

MADA NOMINAL PLURALS

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N.B. THE PRESENT PRINTOUT IS IN MADA ORTHOGRAPHY, NOT IPA

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1. The Mada language: location, Origin and Classification

1.1 Location and Name

The Mada people live primarily in the region between Anjida and Akwanga on and around the road leading from Fadan Karshe to Akwanga in Plateau State, Central Nigeria. Their numbers are hard to estimate but probably now exceed 50,000.

The principal modern work on the Mada language is Price (1989)¹. This work covers the phonology and orthography of Mada spoken in Rija, a village central to Mada country and the dialect chosen for New Testament translation. Mada has an extensive dialect network and there is quite a high level of variation from village to village. Price (1989) gives a valuable comparative wordlist in different dialects, which shows that at least some of them have markedly different phonology from Rija Mada and probably have been influenced by Eggon.

1.2 The Sound System of Mada and its Orthography

1.2.1 Phonology

Rija Mada has twenty consonant phonemes:

	Labial	Labio-dental	Alveolar	Velar	Labio-velar
Plosives vls	p		t	k	kp
vd	b		d	g	gb
Fricatives vls		f	s		
vd		v	z		
Affricates vls			ts		
vd			dz		
Nasals	m		n	ŋ	
Laterals			l		
Vibrants			r		
Approximants vls					ʌ
Approximants vd			y		w

There are eight vowel phonemes:

	Front	Central	Back
Close	i		u
Close-Mid	e	ə	o
Open-Mid	ɛ		ɔ
Open		a	

¹ Gerhardt (1983:112 ff.) includes some notes on the phonology and noun-class systems of two Mada dialects, but these have been comprehensively superseded by Price (1989).

but five corresponding nasalised vowels;

	Front	Central	Back
Close	ĩ		ũ
Open-Mid	ẽ		õ
Open		ã	

In the original orthography of 1985, the symbol ñ was adopted to mark nasalisation following a vowel, but this has been simplified to n. Thus ã is written ‘an’.

Mada has three level tones and a rising and falling tone. The orthography marks tones as follows:

high tone is unmarked

/ˊ/ mid tone is shown by a macron

/ˋ/ for a low tone

/ˆ/ for a falling tone

/ˊˋ/ for the rising tone.

Although appropriate for an orthography this is confusing to external readers and the following substitution has been made in this paper.

// for a high tone

/ / mid tone is unmarked

1.2.2 Orthographic conventions

The Mada alphabet is near-phonemic and is made up of thirty-four letters. These are arranged as follows:

a, b, c, e, ε, ə, d, f, g, gb, h, hw, i, j, k, kp, l, m, n, ng, ny, o, ɔ, p, r, s, sh, t, u, v, w, y, z, zh.

These correspond to the IPA symbols used in the phonology via the following conventions;

ng	ŋ	
c	tsʸ	
j	dzʸ	
sh	sʸ	
ny	ɲʸ	
h	ɰ	before o ɔ u
hw	ɰ	elsewhere

2. Mada and its neighbours

2.1 The classification of Mada

Mada was first classified as part of the Plateau language group (Greenberg 1963) and Williamson (1971), Hansford *et al.* (1976), Gerhardt (1989) and Crozier and Blench (1992) have followed this view. Mada was put together with Ninzam, Ayu, Che, Ninkyop and some other languages as part of Plateau IV. More

recently, this group has been christened ‘Ninzic’ in the light of the numerous languages with a –nin- element in their ethnonym (Blench xx).

Greenberg’s (1963:9) original list was Rukuba (Kuche), Ninzo (Ninzam), Ayu, Mada, Kaninkwom. The current list of Ninzic languages is as follows;

Ninzo
Ce [=Rukuba]
Mada
Bu-Ninƙada
Numana-Nunku-Gwantu-Numbu
Ningye
Kanufi
Ninkyop-Nindem

Doubtfully

Vaghat-Ya-Bijim-Legeri
Ayu?

Data on many of these languages is too weak to be confident of their place within the group. However, on Ninzo and Ce relatively extensive data means that we can be sure these are the closest relatives of Mada.

2.2 Languages that have influenced Mada

3. Nouns and noun-classes

3.1 Categories of nominal plural

Most Plateau languages were historically noun-class languages, in other words, nouns were divided into classes marking singular and plural by alternating affixes and with some semantic content. Apart from plurals, affixes can also signify other features of the noun such as size or variation in meaning. Although affix alternation is a feature of Niger-Congo and some version of it must have been inherited from pre-Benue-Congo, the internal evidence for Plateau languages is highly variable. Affix-marking co-exists with other pluralisation strategies, some clearly recent and others of uncertain antiquity. The literature, implicitly or otherwise, assumes that many languages are ‘transitional’; a purportedly orderly Bantu-like system is collapsing and new systems are developing, or otherwise being simplified. I have elsewhere questioned whether the evidence justifies attributing to proto-Plateau such an orderly system (Blench 2000b).

The Mada language, like many of its neighbours, has a number of competing systems simultaneously present in the language. The replacement of one system by another is shown by the fact that two alternative plurals for some words co-exist, both acceptable to speakers. There is no doubt that over time one will come to replace the other. However, a dictionary must record these as they are at present.

Mada noun plurals can be divided into six categories:

- I tone-change
- II initial syllable reduplication
- III prefix addition
- IV person nouns acting as pseudo-prefixes
- V diminutives acting as pseudo class-prefixes
- VI Suppletives

Prefixes marking size can alternate with non-prefixed nouns creating a plethora of additional forms. Some nouns usually take diminutive prefixes in speech, but these are not easy to predict. All nominals form part of an elaborate concord system expressed by tone. A description of this will be given in another paper.

Some conception of the historical layering of these prefixes can be detected through the existence of multiple forms, sometimes with, for example, tone-raising applied to a noun formerly showing first syllable reduplication or prefix addition applied to a tone-raised plural. The following sections give examples of each type of plural.

Type I nouns: tone-alternation

The single most common pattern of pluralisation in Mada is tone alternation. Under different guises this is common across much of Plateau, and in the great majority of cases the tone is raised, usually one level in three-tone languages. This rule is applied to productive prefixes where these are present (Izere, Tarok) and to stems where prefixes have eroded (Hyam, Berom) (see Blench 2001 for discussion). Even in languages where productive prefixes are present synchronically, tone-plurals are thought to derive from the erosion of former prefixes. However, such forms may have evolved at various periods in the prehistory of Plateau and it is not necessary to assume they were a feature of proto-Mada. Ninkyop, for example, another Ninzic language without prefixes, shares some features with Mada suggestive of an earlier phase of prefix loss. For some word-classes, tone-plurals may already have been generalised in pre-Mada although they are also found on very recent loanwords such as ‘motorcycle’ or ‘cutlass’ which may never have had a prefix. One word, **aku**, parrot, has been borrowed from Hausa, preserving an undeleted V-initial.

As the examples given below demonstrate, tone-alternations in Mada plurals are highly diverse, pointing to a complex history of compounding, borrowing and reanalysis. Although some patterns are common and others very rare, it would be stretching the case to call these patterns noun-classes. Certainly, they seem to have little semantic unity. Indeed the tones on recently adopted loanwords are probably assigned by the tone of the donor language, not by a category of semantic content. Mada tone-raising is almost always single-step, L→M or M→H etc. However, where the initial word is polysyllabic, the effects on the tone of the plural are highly diverse and difficult to predict. The examples give sets of different patterns of tone-raising, divided into single and multiple changes.

Semantically, person, animals and to a lesser extent, trees, are widespread in these classes. In some pairings, animal names form every member of the set, elsewhere they predominate. This strongly suggests that when Mada had a prefix system, classes had a strong semantic element, at least as far as persons and animals were concerned.

Monosyllables

The possible tone-alternations on monosyllables are;

- L→M
- L→H
- M→R
- M→H
- R→H
- H→R

The following tables give examples of each possible pairing;

L	M	
kyù	kyū	death
brì	brī	ghost
mf̄ər	mf̄ər	vagina

L	H	
b̀ər	b̄ər	royal python
b̀n	b̄n	hawk
g̀ur	ḡur	granary
kp̀m	kp̄m	silk-cotton tree

Only a single case of M→R has been encountered;

M	R	
j̄ū	j̄ǔ	water-yam

M	H	
b̄ē	b̄e	monkey
l̄ō	l̄ə	locust tree
ts̄ər	ts̄ər	mahogany
c̄ə	c̄ə	leopard

R	H	
d̄ǎ	da	cutlass
c̄ě	c̄e	old age
d̄ər	d̄ər	heart
ḡbyě	ḡbye	straight razor
ḡbǎ	gbm	sound

The alternation H→R is rare; the following table lists all examples so far encountered;

H	R	
cun	cũn	forest
ji	jĩ	mortar
nan	nǎn	flesh, animal
kpə	kpǎ	shoe
mbu	mbũ	mat
ngwɔn	ngwǎn	hand

Disyllables

Disyllabic roots admit a wide range of pairings. The following tables exemplify all the pairs so far recorded. Where the examples are numerous, the pairing is common. Where only one or two cases are noted, this represents the total of those so far encountered.

LL	HL	
bəbè	bəbè	tail
mgbəmgbər	mgbəmgbər	navel

LL	ML	
kpàki	kpāki	stick
kpàti	kpāti	box
màmgbhyèn	māmgbhyèn	wasp

LL	MM	
gbàrkì	gbārki	flower
kikɔn	kikɔn	weapon

LL	HH	
gəntsù	gəntsu	grass sp.
lùmvù	lumvu	beetle
məgàn	məgan	sap
mgbəryò	mgbəryo	throat

LM	LR	
mgbərín	mgbərín	urine

LM	FM	
mkpànē	mkpānē	elderly person

LM	HM	
ywèkō	ywekō	chicken egg

LM	MM	
kàkō	kākō	fowl
kənggān	kənggān	drum
kìrē	kīrē	food
kəmbō	kəmbō	calabash
tənzē	tənzē	goodness, beauty
wəndō	wəndō	trousers

LM	HH	
gənggān	gənggan	barrel-drum
gəntē	gənte	raft-zither
gəri	gəri	co-wife
kpàlo	kpalo	tree pangolin
sàpər	sapər	soap
LR	MM	
mgbənjān	mgbənjān	beard of maize
LR	HH	
cinjī	cinji	hourglass drum
ləywa	ləywa	stink-ant
LH	MH	
bābər	bābər	motorcycle
kikye	kikye	bicycle
ML	MH	
kəgb	kəgbu	baboon
ù		
ML	HM	
pərki	pərki	cane
ML	HH	
tərmgbù	tərmgbu	snake sp.
MM	HM	
mgbərōn	mgbərōn	stool
MM	MH	
tātē	tāte	father, elder
MM	HH	
nggūngg	nggunggu	metal dish
ū		
tərmvū	tərmvu	hyena
MM	LR	
nyənyōn	nyənyōn	leather thong
MH	HH	
gbəntan	gbəntan	sheep
gūgu	gugu	goat
kpəgbru	kpəgbru	vulture
ləkə	ləkə	age-mate
tātsu	tatsu	amphisbaenid snake

RL	HM	
brěkrì	brėkrī	yam heap
běkì	bekī	seed
RL	HL	
mgběshò	mgbəshò	speargrass
běmkpàn	bemkpàn	maize kernel
RM	HM	
lědē	lədē	pig
nggǎgyū	nggagyū	dog
RM	HH	
běkpū	bekpu	kernel of guinea corn
běncī	benci	acca cultivar
bīshī	bishi	eye, face
mgbǎntō	mgbantō	stone
RH	HH	
bǎrga	barga	lion
běkan	bekan	ring
mkplūn	mkplun	spherical object
RR	HH	
bězū	bezu	bullet
HL	LM	
mgbəjə	mgbəjə	cane
HL	MM	
kənkōn	kōnkōn	way

The pair HL/HH is widespread but entirely confined to animals.

HL	HH	
gantàn	gantān	brown spider
lunkpùr	lunkpur	hartebeest
məsà	məsa	cat
mkpələ	mkpəla	black kite
HL	RM	
kpəntàn	kpəntān	skin
ncancùn	ncāncūn	story
HM	RM	
ləgū	ləgū	cassava
mgbətsā	mgbətsā	spoon

HM	HH	
gbəjī	gbəji	steam
gbəryūn	gbəryun	knee
kagbōn	kagbɔn	tortoise
kaprē	kapɛ	nightjar

Trisyllables

Trisyllabic tone alternations are quite rare in Mada and seem to form no obvious groups. Surprisingly, there are several recent loan-words among this restricted set. The table below sets out all the alternations recorded.

s.	pl.	Gloss	Comment
bəbrɛywi	bəbrɛywi	cockroach	redup.
gbəgbakì	gbəgbàkī	broken calabash	redup.
gbəlantswē	gbəlantswē	cricket	
kāləbā	kaləba	bottle	< Hausa
kìyəwə	kìyəwə	domestic animals, livestock	
kpòmgbukpòn	kpòmgbukpòn	large male patas monkey	? redup.
kukukì	kùkukī	stick	redup.
mbəmbəlōkì	mbəmbəlòkī	gutter	redup.
mələka	mələkū	angel	< Hausa
məsārā	məsārā	white person	< Hausa
mkpəlōtù	mkpəlɔtu	skull	
njilādān	njiladan	gecko	
njinjākì	njīnjàkī	rag	redup.
ntənāntsò	ntənantso	chameleon	? redup.
shəshàɛ	shəshàɛ	weaver bird	redup.
tətələ	tətələ	lantern	< Hausa + redup.

As with other tone-plurals, animals predominate. Despite the Hausa source of some of these words they do not appear to reflect the tones of the original Hausa suggesting that they were borrowed via other languages in the area. The word for ‘angel’ has retained its Hausa plural, unlike other loanwords. Other languages in the region, such as Hyam also show the same feature for the word for angel.

Many of the trisyllabic alternations show evidence of initial syllable reduplication (see Type II below). Usually these exhibit an additional syllable in the plural, but in this case the tone alternation suggests that the plural was re-analysed as a singular and then a tone-plural formed. The case of **tətələ** ‘lamp’ is interesting because it must derive from Hausa *fitila*. The **fi-** element was presumably analysed as a diminutive prefix (see Type V) and deleted, and then a reduplicated plural generated through a regular process. However, the reduplicated plural then became frozen in turn generating the synchronic forms noted above.

Type II nouns: initial syllable reduplication

A pattern familiar from other Plateau languages in this region is the full or partial reduplication of the first syllable of the stem. Ningye, Ninzo, Fyem and Hasha all show this pattern in varying degrees, with Hasha a case where all nouns and verbs form plurals in this way. The probable source of this strategy is the Chadic languages with which Plateau has interacted for a long period, but reduplication rules have become generalised in Plateau languages no longer directly in touch with Chadic languages of this type. As a percentage of the overall lexicon, first syllable reduplication is not all that common in Mada, but its

occurrence on rather fundamental items of vocabulary does suggest its antiquity. Table 1 shows all the examples so far recorded, including cases where a second plural form is also in use;

Table 1. First syllable reduplication in Mada nouns

Pattern	s.	pl.	gloss
bə→bə	bār	bābār	farm shelter
bə→bə	bàr	bābàr	hat
bə→bə	bě	be, bəbe	seed
bwə→bə	bwǎ	bābwə	pocket
cu→cu	cūn	məcūn, məcūcūn	chief
gbə→gbə	gbōn	gbāgbōn	short piece of wood
gbə→gbə	gbòn	gbāgbòn	family
gbri→gbə	gbrīn	məgbrīn, gbāgbrīn	spirit, photo, shadow, soul, mirror
gbu→gbu	gbù	gbūgbu	town, hill
gyə→gi	gyār	gigyār	mother
kpa→kpə	kpān	kpākpān	friend
kpre→kpə	kprē	kpākpṛē	lower leg
kri→kə	kri	kākri	yam
lə→lə	lōn	mālālōn	husband
ci→ci	məcī	mācīcī	father-in-law
mbə→mbə	mbā	mbāmbā	wife, woman
mbə→mbə	mbār mpà	mbāmbār mpà	scar
mbe→mbə	mbē	mbāmbē	sprout
mbwa→mbu	mbwà zə	mbūmbwà zə	foot
mgbə→mə	mgbān	māmgbān	armpit
mgbə→mə	mgbān	māmgbān	wing
mgbə→mgbə	mgbà	mgbāmbà	aroma
mgbi→mgbə	mgbīr	mgbāmbīr	bush patch
mgbə→mgbə	mgbō	mgbāgbō	rice and beans
mgbə→mgbə	mgbò	mgbāgbò	swamp, fadama
mgbə→mgbə	mgboren	mgbāmbōrēn	word
mkpi→mkpə	mkpīr	mkpāmkpīr	hip
młə→mə	młā	māmłā	first born
młə→mə	młə	māmāmłə	groping in darkness
mpə→mpə	mpā	mpāmpā	sore, wound
mpə→mpə	mpā	mpāmpā	calabash
mpre→mpə	mprē	mpāmprē	sheet of paper
mpu→mpu	mpù	mpūmpù	thigh
mpu→mpu	mpūr	mpūmpūr	fear
nci→nci	nci	ncīnci	traditional district
nji→nji	njī	njīnji	knife
njo→nju	njò	njūnjo	horn
nkə→nkə	nkōn	nkōn, nkōnkōn	road, way, door
nkə→kə	nkōn	kānkōn	elbow, ankle
nkyə→nkyə	nkyār	nkyānkyār	group
nkyə→nkyə	nkyen	nkyānnkyen	remaining part
ri→ri	rī	rīrī	day
te→tə	tē	te, tētē	father
tse→tse	tse	tsētse	town

Where two forms are given in the plural column both are acceptable to speakers.

This table may conflate two different phenomena, complete reduplication in monosyllables such as knife, district, woman, fly, part and thigh and partial reduplication where syllable copying is not exact. The small number of examples makes these difficult to disaggregate. The great majority of reduplicated syllables begin with prenasalised consonants and labials dominate the remainder. Body parts and kinship terms dominate the semantics of reduplicated plurals although other terms occur. Notably, however, no animals form plurals in this way in contrast to tone-alternations. There are no obvious loanwords in the class of words showing initial syllable reduplication although this process seems to have occurred and then excluded by the adoption of a tone-alternation as a plural, as in the case of **tətələ** ‘lamp’ noted above.

It is clear that these pairings are not generated by morphological rules that admit of no exceptions; the differing results of reduplicating **nkɔ** suggest that historical explanations must be adduced to account for such variation. Despite this, most of the reduplications do follow a pattern, as the following rules show;

Rule 1. Where V_1 is schwa or a high vowel, the syllable is reduplicated precisely

Rule 2. All other vowels are reduplicated as schwa, except where C_1 is palatalised

Rule 3. Rhoticisation, labialisation, palatalisation and fricativisation are ignored in reduplication where Rule 1 has not been applied

Some words suggest ‘fossil’ reduplication, i.e. a previously reduplicated form has now been adapted as a tone-plural and reduplication is now unproductive. In this case, the plural must have been adopted as a base form and a singular created by analogy. The following table gives some examples;

bə̀bè	bə́bè	tail
kək̄	kək̄	fowl
ləlān	ləlān	scorpion

Some trisyllabic tone-plurals seem to derive from a similar source.

A case which looks like segmentation by false analogy and consequent creation of a reduplicated form is the word for ‘sweet potato’, either **kyūnkyū** or **dankyū** (both singulars). **Dankyū** is apparently from Hausa *dankali*. The sweet potato is a recently introduced New World crop, so such a borrowing is very likely. **da-**, however, is an unlikely prefix in pre-Mada, but it may have been analysed as a generic prefix and deleted in order to form a reduplicated plural. With some exceptions, tubers do not have morphologically marked plurals in Mada, hence **kyūnkyū** no longer has a singular corresponding form.

Type III nouns: prefix addition

The most recent addition to the Mada repertoire of plural strategies is probably the **mə-** prefix. This appears to have two realisations, **mə̀-** and **mə́-**. The low-tone form seems to have no strongly-defined semantic field (Table 2, Table 3), but mid-tone **mə́-** is applied quite strictly to persons (Table 4, Table 5). The examples in these tables and in other sections show the prefix has been added, sometimes subsequently to other strategies, such as tone-raising or reduplication, providing evidence for its recent genesis. Eggon has a **mo-** prefix for person nouns and this seems a likely origin for **mə̀-** as southern Mada dialects appear to have come under the influence of Eggon.

Most nouns taking a **mə̀-** prefix conserve stem-tone (Table 2);

Table 2. Mada m̀- prefixes where stem tone is conserved

bān	m̀bān	law
gōn	m̀gōn	back
gā	m̀gā	shoulder
gbrīn	m̀gbrīn, gbāgbrīn	spirit
jūjū	m̀jūjū	hole
kp̄	m̀kp̄	female agama lizard

However, a minority of nouns with m̀- prefixes alter the stem-tone (Table 3);

Table 3. Mada m̀- prefixes where stem tone is not conserved

cār	m̀cār	stranger
do	m̀dō	market
gbla	m̀gblā	tribal mark
nzār	m̀nzār	hoe
kōn	m̀kōn	war
gỳn	m̀gỳn	hare

In all these examples, except the words for ‘war’ and hoe, the stem tone falls one level.

Table 4 shows m̄- prefixes with conserved stem-tone;

Table 4. Mada m̄- prefixes where stem tone is conserved

bre	m̄bre	grave
lənggə	m̄lənggə	enemy
m̄la	m̄m̄la	relation
nē	m̄nē	person
v̄ənggə	m̄v̄ənggə	girl

and Table 5 the m̄- prefix with altered stem-tone;

Table 5. Mada m̄- prefixes where the stem tone alters

grě	m̄gre	aunt
krě	m̄kre	uncle
ywe	m̄ywē	in-law

Table 4 and Table 5 illustrate the strong relationship between the mid-tone m̄- prefix and person nouns. The great variability in stem-tones presumably reflects a wide range of different nominal affixes in pre-Mada.

This prefix may be present in the name of the people themselves, /m̄da/, a form which has no singular today and is invariant. However, earlier sources give these people the name ‘Yidda’, suggesting that in the early colonial period, /m̄da/ still alternated with a V- prefix such as *ì-* that is now lost². The persistence of such prefixes in the closely related Ninzo language provides some support for this hypothesis. The fixing of Mada as the name of the people may thus well be a phenomenon of the twentieth century.

² I am grateful to Norman Price for this suggestion

Type IV nouns: person nouns acting as pseudo-prefixes

Type IV consists of person nouns or pronouns that alternate in front of stems, giving the appearance of prefixes. Indeed it has been frequently speculated that such systems are the origin of Niger-Congo alternating affix systems (see Williamson & Blench 2000). The most common example is **wan/ban**;

wan/ban

wāndò	bāndò	farmer
wānfà	bānfà	fool
wāngbò	bāngbò	Igbo person
wāngi	bāngi	thief
wānkè	bānkè	house owner
wānkpānnēn	bānkpānnēn	soldier, policeman
wānkwār	bānkwār	wizard
wānrèkī	bānrèkī	trader
wānwō	bānwō	blind man
wānywànan	bānywànan	butcher

This alternation exists only in compounds, as there are no corresponding isolated nouns synchronically meaning person. However, the other example, **vān** pl. **nywen** ‘child’, is attested in isolation and is applied both to human and animal nouns;

vān/nywen

(və)nzè	nywenzè	young man
vənce	nywēnnce	bird
vəmbàn	nywēnmban	hawk
vərà	nywēnra	granary
vətò	nywētò	squirrel

The final nasal of **vān** is homorganic with the stem-initial consonant that follows, unlike the final nasal of **nywen** which is always conserved. However, the nasal of **vān** is sometimes deleted as the examples above show. The likely explanation is that it is being re-analysed as a diminutive prefix (see below), a process that is still incomplete.

Type V nouns: diminutives acting as pseudo class-prefixes

Like Berom, Mada permits most nouns to take optional diminutives, obligatory in a few cases. The Berom prefix is **ke-**, so it is unlikely to be cognate with Mada **və-**, but the two are used in a very similar fashion. The origin of the Mada diminutive is derived from the word for ‘child’ described in the previous section. The form **vān** for child is used without the final nasal, and it has an allomorph **fə-**. Both allomorphs have the same plural, namely **nywēn**. Table 6 gives some examples of the distribution of these prefixes on syllable reduplicating nouns;

Table 6. Diminutive prefixes in Mada nouns

s.	gloss	dim.	s.	gloss	dim.
bōr	farm shelter	fə	lɔn	husband	və
gbōn	short piece of wood	fə	bər	hat	və
gbòn	family	fə	bě	seed	və
gbrīn	spirit	fə	gbù	town, hill	və
kpān	friend	fə	gyǎr	mother	və
mbā	wife, woman	fə	kprē	lower leg	və
mbōr mpà	scar	fə	mbē	sprout	və
mgbān	armpit	fə	mbwà zè	foot	və
mgbān	wing	fə	mgbò	swamp, fadama	və
mgbō	rice and beans	fə	mlà	first born	və
mgboren	word	fə	mpā	calabash	və
mpā	sore, wound	fə	mpù	thigh	və
mprē	sheet of paper	fə	njò	horn	və
nci	traditional district	fə	nkòn	road	və
njī	knife	fə	tè	father	və
nkyen	remaining part	fə			
tse	town	fə			

There seems to be no easy way to predict which allomorph will be applied to which stem nor are these reflected in other areas of the concord system. Words which use the **wan/ban** alternation cannot also take the **və-** prefix.

The distinction between the **və-/fə-** prefix and the word for ‘child’ is illustrated by the fact that the word for child can take a diminutive prefix and that prefix is **fə-** not **və-**. Thus;

fəvèn **nywen** small child

Occasionally the intersection of the two systems can produce pseudo-alternations. Thus **lɔn**, man, uses syllable reduplication of Type II to form a plural. However, the use of a diminutive in the singular creates an apparent alternation.

vəlɔn **ləlɔn** man

Suppletives

Suppletive plurals in Mada are quite rare. The only examples so far recorded are;

mbrē **vē** day
vēn **nywen** child

A unique case is;

màleka **màlekū** angel

which replicates the Hausa plural alternation. This may well be a transitional form.

3.2 Speculations on the history of Mada noun-classes

As suggested earlier, Mada must have had a system of alternating V- and CV- prefixes at one time, similar to those in Ninzo and Ce. This probably co-existed with initial syllable reduplication since this is widespread

throughout Plateau languages of this region. Evidence from fossil reduplications and reduplication occurring on Hausa loanwords argues that until recently this process was both more widespread and productive. The prefixes began to erode, creating initial floating tones or shifting the prefix tone rightward. The result was that most nouns make plurals by tone-alternations. Mada stems have also eroded leftward, as almost all instances of Benue-Congo C₂ have been deleted and replaced by nasals or vibrants. If the tones of V₂ were retained this would explain the great diversity of tone-alternation pairings.

Relatively recently, a ‘new’ prefix, **m̀̀**- has been adopted, probably from Eggon. It is spreading throughout the language, hence the co-occurrence in some words of two plurals, with and without **m̀̀**-. **m̀̀**- has been superimposed on other plurals, hence it is found prefixing both reduplicated and tone-plurals. Rather surprisingly it has been applied to many items of ‘fundamental’ vocabulary such as body parts. The Mada system of person nouns used as pseudo-prefixes is likely to be a Mada innovation. It was productive until recently, as witness the word for ‘Igbo’.

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