

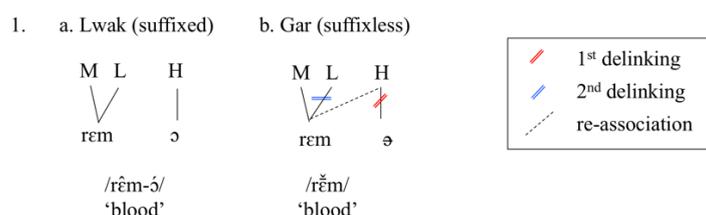
The diachronic development of Shilluk suffixal morphology and its implications on the tone system

The Shilluk language (West Nilotic, South Sudan) has a rich suprasegmental system. Previous studies on the Lwak dialect of Shilluk postulate nine tonemes in the language: High, Mid, Low, High Fall, Low Fall, High Fall to Mid, Late Fall, High Rise, and Low Rise (Remijsen et al. 2019). The size of the Shilluk tonal inventory contrasts with that of related West Nilotic languages, e.g. Dinka (Luanyjang dialect), which has four tonemes (Remijsen & Ladd 2008). This raises the question of why Shilluk has a comparatively large tonal inventory. By comparing two Shilluk dialects—Lwak and Gar, the latter of which was previously undocumented—I show that this can be explained by the diachronic development of Shilluk suffixal morphology.

Acoustic data of Gar indicates that Gar has the same tonal inventory as that of Lwak. However, comparison with reference data of Lwak (Remijsen et al. 2018) shows dialectal variation in the distribution of tonal specifications in nouns, which I attribute to the loss of suffixes (Remijsen & Ayoker 2019). Further analysis on the suffixation patterns in Gar nouns shows Gar has lost the suffixes $-ɪ/-ɔ$ in various areas of the grammar where Lwak shows these suffixes; e.g. ‘blood’: Gar /rēm̃/; Lwak /rēm̃-ó/.

Following Andersen’s (1990) diachronic analysis of ternary vowel length contrast and suffix loss in West Nilotic languages, I postulate that the Lwak dialect reflects a more conservative stage in the diachronic development of Shilluk suffixal morphology. In contrast, Gar reflects a more innovative stage, in which suffixes have been lost. This draws parallel to Andersen’s (1990) analysis of Pāri and Dinka as two distinct West Nilotic languages whose patterns of suffixal morphology exhibit an earlier and a later diachronic stage, respectively.

By comparing Gar and Lwak cognates, this study shows that suffix loss in Gar only involves the loss of segmental material. The tone of the lost suffix re-associates with the stem syllable compositionally. (1a) shows that the Lwak cognate of ‘blood’ has a suffix vowel associated to a High tone. In contrast, (1b) shows that in the Gar cognate, the segmental material of the suffix is lost and the High tone from the lost suffix re-associates to the stem syllable, combining with the existing tone specification. This results in a High Rise tone specification on the stem syllable /rēm̃/. This compositional interaction analysis thus provides an explanation for the varying distribution of certain tone specifications between Lwak and Gar, such as that Gar has more suffixless nouns specified with the High Rise tone than Lwak. Therefore, by extension, the loss of suffix phenomenon offers insight on how Shilluk developed more contrastive tones than its neighbouring West Nilotic languages. This study of Shilluk contributes to the cross-linguistic picture of how tonal languages expand their tonal inventory.



References

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