

Book Review

Vanderelst, John. 2016. *A grammar of Dagik, A Kordofanian language of Sudan.* Cologne (Köln): Köppe. 2016. xix + 263 pp. ISBN 978-3-89645-566-6 €49.80

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Together with eight other languages (Quint forthcoming a; Norton and Kuku Alaki 2015), Dagik belongs to the Talodian group, which itself is one of the five subdivisions of the Kordofanian family of the Niger-Congo phylum. To my knowledge, John Vanderelst's monograph is the first book-length study entirely devoted to the description of one of the Talodian languages. This Dagik grammar is derived from the author's PhD. It is organised as follows: after some general elements (Table of contents, List of abbreviations ..., v-xix), an Introduction (Chapter 1, 1–8) gives some basic information about the Dagik community, its language and the methodology and theoretical framework used to describe it. Chapter 2 (9–36) deals with the phonology of Dagik, presenting in turn the vowels, the consonants, the syllable structure, and the tonal system. Chapter 3 (37–81) is concerned with nominal morphology: it details in particular the Dagik noun class system, nominal derivation and compounding, and the characteristics of various constituents of the noun phrase other than the noun (demonstratives, possessives, numerals, quantifiers). Chapter 4 (83–139) examines the verbal morphology, paying much attention to extensions and inflection. The three subsequent chapters are each devoted to a specific grammatical category or notion: adjectives (Chapter 5, 141–152), pronouns and indexes (Chapter 6, 153–170), and spatial and temporal meanings, including adverbs and locative nouns (Chapter 7, 171–198). Finally, Chapter 8 deals with clause structure. Appendices (235–257) follow, presenting the transcription and orthographic conventions (I), an interlinearized text (II) and a Dagik-English wordlist of about 1,000 items (III); finally, a references section (259–263) concludes the volume.

Regarding its format, the book is well presented. There are also relatively few typos: I have been able to find some three dozen, a moderate number given the complexity of the glosses and the fact that the author is not a native English speaker. Nevertheless, I think the font of the text is really too small, which impacts negatively on the reader's concentration. It would also have been nice to indicate the hierarchy of the various (sub)sections more clearly in the Table of contents (vii-xv), using for instance different types or sizes of fonts and/or indentations.

Regarding its contents, this grammar has many positive points. First of all, as shown above, its structure is well balanced and actually gets close to the ideal of completeness: most of the points that a typologist (Cristofaro 2006) or a specialist of Kordofanian or Niger-Congo languages would like to check in a descriptive grammar of this kind are dealt with, in a systematic, ordered, rigorous way. Each chapter is headed by a short introduction that helps the reader make their way across the various subsections. Second, the book is well informed both from a typological perspective (e. g. mention of Dik (1981) and Lambrecht (1994) in the subsection devoted to information structure, 230) and concerning the field of Kordofanian studies (e. g. see references to Ebang and Tima in the discussion of “*encoding flexibility*, i. e. the ability for the same paradigm to encode several syntactic roles”, 163). Note also that most of the examples of the book are carefully interlinearized using the *Leipzig Glossing Rules* and hence are accessible to a large audience of linguists, including non-specialists of Kordofanian and related languages. Third, some analyses provided by the author are linguistically elegant, be it in the domain of phonology (e. g. the role of the latent **-t** in blocking some lenition processes, see examples 110 and 205 and comments thereof, 109 and 126–127), morphology (e. g. the question of the status of the “plural addressee marker” – **no**, 164) or semantics (e. g. the use of the clause-final clitic falling tone – a strategy typically employed to mark non-human comitatives – with human referents who cannot decide for themselves to accompany the subject participant as they are “too young” (children) or “too old”, and hence somewhat deprived from their animacy, see example 44, on page 209). Fourth, in discussing the examples he provides (e. g. example 89, 217), the author also shows a praiseworthy sensitivity to the context (or “situation”) in which a given utterance is produced. Fifth, the wealth of rich, informative data contained in this Dagik grammar allows fruitful comparisons both with neighbouring Kordofanian (or other Nuba Mountain) languages and with other branches of Niger-Congo. Regarding Kordofanian, many parallels can be drawn, which can be attributed either to a common origin or to areal tendencies, e. g. (i) Dagik /t/ is realized as [r] in intervocalic position (23), just as in Koalib (Quint 2009: 111–112, Quint 2006: 123–124) and in some Nubian varieties (Comfort 2013); (ii) the Dagik adverb **kəme** (175) means both ‘only’ and ‘[in an] empty [state]’: in Koalib these two meanings are also associated with one and the same adverbial item, namely **ḏòmòny** (Quint and Ali Karmal Koko forthcoming). In some cases at least, the commonalities with other (non-Kordofanian) Niger-Congo languages may well be due to a shared origin. Consider for instance (i) the segmental proximity of the word for ‘eye’ in Dagik **sigi** (48 and 254) and Djifanghor Nyun (= Baïnouck, Niger-Congo, Atlantic, Nyun-Buy) **siggil** (Quint forthcoming b) or (ii) the fact that, in Dagik (53) as in

Djifanghor Nyun (Quint forthcoming b), one noun-class (**j-** in Dagik, **hu** in Nyun) is exclusively or mainly centred on the noun meaning ‘thing’¹ (**ja** and **hoñj** respectively).

Yet, despite its many virtues, Vanderelst’s book also exhibits some more questionable facets. First, and most importantly, the phonological account the author gives of Dagik is not fully satisfactory. Thus, regarding vowels: (i) more information would be needed about the + ATR vowels that appear between brackets (e), (ə), (o), (a) in Table 2 (12) (Vowel system (8-12 system, i.e. 8 phonemes + 4 allophones)) and which are considered as “allophones” of their – ATR counterparts; (ii) Vanderelst, relying on various arguments, considers that “vowel lengthening is conditioned, not contrastive” (16). He may be right, but a consequence of this verdict is that, except for the section of the book devoted to “vowel length” (16–18), Vanderelst does not indicate vowel length in his phonologically-based transcriptions. In a first description of a hitherto almost undescribed language, this type of decision seems definitely too drastic: it would have been safer to use a more phonetically-based transcription (mentioning vowel length – and other salient acoustic features – when it is perceived) throughout the book so that other researchers (e.g. phoneticians and phonologists) can take advantage of the first-hand data provided by the author in his monograph in order to produce their own analyses. Once vowel length is suppressed from the transcriptions, one is obliged to depend on Vanderelst’s own analysis in this domain without being able to go further (see Creissels 1994: 26 for an appeal to caution in this respect). Concerning tone, only two pages (35–36) are devoted to this central part of Dagik phonology and grammar and the exact way the three different heights mentioned for mid tone (M_L , M_{LL} , M_{LLL}) appear in context would certainly deserve more than the few examples devoted to them. Furthermore, although Vanderelst mentions the tonal patterns of many lexical items, tone is generally absent in most of the linguistic examples he presents, which raises serious problems: (i) the pronoun **anj** (tone pattern [HL], see 153) encodes the subject 3rd person singular (S3SG) and has the same segmental form as the question word **anj** ‘who?’ (see 154, 219–221) but, to my knowledge, the tone pattern of the question word is not mentioned. Therefore, the question remains as to whether these two **anj**-s are exact homophones or are distinguished through tone; (ii) in a similar vein, in the chapter dealing with ‘clause structure’, Vanderelst asserts that “a distinction between direct and indirect speech is not morphosyntactically encoded” (225) and, a bit further, that “the relative clause only differs from its corresponding main clause by the

¹ In this second case, one cannot exclude a general cognitive explanation linked with the semantics of ‘thing’ in human languages.

prefixation of the attributive marker” (228). The same sentences could apply to Koalib² (the Kordofanian language I personally know best) if we consider only the segmental level of the sentence. However, both sequences in indirect speech and relative clauses are tonally marked in Koalib (concerning relative clauses, see Quint 2013: 311–312, 2009: 142, 2006: 160): it may well be the same in Dagik, but as tone is not indicated in the Dagik examples of this book, it is impossible to check it. Second, several examples adduced by Vanderelst to illustrate his analyses are hardly tenable from a pragmatic viewpoint: in which plausible context would a Dagik speaker assert spontaneously that ‘the calf eats meat’ (60) or that ‘this leopard is not a black woman’ (145)? Third, many times, in particular when dealing with verb extensions, the author does not translate the extended verbs separately from their corresponding underived forms, e. g. on page 101, the first line of example 40 reads:

war-ɔ [underived form] **wak:-ɔ** [middle voice form] ‘grill’

The translation ‘grill’ seemingly applies to both items, and it is up to the reader to deduce the semantic effect(s) conveyed by the middle voice form in contrast with the underived form. It is true that for each verb extension, Vanderelst has included a section entitled ‘semantic range of the extension’ but, having myself worked in some detail on verb extensions in two Niger-Congo languages (Koalib – see Quint 2010 – and Nyun), I can testify that, for a given extension, there are always some derived verbs whose meanings are not predictable from the semantics of the underived form. For that reason, it would have been more convenient to systematically mention the meanings (and possibly the valency) associated with both the underived and derived verbs for each case provided by the author. Fourth, some of Vanderelst’s interpretations seem to depend too heavily on the English equivalents of the Dagik terms: e. g. 101, **isak:-ɔ** ‘wear’ is given as an instance of “lexicalized” middle voice extension, derived from **is-ɔ** ‘put, give’. But what if, instead of translating **isak:-ɔ** by ‘wear’, Vanderelst had resorted to ‘put on (a cloth)’? In that case, the meanings of **is-ɔ** ‘put’ and its middle voice extension **isak:-ɔ** ‘put on (a cloth)’ would have appeared to be related and the middle voice extension would not have qualified as an example of lexicalization. Fifth, on various occasions, Vanderelst seems to be unaware of the fact that the influence of Sudanese Arabic (the dominant language in Sudan) may account for several features observed in Dagik, e. g. the “separative

² Except for the Dagik attributive marker, which has no equivalent in Koalib.

strategy” (150) that is used to express comparisons of superiority and in which “the standard of comparison is encoded as the source of motion”, parallels closely the Arabic comparative construction, where the standard is preceded by the preposition **min**, which also expresses the [SOURCE OF MOTION]. As Dagik also uses another strategy to express comparisons of superiority, it is reasonable to think – or at least to mention the possibility – that the existence of the “separative strategy” in Dagik may well be a calque of Arabic. Sixth, some of Vanderelst’s analyses do not seem fully reliable or might profitably be made better by making use of general typological notions: e. g. (i) it is difficult to believe that “speakers’ intuition” (54) is a criterion robust enough so as to allow one to distinguish between “singular/plural” and “singulative/collective” class-pairings for Dagik nouns; (ii) Vanderelst provides (165, footnote 137) two examples illustrating the fact that in some cases “the patient role precedes the recipient (...) or the beneficiary”, contrary to the general rule he has given in the main text. However, in both counterexamples adduced by the author in the footnote, the recipient or beneficiary is a 1SG and the patient a 2SG, while the patients given in the main text are 3PL or 3SG: this suggests that the different orderings observed for patients and recipients/beneficiaries could be linked with a type of pronominal hierarchy comparable to what has been described for various Amerindian languages (e. g. in Emérillon, see Rose 2011: 67–81). It would be worth at least to check the validity of this hypothesis. Seventh, this book lacks a thematic index, which would certainly have made it easier to use for its readers. Eighth, visibly due to the fact that this Dagik grammar is a pioneering work, the author is prone to say that such and such point “merits further research” (or an equivalent formula). This mantra shows up more than twenty times in the whole book (e. g. 14, 25, 41, 124 ...), which is certainly excessive and contributes to giving the reader the (wrong) impression that the grammar they have in hand is somewhat incomplete or ill-informed.

Of course, it is easier to criticize a grammar than to compose one. And I am aware while writing these lines that my own Koalib grammar is not completed and published, whereas Vanderelst’s is now available to whoever would like to read and comment on it. The various observations and restrictions developed above should not minimize the obvious merits and value of Vanderelst’s work, the first scholar to have successfully concluded a comprehensive description of a Talodian language. The fact that this Dagik grammar was recently followed by the description of another Talodian language (Smits 2017) shows that John Vanderelst’s painstaking work is not isolated, and that the field of Talodian (and Kordofanian) studies is growing steadily, thereby allowing the scientific community to get a more direct access to these hitherto under-researched languages.

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