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Development of a case system in a peripheral Mande language¹

In Niger-Congo languages, morphological cases are very scarce. This is especially true for nouns (while personal pronouns may have different forms in different syntactic positions more frequently). Mande languages are usually regarded as the poorest in morphology in the Niger-Congo macrofamily, therefore one could hardly expect to find a noun declination in this family. And still, it has emerged in at least one language of the Southern Mande group, namely, Dan-Gwɛetaa.

In this language, a system of six morphological cases has appeared. However, this system has numerous restraints:

— it concerns only a minor subclass of nouns, so-called “locative nouns”, counting about 50 lexemes (less than 3 % of the entire number of nouns in the dictionary; this figure would be much higher if toponyms are taken into account);

— there is not a single lexeme among the “locative nouns” that would have a full paradigm of cases. The great majority of them have only two case forms (most often, the common case and the locative case), more rarely three, and only six lexemes have four case forms;

— the cases in Dan-Gwɛetaa do not distinguish the nuclear syntactic positions, they rather mark peripheral (oblique) positions in their opposition to the nuclear ones (and to each other).

Case forms of “locative nouns” came to existence through merger of noun roots with postpositions, with the exception of the locative case which is formed by the adverbial suffix *-dɔ̃*. In certain contexts, forms of oblique cases can be decomposed into their original components (the noun root and the postposition).

Although rather few in the dictionary, locative nouns are quite frequent in texts. In fact, fusion with postpositions (resulting in emergence of locative nouns) concerns primarily the most frequent words in most typical contexts, and the same elements may fail to merge when used in a less typical meaning.

There is a kind of case agreement that manifests itself on the possessive marker (which can also be interpreted as a postposition in a possessive nominal construction). When such a possessive construction appears in the nuclear argument (subject or direct object) position, a default possessive marker *ɔ̃* is used, and when it assumes the oblique position (mainly with the locative semantics), the marker *gɔ̃* is used instead. However, the possessive marker *gɔ̃* may also appear in possessive constructions in the oblique position, even if no locative noun is involved; therefore, *gɔ̃* can be regarded as an autonomous marker accumulating two grammatical meanings (possessive and the indication of the oblique syntactic function of the NP), rather than as a case agreement marker.

Oblique cases forms can be reduplicated. Such a reduplication expresses intensity or a long duration of the situation described by the predicate. Reduplication of the same type may also concern certain more or less lexicalized oblique expressions (morphologically non-merged) composed of nouns and postpositions; this fact can be interpreted as a first step to the fusion and formation of new morphological cases.

Merger of nouns with postpositions is attested in other South Mande languages as well: in other Dan varieties, Tura, Goo, Guro, Mwan, Mano. However, only in Dan-Gwɛetaa it has brought forth the emergence of a noun declination system, although highly irregular and lacking congruity.

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