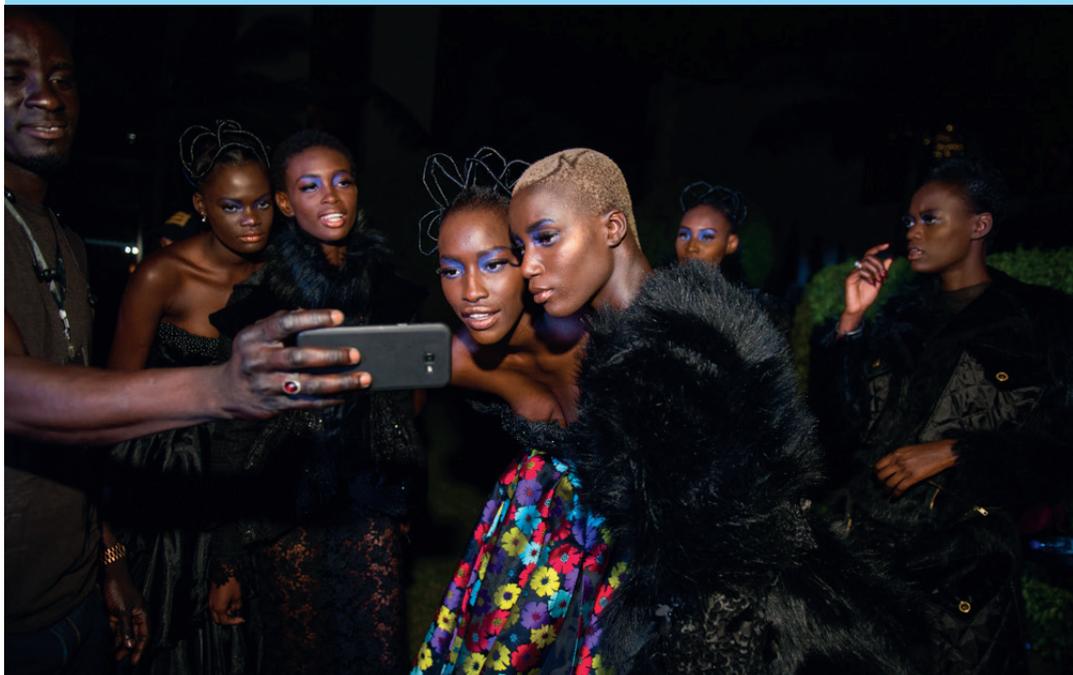


#07

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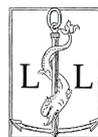
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Courriel : llafrique@cnrs.fr

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Comptes rendus de lecture

Book reviews

Heleen SMITS, *A grammar of Lumun, a Kordofanian language of Sudan*, Utrecht, LOT, 2017, 807 p. [<https://www.lotpublications.nl/a-grammar-of-lumun>].

By Nicolas Quint

CNRS, UMR 8135 Langage, langues et cultures d'Afrique (Llacan)

Lumun is one of the nine languages comprising the Talodian family (Norton & Alaki 2015), itself one of the five groupings that make up the Kordofanian branch of Niger-Congo (Quint 2020; 2009: 3-12; 2006: 1-9). The present publication is the author's PhD, defended and published in 2017 in two volumes.

Lumun data had previously been published (e.g. Stevenson 1956-1957; Schadeberg 1981; Spronk 2004). However, the present study represents by far the most complete description of the language and is probably also the most ambitious and detailed linguistic description ever issued of any Kordofanian language to-date.

Let us begin first with the structure of this work. Heleen Smit's (henceforth HS) grammar of Lumun opens with an initial section comprising resources that enable the reader to make their way through the book, namely a table of contents (p. V-XVI), a list of tables (p. XVII-XX), acknowledgements (p. XXI-XXIV), a list of abbreviations and symbols (p. XXV-XXVIII) and two maps presenting the Lumun linguistic area (p. XXIX-XXX). In the introduction (§1: 1-18), HS presents us with basic facts about the Lumun people – a community of about 20,000 people (p. 1) whose homeland is situated in the southern part of the Nuba Mountains, in the centre of the Republic of Sudan – and their language. She also gives information about her fieldwork experiences, her methodology (glossing of examples etc.) and the organization of the book. As HS's "research for the current study started in September 2007" (p. 11) and the grammar was released in 2017, we can deduce that it took her 10 years to complete her PhD: this is not surprising given the high quality of this work and the considerable amount of information it contains. In the following chapters (§), HS analyses the main characteristics of Lumun grammar across 700 pages: phonology (§2), i.e. vowels and consonants, tone (§3), nouns (§4), concords (§5), i.e. the morphology associated with noun classes, pronouns (§6), connexive and possessor pronouns (§7), demonstratives (§8), the restrictor (§9), a morpheme that "turns adjectival and verbal predicates into attributive modifiers [...] of the head noun" (p. 289), adjectives (§10), relative clauses (§11), verbs (§12), pluractionals (§13), verbal derivation (§14), the diverse usages of *cík* (§15), a common noun originally meaning 'place(s)', which grammaticalized into "a vague reference particle"

and “a pragmatic marker” (p. 565), prepositional proclitics (§16), adverbs, discourse markers and interjections (§17), conjunctions (§18), focus (§19), and question words and particles (§20). Following these chapters, which represent the main bulk of the book, we still find two appendices, namely a text sample (p. 717-749) and a Lumun wordlist (p. 751-758), a reference section (p. 759-768), an abstract in Dutch, the author’s mother tongue (p. 769-776) and her curriculum vitae (p. 777).

Regarding their form, the two volumes that make up this grammar are highly commendable: the layout is simple and efficient with appropriately sized fonts, typos and errors are virtually absent (I personally found only a few dozen across the whole work), and hence the book is decidedly reader-friendly, which is no small advantage, taking into account its length.

Regarding its scientific content, the Lumun grammar is undoubtedly an outstanding achievement, characterized by a high degree of consistency and revealing a deep knowledge of the language under scrutiny. First, from a methodological point of view, the analysis is rigorous and makes ample use of the corpus, pointing out the cases where a given form, whether expected or obtained through elicitation, is not attested “in speech nor in written text” (cf. discussion about hortative pronouns, p. 227). Second, HS provides detailed and convincing accounts of the forms and structures she describes, e.g. when she examines the two alternative realizations of the shortened Past Complete of ‘to be’ (p. 388) and shows how one of them – the “expected form” – is, from a morphological viewpoint, more easily predictable than the other. Third, she is able to grasp subtle semantic differences that increase the value of the grammar even more, e.g. when she illustrates the contrast between adjectival and invariable numerals (p. 295), the former expressing an exact (“precisely counted”) number whereas the latter convey an approximate value (“one more or one less would not be impossible”) of the same number. Another impressive example is the distinction between “the adjective and the Complete of the related (inchoative) state verb” (p. 284), illustrated by the item ‘old’, whose adjectival form, when combined with the noun *mīl* ‘sorghum’, refers “in a neutral way” to ‘old sorghum’ (*mīl ɪ-m-īpɛ*), meaning “sorghum that has been stored”, whereas the verbal form refers to ‘sorghum which has become old’ (*mīl ɪ-m-īpā.t*), the meaning of which is clarified by the author as follows: “picture that comes to mind: it has holes from being eaten by ants, it has probably been stored for several years”. Fourth, HS frequently resorts (i) to internal reconstruction, e.g. when she explores the historical relationship between the different passive forms and their link with verbal pluractionality (p. 541f.) or (ii) to comparisons with related languages, e.g. when she posits the existence of “a pronominal formative

η(ɔ)”, basing herself on similar forms attested in other Talodian varieties (p. 198f.). Fifth, HS is modest and honest enough to say “I do not know”, e.g. p. 52, about the possible existence of a contrast between [ɾ] and [r] for one of her informants. By overtly admitting the limits of her own knowledge, the author proves that she is in fact a reliable scientist. Sixth, HS also expresses valuable typological insights about Lumun: to the best of my knowledge, she is the first to explicitly mention the existence of a “person hierarchy” in the pronominal system of a Kordofanian language (p. 215), a phenomenon whose existence was already suggested by the data published by Vanderelst (2016), as commented on in Quint (2019: 315). Seventh, HS fully assumes her theoretical premises, e.g. she resolutely refuses to take into account the notion of syllable in her analysis (p. 25 note 15), preferring instead to consider “the mora, not the syllable [my underlining] as the unit on which a toneme (...) is realized” (p. 83). In full accordance with this choice, HS’s Lumun grammar does not include a chapter devoted to the syllabic structure, which is quite unusual for a functional description of a little documented language, but in total harmony with her phonological convictions. Eighth, HS is also a creative scholar, who does not hesitate to add especially devised sections to her grammar in order to make her analyses fit the data: section 15, entirely devoted to one specific item of the language, namely *cik* (see above), bears witness of the author’s flexibility and adaptive capacities.

As a Kordofanist (e.g. Quint 2020), I am also fascinated by the numerous linguistic features described by HS for Lumun that seem to closely parallel what we can find in other Kordofanian languages, in particular Koalib, the Kordofanian language (Heibanian family) I know best. Regarding phonology, (i) Lumun, like Koalib has a phoneme /ɾ/, but in both languages this /ɾ/ cannot be geminated (p. 50, 464; see Quint 2009: 81; 2006: 90f. for Koalib), and (ii) alveolar /t/ has a rhotic allomorph /r/ between vowels (p. 22, 49f.; see Quint 2009: 111f.; 2006: 123f. for Koalib). Regarding morphology, (i) the demonstrative follows a similar morphological formula: compare Lumun *en-CL¹-í* ‘this’ (p. 255) and Koalib *ké-CL-ó* ‘this’, which can both be glossed as DEM-CL-PROX, (ii) both languages have an associative plural suffix (Lumun *-(ηɔ)n*, Koalib *-ηá*) used with a restricted set of items, including proper nouns and some pronouns, e.g. Lumun *ṣṣṣ/ṣṣṣṣ ~ ṣṣṣwṣṣ/ṣṣṣwṣṣ* ‘who/who-PL’ (p. 687-692) and Koalib *éyyé/éyyéṣ* ‘who/who-PL’. Regarding semantics, (i) both languages have a series of anthroponyms based on the person’s birthrank, e.g. Lumun *Kokkô*

1. Although HS uses the abbreviation C (p. XXV) to denote (class) concords (or markers), I have used the form CL and adapted her glosses accordingly throughout this review, in order to render more explicit the link between the abbreviation CL and the notion of ‘(noun) class’.

‘name of the first born male’ (p. 179) and Koalib *Kwókkò* ‘idem’ (Quint & Manfredi 2020: 21ff.), (ii) Lumun and Koalib also share the same syntactic frame for experiential constructions, in which the experiencer is the object, the sensation or affected organ is the subject and the verb that relates them means ‘bite’ (*ɔkǎrellɔ* in Lumun (p. 475) and *yèé* in Koalib), i.e. in both languages, ‘the foot is biting me’ means ‘my foot hurts’. When compared with other related or geographically close languages, the rich data gathered by HS in her grammar will therefore enable future researchers to develop fruitful areal and comparative studies.

In spite of its many obvious good qualities, HS’s grammar also presents several drawbacks, some of which are examined hereafter. First, her examples are not numbered, which is a serious impediment for the user and the author herself, e.g. when she refers to “the earlier given example, which is repeated here” (p. 307). Without any clear reference (example or page number), if one has already forgotten the context in which the example was first produced, it is just impossible to find it again. Second, the book lacks a thematic index: this grammar is so rich that the tables of contents found at the beginning of each volume are clearly not sufficient to fully exploit the data and analyses it encloses. The lack of a thematic index will be most strongly felt by typologists and comparativists, who certainly represent a substantial portion of the potential readership. Third, in spite of HS’s care, some inconsistencies and omissions have made their way into the book: e.g. (i) *ɔpǎkí* is translated as both ‘grandparent (...) and grandchild’ in the running text (p. 180) but as ‘ancestor, descendant’ in Table 24 (next page), where the meanings ‘grandparent, grandchild’ are associated with another noun, namely *ápɔpɔ* (itself derived from Sudanese Arabic), (ii) on p. 363, three possible environments (a, b and c) are listed for the use of the Dependent Perfective: a) and b) are duly handled by HS in the following pages (p. 364ff.), however she apparently forgot to deal with the third environment, in which the Dependent Perfective is used “as a second command coordinated through *anǎ* ‘and’ with an Imperative”. Fourth, here and there, the same piece of information is needlessly repeated in different passages of the book, e.g. the use of the allomorph *na-* of the prepositional proclitic *nɔ-* in comparative constructions (p. 591 and 595ff.). Fifth, some of HS’s hypotheses and explanations look arbitrary or speculative: e.g. I have not fully understood (i) why the “lower numerals [which] take, or can take, a concord” are not included in Table 28, aimed at giving “an overview of modifiers with concord” (p. 190ff.); (ii) why the author rejects the possibility of the morphological structure *at-CL-ɔt* ‘associative marker’ being alternatively analysed as *a-CL-CL-ɔt*, while she accepts the fact that “the variant *a-CL-CL* of the focus marker (...) may have developed from *ak-CL*”

(p. 301). Sixth, HS sometimes resorts to infelicitous wordings, e.g. when she mentions “[singular/plural] noun class pairs with less than 6 members” (p. 130), she qualifies such pairs as “rarely occurring”. However, in Table 20 (p. 130ff.), which presents us with some of the nouns associated with the pairs in question, we can find items such as ‘tree’ and ‘stone’, which probably are not “rarely occurring” words in Lumun daily speech. It would probably have been better to say that these pairs have “few members” (in the available lexicon compiled by the author). Seventh, in spite of the wealth of data this grammar provides about Lumun, two domains appear not to have been given sufficient attention: (i) no specific chapter is devoted to ideophones and onomatopoeia, in spite of the importance of these parts of speech in Niger-Congo languages in general and in Kordofanian in particular. HS explicitly mentions color and (other) “intensifying adverbials” (p. 291f. and 633f.). A bit further on (p. 641), she introduces “symbolic interjections”, which express “sounds” – e.g. *attáp* ‘sound of [a] palmfruit [*sic*] hitting the bottom of the tortoise’ – and also appear in the illustrative texts of the appendices, although they are not glossed nor translated therein: see the occurrence of *attáp* p. 742 (line 108), associated with the verb meaning ‘throw’. It seems therefore plausible that Lumun, like Koalib (Quint & Ali Karmal Koko 2018) or Moro (Ali Naser & Rose 2020), has a category of expressive or intensifying adverbs that convey various types of sensorial perceptions and could be described as ideophones but are not treated as such by HS; (ii) the grammar does not explicitly deal with syntax, in particular word order and the structure of the complex sentence. Of course, these notions are not totally absent from HS’s work: section 18 (p. 643-678), which focuses on conjunctions, exemplifies the use of *ana* ‘and’, the “subjunctive particle *á-*” and the “complementizer” *akka*. Therefore, by reading through this section (and others), the reader will be able to get an idea of how Lumun combines different types of subordinate and coordinate clauses. However, a section or chapter specifically dedicated to syntax would have been most welcome for the full completion of this descriptive grammar.

A reviewer is expected to criticize the book under scrutiny – which is precisely what I have just done. But, frankly, I feel almost ashamed to have formulated negative statements about HS’s grammar. In my opinion, these shortcomings are not really significant in view of the exceptional scientific value of the admirable piece of work HS has managed to produce. Both the scholarly and the Lumun communities can rightly be grateful for the huge effort Heleen Smits has put into her study: thanks to her praiseworthy commitment, we now know what a Kordofanian language looks like at a level of detail never previously attained. This Lumun grammar will cer-

tainly remain a model for Kordofanists and other Nuba Mountain language specialists for many years to come.

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