

Abstract

Nominal and Verbal Number in Tabaq

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Tabaq is a severely endangered and under-researched Kordofan-Nubian language from the Nuba Mountains in southern Sudan. It falls within the Eastern Sudanic branch of Nilo-Saharan, the most controversial of the Greenbergian Phyla. Here, nominal number marking plays an important role, because languages with contentious genetic affiliation that display a tripartite system—the ‘prototypical Nilo-Saharan number marking system’ (Dimmendaal 2000: 216)—could be classified as Nilo-Saharan on that basis.

The tripartite system consists of three different marking patterns for nouns: singulative (singular suffix, inherently plural root), plurative (plural suffix, inherently singular root), and replacive (plural and singular suffixes). In Tabaq, we identify a complex interplay between the marking patterns and suffix form, semantic number and semantic class of the noun, and phonological shape of the root. For the first time, diachronic evidence of reconstructed Proto-Kordofan Nubian forms is used in addition to elicited data (from the Tabaq corpus at the Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR)), enabling us to identify synchronically opaque suffix allomorphs. We describe nine categories of different marking patterns and formatives for nouns.

Tabaq also has the rare morphological feature of marking number on verbs. Although the verbal morphology of Tabaq has not been thoroughly analysed, it is clear that there are many examples of participant number marking on Tabaq verbs, and some of event number marking. Participant plural marking in Tabaq can take many forms, from tone change and reduplication to suppletive verb stems. The most common, however, is the $-\varepsilon(r)$ suffix that is also attested in the related languages Karko (Jakobi 2017) and Uncu (Comfort 2014).

References

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