EDITORIAL BOOK CRITIQUE: *A GRAMMAR OF KUSAAL: A MABIA LANGUAGE OF NORTHERN GHANA*

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Abstract

In this paper, we review Musah's (2018) *Grammar of Kusaal* – a modern, carefully researched study of Kusaal, a Central-East Mabia language spoken in the Bawku Municipality and surrounding towns, and in parts of Burkina Faso and Togo. The review covers major topics in the book such as phonology, morphological affixes, syntax of nouns, verbs and modifiers, temporal and aspectual marking, argument structure and grammatical relations, serialization, and focus constructions. The author makes an effort to situate the Kusaal language in the larger Mabia cluster in the analysis of the data. More importantly, he provides fresh data and analysis of Kusaal that incorporates ethnolinguistic knowledge. The book is written in a clear language and effort is made to limit theoretical labeling and jargon to a minimum thus, making it accessible to those with limited background in linguistics.

Keywords: Kusaal, grammar, syntax, phonology, morphology

1. Introduction

The book under review, *A Grammar of Kusaal* by Anthony Agoswin Musah (Musah, 2018), is a well-researched and well-written book that provides a comprehensive linguistic account of the Kusaal language, which is spoken in north-eastern Ghana and parts of Togo and Burkina Faso. The book has ten (10) chapters that cover a broad range of linguistic topics in Kusaal such as the sound system and patterns, inflectional and derivational affixes, structure and properties of noun and verb phrases and their modifiers, clause structure, aspect, modality, and negation, focus constructions and question formation. Musah (2018) employs Dixon's (2012) Basic Linguistic Theory (BLT) approach as a methodology and a theoretical framework for analyzing the data. The analysis provided in the book is consistent and devoid of complicated linguistic

terminology which makes the book accessible for those with interest in the Kusaal language but without extensive linguistic training. The review proceeds with topics in the order of appearance in the book and provides comments on some of the salient points.

2. Overview of chapters

2.1   Background on Kusaal

Chapter one of the book provides important background on Kusaal including relevant geographic, demographic, economic and occupational information about the language and the people. Kusaal is spoken predominantly in the Bawku Municipality and immediate towns like Zebilla, Garu-, Tempane, Pusiga-Polimakom and Binduri. Kusaal is spoken by the Kusaas/Kusaa who number over four hundred and twenty thousand (420,000) across north-eastern Ghana. The author also provides information on socio-cultural aspects of the people such as the governance system, practice of faith and religion, kinship systems, celebratory rites such as funerals, festivals, and marriage. Kusaal is used alongside other languages from the area such as Hausa, Mampruli, Moore, and English. Kusaas use Kusaal for interpersonal communication and in in-group settings such as home. Kusaal has two geographical dialects, Agole and Toende with Agole being the predominant one in terms of speakers. Musah (2018) identifies as a Mabia Central-East language, following Bodomo (1993).

2.2   Phonology

Chapter two presents the phonology of Kusaal. Musah (2018) identifies twenty-three (23) consonants, nine (9) phonetic vowels, and three register tones (high, mid, low). The study points to only one syllabic consonant, the bilabial nasal /*m*/, e.g., *m* '1SG/OBJ/POSS'. Vowels are distinguished based on part of tongue, height, lip posture and tongue root position. Four vowels each display the feature Advanced Tongue Root [+ATR] {*i, u, e, o*} and Unadvanced Tongue Root [-ATR] {ɪ, ʊ, ɛ, ɔ}. However, the central low vowel /*a*/ appears to be neutral for the feature [ATR]. Thus, Kusaal differs from some of the languages in the Mabia sub-family where the central low vowel /*a*/ has the feature [-ATR], e.g., Gurenɛ (Atipoka and Nsoh, 2018), and from Kwa languages where /*a*/ has [+ATR] variant /*æ*/ or /*e*/ (Dolphyne, 1988). In addition to cross-height ATR harmony, vowels in Kusaal also harmonize in *roundness* within stems and with affixes. Musah (2018: 61) argues that in Kusaal the tone bearing unit is "the mora rather than the syllable" and a long vowel may bear up to two tones. However, there is no further articulation of this argument in the book, although references are provided for further reading on the issue.

As is common in tonal languages, tone has both lexical and grammatical functions in Kusaal.

2.3   Noun and noun class

Chapter three of the book focuses on nouns and the noun class system in Kusaal. The author provides many examples of proper and common nouns, concrete and abstract nouns, and countable and uncountable nouns. Musah (2018) shows that the pronominal system in Kusaal is inflects for features such as *person*, *number*, *human*, and *case* but not *gender*. Also, there are weak and strong pronominal forms; the former may attach to verbs as suffixes, e.g., *-m* '1SG.OBJ', *-if* '2SG.OBJ', while the latter are free. The strong forms (or emphatic forms) are used in focus constructions and questions. The language also has plural and singular proximal and distal demonstratives, a reflexive pronoun *mmɛŋ* 'self' and a reciprocal pronoun *taaba* 'each other/one another', relative and interrogative pronouns with human/non-human and singular and plural forms. Musah (2018) provides an analysis of the (remnant) noun class system in Kusaal. He identifies twenty-three (23) singular-plural declension sets reconstructed from *Proto-Mabia but the actual count of active classes in Kusaal appears to be between eleven (11) and fifteen (15), as shown in Figure (1). Thus, Musah (2018) provides a general picture within which noun classes in Kusaal should be interpreted.

2.4   Noun phrase and modifiers

Chapter four covers nominal modifiers in Kusaal. The book argues for a class of "adjectives" in Kusaal as has been proposed in other sister Mabia languages such as Gurenɛ and Dagbani. Adjectives inflect for number and typically occur with *bʊn-* 'thing' although they may occur with other nouns in the language. Also, there are predicative adjectives which incorporates the copula, e.g., *tʊl* 'be hot', and those that occur post-copula, e.g., *sʊ'ʊm* 'good'. Post-copula adjectives are shown to be different from noun complements because while noun complements can be fronted, post-copula adjectives cannot be fronted without a noun head, e.g., *bʊn-* 'thing'. The space, location and landmark of one entity in relation to another is indicated with *relator nouns* (sub-class of nouns derived from body/object-parts), e.g., *zug* 'head' and/or a locative marker *-Vn*. Musah (2018: 138) identifies a particle *nɛ* as a "fully-fledged preposition" that "is preposed to NPs and conveys the semantic function of "instrument."" Musah (2018), however, notes in footnote 27 that the particle *nɛ* has several other functions including "comitative conjunction and a marker of general emphasis or broad focus" (p. 138). We will comment a bit more on this particle in section 2.9.
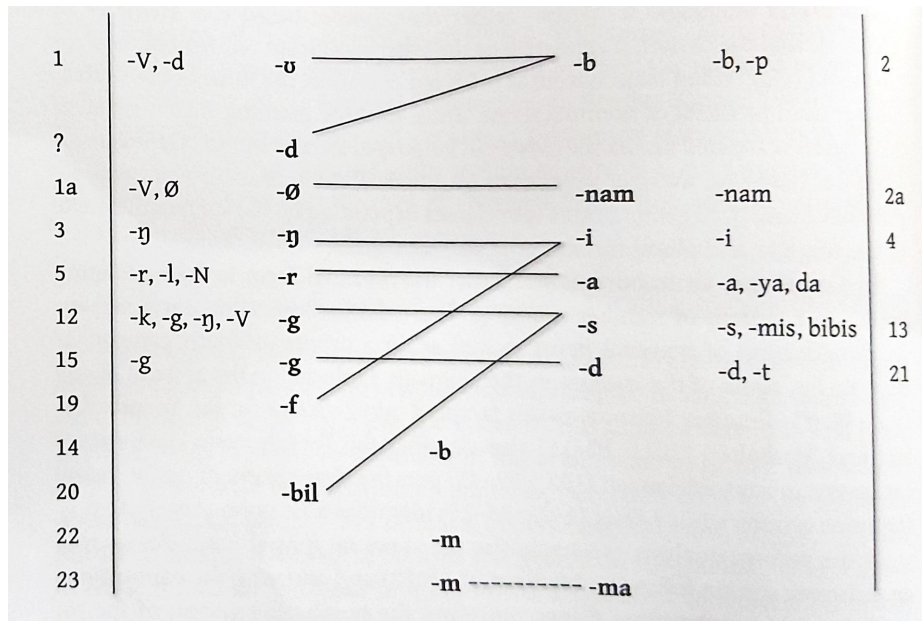
Figure 1: Kusaal nominal suffixes (Musah, 2018: 98)

Chapter five discusses the noun phrase and the distribution various elements within the phrase. Like many Mabia languages, in Kusaal determiners, demonstratives, quantifiers, numerals and adjectives all occur post-nominal. Kusaal distinguishes between definite and indefinite determiners: the definite determiner is *la* and indefinite is marked by *sɔ'* (human, sg.), *sie'ba* (human, pl.), *si'a* (non-human, sg.). Bare nouns may also encode (in)definiteness depending on context. However, the author does not indicate what kind of meaning is encoded by definiteness markers in Kusaal. For example, Schwarz (2013) shows that across languages there are different kinds of definite markers, which he refers to as *strong* and *weak* definites, and these correspond to different meanings such as *uniqueness* and *familiarity*. Also, there is no account of the distribution of *la* outside the noun phrase, such as in relative clauses (see Abubakari 2019).

2.5 Verb phrase and affixes

Chapter six focuses on verbs and their syllable structure, verbal affixes, and syntactic distribution. Verb stems in Kusaal tend to have a CV or CVC syllable structure, although V/VV stems are also possible. There are several derivational affixes which are marked on verbs stems in Kusaal including the causative *-(V)s*, applicative *(-l)*, inversive *(-g)*, iterative *(-Vs)*, and ventive *(-na)*. As shown in (1) below, the causative and iterative

utilizes the same morpheme *-Vs*. Musah (2018: 156) argues that "the iterative differs from the causative construction in that while the causative explicates the introduction of an underlying agent in the verb form, the iterative reinforces the number of times an action is undertaken in succession..." Musah's (2018) explanation of the causative as 'introducing an underlying agent' while intuitive is not unproblematic because causative morphology does not always add an external argument to the verb. For instance, in Japanese (2), in the so-called adversity causative, there is no external agent or causer introduced into the sentence by the causative morpheme *-(s)ase*. Similarly, in Finnish (3) the causative suffix *-tta* can be used to " causativize an unergative verb without introducing a new argument in the syntax" (Pylkkanen, 2000: 140). Thus, it appears that in Kusaal the causative suffix when it attaches to a bi-eventive verb stem doubles or iterates the event, rather than introducing an external argument. In other words, the iterative and the causative do not appear to be separate markers.

(1)   Causative vs. iterative in Kusaal (Musah, 2018: 155-156)
      <u>causative</u>
      di   'to eat'   ∼   *di-is*   'to feed'
      mu'a   'to suck'   ∼   *mu'a-s*   'to suckle'

      <u>iterative</u>
      tua   'to pound'   ∼   *tua-s*   'to pound severally'
      kia   'to chop'   ∼   *kie-s*   'to chop severally'

(2)   Japanese (Pylkkanen, 2000: 137)

         Taroo-ga   musuko-o sin-ase-ta.
         Taro-NOM son-ACC   die-CAUSE-PAST
         (a) 'Taro caused his son to die.'
         (b) 'Taro's son died on him.' (the adversity causative)

(3)   Finnish (Pylkkanen, 2000: 141)

         Maija-a   laula-tta-a.
         Maija-PAR sing-CAUSE-3SG
         'Maija feels like singing.'

2.6   Tense and aspect

Chapter seven of the book is titled 'aspect and modality in Kusaal'. In this chapter, Musah (2018) proposes that "time relations in Kusaal are best described in terms of the opposition between perfective and imperfective... tense... is secondary". The data reveals, however, that Kusaal marks past and future time with free standing particles

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but aspect through inflectional suffixes on the verb. There are several particles (derived from temporal adverbs) that encode various temporal delineations of past time including *da* 'two or more days ago', *sa* 'yesterday', and *pa* 'earlier today'. Although Musah (2018) does not refer to these particles as tense, he notes that "the functions these forms play are comparable to the well-known multiple past and future tense systems of Bantu languages" (p. 162). The future is marked by *ná* (affirmative) or *kʊ* (negative) which "points to a generic time in the future" and may combine with temporal adverbs like *saa* 'tomorrow' or *daa* 'two or more days to come'. Musah (2018) "prefers not to refer to the future form as a tense category" because it has modality interpretation as well (p. 181). Unfortunately, he does not discuss modality in Kusaal although the title of the chapter portends such presentation.

Musah (2018) identifies two (2) main aspects in Kusaal namely, imperfective and perfective. He proposes that the imperfective has two sub-categories, the habitual *-Vd/-t* and the progressive *-Vd/t-nɛ*. On the other hand, the perfect(ive) is marked by *-Vya* on the verb. As (5) shows, the progressive appears to be a "focused version of the habitual" (p. 175). It can be noted, however, that while particles used in focus sentences may also function as a temporal marker (see Schwarz and Fiedler 2007 on Lelemi; Duah 2019 on Akan), it is not clear that this is the case in Kusaal, at least not based on the available data. In fact, as Musah (2018) shows, verbs inflected with the 'habitual' suffix alone may also have progressive interpretation, as shown in (6a-b) . Also, *-Vd/t-nɛ* marking on the verb is not always interpreted as progressive but sometimes a habitual meaning is obtained, as (6c) shows. Thus, in Kusaal there appears to be a clear contrast in terms of marking between imperfective events (habitual and progressive) (4) and perfect(ive) events (7).

(4)   **Awam di'e-d   yɔɔd.**
         Awam collect-HAB salary
         'Awam collects salary.' (Musah, 2018: 174, ex.393)

(5)   **Dasaŋ   la kʊ-ʊ-nɛ   nɔɔs.**
         young man DET kill-HAB-Foc chickens
         'The young man is killing chickens.' (Musah, 2018: 177, ex.400b)

(6)   a.   **Ba sɛ̃'-ɛd   zimi nɛ.**
         3PL roast-HAB fishes Foc
         'They are roasting fishes (not meat).' (Musah, 2018: 177, ex.403b)

     b.   **O   di-t   sa'ab nɛ.**
         3SG eat-HAB TZ   Foc
         'He is eating TZ.' (Musah, 2018: 177, ex.404b)

    c. **Sɔ'mɛkama zig-id-nɛ   o   mɛŋ yɛla.**
       everyone   strives-HAB-Foc 3SG REFL matter
       'Everyone strives for their own cause.' (Musah, 2018: 225,ex.618)

(7)   **Ba tɛ̃'ɛ̃s-iya.**
       3PL remember-PRF
       'They have remembered.'

2.7 Argument structure and grammatical relations

Chapter eight looks at clause structure in Kusaal. In this language, there are many verbs that alternate between transitive and intransitive uses, the so-called 'ambivalent/ambitransitive'. However, some of the cited examples appear to involve NPs adjuncts with an adverbial function (8). For instance, in (8b) the NP *kum bɛ'ɛd* 'bad death' is not a direct object of the verb but an adjunct. The language distinguishes between subject and object arguments based on their relative positions in the clause rather than any inflectional morphology to show their grammatical relation (perhaps, an exception can be found pronominalization). Musah (2018) identifies an indirect object based on semantic roles such as 'beneficiary', and is "usually introduced by a second verb *tis* 'to give'" (p. 190). Thus, in (9), *ti* '1PL' and *o* '3SG' are identified as indirect objects while *zimi* 'fishes' and *toroko la* 'the truck' are labeled as direct objects. It is, however, not immediately clear what syntactic properties differentiate direct objects from indirect objects in Kusaal, especially since all the objects appear to be arguments of a different verb. Thus, the objects in the sentences in (9) may be 'symmetric objects' with no differential syntactic relation between them (Bresnan and Moshi, 1990). In ditransitive constructions though the indirect object (or asymmetric object, a là Bresnan and Moshi 1990) "always precedes the theme, the direct object" (p. 201).

(8)   a. **Pu'a la sid   kpi-nɛ.**
        woman DET husband die-Foc
        'The woman's husband died.' (Musah, 2018: 188, ex.446)

    b. **Dau   la kpi-nɛ kum bɛ'ɛd.**
        man.SG DET die-Foc death bad
        'The man died a bad death.' (Musah, 2018: 188, ex.447)

(9)   a. **Atiig da'a-nɛ   zimi tis-i   ti.**
        Atiig bought-Foc fishes gave-Foc 1PL
        'Atiiga bought fish and gave us.' (Musah, 2018: 191, ex.462)

    b. **Bʊŋ   la yɛ'ɛg-nɛ toroko la tis   o.**
        donkey DET pull-Foc truck   DET INSTR 3SG

'The donkey pulled the truck for him.' (Musah, 2018: 191, ex.465)

2.8   Serial verb constructions

Chapter nine of the book discusses serial verb constructions (SVCs) by "adopting a pro-totypical approach" (Musah, 2018: 213). The chapter discusses some features of SVC in Kusaal such as the notion of single eventhood, argument sharing and the connector constraint. Musah (2018) argues that while 'protypical' SVCs encode meaning which may be conceptualized as a single event, other SVCs may involve separate events. In Kusaal SVCs, verbs may share the subject and object arguments, although "there are instances where some arguments are not shared by all the serialised verbs..." (p. 216). The author, however, does not provide any tests that proves argument sharing or other-wise in any of the cited examples (see for example, Hiraiwa and Bodomo 2008; Duah and Kambon 2020). Musah (2018) provides examples of purported SVCs in which a remnant of a coordinator *-n* occurs and argues that although such constructions may be ruled out by the connector constraint they exhibit important features of the category of SVC such as single tense/aspect marking. The details on this construction, however, is terse and not further pursued in the rest of the work. As a general observation, the chapter on serial verb constructions is uncharacteristically short (8 pages) and the content raises more questions about the nature of serialization in Kusaal.

2.9   Focus constructions

The last chapter of the book looks at 'pragmatically marked structures' such as focus, negation, and question formation in Kusaal. Throughout the book we encounter sentences which routinely have the particle *nɛ* (or its allomorphic variants *n* and *-i*) that attaches to verbs, as in (10a) or placed after nominal objects, shown in (10b). Musah (2018) analyses *nɛ* as 'broad focus' (glossed as Foc) which "focuses only elements in the predicate." The reduced allomorph *n* and *-i* can be used to mark subject *in situ* focus (11a-b), but not the full form (10c). Kusaal has another particle, *ka* that is used to mark *ex situ* focus. Musah (2018) identifies *ka* as encoding 'narrow focus' (glossed as FOC) in which "the element being focussed (sic.) is raised to subject position at the left periphery of the clause" (p. 225). As shown in (12a-b), *ka* can be used in both subject and non-subject *ex situ* focus. There is, however, little effort in the book to tease apart the interpretation of the different particles in their contexts of use.

(10)   a.   **Pu'a   la   tʊm-nɛ biig.**
           woman DET sent-Foc child
           'The woman sent (not called) the child.' (Musah, 2018: 222, ex.606b)

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    b. **Ya li teŋ-in   nɛ.**
    2PL fall ground-LOC Foc
    'You fell to the ground.' (Musah, 2018: 222, ex.607a)

    c. ***Pu'a la   nɛ tʋm biig.**
    woman DET Foc sent child
    (Musah, 2018: 222, ex.606b)

(11) a. **Azankuar n wʋm ala la.**
    Azankuar Foc hear thus DET
    'When Azankuar (not another fellow) heard that...' (Musah, 2018: 224, ex.614)

    b. **Suoŋ-i   kʋ pu'a.**
    rabbit-Foc kill woman
    'It is a rabbit that killed a woman.' (Musah, 2018: 225, ex.619)

(12) a. **Ni'im ka biis   la ɔb.**
    meat FOC children DET chew
    '(It is) Meat that the children ate.' (Musah, 2018: 225, ex.620)

    b. **Fʋ   baa la ka o kis.**
    2SG.POSS dog DET FOC 3SG hate
    (It is) Your dog that he hates.' (Musah, 2018: 225, ex.622)

    Musah (2018) provides important data that helps the reader to identify the source of the so-called focus particles in Kusaal. It is often takes for granted that particles used to express various foci exist for such purposes only in the grammar of languages that have them. However, it is the case that what eventually manifests as a focus particle is often a grammaticalization from another category. In Kusaal, Musah (2018) shows that both *nɛ* and *ka* have other functions apart from marking focus. *nnɛ* appears to have developed from a comitative copula into a clausal coordinator into its use as a focus particle. Such a grammaticalization path of focus particles has been found in other languages (Schwarz and Fiedler, 2007; Duah, 2019). On the other, the focus particle *ka* appears to have developed from a complementizer and it is, therefore, a prime candidate for *ex situ* focus, which involves a kind of clausal embedding. Thus, Musah (2018) contributes very relevant to on ongoing discussion about the categorial status of focus in the grammar of languages (see Hartmann and Zimmermann 2007).

(13)   (comitative) copula > coordinator > focus particle (see Musah 2018: 202-203)

3.   Conclusion

Musah's (2018) *Grammar of Kusaal* is an excellent contribution to linguistic research on Kusaal and provides novel data and analysis on various aspects of the language. The book displays evidence of careful research and a deep understanding of the language and how it works. There are copious footnotes that provide relevant ethnographic and cultural explanations to ideas, notions and expressions which may otherwise sound arcane or untenable to the uninitiated reader. More importantly, the book serves as an important backdrop within which the rest of the Mabia languages can be studied. Musah (2018) is highly recommended for Mabia scholars and students in particular, African language enthusiasts and scholars, and the general linguistic community.

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