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SOME ELEMENTS OF GBAN GRAMMAR AND LINGUISTIC TYPOLOGY

The aim of this paper is to display certain phenomena of Gban (Southern Mande, Niger-Congo) which seem to be of interest for linguistic typology.

1. Numeral classifiers
At the current stage of analysis, only some preliminary remarks can be made, but even now it is clear that Gban has numeral classifiers, and they seem to be a recent phenomenon in this language rather than an ancient one. A much more thorough analysis is needed, however.

By the moment 6 classifiers have been found: vĩ, tô, wľĩ, lă, kwě, mĩ:g. It is interesting that all the classifiers have an extra-high tone (Gban has 6 tones, four register and two modulated) and only non-back vowels. The word order is: Noun – Classifier – Numeral.

Two interpretations of the semantics of the classifier vĩ are possible: neutral (default) classifier¹ and classifier with the semantics of “humans and objects somehow associated with humans”. It appears in combinations only with numerals² for such nouns as “person”, “child”, “head”, “hand”, “house” and many others.

The meaning of the five other classifiers, tô, wľĩ, lă, kwě and mĩ:g, can be demonstrated in combination with the stem yũkwĩ which can be vaguely translated as “plant and its parts”.

Yũkwĩ tô means “tree”, yũkwĩ wľĩ ‘fruit’, yũkwĩ lă ‘leaf’, yũkwĩ kwě ‘stick’, yũkwĩ mĩ:g ‘board, plank’. Lă is also used for counting pieces of cloth with the stem tô “fabric, cloth”. Wľĩ in combination with the stem kẽ ‘hoe and its parts’ means ‘the iron part of the hoe’, ‘hoe blade’. As for the meaning of “handle of the hoe”, it is derived from the same stem and “default” classifier, in contrast to the expected combination with the same classifier as “stick”.

The word tô is also used for the names of species of trees. Its semantics³ can be defined as “something vertical” and, may be, also “alive” and “one-dimensional”. I should also note that the classifier has exactly the same form as the Bantu root for “tree”, *-tĩ.

Wľĩ is also used for species of fruits. Its semantics can be defined as follows: “round object” or “not elongated object”, possibly, “three-dimensional”. Formally, it reminds the the very current Niger-Congo noun class affix for “fruit and round objects” *li (i).

¹ The presence of classifier with zero semantics is considered by Lacoff (1986) to be a very typical feature of classificatory systems.
² This and other classifiers do not appear with such quantitative words as “many”.
³ Any generalization in this communication concerning dominant semantic features are of very preliminary character.
The meaning of la seems to be “flat object”, possibly, “two-dimensional object”. Kwē can have two semantic interpretations: either “diminutive” or “not alive”, or both, possibly, combined with “elongated form”, or “one-dimensional”.

Mi has the meaning of “a flat and elongated object”, may be, also “not alive”.

So, we can conclude that the classifiers in Gban are sortal rather mensural according to Aikhenvald’s (2000) classification. They are obviously shape-oriented, though such features as “alive” and “human” may turn out relevant for the system as well. This and many other items can be clarified after more thorough special investigation of much greater set of nouns.

2. Pseudo- (proto-?) agreement in Gban

Keeping in mind the classifiers as possible source of noun classes, I should mention one more phenomenon which is a good candidate for potential noun classes formation. Although the noun for “person”, mű is not currently attested in Gban as an agentive derivative element (as in South Western Mande), it is still used in the context which can probably form the adjective agreement. In Gban both adjectives and qualificative verbs exist. They can be used in the same context, but the verbs signify less permanent quality of the subject than the adjectives, and they necessarily go together with a copulative verb yee ‘be’. When the adjective is used for qualificative predication, a repetition of the subject referent noun immediately before the adjective is necessary. Compare:

(mű) e le “(the person) he is good” (a verb),

and

(mű) e yee mű le “(the person) he is man good” (adjective).

Both examples are given in Present. In this case, the adjetival form was derived from the verb by a regular suffix -le, which seems to be a kind of participle marker. In other cases, adjectives derive from verbs in more complicated way: either through irregular derivation or they are represented by different stems. In any case, adjectival forms are always longer than the verbal ones. Taking into consideration the similarity of the lexeme for “person” in Gban and in Bantu (on Niger-Congo in general?) noun class 1 affix *mu-, the adjetival predication in Gban looks very similar to a Swahili (and Bantu in general) phrase with the same meaning (here an adjective is used; qualificative verbs are much less current in Bantu): M-tu ni m-zuri. ‘Man (CL.1l) is (copula) (CL1 prefix)-good’. The only typological difference is that in Swahili, an agreement prefix is used instead of the noun stem in Gban.

I would conclude that the scarce nominal morphology of Mande language seems to be of great importance both for the Niger-Congo studies and for the understanding of the process of noun class formation and evolution.

3. Ergative series of pronouns

According to the interpretation suggested in [Vydrine 2006], in Gban, Mano and Guro there is a special series of personal pronouns which can be treated as ergative.

Gban (only with pronominal objects, 2PL excluded, Imperfective excluded):

a. ì ta  b. ni ì be  c. mē ee be

I go  you me take  I you take

ì stands for an intransitive subject (a.) and object (b.), mē (the vowel changes
according to a regressive assimilation rule) stands for a transitive subject (c.).

3SG pronoun seems to demonstrate a contrastive type of alignment, instead of an ergative one:

d. \( \varepsilon \) \( ta \)

He goes

e. \( aa \) \( a \) \( be \)

you (pl) him take

f. \( ye \) \( i \) \( be \)

he me takes

\( \varepsilon \) stands for subjects of intransitive verbs (d.), \( a \) for objects (e.), \( ye \) for subjects of transitive verbs.

However, it seems that in Gban this phenomenon should be interpreted as only a formal resemblance to an ergative alignment: the emergence of a new pronominal series can be explained through contraction with subsequent elements. However, in Guro a very similar process cannot be explained as a simple contraction, because the “ergative” series appears not only with pronominal objects and has no tense-aspect restrictions.

4. Tonal agreement of the ergative type

In the Present tense in Gban we can see another example of “formal ergativity”. The first syllable of the verb is influenced by the tone of the last element of the NP of the subject for intransitives and object for transitives, while subjects of transitives do not have this sort of tonal agreement.

a. \( \ddot{i} \ \ddot{t} \ddot{a} \)

‘I go’.

b. \( \ddot{i} \ \ddot{b} \ddot{l} \ddot{u} \ \ddot{b} \ddot{e} \) (the lexical tone for \( \ddot{b} \ddot{e} \) is extra-high)

‘I bread take’.

This process is, certainly, a formal one: the verb takes the tone of its next left element. As far as the word order in Gban is SOV, intransitive verbs are in contact with the subject, and transitive verbs with direct object. So, it creates a sort of ergative tonal agreement.

Last two phenomena can hardly be treated as real ergative alignment, but they can show the ways this type of alignment can appear.

Literature

