

Project for MA Thesis:

The Gender System of Somali

Overview

- Introduction to Somali
- Gender polarity
- Reconstruction of the gender system through Corbett's approach:
 - Identification of agreement markers in different contexts
 - Identification of agreement classes
 - Relation between agreement classes and head noun classes
 - Delineation of the full gender system
- Consistency of genders: data collection
- Final considerations on assignment criteria

1. The Somali language: basic facts

- Afro-Asiatic
 - Cushitic
 - East
 - Somali (6)
 - Dabarre [dbr]
 - Garre [gex]
 - Jiiddu [jii]
 - Maay [ymm]
 - Somali [som]**
 - Tunni [tqq]

Fig.1: Classification of Somali (following ethnologue.org)

| | |
|----------|--|
| Speakers | 14,679,300 |
| Location | Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti |
| Dialects | Benaadir, Maay and Northern Somali (Saeed 1999) |
| Writing | Latin script since 1972 |



Fig.2: Distribution of Somali speakers (image from wikipedia)

Main typological features:

- SOV, focus particles
- agglutinative language with complex inflectional system
- 2 genders (masculine / feminine), 2 numbers (singular / plural)
- suffixation, reduplication, stress alternation

(1) Examples of stress alternation marking gender and number:

| | | | |
|----------|------------|----------|----------------------------|
| ínan | ‘boy’ | inán | ‘girl’ |
| Soomàali | ‘a Somali’ | Soomaali | ‘Somalis, the Somali race’ |
| êy | ‘dog’ | éy | ‘dogs’ |

(Saeed 1999:17)

2. Gender polarity

Except for some phonological constraints, gender distinction is not specified on the name itself, but can be observed by means of the suffixed definite article.

Most Somali nouns seem to systematically reverse their gender when occurring in the plural, as suggested from the /k/ vs. /t/ alternation concerning the agreeing definite article.

(2) Gender agreement with definite articles (Saeed 1993:124-125):

| NOUN | MEANING | GENDER | DEFINITE ARTICLE |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------------|
| baabùur | truck | masculine | kii |
| baabuurro | trucks | feminine | tii |
| dayuurad | airplane | feminine | tii |
| dayuurado | airplanes | masculine | kii |

Graphically, this syncretism of the determiners could also be represented as in (3).

(3)

| | singular | plural |
|-----------|----------|--------|
| masculine | kii | tii |
| feminine | tii | kii |

Literature on Somali language (Saeed 1999, Berchem 1991, Serzisko 1982, 1984) describes this phenomenon as ‘gender polarity’ or gender reversal. Yet the term is a bit problematic since the double coincidence of definite articles does not necessarily mean that the gender is reversed. This assumption seems also to leave aside the fact that gender should be considered as an inherent feature of nouns.

3. Reconstruction of the gender system

Definition of gender according to Corbett 1991: “Class of nouns reflected in the behaviour of associated words.”

- The defining factor of gender is agreement (a process in which certain words change their form so that values of certain grammatical categories match those of related words).
- Controller vs. target

3.1 Agreement system

In Somali there is an agreement system that involves a set of three different agreement domains:

- Agreement within the NP (internal agreement) between the noun and the related determiner (definite article, possessive, interrogative and demonstrative pronouns):

(4a)

| | |
|--------------|-----------|
| baabùur-kii | |
| truck-S1.DEF | the truck |

(4b)

| | |
|--------------|-----------|
| náag-tii | |
| woman-S2.DEF | the woman |

(Saeed 1999:55)

- Verb-subject agreement (external agreement):

(5a)

| | | | |
|------------|-----|----------|--------------|
| ínan-kii | waa | y-imid | |
| boy-S1.DEF | FOC | 3S1-come | the boy came |

(5b)

| | | | |
|-------------|-----|----------|---------------|
| ínán-tii | waa | t-imid | |
| girl-S2.DEF | FOC | 3S2-come | the girl came |

(5c)

| | | | |
|-------------|-----|--------------|---------------|
| inammá-dii | waa | y-imaad-deen | |
| boys-P1.DEF | FOC | 3P1-come | the boys came |

(5d)

| | | | |
|--------------|-----|--------------|----------------|
| inamo-hii | waa | y-imaad-deen | |
| girls-P2.DEF | FOC | 3P2-come | the girls came |

(Serzisko 1982:185)

➤ Agreement between noun and clitic subject pronouns:

(5a)

baabùur-kii waa + **uu** y-imid
 truck-**S1**.DEF FOC + CPRO.**3S1** 3S1-come the truck came

(5b)

náag -tii waa + **ay** t-
 imid
 woman-**S2**.DEF FOC + CPRO.**3S2** 3S2-come the woman came

(5c)

baabuurró-dii waa + **ay** y-imaad-deen
 trucks-**P1**.DEF FOC + CPRO.**P1** 3P1-come the trucks came

(5d)

naagó-hii waa + **ay** y-imaad-
 deen
 women-**P2**.DEF FOC + CPRO.**P2** 3P2-come the women came

(Saeed 1999:56)

On the base of this syntactic evidence, it is possible to determine the complete agreement class system:

(6)

| Agreement Class | Determiner | Clitic Pronoun | Verb affix | Independent Pronoun | Example nouns (translation) |
|-----------------|------------|----------------|------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| S1 | -kii | -uu | y- | isagá | boy, man, ox |
| S2 | -tii | -ay | t- | iyadá | girl, dagger, oxen |
| P1 | -tii | -ay | y-...-een | iyagá | boys, daggers |
| P2 | -kii | -ay | y-...-een | iyagá | girls, men |

- 4 agreement classes
- “Polarity” concerns only determiners

3.2 Head noun classes

- Nominal classification on account of overt morphological features marked on the noun
- Relation between agreement classes and head noun classes as intermediate step to the description of gender
- I use Saeed's classification of countable nouns in 7 declension classes, which is based on plural formation features, agreement in singular and plural and accentual patterns

(7)

| Head Noun Class | Sg Agr Class | Pl Agr Class | Plural Formation | Example nouns |
|-----------------|--------------|--------------|------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 | S2 | P2 | -o / -yo | girl, woman, fear, border |
| 2 | S1 | P1 | -o / -yo | boy, truck, scholar, flame |
| 3 | S1 | P2 | -o / -yo | street, day, tooth |
| 4 | S1 | P2 | reduplication | man, mouth/language, fire |
| 5 | S1 | S2 | accentual change | camel, bull, wolf, Arab, Somali |
| 6 | S2 | P2 | -oyin | mother, grandmother, town |
| 7 | S1 | P1 | -yaal | father, director, ambassador |

- More declension classes exhibit the same agreement
- A separate analysis is needed for non count nouns. Following Saeed, mass nouns can take either a singular or a plural agreement:

(8a)

Shàah-kii wàa + uu qubtay The tea spilled
Tea-**S1**.DEF FOC + CPRO:**3S1** spilled:**3S1**

(8b)

Caanó-kii wàa + ay qubteen The milk spilled
Milk-**P2**.DEF FOC + CPRO:**3P2** spilled:**3P2**

(Saeed 1999:57)

- In addition, there are a few nouns (Serzisko 1982:185) taking S2 in the singular and P1 in the plural (e.g. amley-dii: *the dagger*, amleyaal-tii: *the daggers*).

(9)

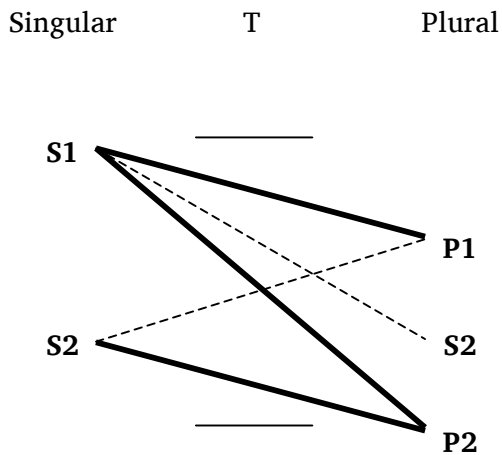
| Singular | Plural | Head noun class | Example noun |
|----------|--------|-----------------|--------------|
| S1 | P1 | 2,7 | boy |
| S1 | P2 | 3,4 | man |
| S2 | P2 | 1,6 | woman |
| S1 | S2 | 5 | bull |
| S2 | P1 | | dagger |
| S1 | - | | tea |
| - | P2 | | milk |

- 5 noun classes with singular/plural pairings
- 2 unpaired noun classes (Tantum)
- Each row in table (9) indicates a potential gender

3.3 The gender system

The observed interaction between agreement and number may also be portrayed in the following way:

(10)



Crossed system:

- 4 target genders: 2 in the singular, 3 in the plurals
- 5 controller genders (genders into which nouns are divided)
- 2 transnumeral genders (singularia tantum and pluralia tantum)

The "maximalist" problem (Corbett 1989:69):

A problem which arises with the agreement classes approach is that the number of classes may be considerably larger than the traditional (and often intuitively satisfying) number of genders generally accepted for a given language. [...] We shall, therefore, investigate how the number of agreement classes may be reduced, in principled ways, to give a lower number of genders.

4. Data collection

In order to evaluate the consistency of genders, I provide a classification of all Somali nouns (based on a Somali-English dictionary) according to the genders previously found.

(11)

| 1 | GENDER | DECLENSION | NOUN | TRANSLATION | NOTES |
|----|--------|------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------|
| 4 | S1-P2 | 4 | aar | adult male lion; (fig.) brave man | |
| 5 | | | aas ¹ | burial | |
| 6 | | | aas ² | colorful light ofset | |
| 7 | | | ab | ancestor | also decl. 7 |
| 8 | | | af ¹ | mouth | |
| 9 | | | af ² | language | |
| 10 | | | af ³ | cutting edge, sharp point | |
| 11 | | | af ⁴ | well, opening ofurrow | |
| 12 | | | af ⁵ | poll, canvas | |
| 13 | | | baal ¹ | wing, feather | |
| 14 | | | baan ² | band, orchestra | (english) |
| 15 | | | baaq | call, summoning from afar | also decl.2 |
| 16 | | | baar ¹ | tip, peak | |
| 17 | | | baar ² | bar, pub | |
| 18 | | | baar ³ | palm tree | n4 f |
| 19 | | | badh | half | |
| 20 | | | bal | large leaf | |
| 21 | | | bam | bomb | (english) |

Methodological remarks:

- All entries in the dictionary are given together with declension class, def. articles and plural form whenever this differs from the expected one.
- Some nouns belong to more than one decl. class.
- A group of nouns without plural ("decl. 0") can take -tii (as def. article). Hence I need to postulate an additional transnumeral class S2.

- 24,4% of all nouns (mainly collective, abstract, mass and verbal nouns) are given without decl. class. They converge on the 3 transnumeral genders (S1, S2, P2).
- Arabic loans, due to their irregular plural, do not belong to any declension class. Nevertheless they can be led back to one of the genders I, II or III on account of their agreement (S1-P1 or S2-P2).

Results:

- Total nouns: 13,097
- Arabic loans: 1,6 %
- S1, S2 and P2 transnumeral: abstract, collective, mass and verbal nouns

(12)

| Gender | S1-P1 | S1-P2 | S1-S2 | S2-P2 | S2-P1 | S1 | P2 | S2 |
|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|----|----|
| % | 41,3 | 5,1 | 0,8 | 23,7 | 3,2 | 24,4 | | |

➤ See attached table with complete gender system

5. Final considerations

- 8 controller genders, 3 of which transnumeral
- Tight interplay of formal and semantic criteria
- Phonology and morphology play a major role in determining membership to the declension class (hence gender)

- Semantics seems to operate a distinction in 3 “macro-genders”:
 - Non count nouns (abstract, collective, mass, verbal): VI, VII, VII
 - As for count nouns, biological sex marks a first distinction between genders I, II and III on one side, and genders IV and V on the other side. Morpho-phonological constraints (stress, final vowel, derivational suffix) help to account for all other attributions.
- The /k/ vs. /t/ alternation in the singular mirrors the semantic basis of count nouns
- From “gender polarity” to “article polarity”

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Gender System of Somali

| GENDER | SG-PL AGR | DET | FORMAL CRITERIA | PLURAL FORMATION | DECLENSION | SEMANTIC CRITERIA | EXAMPLE NOUN | TRANSLATION | % |
|-------------|--------------|-----|--|------------------------|------------|--|-----------------|-----------------|------|
| I | S1-P1 | k-t | stress on pen syll | -o / -yo | 2 | male | baabùur | truck | 41,3 |
| | | k-t | end with -e, stress on pen syll | -yaal | 7 | male, agentive and instrumental | agaasíme | director | |
| II | S1-P2 | k-k | stress on pen syll | -o / -yo | 3 | body parts | ílig | tooth | 5,1 |
| | | k-k | monosyllabic | reduplication (-aC) | 4 | male | áf | mouth, language | |
| III | S1-S2 | k-t | stress on pen syll (or falling tone if monosyllabic) | accentual change | 5 | male, (collective reading in the plural) | àwr | male camel | 0,8 |
| IV | S2-P2 | t-k | high tone on last syllable | -o / -yo | 1 | female | náag | woman | 23,7 |
| | | t-k | end with -o, stress on pen syll | -oyin | 6 | female | hóoyo | mother | |
| V | S2-P1 | t-t | - | -o | - | female | amley | dagger | 3,2 |
| VI | S1 | k | - | - | - | abs., coll., mass, verbal nouns | cis | respect | 24,4 |
| VII | P2 | k | - | - | - | mass nouns ending with -o | timó | hair | |
| VIII | S2 | t | - | - | - | abs., coll., verbal nouns | agab | goods | |