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Pseudowords and ideophones in West African traditional narratives

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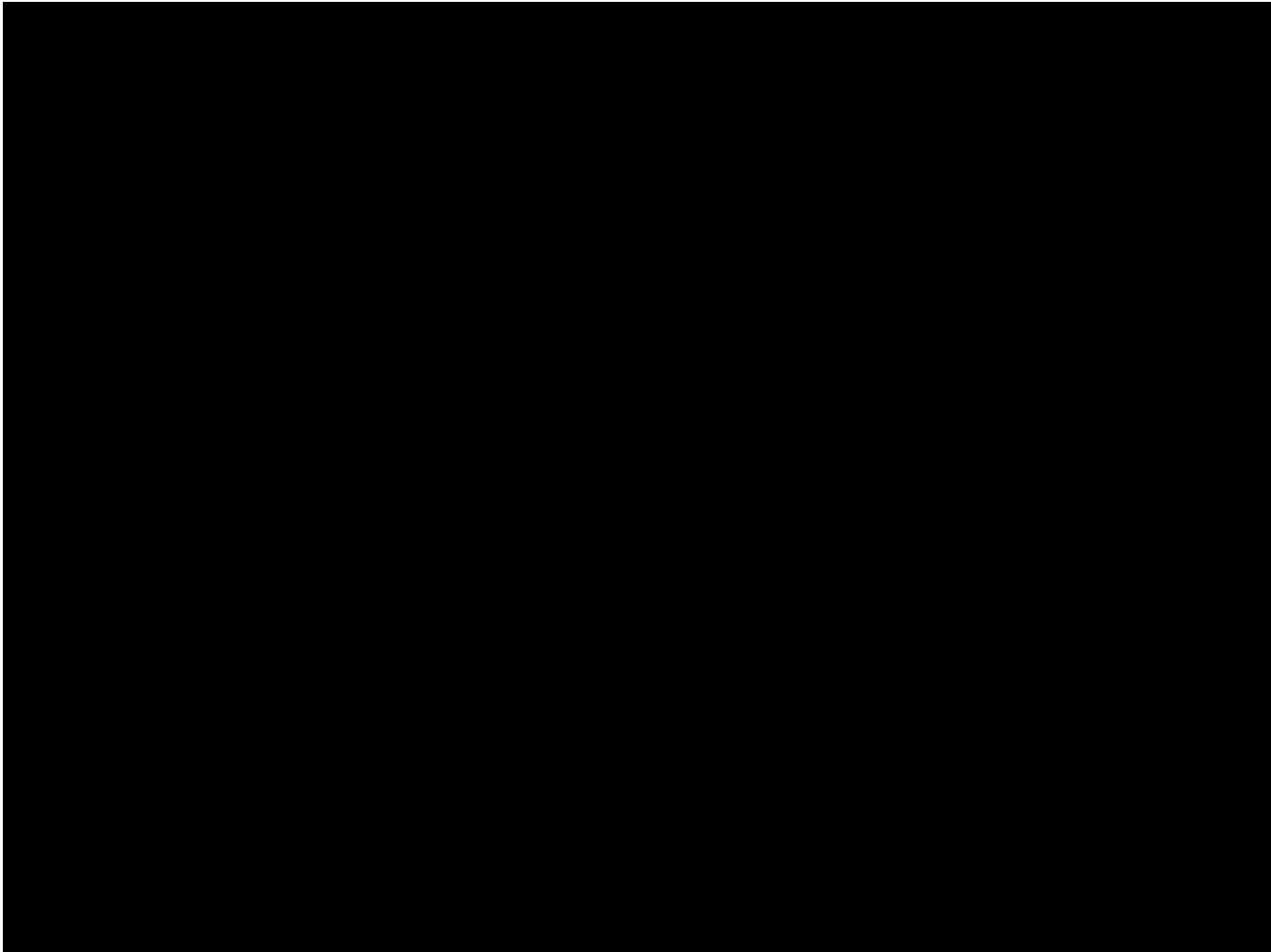


Why study West African traditional narratives?

- The **WEIRD bias** in social and behavioral science studies (Henrich et al. 2010; Majid & Levinson 2010)
 - overrepresentation of data from languages spoken in Westernized, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic Societies
- The **LOL bias** in linguistic typology (Dahl 2015):
 - overrepresentation of data from Literate, Official languages with Lots of users

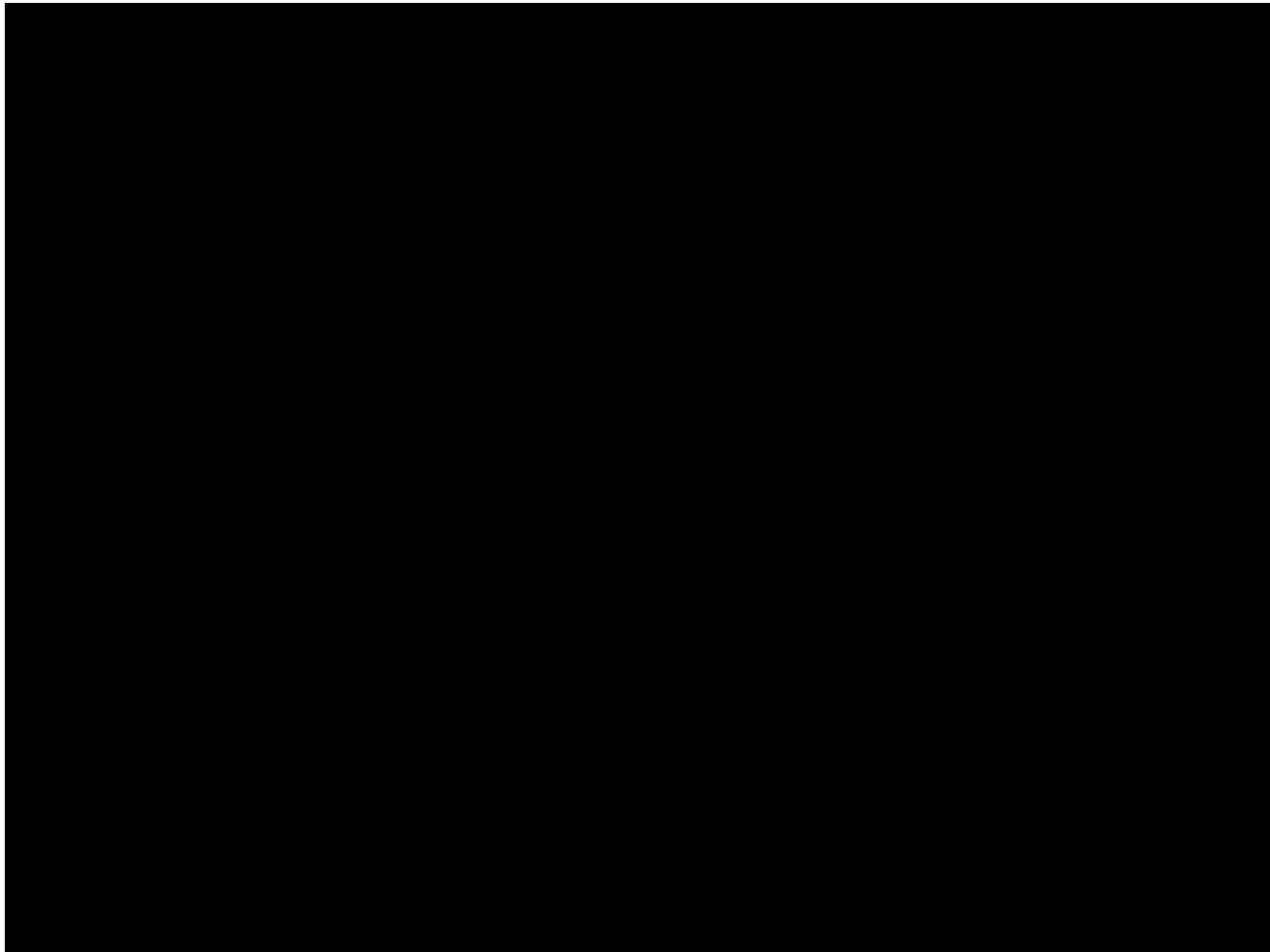
Why to study West African traditional narratives?

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- The **LOL bias** in linguistic typology (Dahl 2015):
 - overrepresentation of data from Literate, Official languages with Lots of users
- West Africa (Nikitina 2018):
 - relatively **little is known**;
 - storytelling is very valuable, as the culture is **fundamentally oral**;
 - storytelling practices are **highly endangered** as the societies are undergoing rapid changes



Ginyanga (Kwa),
Togo

(Aplonova In Progress)



Kafire (Gur),
Côte d'Ivoire

(Silué 2022)

West African traditional narratives

- Narrative performance is not a one way process, it includes a lot of interaction with the audience (Ntuli 2010);
- Narrators gesture a lot, sing, dance and incorporate the characters (Finnegan 2015: 54-62);

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- Narrative performance is not a one way process, it includes a lot of interaction with the audience (Ntuli 2010);
- Narrators gesture a lot, sing, dance and incorporate the characters (Finnegan 2015: 54-62);
- Narrators use special linguistic means to make the narration more vivid (Kyiileyang 2016), for instance, **ideophones** and **“pseudowords”**

Ideophones and “pseudowords”

- **Ideophones**: open lexical class of phonologically and morphosyntactically marked words that depict sensory imagery (Dingemanse 2017 inter alia);
- **“Pseudowords”**: words that abide by the phonology of the language while not being part of its lexicon and lack the form-meaning dualism that a typical language sign is supposed to have (Chuang et al. 2021, Idiatov 2005a: 74);
- **Ideophones** and **“pseudowords”** help to create a heightened theatricality i.e., they make narratives more impressive and testify to the skillfulness of the narrator (Nikitina 2012, 2018);
- However, while both types of expressives have similar artistic/performative functions, they differ in several other respects;

[Hyena saw that Lion
was on top of the
termite mound and
said to the Lion]

à gí kákúlò kwó

“It is worth dying for!”

nī ò bàbàw

And [Hyena] fled

á bé gí pé ò kōlī
gòrògòrò gòrògòrò

They chased it
[Hyena]

[Hyena saw that Lion
was on top of the
termite mound and
said to the Lion]

*á wú ?é?é à gí kákúlò
kwó*

And he: “He-he, it is
worth dying for!”

*nī ò **bàbàw***

And [Hyena] fled

*á bé gí pé ò kōlī
gòrògòrò gòrògòrò*

They chased it
[Hyena]

ngbe mi ni okugobu asi
(X2)

I am going to my own
mother

togologo
calmly

mi ni lasa kutu sa mi
my mother will give me
a pot

togologo
calmly

ncu ba sa mi si ma ka
I will take it and give to
my father's wife

[song in the fairytale]

ngbe mi ni okugobu asi
(X2)

I am going to my own
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mi ni lasa kutu sa mi
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Database of traditional narratives

DiscourseReporting database

- The DiscourseReporting database (Nikitina et al. 2021): collection of traditional folk stories in [10 languages](#) in West Africa and Eurasia
- All of the texts are:
 - transcribed
 - semi-automatically glossed
 - translated
 - annotated for instances of reported speech

DiscourseReporting database

- Data is very diverse: multimedia files, archived transcriptions, data from the field, written/unwritten languages, recordings of professional storytellers as well as of regular people, one or multiple participants...



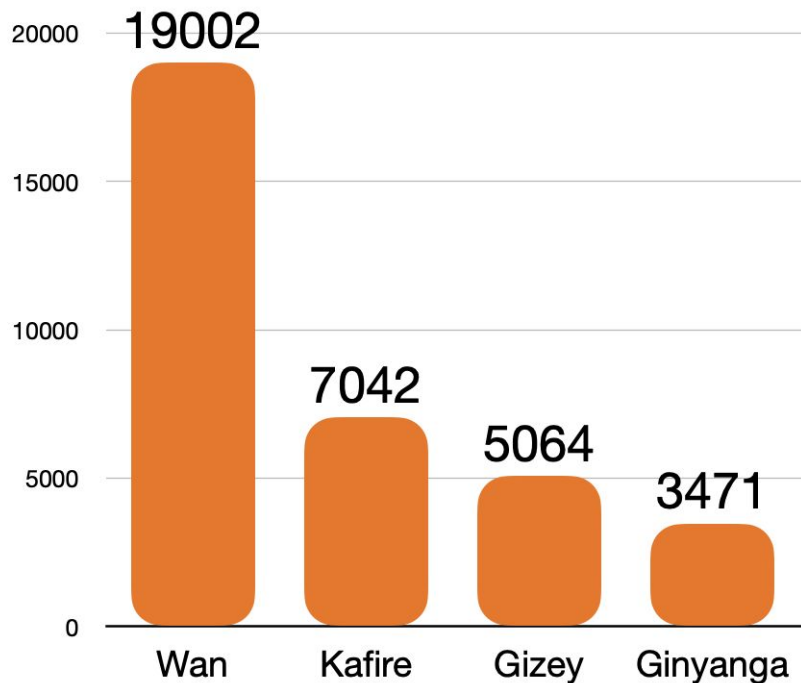
Datasets discussed in this talk

- Wan (Mande)
- Kafire (Gur)
- Gizey (Chadic)
- Ginyanga (Kwa)



Datasets discussed in this talk

- Wan (Nikitina f/c)
- Kafire (Silué 2022)
- Gizey (Guitang 2022)
- Ginyanga (Aplonova In Progress)



Ideophones and
“pseudowords” in our dataset

The most common ideophones in our data

- Wan: *ségé-ségé* ‘completely’ (35/302) 11%
- Kafiré: *gòrògòrò* ‘completely’ (18/41) 44%
- Gizey: *tāt* ‘sense of duration’ (57/178) 32 %
- Ginyanga: *káká* ‘sense of duration’ (17/46) 37%

How to segment repeated ideophones?

Wan: <i>ségé-ségé</i> ‘completely’	→ two bases with a dash
Kafire: <i>gòrògòrò</i> ‘completely’	→ two bases without space
Gizey: <i>tāt</i> ‘sense of duration’	→ one base
Ginyanga: <i>káká</i> ‘sense of duration’	→ two bases without space

- In these languages, repeated and reduplicated ideophones often involve bases not attested independently;
- The base can be repeated unpair number of times (*káká káká ká*);

“Completely” and “sense of duration”

Wan (Mande)

(1) *bé áń kāñ znā znāā mū é tēñ*
then 3PL feather pretty pretty PL DEF all

gō mī sée-sée-sée-sée
remove:PAST at IDPH-IDPH

‘And they plucked all his pretty feathers - completely!’

Gizey (Chadic)

(2) *nàm sùt tāt(X4) fùm hàj*
3sm scoop.PFV long_duration find.PFV=3SM inside

?ìn lúrrà
cop toad=art

‘He drained (water) continuously. It is a toad that he found inside’.

How to gloss ideophones?

- (1) *bé áṅ kǎṅ znā znāā mū é tēṅ*
then 3PL feather pretty pretty PL DEF all

gō mī séé-séé-séé-séé
remove:PAST at IDPH-IDPH

'And they plucked all his pretty feathers - completely!'

- (2) *nám sùt tāt(X4) fùm hàj*
3sm scoop.PFV long_duration find.PFV=3SM inside

ʔìn lúrrà
cop toad=art

'He drained (water) continuously. It is a toad that he found inside'.

“Pseudowords”: refrains

- One instrument (the flute), different sounds:

(3) *tɛ́lí tɛ́é tɛ́gìlìtɛ́ tɛ́lí tɛ́é tɛ́gìlìtɛ́*

Gizey (Chadic)

tídín *mí* dʒɛ̀wn j=úm lìmé *tɛ́é* ʔìn *tɛ́é*
drum REL old.days call=3SM how *** COP ***

dàkɛ́àmɛ́àm dákɛ́àmá

‘[As Dog’s child saw Hyena, he picked up his **flute** and started playing:] *** how is the ancient drum called? ***’

“Pseudowords”: refrains

- One instrument (the flute), different sounds:

Gizey (Chadic)

(4) *dìwè téééé lòò téééé tùn déé dòò*

<i>màtn</i>	<i>ʃàwn</i>	<i>ʃàn</i>	<i>dì</i>	<i>tá</i>	<i>ʃéjt</i>	<i>kùrùn</i>	<i>dèw mútù</i>
devil	DEM	kill.me	NEG	eat	millet	inside.me	one eat

‘[Goose and Crane practise singing and playing **the flute** with this song]: *** This devil should not kill me (until) I eat the millet.’

“Pseudowords”: refrains

- One instrument (the flute), different sounds

(5) *dòŋlì dòŋlì*

<i>tʃàn</i>	<i>mán</i>	<i>dī</i>	<i>?àn</i>	<i>gàw</i>	<i>mán</i>	<i>hàb</i>	<i>zùwédà</i>
kill.me	me	NEG	1SG	drink	me	porridge	groundnut

‘[Zlo (a character) also plays the **flute** (with Goose and Crane)]: *** don’t kill me, I am eating groundnut porridge’.

One instrument, different sound – why?

- It is not an onomatopoeia, because we would expect a regular correspondence between a sound of a musical instrument and a word that describes it, which is the case in other languages;
- One possible explanation is to suggest that it is similar to musical surrogate languages, e.g. drum and balafon languages, widely attested in West Africa (Rattray 1923, Zemp & Soro 2004);
- It might be an evidence of the tight connection of music and language, being “both universals aspects of human expression” (McPherson 2019:16)

“Pseudowords”: words from an unintelligible foreign language

Wan (Mande)

(6) *gyiŋgεε gyiŋgεo gyiŋgε klã ã nĩ Yomolina*

Ginyanga (Kwa)

(7) \emptyset -nari *dondo su ahe* \emptyset -nari *dondo su ahe geyi gbegeyi gbe*
CL1-spider *** CL1-spider ***

gεca *wu jε* \emptyset -nari *dondo su aho* \emptyset -nari
a.lot *** CL1-spider *** CL1-spider

Why “” ?

- In the ERC Discourse reporting project, during informal discussions of songs in the fairytales we start spontaneously using the term “**pseudowords**” related to the words that apparently do not have any sense;
- During the preparation of this talk, we found out that this term is almost exclusively used in experimental linguistics;

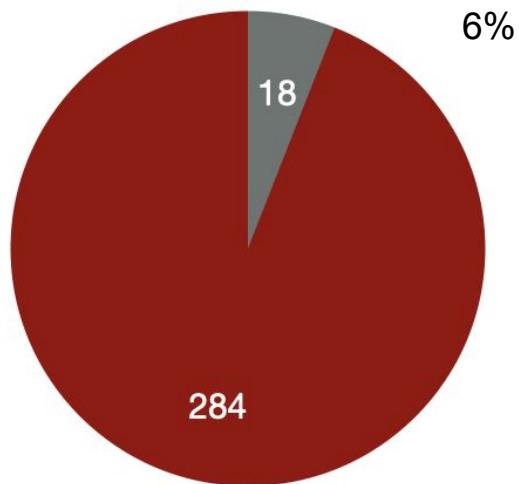
**Wuggy: a multilingual
pseudoword generator**



Distribution from the biggest corpus: Wan (Mande)

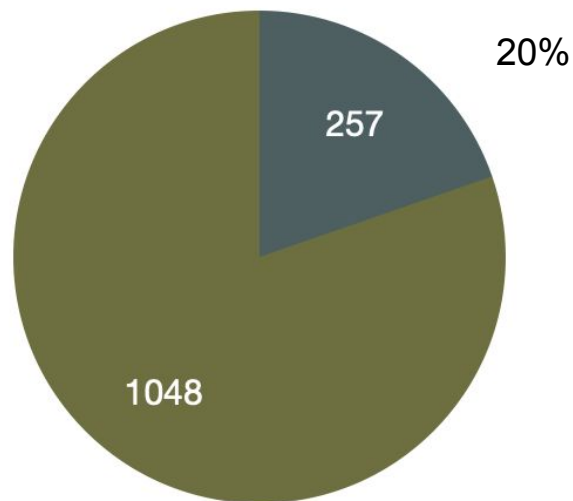
Distribution of ideophones

- Speech of the characters
- Narrator's speech



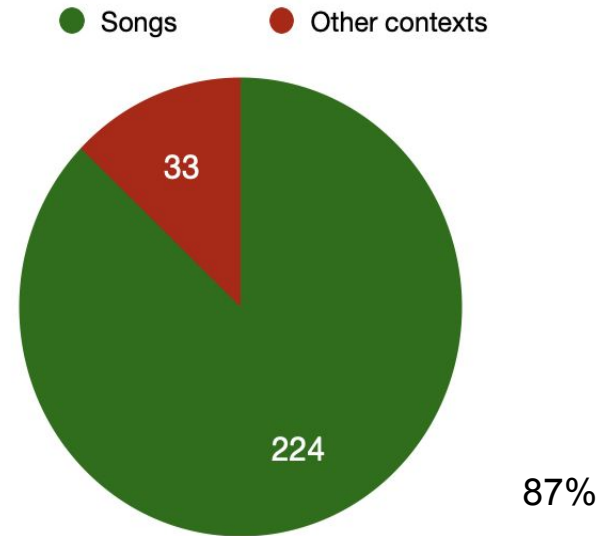
Distribution of pseudowords

- Speech of the characters
- Narrator's speech



87% of pseudowords from characters' speech occur in songs

- “Refrains” are proper to songs, they give the rhythm to the song;
- Words from different languages in songs are also widely attested in different African cultures (Patterson 2020, Beletsky 2021);
- Songs may be treated as a second layer of quotation, that might attract all unintelligible elements in order to make these passages marked in comparison to other parts of the narration;



Conclusions

- In this talk, we have discussed two types of expressives that occur frequently in West African traditional narratives, i.e. ideophones and “pseudowords”;
- We have mentioned several methodological issues related to them, i.e. segmentation, glossing and consistency of annotation;
- We have shown that they are distributed unequally in the narratives: ideophones are attracted to the narrator’s speech, while “pseudowords” mostly occur in songs;
- The study of the expressives is still challenging due to the annotation’s convention of the corpora, vague border of such phenomena as “pseudowords” and a lack of their analysis in natural languages.

Thank you for your
attention!

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Additional slide: pseudowords in non-experimental linguistics

- Words that “lack the form-meaning dualism that a typical language sign is supposed to have”. (Idiatov 2005a: 74) – part of the numeral divided by a restrictor

Tura (Mande), Côte d’Ivoire

1	dô	6	sáàdô	wàâ	zîn	lefu	nâ
2	pùlê	7	sáàpùlê	3SG.SUBJ.NEG.TAM	g[o.down]	even	[g]o.down(or TR)\TAM
3	yàkâ	8	sáàkâ				
4	yìsê	9	sóìsê	wàâ	pù	lefu	lê
5	súlú (sólú, sóólú)³	10	buu	3PL.SUBJ.NEG.TAM	t[wo]	even	[t]wo (= TR)
							‘They are not even two/ they are not two at all [but just one].’