identifies, most interestingly, a group of “schizophrenic” clitics (including some predicative markers and preverbs), which combine, in the same construction, properties of enclitics and proclitics (p. 44).

Turning to the functioning of grammatical markers, Malinké of Kita is characterized by an unusually broad range of uses of definite forms, suggesting that the definite form functions as the unmarked form of the noun (for example, the definite marker is present when a word is cited in isolation). The unmarked status of definite forms prompts Creissels not to state any specific conditions on the use of the definite marker, but rather, to describe contexts where the definite marker need not be present. This simple move illustrates how an elegant, data-driven description can be achieved by adopting a non-standard solution.

Other unusual properties of Malinké of Kita noted by Creissels include:

- the special optative form (used exclusively in formulaic constructions involving ‘God’ as the subject);
- the extended use of the “inalienable possession” construction, which appears to be productive and is widely used, e.g., with inanimate possessors;
- the special narrative predicative marker appearing in the first clause of a sequential construction (the subsequent clauses feature an infinitival marker).

Of special interest to typologists is the unusually detailed – for a grammar of a Mande language – discussion of various types of adverb, which includes an original classification of ideophones into “intensifying” (describing the intensity of an action) and “specifying” (describing the manner, p. 152-153). Those interested in syntax will enjoy the sections on secondary predication and the associative construction, as these topics are rarely covered in the grammars of related languages. Those interested in discourse structure will be interested in the special subsection on discourse connectors and in observations on characteristic properties of oral narratives; in particular, texts in the oral tradition are characterized by the occasional use of the old definite ending *-o*, which had been replaced by a tonal definite marker in other registers.

In a careful, detailed description like *Le malinké de Kita*, there is little one could disagree with. The only tendency that occasionally made me wish for more explicit discussion has to do, in a way, with the book’s major merit – the prominence of the historical perspective in the synchronic analysis, to the point that sometimes the distinction between synchrony and diachrony may appear to be blurred. The lack of

explicit delineation can be illustrated with the treatment of instances where what seems to be the same form is used in different functions. For example, the qualifying construction may involve different types of modifiers, including ordinary verbs and nouns that “can also be used” as modifiers (cf. |h̄in| ‘blacken’ vs. |k̄e-hin| ‘dark-skinned man’ or |k̄e| ‘man’ vs. |s̄u-ke| ‘male horse’). What is not entirely clear from the discussion is whether such cases involve the same – perhaps polysemous – word used in two different positions or two different words that are no more than historically related. Similarly, another group of modifiers is represented by qualifying verbs combined with a nasal ending (cf. |kutu| ‘be short’ vs. *kèkúdûn* ‘small man’). Here again, it is not entirely clear whether the relation between the two forms is productive or whether the adjectival forms are no longer perceived as part of the verbal paradigm.

The same point applies to the discussion of genitive markers. The genitive construction commonly involves elements that have corresponding postpositions, but the fact that they no longer retain their original postpositional semantics may suggest that the relation is only diachronic, and the genitive elements could be alternatively regarded as synchronically independent possessive linkers. Finally, also lacking is an explicit discussion of the synchronic vs. diachronic status of the relation between postpositions and nouns, and more generally, between postpositions, nouns, and preverbs. As in other Mande languages, Malinké postpositions are often homophonous with nouns, from which they derive historically. Whether all such postpositions are synchronically independent of the corresponding noun, however, is not made explicit. The same forms also occur as preverbs (i.e. some preverbs also “have the status of postpositions”, p. 69), but whether they derive from postpositions or directly from the corresponding nouns remains unclear.

On the other hand, the slightly vague description of the relation between homophonous words (or between different uses of the same word?) may present a descriptive advantage, as this may be the case where leaving a characterization open to interpretation may be preferable to imposing any particular analysis without sufficient motivation. In any case, this minor issue has no impact on the overall quality of the book, and one may only wish that some of the issues it raises were further developed in separate studies.

The body of the grammar is followed by an index, which includes not only linguistic terms but also selected lexical items (‘be’, ‘want’, ‘who?’, etc.). The lexical orientation of the grammar is further emphasized by an appendix consisting of a lexicon, sorted by semantic field. Some of the fields are more precisely defined than others (e.g., “body-related terms”, “natural environment”, “substances” for nouns,

“physiological states and processes” vs. “manipulations (changes of state)” for verbs), but the appendix no doubt provides interesting material for comparative or typological studies of the lexicon.

The second appendix consists of a text – Adam and Eve in Paradise, glossed and transcribed. The text presents a curious version of a biblical story, adopted from Diabaté (1990).

In sum, *Le malinké de Kita* is clearly one of the best grammars of a Mande language written so far, and is an excellent reference source to be used not only by experts in Mande, but also by typologists and general linguists. The grammar is easily accessible to readers previously unfamiliar with Mande languages, and conforms to the highest standards of language description.

References

- Creissels, D. & C. Grégoire. La notion de ton marqué dans l’analyse d’une opposition tonale binaire: Le cas du mandingue. *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics* 14, 1993, pp. 107-54.
- Diabaté, M. M. *Transcription et analyse de textes de tradition orale malinké*. Doctoral dissertation, Grenoble, Stendhal University, 1990.
- Keita, B. *Eléments de description du malinké de Kita (Mali)*. Doctoral dissertation, Grenoble, Stendhal University, 1985.

Tatiana Nikitina