THE PEREMA [WOM] LANGUAGE

of

NORTHEASTERN NIGERIA

Classification, phonology and noun morphology

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1. Introduction

This paper presents a summary of research into Perema [Wom], an Adamawa language of Eastern Nigeria[1]. Wom is closely related to Samba Leeko, and is usually classified as part of the Samba Leeko group. This is generally treated as distinct from the Vere-Duru group (Greenberg 1965; Boyd 1986). However, its links with languages of this group suggest they should form part of larger unit, as suggested below.

Figure 1. Classification of the Perema language

Pere (Kutin)

Perema [Wom]
Nyong [Mumbake]

Samba Leeko

Koma cluster

Momi [Vere]
Mom Jango
Duru etc.

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The only previous data on the Wom language is contained in Meek (1931:xx). Meek's short wordlist and ethnological notes demonstrate clearly the affinities of Wom with Mumbake and Samba Leeko.

The name Wom is that used by the Vere and other neighbouring groups, but the Wom themselves have:

Language	Perema
One Person	Pere
People	Pereba

This clearly suggests the correct name for the Kutin people, Pere (Raen 1984), and shows in passing that Wom retains an operative suffix system, unlike many related languages. Pere would also be the logical name for the Wom, but since this would be a source of confusion it is probably better to retain Pereba as a generic and use Perema for the language.

Attempts to classify the languages of the Vere group have not been founded on a very extensive database. The following table, based on my own field data for 'Vere' (Momi and Mom Jango) and modifying Boyd (1986) for Cameroun languages show the possible relations of the languages of this area.

Ethnographically speaking, the most curious feature of the Pereba is that they are encircled by the Vere (Momi) and that as a result have fallen within their cultural orbit. They share almost all types of material culture and have extremely similar ritual systems. As a consequence, although the base vocabulary is quite different, cultural vocabulary between the two languages is replete with loan-translations. In addition, Perema is apparently beginning to borrow certain phonological features of its neighbour, Momi, in particular the replacement of stops in CVC sequences with glottal stops. This is extremely common in Momi, rarer in Perema and not recorded in Samba Leeko.

2. Phonology of Perema

The analysis by Noss (1976) of Samba Leeko is a useful comparison for understanding the phonology of Perema.
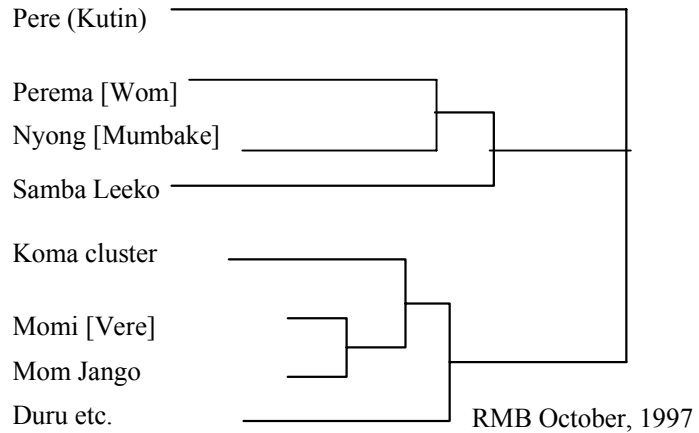
2.1 Consonants

Table 1. Consonant inventory of Perema

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Alveolar	Alveo-palatal	Palatal	Velar	Labial-velar	Glottal
Plosive	p b		t d		c j	k g	kp gb	ʔ
Nasal	m		n			[ŋ]		
Trill			r					
Fricative		f v	s z	ʃ ʒ		h		h
Approximant					y		w	
Lateral Approximant			l					

Despite Meek's transcriptions, there are no doubled consonants except /ŋ/, for example, /ŋaŋŋa/ 'mouth'.

The glottal stop is rare and may have been borrowed from Momi (Vere), where it commonly replaces the consonant in CVC sequences.

/h/ has been recorded in a single example [not apparently a loan word]

Labialization is not distinctive

Thus k -> kw and kp-> kpw -> kw

2.2 Vowels

Wom has eight phonemic vowels;

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

There are no nasalised vowels.

Vowel length is not phonemic, although vowel doubling is common. All such examples are treated as VV sequences.

/a/ is neutralised to /ə/ when it ceases to be word-final.

2.3 Tones

There are probably two level tones and a falling tone as in Samba Leekɔ.

3. Morphology of Perema Nouns

A major feature of interest in the morphology of Adamawa languages is the system of concords most prominently manifested by (usually) CV suffixes on nouns. In many groups, however, these suffixes have ceased functioning and can only be re-constructed historically as for example in Mumuye (Shimizu 1983). Momi, however, retains a fully functioning system. The particular interest of Perema is that, while Samba Leekɔ, its nearest relative, has dropped a functioning concord system in favour of a single CVCV plural suffix, in Perema a complex suffixing system still exists. In addition, there seem to have been two historically distinct CVCV plural suffixes that have made a bid to become generalised across all the noun classes.

The fact that the system is still in flux is shown by the fact that at the same elicitation session in the same village two informants may give different plurals for the same singular form. When asked which is the 'correct' form, they very often conclude that both are possible. This is not an age or generational phenomenon.

This paper describes the system of plurals in Perema. It should be stated at the outset that this is a preliminary account and that a fuller investigation of the concord system will undoubtedly reveal more about the genesis of the present situation.

Stage I.

Perema originally possessed a fully operative set of alternating suffixes that formed part of a more general concord system. These suffixes still survive in a number of nouns; especially those concerned with persons.

Alternation	s.	pl.	Gloss
nà/mà	nèkènà	nèkèmà	woman
ŋà/bà	nidíŋà	nidíbà	person
yá/bá	lìyá	lìbá	thief
wá/bá	rúùwá	rúùbá	guest
wà/rà	dàŋgùwà	dàŋgɔ̀rà	road

Many names of animals and birds take the form CVa with plural is formed CVba. This is probably originally either an alternation á/bá, or else a further deleted consonant must be postulated i.e. CVCa→CVV. Examples;

s.	pl.	Gloss
vùá	vùbá	goat
sèá	sèbá	cobra

However, consonant deletion of this type is quite ancient, as cognate forms in Samba Leeko, Mumbake and Vere show comparable VV sequences.

Stage II.

The second phase was the generalising certain Ca plural suffixes to larger classes of nouns; the sign of this class is that the Ca suffixes on the singular forms are now unproductive.

bá is broadly associated with potentially animate objects, e.g.;

s.	pl.	Gloss
vàlá	vàləbá	corpse
zàrà	zárùbá	buffalo

rá is generally found with plants;

s.	pl.	Gloss
zàmrá	zàmrə rá	okra
kə lá	kə lə rá	shea-butter tree

ná is very rare and seems to lack any phonological or semantic patterning.

s.	pl.	Gloss
màgá	màgə ná	drinking gourd
kʷɔlá	kʷɔlèná	hill
pɛ́tíga	pɛ́tígə̀ ná	back

Stage III.

The third phase of pluralisation was the adoption of CVCV plural suffixes. The two suffixes are;

dìŋrá
və̀ rɔ̀

In contrast to the CV suffixes these delete the final vowel of the singular form.

dìŋrá is used where the final syllable is nasal + **-a**, after some VV sequences when a nasal is inserted before the suffix. Examples;

s.	pl.	Gloss
kpàáná	kpàán-dìŋrá	sorghum
vàmà	vàm-dìŋrá	breast
pèá	pen-dìŋrá	stone

The **və̀ rɔ́** suffix deletes either a Ca suffix or a final **-a**. To judge by the discussions among informants it is probably the most recent innovation, and its application to some nouns not fully accepted. This appears to be an areal innovation, since it is also found in Samba Leeko, Kam, Koma and Pere (Kutin). Examples;

s.	pl.	Gloss
dùŋrà	dùŋt- və̀ rɔ́	yam
zàgìyá	zàgì- və̀ rɔ́	red yam
tédúmà	tédúm- və̀ rɔ́	bush-pig
bùùgà	bùùg- və̀ rɔ́	soap

The word for 'hippo' **vémùá** would regularly form a plural **vémùbá**, but today most speakers agree that **vémù - və̀ rɔ́** should be used.

The corresponding suffix in other related languages is;

Nyoŋnepa   **vará**
Samba Leeko   **birá**
Kam
Koma
Pere

Exceptional cases

The three stages outlined above describe an idealised model. However, there are numerous exceptions in even the basic vocabulary. Further data will undoubtedly reveal even more types of pluralisation strategy. The five types of exception so far noted are;

1. 'Blacksmith' **làmá** has the plural **lámá**. No other examples of this type have so far been recorded.

2. Certain nouns with the final sequence –**msa**- insert a plural infix /ə̀/ before the final -sa. Thus;

s.	pl.	Gloss
gbàmsà	**gbàmwə̀sà**	chin
gbànàmsá	**gbànàmwə̀sá**	cane-rat

Other consonants before a final -**sa** almost invariably give -**sə̀rá**. Thus;

dàksá	pl.	**dàksə̀rá**	squash

3. Some words insert -**p** before the first consonant of the original CV suffix. Some of these also use the more common pluralisation strategy in addition. Thus;

s.	pl.	gloss
rìdà	**rìpdàbà**	monitor lizard
nèrbùá	**nèpbùbá**	affinal relatives
kùbàárá	**kùpbàárá**	egg

The word for 'egg' is of particular interest, since the /p/ is the only sign of the plural.

4. Some words, particularly those in relation to persons, have suppletive plurals. Examples;

s.	pl.	gloss
wà	**yábàbà**	child
wàvànà	**yábvàmyágà**	young man

The repetition of -**ya** in this second word suggests the incorporation of a concord marker into the stem.

This particular stem change also occurs in related languages such as Momi, Samba Leeko and Koma. In Momi for example;

wàzà	pl.	**yáŋbì**	child

The -**bi** suffix, in passing, does seem to refer back to Niger-Congo roots for child.

5. Two exceptional words;

s.	pl.	Gloss
mèŋvɛ́rà	**ɔ̀bvɛ́rɛ́bà**	friend
nɔ́rà	**nɔ́wàvàrà**	eye

4. Conclusion

Adamawa languages have suffered from long neglect in comparison with the other principal families of African languages. The function of this paper is to draw attention to the fascinating problems in noun morphology that occur in Wom and related languages. The data in this paper should be regarded as a preliminary sketch only.

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