

Humanities of the Lesser Known
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The Grammatical and Discourse Properties of Uncunwee Traditional Songs

In this talk, we discuss a variety of grammatical and discourse properties of traditional songs in Uncunwee (Ghulfan), an endangered Nilo-Saharan, Kordofan Nubian (KN) dialect spoken in the northern Nuba Mountains of Sudan. The KN dialect group consists of more than 30 closely related languages or dialects spoken in various communities, whose members identify both themselves and their languages as Ajang.

The examination of Uncunwee songs, along with spoken narrative texts, gives an understanding of grammatical, discourse, and information structure that elicited sentential and suprasentential data do not. These songs, which have been passed down orally through generations, come in various genres: war songs, work songs, funeral songs, ritual songs, and history songs. As vessels of oral history, they also yield important historical linguistic data in that they often preserve an older version of Ajang that transcends modern Kordofan Nubian dialectal differences and that contains morphological features and words not common in the modern Ajang dialects.

In the area of grammar and discourse, Uncunwee songs provide data in areas such as *morphological marking of arguments in discourse*, *verb serialization*, *discourse cohesion*, and the *ordering of information*, that are often rare or not found in other types of spoken discourse.

Though these songs are still under analysis, we have already found the following new or rare information:

- unusual use of possessive markers to link non-tensed verbs: Normally, verbs that bear no tense marking are linked to tensed verbs by use of what is often called converb markers and particle indicating simultaneity. In our examination of songs, we have found, in the case of the verb *say*, the linkage is also accomplished by use of a possessive interfix, used normally only in noun compounding.
- rare instances of cataphoric reference: Most pronominal reference in Uncunwee that we know of is anaphoric, meaning that a pronoun looks backward in the discourse for its referent. In our examination of the songs, we have now seen instances of cataphoric, or forward-looking, reference.
- seemingly noncohesive topic introduction: We have found instances in the songs where the singer inserts a new topic into the foreground narrative without using any cohesive device, then abruptly switches back to the main narrative event. Though our knowledge of topic introduction devices is very minimal, this kind of topic introduction seems to be rare.

- evidence of a distant past tense category: Though this needs much more analysis, we have found in the songs what looks like the difference between recent (generic) and distant past tense marking, which is something that we have yet to encounter in the spoken narratives that we've been analyzing. If there is a distant past category, we are fairly certain that it will show up in other contexts, as well.
- use of what looks like differential object marking: We are now seeking to understand contexts in which object marking is obligatory and those where it is optional. Our analysis of the songs has provided new information in this area.

Our study examines these properties and other properties of songs and seeks not only lexical, grammatical, and discourse information but also to examine the differences in these areas between present and historical varieties of the dialects, and between sung and spoken texts. This will be the focus of our paper.