Book Review

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This book, the outcome of six years of research, describes the phonology and aspects of the grammar and cognitive syntax of Syer, a Senufo language very closely related to Kar, the two being commonly referred to respectively as western and eastern Karaboro. Karaboro constitutes a dialect continuum, and the discussion seems to suggest that lack of mutual intelligibility between Syer and Kar may be as much a product of attitudes as of linguistic divergence (see p. 10). The book specifically describes the language as spoken in the Bakona district of Ténguéréla, about 8 km from Banfora in south-western Burkina Faso, chosen because it occupies an extreme on this continuum. Handy maps (which, oddly, are not listed in the Contents) help to resolve possible confusions. The book ends with two lexical appendices, one listing over 1,000 nouns indicating the class forms each occurs in and another listing about 350 verbs. If a word is borrowed the source is also indicated. These appendices are in themselves a valuable resource.

The Introduction outlines the terminology used for the language and its speakers by themselves and by others, reviews the linguistic situation in the area, considers the classification of the language and discusses the scope of the work and the methodological approach adopted. Syer, which is not endangered, is reportedly spoken by about 65,000 people, and is surrounded by non-Senufo Gur languages in an area where Jula is the principal second language. Notably, the author worked through Jula rather than French, as it was better understood by her assistants. Complex syntactic constructions, including multi-verb constructions, are not explicitly dealt with, but on the other hand, the descriptions in some chapters, particularly that dealing with tense, aspect and modality (Chapter 8) frequently call upon such constructions. The overall approach leans towards cognitive linguistics, drawing particularly on Croft (2012) and Bybee et al. (1994). In what follows I do not attempt to describe the entire book in all particulars, but dwell especially on phenomena that are noteworthy especially to a linguist familiar with Central Gur and Kwa languages but not Senufo.

The Introduction is followed by a chapter titled "Phonology". Tone however is dealt with in a separate chapter. Oriented around syllable structure, the

Phonology chapter is thus essentially about segmental phonology, with little attention to suprasegmentals and prosody except for a tantalizingly brief and undeveloped reference to syllable stress (16). Stress (also referred to as accent) appears to be relevant to intervocalic consonant weakening (22, 26), and is a conditioning factor in the palatalization of consonants (40, 41). Stress or accent in Gur languages has been discussed (Dakubu 2006 on Farefari, Nicole 1980 on Nawdm, Abbott and Cox 1966 on Bassari) but has not (to my knowledge) been thoroughly described, and specific comment on its realization would have been welcome. I also find no indication in this chapter or the next (or elsewhere in the book) of such a basic prosodic fact as whether the language shows downdrift or not (although it does have downstep, on which more later).

This chapter also describes the operation of vowel harmony, which in the case of Senufo languages is not a necessary feature of the phonological word but refers to the spread of features from the root to a suffix with no specified vowel or a seriously underspecified vowel, or in some circumstances across word boundaries. This is rather different from the vowel harmony found in Kwa languages and some Central Gur languages, where it is usually defined by spreading of the ATR feature, applies to the entire simple word, and spreads to the left if the language employs prefixes. In Syer, a suffix can have a fully specified vowel, and then no harmony applies (73). Vowel length seems to have marginal status, occurring mainly to carry a tone change.

Syer has three phonemic tones, but although tone is a property of the syllable, "a tone tune is a property of a word, associated to syllables according to their number" (114), so that for example HL may occur on one syllable, on two, or on three, with L occurring on the last syllable. Tone in this language is said to have three functions: lexical, grammatical, and organizing (85). It is not entirely clear to me what the author means by the "organizing" function – it apparently has to do with the fact that the tones of a word are affected by what precedes and/or follows it.

The lexical distribution of tones is somewhat skewed. It appears that there is no word with underlying initial High tone, only High-Low. Low seems to be the most stable tone. Non-borrowed nouns generally end in a fall to L if the last syllable is not otherwise L. Three tone classes of verbs are recognized, but the manifestation of their tones is heavily affected by the preceding syllable; thus M and HL verb tones are affected by the final tone of a preceding Object (Syer is an SOV language) and neutralized in very many situations (see p. 27). "Floating tone" in this language refers to a "delinked" word-final Mid that affects the tones of a following word, so that for example a Mid tone verb becomes High-Low after a Mid tone which is then dropped (128). The processes are fairly

complex, and this reader would have welcomed a more formal writing out of the rules to help sort them out.

The chapters on Nouns, Verbs, and Other Word Classes are essentially on morphology. Syer nouns take typical Senufo class suffixes, with nine nominal classes that form four regular genders and two single-class genders. The peculiarities of each gender and its constituting class suffixes are exhaustively described. There are a number of interesting irregularities. For example, a diminutive suffix replaces the normal class suffix, but without changing the class of the noun for agreement and reference purposes (165). Even though the class system is strongly suffixing, a few verbs are nominalized with a prefixed nasal (175). Some verbs and adjectives are nominalized with a prefixed **wɔ̄** 'thing' (176).

The author refers (page 147 and elsewhere) to Manessy's "enlargements", suffixes with little or no definable semantics, often consisting of /l/ plus a vowel, that regularly occur combined with certain class suffixes. The term seems awkward in English – a possible substitute might be "nominal extensions", which seems more natural even though it is longer.

Another problematic term is the use of "associative" for the suffix **-yè** (170), a suffix added especially to proper nouns that indicates 'X and people associated with X', thus **Adama-yè** 'Adama and those belonging to him'. A parallel affix occurs in other languages; for instance in the Kwa languages Ga and Dangme a suffix **-mɛ̃** serves the same purpose, although in that case the suffix is almost certainly derived from the plural form of a morpheme meaning "person", which does not seem to be the case in Syer. The term "associative" is commonly used for an NP construction built from two nouns, where the relationship is either possessor-possessum or something very like it. It is true that there is a certain syntactic and semantic resemblance between such a construction and the noun plus "associative" suffix, but since the latter seems to be strictly morphological in Syer and plurality of persons is the salient semantic feature, to avoid ambiguity, it might be better to label it in full as "associative plural" in line with usage in the typological literature (see e. g. Moravcsik 2003).

Normally, as in other languages of the area, in a two-noun compound the second is the semantic head, but there are a number of nouns that occur frequently in second place that Dombrowsky-Hahn follows Kießling (2013) in calling "class terms". These are classifiers – physical and social descriptors – which do not head their compound semantically (although it could be argued that they are still syntactic heads). Many of the terms that occur in this category in Syer are widespread in the region, such as those that distinguish male and female, locations, stick-like things, small or young animals, while others are more specific to Syer and perhaps Senufo languages (see pp. 183–91). An interesting case of the latter is the use of **nṹ** "mother" to denote "a prominent

representative of" the first noun (184) (compare informal English "the mother of all X"). These terms are interesting because the forms containing them seem to occupy a syntactic space somewhere between compounding and derivation, and it has been claimed that they are or can be a source for reformation and renewal of class systems. However, these "class terms" seem to persist as such, and it may be doubted whether they in fact ever develop into class-and-concord systems of the Bantu/Niger-Congo type. They are very common in Ga and Dangme, for example, which have no such noun class systems, and there is no evidence that they are developing them.

As is usual in Gur languages, the fundamental morphological distinction in verbs is between perfective and imperfective forms, the perfective being unmarked. Imperfective forms take a suffix **-ni ~ -n** and LM tone, so that all lexical tone contrasts in the verb are lost. This is not an isolated development – in Farefari (Gurenɛ) there are no lexical tone contrasts in any form of the verb (Dakubu 2006). Syer verb morphology seems particularly scanty, with various meanings, including causative, plural, iterative and intensive, being marked by virtually homophonous suffixes of shape **-gV ~ ŋ**.

All other word classes – all kinds of pro-forms, adjectives, numerals, quantifiers, ideophones, TAM auxiliaries, adpositions, conjunctions and discourse particles as well as copulas are brought together in a single chapter (Chapter 6), "Other Word Classes". This feels like a bit of a rag-bag, and one wonders why, for example, nominal related classes, such as pronouns, determiners and especially adjectives are not discussed in direct association with nouns, especially since adjectives can only occur compounded with nouns and the phonological processes are similar to those for nouns if not identical.

The numeral system, which is apparently typical of Senufo languages, is interesting because of a morphological disjunction between the numbers 6, 7, 8 and the rest. That is, 7 and 8, respectively **klɔʃĩn** and **kɔtààr**, seem to be built on 6, **klɔ̃n**, by adding the forms for 2 and 3, even though this admittedly makes no sense arithmetically. A somewhat comparable but more transparent situation exists in Ga, where 7 and 8, **kpaago** and **kpaaɲɔ̃**, seem to be built on 6, **ékpàa**, by adding 1 and 2. However, in Ga 10, **ɲɔ̃ŋmã̀**, also appears to be etymologically derived from 6, that is, 2×6. (Syer has a unique form for 10.) A possible explanation is that ultimately both the Senufo and the Ga-Dangme number systems derive not from 5-base but from 6-base systems, and that old compounds were re-lexicalized to suit a reconfigured system, with sometimes irregular results.

Syer being an OV language, postpositions tend to be derived from verbs (253–254). At the same time, there are complex postpositions composed of two elements of which the first is very often a nominal, a body part term, in a

possessive relationship with a simple postposition which however is very often **nì**, a verb in origin, but reduced to a clitic = **ŋ** (262). This situation is very suggestive of possible routes for shift in word class, and also of syntactic structure.

The final "Other" word class described is Copulas. Most of these however are identifiers, not verb-related in any way, and appear to be syntactically and even morphologically related to determiners. One wonders why the term "copula" is used in such cases, especially since in the examples given in this section there is only one nominal argument (276).[1]

(180)   a. **cɔ   wṹ**.
            woman   IDEN1
            'It's a woman.'

(181)   **cɔ́   yìrɛ̀ ni   wṹ**.
        woman   DISC   REM IDEN1
        'He was even a woman.'

This is true even of the "invariable copulas". Not until more than 150 pages later, in the chapter "Non-Verbal Predicates", do we discover that the "simple identifier copula" **wṹ** can relate two arguments:

(20)   **Fùsenì cɔ   wṹ   nì   Jènébà n.**
       Fuseni wife IDEN1 with Jeneba with
       'Fuseni's wife is Jeneba.'
       (440).

There is no cross-reference. Surely a less rigid approach to separating morphological structure (especially for word classes that have very little such structure) and syntactic behaviour would have allowed a more satisfying description and facilitated reference.

Consistent with the bottom-to-top organization of the book, the first chapter on syntax describes the Noun Phrase. Although no mention was made of downstep in the chapter on tone, expressions with a symbol "!" between words (apparently it is not found within words) occur quite frequently in examples, but not until page 284, in the description of determiners, does the reader discover that it does indeed

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1 The abbreviations used are as follows: IDEN Identifier morpheme, DISC Discourse particle, REM Remote past.

signify tonal downstep, and processes involved in it are not described until page 316 and following, with the description of possessive phrases.

The system of determiners is elaborate, and although there are no specific possessive pronouns, there are tone changes specific to possessive constructions. The processes are fairly complex, and not always easy to follow, perhaps partly because the organization of the material necessitates frequent repetition from previous chapters.

Chapter 8, on Tense, Aspect, Modality and Negation (TAMP), was developed employing Dahl's (1985) questionnaire and Bybee et al. (1994), and describes contexts of use and semantics in some detail. The aspect system, particularly for the imperfective, is quite elaborate. Many distinctions depend upon tone changes, either in the verb or in the subject pronoun. A number of features are widespread, for example the absence of a dedicated present tense (387), and the relationship of the progressive to locativity (358) and to future tense, modality and inceptives (365, 402, 404).

In the chapter on Non-Verb Predicates as in the chapter on TAMP, much attention is paid to context of use and usage patterns. Expressions with copula verbs are included here, even though at least one copula, **pyì**, can be used with verbal TAMP markers (453).

Following Croft (2012), the point of departure for Chapter 10, which describes verb-headed predicates and their arguments, is the event, or "force dynamics"; how force is transmitted from one participant to another, also termed "causation". The chapter discusses event types according to the number of participants in the event. The prototypical event structure is taken to be the agent subject, followed by an object with the role of either path or theme, and the verb. Three verbs in particular, "give", "ask", "show" are discussed in considerable detail. Normally in Syer a verb cannot be ditransitive, and a third argument must be expressed as an oblique, after the verb and with an adposition, but an interesting extension of transitivity is provided by what the author calls a predicate nominal, which occurs after the verb but without an adposition and seems to express a resultant attribute of the patient object:

(138) **ù   kàá   gi !   prugu   pìgàr   fàlòŋ**
       he   IT(go)   DEF15   skin   sew   skirt
       'He sewed the skin into a skirt.'   (510)

(140) ... **mɛ̀   mɛ́   mɛ̀   ploòb   ʃyè   cɛ̀**...
       ... You   COND   your   children   bear   women...
       '... if you have only daughters...'   (511)

Syer has a passive which is not morphologically marked, but indicated by promotion of the Patient argument to subject. The passive may alternatively be interpreted as an anti-causative, thus (free translations are adjusted, MEKD):

(223)   a. **ù   kɔl   mrâ   dɛ̀ɛ̀ ni**
       he.PRF tape adhere leg   at
       'He stuck the tape to the leg.' vs.
    b. **kɔl   Ø   mra   dɛ̀ɛ̀ ni.**
       tape   PRF adhere leg   at
       1. 'The tape has been stuck to the leg.'
       Or 2. 'The tape sticks to the leg.'   (542)

Apparently this kind of diathesis is fairly widespread in Gur (542), but like many other phenomena mentioned in this book one would like to see it developed further.

The author does not claim that all problems treated have been solved, which is entirely in order. Nevertheless, one cannot help feeling that the organization could have been more carefully thought through. Although downstep appears we never find out exactly what it represents in Syer. Similarly, serial verb constructions are invoked, especially in Chapters 5 and 10, but we are not told how the concept applies to this language. Even though complex predicates are reserved for another study, approaches to SVCs vary, and at least a provisional definition is necessary.

The English is generally adequate. There are a few infelicities of expression, some of which have been mentioned as well as a few spelling errors and typos, but given the length of the book they are very few. Frequent references to comparable phenomena in other Senufo languages and especially to the work of Carlson on Supyire are definitely a plus. The book will be a necessary reference work and source of ideas for anyone interested in Karaboro, Senufo, Gur or West African languages generally.

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