

Stem-internal morphology in Shilluk transitive verbs

Western Nilotic languages present some of the richest systems of suprasegmental distinctions in the world. Dinka, for example, has three levels of vowel length (Remijsen & Gilley 2008), and independent tone and voice quality distinctions (Andersen 1987). This paper presents an analysis of the suprasegmentals in Shilluk, another Western Nilotic language. The data come from the system of transitive verbs, where suprasegmentals play a crucial role. While several studies on the Shilluk grammar are already available (e.g. Miller & Gilley 2001), the system of suprasegmental distinctions and its role in the morphosyntax are not yet well understood.

Like Dinka, Shilluk has three levels of vowel length, i.e., CVC vs. CVVC vs. CVVVC – cf. (1). This feature distinguishes lexical stems, and also morphological inflections. Among transitive verbs, we find that there are three patterns of vowel length. There are (a) short verbs that remain short across the verb paradigm; (b) short verbs that lengthen the vowel in some inflections; and (c) long verbs, all of which lengthen. This system is comparable to the lexical and morphological use of vowel length in Dinka (Remijsen & Gilley 2008). However, whereas in Dinka the long grade of short verbs coincides phonologically with the base form of long verbs (CVVC), in Shilluk the long grade of short verbs is identical in phonological length to the long grade of long verbs (CVVVC). Relative to Dinka, we find two additional complications in the Shilluk quantity system. One is that the three-level length distinction also appears in suffixed verb forms, as illustrated in (2); another is an elusive quantity distinction in the coda of the stem (3), reported first in Gilley (1992). The latter distinction is limited to forms with CVC and CVVC stems.

Tone and ATR also carry a high functional load in Shilluk transitive verbs. Shilluk has seven tonemes, all of which are distinctive in transitive verbs. A minimal set involving two lexical stems appears in (4). These tonemes are stable across contexts: we have found no evidence for tone sandhi phenomena. The ATR value also plays a role in transitive verb morphology – among others in the marking of spatial deixis, as in (5).

While a few inflections have the same suprasegmental marking across all transitive verbs, most inflections have different tone or quantity patterns in different subsets. A total of seven verb classes can be distinguished in this way.

Data

á-Íêŋ á-Íêeŋ á-lèeεŋ (1)
drum:PAST throw:PAST throw:PAST&2SG

á-lèŋ-á á-lèeŋŋ-á á-lèeεŋ-á (2)
drum:PAST&1SG throw:PAST&ITERAT&1SG throw:PAST&1SG

á-kòk-á á-kòk-ká (3)
hoe:PAST&1SG hoe:PAST&ITERAT&1SG

High-Fall bũʊl á-kɔ̃l kɪ-kêŋ (4)
Bol:N PAST-offend:PAST LOC-here
'Somebody has offended Bol here.'

Low bũʊl á-kɔ̃l kɪ-kêŋ
Bol: N PAST-offend: PAST&2SG LOC-here
'You have offended Bol here.'

Mid wʌc á-kɔ̃l bũʊl
letter: PL PAST-offend:PAST&INSTR Bol: N
'Somebody has offended Bol using letters.'

Rise wʌc á-kɔ̃l bũʊl
letter:PL PAST-offend:PAST&INSTR&2SG Bol:N
'You have offended Bol using letters.'

Low Fall cūu á-kɔ̃l kɪ-kêŋ
bone:PL PAST-takeout: PAST LOC-here
'You have taken out (fish)bones here.'

High ŋɔ̃oom á-kɔ̃l cūu
awl:SG PAST-takeout:PAST&INSTR&2SG bone:PL
'You have used an awl to take out (fish)bones.'

Late Fall cūu á-kɔ̃l kâal
bone:PL PAST -takeout:PAST&FUG cattlecamp:SG
'Somebody has gone away to the cattlecamp to take out (fish)bones.'

á-léεεŋ á-léeeŋ (5)
PAST-throw:ERG&PAST&CENTRIFUGAL PAST-throw:ERG&PAST&CENTRIPETAL

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