Artem Davydov
St. Petersburg State University

On Souleymane Kanté's "Nko Grammar"

0. Linguistic works occupy an important place among the rich written heritage of the Guinean scholar Soulemane Kanté (1922-1987). They include his fundamental "Nko Dictionnary" which contains more than 30,000 entries, several bilingual dictionaries, a series of primers, a three-volume "Nko Grammar" and some other works[1]. The three volumes of Kanté's "Nko Grammar" are the same as the 4th, the 5th and the 6th Nko learning books which follow Nko primers and readers. It is considered by the partisans of the Nko cultural movement that a person willing to learn the Nko script has to master all these books in consecutive order. Being thereby rather a teaching book than a scholar research, "Nko Grammar" carries many features typical to this genre. The most marked one is probably the Kanté's tendency to be highly repetitious. This tendency reveals both in each volume taken separately and in "Grammar" as a whole.

A collation of the texts of the three volumes of "Nko Grammar" reveals that the text of one of them is repeated in the others practically word-to-word, or, to be more precise, that the texts of the further volumes are enlarged versions of the texts of the previous ones. Each next volume is larger than the preceding one (the first volume contains about forty pages, while the third contains about fifty), but the range of the questions raised remains invariable. The present study is based mainly on the analysis of the first volume, but also involves data from the third volume.

The first volume of the "Nko Grammar" consists of 30 chapters and a short preface. Chapters 1 and 2 contain some preliminary remarks. In Chapter 1 Kanté affirms that Bamana, Maninka, Dyula and Mandinka are dialects of a single Manding language, or Nko. Such pan-Manding attitude of Soulemane Kanté has been considered by Western scholars more than once and doesn't need further comments. Nevertheless, despite the pan-Manding attitude of its author, "Nko Grammar" is based mainly on the Maninka language materials. As it seems to me, the use of the data of other Manding languages is of more or less random character. More than that, forms of Manding idioms other than Maninka cited by Kanté are often incorrect. For example, when discussing plurality of nouns in Chapter 6, he gives a Bamana example *yíri ù* 'trees', while the correct form should be *jíri ù*.

In Chapter 2 Kanté explains his motivation for writing a grammar. After enumerating ten particles of speech, he affirms that the description of the usage of each of them is called "grammar" and that such description "cleans the language". This corresponds with Kanté's puristic views well described in the literature.

The subsequent chapters of the "Nko Grammar" deal mainly with the definition of the parts of speech in the Maninka language. Soulemane Kanté distinguishes ten parts of speech in

---

[1] See the lists of works written by Soulemane Kanté in [Oyler, 2005, 183-198] and [Wyrod, 2003, 119-121].

Maninka, these are: noun (*tɔ́ɔ*), pronoun (*tɔ́ɔnɔdɔbila*, literally, "what takes the place of the noun"), adjective (*mànkútu*), predicative marker (*bósolan*), verb (*kúmasobo*, literally, "the meat of speech"), particle (*kùnkúdu*), adverb (*kàlá*), interrogation (*nìninkalí*), expressive adverb (*dɔ̀gbɛlɛyalí*, literally, "strengthening") and interjection (*kánto*). It should be mentioned that Kanté's approach doesn't match entirely with that of Western scholars, and the translations of his terms proposed above are often very approximate.

Kanté does not explicitly advance any formal criteria of distinguishing the parts of speech. His approach can be best defined as spontaneous. However, some criteria might have existed, even if these criteria are not hierarchized and not explicitly presented in the "Nko Grammar". Judging by some Kanté's explanations, one may conclude that the semantic and the syntactic criteria were of primary importance for him. For example, here is his definition of adjective (*mànkútu*): "An adjective attaches to a noun and shows its characteristics and qualities, its features and properties" [Kanté, 9][2]. At the same time, Kanté often provides no general explanation of the semantics and/or syntactic behaviour of some parts of speech he distinguishes, moving straight to their division into subgroups. Eight of ten parts of speech in the "Nko Grammar" are distinguished according to the syntactic criterion. The adjective (*mànkútu*) is distinguished according to the semantic criterion, but its inner division into subgroups is carried out according to the syntactic criterion. The interrogation (*nìninkalí*) represents an extreme case, where no exact criterion can be detected.

Kanté's efforts to characterize the syntactic roles of the parts of speech often lead him to logical loops. Thus, he defines a predicative marker (*bósolan*) as "a word which arranges a verb" [Kanté, 14], while a verb (*kúmasobo*) is defined as "a word arranged by a predicative marker which shows its tense" [Kanté, 21]. It is interesting to note that Valentin Vydrine found similar shortcomings in Souleymane Kanté's "Nko Dictionary" [Vydrine 1996, 68].

Let us consider the system of parts of speech in Maninka, as Kanté understands it, in more detail.

1. Noun (*tɔ́ɔ*). Soulemane Kanté establishes two subclasses within this part of speech, a proper noun (*fòdoba tɔ́ɔ*) and a common noun (*kèlenna tɔ́ɔ*). While the semantic basis of such an allocation needs no further explanation, the morphological criterion used by Kanté is less evident. Kanté distinguishes two basic phonological tones (*kánmasere*) in Maninka, high tone (*kánmayɛlɛ*) and a low tone (*kánmajii*)[3]. Each of these basic tones may be falling (*kánmafanen*) or smooth (*kánnabàranén*). This corresponds with the term "tonal article" in the Western tradition. *Kánmafanen* means a vowel with a tonal article (*áˋ*) and *kánnabàranén* means a vowel without it. According to Kanté, the final tone of a proper noun is always smooth, while that of

---

[2] Henceforth, a numeral indicates the number of the chapter in the first volume of the "Nko Grammar".

[3] It is noteworthy that Soulemane Kanté uses the terms "high" and "low" as it is established in Western linguistic and musical tradition, while in the terminology of the Maninka griots the term *dùuma* "low" designates a high tone and the term *sánfɛ, sánmà* "high" designates a low tone [Charry 2000, 325-6].

a common noun may be smooth if it is indefinite (*máfilinén*) and falling if it is definite (*málɔnnɛn*).

2. "Pronoun (*tɔ́ɔnɔdɔbila*) takes the places of three persons (*kúmatii*) and leaves their names untold" [Kanté, 7].

3. Kanté's definition of adjective (*mànkútu*) has already been cited above. Within this class of words he distinguishes three subclasses: attachable adjective (*mànkútu tùuntá*), unattachable adjective (*mànkútu tùunbáli*) and "intermediate" adjective (*mànkútu tédɔ*).

3.1. He divides the attachable adjectives into six subclasses.

3.1.1. Connected attachable adjective (*tùunta náranen*) subclass consists of only two formants, *-ba* and *–nin* (and their dialectal forms). Kanté's term corresponds to the augmentative and diminutive suffixes of the Western tradition.

3.1.2. "Short attachable adjective" (*tùunta gbɔ́ku*) subclass corresponds to the term "adjective" in the Western tradition. Kanté gives only a very concise definition of it: "It attaches to a noun shortly" [Kanté, 10]. The examples are also very few: *yɔ́rɔ súdun`* 'a place not far away', *yíla ján`* 'distant place', *mɔ̀ɔ nɔ́ɔn`* 'dirty man', *dénnɛn kálin* 'fidgety child'. From these examples one may conclude that under the term "brief attachable adjective" Kanté understands an adjective which makes up a tone-compact syntagma with a noun.

3.1.3. The subclass of "verbal attachable adjectives" (*tùunta kúmasoboma*) unites two very diverse, from the viewpoint of the Western tradition, classes of words: nouns with agentive suffix *-la/-na* (e.g. *mɔ̀ɔ fàa-lá`* 'murderer', *wádi ɲínin-na`* 'money seeker') and perfective *-len/-nen* participles used in adjective function (e.g. *yíri tĕenén`* 'a cut tree', *sŏn mìdanén* 'a caught thief'). Kanté defines them as "perfective aspect" (*kédɔ bĭntá*) and "imperfective aspect" (*kédɔ tàminnén*) respectively.

3.1.4. Under "discursive attachable adjective" (*mànkútu làkáli*) Kanté understands a participle used in appositive function which does not make up a compact tonal syntagma with a determined noun or pronoun: *í súmaman* 'you are calm', *à fìnnén* 'it is black', *à gbélen* 'it is white/clean'.

3.1.5. Kanté's term *mànkutulanmá*, which may be roughly translated as '[a word] which has an adjective marker', designates what is meant in the Western tradition by predicative adjectives, i.e. adjectives which go with predicative markers *ká* (positive) and *mán* (negative).

3.1.6. The last subclass established by Kanté is that of numeral adjectives (*mànkútu dàmafɔlá*). It includes both true numerals (such as *cɛ̀mɛ́* 'hundred' or *mùwán* 'twenty') and all adjectives with quantitative meaning, e.g. *béɛ* 'all', *yírika* 'several', *síyaman* 'many', etc.

3.2. "Unattachable adjective" (*mànkútu tùunbáli*) "is such an adjective whose meaning can be understood even if it's not attached to a noun or a pronoun. It is an adjective which became a noun" [Kanté, 11]. It corresponds to the "substantivized adjective". Kanté distinguishes three subclasses of "unattachable adjectives".

3.2.1. To the first subclass Kanté attributes the words with suffix of relative adjective *-ma* (e.g. *sáyima* '[something] yellow', *ɲìmá* '[something] good'), non-predicative adjectives

derived form predicative adjectives by suffix *-man* (e.g. *síyaman* '[something] numerous', *díman* '[something] tasty'), ordinal numerals derived from cardinal numerals by suffix *–nan* (e.g. sábanan 'the third', tánnan 'the tenth'), adjectives with augmentative suffix *–ba* (e.g. *kùmbabá* 'fat person') and nouns which have a lexicalized formant *-ba* (e.g *wáraba* 'lion').

3.2.2. The second subclass includes words derived from nouns by the suffix *-ma* (e.g. *hánkilim*a 'clever person', *kɔ́nɔma* 'a pregnant woman'), participles with patientive suffix *-tɔ* (*jànkarotɔ́* 'ill person'), nouns with the gentile suffix *-ka* (*kánkanka* 'an inhabitant of Kankan', *ábijanka* 'an inhabitant of Abidjan').

3.2.3. The third subclass includes words derived from verbs by the agentive suffix *-baa* (*nàbaa* 'one who came', *bɔ́baa* 'one who came out'), by the suffix of patientive noun *-baatɔ* (*fàabaatɔ́* 'one who is being killed'), by the suffix of negative participle *-bali* (*màlobáli* 'shameless'), by the suffix of debitative participle *-ta* (*fèretá* 'what is to be sold'), by the agentive suffixe *-la* (*táala* 'one who goes'), by the instrumental suffix *-lan* (*tèɛlán* 'axe'), by the suffix of verbal noun *–li* (*fàalí* 'murder').

3.3. Kanté's definition of "intermediate" adjective (*mànkútu tédɔ*) is very brief: "It is an adjective which matches both with attachable and unattachable adjectives" [Kanté, 12]. Judging by examples, one may conclude that Kanté means words which function both as nouns and as adjectives: *bèlebéle* 'fat, a fat person', *kéndɛ* 'healthy, cleanliness', *sàlá* 'lazy, a lazy person'.

4. Predicative marker (*bósolan*). This Kanté's term matches almost exactly with the term "predicative marker" of the Western tradition. Kanté mentions three types of predicative markers: a) markers of the past (*tàminnɛ́n*) tense – *báda, kà, da*; b) markers of the present (*bǐntá*) tense – *yé … lá, tɔ́*; c) markers of the future (*lɔ́ɔlali*) tense – *bɛ́, dí, bénà, dínà, nà*. Surprisingly, negative equivalents of predicative markers are not included into this part of speech. Instead, they are considered to be particles (*kùnkúdu*), cf. p. 6.2.

5. Verb (*kúmasobo*). Relying on a combined semantic-syntactic criterion, Kanté distinguishes three basic roles in the situation: doer (*kébaa*), patient (*kébaatɔ*) and action itself (*kéli*). Using this roles as the basis, he distinguishes four types of verbs.

5.1. Intransitive verb (*kúmasobo dànjedɛlá*). "Its action is only limited to a doer" [Kanté, 21]. Kanté's examples: *ń báda nà* 'I came', *à báda sà* 'he died'.

5.2. Transitive verb (*kúmasobo tàminnjédela*). "What a doer does is directed to another person. This person is a patient" (ibid.). Kanté's examples: *ń bad'à gbàsi* 'I hit him', *à kà àlú tɔ́rɔ* 'he disturbed them'.

5.3. Reflexive verb (*kúmasobo kénjèdelá*). "What a doer does, he himself is the target of it. He is both a doer and a patient" (ibid.). Kanté's examples: *ń báda ń wìli* 'I stood up', *í bád'í mìn* 'you've quenched your thirst'.

5.4. Reciprocal verb (*kúmasobo kéɲɔɔnna*). "Many people do it. They do it together. All of them are both doers and patients" (ibid.). Kanté's examples: *àlú kà ɲɔ́ɔn kèlɛ* 'they waged war with each other', *álu yé ɲɔ́ɔn kànin* 'love each other'.

6. Particle (*kùnkúdu*). Kanté divides this class of words into two subclasses.

6.1. The subclass of "connectible particles" (*kúnkudu nárata*) includes what is meant in the Western tradition by affixes. Kanté distinguishes three types of connectible particles: prefixes (*nénara*), suffixes (*kónara*) and interfixes (*ténara*). Kanté' "prefixes" are morphemes *dɔ-, la-,* and *ma-* which are also considered as prefixes by Western linguists, and a lexicalized formant *da-* 'edge' in such verbs as *dábìlá* 'to finish' and *dámìné* 'to start'. He classifies with "interfixes" only one formant, *ń* (from 1sg personal pronoun *ń*) in such compound words (Kanté calls them *kúmasobo sóoronen kíli tɔ́ɔ*, "noun, derived from compound verb") as *jìinńná* 'rancour'. As for suffixes, Kanté refers to the chapter dealing with the "unattachable adjectives" (cf. p. 3.2) for the examples.

6.2. Kanté's subclass of "attachable particles" (*kùnkúdu tùuntá*) includes words which are considered in the Western tradition as particles (e.g. *háli* 'even') and conjunctions (e.g. *ní* 'if, when', *kàbíi* 'since', *bá* 'because), but also negative predicative markers (*té, ténà, má*), imperative predicative markers (*ká, kánà*), infinitive marker *kà*, the predicative of speech *kó*, possessive marker *lá/ná*, predicative marker of hypothetical future *máa/mána*, etc. It is evident that all these words were included into class of "attachable particles" by the leftover principle.

7. Adverb (*kàlá*). Relying on the semantic criterion, Kanté distinguishes three types of adverbs: temporal adverbs (*wáati kàlá*, e.g. *fɔ́lɔ* 'formerly', *kúnùn* 'yesterday', *sísèn* 'now'), locative adverbs (*yɔ́rɔ kàlá*, e.g. *télebe* 'West') and adverbs of manner (*kéɲa kàlá* or *lìhála kàlá*).

8. Interrogation (*nìninkalí*) is probably the most controversial part of speech established by Kanté. He defines it as following: "The sense of interrogation is the search of understanding" [Kanté, 28]. Kanté divides this part of speech into fourteen subclasses depending on the subject of interrogation. Thus, he distinguishes the subclasses of human interrogatives (*mɔ́ɔ tá*), things interrogatives (*fɛ́n tá*), place interrogatives (*yɔ́rɔ tá*), quantitative interrogatives (*yírika ní sɔ̀nkɔ́ tá*), etc. These subclasses include not only "interrogative particles" of the Western tradition (such as *jɔ́n* 'who', *mùn* 'what', *jèli* 'how much'), but also some fixed phrases, such as *í ká kéndɛ?* 'how are you?' or *hára sìdá* 'have you slept well?'.

9. Kanté's term *dɔ̀gbɛlɛyalí* matches completely with the Western term "expressive adverb". Kanté distinguishes two types of expressive adverbs: "pure expressive adverb" (*dɔ̀gbɛlɛyalí kólikoli*, e.g. *bérɛsè* in *à fánen bérɛsè* 'it is completely full', *páyipayi* in *à kálaman páyipayi* 'it is very hot', *jɔ́ɔkɔkɔ* in *à súmanɛn jɔ́ɔkɔkɔ* 'it is very cold') and "expressive adverb transformed to an adverb of manner" (*dɔ̀gbɛlɛyalí lìhala kàlalamá*, e.g. *fúsɛ* in *à gbénɛn fúsɛ* 'it is very clean', *pónkin* in *à jànmán pónkin* 'it is very long', *'tóetoe* in *à kùmunnén tóetoe* 'it is very sour'). Unfortunately, Kanté doesn't give a satisfactory explanation of such a differentiation neither in 1st nor in 3rd volume of his "Nko Grammar". Syntactically and morphologically the words of these two types are equal. It is possible that the reason of the differentiation was of semantic kind, but it remains unclear.

10. Kanté's term *kánto*, or interjection, also matches with the analogous Western term. Basing on semantic criterion he distinguishes fifteen types of interjections, e.g. interjections of

astonishment (*kábakoya*), cries of pain (*dímin*), appellatives (*kílili*), interjections of hesitation (*síka*), etc.

      11. It should be acknowledged that despite the lack of formal criteria in distinguishing parts of speech and other mentioned shortcomings, "Nko Grammar" remains a unique linguistic study performed by a native Maninka speaker. Its merits surpass considerably its demerits. Souleymane Kanté was the first to distinguish tones in the Maninka language and to involve the suprasegmental level into the grammatical study. His methods are not always consistent but it would not be an overstatement to say that Kanté's "Nko Grammar" is based on a deep analysis of the Maninka language materials. The successful use of "Nko Grammar" in the Nko traditional education is the best confirmation of it.

References

Charry, Eric. Mande Music: Traditional and Modern Music of the Maninka and Mandinka of Western Africa. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Kántɛ, Sùlemáana. *Nkó kángbɛ kùnfɔ́lo.* Kɔ́nakiri, 1996. [Kanté, Souleymane. *Elementary Nko Grammar.* Conakry, 1996.]

Kántɛ, Sùlemáana. *Nkó kángbɛ kùnbabá.* Kánkàn, 1998. [Kanté, Souleymane. *Advanced Nko Grammar.* Kankan, 1998.]

Oyler, Dianne White. *The History of the N'ko Alphabet and its Role in Mande Transnational Identity: Words as Weapons.* Cherry Hill, NJ: Africana Homestead Legacy Press, 2005.

Vydrine, Valentin. Sur le "Dictionnaire Nko". *Mandenkan* nº 31, 1996, pp. 59-75.

Wyrod, Christopher. *The Light on the Horizon: N'ko Literacy and Formal Schooling in Guinea.* MA Thesis, 2003, George Washington University.