

Mwaghavul plural verbs



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Abstract

The Mwaghavul [=Sura] language in Central Nigeria is a relatively large West Chadic language which has received only limited attention from linguists, despite publications on the neighbouring Mupun language. Mwaghavul has an elaborate system of plural verbs, where plurality denotes the iterative, repeated action or action on multiple objects and often concomitant semantic shift. Some verbs have two plural forms denoting different types of multiple action. Only a very small subset of the class of verbs have plural forms. Many singulars and plurals show morphophonological alternations but these are not predictable. Some plurals are suppletive. Given that such plural verbs are characteristic of the Plateau languages with which Mwaghavul is in direct contact, it might be thought these are borrowed, but there is no evidence for direct copying. The proposed explanation is metatypy, where a structural idea is adapted across language boundaries, without borrowing actual lexemes.

1 Introduction

A feature of Chadic languages whose present distribution and significance is somewhat unclear is the ‘plural’ or ‘pluractional’ verb. Verbs can have at least two morphologically distinct forms, one of which can be derived from the other by more or less transparent processes, except in rare cases of suppletion. Plural verbs are a common feature both of Chadic languages and neighbouring East Benue-Congo languages. For Chadic, Newman (1990) has described the operation of both nominal and verbal plurality, while Brooks (1991) presents a useful review of plural verbs throughout Africa. Within East Benue-Congo, plural verbs have been described principally from Plateau and Cross River families. For Plateau, the first description of plural verbs may be Bouquiaux’ (1970) account of Berom. Izere has been the subject of at least two partial accounts (Wolff & Meyer-Bahlburg 1979; Gerhardt 1984), McKinney (1979) characterised Jju and Aron (1996/7) has described plurality in verbs in Obolo, a Cross River language as well as providing some references to extra-African literature. Plural verbs also exist in Nilo-Saharan (see Keegan 1999 for Mbay examples) and in Gur (Blench 2003).

The precise definition of plural verbs is more than a little confusing, in part because the morphosyntactic systems are now almost always fragmentary and because the emphases of their use do indeed vary from language to language. In Izere and Fyem they have been described as ‘continuous’; in Jju (Kaje) and Berom as ‘plural’ verbs and in Chadic as pluractional (Newman 1990). Aron (1996/7) contrasts ‘distributive’ (where the subject or object can be plural) with ‘iterative’ where an action is performed many times. Their uses can be categorised as follows;

1. Describing an action repeated many times
2. Describing an action with multiple subjects
3. Describing an action with multiple objects
4. Describing an action conducted over a long time
5. Any combination of these

The iterative use of the plural forms led some researchers to associate these forms with an imperfect; if an action is undertaken many times it is presumably incomplete and thus contrastive with a completed form. However, in most languages where the verbal system has been described, aspect and plurality are distinct.

An aspect of verbal plurality that is contrastive with nominal plurals is that speakers do not generally connect forms systematically, particularly when plurals are suppletive. Thus speakers can easily cite noun-class affix pairings but are not usually aware of verb pairings, although they usually recognise them when pointed out. This is even more the case where there are triplets, multiple plurals linked to a singular form. As a consequence, there are sometimes borderline cases when the relationship between a singular and a plural form can be in doubt especially where the semantics are no longer transparent.

The source of plural verb formation strategies is as yet unclear. In most languages so far studied, the diversity of forms suggests that these are remnants of a morphologically and semantically complex system that has undergone semantic re-ordering. The most likely hypothesis is that the verbal plurals are former semantically diverse verbal extensions that have undergone erosion and restructuring. However, the comparative evidence is not yet available to provide concrete underpinning to such a speculation. This paper¹ describes the system of plural verbs in Mwaghavul [=Sura], a West Chadic language of east-central Nigeria. The morphology of plural verbs is discussed and as complete a list of verb-pairings as possible is presented. The paper then explores some of the semantics of plurality, and concludes with some historical speculations as to the origin of plural verbs.

¹ This paper was first given at the 5th BICCL, Leipzig, 10-14th June, 2009 and subsequently revised. The data was gathered for a Mwaghavul dictionary (Dapiya, Blench & Bess forthcoming) and I would like to thank Nathaniel Dapiya and Jacob Bess for helping me with sentence examples to illustrate the workings of the plural verbs. Data on neighbouring Benue-Congo languages has been gathered over a long time and I would like to thank numerous collaborators who have assisted me over the years.

2. Mwaghavul background

Mwaghavul is a relatively large West Chadic language spoken in Mangu Local Government Area, Plateau State, Nigeria. The main towns of the Mwaghavul are Mangu and Panyam. There are generally estimated to be some 150,000 speakers of Mwaghavul, although such a figure is largely guesswork. Mupun, often considered a distinct language, is very close to Mwaghavul and the division may be more ethnic than linguistic. The closest relatives of Mwaghavul are Cakfem-Mushere and Miship and it falls within the same group as Ngas and Goemai. The Mwaghavul are known as ‘Sura’ in much of the older literature. Mwaghavul is bordered by Plateau (i.e. Benue-Congo) languages to the north and west, notably Berom and Izere.

Mwaghavul (under the name Sura) was first described in modern linguistic terms by Jungraithmayr (1963/4). More recently, Frajzyngier (1991, 1993) has published a dictionary and grammar of the neighbouring Mupun language. Scripture portions were first published in the 1920s and there is an active literacy programme associated with a Bible Translation Project and a collaborative project to produce a dictionary is also under way. However, no phonological analyses associated with the orthography have ever been published.

3. Mwaghavul phonology

There are six vowels in Mwaghavul, the cardinal vowels and a central vowel /ɨ/. Phonetically, the mid-vowels are /ɛ/ and /ɔ/ but they are not in contrast with /e/ and /o/ and are thus represented by ‘e’ and ‘o’ in orthographic practice.

Degree	Front	Central	Back
Close	i	ɨ	u
Half Open	ɛ		ɔ
Open		a	

Vowel length is contrastive, but there are no nasal vowels. Since VV sequences of the same vowel can bear different tones, there is a strong argument for considering these as distinct from the long/short oppositions that characterise a language such as Hausa.

Mwaghavul consonants are as follows:

	Bila- bial	Labio- dental	Alve- olar	Post- alveolar	Pala- tal	Vel- ar	Labial- velar	Glott- al
Plosive	p b		t d			k g		ʔ
Implosive	ɓ		ɗ					
Nasal	m			n	ɲ	ŋ		
Fricative		f v		s z	ʃ ʒ	[χ]		h
Affricate						tʃ dʒ		
Approximant					y		w	
Trill			r					
Lateral Approximant			l					

Mwaghavul has palatalised and labialised consonants in contrast with their normal forms. In addition it permits homorganic nasals for some consonants. /g/ has a positional allophone /ɣ/ in intervocalic position; this is represented as ‘gh’ in the orthography, including the ethnonym. Although it is technically unnecessary, it is written here to make the transcriptions more accessible to Mwaghavul speakers. Phonetically, Mwaghavul has two /r/ sounds, in medial and final position, but again, these are not contrastive phonemes.

Mwaghavul has three level tones (Jungraithmayr 1963/4: 19). Falling and rising tones are heard phonetically on sequences of similar vowels, but it is doubtful whether there are underlying glide tones. Examples in

Jungraithmayr, such as *dī*, the relative pronoun, are currently written with a doubled vowel. Tones are not written in the orthography, which is a problematic decision, as significant grammatical distinctions are sometimes made with tone.

4. Mwaghavul plural verbs

Mwaghavul has an elaborate system of plural verbs, where plurality can denote iterative, repeated action, multiple subjects or action on multiple objects. Some verbs have two plural forms denoting different types of multiple action. Some plurals are suppletive. Jungraithmayr (1963/4: 31-32) has a short discussion of plural verb stems and cites some examples. Most of these occur in the present dataset, but some were unknown, which may simply reflect language change in the past half-century. Frajzyngier (1993: 55-62) gives more examples of plural verbs in Mupun, many of which show similarities to Mwaghavul. In some cases the vowels and tones differ slightly from these earlier transcriptions. Table 1 shows all the Mwaghavul plural verbs presently identified. These constitute only a very small proportion of all Mwaghavul verbs and there appears to be no way of predicting whether a verbal plural exists.

Table 1. Mwaghavul plural verbs

sg.	pl.	pl.	Gloss	Notes
at	irap		to bite	
bák	biyan		to pound condiments in a mortar	
ḡàl	jwal		unite, fix, join	
ḡéé	ḡak		to dissect, cut open, split open	
ḡwot	fwo		to release, drop	
can	saa		to cut	
cèt	cicèt		to cook	
cùt	cwàt		to hit	
dés	nan		be big in size	
dùgùn	dwaghan		to annihilate	
dùgùr	dwaghar		to block, debar, prevent	
dul	dirs		to pull	
dǎksak	dǎksuk		to prepare oneself	
dǎl	dǎlaŋ		to swallow	
dǎr	dǎraŋ		to stand	
dǎin	dǎwan		to tie s.t. such as a goat	
dǎgun	dǎwagan		to have sexual intercourse	
dut	dwat		to be diminutive, dwarf	
kin	kan		to defecate, to urinate	
kiḡin	kiḡan		to mix things up, juggle	
kóón	liyòòn		to dismantle a house, to be taken apart, to be stripped out, to be lost (teeth)	
kuul	kwaghal		to tie a knot	
làà ²	la		to give birth, to be delivered of a baby	pl. means to give birth many times
làŋ	laŋ		to hang	pl. means many things hanging
lè	kwáŋ		to keep, to place, to cause, to put s.t.	pl. means to put many things
lop	jwal		to put in	
lùgùs	lwagas		to thresh fonio with the feet [practice discontinued]	
lùn	lwan		to mend kutut tray with cow-dung or laap preparatory to the threshing of millet usually the cow dung is used for both exercises	
lùs	lwas		to mend, patch	
mét	mirep		to jump	
mìs	myas		to drink too much water	

sg.	pl.	pl.	Gloss	Notes
mìs	myas		to slap s.o.	
mùk	mwak		to sip	
múl	mulam		to rub in s.t.	
mùùt	murap		to die	
náá	lyap		to see, behold, examine	
nugul ¹	nwagal		to bend	
nun̄	nwan̄		to strike any sounding iron	
nùn̄ ¹	nwan̄		to set fire to something, burn	
nùn̄ ²	niram, nas	siram, nas	to beat e.g. child	
pet ¹	pìrep		to burst, explode spontaneously	v.i.
pèt ²	pìrep		to call	
piin ¹	pìrep		to burst, explode	v.t.
piin ²	pyan		to break, split s.t.	pl. means 'to break into pieces' as opposed to 'split in two'
pun ¹	pwan		to eject, evict	
pun ²	pwan		to thresh maize	sg. is to remove a single grain, the pl. is to remove many
pùs	pwas		to nail an object, to kick, shoot, arrow, gun etc.	
put	pwat		to go out, get out	
rù	rwa		to go into soft ground (e.g. a worm, to set (of sun)	
shaṅ	shwat sár		to slap a person more lightly than mis	
sár ¹				
shaṅ	shwat sár		to withdraw from an action	
sár ¹				
shwaa	mis	myas	to drink plenty of water	
sù	swa		to run	
sùl	sulwan̄		to pierce, penetrate	
teer ¹	yem		to spend the night	
tèn ¹	tìrej		to press, to iron clothes etc	
tèn ²	tìrej		to lock door	because you had to press the lock
tèn ³	vwáp		to press s.t. down with the foot	
tep	tìrep	roghop	to break, snap	
tù	twa		to kill	
tùgùm	twagham		to disappear, to go from view, hold upside down	
tugun	twagan		to pinch, to slice a bit or take a bit and give out	pl. means repeated action, or giving out a series of small portions
tún̄	twaas		to touch	
tùs	twas		to spit	
vùùn	vwán		to persist	
vwèt	fwo	car	to throw away indiscriminately	<i>fwo</i> is throwing away many things
yàà	yak		to catch, hold	
yal	yilan̄		to dissect, tear-open	

Only a very small subset of the class of verbs have plural forms. Many singulars and plurals show morphophonological alternations but these are not predictable.

5. Morphology

The most common derivational process for plural verbs is palatalisation and labialisation of the initial consonant, which results from the application of internal –a- plurals, a very widespread strategy in Chadic and indeed Afroasiatic languages (Newman 1990: 72). All Cu- sequences (cu-, dū-, ku-, lu, mu-, nu, pu-, ru-, su-, tu- and vu-) have corresponding –Cwa plurals. Thus;

cùt	cwat
dut	đwat
lùn	lwan
muk	mwak
nùŋ	nwaŋ

and so on. This rule is not invariable, as the alternation *dul/dires* indicates. Verbs with initial labialised consonants such as *shwaa* and *vwet* only ever have suppletive plurals. Some pairings, such as *tù/twa* ‘kill’ and *sù/swa* ‘run’ are identical in Ngas, showing that some alternations must be reconstructed back to the proto-language (see Takács 2004 for more examples). However, comparing Mwaghavul/Ngas with other languages in the group, such as Ron (Jungraithmayr 1970) or Goemai (Hellwig in press) verb plurals are often quite different although some of the formation processes are related.

Palatalisation is much rarer output from internal –a- plurals, as the alternations *mis/myas* and *piin/pyan* suggest, but it is too rare to develop a rule for its application. In contrast to verbs where –u- is the main vowel of the root, verbs with front and central vowels form highly diverse plurals. Table 2 shows a low-frequency rule in Mwaghavul verbal plurals;

Table 2. -i(i)/r(l) infixing in Mwaghavul verbs

sg.	pl.	Gloss
ďāl	ďilaŋ	to swallow
ďār	ďiraŋ	to stand
ten	tireŋ	to press, to iron clothes etc
yal	yilaŋ	to dissect, tear-open

The most likely explanation is that final l/r/n → ŋ and -i(i)/r(l) is infixing. However, with such a limited number of cases, no rule can be established. An analogous process, shown in Table 3 give some support to this hypothesis. Here, a word-final –C becomes –p in the plural shows a related process, and a similar -V/r infix is introduced.

Table 3. -V/r infixing and final –p in Mwaghavul verbs

sg.	pl.	Gloss
at	irap	to bite
met	mirep	to jump
mùùt	murap	to die
piin	pirep	to burst, explode
pet	pirep	to burst, explode spontaneously
tep	tirep	to break

Newman (1990: 81) proposes that these arise from the final –p is a reflex of *t ‘via a morphologically restricted dissimilation rule’. Thus according to this hypothesis *mùùt/ murap* (<*mutat). However, finals other than –t result in –p, including ø, as in;

náá	lyap	to see, behold, examine
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which suggests –Vp is an affix of some type. §7. discusses other hypotheses to account for Mwaghavul verbal morphology, and as Table 6 shows, final –p occurs in the Plateau language Izere, although curiously alternating with singular –k.

Suppletive verb plurals are quite rare; Table 4 shows all the examples so far recorded. Where there are two plurals, one may be formed by prosodic alternation and the other be suppletive.

Table 4. Mwaghavul suppletive verb plurals

sg.	pl.	pl.	Gloss
at	irap		to bite
ɓwot	fwo		to release, drop
ɗès	nan		be big in size
lè	kwáŋ		to keep, to place, to cause, to put s.t.
lop	jwal		to put in
teer	yem		to spend the night
tèn	vwáp		to press s.t. down with the foot
shwaa	mis	myas	to drink plenty of water
vwèt	car	fwo	to throw away indiscriminately

Only four cases of triplets have been recorded, and the relationship between singular and plural is always suppletive, although the two plurals can be related, as in *mis/myas* above.

Comparison with Frajzngier (1993) shows many striking differences with Mupun, notably many fewer forms with the palatalisation and labialisation resulting from internal –a- plurals. The suppletive plurals in Mupun are also quite different (op. cit. p. 58) and Frajzngier transcribes pairings such as *tep/tirep* as *tēp/trēp*. Such plurals in Mwaghavul clearly have two tone-bearing syllables, so Mupun may be in the process of deleting V₁. In many other ways, Mwaghavul and Mupun are very similar, both lexically and grammatically, but differences such as this may make intercomprehension problematic.

6. Syntactic context

Mwaghavul shows a fairly consistent SVO word order, and plural verbs do not show any particular unusual behaviour within this context. The sentence examples below explore the main contrastive usages of singular/plural pairings. Most common is the iterative use, to do something many times. For example;

Shààrlek fina wuri at an
 Enemy my he bit me

nfùtmo teer irap an
 mosquitoes during the night bit many times me

In contrast to most other Chadic languages, including closely related ones, Mwaghavul has no morphological plurals. With one or two exceptions, all nouns form a plural by adding –*mo* to the stem. A similar affix occurs in the closely related Ngas, where nominal plurals use a suffixed –*ma*. However, many nouns either have no plural or else they often express plurality through verbs. Where the verb is transitive, the object is assumed to be plural, whereas for intransitive verbs it is the subject. Thus;

wán nduŋ ɗál yen fina ni
 I will swallow pill my the

but;

wán ndùŋ ɗilaŋ yen fina ni mo
 I will swallow pill my the pl.
 I'll swallow my pills

and;

làà disi wuri gyar dùt
boy this he excessively be short
this boy is excessively short

jép disi mo dwat zam
boys these pl. are short excessively
these boys are excessively short

In the following example, it seems that additional nominal number marking is required to disambiguate the referent of the plural verb. The singular of *piin* 'to break' is used as follows;

wán kin piin tughul àm ni
I have broken pot water it

However, in this example, because many people and acting on multiple objects, the plural verb does not provide sufficient information about the number of objects. As a consequence, the pot must be pluralised as well.

doghon jépmo teer pyan tughul fina ni mo
Yesterday children during the night broke pot my them pl.
Children broke my pots last night

In one triplet, the first plural implies a single person doing something excessively, whereas the second plural marks multiple subjects doing something to excess. Thus;

wurí shwaa àm fina ni kyes
He drank water my it completely

and;

wán doghon mis àm ni zam
I yesterday drank too much water it excessively

but;

màt kook mo doghon myas wáár dī dēé ni
Female dancers pl. yesterday drank too much kunnu be there remaining it

A more subtle semantic distinction is marked with the verb 'to break'. The sense of the singular verb is 'to snap' or 'to break in two', as in;

jépmo ki tep kam-dàghàr fina mi
children have broken in two walking-stick my it

The plurality of the subject or object is not relevant. Where the action of breaking involves multiple blows, the first plural is used;

wátmo doghon tirep pò lù fina mi
thieves yesterday broke door house my it
yesterday, thieves broke down the door of my house

Where there are multiple actions of breaking but also many objects being broken, the second plural is used;

mo teer roghop shwáá an nwát
 they during the night broke maize my stealing
 they broke off and stole many of my maize-cobs last night

Exactly the same distinction is made with the pairing *piin/pyan*, although in this case there is no third member of the set.

Another triplet, *vwèt/fwo/car* ‘to discard, throw away or at indiscriminately’, also illustrates different types of plurality. A single object takes **vwèt**;

wurí táá vwèt kwàghàzàk firi
 he on the way discarded shoe his

whereas throwing away multiple objects is *fwo*;

wùrá táá fwo léé fira a ár mwaan
 she on the way discarded clothes her on road go

The second plural, *car*, is used to create a reflexive (normally a pronominal construction in Mwaghavul), as in;

mo nkaa car shak
 they at throw one another
 they are throwing things at one another

The number of plural verbs is relatively small and the permitted contexts of use are highly idiosyncratic. It does not seem that it would be possible to predict whether number marking indicates semantic differences, or the plurality of the subject of object, although there is a general rule of transitivity. It is likely that speakers must simply learn individual rules for each verb.

7. Plateau languages and contact hypotheses

Given that such plural verbs are characteristic of the Plateau languages with which Mwaghavul is in direct contact, it might be thought these are borrowed, but there is no evidence for this. Substantial draft dictionaries of both Berom and Izere exist (Blench et al. forthcoming, Blench & Kaze forthcoming) and it is possible to search for potential lookalikes and thus candidates for borrowing. However, the relevant Mwaghavul verbs have no obvious resemblances to Berom and Izere.

How, at the level of process of plural formation, a number of similarities do occur. Table 5 shows a typical process of –Vr- infixing in Berom which should be compared to the –Vr- infixing in Mwaghavul (Table 2 and Table 3). Berom verbs also show the same t → r dissimilation as Mwaghavul.

Table 5. Berom –Vr- infixing in verb plurals

bòt	bòrəs	put on the lap
jùt	jùrus	carry, hand over
mət	mərəs	cheat
rot	roros	bite, sting, throb with pain
tət	tərəs	reduce
tút	túrus	climb
wét	weres	prick up the ears, listen
wət	wərəs	taste, take a sip

Another related process attested in Plateau is the development of final –p, for example in Izere (which shares a common border with Mwaghavul). Examples of verbs with this feature are shown in Table 6;

Table 6. Final –bVk/sVp alternation in Izere verbs

fábák	fásàp	to fold or draw close to the body
fúbúk	fúsùp	to sip
kábák	kasàp	to share out
kúbúk	kusùp	to open
nabak	násàp	to lift up, stretch
túbúk	túsùp	to stab, pierce

It is tempting to link the –b- in the singular with final –p in the plural invoking a process of metathesis. On the other hand, the similarities to the Mwaghavul verbs in Table 3 may point to a still opaque process of affix copying.

8. Conclusion

Mwaghavul and close relatives such as Ngas have a rich system of verbal plurals, with some formation strategies reflecting widespread Chadic morphological processes. However, others correspond in general appearance and semantics to neighbouring Plateau languages. In view of this, it might be that these forms are borrowed, but there is no evidence for direct lexical borrowing. However, there is evidence for analogous processes and cognate morphemes, notably the –Vr- infix. A more likely explanation is metatypy, where a structural idea is adapted across language boundaries, without borrowing complete words. Verbal plurals are relatively rare in most languages, which makes finding conclusive evidence for any hypothesis problematic. Moreover, the documentation of many languages in this area is patchy at best. But it is safe to say that the Chadic/Plateau interface, with pervasive bilingualism between languages with deep structural differences will produce a wide variety of outcomes, depending on the specific circumstances of particular interactions.

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