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A survey of Niger-Congo noun class agreement systems

As pointed out by Good (2012) for Benue-Congo, the noun class markers and pairings so distinctive of Niger-Congo languages are parts of a larger morphosyntactic *system*. Although there are long-standing proposals concerning the noun class markers and some pairings for Proto-Niger-Congo (Williamson 1989), less attention has been paid to the broader morpho-syntactic properties of the system. The wealth of descriptive data collected over the past thirty years allows us to revisit these valuable proposals and expand their coverage of the entire system. This paper will present the results of a survey of the noun class *agreement* systems of Niger-Congo languages. In scope this paper aims to address all of Niger-Congo, although language families exhibiting little evidence of noun class systems (e.g. Mande) are necessarily excluded. Here I mean *noun class system* to be narrowly defined as a system displaying the following properties typical of Niger-Congo collected by Kiessling (2013:44): “a) all nouns assigned to a limited set of noun classes marked by nominal prefixes or suffixes; b) all nouns control, by virtue of their assignment to a class, a system of concordial agreement which penetrates vast sections of the morphosyntax and which is also used for anaphoric reference; c) class assignment is governed by semantic principles so that classes could be described as semantic networks; d) most noun classes form singular-plural pairs or genders.” The point in c) should be made more specific: unlike in familiar Indo-European systems, sex/gender is *not* a feature relevant to typical Niger-Congo systems, and thus families such as Ijoid (Jenewari 1989) are excluded as well.

Noun class agreement system features

- i. Number of Noun Classes/Pairings
- ii. Affix Type
- iii. Agreement Targets
- iv. Number of Agreement Series
- v. Variation in the form of agreement marker within a series
- vi. Variable Exponence of noun class or agreement markers
- vii. Semantic coherence of noun class/gender

A genealogically balanced pilot survey has revealed the above features to be relevant to the reconstruction of the PNC agreement system. While the descriptive literature of Niger-Congo makes these parameters quite clear, no attempt has yet been made to reconstruct all of these aspects of the Proto-Niger-Congo system.

Noun Class Markers. Noun class inventories can range from relatively small to quite large (e.g. twenty-five in Fula). Languages with large noun class inventories can have even larger inventories of pairings (Bainouk, Northern Atlantic, as described in Cobbinah 2013, has around 60 different pairings). Affix type can vary between prefixing (found in most subfamilies), suffixing (found predominantly in Gur and to some extent Atlantic), circumfixing (as in Ditammari, a North Central Gur language, e.g. *mā-tāā-mà* ‘voice’, Reineke 2012: 135), and mixed systems.

Agreement Targets. In all languages of the pilot survey, noun class agreement is triggered on adjectives, demonstratives, (a subset of) numerals, and pronouns (subject, object, possessive, and relative pronouns). These may be considered good candidates for agreement targets of the proto system. To this list may be added interrogatives (‘which’ and ‘how many’), although they did not appear in one language of the pilot (Ditammari). Faraclas (1986) argues that subject-verb con-

cord is the most persistent target in Cross-River languages, but the historical status of subject-verb agreement outside of Benue-Congo is less clear (Hyman 2011, Güldemann 2011).

Agreement Series. Agreement *series* refers to the number of distinct realizations of a noun class marker (or agreement marker) conditioned by the different word classes of the target. For example, Meeussen's (1967: 97) reconstruction of the Proto-Bantu noun class system has five distinct series, the nominal prefix, numeral prefix, pronominal prefix, verb initial prefix, and verbal pre-radical prefix. Arnott's (1970) description of Fula, barring a more abstract morphological analysis, shows an impressive eleven distinct series. Agreement series are then possibly subject to internal variation caused by phonological or morpho-phonological processes, such as vowel harmony, as seen in the Cicipu class 1 prefix: *ka-ádándá* 'thorn' vs. *ko-óci* 'hole' (McGill 2007: 65).

Variable Exponence. This feature refers broadly to a set of phenomena including the fact that in languages such as Khasa (Southwestern Gur), adjectives "take on" the noun class marker of the head noun (*hárá* 'woman', but *há-fíra* 'white woman', Mieke 2007: 156). This situation is even more extreme in Aghem (Kwa), where there are a number of constructions in which nouns appear without their class prefix, such as possessives (compare *tí-bvú* 'dogs' with *bvú'tájá* 'my dogs'), demonstratives (*bvú'tín* 'these dogs'), and associatives (*bvú'tí 'wé* 'the dogs of the child', Hyman 1979). In each of these cases the class is marked on the modifier of the noun.

Semantic Coherence. The feature semantic coherence examines the extent to which noun class membership can be defined in semantic terms (e.g. Bantu human pairing 1/2), as well as any and all derivational functions classes may exhibit.

The results of this survey serve as a first step toward the comprehensive reconstruction of these features, serving to summarize the diversity of agreement systems seen in the Niger-Congo family and to populate the hypothesis space of the nature of the Proto-Niger-Congo system.

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