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Kisii Town Nubian morphology: Investigating grammatical features in a multilingual context

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Abstract

The study examines the morphological characteristics of Kisii Town Nubian, a unique language spoken by a Nubian ethnic community in Kenya. Despite being geographically distinct from original Nubian languages, Kisii Town Nubian has complex grammatical markers and agglutinative morphology. The research aims to record the morphology of grammar, including prefixes, suffixes, and infixes, and examine how the language is affected by its multilingual setting. The study uses fieldwork, written material collection, and spoken language data to provide a comprehensive description of Kisii Town Nubian's morphology, highlighting its distinctive characteristics and potential phonological alterations. It also explains the impact of morphological patterns on Arabic loanwords. The findings advance knowledge of this endangered language and provide guidance for future language revival initiatives. The study also establishes the foundation for further investigation on the syntax, phonology, and vocabulary of Kisii Town Nubian in the context of multilingualism.

Keywords: inflectional and derivational morphology, loanwords, language contact, morphemes



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Public Interest Statement

This study contributes to understanding the unique linguistic identity of the Kisii Town Nubian community. By documenting and analyzing the language's morphology, the research will provide valuable data for historical linguistics, language contact studies, and the preservation of endangered languages. The findings can also inform future language revitalization efforts for Kisii Town Nubian.

Introduction

Nubian languages, a branch of the Eastern Sudanic family, are spoken by various ethnic groups inhabiting parts of Egypt, Sudan, and Kenya. The Kisii Town Nubian community in Kenya represents a unique case, having resided there for over a century but maintaining a distinct linguistic identity. Their language, Kisii Town Nubian (hence KTN), exhibits agglutinative morphology (building words with suffixes) and intricate grammatical features. This study aims to analyze the morphology of KTN, focusing on grammatical features and the influence of surrounding languages.

Nubian Morphology is generally agglutinative (Gussenhoven, 2006). The language displays various word-formation processes that are language-specific. For example, the language plural formation is quite intricate, involving suffixation and final stress (Kihm, 2011). This is more complex than its lexifier, Egyptian/Sudanese Arabic. The language also has complex or unpredictable suffixation. This includes verbal extensions of causative, applicatives, and plural stem suffixes. Nubian morphology also exhibits evidence of Arabic influence through several loanwords (Kaye, 1992). This study will focus more on the language's grammatical features (Oei, 2014).

Research Objective

To document the morphological features of Kisii Town Nubian: This objective involves collecting and analyzing a corpus of spoken and written Kisii Town Nubian to identify the various morphemes (meaningful units) used in word formation. The focus will be on grammatical morphemes such as prefixes, suffixes, and infixes that indicate grammatical categories like tense, aspect, mood, number, and gender.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Domain Theory

This research is based on the Domain Theory (DT) proposal, proposed by Schmidt-Rohr in 1932, who believes that social, cultural, and language learning cannot be separated from communication. How community members choose different languages or switch to another can determine the social impact of language choice (Fishman, 1972). For example, all countries may have societal concerns about bilateral meetings, small talk, important group work, social communication, contact, and commitment. Additionally, Fishman (1977) emphasized that these social groups can be examined according to compositional differences, permeability of group problems, organizational structure and interaction content, and security restrictions.

Fishman's version of linguistic field theory defines the field as a theoretical construct representing language, which is considered a more powerful explanatory tool than context, place, and interlocutors (Fishman, 1972). Fishman's field analysis illustrates language use in different organizations and cultures. "Context attempts to describe the wide range of interactions in many language environments" (p. 19). Fishman adds that there are five language areas. These areas include family, friendships, religion, education, and work. Olmes (2008), who analyzed the sincerity of public leaders' speeches, presents a similar perspective. Sahgal (1991) identified three language areas in India. This is the realm of family, friendship, and partnerships. Another researcher, Gorlach (1991), suggested that communities in English-speaking countries use their language for various activities. However, in India and Singapore, English is considered a second language that is used only for administrative purposes. It is again applicable in law,

news, and information. Other features of the language are limited to the first language. DT will lead the literature review, data collection, and analysis of objectives (i) and (ii), particularly home language use and usage across demographic differences. Domain Theory has weaknesses. He says this is “a model of social development” (Tisak, 1995, p. 96), but it is not development or only weak development. Domain theory attempts to distance itself from Piaget and Kohlberg to being non-developmental. However, it makes many connections with the theories of Piaget and Kohlberg regarding the concept perspective needed to explain how leaders develop. Additionally, field theory is considered an explanation of moral behavior (Turiel, 1998, 2006a). However, if it is not development, it indirectly has little to do with morality. (2) The theory is said to be different from the theories and findings of Piaget and Kohlberg (Smetana, 1995a). However, the final findings and theories are partly derived from and based on these ideas. (3) The theory is said to be “social science in its findings” (Turiel & Smetana, 1998, p. 309), but there are also different types of inequality. Throughout our review, we argue that these doubts partly arise from overconfidence in research results derived from empirical evidence. For example, in a more straightforward sense, the development concept consists of structure, hierarchy, continuity, and transformation rather than content, non-hierarchy, accumulation, and transformation (Overton, 1998; Werner, 1975).

Optimality Theory

Optimality theory (OT), proposed by Prince and Smolensky in 1991, has taken linguistic research by storm. Phonologists readily abandoned this rule when faced with simple constraints such as performance standards. They moved to the assumption of universal restrictions rather than integrating restrictions and rules, including the language situation. Phonics quickly emerged, focusing on universal elements rather than the regular elements of a language. The study of phenomena in other areas, such as morphology, syntax, language acquisition, and transformation, is also considered from an OT perspective. Paradigms are changing a lot and at an alarming rate. (D.B. Archangeli).

In phonics, Universal Grammar attempts to explain the regularities and changes found in the speech organization of sounds. This involves methods of teaching a native speaker of a language the following features: (a) phonemes, the sound patterns of words in a language (b) transitions and changes in morpheme letters in many cases; In other words, the part that uses the language, including the underlying language and the surface language; yes, the characteristics of the situation that led to the change; (c) Exceptions to any of the above. In the context of words, the ideal model would provide a way to show similarities between words, distinguish words, and predict what kinds of patterns should and should not exist. It is always tempting to extend the model to include exceptional cases and elements of phonetic organization that are not adult grammatical elements, like first or second language acquisition, historical, and language change.

OT has been proposed as a universal phonological grammar that addresses the above issues more directly than other phonological models (Prince & Smolensky, 1993; McCarthy & Prince, 1993a). Although OT is based on universal constraints, these constraints can still be violated. Since the constraints are universal, they provide an unambiguous way of describing the differences between common words. There is a way to show the difference between languages by crime: the level of crime at which all prohibitions are specific to each language. The OT proposes a way to impose a ban on infringement, such as an interdict - the infringement of the subordinate jurisdiction can be prevented for further enforcement of the ban.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design. According to Mugenda (2003), this approach was suitable because it allowed the researcher to probe and interrogate the subjects and obtain helpful information that was not otherwise obtainable in quantitative research. The qualitative design allowed the participants freedom of expression in their own words, which helped the researcher obtain the desired information on the heritage language preservation of Nubians within the study area. This study conducted field research in Kisii Town, collaborating with native speakers to collect spoken language data through audio recordings

of interviews and conversations. Written language data can also be gathered through existing materials like community publications, historical documents, or religious texts written in Kisii Town Nubian (if available).

Data analysis

Transcribe the collected audio recordings and analyze them for morphological features, focusing on morphemes used for grammatical purposes. Analyze written materials to identify morphological patterns and compare them with spoken language data. Using comparative linguistic methods, compare the identified morphological features of Kisii Town Nubian with those documented in native Nubian languages and Arabic.

Expected outcomes

This study is expected to deliver the following outcomes:

- 1) A comprehensive description of the morphological features of Kisii Town Nubian, focusing on grammatical morphemes and their functions;
- 2) Identification of potential sound changes and morphological innovations that differentiate Kisii Town Nubian from its ancestral languages; and
- 3) Insights into the influence of Arabic on Kisii Town Nubian morphology, including the presence of loanwords and potential adaptations of Arabic morphological patterns.

3.0 Results

The Kisii Town Nubian Morphology

The third objective was to investigate the morphological variation between heritage Nubian in Kisii Town and native Nubian. Nubian Morphology is generally agglutinative (Gussenhoven, 2006). The language displays various word-formation processes that are language-specific. For example, the language plural formation is quite intricate, involving suffixation and final stress (Kihm, 2011). This is more complex than its lexifier, Egyptian/Sudanese Arabic. The language also has complex or unpredictable suffixation. This includes verbal extensions of causative, applicatives, and plural stem suffixes. The morphology of Nubian is also exhibiting evidence of Arabic influence through a number of loanwords (Kaye, 1992). This study will focus more on the language's grammatical features (Oei, 2014).

Nubian Inflectional Morphology

The Nubian in Nyanchwa, Kisii Town contains countable nouns with inflectional morphemes when changing from singular to plural- most of them contain or add '-an' at the end of the plural noun form. Uncountable nouns contain lexical morphemes. The active voice sentences have a fixed arrangement of Subject, Verb, and Object (SVO), and they change to the passive in the Object, Verb, and Subject (OVS) order. That is illustrated in the tables below.

Table 1.0: Inflectional morphemes in Kisii Town Nubian for number

| Word (Singular) | Gloss | Plural | Gloss |
|-----------------|--------|-----------------------|----------|
| <i>Ajol</i> | person | <i>ajumaal anasi</i> | people |
| <i>Nyereku</i> | child | <i>yalaa</i> | children |
| <i>Sabi</i> | friend | <i>suban/ suba-na</i> | friends |
| <i>Keli</i> | dog | <i>kel-an</i> | dogs |
| <i>Gidida</i> | hen | <i>gidida-an</i> | hens |

Source: Interview data

The table above shows that the noun '*keli*' (dog) has changed to its plural form, '*kelan*' (dogs). The morpheme '*-an*' is a suffix representing 'plural/many'. The noun '*gidida*' (hen) changes to '*gididaan*' (hens), where '*-an*'

still denotes the plural form.

However, there are irregular forms in this formation like ‘*ajol*’ (person) ‘*anasi*’ (people), ‘*nyereku*’ (child) ‘*yalaa*’ (children).

The Nubian derivational Morphology

Derivational morphology is a broad field. The list of processes or relations that occur during derivation is long and poses many empirical and theoretical challenges for the analyst: prefixation, suffixation, infixation, circumfixation, transfixion, conversion, reduplication, truncation, reverse engineering, template derivation, etc. (Lura, 2020).

Table 2.0: Derivational morphemes in Kisii Town Nubian

| <i>Verb</i> | <i>Gloss</i> | <i>Noun</i> | <i>Gloss</i> |
|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| <i>seregu</i> | steal | <i>serega</i> | thief |
| <i>akul</i> | eat | <i>akil</i> | food |
| <i>alab</i> | play | <i>lib</i> | game |
| <i>guna</i> | sing | <i>kungu</i> | a song |

Source: Interview data

Analysis in Table 2.0 above reveals that Kisii Town Nubian derivational morphology is nonconcatenative through transfixation in which vowel and consonant morphemes are interdigitated. For example, depending on the vowels, the Kisii Town Nubian **consonantal roots** s-r-g, k-l, l-b can have different but semantically related meanings. Thus, /seregu/ ‘steal’ and /serega/ ‘thief’ both come from the root s-r-g. Words from s-r-g are formed by filling in the vowels, e.g. *seregu* ‘steal’ *serega* ‘thief’ /*akul*/ ‘eat’ and /*akil*/ ‘food’ both come from the root k-l forming the words *akul* ‘eat’ *akil* ‘food’ just by adding vowels. Again, /*alab*/ ‘play’ and /*lib*/ ‘game’ both come from the root l-b forming the words *alab* ‘play’ and *lib* ‘game’ by adding vowels. In McCarthy’s conjunction-free morphology analysis, roots are assigned to one layer, and vowel patterns are assigned to another layer. Extensive medical treatments are found only in Afro-Asiatic and some Nilo-Saharan languages (e.g., Lugbara) and are uncommon or new elsewhere.

Table 3.0: Lexical morphemes in Nubian uncountable nouns

| <i>Word (singular)</i> | <i>Gloss</i> | <i>Plural</i> | <i>Gloss</i> |
|------------------------|--------------|-----------------------|--------------|
| <i>Jua</i> | house | <i>jua</i> | house |
| <i>Moyo</i> | water | <i>moyo</i> | water |
| <i>Degil</i> | flour | <i>degil</i> | flour |
| <i>Masara</i> | rain | <i>Masara</i> | rain |
| <i>Lengesel sida</i> | bed | <i>lengese / sida</i> | bed |
| <i>Akil</i> | food | <i>akil</i> | food |
| <i>Leben</i> | milk | <i>leben</i> | milk |
| <i>Segete</i> | coldness | <i>segete</i> | coldness |

Source: Interview data

Notably, the morphemes above stand on their own without using other morphemes to imply meaning. The data collected indicate that the Nubian language has fewer uncountable nouns than countable ones.

Gender marking in Kisii Town Nubian

Gender marking does not occur in the Nubian language. Gender marking is shown only for animals of their biological sex. People and pets have separate male and female names.

Table 4.0: Gender marking in Nubian words

| Feminine | | Masculine | |
|------------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| Word | Gross | Word | Gross |
| <i>bi'niya</i> | girl | <i>yo'wele</i> | boy |
| <i>marya</i> | woman | <i>'ragi</i> | men |
| <i>a'buba</i> | grandmother | <i>ji'di</i> | grandfather |
| <i>'bagara'</i> | cow | <i>'toru</i> | bull |
| <i>gala'moyo</i> | goat | <i>'tesi</i> | he-goat |
| <i>gi'dida</i> | chicken | <i>'di</i> | cock |

Source: Interview data

Table 4.0 indicates that there is no relationship between the words marking gender in the Kisii Town Nubian. They are independent lexemes from each other.

Table 5.0: Feminine and masculine members of a pair

| Feminine | | Masculine | |
|------------------------|-----------|-------------------------|----------|
| Word | Gross | Word | Gross |
| <i>nyere'ku biniya</i> | baby girl | <i>nyere'ku yo'wele</i> | baby boy |
| <i>a'ku bi'niya</i> | sister | <i>a'ku yo'wele</i> | brother |
| <i>ko'ru 'marya'</i> | ewe | <i>ko'ru 'ragi</i> | ram |

Source: Interview data

Table 5.0 indicates that the male and female members of a couple may also be represented by a match. *'Marya or bi'niya, 'ragi or yo'wele, respectively*, before the actual gender marking words.

Discussion

The investigation into the morphological features of Kisii Town Nubian (KTN) revealed a unique language shaped by its history and multilingual context (Gussenhoven, 2006; Kihm, 2011). This section discusses the key findings on KTN morphology, including inflectional and derivational morphology, while considering the influence of Arabic and the lack of gender marking within the language itself.

Inflectional Morphology and the Plural Marker

One of the distinct features of KTN morphology is its system of inflectional morphemes used for marking plurality in nouns (Kihm, 2011). The study found that most countable nouns utilize the suffix “-an” to indicate plural, as exemplified by *'ajol'* (singular: person) transforming to *'ajumaa/anasi'* (plural: people) (see Table 4. 14). This system aligns with the agglutinative nature of Nubian languages where morphemes are added to create new meanings (Gussenhoven, 2006). However, the presence of irregular forms like *'nyereku'* (child) becoming *'yalaa'* (children) highlights the existence of exceptions within the inflectional system (Oei, 2014).

Non-concatenative Derivational Morphology

Another interesting finding pertains to KTN's derivational morphology, which appears to be non-concatenative and employs a process known as transfixation (Lura, 2020). This process involves interdigitation of vowel and consonant morphemes. Table 4.15 illustrates this concept, where the roots like 's-r-g' (steal) and 'k-l' (eat) combine with different vowels to create words with related meanings, such as 'seregu' (steal), 'serega' (thief), 'akul' (eat), and 'akil' (food). This mechanism demonstrates a unique way KTN builds new words from existing roots.

Arabic Influence: Loanwords and Beyond

The study acknowledges the historical presence of Arabic in the region and explores its influence on KTN morphology (Kaye, 1992). While the findings do not delve deeply into loanword morphology, the presence of Arabic loanwords like 'leben' (milk) suggests some influence at the lexical level. Further research could explore how these loanwords have adapted morphologically within KTN.

Absence of Grammatical Gender Marking

An intriguing aspect of KTN grammar is the lack of inherent gender marking in nouns. The study highlights that gender distinction is only made for biological sex of animals and people, employing separate lexemes for male and female (see Table 4.17). This finding contrasts with many languages where grammatical gender is assigned to nouns independent of biological sex.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study provides valuable insights into KTN morphology; however, some limitations are worth mentioning. The focus on a specific community in Kisii Town might limit the generalizability of findings to other Nubian speakers. Additionally, a more detailed investigation into derivational morphology beyond transfixation could offer a richer understanding of word formation processes in KTN.

Future research could explore dialectal variation within KTN across different communities. A deeper analysis of loanword morphology can illuminate the extent of Arabic influence on KTN's vocabulary and word formation. Furthermore, investigating potential gender marking strategies beyond separate lexemes for animals and people would provide a more comprehensive picture of gender representation in KTN.

Summary

This study investigated the morphological features of Kisii Town Nubian (KTN), a unique language spoken by a Nubian ethnic group residing in Kenya for over a century. Despite separation from ancestral Nubian languages, KTN exhibits agglutinative morphology with distinct markers for grammatical categories. The research focused on two primary objectives:

- 1. Documenting Grammatical Morphology:** The study analyzed spoken and written KTN to identify morphemes used for grammatical purposes, such as plural marking with the suffix "-an" and non-concatenative derivational morphology using transfixation (interdigitating vowels and consonants to create new words).
- 2. Investigating Arabic Influence:** The research explored the influence of Arabic on KTN morphology, noting the presence of loanwords but not delving deeply into their morphological adaptation.

Conclusion

The findings reveal a fascinating language system. KTN's agglutinative core allows for word building through morphemes. The inflectional system utilizes suffixes for plurality, while derivational morphology employs transfixation, creating words with related meanings from shared roots. Notably, KTN lacks inherent grammatical gender marking, with distinctions made only for biological sex using separate lexemes. This

study sheds light on how KTN has adapted and evolved in a multilingual context. While Arabic loanwords indicate some lexical influence, further research is needed to understand their deeper morphological impact.

5.3 Recommendations

This research lays the groundwork for further exploration of KTN. Here are some key recommendations:

Dialectal Variation: Investigate potential variations in KTN morphology across different Nubian communities.

Loanword Morphology: Conduct a deeper analysis of how Arabic loanwords have adapted morphologically within KTN.

Gender Representation: Explore alternative strategies for gender marking beyond separate lexemes for animals and people.

By addressing these areas, future research can provide a more comprehensive understanding of Kisii Town Nubian morphology and its place within the endangered language landscape.

The study of Kisii Town Nubian morphology sheds light on a fascinating language that has preserved its agglutinative core while incorporating unique features like non-concatenative derivation and lacking inherent grammatical gender. By documenting these characteristics, the study contributes to the understanding of endangered languages and the influence of language contact on morphology. Further research, as suggested above, can enrich our knowledge of this unique linguistic system and its place within the broader Nubian language family.

Future Research

This study lays the groundwork for further research on Kisii Town Nubian. Future studies could explore the language's syntax, phonology, and lexicon in greater detail. Investigating language attitudes within the Kisii Town Nubian community can also provide valuable insights into language maintenance and potential language shift.

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