

#06

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Africaines



- _ Proto-Berber phonological reconstruction: An update
- _ Harmony and disharmony in Mbat (Jarawan Bantu) verbs
- _ Inheritance and contact in the genesis of Gisamba (Bantu, L12a, DRC): A diachronic phonological approach
- _ Comptes rendus / Book reviews



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Valentin VYDRIN, *Cours de grammaire bambara (ouvrage en réalité augmentée)*, Paris, Presses de l'Inalco, 2019, 597 p.

by Klaudia DOMBROWSKY-HAHN
University of Bayreuth

The *Cours de grammaire bambara* deals with the grammar of the Mande language Bambara (or Bamanankan), the most important national language spoken in Mali. The author characterizes the book as a compromise between a language textbook and a reference grammar. This review follows up on the question of whether this combination is advantageous.

The book is subdivided into 38 lessons, preceded by an introduction and followed by two appendices, which provide lists of glosses, grammatical morphemes and references, including printed and electronic resources. The book closes with an index of topics.

As expected from a textbook, the chapters are called “lessons”, and each of them is designed for 90 to 120 minutes. They are arranged according to grammatical topics. In most cases, a lesson covers one topic (i.e. participles and converbs are the only topic of lesson 18, the infinitive is the only topic of lesson 31); exceptionally, several short topics are combined in one lesson (i.e. lesson 4 includes sections on the metrical foot, minor tone classes, identification clauses and personal pronouns). Every lesson discusses the grammatical topic it focuses on and illustrates it with examples taken from naturally produced texts. To justify the label “augmented reality”, an application downloadable onto a smartphone provides the opportunity to listen to the recordings of the example sentences. The lessons end with suggestions for further reading and up to five exercises.

The first lesson introduces the geographical distribution and the sociolinguistic status of Bambara in Mali and discusses its external and internal classification. The grammar lessons set out very traditionally with a discussion of phonology and tonology. Other lessons are based either on a form or on a function. As an example, lesson 33 is dedicated to the subjunctive and the manifold constructions in which it is used, whereas lesson 34 focuses on the different ways to express conditional and temporal clauses.

The *Cours de grammaire bambara* is the first thorough grammar of the language since Dumestre's (2003) *Grammaire fondamentale du bambara*. It deals with all important grammatical topics of the language, taking into account the results of recent research not only on Bambara but on the cluster of Manding varieties as a whole. To mention but a few of them: the new interpretation of the tonal system

of Bambara based on the idea that next to syllables that carry a tone of their own there are toneless syllables; the introduction of the unit of foot; the categorization of the quotative *kó* among others as copula; the purely tonal distinction between a “visual” and a “non-visual” progressive, recalling different categories of evidentiality known in other languages.¹ The explanations are kept short and suppose some previous knowledge of the language, but the additional titles for further reading at the end of each lesson invite the reader to delve deeper into the respective topic. With respect to some subjects a parallel reading of Dumestre’s (2003) and Vydrin’s books may be beneficial.

The author follows the widely acknowledged scientific practice in language description by using almost exclusively attested examples from texts to illustrate the presented forms and functions. When compared to previous grammars, the presentation of example sentences is innovative in several respects. First, the innovative character relates to the type of transcription and translation including four levels. The first level presents the “surface realization” taking into account the tonal melody after application of tone rules, the vowel assimilation processes and some particularities of pronunciation, such as the production of certain instances of <s> as postalveolar fricative [ʃ], written as *sh*. The second level corresponds to the orthographic transcription plus the notation of lexical tone. It includes, among others, the tonal article in form of a floating Low and, in most examples, a separation of words into morphemes. The third level bears the glosses, the fourth is a free translation. The second innovation consists in providing audio files of all illustrating examples. These audio files were recorded with the help of several Bambara speakers in Bamako and in Paris, and are accessible by means of a smartphone application. Every sentence is repeated thrice by the same speaker. It is worth mentioning that the separation of the first two levels of transcription, and, especially, the marking of the Low tone article on the second level throughout all sentences makes the outstanding value of the book.

Students of linguistics may feel irritated by the author’s idiosyncratic use of some technical terms. Deviating from the habitual usage, the author subsumes such grammatical morphemes as pronouns, postpositions, some determiners and some discourse particles under the term of “auxiliaries” and “semi-auxiliaries” (p. 554-560), next to predicate markers, which are the elements that convey tense, aspect,

1. The sentences meant to illustrate the “non-visual progressive” (p. 93-94) and the corresponding recordings are not considered to be grammatical by all speakers, though (S. Doumbia from Bamako, p.c.).

mood and polarity values of a verb. The designation “reflexive” is used not only for participants who are simultaneously initiator and endpoint of an event, but more widely for pronouns coreferential with the subject (p. 189 ff.). The terminology chosen for the description of Bambara tonology is likely to trigger misleading associations. In chapter 3, the author discusses the distinction between “dominant” and “recessive” syllables: only dominant syllables bear their own tone, while recessive syllables depend on the tone of the dominant syllable with which they constitute the tonal domain. The terminology of dominant and recessive syllables suggests a metaphorical reference to the meaning of these terms in genetics. In genetics, a recessive allele is that one of a pair of alleles that is masked by the activity of the second, when both are present on the same gene. But following the author’s explanations there are not two tones on a recessive syllable, rather, it is toneless and its realization depends on the tone of a neighboring dominant syllable. Since nothing else is covered, as the author admits in another publication, they could have simply been called “no tone syllables” (Vydrin 2016: 85).

There seem to be some inconsistencies with respect to the description of constructions expressing resultative aspect. A state resulting from a preceding action, and sometimes even pure states which do not require a preceding action to occur,² are encoded by means of the resultative participle *V-len (-nen)* and the identifier *dòn* (neg. *té*) or the copula *bé* (neg. *té*) otherwise found in locative and existential clauses, as in (1).

- (1) Nê dén-` sà-len bé
 1SG.EMPH child-ART die-PTCP.RES COP³
 ‘My child is dead [I am mourning it].’ (8-28), p. 100

Following Idiatov (2000: 34), this construction is discussed as one of the aspects and moods, and its exponents figure in the list of aspectual and modal markers in lesson 8, entitled “verbal intransitive and transitive clauses, verbal conjugation”. In contrast, in lesson 18, similar constructions are considered to be instances of a secondary predicate.⁴ Although the participle does indeed function as a

2. For instance in sentence 8-29 cited by the author on p. 100: *jíriba jò-len be dúkene` ná* ‘There is a big tree in the yard’, where the verb *jò* ‘stand’ does not imply an action.

3. Abbreviations: ART tonal article, COP copula in affirmative clause with nonverbal predicate; COP.NEG copula in negative clause with nonverbal predicate, PTCP.RES resultative participle; 1SG.EMPH first person singular emphatic pronoun.

4. The latter interpretation entails other misleading conclusions, e.g. in lesson 32 on the infinitive, where a similar construction is interpreted as a “semi-verbal or nonverbal predicate”.

secondary predicate in other contexts, particularly in verbal clauses, this is not the case in sentences such as (2).

- (2) Ní áw bèn-nen té [...]
 if 2PL agree-PTCP.RES COP.NEG
 ‘If you do not agree [the family will be divided].’ (18-11), p. 220

One of the major criteria of secondary predicates is their optionality. Thus, according to Schultze-Berndt & Himmelmann (2004: 65), when secondary predicates are omitted, the remaining string does not become ungrammatical and the relationship between the constituents is left unchanged. However, if the participle supposed to function as a secondary predicate is omitted in the mentioned example, the relationship between the remaining constituents and, as a result, the sense of the sentence (3) changes considerably. (3) is an identification clause, with its meaning changing to ‘if you weren’t; without you (lit.: if it is not you)’.

- (3) Ní áw té
 if 2PL COP.NEG
 ‘If you weren’t [without you] [the family would/will be divided].’
 (18-11), p. 220

The *Cours de grammaire bambara* bears the following characteristics of a language learning textbook: it is divided into lessons, most of which span about 10 to 20 pages; it includes explanations of the topics discussed, and it ends with exercises. The amount of knowledge that is to be conveyed in 90 to 120 minutes is well measured. The grammatical phenomena are explained, albeit sparsely.

The assignments at the end of each lesson are adapted to the respective grammatical topic. Thus, the lists of minimal pairs at the end of lesson 2 on phonology are likely to be pronunciation exercises, even if there is no description of the task. In lessons 3 to 5 focusing on tone and in all the following lessons, the students are asked to note the tonal realization of sentences for which only the lexical tone is provided, by applying the tonal rules introduced in lesson 3. The bulk of the tasks are translations in both directions, but there are also more specific tasks such as the transformation of transitive into antipassive sentences (lesson 20), or searching for the meaning and the analysis of some particular constructions in the *Corpus Bambara de Référence* (lessons 22 through 24).

The usual efforts to ensure scientific correctness in language description (i.e. the exclusive use of attested examples) has prevented the illustrative examples from being arranged according to a difficulty level starting with the easier ones, and to avoid the occurrence

of difficult constructions before they are theoretically introduced. Thus, chapter 7 on locative clauses and simple postpositions mentions the use of the postposition *kó* ‘after’ as final conjunction in temporal participial clauses and illustrates it with a complex sentence, before even simple clauses with a verbal predicate are introduced.

Furthermore, there are no vocabulary lists. This may be due to the close link of the textbook to the database *Corpus Bambara de Référence*, of which the author is the initiator and the person responsible (Vydrin *et al.* 2011-2020). Learners are apparently required to use the database dictionary to find unknown lexemes.

This book is strongly recommended for Bambara learners, albeit not for beginners. Not only the title but some of its features too suggest that it is intended for language learners: its organization into lessons including grammatical topics and exercises, the four-level representation of example sentences separating the levels of surface realization and the more abstract morpho-lexical level, and the accompanying audio recordings, which allow a sentence to be perceived in the visual and the auditive sensory modalities. The latter are valuable for the auditory perception of such difficult phenomena as the tonal and intonational realization of a sentence. However, since the exposition of the topics includes a lot of technical terms, learners’ progression is taken into account only in the very beginning, and vocabulary lists are not provided, it does not seem suitable for beginners, at least not as a self-learning tool. Obviously, the intended audience of this book are rather (L1 or L2) speakers of the language: students who already have some skills in the language and want to learn more about the grammar of the language, such as for instance (future) teachers of Bambara, or students of linguistics interested in the language structure. In the sense that every person is engaged in lifelong language learning, this book is intended for learners on a high level.

As a reference grammar, the course is a very welcome addition, an extension and an update of Dumestre’s (2003). One can safely state that this book is setting the standard for the grammatical analysis of Bambara. It would be definitely desirable to make it accessible in Mali, too.

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