Can Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic help us understand the evolution of Niger-Congo noun classes?

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Noun classes: Niger-Congo and elsewhere

- Globally speaking, Niger-Congo type noun-classes are fairly rare; semantically based systems of number marking with affixes and concord on adjectives and other parts of speech really only occur in Africa in parts of Niger-Congo
- Indeed, they are not even typical of the whole of Niger-Congo, despite a large and careless literature to the contrary.
- They are lacking in Mande, Dogon, Ijoid, Kaalak-Domurik & ?Rashad apparently from the beginning
- They appear to have eroded in much of Kwa and Volta-Niger
- So it is quite likely that they appeared partway through the evolution of Niger-Congo and the non-class languages are at the top of the tree..

Noun classes: Niger-Congo and elsewhere

- Elsewhere in the world, the main area where these occur is in Papuan and Australian languages. In most cases these languages have only three or four classes, but a few have evolved complex systems comparable to Niger-Congo
- Similar systems without the same type of concord appear in North Caucasian and Yeniseian
- Nilo-Saharan has striking systems of affix alternation marking number in a few branches, Daju, Kadu and Koman, but these are not associated with semantics or concord
- These can often be associated with a three-term system of number-marking
- So it seems a reasonable question to ask how noun-classes evolved.

Word structure in Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic

- The Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic language phyla, despite being geographically intertwined in SE Asia, are not usually thought of as being genetically related.
- Despite this, they have a strikingly similar word structure, usually known in the regional literature as ‘sesquisyllabic’. This image this suggests is quite misleading. However, words typically have a C prefix and a stem that looks as if it is underlying CVCV, though it is shortened in many languages
- In the regional literature the terms ‘minor’ and ‘major’ syllable are used
- Chinese, of course is not like this, but Sinitic is highly atypical for Sino-Tibetan; Tibetan does have this structure
- It is tempting to pronounce words as if they had a consonant cluster at the beginning but it ain’t so.

Word structure in Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic

- These prefixes do *not* mark number and thus do not alternate but they do have semantic associations; there is a particularly widespread k- prefix in Austro-Asiatic marking animals.
- Moreover, the prefixes can be exchanged in cross-linguistic perspective, in other words, the stem will remain the same and a new prefix acquired
- So it is reasonable to assume that there was once a much more widespread system of semantically assigned prefixes and that this has eroded, but is still partially present in the minds of speakers
- If so, how did this system originate?

Classifiers in Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic

- Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic, along with many other language phyla (Austronesian and many New World phyla) are marked by nominal classifier systems
- These are essentially grammaticalised nouns that have become obligatory accompaniments (clitics?) when marking plurals or groups of nouns
- They do not usually show any type of agreement (?exceptions in the Amazon)
- It is likely that the prefix systems in Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic are in fact frozen classifiers, which preceded noun stems and then became partially incorporated
- A new classifier would then be applied to the stem
- This very much corresponds to affix renewal in Niger-Congo where noun-class affixes become unproductive and a new affix is added

Northwest Kainji went down this road

- Such a word structure is not typical of Niger-Congo in general
- However, at least one group of languages does look like this synchronically. Nouns in the northwest Kainji languages (cLela, tHun, ut-Main, Gwamhi-Wuri), typically have the structure C.CVCV (often transcribed with a schwa to make sense of the otherwise disquieting appearance)
- These prefixes can be said to bear tone, although it appears to be always low, so it is no longer functional (also the case in Himalayan Sino-Tibetan)
- And it is highly likely that this was an intermediate stage in some other branches of Niger-Congo
- Hyamic (Plateau) has developed a complex system of initial clusters

And others went down this road

- Probably due to deletion of –V in the prefix
- Similarly, many Kordofanian languages have C.VCV structures, where the initial C is an alternating prefix. This suggests (perhaps) loss of C1 of the stem and subsequently loss of –V from the prefix.

Classifiers in Africa? I

- Nilo-Saharan languages does not have concord but does have productive affixes and affix renewal
- A language like Krongo can have up to three frozen affixes
- Which of course is part of the reason Greenberg classified the ‘Tumtum’ languages as Niger-Congo
- We do not usually consider African languages as having nominal classifiers, or SE Asian languages as having noun-classes.
- But there is increasing evidence for the secondary evolution of nominal classifiers in Niger-Congo languages
- The most well-known case is Kana, an Ogoni language, part of the Cross River group.
- Kana has pretty much lost its nominal morphology, and the classifiers, may be an attempt to compensate, as it were

Classifiers in Niger-Congo? II

- Other examples have been mooted, such as in Ejagham (Ekoid), although rarely described in detail
- An interesting example is Mambay, an Adamawa language spoken in north-central Cameroun, described by Erik Anonby.
- Mambay has a functioning system of noun-class suffixes, but which appears to be developing prefixed classifiers
- Examples given by Anonby include the ‘collectives’ which precede nouns, do not show concord and have broad semantic correlations
- I suspect these systems are more common than has been recognised, as a function of what we expect to find in various language phyla.

Gumuz

- Recently, a clue to the evolution of such systems has surfaced. Gumuz, a Nilo-Saharan language of the Ethio-Sudan borderland described by Colleen Ahland, turns out to have a system of predicate classifiers, marking semantic fields, typically of shape or texture.
- These are infixed in ‘split verbs’ and are copied as demonstratives.
- The major classifiers are **-**Vk’^{w} ‘head’, -Vts ‘body’, -Vc ‘eye/seed’, -k’^{w}ós ‘tooth’, and –ts’ê ‘ear’
- Mithun(1986) describes a verbal classifier whereby “a noun is incorporated into a verb to categorize an extra predicate argument...usually in S or O function.”
- With this type of verbal classifier, there is frequently a generic-specific relationship between the incorporated NP and the external NP which accompanies it.

Gumuz II

- The significance of this system is that classifiers which develop from grammaticalised body parts are governed by the semantics of nouns
- For example;
- '*entities that are head-like in shape and/or function or closely associated with such objects*' *govern the following classes of object*
  - ❖ fingers, toes
  - ❖ water, sauce, beer,
  - ❖ lotion, soap (in a container)
  - ❖ ears of corn
  - ❖ pots, pans, cans

Gumuz and Western Nilotic

- In constructions where the classifier refers to the object of the main verb, the classifier is suffixed to the verb and thus abuts the object noun directly
- It is thus not difficult to see how it could become attached to the noun rather than the verb
- It is not clear how common such systems might be in Nilo-Saharan
- Western Nilotic, as described by Anne Storch, has a system of nominal suffixes which appear to have semantic correlates
- There are both singular and plural suffixes marking length, roundness, part of etc.
- And there is some evidence for a system of suffix alternation which has been overwritten by spreading ‘imperial’ number markers kV- and N-

Gumuz and others

- As with Gumuz, grammaticalisation of body parts seems to be a major source for affixes
- Nilotic languages also have nothing that could be described as concord
- The T/K and N/K ‘substrata’ identified by Bryan in the 1950s and Greenberg’s (1981) moveable –k as a ‘Stage III’ article are all reflections of this broader phenomen
- The persistence of t- and k- affixes are the most visible evidence of this system of incorporation and renewal

Three-term number-marking

- However, Nilo-Saharan has another widespread feature, identified by Gerrit Dimmendaal in 2001, the system of three-term plurals
- Essentially, this is a system whereby the unmarked term refers to a concept in general and a singulative and plurative are marked with affixes
- In English this could be conceptualised by the triplets
  - ‘a beer’ ‘beer’ ‘beers’
  - ‘a sea’ ‘sea’ ‘seas’
- Such three term systems of number-marking are common in Nilo-Saharan and often make use of the affixes, especially t- and k-, which may thus alternate
- So it seems possible that the combination, in Nilo-Saharan, of a predicate classifier system and three-term number marking allowed the development of alternating affixes with semantic content

The controversial bit

- Referring back to the possibility that noun classes were not typical of early Niger-Congo, I want to suggest that contact with Nilo-Saharan was responsible for their evolution
- At the node where Atlantic, some Kordofanian, Kru-Gur-Adamawa and other develop, is a radical break with the Mande/Dogon/Ijoid zone
- The guilty party may be Central Sudanic, which looks nothing like Niger-Congo morphologically today due to massive erosion, but shares more lexicon than most Nilo-Saharan
- So imagine persistent bilingualism leading to the adoption of both the three-term system of number-marking and the concept of semantic association of affixes

The controversial bit II

- What may have happened is that the early adopters made the same mistake as Greenberg over Kadu; they interpreted the system as more coherent and integrated than it actually was.
- It seems possible Kaalak-Domurik [Katla-Tima] is an example of this; essentially, underneath extensive allomorphy, these languages have two singular number markers t- and k- and one plural marker, i-, which may have been adopted from Nilo-Saharan and are certainly not evidence for a system of noun-classes.
- Three-term number marking persists in Niger-Congo today, especially in Gur and Kainji, though it has rarely been described. (and even singulatives in t-, though this may be coincidence)
- So what was probably a relatively simple system (such as those Papuan with 3/4 classes) became elaborated with multiple semantically associated affixes
- Which has also happened rather more rarely in both Papuan and Australian

The controversial bit III

- The last step is the evolution of concord, which is highly distinctive to Niger-Congo (although note it also evolves from non-concord systems in Oceania)
- My suggestion is that this evolves from demonstrative copying
- Long ago, Carl Hoffman suggested (in a discussion of Kainji) that copying of demonstratives lay at the origin of the switch from prefixing to suffixing and vice versa
- All that has to happen is for the copied demonstrative to be interpreted as part of an adjacent adjective
- The same mistake that leads to ‘thine arse’ being written ‘thy narse’ in Renaissance England.

A link with verbal extensions?

- There is a curious relationship between verbal extensions and noun-classes. At least in Niger-Congo, the two seem to go together (though not perfectly), although I don't have any good explanation for this
- But (at least in Plateau and Gur), the same three-term system of number-marking occurs with singulatives and pluratives

Conclusion

- Of course, if any of these hypotheses are right, our approaches to Nilo-Saharan and Niger-Congo morphology must be rethought in a major way
- Relic or unproductive morphology can be analysed for evidence of the semantics of nominal classifiers
- And we need to rethink the similarities between these two phyla (borrowing or genetic relationship?)
- And perhaps get away from a simple dichotomous account of noun-class pairings in Niger-Congo
- Looking at extra-African evidence for how morphological systems evolve may well provide clues to the genesis of those within Africa.

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