

# “Simplification” and “Innovation” in the Noun Class System of Serer

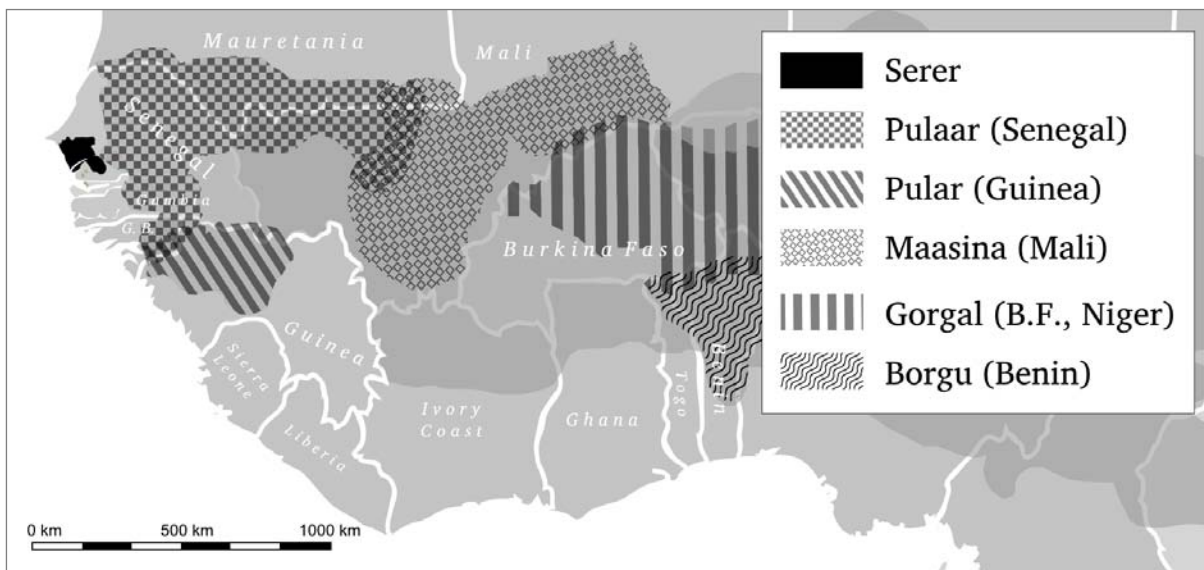
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## 1 Introduction

- Serer + Fula < Northern < Atlantic < Niger-Congo (Segerer 2016)
- Serer:
  - 1.16 million speakers in Senegal and North-Western Gambia (Lewis *et al.* 2016)
  - Sources: Grammar of Faye (1979) and Sarr (p.c.)
- Fula:
  - Spoken in 18 countries by around 22 million people (Gajdos 2004: 10f.)
  - Source: Grammar of Sylla (1982) (Pulaar, Senegalese variety)



**Map 1.** Serer and Fula in western Africa (map by Simon Argus, based on Lewis *et al.* 2016 and Harrison 2013)

- Serer has 13 noun classes<sup>1</sup>
- Nouns are grouped together 1) by form (class prefix, agreement targets<sup>2</sup>) and 2) by semantics (e.g. human, liquids and mass nouns, diminutive, etc.)

(1)	a.	Class 12: diminutives	b.	Class 6: liquids and mass nouns
		<i>o-mbaal onq-e</i>		<i>fo-neew ol-e</i>
		12-sheep 12.DET-PROX		6-butter 6.DET-PROX
		'the lamb'		'the butter'

(Faye 1979: 126, 128)

- One and the same nominal root might appear in different classes (e.g. for diminutive, plural, etc.)
- Consonant mutation: the initial consonant of a stem changes according to language-specific rules
- For instance, *j* alternates with *c* and *nj* ( $\triangleq$  mutation grades)

(2)	a.	<i>o-jisiis</i>	'sparrow' [class 7, e.g. animals in the singular]
	b.	<i>xa-cisiis</i>	'sparrows' [class 12, plural]
	c.	<i>o-njisiis</i>	'little sparrow' [class 8, diminutive]

(Faye 1979: 36)

## 2 “Simplification”

### 2.1 *In number of noun classes*

- Merrill (2014) reconstructs for Proto-Serer-Fula the class prefixes of 19 classes
- He takes into account 1) class affixes and 2) consonant mutation
- He also reconstructs the class prefixes and determiner stems for Proto-Serer by considering dialectal differences
- 16 classes in Proto-Serer
  - 5 classes less than Proto-Serer-Fula
  - 2 additional classes
- Proto-Serer-Fula prefix is sometimes reconstructed from the determiner stem (*\*ɣol- < \*ol-*; class 10) and sometimes from the class prefix (*\*gin- < giN-*; class 14)
- Class prefix might trigger fortition (X) or nasalisation (N) on the noun stem

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed, cross-dialectal analysis is provided by Renaudier (2015).

<sup>2</sup> These include at least determiners, demonstrative pronouns, and adjectives.

#	Proto-Serer-Fula class prefix	Proto-Serer		#	Proto-Serer-Fula class prefix	Proto-Serer	
		Class prefix	Determiner stem			Class prefix	Determiner stem
1	*xax-	xaX-	ax-	12	*han-	aN-	al-
2	*ox-	oX-	ox-	13	*fan-	faN-	f-/fan-
3	*ǂe-	∅-	w-	14	*gin-	giN-	al-
4	*re-	∅-	l-	15	*gan-	(g)aN-	al-
5	*ye-			16	*dik-	X-	k-
6	*yun-	N-	n-	17	*dak-	aX-	ak-
7	*rin-			18	*dam-	fo-	ol-
8	*ru-			19	*ho-		
9	*hiX-			20		oN-	ong-
10	*yol-	o-	ol-	21		foN-	n-
11	*yal-	aX-	al-				

**Figure 1.** Reconstruction of Proto-Serer-Fula noun class prefixes and Proto-Serer (Merrill 2014)  
(X = affix triggers fortition on the noun stem; N = affix triggers nasalisation on the noun stem)

## 2.2 In head noun marking

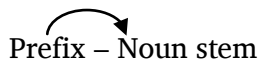
- 5 classes do not require any prefix (∅-)
  - Except for *fa-* (class 5) and *xa-* (class 12), the prefixes mark noun stems of at least two different classes
- ⇒ Reduction and ambiguity in head noun marking!?
- Not really: Prefixes might trigger fortition (X) or nasalisation (N) on the noun stem
- ⇒ Prefixes are ambiguous but class might be disambiguated by consonant mutation and by agreement targets
- E.g. the prefix *o-*:
- (3) a. *o-koor ox-e* 'the man' [class 1, fortition]  
b. *o-mbaal onq-e* 'the lamb' [class 8, nasalisation]  
c. *o-jisiis ol-e* 'the sparrow' [class 7] (Faye 1979: 114, 117)

	#	Class prefix		#	Class prefix
singular	1	oX-	plural	9	∅-
	2	a-		10	aX-
	3	∅-		11	∅X-
	4	∅N-		12	xaX-
	5	∅-/ faN-		13	foN-
	6	fo-			
	7	o-			
	8	oN-			

**Table 1.** Class prefixes in Serer (cf. Faye 1979) (X = affix triggers fortition on the noun stem; N = affix triggers nasalisation on the noun stem)

### Quick recap

- Reduced system
  - Serer has less classes than Proto-Serer-Fula
  - Sometimes no class prefix at all on the head noun
  - Prefixes are often not unique for one class
- But: Prefixes load information about class on the noun stem by triggering fortition or nasalisation



- Fula more complex than Serer: more noun classes (21 classes) and less ambiguous class affixes

### 2.3 In class pronouns

- There is maximally a singular/plural distinction
- Singular classes cannot be identified by the pronouns
- *Ten* and *den* are polyfunctional

	#	Subject pronoun	Emphatic pronoun	Object pronoun	Possessive pronoun
singular	1	a	ta	= (i)n/ = ne	ten
	...				
	8				
plural	9	a	da	(a) den	den
	...				
	13				

**Table 2.** Subject, emphatic, object, and possessive pronouns in Serer (cf. Faye 1979; Sarr, p.c.)

- In contrast, Fula has distinct pronouns for each single class

#	Subject pronoun	Emphatic pronoun	Object pronoun	Possessive pronoun
1	o	kanko	mo	makko
2	be	kambe	be	mabbe
3	de	kannje	de	majje
4	di	kannji	di	majji
5	nde	kayre	nde	mayre
...	...	...	...	...
21	dum	kannjum	dum	majjum

**Table 3.** Subject, emphatic, object, and possessive pronouns in Fula (Sylla 1982)

### 3 “Innovation”

#### 3.1 The subject pronoun “a”

- 1<sup>st</sup> Function: As third person subject pronoun for all classes

(4) a. *a jaayik*  
PRO travel:DIST  
‘(The king [class 1] had wives.) He travelled.’ (Faye 1979: 283)

b. *a ut=in*  
PRO dig\_out=3S  
‘(The eagle [class 2] came.) It dug her out.’ (ibid.)

- 2<sup>nd</sup> Function: In co-occurrence with lexical subjects in canonical affirmative clauses

(5) *Ferdi a jaam-a maalo*  
5.PN PRO? eat-PFV3 5.rice  
‘Ferdi ate rice.’ (Sarr, p.c.)

- However, not every pre-verbal lexical subject triggers the presence of *a*

(6) *Ferdi jaam-a maalo*  
5.PN eat-PFV3 5.rice  
‘Ferdi ate rice.’ (Sarr, p.c.)

- Prosodic difference?

#### Hypothesis:

The information-structural status of the lexical subject determines the presence of *a*! If the lexical subject is the sentence topic, *a* is present. If not, not.

**Definition:**

The sentence topic is that entity in a sentence about which something is predicated.

(cf. Dik 1997; Reinhart 1982; Lambrecht 1994)

- In (5) the lexical subject is the sentence topic

(5') *Ferdi a jaam-a maalo*

5.PN PRO? eat-PFV3 5.rice

'{What about Ferdi?} Ferdi ate rice.'

(Sarr, p.c.)

- Very likely this structure developed out of a left-dislocation construction

(5'') *Ferdi, a jaam-a maalo*

5.PN PRO? eat-PFV3 5.rice

'{What about Ferdi?} Ferdi, he ate rice.'

(Sarr, p.c.)

- Whenever the lexical subject is not the sentence topic, *a* is absent

(6') a. Thetic sentence (cf. Sasse 1987)

*Ferdi ∅ jaam-a maalo*

5.PN eat-PFV3 5.rice

'{What happened?} Ferdi ate rice.'

(Sarr, p.c.)

b. Subject focus

*Jeen ∅ jaam-u saac k-e*

5.PN eat-PFV1 11.couscous 11.DET-PROX

'{Who ate the couscous?} JEEN ate the couscous.'

(Faye 1979: 59; context by Sarr, p.c.)

⇒ The relationship between subject topics and the pre-verbal *a* has not been described explicitly yet

### 3.2 The subject pronouns “*ta*” (sg.) and “*da*” (pl.)

- *A*, *ta* and *da* are commonly associated with specific verb conjugation paradigms
- Faye (1979) and Renaudier (2012): imperfective ending *-aa* occurs with the subject pronouns *ta* and *da*, not with *a*
- However, Faye’s corpus contains examples which contradict this statement

- (7) (The eagle came. It dug the child out, went to the tree at the public place and built a nest there. It kept the child over there and gave her food.)

*ta jaam-aa a jaam-aa a jaam-aa bo a maak*  
S:PRO eat-IPFV PRO eat-IPFV PRO eat-IPFV until PRO be\_big

*ta waaf-aa wurus (...)*  
S:PRO look\_for-IPFV 7.gold

‘She ate. She ate. She ate until she was big. It looked for gold.’ (Faye 1979: 283)

### Hypothesis:

Switch-reference<sup>3</sup> determines the form of the subject pronoun! When there is referent switch, the pronouns *ta/da* are used. When there is no referent switch, the subject pronoun is *a*.

### Definition:

Switch-reference is an inflectional category of the verb, which indicates whether or not its subject is identical with the subject of some other verb. Its function is to avoid ambiguity of reference. (Haiman & Munro 1983: ix, xi)

- The evaluation of one of Faye’s (1979: 283-286) fairy tales shows that in the majority of cases, the data confirm this observation
  - *A* marks no referent switch in 47 out of 49 examples
  - *Ta* and *da* signal referent switch in 25 out of 27 examples
- Pronouns *ta* and *da* do not mark switch reference in relative clauses

- (8) (They were at sea until they reached Kulaar.)

*ye da ndet-na Kulaar (...)*  
when P:PRO go-REL GN

‘When they arrived at Kulaar, (they laid down dreaming of three drums which were swinging on a baobab tree.).’ (Faye 1979: 291)

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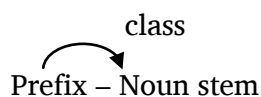
<sup>3</sup> The term “switch-reference” in relation with the pronouns *ta* and *da* is only mentioned by Neely (2013). Unfortunately, she does not go into detail at all and also misses the fact that switch-reference is independent from conjugation and periphrastic constructions.

#	Subject pronoun		Emphatic pronoun	Object pronoun	Possessive pronoun	
	No referent switch	Referent switch				
singular	1	a	ta	ten	= (i)n/ = ne	ten
	2					
	3					
	4					
	5					
	6					
	7					
	8					
plural	9	da	den	(a) den	den	
	10					
	11					
	12					
	13					

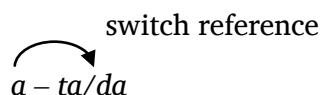
**Table 4.** Subject, emphatic, object, and possessive pronouns in Serer (cf. Faye 1979; Sarr, p.c.) (revised)

## 4 Summary

- Reduction in number of noun classes
- Reduction in head noun marking
  - But: prefixes might load information about class on the noun stem (hence the mutation grades)



- Reduction in the pronominal system: maximally singular/plural distinction
- Possibly innovation
  - Distinction between topical and non-topical lexical subjects
  - Switch-reference system: the pronoun *a* loads information about “reference tracking” on the pronouns *ta* and *da*



- Fula is more complex and probably more conservative



## 5 Abbreviations

DET	determiner stem	P	plural	PROX	proximate
DIST	distal	PFV	perfective	REL	relative
GN	geographical name	PN	proper name	S	singular
IPFV	imperfective	PRO	pronoun		

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