

# Workshop: Morphological complexity in noun class systems

June 21 2017, 13:00-17:30

Room T101, 21/22/ Russell Square, SOAS

## Timetable

<b>13:00-14:00</b>	Francesca di Garbo: <b>Modeling the complexity of grammatical gender systems. Three case studies in synchronic and diachronic typology</b>
<b>14:00-14:45</b>	Hannah Gibson, Rozenn Guérois and Lutz Marten: <b>Dynamic developments in the marking of diminutives in Bantu</b>
<b>14:45-15:30</b>	Andrew Harvey : <b>Noun roots in Gorwaa: Toward a morphosyntactic description of the Gorwaa noun</b>
<b>15:30-16:00</b>	<b>Coffee break</b>
<b>16:00-16:45</b>	Alexander Cobbinah: <b>Complex noun class systems in contact</b>
<b>16:45-17:30</b>	Rachel Watson: <b>The same but different: noun classification at the Crossroads</b>

# Abstracts of presentations (in alphabetical order)

## Complex noun class systems in contact

Alexander Cobbinah

SOAS, University of London

In my talk I will present the noun class systems of the Bainounk and Joola languages covered by the Crossroads project (Bainounk Gubëeher and Gujaher as well as Joola Banjal and Kujireray as described by Sagna 2008, Watson 2015, Cobbinah 2013, Lüpke in press) in terms of morphological complexity and its relationship to the parameter language contact. This analysis applies the typological studies by Di Garbo (2016a & b) that focus on a wider sample of noun class languages to a more controlled setting with strong areal influences, for which a large amount of data on sociological, linguistic and anthropological details is available.

The languages spoken in Casamance, including those presented in this talk, have very high rates of overall complexity in the domain noun class, with large numbers of noun class and agreement markers, sophisticated number systems (Cobbinah & Lüpke 2014), animacy agreement (Cobbinah in press) and evaluative morphology. There are, however, subtle differences between them in terms of complexity, which can be related to their respective contact situations. Gubëeher is spoken in an area where high levels of multilingualism with neighbouring Joola languages are the norm, a situation that I claim helps to maintain or even increase complexity of the noun class systems of these languages through borrowing of noun class morphology on both sides and by encouraging strong semantic connotations of noun classes through shared semantic parameters across language boundaries. Gubëeher is also contributing to complexity in Joola Kujireray and Banjal by strengthening the pervasiveness of triadic paradigms (singular, plural, collective) in these languages. The main contact languages of Gujaher on the other hand, Mandinka and Portuguese Creole, do not have noun classes, whose influence is hypothesised to have favoured the development of animacy agreement and led to a reduced, but still impressive, set of noun class and agreement patterns.

## **Modeling the complexity of grammatical gender systems**

### **Three case studies in synchronic and diachronic typology**

Francesca Di Garbo  
Stockholm University

In this talk, I present three case studies, two completed and one ongoing, which address two main questions: how to assess the complexity of gender systems in typologically meaningful ways, and how to model the way in which this complexity evolves through time.

Case study 1 is based on Di Garbo (2016). In this study, I propose a complexity metric for grammatical gender and apply it to the gender systems of 84 African languages. After presenting the features the metric is based upon, I illustrate how the languages of the sample score with respect to these features. The results show that the gender systems of the sampled languages lean towards high complexity scores and that closely related languages tend to have the same or similar complexity scores. Outliers are rare and can be explained as a result of contact phenomena.

Case study 2 is based on Di Garbo & Miestamo (accepted) and Di Garbo (under review). It explores diachronic variation in gender systems' complexity as well as the socio-historical correlates of gender systems' complexification and simplification, with focus on the morphosyntax of gender agreement patterns. Based on a convenience sample of 15 sets of closely related languages, I illustrate the patterns of language change behind the emergence, reduction and loss of gender agreement morphology, as well as their possible socio-historical correlates.

Case study 3 is based on ongoing work on the typology and diachrony of Bantu gender systems (a.k.a. noun class systems), which I am working on together with Annemarie Verkerk (MPI for the Science of Human History). While most Bantu languages are characterized by highly pervasive, non-sex-based gender systems (e.g., Duala, ISO: dua), some Bantu languages display instances of restructuring in this area of grammar: partially animacy-based gender marking (e.g., Swahili, ISO: swh); completely animacy-based gender marking (e.g., Bera, ISO: brf), and no gender marking at all (e.g., Komo, ISO: kmw). The aims of the project are: (1) to map the distribution of restructured systems in the Bantu speaking world, (2) to investigate the patterns of change that account for the transition(s) from the Duala to the Swahili, Bera, and Komo systems, and (3) to account for the socio-historical factors that may have contributed to shape the distribution of these systems.

## **References**

Di Garbo, Francesca. 2016. Exploring grammatical complexity crosslinguistically: The case of gender.

*Linguistic Discovery* 14. 46–85. DOI:10.1349/PS1.1537-0852.A.468.

Di Garbo, Francesca. under review. The complexity of grammatical gender and language ecology,.

Di Garbo, Francesca & Matti Miestamo. accepted. The evolving complexity of gender agreement systems. In Di Garbo, Francesca and Bernhard W'alachli (ed.), *Grammatical gender and linguistic complexity*, To be submitted to: Berlin: Language Science Press.

### **Dynamic developments in the marking of diminutives in Bantu**

Hannah Gibson, Rozenn Guérois and Lutz Marten

SOAS, University of London

Diminutives are a well-attested grammatical category in Bantu languages. It is likely that historically diminutives were expressed as part of the noun class system, and the reconstructed Proto-Bantu class 12 (with prefix *\*ka-*) has been proposed as being centrally associated with diminutives (together with a corresponding plural class 13 *\*tu-*). In terms of semantics, diminutives in Bantu languages often express physical smallness, but the meaning of the category can also include off-spring, young age, or deficiency. Morphologically, diminutives are typically formed by nominal derivation, for example through class shift into a diminutive class such as class 12. However, in addition to the use of the historic diminutive noun class 12, diminutives are formed in different ways in several Bantu languages, including the use of other noun classes, of derivational suffixes, or through compounding. There are also numerous examples of lexicalised diminutives which show a relation to productive diminutive derivation, but contain elements of lexical idiosyncrasy in form or meaning.

This talk presents an overview of diminutives in the Bantu language family, with an emphasis on the role of the noun class system in diminutive formation. It charts different processes of language change which have shaped the present-day situation, as well as highlighting instance in which language contact has played a role in the development of diminutive systems. The talk is based on a cross-Bantu typology, examining some 25 languages from across the Bantu region. It will also address semantic and pragmatic processes underlying the change and variation in Bantu diminutives.

### **Noun roots in Gorwaa:**

#### **Toward a morphosyntactic description of the Gorwaa noun**

Andrew Harvey

SOAS, University of London

An analysis which identifies roots for nouns in South Cushitic is important for understanding the system of gender/number in this language family. Thus far, however, such an analysis has not been seriously pursued.

In this talk, I will outline an approach for arriving at the noun roots in the South Cushitic language Gorwaa by 1) establishing the grammatical properties of gender/number in Gorwaa relevant to the morphosyntax; 2) enumerating a list of number suffixes for Gorwaa; and 3) demonstrating the process of suffix stripping to arrive at the root. Exceptions to this process (i.e. ‘bare roots’) will also be examined. Evidence for the validity of this process will be presented in the form of deverbal nouns.

Gorwaa (ISO 693-9: *gow*) is spoken in the East African Rift Valley of central Tanzania by approximately 15,000 people (Mous 2007: 2). Due to small speaker numbers, sudden, rapid urbanization, and what has been described by Muzale and Rugemalira (2008) as a political environment hostile to languages that are not Swahili or English, Gorwaa will face considerable challenges to remain viable into the next century.

Up to the present point, the literature suggests that ‘number-derived’ forms in South Cushitic are formed from morphologically simpler ‘base-forms’ (see Mous 1993: 50-74 for Iraqw, and Kießling 2000: 10-11 for South Cushitic in general):

- (1) *hapél* (M) ‘bats’ (as a group) → *hapeelmó* (M) ‘bat’ (Gorwaa)  
 → *hapeelma’* (N) ‘bats’

(adapted from Kießling 2000: 11)

This is problematic in that it does not fit well with our current (generative) understanding of how nouns are inserted into the syntax, and it obscures patterns that may potentially shed light on a system regularly characterized as complex (Mous 1993: 44-46, Kießling 2000: 11). Against this background, I develop an analysis which employs Distributed Morphology (e.g. Marantz 1997) as an explanatory tool. In particular, I propose that in Gorwaa, all nouns begin as forms in the lexicon, *unspecified for both gender and number*. Nouns gain their gender/number features by moving through one or more functional heads. The process would look something like this:

- (2) *hapeel- vbat* → *hapeelmó* (M) ‘bat’  
 → *hapél* (M) ‘bats’ (as a group)

→ *hapeelma'* (N) 'bats'

In setting up the argument above, several properties of gender/number in Gorwaa will be argued for with examples, namely: a) that syntactic gender has a basis in biological sex, but that the core of semantically compliant nouns is very small; b) contra typological analyses of South Cushitic (e.g. Corbett 2005: 126-129), Gorwaa possesses 3 major syntactic genders, manifest in agreement patterns; c) the syntactic gender of a noun may change when the noun is changed for number (e.g. in (3) below, *desu* – pl. form of *desi*(F) – triggers the same agreement as *garma*(M), therefore indicating that it, too, is (M) gender); and d) Gorwaa possesses two syntactic number values: singular and plural.

- (3) a. *desír tleer i qwala/amís*  
girl.LF tall.F Aux make.happy.F.Pres  
'a tall girl makes one happy'
- b. *desú tlét i qwala/amiis*  
girls.LF tall.M.PI Aux **make.happy.M.Pres**  
'tall girls make one happy'
- c. *garmá tleér i qwala/amiis*  
boy.LF tall.M.Sg Aux **make.happy.M.Pres**  
'a tall boy makes one happy'

Following an exhibition of the number suffixes of Gorwaa, attention can then turn to the process of proposing roots. Through suffix-stripping, as well as taking suprasegmental operations into account, it will be shown how roots may be identified. Evidence from deverbal nouns will be presented to show that the roots proposed are plausible. For example, the verb *fiiis* 'to steal' + *-oo* → *fiiisoo*(F) 'stealing' – by analogy, the nouns *mar'oo*(F) 'caves', *gitsoo*(F) 'grasses', and *qan'oo*(F) 'eggs' can be parsed in the same way, yielding *mar'-Vcave*, *gits-Vgrass*, and *qan'-Vegg*. Finally, zero-marked nouns will be examined, and a mechanism proposed in which they are valued for gender.

The talk will conclude by highlighting promising prospects in understanding the

gender/number system in South Cushitic brought to light by this exercise, including some possible criteria by which a root selects its number suffixes, as well as some putative semantic similarities of these proposed declensional groups.

## References

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### **The same but different: noun classification at the Crossroads**

Rachel Watson

SOAS, University of London

In this paper I compare some aspects of the noun classification systems of the three languages that form the focus of the Crossroads project – Joola Banjal, Joola Kujireray and Baïnouk Gubëeher. Joola and Baïnouk languages are known for their large and complex noun classification systems which conflate number values with other semantic information such as size and physical configuration. Each of these languages has over twenty separate noun class prefixes, which combine into upwards of 25 paradigms (groupings of prefixes representing different number distinctions). Despite this broad typological comparability, the systems exhibit significant differences when examined at a more fine-grained level.

I compare these three systems from two perspectives. First, I present some of the differences that are maintained between the systems, in particular how Baïnouk Gubëeher exhibits a more complex system expressing finer distinctions both of number and semantic domains. Second, I examine some areas where the systems exhibit contact effects namely the borrowing of noun class prefixes, although these prefixes are used in different ways in each of the languages.