

Kunama

Lionel M. BENDER. 1996. Languages of the World / Materials 59, 60 pp.
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Bender's work on Kunama is based on data gathered during visits in East Africa over the last 30 years. He specialized in East African languages as early as the 1960s, and from early lexico-statistic approaches to classification he kept on refining his methods with each of his numerous publications. As he now publishes a short monograph on one of the more intriguing Nilo-Saharan isolates, the comparatist and the theoretical linguist will peruse this brochure with heightened expectations.

The brochure (only 50 AS-sized pages) does not disappoint these expectations. One reason for this is that Bender writes a rather compressed style, piling up considerable information in every phrase: employing mphl. & synt. abbrs. whrvr. pssbl. In spite of this brevity, his presentation of linguistic findings remains inviting, and a few passages are spiced with glances of theoretical perspectives (references to universals, x over x marking, grammaticalization). In general, however, Bender follows conventional patterns-which makes his work comfortable for readers who are looking for particular data 'about the language: The phonology is introduced with a grid of traditional features, and the morphology guides the reader along with traditional categories: 1 nouns, 2 pre- or postpositions or case, 3 demonstratives, 4 adjectives, 5 pronominals, 6 conjunctions, 7 adverbs and interjections, 8 verbs.

The central section covers nearly 60 percent of the booklet and is dedicated to the morphology (section 3), the most fascinating aspect of this language, given the numerous 'special' Kunama features. The rest of the brochure is dedicated to first (1) introduction and (2) phonology-then (4) syntax and (5) texts-ca. 10 percent each. One might have liked to find more on syntax and text structures. (The reviewers-engaged in dialect surveys and orthography studies-had hoped to find more about dialect and phonology issues), but given the 30 years of war between Ethiopia and Eritrea (Kunama straddles the border between both), it would be unfair to complain about the absence of such information in a brochure of this series.

The introduction offers a weighted review of the literature. One 'unpublished' but important work is missing, even though Bender was acquainted with its author: 'Sentence structure of Kunama', a thesis of about 120 pages written in 1987 by the late Nikodemos Idris-himself a Kunama.

Its unique value lies in the balanced reviews of contradictory claims made by foreigners, and in the rich illustration of NP and VP structures.

With the classification of this extraordinary Nilo-Saharan language Bender comes to a strong and important point of the introduction. He rejects (with more words than necessary) speculations about links with Omotic or Basque. Given his rich experience in matters Nilo-Saharan and given his fresh evidence (of which he publishes few but strong morphological and other isoglosses (especially p. 5)), he adds much strength to the claims in earlier publications. The conclusion? Bender now places Kunama as

'coordinate with' Maba, For, Central Sudanic, Berta, and 'Core' Nilo-Saharan.

The phonology of Kunama is so straightforward that Bender considers it 'bland' (before he touches on 'suprasegmentals'). A Nilo-Saharan language with *eng* or *enye* as the only 'marked' segments is remarkably simple indeed. Bender likes to speak of an 'Ethiopian language area' (ignoring the flaws of this fuzzy generalization). Certainly Kunama cannot be considered part of such an 'area' if that would imply (a) rich sets of ejectives (Semitic), (b) implosives (Cushitic), or retroflexes (Omotic): Kunama has none of these! Likewise when compared with Nilo-Saharan wealth of interdentals or vowels (except for 'Taguda' (see Nikodemos 1987), Kunama is different.

It is a peculiar tradition of East African comparativists to shun tone analysis. For this Nilo-Saharan language, however, Bender does include many remarks about tone and he (somewhat over-cautiously) even considers both tone and stress contrastive. The transcription often shows tone, often stress, often both; unfortunately this leaves all unmarked data doubly ambiguous.

In the morphology, there are several fascinating remarks which transcend the presentation of data, e.g.:

As is cross-linguistically usual, when both d.o. and i.o. are present, i.o. takes precedence in marking [po 14]-many [postpositions] are clearly linked to nominals, e.g., body-parts (a subject which has become popular in linguistic circles lately as part of 'grammaticalization) [po 14]. The category off] conjunctions overlaps with postpositions and adverbs and also bears on syntactic structures such as subordination. I think some [enclitics vs. postpositions vs. self-standing words] are further along toward becoming case-markers than others [po 23].

Walking along Bender's gallery of traditional word classes, we meet some eye-catching portraits:

Articles: There are no articles in Kunama.

So how does Kunama take care of definiteness? Nikodemos emphasizes the role of demonstratives, and John Abraha analyzes *-ella/e* as indefinite article.

Adjectives: Setting up adjectives as a category is questionable, [they have the] same shapes as nouns, [they] stand alone in nominal slots...

Pronouns: Kunama is one of the minority of N-S languages having an inclusive-exclusive distinction [... it] has the most developed such system, having also dual person, found otherwise only in a trace in Nyimang of East Sudanic [po 17].

Bender then presents the person-number system according to the categories speaker and hearer inclusion (S, II) [po 18] in a way which highlights formatives like dual= long vowel, non-singular=m, K=+H+S etc.) and which shows how *b* in *aba* T is special not only in the Kuanam system, but 'unique in Nilo-Saharan'. We have added Barka data in brackets [] where they differ from Marda. Barka compensates vowel length by consonant length.

	+Speaker		-Speaker	
+Hearer	-	-	ena	2 sg.
	kiime [kimme]	1 du.in.	eeme [emme]	2 du.
	kiime	1 pl.in.	eme	2 pl.
-Hearer	aba	1 sg.	unu	3 sg.
	aame [amme]	1 du.ex.	iime [imme]	3 du.
	ame	1 pl.ex.	ime	3 pl.

Selectors: The complexity of the pronoun system (above) is compounded in a system of 'selectors', of which 121 are conceivable-the product of 11 subjects (see the 11 cells above) multiplied by 11 objects.

Verbs: The division into verbs with prefixes (P) vs. verbs with suffixes (S) is not the common Afro-Asiatic divide where P vs. S goes with aspects: In Kunama this is a 'division of verbs into two conjugational types' which is presented in some detail [op.24-28).

The syntax section centers around a nostalgic presentation of nine 'Phrase Structure' rules and a few 'Transformation' rules. The strength of this presentation is that it does present a 'condensed' compilation of facts [p. 39]. Bender characterizes Kunama as 'highly agglutinative', as SOV 'having postpositions', and close to Heine's 'type D' (p. 39).

There are two short texts. Unfortunately the texts and their morpheme-by-morpheme translations are given in separate sections, which has allowed for some inconsistencies to creep in.

The brochure is prepared carefully and the data are glossed accurately with only few exceptions (e.g., on pp. 7-8, *gooda* should be glossed 'sitting', and *oikeda* 'opening'). The tonal analysis is still lacking but any future dictionary must certainly include tone. Contrary to the statement in the brochure, no dictionary will be published by Bender in the near future, nor does Alexander Naty seem to have the time to do so. However, the Eritrean Ministry of Education is committed to publish reference works for all Eritrean languages, and this will include dictionaries. In spite of its small size, the booklet has a huge amount of data and fresh insights to offer. It is a worthwhile acquisition even for linguists not intensely involved with Nilo-Saharan - e.g. as an example of how to write a rich morphology and how to present a grammar utilizing the strengths of various models eclectically. The Curriculum staff of the Eritrean Ministry of Education consider themselves fortunate that this grammar has appeared now as they are writing pedagogical grammars for the Kunama schools.

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