

Untangling the origins of floating suprasegmental component in Nuer.

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In this talk, I report on a study of floating suprasegmental component (FSC) in a major but little-documented West Nilotic language Nuer spoken in South Sudan and Ethiopia.

FSC is found in a class of nouns. It consists of a floating mora and a High tone that occur at the left edge of the word, represented as (̣) in Table 1. When the word with FSC occurs in isolation, as is the word ‘Dok person’ in (a), no surface evidence of FSC is present (cf. the noun ‘child’ that does not have FSC). FSC is realised only with the addition of the preceding context. This is shown in (b) where the preceding context is an open syllable. This syllable is Low-toned and has a short (V) vowel when followed by the noun without FSC. When followed by the noun with FSC, the preceding syllable has a rising contour tone and the vowel is long (VV). The change in the tonal melody and vowel lengthening before ‘Dok person’ is the effect of FSC (Reid 2019: 77-80, 2021a,b).

Table 1. Nouns with and without FSC in different contexts.

| noun class context | without FSC | with FSC |
|------------------------------------|--|--|
| a. Isolation | [gàt] ¹ gàt ‘child’ | [dòk] ̣dòk ‘Dok person’ |
| b. Preceded by an open syllable | [jèn n̄éɛɛnè gət] jèn n̄éɛɛn-è gət 3SG see-3SG child ‘S/he sees the child.’ | [jèn n̄éɛɛn̄é dòk] jèn n̄éɛɛn-è ̣dòk 3SG see-3SG Dok.person ‘S/he sees the Dok person.’ |

As part of the study, I aimed to untangle the historical origin of FSC. To this end, I made use of 1) traditional approaches employed by historical linguists and 2) first-hand descriptive work on the variation in Nuer dialects. The former included working with the cognate West Nilotic data. The latter involved working with speakers of a number of Nuer dialects to document and describe the differences and similarities between them.

I discuss the methodology employed in the study, including my choice for targeting certain dialects and the types of data that were collected; and the benefits and challenges of investigating language change in an underdocumented language.

References

- Reid, Tatiana (2021a). Floating suprasegmental component in Nuer. P-workshop, University of Edinburgh, 18 June.
- Reid, Tatiana (2021b). On the nature of floating suprasegmental component in Lou Nuer. 10th Word Congress of African Languages. Leiden University, 7-12 July.
- Reid, Tatiana (2019). *The phonology and morphology of the Nuer verb*. PhD thesis. Surrey Morphology Group. University of Surrey.

¹ Surface phonological transcription occurs between square brackets, UR representation occurs without brackets; ̣ = floating mora and High tone, 3SG = third person singular; ε - short vowel, ɛɛ - long vowel, ɛɛɛ - overlong vowel; Dok person = a member of the Dok clan of Nuer.