

## **Specificity and Number**

### **What really counts in the noun class systems of some Gur languages**

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A well-known grammaticalisation chain:

*demonstrative* > *definite article* > *specific article* > *nominal marker* (see Greenberg 1977, 1978, 1991): affix renewal cycles in some Niger-Congo noun class languages

Source for “definite” suffix in the Gur languages Buli and Kɔnni:

- indefinite quantifier functioning as a demonstrative identifier in clausal presentational constructions
- reference-establishing with non-referential noun

Structure of talk:

- Section 1: background information on the languages and problems for traditional analyses
- Section 2: analysis in terms of an indefinite quantifier with demonstrative identifier function and non-referential bare nouns
- Section 3: Conclusionary remarks

#### **1. The languages and the traditional “indefinite / definite” distinction**

- Buli (150,000 speakers) and Kɔnni (2,500 speakers) in Northern Ghana
- form the Buli-Kɔnni subgroup within the Oti-Volta branch (Naden 1989)
- tone languages with high grammatical functional load of tone (no lexical verb tone)
- both have a 3-tone-contrast, but only Buli reflects all three on the pitch level
- agglutinative morphological type with preference for suffixes
- basic constituent order SVO (OTHER), relatively fixed, head-final associative construction
- aspectually organized verb system with unmarked perfective, considerable degree of verb serialization
- fully operational overt noun class systems: nominal class suffixes and agreement (pronouns, demonstratives, numerals etc.)
- nouns typically occur in four different forms which are traditionally (Melançon et al 1974, Kröger 1992 etc.) described as “indefinite” and “definite” forms in singular and plural respectively

(1)	“SINGULAR”		“PLURAL”		
	“INDEF.”	“DEF.”	“INDEF.”	“DEF.”	
Buli	mà	mà-wā	mà-bà	mà-mā	‘mother’
	bīā-k	bīā-ká	bāā-sā	bāā-sā-ŋá	‘dog’
	gbáŋ	gbáŋ-ká	gbáŋ-sà	gbáŋ-sá-ŋá	‘leather, book’
	gbàlù-k	gbàlù-kū	gbàl-tà	gbàl-tà-ŋā	‘spear’
	tāin	tān-ní	tān-ā	tān-ā-ŋá	‘stone’
Kɔnni	táà	táá- <sup>1</sup> wá	táá- <sup>1</sup> lí-ŋ	táá-lí- <sup>1</sup> bá	‘sister’
	gbàá-ŋ	gbàà-ká	gbàà-sí	gbàà-sí-sí	‘dog’
	bìŋkpíá-ŋ	bìŋkpìà-kú	bìŋkpìà-tí	bìŋkpìà-tí-tí	‘shoulder’
	súŋ	súm-bú	sún-tí	sún-tí-tí	‘broom’
	tǎŋ	tàn-ní	tàn-á	tàn-á-há	‘stone’

- speculation: the “definite” nominal suffixes in Proto-Buli-Kɔnni possibly started from constructions like “axe, it ...” or “baboons, they ...”, with the pronoun then turning into a suffix of definiteness as an innovation “à la Greenberg 1978, 1991” (Cahill, ms 1997)
- problems:
  - Such constructions were suggested as source for *verbal* agreement (Givón 1976), not for *nominal* affixes
  - How can such origin account for the asymmetric, but systemic lack of agreement (2) in the noun class paradigms of both languages?

(2) Asymmetric lack of agreement in definite suffixes and pronominal concords in Buli and Kɔnni

Singular			Plural	
Buli	Kɔnni		Buli	Kɔnni
-wá wà=, ð=	-wá, -wó u=, u=	definite suffix pronominal concord	-má bà=	-bá, -bé ba=, be=
-ní dì=	-rí, -rí <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">ka=, ke=</span> (dɪ=, di=)	definite suffix pronominal concord	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">-ŋá</span> ŋà=	-há, -hé <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">a=</span>
-kú kù=	-kú, -kú <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">ka=, ke=</span>	definite suffix pronominal concord	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">-ŋá</span> tì=	-tí, -tí <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">a=</span>
-ká kà=	-ká, -ké <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">ka=, ke=</span>	definite suffix pronominal concord	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">-ŋá</span> sì=	-sí, -sí <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">a=</span>
-mú bù=	-bú, -bú <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">ka=, ke=</span> (bu=, bu=)	definite suffix pronominal concord		

Buli is lacking the full class paradigm among the “definite” plural suffixes, Kɔnni is lacking the full class paradigm among the pronominal concords in the plural classes (and to some degree also in the singular)

- > Animacy-controlled: Humans are predominantly denoted by nouns in noun classes without the framed class markers, the lack of agreement concerns noun classes typically encoding .

## 2. Analysis

### 2.1 Kinds of reference

*Non-referential NP:* not referring to an entity in the universe of discourse

*Definite NP:* reference to an entity that is part of the common ground

*Specific NP:* reference to a particular entity (whether it is part of the common ground or not > [+/- definite]) in the universe of discourse

This referential categorization is partially reflected by the morphology of nouns in Buli and Kɔnni:

(3) Postpositions: restricted to “indefinite” NP

- a. Buli
- |      |          |          |
|------|----------|----------|
| ɲààŋ | ‘behind’ | < ‘back’ |
| zúk  | ‘above’  | < ‘head’ |

nààwùsìmàŋā zùìmà  
 horse:pl:DEF head.pl:DEF  
 ‘on/above the horses’

but: nààwùsìmàŋā zùìmàŋā  
 horse:pl:DEF head.pl:DEF  
 ‘the heads of the horses’

- b. Kɔnni
- |         |         |                   |
|---------|---------|-------------------|
| chí!áŋ  | ‘under’ | < ‘bottom, waist’ |
| sí!kpéŋ | ‘above’ | < ‘head’          |

tànní chí!áŋ  
 stone:DEF under  
 ‘under the stone’

but: ? tànní chí!áŋká  
 stone:DEF bottom:DEF  
 ‘the bottom of the stone’

## (4) Classifying nominal predicates: restricted to “indefinite” NP

a. Kɔnni  
 yóbíŋ yìwó dɔŋ-kpíŋkpí'íŋ.  
 elephant COP:PTL animal-RED:big  
 ‘An elephant is a large animal.’

b. Buli  
 ká tììb.  
 PTL tree  
 ‘It’s a tree.’

## (5) Reference in Buli possessive construction

a. náá-níílà ‘cow-horns, horns of a certain cow’ ([+/- referential POR])  
 b. náámú nííláŋá ‘the horns of a certain/the cow’ ([+ referential POR])

## (6) Referentiality in Kɔnni possessive construction

a. hánì-nǔŋ /HL LH/ ‘mother-in-law’ ([- referential POR])  
 b. há'nín nùŋ /HLH<sup>H</sup>L/ ‘in-law’s mother’ (Cahill 2007) ([+? referential POR])

## (7) Semantics-pragmatics Morphosyntax

Non-referential	“indefinite” NP
Definite	“definite” NP
Specific	“indefinite” or “definite” NP depending on wider construction, in some environments ambiguities remain

**2.2 Demonstrative identifier**

- “indefinite” nouns receive a referential interpretation as specific in presentational constructions
- presentational construction involves a demonstrative identifier” (Diessel 1999)

## (8) Presentational constructions with demonstrative identifiers

Buli  
 dáám àlē ùnā.  
 beer &:PTL DEM.ID  
 ‘Here’s/This is a beer.’

Kɔ̀nni  
 jìbìŋ wón!dí.  
 knife PTL:DEM.ID  
 ‘There’s/That’s a knife.’

- (9) Buli
- a. gbáŋ lē ñnā.  
 paper PTL DEM.ID  
 ‘Here’s/This is a paper.’ (not \*It is paper.) *referential specification inthetic statement*
- b. ká gbáŋ.  
 PTL paper  
 ‘It is paper.’ (not \*It is a paper.) *qualification in categorical statement*
- (10) Kɔ̀nni
- a. ñ=jìbìŋ wón!ná.  
 1sg=KNIFE PTL:DEM.ID  
 ‘There’s/That’s my knife.’ *referential specification inthetic statement*
- b. wúú !tíŋ.  
 PTL tree  
 ‘It is a tree.’ *qualification in categorical statement*

(11) “Definite” (Noun Class) Suffix < Demonstrative Identifier (N-“CL”)

- Demonstrative identifier does not *maintain* or *reactivate*, but rather *establishes* or *activates* reference.
- Regular adnominal use of demonstrative identifier in the Chuchulini dialect of Buli ‘this month’ *chíríká=ñnā*
- The initial nasal of the demonstrative identifier is responsible for nasalisation of voiced onsets of Buli class markers (see 2), while in Kɔ̀nni, this nasal forms the coda of the preceding syllable.
- The lack of the full class paradigm in non-human plural classes (see 2) has a pragmatic motivation: non-human non-individualized entities are lowest on the topicality hierarchy (Givón 1976) and the need for a presentational introduction will rarely if ever occur. The pronominal proclitics in Kɔ̀nni and the definite suffixes in Buli are both subject to topicality considerations: the more topical the members of certain classes prototypically are, the higher the chance for their consideration in presentation (first reference) and for some degree of continuity (maintained reference) in discourse.
- Kɔ̀nni displays more restructuring efforts than Buli concerning the former adnominal demonstrative identifier: “indefinite” plural suffixes are reduplicated in those plural classes that are typically not applied to nouns denoting humans.

### 2.3 Non-referentiality in the noun class system

(12) The “indefinite/definite” distinction reconsidered

number	-	+	+	+
reference	-	+	-	+
	“indef. sg.”	“def. sg.”	“indef. pl.”	“def. pl.”

(13) Noun class system with nominal suffixes in Buli (+ addition, / substitution)

1	<b>WA</b> -Ø, -ɔa + <i>def</i> -wá	<b>BA</b> -ba, irreg. / <i>def</i> -má	2
5	<b>DI</b> -(r)i, -n(i) / <i>def</i> -ní	<b>NGA</b> -a, irreg. + <i>def</i> -ŋá	6
15	<b>KU</b> -(u)k, -(u)ŋ / <i>def</i> -kú	<b>TI</b> -ta + <i>def</i> -ŋá	21
12	<b>KA</b> -(i)k, -(i)ŋ / <i>def</i> -ká	<b>SI</b> -sa + <i>def</i> -ŋá	13
14	<b>BU</b> -(u)b, -(u)m / <i>def</i> -mú		

(14) Substitution among number marking noun class suffixes in Buli

“indef.sg.”	“def.sg.”	“indef.pl.”	“def.pl.”	
zúé	zúé-wá	zúé-bà	zúé-má	thief
gáárú-k	gáárú-kú	gáárú-tà	gáárú-tá-ŋá	cobweb
bàŋ	bàŋ-kā	bàŋ-sà	bàŋ-sà-ŋā	lizard
gbànī-ŋ	gbànī-kā	gbànī-sà	gbànī-sà-ŋā	sp. cripple
lām	lām-mú	lān-tā	lān-tā-ŋá	meat

## (15) Noun class system with nominal suffixes in Kɔ̀nni (+ addition, / substitution)

1	<b>WA</b> -Ø, -U, -ŋ +/ <i>def</i> -wÁ	<b>BA</b> -(II-)ŋ, irreg. +/ <i>def</i> -bÁ, irreg.	2
5	<b>RI</b> -ŋ, -Ø / <i>def</i> -rÍ	<b>HA</b> -A, irreg. + <i>def</i> -hÁ	6
15	<b>KU</b> -ŋ / <i>def</i> -kÚ	<b>TI</b> -tÍ + <i>def</i> -tÍ	21
12	<b>KA</b> -ŋ / <i>def</i> -kÁ	<b>SI</b> -sÍ + <i>def</i> -sÍ	13
14	<b>BU</b> -ŋ / <i>def</i> -bÚ		

## (16) Kɔ̀nni verbal nouns

chaari	‘winnow’	chààríŋ	‘winnowing’
jूसी	‘ask, request’	jùòsíŋ	‘asking, request(ing)’
vaasi	‘boil’	vààsíŋ	‘boiling’

- Self denotation *kòmíŋ* (not “Kɔ̀nni”, as established in the literature) equally denotes language, custom, and people (‘I/we am/are/speak ...’)
- Reference to specific instances of speech, custom and people by definite markers of class RI, WA, and BA, respectively

Specific reference and number:

- traditional “indefinite singular” is not marked for reference (and thus not for number; consequently falling into the category of “general number”, Corbett 2000)

- (17) reference specification: with majority of nouns in singular (demonstrative identifier)  
 number specification: with majority of nouns in plural

## 2.4 Indefinite quantifier and its place in specificity and number marking

Reference specification in head-final possessive construction:

- (18) Non-referential Noun – Indefinite quantifier:

“X<sub>Dependent</sub> – one (out of X)<sub>Head</sub>”

- for the development of the numeral ‘one’ as an indefinite marker see Givón 1981 and many others
- in my proposal, referentiality (“pronoun”) rather than cardinality (“numeral”) is central
- partitive indefinite quantifier to distinguish specific from non-specific nouns, rare indications of such systems in Africa (but see Givón 1978, Dimmendaal 1983, Heine and Reh 1984, Heine 1997)
- Grammaticalisation chain: 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun (also used as a specificity marker) - Article-like marker - Marker of nominality (Aikhenvald 2003: 368)

The role of the versatile nasal (N): On the one hand, the nasal marks the (pronominal) head. This strategy has been particularly favoured in Buli, where a syllabic nasal is prefixed/procliticized to a range of quantifiers, among them some lower numerals in enumeration). The motivation behind this head-marking is to signal reference even in the absence of a lexically specified entity.

(19) Head-marking strategy in Buli:

“(X<sub>Dependent</sub>) – [N-one]<sub>Head</sub>”

compare also other quantifiers: *n-tògà* ‘three’, *n-nà̀nsì* ‘four’, *ỳ-wàlá* ‘the other one’, *m̀-bàlá* ‘the other ones’

(20) Dependent-marking strategy in Kɔ̀nni

“[X-N]<sub>Dependent</sub> – (one)<sub>Head</sub>”

compare also absolute pronouns such as: *wó-níy*, *ká-níy* ‘this/that’ (human, non-human) and *bá-ním-!bá* ‘those [humans]’

Interaction between presence of marking and marking-strategies on the one hand and lexical semantics of nouns, on the other, for instance:

1. The existence of a dedicated noun class for abstract properties and mass nouns denoting liquids and other very fine substances is a direct reflection of the non-referential noun form (class 14: measurement by indefinite quantifier BU).

2. Development of secondary variants (b) of kinship terms

(21)	“indef. sg.”	“def. sg.”	“indef. pl.”	“def. pl.”	
a.	chùá	chùà-wá	chùá <sup>1</sup> líŋ	chùàlí- <sup>1</sup> bá	father
b.	chǒŋ	chòŋ-wá			
a.	nàá	nàà-wá	níí <sup>1</sup> líŋ	níílí- <sup>1</sup> bé	mother
b.	nǔŋ	nùŋ-wó			



- variant a. is restricted to 1sg/pl and to 2sg possessors, all others occur with the variant b. (Cahill 2007)
- the headless variant b. is “less referential” and role-denoting (acting as head itself)

### 3. Inalienable paired (or non-single) properties:

- reference via possessors: associative marking for reference
- unmarked non-singular (plural), marked singulative (inverse number marking)

#### (22) Singulative *-ri* and associative plural suffix *-ma* in Buli

<i>“indef. sg.”</i>	<i>“def. sg.”</i>	<i>“indef. pl.”</i>	<i>“def. pl.”</i>	
nísí(-rí), nísí-rì	nísí-ní	nísà	nís-á-ŋá	hand, arm (fingers to elbow), <i>this</i> <i>“pl.” form is unmarked for number</i>
		nìsì-mà	nìsì-mà-ŋā	<i>additional “pl.” form</i>
féli-nì	féli-ní	féli-mà	féli-má-ŋá	language of White people

- > Other reference and number marking strategies and devices besides the indefinite quantifier exist

### 3. Concluding remarks

- The review of “indefinite/definite” and “singular/plural” noun class suffixes reveals that the “definite” suffixes have not been grammaticalized from a distal demonstrative. The “definite” suffixes in Buli and Kɔnni are rather originally designed as specificity devices.
- A large number of nouns has a basic non-referential form, corresponding to the “general number” category in Corbett’s terms.
- Reference is often established with the help of an indefinite quantifier, functioning as a demonstrative identifier in a presentational construction. The current “definite” singular suffixes developed from such elements.
- In the current state of the languages, “definite” suffixes can be applied to (almost) every noun as result from analogy pressure, such readaptation has been particularly far developed in Kɔnni.
- The indefinite quantifier represents an important means to establish reference for several nouns, including abstract terms and mass nouns. Some nouns, however, such as inalienable and paired body parts, may rely on completely different principles for reference- and number marking.
- Different reference- and number-marking strategies correlate with the largely non-referential background of most nouns, the count/mass distinction, the animacy hierarchy, and some other parameters and are important for the typology of noun class and of number systems. The observations made in these two Gur languages relate to similar phenomena in

a variety of languages of the wider area (see inverse number features in Supyire, Dagaare, Cushitic; general number in Cushitic, Atlantic, etc.).

- The peculiar split in head- and dependent-marking strategies in the possessive construction that was observed across the two languages needs further investigation. On the segmental level, Buli focusses on the referential task and marks pronominal heads by prefixing the syllabic nasal. Kɔnni focusses on the denotational part and marks a noun as non-referential, whenever it is deprived of its head. These observation should be completed by a reconsideration of the language-specific tone marking principles applied.

COP	copula
DEF	definite
DEM.ID	demonstrative identifier
INDEF	indefinite
pl	plural
POR	possessor
PTL	particle
RED	reduplication
&	prosodic connective

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