

Article Summary of Baerman 2012: “Paradigmatic Chaos in Nuer”

Nuer is a remarkable language with regards to its case-number suffixes: though the inventory is quite small (*kä*, *ä*, *ni*, and \emptyset) and their environments are also limited, there is an extraordinary amount of variation: at least twenty-four inflectional classes in Frank’s (1999) corpus data. Blocking and extension are two well-attested processes in morphological theory that can explain the apparently inconsistent distribution of a single form. Yet neither process, or combination thereof, is sufficient enough to explain the data in Nuer. It is also extremely unlikely that this jumble of patterns is due to accidental homophony, as there are some logical patterns, such as *-ni* being strictly plural. There must therefore be another analysis that deals with the data in a more comprehensive manner.

Baerman proposes a set of rules that lead to not one but four default forms. The rule sets include: (1) mapping of morphological indices to phonological forms (*KÄ*, *Ä*, *NI*, and *ZERO*); (2) the available environments of the suffixes (*kä* and *ä* for GEN/LOC SG, *ni* for PL, and \emptyset anywhere); (3) global rules, that provide the preliminary default suffixes; (4) suffixation-contingent rules, that alter other forms in a paradigm depending on known suffixes; and (5) stem-contingent rules, which determine suffixation depending on the alternations of the stem. These rule sets are preceded by Frank’s proposal of a “semi-hierarchical model of stem organization” where the nominative singular affects the nominative plural, and the nominative forms affect the genitive and locative. The combination of Baerman’s rules leads to multiple default classes due to the effect of stem alternation. The stem alternations themselves cannot usually provide much information in isolation, as differences such as lengthening and vowel quality can signal *either* a change a singular form to plural or a plural form to singular. However, there does appear to be some predictability e.g. non-alternating stems cannot take zero suffixation.

The key point here is that the default suffixation is heavily dependent upon the form of the stem to which it attaches. Rule set (2) governs the environment of the suffixes. Within this, set (3) first defines preliminary default suffixation, before rule set (5) analyzes the individual lexical entries of each stem, including any alternations. This is the stage that produces multiple default forms, as it is affected by lexical factors. Set (5) changes suffixes where necessary, and set (4) changes suffixes depending on the output from (5). These rules lead to a total of four distinct default patterns. The remaining non-default forms comprise 57% of the data. Though this rate seems high, other languages with inflection classes actually have a similar proportion of irregularity.

Once these default forms have been established, then the remaining forms are determined by application of morphological indices. These indices are expressed in the lexical entries. The various rule sets establish all the possibilities of a given form before one is concretely chosen. For the non-default patterns, between one and four morphological indices from rule set (1) are applied. It is mentioned that it is irrelevant whether a particular index is considered to be applied to the genitive or locative, due to rule 4b: “By default, genitive and locative are identical.” When the genitive and locative cases are not syncretic, then both must each have a morphological index in its lexical entry in order to override the default.

Much of the complexity in Nuer is still attached to lexical entries, but this analysis provides rule sets that are able to lend some order to the apparent paradigmatic chaos. Form-function mapping cannot regularly assign specific meaning to a suffix, so instead this article proposes a system of analysis that still allows for some flexibility. The rule sets take into account stem alternations to organize each lexeme into one of four default forms, before morphological indices within the lexical entries apply to produce the numerous inflectional classes of Nuer.