A Descriptive Grammar of

Shilluk

Bert Remijsen & Otto Gwado Ayoker

Introduction

This special publication of Language Documentation and Conservation presents descriptive analyses on topics in the grammar of Shilluk, a Nilo-Saharan language spoken primarily in South Sudan. A salient characteristic of Shilluk is that it is rich in fusional morphology. That is, stem-internal changes, particularly in terms of tone and vowel length, have a high functional load in the paradigms of verbs and nouns. From 2008 onwards, we have built up a detailed understanding of these contrasts and their role in the grammar.

Accountability is a central concern in documentary and descriptive linguistics (Himmelmann 1998, Woodbury 2003), and it is one that has determined the design of this publication in various ways. One way we are ensuring that our description is accountable is by including sound examples. We do this because the phenomena themselves are sounds; transcriptions based on the sounds are hypotheses (cf. Rice 2014). Aside from making the work more accountable, sound examples embedded in publications make the phenomena more accessible, reducing the threshold between the reader and an unfamiliar language. This is particularly important when the relation between a transcription and the sound it represents is hard to interpret, as is the case with tone. For example, on the basis of the transcription in (1), the great majority of readers will not have a clear sense of how the tone pattern of this monosyllabic word sounds. In fact, it carries a High Fall to Mid, which is realised as a shallowly falling contour in the upper half of a speaker's tonal range. This melodic form is clear and concrete from the sound example, to the extent that a reader could mimic the melody they hear to develop a grip on the melodic shape.

jʌ́ʌʌ̰
boat:P
'Boats.'

We believe it is important to make our descriptive analysis of Shilluk phonology accountable and accessible in this way, because research that is not accountable is of limited value to the study of language, and accessibility is crucial to get the message across. That is why we embed sound examples in relation to all numbered illustrations (see Chapter 1).

We will add chapters as our understanding warrants it. This incremental model of publication is also motivated by accountability. As anyone who has engaged in it knows, descriptive research is by its nature a long-term endeavour. In our case, even though we have been investigating Shilluk

grammar for ten years now, there are still phenomena that belong in a comprehensive description but of which we do not yet have sufficient understanding. In this regard, the work on the grammar of Dinka by Torben Andersen has been an inspiring model to us. Over a period of several decades, from Andersen (1987) onwards, he has published research articles describing many parts of Dinka grammar, to the effect that, at this point, the amalgam of these publications approaches the scope of coverage of a traditional descriptive grammar. However, journal articles are restricted in their length, and a report that takes 80 pages, as our descriptive analysis of the base paradigm of transitive verbs does in the first chapter, is problematic in that respect. By publishing in an electronic-only manner, we are not limited in this way.

A final accountability measure is peer review. Each chapter is reviewed independently, that is, with the review process managed by the journal editor. We take this opportunity to thank Nick Thieberger and the anonymous reviewers involved for giving us the opportunity to contribute to the documentation and description of the Shilluk language in the best way we can imagine.

References

Andersen, Torben (1987). The Phonemic System of Agar Dinka. *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics* 9, 1–27.

Himmelmann, Nikolaus (1998). Documentary and descriptive linguistics. *Linguistics* 36, 161–195.

Rice, Keren (2014). Sounds in grammar writing. In Toshihide Nakayama and Keren Rice (eds.) *The art and practice of grammar writing. Language Documentation & Conservation*, Special Publication 8, 69–89.

Woodbury, Tony (2003). Defining documentary linguistics. *Language Documentation and Description* 1, 35–51.